

That's My Byline – Writing Articles

How many times have you chosen a magazine and thrown it away in disgust, convinced you could write a better article than the one you just read? I'll bet it's happened many times.

You probably can write a better piece. So why not start enjoying the thrill of seeing your byline in your favorite periodicals now that retirement has given you the luxury of time to pursue a new venture.

Those of you who are uneasy about tackling a full-length book, but have a burning desire to see your words in print can begin your new career with articles. They are easier to write than books, and you can reach publication a great deal faster. You will also reach many more people with this one article than you would with a book, unless your opus managed to reach best seller heights.

When you freelance articles, you are not limited to a single subject, as you would be in a book. Instead you can graze across all of your interests, and write separate pieces for each of them. Thousands of periodicals are in print, hungry for interesting articles to outdo their competitors. Magazines cover hobbies, sports, economics, politics and so much more. Trade journals service every profession and businesses of every sort.

Guides to the Right Market

You will find a number of excellent directories on the shelves of your local library. Some, like *Writer's Market*, *BurrellesLuce*, *Oxbridge* and more, list staff and contact information. *Burrelle's*, for example, has a Media Contacts program to help you reach the right person with your work.

Writer's Market is one of the most detailed guides for authors. Its 400 pages of consumer magazines and 150 pages of trade journals offer contact and payment information, details on editorial preferences and tips to help you.

More than 2,000 periodicals are listed in Meg Weaver's *Wooden Horse* web site (www.woodenhorse.com).

Specialty directories in a wide variety of fields are available. For example, www.travelwriters.com, includes 500 travel magazines and newspaper travel sections.

How a Writer Reads

Once you've selected the periodicals you think you want to target, you must obtain copies and read them carefully. But you have to read them like a writer, not just a casual subscriber. Each section of the magazine has something to tell you that will make acceptance of the article you submit more likely.

The cover lines (teasers on the front cover) are a tip-off to the type of story the editors believe will best attract readers. Review several editions of covers. Next review the table of contents. It will show you the kind of articles the editors prefer.

The advertisements that appear in the magazine are the result of extensive research by ad agencies and businesses that analyze the readership. By studying the products advertised and the sales copy, you can tell the educational level, income level and other pertinent information about the people who read this magazine.

The front of the magazine usually will contain an editor's message that will frequently reveal even more about the editor's preferences. The masthead too provides a wealth of information. Compare the names of staff members with the bylines to

determine whether the editors are welcoming to freelancers or prefer to use only material written by members of their staffs.

Breaking In

As a beginner you are at a disadvantage because you have little or no portfolio to demonstrate the quality of your work. However, as a retiree, you have a great advantage. You have the knowledge and experience gained during the years you worked and became expert in a specific industry.

With just a bit of ingenuity, you will develop ways to convince an editor that you are the person to write a piece on your former vocation or perhaps a lifelong hobby or pastime. I assure you there is a market for every subject if you just look for it.

Climbing the Ladder

Like anything else, you begin at the bottom. The first rung of your ladder can be your local newspaper or magazine. Save each published article you submit to start your portfolio of clips.

If you are writing about your former vocation, you can approach a trade journal without generating a lot of clips. Your expertise alone can make your article saleable even if you write just passably well, because trades are a voracious market in which knowledge is far more important than writing ability.

Regional magazines—with circulation statewide or broader—are the next step of the ladder to shoot for. As you become more comfortable with your writing, reach out for a major national magazine. Some include a regional section, which is far easier for a writer to reach than the main pages. These are usually shorter than the main articles and far less competitive than the longer features the publication runs.

When your portfolio is capable of projecting you to the top of the ladder and your reputation has begun to grow, you are ready for the features well of national publications. But this doesn't mean you should target only the highest circulation magazines. For example, you may be a gardener, a home decorator or craftsman, but that doesn't necessarily give you license to shoot only for *Home and Garden*.

There are hundreds of other publications that relate to your specialty and your chances for acceptance are far greater. There is also the excellent chance that an editor from *Home and Garden* may see one of your pieces and invite you to write.

Editors' Responses

The most talked-about response a submission receives is the rejection slip. You've heard of writers who paper a room with them. But at the same time thousands of acceptances are sent out. If they were not, the pages of your favorite publications would be blank. Yes, you will receive rejections. All of us have and still do. But don't let that discourage you.

Many submissions are rejected not for quality, but for a host of reasons that have no bearing on your abilities. Advertising may be low and the number of pages available for editorial reduced. Perhaps a similar story either ran recently or has already been booked for publication by the editor. There are many reasons for rejection. But if you don't continue to submit again and again, you will never reach print.

Simultaneous Submission

Many authors submit a piece to several publications at one time. This is called "simultaneous submission," and does bear a minimal risk. If an editor receives your submission, likes it and offers you publication, he/she will be rather unhappy to learn that

it has already been accepted by a competitor. It is imperative that you place a note on your submission notifying the editor that it is simultaneous.

Fortunately, this problem has been greatly alleviated by the growing number of periodicals that accept e-mail submissions. This system benefits both the writer and editor. You will probably get a same-day response because it is so easy for the editor simply to hit “reply” and notify you of the decision. You can then immediately fire the story off to the next in line on your list of potentials.

Article writing is a wonderful way to expand your knowledge and your awareness. You can write on a vast variety of topics as long as you are willing to do the needed research.

Without ever crafting a book, many writers have established outstanding reputations and loyal readers who follow their articles and/or columns in newspapers and magazines. You too can join their ranks.