

The Easy Step by Step Guide

Writing

Articles and

Newsletters

Pamela Brooks

ROWMARK

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Pamela Brooks

Rowmark

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About the author

Following a degree in English, Pamela Brooks spent ten years as a communications specialist for a blue-chip financial services company. She completed the Chartered Institute of Marketing diploma with distinction in the communications paper, then switched to working as a freelance writer following the birth of her first child in 1997.

She has also produced newsletters for a local charity and has written extensively for the parenting, health and women's press.

Introduction

Written your society newsletter for years and want some fresh ideas to liven it up a bit? Thinking about earning some extra money as a freelance journalist and want some ideas about where to start? Been charged with setting up the company website and wonder what sort of thing to put on it?

Then this easy step by step guide to writing articles and newsletters is for you.

Articles have an incredible range – anything from a 50-word ‘filler’ in a magazine through to a 5,000-word lengthy piece in a learned journal, and everything in between. An article can be news or a feature. A feature can be an interview or profile, a think piece, a ‘how to do something’ guide, a review, an A–Z or a number of top tips ... anything you choose.

Newsletters can be anything from a black and white single-pager sent to customers or club members through to a glossy full-colour production with photographs and advertising.

Web sites often contain similar text to newsletters and articles, though the way people read text on the web isn't quite the same as the way they read 'hard' copy: they want quality information in bite-size pieces, *right now*, and your audience will disappear at a mouse-click if they don't get it!

The line between web sites, articles and newsletters can be blurred. For example, a charity raising funds for research into a specific illness might produce one newsletter for fundraisers and a different one for people with that illness; they might also have a web site containing information from both those newsletters (albeit in a more technology-friendly format), and offer articles from those newsletters to local media.

But they all have one thing in common: the audience. That's the most important thing to think about for any type of written communication. Who are your audience, what are they looking for and how can you meet that need?

How to use this guide

Whether you're a freelance writer or working for a small business, a charity or are a committee member of a society, you're likely to work on a newsletter, a web site or an article at some point. This book will show you how to write effective web copy and articles and how to produce newsletters.

I recommend that you read it through from beginning to end and then dip into it to refresh your memory. At the end of each chapter there is a summary of the points covered.

There are also examples throughout from fictitious case studies (*Health Weekly* magazine, *Playdays*

newsletter) to help show you how to write an article, newsletter and web site page.

What you will learn from this guide

This guide looks at how to write articles, newsletters and web site copy. It will help you to understand the processes involved in producing a newsletter and how to tailor your copy to suit your audience.

This guide will show you:

- how to identify your audience and what they're looking for, and how to meet those needs
- how to produce a newsletter
- step by step, how to write and produce articles
newsletters (in-house and external)
web site copy.

Note: rather than using the cumbersome form 'he or she' throughout the guide, I have used 'he' – this is purely for convenience and no prejudice or bias is intended.

1

The basics

Good communication

Whether you're writing a newsletter, an article or copy for a web site, you are communicating something to your audience. Your audience has chosen to read your words – either because they want to learn something or because they want to be entertained – so you need to live up to their expectations. That means communicating well.

Good communication is relevant, focused, timely and readable.

Relevant

the title is probably what attracted your reader to your piece, so your words need to be relevant to the title. If it's an article about 50 ways to burn 100 calories

and you suddenly start talking about politics (or vice versa), it's not relevant and you'll lose your reader. Ditto an article about bungee-jumping in a newsletter for a playgroup (unless, of course, it's an account of how someone raised money!), or a page about diamond-mining in a web site for a stationery company (unless you've clearly marked it as a 'link' and explained its presence).

Focused

when you write, have a specific person in mind: that is, imagine your average reader (if the profile fits someone you know, so much the better – pretend you're talking to that person as you write). The section on page 7 gives more advice about identifying your audience.

Timely

particularly with newsletters and web sites, the content has to be *newsy*! There's no point in a local garage sending its customers a newsletter containing an article about ways to protect their cars in winter if the issue date is the middle of summer. There's also no point in a web site that never changes its text – the internet audience is looking for current information, so you should update your web site regularly. Even if you think you know your subject backwards, check that you've seen the latest information and are up to date with any new developments in the area. You also need to take into account the frequency of your publication (or how often the web site is updated) – something produced weekly or even daily needs to be even more topical than something produced every three months. And bear in mind that magazines have long

lead times and monthly magazines are generally on sale a month in advance of their cover date – so the February issue of a monthly magazine is on the shelves in January, and at the same time the editor will be planning the May or June issue.

Readable

keep it simple (but not patronising) and lively. Ramble and your reader will simply flick to another article or web site, or decide not to bother reading your newsletter in future. And always avoid jargon, unless you're talking to the trade and using terms standard to that industry.

Identifying your target audience

Who are you talking to? In broad terms:

Articles

could be for

- the consumer press (daily, weekly and monthly magazines and newspapers for the average person in the street – note also that the newspapers may be national, local or regional)
- the trade press (publications for people working in a particular area, such as nursing or farming or teaching)
- professional journals (though you're likely to need a professional qualification or a lot of experience in that subject)

- the specialist press (special-interest publications aimed at people interested in a particular subject, such as weddings, fashion, pets, cars, sport).

The media pack for the publication will tell you more about the audience, including:

- how many buy it (circulation figures)
- how many read it (readership figures)
- age range
- male/female split
- socio-economic group (education and disposable income)
- lifestyle factors (interests, where they live, political/religious/social links).

These, together with a couple of back issues of the publication, should tell you the style, tone and vocabulary you need to use for that audience.

Some publications also produce editorial guidelines which tell you exactly what they want so it's worth asking for a copy when you send in a query letter.

Newsletters

these are for specific groups such as:

- employees (internal newsletters)
- suppliers, customers, retailers and distributors (trade newsletters)

- special interest groups (for example a charity, support group or playgroup).

If you're the editor, you'll know who your audience is; if you're writing an article for a newsletter, the editor should be able to give you all the information about your target audience (circulation, age, male/female split, socio-economic group, lifestyle factors).

Web sites

this may be a subscription-only web site (in which case the web site owner will give you the equivalent of a media pack to tell you the age, socio-economic group and lifestyle factors of the subscribers) or a public web site (in which case you need to write for the average consumer).

In most cases, the audience will actually be paying for the privilege of reading your words – by buying the newspaper or magazine, subscribing to a newsletter (internal or 'free' customer newsletters and publication need to try particularly hard because they don't have the same perceived value as those the reader has chosen to buy) or by surfing the net (either they've paid a subscription for unlimited 'free' browsing or they pay their service provider/phone provider for the time they spend online). And customers want value for money.

What does your audience want?

Why is your audience reading the article, newsletter or web site? Possible reasons include:

- news/education – facts about an event, a product or service

- information – for example contact points of specialist groups, listings of local amenities
- entertainment – not necessarily humour; ‘think pieces’ come under this category too.

The five Ws and an H

Basically, we’re talking ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘why’ and ‘how’. These should be the focus of every piece you write.

- **what** – this is the subject you’re writing about (if it’s a celebrity story it might become a who, focusing on the person rather than the event)
- **who** – splits into three: the audience (who you’re writing for), the case study (the audience needs to identify with any personal story you use) and the expert (the audience needs to believe the expert is the best-qualified for the job)
- **where** it’s being published (this tells you the tone and the type of angle the audience expect)
- **when** – is it topical, e.g. tying in with a PR campaign awareness period? Is it seasonal? Do you have the latest information on the subject?
- **why** – should the audience read your work (what’s in it for them?)
- **how** – how you present the information to your reader

A quick word about language

Spelling, grammar and presentation *are* important – if your article looks sloppy and is covered in grammatical and spelling errors, your audience (and your editor!) will start to wonder if you've got your facts wrong, too.

Language is important, too. The language you use in your articles, newsletters and web sites needs to be consistent with the 'house style' of the publication.

A few quick rules of thumb about language:

Do

- keep to the point – you don't have the space for convoluted arguments, and you need to get your points across quickly. If it isn't relevant, cut.
- keep it clear – make it easy for your audience to read. Use everyday speech and avoid jargon unless you're writing for a specialist or trade market and using terms your readers know well.

Simple, short words will help you be clear and to the point.

Don't

- be biased – in terms of sex, race, religion, age, disability and physical appearance. Look at your descriptions, particularly of people – even if it seems neutral, substitute a man for a woman and check if it still seems neutral. For example, 'Jane Smith, whose husband John is CEO of Anytown Company plc, has just opened an organic co-operative.' Would you write 'John Smith, whose wife Jane has

just opened an organic co-operative, has been appointed CEO of Anytown Company plc’?

- use stereotypes.

Grammar and spelling

If you know that grammar and spelling aren’t your strongest point, invest in a bad speller’s dictionary and a simple guide to polishing your grammar, or ask a friend who’s good at grammar and spelling to check your copy.

Some of the points listed below might seem glaringly obvious, but they’re very common!

Apostrophes

The apostrophe has two functions:

- it shows a word or letter is missing – e.g. *he’s* instead of *he is*, *don’t* instead of *do not*, *I’m* instead of *I am* etc.
- it shows possession – e.g. *Peter’s* ball = ball belonging to Peter.

The usual mix-up is between *it’s* and *its*. *It’s* = it is and *its* = belonging to it.

The other common difficulty is apostrophes around plurals. The rule is that the apostrophe goes *after* the subject – so *it’s* children’s feet (not *childrens’*), *people’s* lives (not *peoples’*), but *agencies’s* addresses (more than one agency).

Commas

Commas mark clauses. They act almost as brackets, so you should be able to remove the bit between commas and the sentence would still make sense. For example:

Surprisingly, though, there were many people braving the winds.

You can take out 'though' and the sentence would still make sense. (So you need a comma both sides of 'though'.)

Watch out for commas around 'and' and 'but' – apply the paired commas rule and it will help. (E.g. 'He took a seat beside her, and after a while, turned to look at her.' This is wrong; if you take out the bit between the commas it reads, 'He took a seat beside her, turned to look at her.' This doesn't make sense; so in this case the comma should be *after* the 'and', not before it.)

Think of commas as breathing spaces. If you read your work aloud, nine times out of ten you'll pause naturally where the comma should be.

Punctuation around speech

Punctuation goes inside speech – e.g. 'Sorry, I'm not sure,' she replied.

If you continue the sentence after the speech, use a comma after the closing speech-marks. For example: 'Hello', she said, holding out her hand.

If you have a new sentence after the speech, you need a full stop (or question mark or exclamation mark) before the closing speech-marks. For example: 'No way.' She stared angrily at him.

If you break up dialogue, use a capital letter inside the second speech mark if the dialogue is the start of a new sentence, and a lower case letter if it's the continuation of a sentence. For example:

'Sorry, I'm not sure,' she replied. 'You see, I'm not from this part of town.'

BUT

'Sorry, I'm not sure,' she replied, 'because I'm a stranger myself.'

If you break up speech to show an action or thought, use dashes, e.g. 'Do it like this –' he spun round '– or it won't work.'

Semi-colons, colons and dashes

A semi-colon (;) is used:

- to link two sentences (e.g. 'It was a hot day; she was glad of the air-conditioning.')
- to punctuate a list of items (e.g. 'John looked at his desk. Paper; pencil; rubber; pen; correction fluid; dictionary and calculator. Exactly what he needed.')

Colons (:) and dashes (–) indicate pauses that are stronger than a comma but not as strong as a full stop. For example: 'I could meet you at the train station – say, at ten?')

Words that sound similar but are spelled differently ...

Affect/effect

An event affects someone or has an effect on them –

effect is the noun (naming word) and affect is the verb (doing word).

Bought/brought

You bought a cake at the shop. (Verb is buy – i.e. you paid for it.) You brought it home. (Verb is bring – i.e. you took it somewhere.) So when it comes to giving things: 'I bought you a present' means someone has paid for a present but isn't necessarily going to give it to you; but 'I brought you a present' means someone is about to give something to you.

Breath/breathe

You take a breath or you breathe – breath is the noun (naming word) and breathe is the verb (doing word).

Compliment/complement

Compliment = to say something nice to someone (e.g. 'He complimented her on her dress'); complement = to go well with something (e.g. 'the red of her sweater complemented her dark hair').

Loose/lose

When you lose something you try to find it; when something is loose it needs tightening up. So when you lose some weight, your jeans will be loose.

Another way of remembering which is which is that loose is an adjective (describing word) and lose is a verb (doing word).

They're/their/there

They're = they are; their = belonging to them; and there = place. (e.g. 'They're cross because they've left their ball over there.')

To and too

To is used as a direction (going to a place) or an infinitive (she has a lot to do); too usually refers to an excess (too much, too little, too silly).

Whose/who's

Whose = belonging to whom, and who's = who is (e.g. 'Who's to say?' but 'Whose is that book?')

Wont/won't

Wont = custom ('as was his wont'); won't = will not

You're/your

You're = you are; your = belonging to them (e.g. 'You're cross because you've left your book behind.')

An eye to the future

It's easy to get into a rut, writing for the same publications regularly and being quite happy to do so.

But remember that the media is a shifting industry – even long-standing publications close (such as *Woman's Realm* in 2001), and new publications might only be on the stands for a month or two before the publishing company decides that sales aren't high enough or advertising revenue won't cover the costs. Plus there are trends – suddenly parenting or health or fitness is a popular area and the number of publications in the market doubles, then the market contracts again and many of the new titles disappear.

Personnel change quickly, too. If your editor at *Health Weekly* moves to a different publication, it's a chance for you to write for that publication too (editors often take regular freelancers with them). However, by the same token, it means you'll have to build up a relationship with the new editor of *Health Weekly*, who will be bringing his own tried-and-trusted freelancers with him.

To make sure you don't fall into the trap of relying on one or two particular publications or web sites (and

then finding yourself stuck if they close or the editor changes), keep widening your fields of interest – this improves your chances of staying in the market. Good ways of doing this include:

- finding a new angle on your regular topics – for example, if you usually write about health matters, you could write a piece about office health for an accountancy magazine; or if you usually write about financial matters you could write a piece for a health magazine about your ‘financial health’ and how being in control of your finances will reduce your stress levels (then go into detail about how to sort out your finances)
- finding new topics that interest you – this should come naturally from your research, especially if you make it a rule to find at least one new source for every article you write (magazine, book, web site, expert etc).

In summary

- Good communication is relevant, focused, timely and readable.
- Identify your target audience: consumer press, trade press, professional journals or specialist press for articles; internal, trade or special interest newsletters; paying or ‘free’ audience for web sites. Look at their age, gender, socio-economic group and lifestyle factors.

- Look at what your audience wants – news, information or entertainment.
 - Use the five Ws and an H to focus your work – what (subject), who (audience, case study and expert), where (tone and angle), when (topical, up to date), why (what’s in it for the audience), how (your approach).
 - Your language (tone and vocabulary) needs to be consistent with that of the publication where it appears.
 - Keep it simple and relevant.
 - Avoid bias and stereotypes.
 - Check your spelling and grammar.
 - Remember that editors, publications and web sites change – widen your fields of interest to avoid becoming too reliant on particular publications by finding new angles on regular topics and finding new topics that interest you.
-

2

Getting an article commissioned

The phone rings. It's the editor at *Health Weekly*. Can you just write a quick piece on such-and-such a subject, so many words, by a certain deadline? Oh, and by the way they'll pay you tons for it.

OK. It's a nice dream – especially the tons of money bit! But before an editor rings you asking you to write something, he needs to know:

- you exist
- you have a track record (i.e. you've written articles before, to the right brief and within deadline)
- you're available to write the piece.

So, unless you're an acknowledged expert in a field, don't expect editors to beat a path to your door and ask you to write for them. In most cases, the first contact has to come from you. And that means targeted marketing.

Identifying your market

What do you want to write?

Firstly, identify your market. What sort of articles do you want to write?

Forget the humorous column about your nearest and dearest – editors receive hundreds of similar offers and always refuse them (unless you're already famous or have an extremely good track record with that editor; plus it's harder than you'd think to sustain a column like this over the course of weeks and months).

Forget reviews, too. Editors are inundated with people offering to write reviews about books, films, travel, TV, music, restaurants, theatre performances, concerts and the like. Ditto articles about gardening, cookery and interior design – they're usually regular slots and they'll be written by an in-house expert or a long-standing freelance. There will be a large queue of people wanting to fill that person's shoes, too. Obvious anniversaries and 'reference book' type articles are also likely to be covered in-house.

So focus your energy on targeting an area that's easier to break into – in most cases, this is writing general features. That means an informative (and entertaining) article about one particular subject.

Which subject?

Make a list of what you can write about – and be specific.

- **do you have any qualifications?** (e.g. you're a mechanic and can give people advice on how to do minor jobs on their car, how to prepare it for winter etc.)

- **do you have experience** in doing something? (e.g. you may have restored furniture for years and can give people advice on how to care for their antiques)
- **are you an expert** in anything? What do you know about that others might not, but might be interested in? (Look at your hobbies – maybe you collect snuff boxes or breed finches and could write a feature on how to build up a collection or set up your own aviary.)
- **what are you interested in?** (NB you might not know much about the topic, but if you're interested in it you'll write with passion and be able to research your facts.)
- **do you know any experts** in particular areas who can give your article extra credibility? (See Chapter 4 for more about experts.)
- **do you know anyone with a story to tell**, e.g. the house move from hell for a feature on how to make moving house less stressful? (See Chapter 4 for more about case studies.)

It's best to stick to one particular area that you know well (such as health, parenting or finance) and then start to broaden out when you've had a few articles commissioned and can show a new editor your 'track record'.

Who should you target?

Once you've decided which area you want to work in, check:

- which publications cover that area. Look at Willing's Press Guide or the latest edition of the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook in your local library first, or start browsing the news stands to see:
 - which publications are available
 - how frequently they're published
 - which sort of topics they cover
- do they have slots for freelancers? You should be able to tell that from looking at the publication – check the masthead, which tells you:
 - who the editor is
 - the business name, address and contact details
 - members of staff

Once you've done that, read through the publication, check who the articles are written by (known as the 'by-line') and see how many of those writers are listed as part of the publication's staff.

Remember that small magazines and local publications are much easier to break into than national dailies and large-circulation magazines.

How should you target them?

When you've narrowed down which publications you want to target, try to get hold of four or five back issues and check the publication's style. What kind of articles do they publish? Specifically, look at:

- the length of each article. This will give you a rough idea of how long your article should be – it's usually around 800 words for a page in the average magazine. If you want a closer approximation, count the number of words in ten full lines, then divide by ten to get the number of words per line. Then count the number of lines per column – the

word-count is therefore the number of words per line x the number of lines per column x the number of columns

- the ratio of text to illustrations; the more illustrations, the shorter the article will be
- whether they use case studies and expert heads. Do they box them out or use them as part of the article (also known as running copy)?
- the layout – does it tend to be one long article (running copy) or is there a main piece with lots of ‘boxy’ pieces on the page (case studies and expert heads, as above, plus contact points, practical tips and the like)?
- the length of paragraphs and sentences: short or long?
- the tone (friendly, formal, serious, light-hearted) and vocabulary.

Identifying the gaps

Most monthly magazines work at least three months in advance – but there’s still no point in sending them an idea they covered only two months ago, unless you’re a regular reader of that publication and know they cover the same topic very regularly (in which case you need to make sure you have a new angle!)

This is where studying back issues comes in handy. It’s worth keeping a small database – either on index cards, a computer database package or a spreadsheet – showing which topics were covered, when, and by

which of your target publications. When you start to compare competing publications, you'll be able to see the topic 'gaps' and you'll be able to work out which ideas to send to which publication. Note that you'll need a new angle for the piece – the publication won't use something that's a direct copy from a rival. (And direct copying without acknowledgement is known as plagiarism – you can be sued, so don't do it! There's no copyright on facts but there is on the way they're written down.)

Approaching an editor

Now you know what you want to say and who you want to say it to, it's time to make your initial approach.

Contacting the features department

Larger publications have different editors to handle different sections of the publication – features, health, cookery, motoring and so forth. Some publications have a specific 'commissioning editor' who works with freelancers. Check the publication's masthead to find out who you should speak to. If the editorial staff aren't listed, ring the switchboard and ask to speak to the features department. You need to know:

- who are you talking to? (You'll need this in your covering letter or email.)
- does the publication accept freelance contributions?

- if so, who should you send your feature ideas, CV and cuttings to? Ask for the contact's name and job title and always check spellings.
- how do they prefer to receive contributions – email or by post?
- how much detail do they want for the ideas – a short paragraph per idea, or a more detailed approach (e.g. a whole page outline)?
- how far ahead are they working (i.e. which issue are they planning next)? If you can find out when the regular planning meetings are, it's a good idea to send ideas for features to the editor a week or two before the planning meeting.
- are they looking for ideas in any broad categories? For example, if you're talking to the features editor at *Health Weekly*, are they looking for women's health, children's health, allergies, pregnancy and childcare?
- are there any areas they're specifically avoiding? For example, they may already be planning a 'special' – a very long article or series of linked articles – about a particular topic and won't want to cover that for a few months before or after.

Your submissions package

Whether you're submitting your ideas by post or email, the basic elements of the package are the same:

- covering letter/email

- CV
- ideas
- copy of cuttings (send by post and make sure the photocopies are clear) or web site links (if you've had articles published on the web)
- SAE (for postal submissions)

Your covering letter

Keep it simple and relevant. A good template is:

Dear [Editor name]

I spoke to your colleague [name of person you spoke to] in the features department today and [he/she] suggested that I sent in my CV, some cuttings and some ideas.

[Alternatively, if you spoke to the editor personally:
Thank you for your time on the phone today.]

I enclose a copy of my CV, sample cuttings [list them – you only need 3 or 4] and some ideas for your [date] issue.

I look forward to hearing from you and enclose an SAE.

Yours sincerely

[your name]

Yes, it's bland – but it gives the information the editor wants. Anything else is irrelevant, wastes time and is therefore irritating (and more likely to net you a rejection; your ideas might be brilliant but if you're going to be a pain to work with and want to chat for hours on the phone, it's not worth the editor's time).

A few don'ts:

don't say who's rejected it before

- don't say what other people have said about it (the editor isn't interested in what your partner/parents/friends think!)
- don't say how hard you've worked (it's not relevant)
- don't say how much you expect to be paid for the article (it hasn't been accepted yet and the editor already knows how much he'll pay per thousand words).

Your CV

Again, keep it simple. Unless your academic qualifications or work experience are relevant to the type of article you're writing, don't bother including them – for example, if you're writing articles on financial matters it's worth mentioning that you're a qualified accountant but if you're writing general features it isn't.

What the editor wants to know is:

- your name
- your address

- your phone/fax/mobile numbers
- your email address
- brief paragraph outlining your work experience (e.g. how long you've been a freelance, any relevant work experience or qualifications, your areas of interest)
- what you've had published. Split it down into categories, if you can – e.g. if you've written health articles it could be on alternative health, nutrition, physical issues and psychological issues; in finance articles it could be on pensions, general insurance, investments, life insurance and other savings vehicles. List your article titles underneath the appropriate headings, together with the publication title and issue date.

A good template is:

CURRICULUM VITAE – Jane Smith

Address: 1 The Street, Anytown,
Countyshire, AB1 2CD

Phone: 01234 567890

Fax: 01234 567891

Mobile: 07123 456789

Email: jane.smith@email.co.uk

Work experience

Freelance for five years, working mainly in the parenting and women's health arena. Qualified

nutritionist and aromatherapist.

Articles published

Health, alternative

Insect repellents: *Baby Monthly*, 5.01

Aromatherapy shampoo: *Health Weekly*, 6.01

Natural cold remedies: *Health Weekly*, 11.01

Health, nutrition

Food allergies: *Health Weekly*, 7.01

Healthy lunches: *Health Weekly*, 9.01

Your ideas

If the features department said they wanted long outlines, put each one on a separate piece of paper (make sure your name and contact number is on the header on each page in case any get separated from your submissions package). A good structure for a long outline is:

- title
- introductory paragraph
- bullet points for your main arguments
- concluding paragraph
- brief outline of case study (if appropriate) or expert (if appropriate)

If the features department said they wanted brief outlines, that means one paragraph per idea. You can list more than one per page but again make sure your contact details are on each page in case any become

separated from the rest of your submissions package.

A good structure for a short outline is:

- title
- brief outline of what you're going to cover
- plus case study, expert head, contacts.

For example, if you were targeting a parenting magazine, your short outline might read:

Cravings and aversions

outline by Jane Smith

- Causes of craving not known – theory that it's the body needing certain nutrients
- what's dangerous and what's not (i.e. avoid non-food cravings) and when to see your GP for help
- aversions are likely to be caused by hormonal changes – common ones include coffee, tea, alcohol, chocolate
- case study (Alice Brown, age 30, children 6 months and 3 years; pics available)
- expert head (Sue Heath, lecturer in midwifery, University of Anytown; headshot available)
- contact points

Covering email

If the features department gives you an email address, don't abuse it! Send three or four short ideas at a time and wait at least a couple of weeks (for feedback) before you send the next ones, otherwise you may find they'll regard you as a nuisance and just delete your email without reading them.

For your initial contact:

Dear [editor name]

I spoke to your colleague [name] in the features department today and [he/she] suggested that I email you some ideas and a rough CV.

I've written for the following publications, including:

[bullet point list – publication name plus three or four article titles in each]

I've also written for [web site name] web site – see [include the URL for your article on that site].

Please find some ideas for the [issue date] issue below – if you've already commissioned them, let me know and I'd be very happy to send you some others.

Kind regards

[your name]

[your phone number]

[your email address]

When to chase

Editors are busy people. If it's a small magazine, the editor might have only one – part-time assistant. Either way, don't expect an answer by return and don't pester – that's the quickest way to a rejection slip.

If you haven't heard within a month, either assume that they didn't like your ideas (not all editors answer letters, even if you enclose an SAE) and send some more, or ring and ask *politely* if you can have some feedback on where you went wrong so you can send something more suitable next time.

Then keep going. It might take time, so persevere (but, as I said above, don't pester!).

When an editor approaches you

Some editors like to plan the issue first and commission out the articles afterwards. If you're an acknowledged expert in the field, you've sent in a CV showing a good track record or you've written articles for that editor in the past and are now considered a 'regular freelance', the editor might ring you and ask if you can do such-and-such. They'll give you a brief, tell you how many words they need and set you a deadline.

If you can't do it (due to other deadlines or the fact you don't like the subject), say so. It's better to be upfront and say you can't do it than to say yes and then fail to deliver. But be positive and offer something new instead.

If you accept the commission, there are two golden rules:

- stick to the deadline
- If you have a problem, ring the editor and talk it through. (The editor might have suggested an angle which doesn't work out when you start to research it – if that's the case you need to offer an alternative. Offer solutions, not problems.)

Commissioning forms

The editor will usually either email you a brief (possibly based on the idea you submitted) or send you a commissioning form, depending on whether you've written for that company before and signed any standard forms about editorial agreements.

The commissioning form will contain:

- your name
- your address
- the issue details (issue date and publication date)
- nature of commission (what you're writing – this may be as brief as just the topic name or may be a more detailed brief about the title, the main points, any box-outs needed, whether a case study and/or expert head is needed, any pictures)
- deadline
- length
- fee
- payment terms (usually 30 days after publication;

if the article isn't used, they will pay you a 'kill fee')

- rights (these may be First British Serial Rights, where you can then sell the article again to another editor as long as it's after a specified amount of time following publication, and you'll need to tell the second editor that you've already sold the FBSR); world periodical rights; rights to reprint without additional payment in other publications issued or web site owned by that company. Often an editor will ask for 'all rights'.)
- where to send the invoice and any reference you need to quote in your invoice.

Dealing with rejection

Rejections happen. You might have sold a dozen articles to a publication and the editor decides he doesn't like your next idea. Don't take it personally; either the topic's already been covered by someone else (remember, if they have a long lead time and use other freelancers, someone else might come up with the same idea as you) or it isn't what they want right now. So sulk for a bit, then try the rejected idea on someone else (making sure you've targeted it properly) and send some new ideas to the editor who's just rejected you.

Recycling

There's no copyright in facts so you can write several different pieces using the same information and sell it to different markets – as long as you remember to rephrase what you wrote!

Two quick ways of recycling are:

- changing the angle – e.g. if you've written a piece for a fitness magazine about the heart, you can change the angle slightly for the health pages of a general interest or women's magazine about preventing heart disease; or a piece for a specialist magazine can be made into a local piece
- combining elements of different articles to make a new one – parts of an article about dairy farming and fishing could become a new article about the benefits of organic farming and fishing, for example.

In summary

- Unless you're an acknowledged expert in your field, you'll need to contact the editor for the first time.
- Look at what sort of article you want to write, the sort of subjects you can write about, which publications cover that sort of topic and whether they use freelancers.
- Look at your target publication's style – length, use of case studies and experts, layout, length of paragraphs and sentences, tone and vocabulary.
- Identify the topics that haven't been covered (and remember how far in advance the publication works!).
- Ring the features department to find out if they

accept freelance contributions and, if so, who to send your ideas to, how much detail they want, whether they'd prefer email or post, which issue they're planning next, which categories they want to cover (broad terms).

- Prepare your submissions package – a covering letter, your CV (contact details and list of articles published), cuttings, ideas (brief paragraph or longer outlines) and SAE (or, for email, a truncated CV and a couple of web site article URLs).
- If you haven't heard within a month, assume a rejection – send in more ideas and don't pester.
- If an editor asks you to write something, stick to the deadline and discuss any problems straight-away – it's OK to refuse a commission but come up with an alternative!
- The commissioning form will tell you your brief, fee, payment details, appearance date and deadline.
- Don't take rejections personally – the topic's either not right at that point or may have been covered by someone else (remember lead times!). Try the idea elsewhere and come up with new ones for the editor who rejected you.
- Recycle topics by changing your angle or combining elements from several articles.

3

Writing articles

Types of article

Articles can usually be split into the following types:

- 'how to' articles – i.e. how to do something, such as improving your diet, or how to look after antique pewter. The subject must be interesting to other people and will usually need illustrations or pictures
- think pieces – factual pieces which give the writer's opinion on topical items that would interest the publication's readers; they may attempt to change the readers' perception of something or persuade them to listen to an argument
- news stories – about a person or event (the best angles here are the odd, the interesting and the unusual)
- true life stories (life-changing experiences, confession/repentance etc.; often you can use a case study as the lead section of an article)

- interviews (usually with a celebrity or someone high-profile)
- reviews
- ‘fillers’ or very short articles, sometimes 50–150 words – these can be anything from humorous anecdotes through to practical tips or even a numbered list, such as 3 reasons to get your blood-pressure checked.

They can also be an amalgam – for example, the ‘Cravings and Aversions’ article for *Health Weekly* outlined in the previous chapter is a mixture of these: it’s a factual article which includes news and a true-life story.

Features within a feature

Depending on your target publication’s audience and market sector, their preferred articles might be very plain (for example, in a learned journal) or they might be very ‘boxy’, full of lots of little bits of information.

Typical ‘box-outs’ include:

- case studies or anecdotes (see Chapter 4 for more information)
- expert heads (see Chapter 4)
- quizzes (usually self-scoring)
- practical tips or advice (often numbered or in alphabetical order – for example 5 ways to avoid sibling rivalry, 7 things you never knew about honey, A–Z of uplifting aromatherapy oils)

- statistics
- summaries (usually in bullet-point format – condensing down the main points of the article)
- contact points (can include phone, address, email or web site)
- illustrated panels (e.g. in an article about skin problems, different types of rashes, with a brief description of where they start and distinguishing features).

Our ‘Cravings and Aversions’ article for *Health Weekly* would have quite a few potential box-outs:

- case study (Alice Brown)
- expert head (Sue Heath)
- practical tips or advice (either dangerous cravings or common aversions)
- contact points (NHS Direct and the National Child-birth Trust, for example).

Angles

The angle of your article depends on the audience and the point you want to make.

Many feature editors know that they’re going to cover certain subjects at certain times of the year – in health pages, for example, there’s always an article about smoking in March (to tie in with No Smoking Day), something about sun safety in the summer, and something about stress in the run-up to Christmas. The trick

is to find the new angle – in other words, a way of telling the story differently, with fresh information. Tell the audience something they don't already know.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- what's the storyline? (subject)
- who's my audience? (publication, brief description of readership)
- what point do I want to make? (tells you if your angle is relevant!)

For our 'Cravings and Aversions' article, the answers would be:

- cravings and aversions in pregnancy
- *Health Weekly*, aimed at women aged 25–40, C2DE socio-economic group
- advice on what's normal and what's not, and where to go for help

Some types of angles include:

- controversy
- cutting-edge research
- dramatic story

If our case study, Alice Brown, has had an urge to eat coal during pregnancy and was ill as a consequence, that's a 'dramatic story' angle. If Sue Heath has some new information about why women have cravings, that's a 'cutting-edge research' angle.

Headlines

Don't worry too much about coming up with a brilliant headline – that's part of the job of the sub-editors at a publication. A basic factual title which tells the editor what your article is about is fine. (20 ways to be fit for life, How to train for a marathon, How to check your home insurance cover's up to date)

Though if you're producing an article for a newsletter or web site, your editor will appreciate any attempts at headlines. (See Chapter 6.)

Your headline needs to make an impact. Keep it as short as possible.

The most common sorts of headlines are:

- label – for example, *How to get the most from your pension*
- question (or provocative statement) – for example, *Can you live on £10 a week?*
- quote (or twist it slightly)
- pun
- 'screamer' – this is usually with an exclamation mark at the end, for example *Coal nearly killed my baby!*

Crossheads

Crossheads are simply subtitles placed in the middle of the column above a paragraph (hence the name – they go across the head of the paragraph). They help the readers skim your article and concentrate on the

areas that interest them most.

As with headlines, you don't need to think them up yourself for magazine articles – this is part of the sub-editor's role – though you may need to produce them for web sites and newsletters.

The rule of thumb is to keep them as short as possible (one line of a column). They're usually labels.

Opening paragraph

The opening paragraph is what hooks your audience and persuades them to read on, so it needs to grab their attention. It should:

- be short and to the point
- tell the reader what the topic is and hint at what's to come (only one point – if you try to say too much it'll be cluttered)
- convey the essence of the story
- say how the story will affect the reader (what it means)
- tell the reader something new and interesting (your best bit of information).

Good ways of starting include:

- statements (the most common type of start for a feature)
- questions (provoke the audience; make them think)

- startling facts
- specifics rather than generalisations
- quotes (always attribute them – also better for magazines than newspapers; if your editor hates it use reported speech)
- anecdotes (usually an oblique start so be careful – it has to grab attention)
- description/scene-setting (feature, rather than news – make the audience feel as if they're there, be colourful).

Take the tone from your publication – if they're bold you need to be bold too

Body copy

The middle of your article is known as body copy and is the informative section. It explains your introduction and amplifies it.

A good way of developing body copy is to ask yourself what the audience needs or wants to know next.

For your first draft, write down the bare bones of the points you want to make, then put them in a logical sequence. This is sometimes known as the 'pyramid' structure – you start with the most important piece of information and then the next most, until the least important information is at the end.

In news stories, the structure should be:

- introduction

- retelling introduction with more information
- further information (including background) and quote.

In features, the structure should be:

- introduction
- context paragraph
- scope of the article/why the audience should read on
- main body copy (logical order)
- conclusion.

Tips for body copy:

- try to get the 5 Ws in as quickly as possible
- stick to one thought per paragraph. The first sentence is the main thought, the next one (or two) develops it, and the final sentence rounds off the thought.
- vary your paragraph lengths to make it more interesting to the reader
- check out any facts at least twice – and check that your statements are supported by a reliable source
- use the latest information and attribute quotes correctly
- statistics and facts can be dull so illustrate them –

compare them with something but give the statistics as well. Be specific – state exactly *how* big, not ‘very’ big.

Closing paragraph

This needs to tie up with the beginning but don’t repeat the introduction. Some readers look at the first and last paragraphs of an article and then decide whether or not to read it.

So let the reader go away with something new. Go for impact; keep the conclusion as short as the introduction, and use your second-best bit of information.

Quotes are good, especially if they embody your main point – something for the reader to take away.

Using contact points

These are where the reader can go for more help – such as professional organisations, self-help groups and stockists of a product mentioned in the article. They’re usually placed at the end of the article – often in a box-out – and your audience will need to know:

- name of the organisation
- phone, email and web site details
- opening hours, if appropriate
- stockist details, if appropriate.

Presentation of your manuscript

Your editor might ask for hard copy (meaning the paper copy) or email, or possibly both.

If you're sending hard copy, make sure:

- it's printed on letter-quality print (with a new ribbon or decent ink cartridge!) on A4 paper
- it's double spaced (i.e. has a blank line between each line of text)
- it has a 2cm margin on all sides of the paper
- it has consecutive page numbers, your name and the article title or subject (as an identifier) in the top right-hand corner
- it has the article title and your name on the first page
- your paragraphs are consistent – either indent the first line of each paragraph, or start each paragraph full out to the left-hand side and leave a blank line between paragraphs (don't mix them!)
- you've used a paperclip to keep the pages together (never use a staple or a pin)
- you've checked your copy for errors (factual and typing) before you send it off

Where to get ideas

For the article-writer, anything is a source of ideas!

You could be talking with friends about a subject and suddenly realise it's a topic that affects a certain group of people – for example, back pain affecting office workers and people who drive.

Or you might read an article and feel you still have questions about the subject that haven't been answered – your article would therefore cover the same subject but have a different angle.

Good sources of newsy ideas include:

Press releases

- ring support groups, professional organisations and commercial organisations in the area that interests you and ask to go on their mailing list as a freelance journalist
- ring PR companies who've given you case studies, experts or product samples before; tell them your areas of interest and, if they have other clients who fit the bill, ask to go on their mailing list

Internet

- check the 'news' or PR pages of professional and self-help group sites in your area of interest
- check out news sources on resource web sites such as www.journalismuk.co.uk (to find others, look on your usual browser under 'news and media', then 'journalism')
- check out clippings, wire and news services (e.g. newsnow – www.newsnow.co.uk and PR newswire – www.prnewswire.co.uk).

In summary

- Types of article include: 'how to', think pieces, news stories, true life stories, interviews, reviews and fillers.
- Typical box-outs include case studies, anecdotes, expert heads, quizzes, practical tips or advice, statistics, summaries, contact points, illustrated panels.
- The angle depends on the audience and the point you want to make.
- Tell the audience something they don't already know.
- Check if you have the right angle for your audience – what's the storyline, who's your audience, what point do you want to make?
- Types of headline include label, question or provocative statement, quote, pun, 'screamer'.
- Crossheads are subtitles that help readers concentrate on the areas that interest them most; they're usually labels. Keep them short.
- Opening paragraphs hook the reader, grab attention, are short and to the point. Start with a statement, a question, a startling fact, a quote, an anecdote or scene-setting – but be specific rather than generalise.
- Body copy explains the introduction and amplifies it – use a pyramid structure for news (most impor-

tant information first) and a logical sequence for features.

- Stick to one thought per paragraph and vary the length of your sentences and paragraphs.
- Check your facts.
- Use the latest information.
- Attribute quotes correctly.
- The closing paragraph ties up with the beginning – don't repeat the introduction but bring in new information (your second-best piece). Aim for impact.
- Contacts points are where the reader can go for more information – include the name, address, phone, opening times, email, web site and stockist details.
- Print your article with a new ribbon or decent ink cartridge on A4 paper, using double spacing and 2cm margins, number the pages and put the article title and your name on the first page, use a paperclip to keep pages together, and check it for errors before you send it off.
- Good sources of news include press releases (support groups, professional organisations, commercial organisations, PR companies) and the internet (news/PR pages, resource sites, clippings/wire/news services).

4

Case studies and experts

Case studies

A case study is simply someone whose experience illustrates the point you're making in the article. It helps the average reader identify with your subject

If you are using a local story it's even more important to use a local case study, if possible, so the audience can relate to it.

Where to find case studies

Depending on your story, you could ask people you know. Other sources of case studies include:

- special-interest groups
- professional organisations
- clubs

- support or self-help groups
- PR companies (particularly if your story features a product or service).

For example, if you were writing a piece about eczema and wanted to include a case study who had discovered that certain foods made their eczema worse, you could contact the press office of a national body such as the National Eczema Society. If you wanted a case study who had used a specific complementary or alternative remedy which helped the condition, you could contact the press office (or media liaison officer) of national bodies, asking if a therapist could help you find an appropriate case study. Bear in mind patient confidentiality – the therapist would need to ask the patient first and then ask the patient to contact you. Or you could try the press office (or PR company) of the company making a certain type of cream.

Experts

Experts are useful at illustrating points you have made. They're also good at coming up with extra information you might not get elsewhere.

Some magazines ask for 'expert heads' – that's simply a boxed-out section of the article where your expert comments on one or two particular points, and the box usually contains a head-and-shoulders picture (known as a 'head shot') of the expert.

Where to find experts

Good sources of experts include:

- special-interest groups
- professional organisations
- support or self-help groups
- PR companies (particularly if your story features a product or service – they often have spokespeople available)
- University PR offices
- PR organisations such as Profnet (linking you to university offices in the US and North America as well as Europe – contact them at www.profnet.com).

For example, if you wanted to include an expert's comments about causes, treatments or statistics in the eczema piece, you could contact a professional body such as the National Eczema Society, your local office of the Department of Health, the PR department of your local hospital or the PR department of a university. If you wanted to focus on a specific therapy, you could contact the press office (or media liaison contact) of national bodies, asking if a therapist would be prepared to give you some quotes.

Interviewing techniques

Case studies aren't used to dealing with the media and may be nervous. You need to put your subject at ease – empathise with them, reassure them that you are not trying to make them look silly or dramatic, and you'll only use quotes with their permission.

Experts are more used to dealing with the media but

some may have had a bad experience in the past, so be polite rather than blasé!

Arranging the interview

Your interview can be in person, by phone or – depending on the arrangement you have with your interviewee – an emailed list of questions.

If you want to tape the interview (this isn't mandatory), ask permission first.

If the interview is by phone, make sure you ring at the right time – if something crops up and you can't make the interview, always ring as soon as you can to rearrange it.

If the interview is in person, aim for a place that's quiet (so you can hear the answers!) and where you won't be interrupted.

Make sure the interviewee knows:

- who you are
- the subject of your article
- the angle you're taking (and why you want to talk to them)
- when and where the article is due to appear (experts in particular like to know what the readership of the publication is – this gives them an idea of the readership's familiarity with the subject and how to pitch what they tell you).

Preparing for the interview

Do your research first – this saves your interviewee having to repeat any information and will make sure you're not asking standard questions that have already been answered before (particularly if your interviewee has been interviewed many times before on the same subject) or where you could find the information easily elsewhere.

Write down your list of questions, making sure you either already have the background or the questions covering *who/what/when/where/why* and *how*. Aim for a list of around 20 which will keep your subject talking – but be flexible as you may learn new information that could make a follow-up article, or that might change the focus of your article entirely.

Your questions should be:

- open-ended (i.e. they need more than a one-word answer!)
- precise
- relevant to what your audience wants to know (note that if you're writing for a daily paper, your audience will have a different interest from that of a monthly consumer magazine, which is different again from the trade press)
- preferably ones that only your interviewee can answer.

Conducting the interview

Be polite – you may wish to talk to this expert (or a colleague) again, so you need to build up a good relationship.

Go through your list of questions or talk through the main points in a logical way. Listen for points that need expanding and note follow-up questions. Listen to the answers – if they answer a question later in your list, don't ask a second time unless you want something clarified.

Ask for more detail if you need it. And always ask if you don't understand anything – it's much better to do this than to look foolish later when the sub-editor checks your copy and finds you've got it all wrong! Remember, if you don't understand something your audience isn't likely to either. Check spellings of names, places and technical phrases, and how your interviewee wants to be referred to (e.g. from our 'Cravings and Aversions' article, Sue Heath could be 'senior lecturer in midwifery at the University of Anytown' or 'midwife'. And are you sure it's the University of Anytown and not Anytown University?)

Once you've covered your questions (and you're sure you have the 5 Ws and an H), thank your interviewee for his time and ask if he has anything to add.

After the interview

Send your interviewee a note to thank them for their time. (Good relationship-building, again.)

Double-check your facts to make sure they're correct – and also to rule out potential cases of libel.

If you've promised to send your interviewee a copy of the article, make sure you do so.

Whose article is it, anyway?

Some experts and case studies have had bad experiences in the past – for example, a journalist may have misquoted them to suit the angle of the piece – so they may be wary and want to see the final piece before you submit it. It's actually a good idea to do this in case you've misunderstood any technical details, but make sure your interviewee realises that the editor has the final say so the words might change before the article appears.

Contacts database

Keep a note of who you speak to, where they are and their contact names – you may need to use them for a different piece in the future. Keep them on a database or on index cards, where you can retrieve the information quickly. You may like to have separate databases for:

- editors
- experts
- press liaison officers for special-interest groups, professional organisations, support or self-help groups
- PR companies (particularly if your story features a product or service).

In media and PR, there's often a very quick turnaround of staff, so try to keep your information up to date.

In summary

- A case study is someone whose experience illustrates the point you're making in the article; good sources include special-interest groups, professional organisations, clubs, support or self-help groups and PR companies.
- Experts are useful at illustrating points you've made and giving new information. Good sources include special-interest groups, professional organisations, support or self-help groups, PR companies, university PR offices and PR organisations.
- Interviews can be in person, by phone or by email. Be on time and avoid interruptions. The interviewee will need to know who you are, the subject of your article, the angle you're taking (and why you want to talk to them), and when and where the article is due to appear.
- Do your research first.
- Write down your list of questions, covering the background and the '5Ws and an H' – but be flexible.
- Make your questions open-ended, precise and relevant.
- Go through your list of questions or talk through the main points in a logical way. Listen for points that need expanding and note follow-up questions. Ask for more detail if you need it or if you don't understand something.

- Check spellings of names, places and technical phrases.
 - Ask if the interviewee wants to add anything.
 - Double-check your facts.
 - Let the interviewee see the piece to make any factual changes but explain that the editor has the final say.
 - Keep a contacts database – and keep it up to date!
-

5

Producing newsletters

A newsletter is basically a set of information that's not easily available elsewhere; and it should help its readers feel part of a larger community.

The format can vary widely, from a single sheet of A4 (perhaps folded in half) through to a glossy full-colour publication that may even carry adverts.

Generally, newsletters are used for:

- schools, clubs, hobbies and special-interest groups
- businesses (internal or 'in-house', customer, supplier/distributor – for marketing purposes and to help staff morale)
- professional groups.

If you produce a regular newsletter with a large circulation, by law you should send a copy to the British Library – the Legal Deposit Office, British Library, Boston Spa, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 7BY.

Where does your newsletter fit in?

This is where the '5 Ws and an H' come in again.

- why do you want to produce a newsletter? (the aims)
- who are you talking to? (the audience)
- what does the audience want to know and what kind of topics are you going to cover? (content)
- where else do your readers get their information? (content again – important, because if what you're covering is already available elsewhere, your newsletter will be redundant)
- when are you going to produce it? (frequency)
- how are your readers going to receive it? (format and distribution).

As long as you're sure there's a need for your newsletter (particularly if you're expecting people to pay for it), you can start to plan your newsletter.

Aims of your newsletter

This depends in part on your audience. Write a list of your aims, then put them in order of importance and have the top three in mind when you plan your newsletter.

Your aims could include:

- giving information (e.g. dates of future events for your club, the cost and who to contact for tickets)

- passing on important news (for example, changes in business strategy and their likely effect on staff)
- establishing a community
- marketing aid
- increasing business.

Your audience

Who are they and what do they expect? This will affect your format, content, tone and vocabulary. Look at:

- age
- gender
- socio-economic grouping and lifestyle (income, education, interests)
- when they're likely to see your newsletter and where they're likely to read it
- what they're expecting from your newsletter.

The content

If you can do some audience research beforehand, so much the better – for example, if you're producing an in-house staff newsletter, talk to your colleagues to find out what they'd like to read about. If you're producing a newsletter for a playgroup, ask a few mums

what they'd like to see in it. You could try sending out a questionnaire to your readers or potential audience (though you may find the response is low unless you offer an incentive), or simply ask the questions face-to-face and note the answers on a tick-sheet (or any other format that's easy to analyse quickly).

Where else do they get their information? How can you make it quicker and easier for them? Ask yourself what added value your newsletter is going to bring.

Are there any items that will be a regular feature of your newsletter? For example:

- contents page
- contact information (for example, for a gym's newsletter, class times and costs, how to book and who to contact)
- what's on
- note from the chair/editor/figure of authority
- regular columns
- competition
- 'stop press' – snippets of news that you'll cover in more detail in the next issue.

You need a regular and consistent structure so your readers can find their way round the newsletter easily. Think about the newspapers and magazines you usually read – you can turn to the horoscopes page, the TV page, the weather report or the 'what's on locally' guide without even thinking about it. Your readers need to be just as familiar with your newsletter.

For example, if your 'future events' slot appears on page 6 in this issue, it needs to be in the same place in the next issue.

The most important material should go on the front, the back or in the centre pages, as these are the 'hotspots' of the newsletter. If those spaces are full, then use the first half of the newsletter, as readers turn to this first. Use the second half of the newsletter for information that's only interesting to some of your readers.

Production issues

Look at:

- how frequently it's going to be published. This depends on your audience's needs; it may also depend on how the newsletter is distributed, how long it takes to print and how long it takes to put together
- how it's distributed – by hand, by mail or by 'bulk drop' where the audience can pick it up from strategic sites such as a club room or shop
- the format – the look and feel of the newsletter. This will depend partly on your audience's expectations, partly on how it's going to be produced and distributed and partly on the contents. If you're sending it out by mail it needs to fit standard-size envelopes and the postage costs will depend on the weight. A charity's unlikely to need a glossy, heavy newsletter because it looks expensive and they would rather spend funds on the charity work. Colour is expensive, especially for very short print

runs – if you're only producing 100 newsletters you might find it costs too much to do it in full colour. Think about:

- the number and size of pages; it can be any size you like but A5 and A4 are the most common and practical sizes; the size depends on your audience's expectations but it's best to stick to 1, 2 or a multiple of 4 pages for ease and cheapness of production.
- whether it's black and white (mono), has one or two additional colours (e.g. for titles or illustrations) or is full-colour
- the quality and weight of paper; lower quality means you need to be careful with illustrations because the ink tends to 'bleed' on the paper, whereas paper of a higher quality and weight costs more and may break your budget
- illustrations – photographs or line drawings?
- are you going to include advertisements? If so, your advertisers will want to know how many copies are produced, how frequently, and the target audience
- the design or layout (see page 71 for more details).

The printer

If your newsletter and circulation are very small, you might be able to produce the newsletter yourself, with a desktop publishing package and a photocopier. If it's bigger (and needs 'stitching' or stapling together), has glossy production values (full colour and lots of pictures on heavy, quality paper) or has a large circulation, you'll need to use a printer.

Most towns have a quick-stop print shop. If your

budget's tight, it's also worth asking the print unit at your local college if they can do the job for you.

What the printer needs from you is:

- a style guide (a previous copy of the newsletter will do, or if it's a completely new newsletter he'll need a design guide)
- the copy, either on disk or in a form he can scan in (they can typeset it for you, but this costs more)
- any artwork
- a note of how many copies you need (always add on half a dozen for spares – including one for your files and a library copy)
- a deadline (negotiate this up front).

The printer will then give you a set of proofs, which you'll return with any corrections, and then your newsletter can be printed.

House style

The 'house style' is a set of guidelines which tells any contributors or editors about the format of words, abbreviations, capital letters and the like in any articles submitted to your newsletter. This will help make your newsletter consistent. House style usually includes:

- abbreviations – for example, unless it's well-known to your readers, write it out in full the first time you use it with the abbreviation in brackets immediately afterwards

- capital letters – for example, used only for proper nouns (trade names, company names) but not job titles; specify whether the first word of an article will be set in capitals
- dates – in full or in numbers? Day or month first? E.g. 1 January 2002, January 1st 2002, 1.1.02
- italics – for example, used only for publication names and foreign words
- measurements – for example, space or no space between the unit and the measurement: 5cm or 5 cm?
- numbers – for example, written in full up to 20 and thereafter in numbers; use of % or per cent
- speechmarks – decide whether you'll use double ("he said") or single ('he said') and this will also tell you how to deal with quotes within quotes (double within single or single within double, e.g. "What do you mean by 'now'?" he asked.)
- spellings – e.g. -ize or -ise endings, judgement or judgment, -ed or -t endings for past tense of verbs such as lean or learn.

Typeface

Typefaces fall into two basic types:

serif faces

These have curly bits round the edges and are best for

long pieces of text as they're easier to read. Many publications use serif typefaces for body copy.

This is a serif font called Times New Roman

sans serif faces

These don't have any curls – like this typeface – and are good for headlines as they're clear and have impact.

This is a sans serif font called Arial

Always use upper and lower case for headlines – capitals are much harder to read!

Grid layout

A grid is simply an easy way to help you with the 'look' of your newsletter. Simply divide your page into the number of columns you want, then work out where your pictures will fit, how big they'll be, how much space you'll use for the headlines (be consistent with the size and typeface, so they're the same between pages and between issues) and how the text will work round them.

Put the important text on the top half of your pages – this is where the reader looks first.

One column

This is very simple and basic, best used for A5-sized newsletters. All articles span the width of the page.

For example:

This is a single-column newsletter page

And this is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like.

Subhead goes across here

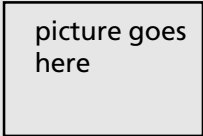
And this is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like.

Two columns

Simply as it sounds – the text is in two columns on each page. It's more flexible than a single-column grid and means you can make more interesting 'shapes'. It can be used for A5 and A4-sized newsletters.

This is a two-column newsletter page

And this is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the give you an idea of what it looks

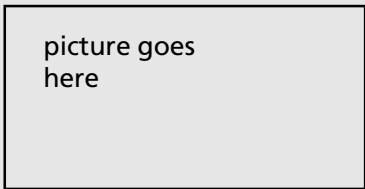


And this is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the body text

Three columns

The text is on three columns on each page which makes it even more versatile – you can have pictures spanning one or two columns. It's best used for A4-sized newsletters (the columns on an A5-sized newsletter would be too narrow).

This is a three-column newsletter page



Subhead
And this is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is

the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the body textan idea

Headline

And this is the body text to give you an idea of what it looks like. This is the



Illustrations

Illustrations in your newsletter depend on your budget, the resources you have in-house, the paper you use and whether you're using colour.

The type of illustrations you could use include:

- photographs (glossy photographs reproduce better than matt; check that it has good tone rather than appearing 'muddy')
- diagrams
- charts (they must have clear labels and contrasting colours so they're easy to read)
- tables (must have clear labels and the figures must be big enough to read)
- drawings (must be clear).

The illustration must be relevant to the story it accompanies and it also needs to be interesting, if it's to grab the reader's attention. Is the story about someone handing a cheque over to your charity? The traditional 'handshake' photo is boring. What did they do to raise the money? If it was a sponsored slim, could you have a picture of the weight-losers next to a mountain of sugar equivalent to the weight they lost? Make it visual!

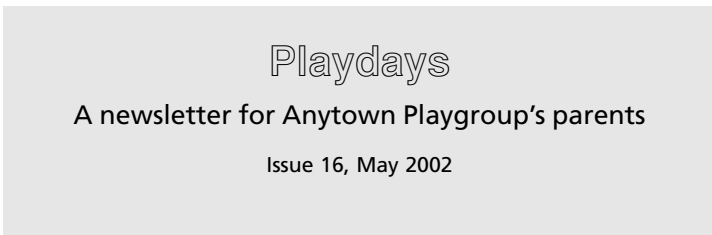
Keep it simple, too, so you don't clutter the pages. Too many different sorts of items on a page – shaded panels, boxes and the like – can make your newsletter look 'bitty' and amateur.

Nameplates

Your nameplate is basically what your newsletter is called. It's always at the top of the first page (on the front cover) and it includes:

- the name of the publication
- a line describing it
- the issue number and date.

For example, you might produce a termly newsletter called Playdays for the parents of children belonging to Anytown Playgroup. Say it's been going for five years – three terms x five years means fifteen issues. The next issue's nameplate might look something like this:



Mastheads

The masthead usually appears at the back of a publication. It shows:

- the name and address of the business publishing the newsletter

- the editor's name and contact details
- the purpose of the publication
- deadline dates for the next issue.

So the masthead for our playgroup newsletter might read:

Playdays

A termly newsletter for the parents of children attending Anytown Playgroup

Published by Anytown Playgroup, 1 Church Street, Anytown AB1 2CD

Editor: Jane Smith, tel 01234 567890

Copy deadline for next issue: September 1

In summary

- A newsletter contains information that's not easily available elsewhere and helps its readers feel part of a larger community; its format varies from a single black and white sheet to a glossy publication.
- Look at your newsletter's aims, audience, content, frequency and distribution to see where it fits in and whether there's a need for it.

- The aims may include giving information, passing on important news, establishing a community, a marketing aid or increasing business.
- Consider your audience's age, gender, lifestyle and what they expect from your newsletter; this will determine your format, content, tone and vocabulary.
- What added value does your newsletter have? Ask the audience what they want. Consider using regular features to help build a regular and consistent structure.
- Put the most important material on the front, back or centre pages; the next most important goes in the first half, and information that's only important to some of your readers goes in the second half.
- How frequently does your audience need to see the newsletter? Are you distributing it by hand, mail or 'bulk drop'? What type of paper will you use, what size it is and is it colour? Will you include advertisements?
- If you use a printer, he'll need a style guide, the copy and artwork, marked-up hard copy, how many copies you need and the deadline. You'll then have a proof, which you can correct, and the newsletter will be printed.
- Develop a house style to tell contributors about your preferred format – this helps keep the newsletter consistent.

- Use serif faces for body copy and sans serif faces for headlines.
 - Do you need one, two or three columns? (One is best for A5 and two or three are more flexible for larger formats.)
 - Illustrations must be clear, relevant and attention-grabbing!
 - The nameplate goes at the front and includes the newsletter name, who it's for, the issue number and date.
 - The masthead goes at the back and includes the name and address of the organisation or business publishing the newsletter, the editor's name and contact details, the purpose of the publication and deadline dates for the next issue.
-

6

Writing and editing newsletters

The editor's job

Editing isn't just about making articles fit the space you have. You also need to think about:

- what to include
- what to leave out
- the order of articles
- how the articles are written.

You also need to be aware of your audience, whether they're getting what they want from your newsletter and whether their expectations change at all.

Planning the schedule

As well as having a consistent layout, your newsletter needs a consistent frequency. If you produce one in

January and one in April, your readers will expect the next one in July. If you produce it in May instead, then one in August, then one in September, they won't know what to expect and you'll lose their goodwill. If you're going to produce a quarterly newsletter, make it quarterly. If you change from monthly to every two months, that's fine – as long as you tell the audience so they know what to expect.

When you're planning your newsletter, start at the delivery date and work backwards. How long does each task take? This gives you your 'latest date' for the previous task, until you reach the start. Then simply turn your list into chronological order and you have your schedule.

With most newsletters, the tasks include:

- ideas meeting
- article writing
- articles in for editing and layout
- disk and artwork to printer
- proofreading and corrections
- delivery from printer to distribution agent
- delivery to reader

So the schedule for our playgroup could read:

Playdays newsletter schedule – March issue

Task	Time needed	Date
Ideas meeting	(3 weeks for writing articles)	14 January
Articles in for editing	1 week	4 February
Disk and artwork to printer	2 weeks	11 February
Proofreading and corrections	2 days	25 February
Delivery from printer to distribution agent	2 days	27 February
Delivery to reader	2 days	1 March

Who's going to write the articles?

This is a big question. If your organisation can't afford to pay an external agency (either a PR or full service advertising agency) to produce the newsletter, you might be the writer as well as the editor – in which case have another look at Chapters 3 and 4.

Or you might ask for contributions. This means:

- paying a freelance (remember your budgetary limitations!)
- asking readers to contribute

- asking other members of your organisation's committee/staff in your office to write an article.

Some people are delighted to have the chance of seeing their words in print. Others are terrified, thinking they're not good enough because they can't spell and their grammar's terrible (which is where you, as the editor, come in – you'll be sorting that out for them).

There's also the apathy factor: particularly if you're editing a newsletter as part of your role on a small committee, you'll probably find that the same old people turn up to help – and getting new helpers is like pulling teeth. Getting contributions to a newsletter is even harder!

So – how do you get people to contribute, and what do you need to tell them in advance?

How to get contributors

Assuming you can't pay for contributions – so using a freelance is out of the equation – you'll need to ask colleagues or fellow club members for contributions.

Try offering a title – 'specialist correspondent' – and the boost to their self-esteem will help persuade them to contribute. Small token payments can also help.

Or put an advert in your newsletter, telling your members which areas of expertise you need – 'wanted: book reviewer' for the Playdays newsletter, or 'wanted: craft ideas for the next newsletter'. Make sure potential contributors know your contact details and deadline date.

Briefing contributors

Your contributors will need to know:

- **who** – the target audience of your publication (unless they're another club member or staff member, for example, and therefore they already know the audience)
- **what** – the topic you want them to write about (if you want to be more specific, brief them about the topic, exactly which issues you want covered, and whether you want to include case studies, experts, contact points and the like)
- **when** you want it (the deadline)
- **where** to send their contribution (and whether you want it on paper, email or disk)
- **how** many words you want
- and, if there's a fee, how much it is.

They'll also need a copy of your house style sheet to guide their writing style. Explain that you may need to edit their words to fit the issue and remember that whereas professional writers are used to being edited, non-professional contributors often feel hurt that their prose has been changed, so you'll need to be tactful!

Editing contributions

Once the article is in, you can check the following:

- **targeting** – it's aimed at the right audience (look

at the tone and vocabulary)

- **logic** – it makes sense; if there's any confusion in the article, check with the writer and change it
- **accuracy** – always check facts and numbers because it's easy to make a typing mistake and hard to spot it!
- **consistency** – check that the article meets your house style and deals with figures, names and details consistently (e.g. if the article talks about Mr Bloggs until the last paragraph and then switches to 'Joe', it's not consistent)
- **balance** – are both sides of an argument treated fairly? If it's one-sided, do you need to balance this contribution with another article?
- **legality** – is anything libellous? Has any copyright been infringed (e.g. quotes that haven't had permission from the copyright owner)? If you have the right to publish the material, it's balanced and it's unlikely to offend friends or colleagues, you're probably safe.

You'll also need to check that it fits the space you've allocated to it. If it's too long, you'll need to cut (flowery language is a good place to start!) If it's too short, you'll need to put in some cross-heads to break up the text and bulk out the length.

Headlines and crossheads

The headline is the article title and it aims to 'hook' the reader. The cross-head is a kind of subtitle which

goes above a paragraph.

As the newsletter editor, it's your job to come up with good titles.

Rules for headlines and crossheads

- make an impact
- keep it relevant
- keep it short (5 words if possible for headlines, one or two for crossheads)
- keep your audience in mind – are they expecting something formal, something chatty, something witty?
- remember the types of headline from Chapter 3 – label, question, quote, pun, screamer

Writing the articles

If you're writing the article yourself, refer back to Chapter 3 about how to write articles.

Remember to keep it ABC – accurate, brief and clear. That means short sentences, understandable paragraphs and structured outlines.

Keep your writing simple – write as you'd speak, don't use jargon, and don't use lots of words if you can be more concise.

Getting feedback

Are you giving your audience what they want? To make sure, you need to get feedback. Ways of doing this include:

- a letters page – the letters they send in will give you a good idea of the sort of changes you need to make, if any
- a competition – if you don't get many entries and the prize is something your audience is interested in, the chances are they're not reading. Time to do more research.
- questionnaire or survey – depending on your circulation, you could send out the questionnaire or survey to all your readers or just a proportion (say, one in ten). Response tends to be low so you'll need an incentive to boost it, e.g. every entry going into a draw. Keep the questions short and relevant – what do you need to know?

In summary

- The editor makes the articles fit the space available and thinks about what to include, what to leave out, the order of articles and how the articles are written.
- Your newsletter needs a consistent structure and frequency.
- When planning the newsletter, set a realistic

schedule allowing enough time for all stages from writing to printing and distribution.

- If you don't want to write it all yourself, think about paying a freelance, asking readers to contribute, asking other members of the committee/club/staff to write an article.
 - Offer people a title and/or token payment. Or try an advert in your newsletter asking for contributions (be specific and make sure everyone knows your contact details and deadline date).
 - Your contributor needs to know the target audience, the topic, the deadline, the number of words, where and how to send it and the fee (if any), plus a copy of your house style sheet.
 - When editing contributions, check the targeting, logic, accuracy, consistency, balance and legality, plus whether it fits the space.
 - Headlines and crossheads need to be written with your audience in mind – they need to be short, relevant and make an impact.
 - Keep your articles accurate, brief and clear – use short sentences, understandable paragraphs and structured outlines.
 - Get feedback via a letters page, a competition, a questionnaire or a survey.
-

7

Writing for web sites and ezines

E-media and traditional media – the differences

Writing for websites and ezines (electronic magazines) isn't quite the same as writing for traditional media.

Firstly, it takes longer to read text on the screen than it does on a page (some experts say 25% longer). Large chunks of text will give your audience eyestrain; use lots of white space with short paragraphs.

Secondly, it's said that web-users have a 3-second attention span. They're more likely to skim-read and they don't concentrate on detail, especially if they're using the only phone-line at home and their ISP is pay-per-view (time costs money!) So you need to keep your words, sentences and paragraphs short and concise. Give a little bit of information at a time and use plenty of cross-heads – but don't make your audience scroll through pages and pages. Use graphics and pictures to illustrate your point but make sure they're quick to

download or you'll lose your audience.

Thirdly, your audience reads in a different way – whereas readers of traditional media might glance through pages between the articles they know they want to read, website readers don't bother spending time downloading pages that might not be of interest. Make sure your articles are relevant and clearly signposted.

Before you start writing

If you're writing for traditional media you know your target audience and the aim of the publication.

If you're writing for e-media, it's pretty much the same. You need to know the objective of the site – this could be to attract new visitors, build relationships with existing visitors or generate repeat traffic. The objectives will tell you the tone to use; the audience will tell you the vocabulary to use.

The text on your home page

Your home page needs to be quick to download or the audience will get fed up waiting and go elsewhere.

Use minimal text and graphics (keep it clean and easy to read) and tell people what the site's about. Use 'blurbs' so people know what they want to click on. A page just saying 'enter here' is a waste of space, and scrolling through tons of text to find what you want is equally irritating.

Text on your site

The site structure

The site needs to be easy to navigate. This means:

- have a neat, logical structure (a pyramid's good – essential information on the top level, more detail further down)
- put links into easy groups
- be consistent.

If you want to get lots of repeat visits, you can give information in stages – but don't frustrate the audience by making them wait too long. Say when the next bit of information will be available and make sure you stick to your deadline; if you don't, you'll lose credibility and the audience will think you're unreliable and not bother coming back.

The 'look' of the site

Boring as it sounds, black text on a light background is best – simply because it's easier to read. Yes, jazzy colour schemes do have an impact, but they also give the reader a headache after a while.

Use **bold** rather than *italic* for emphasis – it's easier to read on screen. Don't overdo it, though, or you'll be 'bullying' your readers.

And don't overdo 'screamers' – having lots of exclamation marks makes your text look amateur.

Don't have too much on a page. As a rule of thumb, if your article's more than 2 printed pages of text the web 'page' is too long.

Keep it interactive – and place links to other sites as far away from yours as possible.

Article structures

The audience of a website or ezine wants information – usually solutions to a problem – so your article needs to be specific, accurate, easy to understand and relevant. Try to predict what they want.

The heading of the article or page is important because it grabs attention. Use powerful words (e.g. ‘free’). Remember that a heading’s often displayed out of context – for example, in a search engine list or on a bookmark menu – so make the first word meaningful and information-carrying rather than clever.

Attention-grabbing headlines make your audience want to read on. Good ways include:

- asking questions
- using inverted commas round a couple of words (highlights them)
- using initial capitals on major words in the headline (but not usually ‘small’ words such as a, of, to, on, or, in).

For the article text, stick to one topic per article and use breakout links for further information. It’s better to have ten small, focused pages than three waffly ones where the audience can’t find what they want.

As a rule of thumb, use half the text you’d use for traditional media. Keep it focused by using:

- one idea per paragraph – with clear paragraph breaks
- cross-heads to break up the page – make them meaningful rather than clever
- bulleted or numbered lists (readers love these as they're easy to scan).

You can also keep your reader focused by asking questions so the audience will keep reading to find the answer.

Begin with the title – tell them what you're going to tell them.

Your introductory paragraph is next: a summary of the main points (preferably no more than three) and the conclusion.

Expand on the main points (one point per paragraph – give links to the appropriate section if you want to give more detail).

Conclude with a strong message – a review, a call to action or follow-up advice.

Language

Internet users are used to informality, so keep your language informal, personal and chatty – but don't talk down.

Keep your text short, snappy and to the point – internet users can't be bothered with waffle. That also means ditching any flowery language, any persuasive language or promotional puff – be objective, give straight facts and don't exaggerate.

Using links

Using links doesn't mean splitting a long chunk of text into several pages – hypertext isn't for continuous flow. Instead, the information's in several 'chunks', and each chunk should focus on one topic. This means the readers can select just those pages or chunks of information they're interested in.

Response mechanisms

If you encourage your readers to respond to you – for example, send you comments on email – make it clear if and when they can expect a reply.

If you offer a reply, it must be quick – 24 hours maximum – or your reader will lose confidence.

In summary

- It takes around 25% longer to read text on the screen than it does on a page so use lots of white space with short paragraphs.
- Your readers are more likely to skim-read so be concise and make sure illustrations are quick to download.
- Your readers won't bother to download pages that might not be of interest so make sure they're relevant and clearly signposted.
- What's the objective and audience of the site?

- Use minimal text and graphics on the home page and include blurbs.
- Make your site easy to navigate with a logical structure, links sorted into easy groups, and be consistent.
- Make it easy to read physically – stick to black text on a light background and use bold rather than italic for emphasis. Don't have too much on a page.
- Web articles need to be specific, accurate, easy to understand and relevant.
- Headings are important – grab attention by asking questions and using inverted commas or initial capitals.
- Stick to one topic per article with breakout links for more detail.
- Use one idea per paragraph; use bulleted or numbered lists.
- Begin with the title, summarise the main points, expand on the points then give a strong conclusion.
- Keep language informal and personal.
- Keep text short and to the point.
- Make each link focus on one topic
- If you're asking for comments, make it clear if and when the reader can expect a reply.

Glossary

body copy – the main text of an article, as opposed to headlines

box-out – information within an article that's placed in a separate box

by-line – the name you wish to appear next to your article (it may be at the beginning, the end or in smaller type at the side of the page): 'written by ...'

case study – someone whose experience illustrates the point you're making in the article

cover date – date on the front of a publication; usually the month or week *after* the date it's on sale (e.g. February cover date magazines go on sale in January)

crosshead – a word or words in the centre of the column to break up text

cuttings – also called 'cuts' – copies of your published articles

deadline – the day your article needs to be with the editor

expert head – a box-out where your expert comments on one or two particular points (often includes a head-and-shoulders photograph)

ezine – electronic magazine

feature – factual article of general interest (not news)

filler – short item which fills a space in a column of a newspaper or magazine, e.g. practical tips, quizzes, puzzles, jokes, interesting facts

font – typeface (usually also with the typesize)

hard copy – paper copy

head shot – head-and-shoulders picture, usually of an expert or a case study, but may also be of the journalist and used next to the by-line

house style – set of guidelines which tells any contributors or editors about the format of words, abbreviations, capital letters and the like

layout – arrangement of illustrations, headlines and body copy on a page

lead time – the time between your deadline and the publication going to print

masthead – goes at the back of the publication and includes the name and address of the organisation or business publishing the letter, the editor's name and contact details, the purpose of the publication and deadline dates for the next issue

nameplate – goes at the front of the publication and includes the publication name, who it's for, the issue number and date

plagiarism – copying directly from another source without acknowledgement

running copy – another term for body copy (i.e. with no box-outs)

screamers – exclamation marks

special – a longer-than-usual article or a linked series of articles in a magazine, dealing with a specific topic

Useful addresses

Chartered Institute of Journalists
2 Dock Offices, Surrey Quays Road, London SE16 2XU
telephone: 020 7252 1187
web site: www.ioj.co.uk

National Union of Journalists
Headland House, 308 Grays Inn Road,
London WC1X 8DP
telephone: 020 7278 7916
web site: www.nuj.org.uk

Society of Authors
84 Drayton Gardens, London, SW10 9SB
telephone: 020 7373 6642
web site: www.societyofauthors.org

The Society of Women Writers and Journalists
Send a stamped addressed envelope for details of
membership to:
Membership Secretary, Joyce Elsdon, Tamarisk Way,
East Preston, West Sussex BN16 2TF
web site: www.author.co.uk/swwj

Writers Guild of Great Britain
430 Edgware Road, London W2 1EH
telephone: 020 7723 8074
web site: www.writers.org.uk/guild

Useful internet sites

Journalism UK – www.journalismuk.co.uk

Ananova (wire) – www.ananova.com

**Other Easy Step by Step Guides
in the series include:**

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