

Caring for the Spirit

'Lost in translation': writing for publication

January 16 2007

Things to consider before you write

- Audience: who are you trying to reach?
- Style and length of article.
- Where to publish. Which journal?

Types of article

Look everywhere – locally and nationally – for opportunities to promote the work of your service and the added value you offer to patient care. As well as newspapers, magazines and professional journals, think about how your service fits with local corporate governance strategies, business plans, trust goal-setting etc.

Different types of article require different writing styles. For example, articles in hospital newsletters tend to be chatty, friendly, informal, while a clinical article in *Nursing Times* is objective, evidence-based, formal.

Know your audience; know your journal.

What are the different types of article in health/professional journals?

- News – usually written 'in-house' by journalists. Short, informative, factual. Details of who, what, where, why and when normally included in first paragraph. Include direct quotes and shorthand terminology: 'chaplains' rather than 'a working party of faith leaders from the chaplaincy service'.
- Feature – explores the human dimension. Aim is to create images in reader's mind; to generate emotion.
- Viewpoint/Opinion – personal perspective and may be controversial, provocative. Often written in reaction to topical event. Good starting point for new writers.
- Clinical/academic – factual, evidence-based, objective. Includes references, which should be accurate, up to date and presented in house style. More formal language; longer
- Internal reports/strategies – precise, condensed, factual, evidence based, accessible to all relevant disciplines

Also specialist journals and supplements (eg cancer care, mental health, hospital medicine), continuing professional development (CPD) articles – designed to extend learning by encouraging readers to reflect and research further.

So within one journal such as *Health Service Journal* or *Nursing Standard*, there is scope to write a 150-word personal perspective on a hot topical issue, a 1,500-word feature on, for example, a case study, or a 3,000-word CPD article on 'caring for the spirit'.

Look for author guidelines either within the journal or on the journal's website. These include important information about the length of submitted articles, format, referencing, the publishing process, etc.

Planning content

Content/article length/style is shaped by the journal you have chosen to approach – for example, *Nursing Times* will probably not accept a 5,000-word exposition on the place of faith in contemporary health care. The *European Journal of Cancer Care* might.

Decide early the central message of your article. What do you want readers to take away from it?

In terms of generating ideas for the content of your article, your approach can be haphazard, non-linear – use brainstorming, mind-mapping, Post-it notes, sheets of A3, notebooks, long walks with the dog – whatever works to get your ideas flowing...

...but you must then sift through those ideas and formulate a structure that is sound, logical, a progression; one that takes the reader on a journey from the introduction of a topic to your conclusions about it.

Working out that logical progression is easier if broken down – use loose headings to order your thoughts. Thinking of the article in sections can help reduce the fear of writing a long article. For example:

- Introduction.
- The issue (why it's important; how it affects patients/staff; available research).
- Our approach; why we developed it; how it works.
- How we piloted it; audit; evaluation.
- Conclusion (lessons learnt; future developments; how practice has been improved).

Expand on sections with rough notes about what to include.

Remember to use tables, figures, diagrams and boxes to clarify points in the text.

Editing and redrafting

Look on your first attempt as a draft rather than the finished product.

When your first draft is finished, leave it alone for a day or two before revisiting.

When you return to it, print it off rather than reading it on the computer screen again. Mistakes may be easier to spot on the printed version.

Check for flow, accuracy, sense and ambiguities. Is the article the correct length? Does it have your 'voice' or does it use overly formal language? Are you complicating sentences in an attempt to sound more erudite?

Have you checked the spelling?

Grammar and punctuation: worry, but not too much. Use full stops, commas, complete sentences and paragraphs. But don't lose sleep over colons and semi-colons if you don't know the difference between them. Your aim is to appear reasonably literate but your article will be edited in-house for sense and punctuation. If you're concerned, revise the basics – plenty of online resources on punctuation.

Are there superfluous words or phrases that will make the reader stumble? For example, delete: 'On successfully being called for interview it materialised that the vacancy would be part of a skill mix pilot study'. Replace with: 'I was told at interview that the post would be part of a skill mix pilot study.'

Consider showing the redrafted article to a colleague or friend – but only if you genuinely want feedback. Be warned: they may be critical – and you may have to do a lot more work.

Repeat the process until you are satisfied with the article.

Ensure that when you submit your article you do so according to the journal's guidelines for authors.

Blocks to writing and overcoming them

Everyone gets stuck – to do so is normal – but there are steps you can take to minimise the risk of it happening too much and too often.

First, consider the practicalities. Writing is time-consuming, intensive and requires concentration. So think about where you will write and when? Will there be interruptions? Can you ask not to be disturbed? Develop a writing routine, if possible. And write in a room that is quiet, comfortable.

Planning content beforehand will help avoid blocks: the sequence is logical and headings mean that you know what will go in each section.

Don't write too soon. Cogitate. Consider. Walk. Think. Keep a notebook. Write when you are ready.

Be selective. Reduce your notes to a workable level. Don't try to include everything.

Gather reference material together beforehand and keep close when writing.

If starting the article is difficult, begin at the end. Write the conclusion first.

Try to write a complete section or a page, then read through. Re-reading each sentence as you go is disruptive and time-consuming.

Be flexible – if something is not working, reject and try again.

Take breaks but stay disciplined. Five minutes off every half hour – or whatever works for you. Having a deadline is helpful – but only if you stick to it.

Relax. It does get easier and will do so if you learn to enjoy writing.