

Writer's handbook

Guidelines:

- Drafts of stories
 - Submit all drafts of stories in Microsoft Word as an e-mail attachment to your writing editorial staff member and assistant editor
 - **Do not double-space between sentences**
 - **Don't tab at the beginning of paragraphs**
 - Turn in stories with double-spaced lines in paragraph form
 - Include headline and possible subhead.
 - Include your name, telephone number, e-mail address and the story's word count at the top of the first page
 - Include a fact file. This should include names and telephone numbers and/or e-mail addresses of people sources used in stories and Web addresses and/or telephone numbers of all other sources. If you did an email interview, include the email conversations. If you do a phone interview, specify and make sure you have the number in your file. If you recorded your interview, be prepared to let us listen to it or include transcription. We will check your sources, so please include proper information for them.

Legal Risks for Ball Bearings Writers and How to Avoid Them – by David Sumner

Ball Bearings has occasionally gotten into trouble and even been threatened with lawsuits. The following guidelines and “commandments” are based on some real-life experiences we have had:

Three types of problems that create legal risks:

- Libel and slander
 - How to prevent it: Always verify the facts, and print nothing that isn't true
- Invasion of privacy
 - How to prevent it: Always get written permission for anything you use or anyone whose photo you use
- Copyright violations
 - How to prevent it: give written credit for sources; get permission for use of borrowed material (editorial or photo material from print or Internet sources)

Ten Commandments to Stay Out of Trouble

1. People must know how their words are going to be used and who is going to read them. Never misrepresent your identity as a reporter. Always let people you interview know where and how their comments will be published. Don't publish any article you've written for class without getting permission from your sources.

2. If you publish anything that could harm anyone's reputation, make absolutely certain you have factual evidence to verify the information. Editors should check and confirm writers' sources of questionable material.
3. Publications are responsible for the accuracy of quoted material of sources used in articles. It's not enough to verify that a source said it. You are responsible for verifying the accuracy of the quote if it could damage someone else's reputation.
4. If you have damaging, but true information about someone, call that person and give him or her the opportunity to respond.
5. Call back to verify factual information with people that you interview. If they grant you an interview, you don't need their approval, but it's a good idea to verify spelling of names, proper nouns and dates.
6. Get written permission for photos from any freelance photographers who take the photos as well as subjects of the photo. People may give you verbal permission but then change their minds. That's why written permission is important. Give written credit to all photographers.
7. Do not lift text, photos or graphics off the Internet or from anywhere else without getting written permission from the publisher. A printed e-mail message is sufficient.
8. You can borrow quotes of less than 100 words as long as you properly credit the source. For example, "According to a Sept. 1999 Newsweek article, so-and-so said that ..."
9. Do not lift quotes out of other stories and make it appear that you interviewed the quoted person. Attribute the source of all direct quotes that you – as a writer – did not personally hear.
10. Print corrections or clarification of all mistakes in the next issue.

25 Rules for Magazine & Feature Writing – David Sumner, Ball Bearings adviser

1. Get to know the reader.

Magazines, unlike newspapers, are targeted for specific, niche audiences. You should study the magazines you plan to write for and know exactly whom you are writing for:

- Men or women?
- Young, middle-aged, or old?
- College graduates or high school dropouts?
- Rural or urban?

2. Figure out your angle.

Don't write about a trend, group, phenomenon, etc. just because it exists. Choose a slice of it that you can cover with depth, detail and insight. To help figure out an angle, read at least a dozen articles in similar topics. See what has not been written on it.

3. Create an action angle and build your story around it.

Weave the story around one central idea or main theme. Create a title containing an action verb. Tell a story about something that is happening.

4. *Choose an angle on which you can offer intelligent insight.*

Your goal is to make readers say, "I've never heard of that before" or "I've never thought of it that way before." Avoid quoting sources who simply restate common sense or what most people can figure out for themselves.

5. *Find the "how" or "why" angle.*

Many magazine stories lend themselves to the "how" or "why" angle. Don't just focus on the "what." But don't forget to tell the readers what, where and when your story is happening.

6. *Summarize the article's main idea in one sentence.*

7. *Get over your shyness, and learn to use the telephone.*

Learn to find, call and talk to people and take notes on the phone. You cannot interview too many people for a story. If you think you will need five sources, then call 10. Over-report so you can use the very best of the very best of your material.

8. *Create a lead that grabs the reader's attention*

The lead consists of the first two or three paragraphs of an article. Its purpose is to:

- Grab the reader's attention
- Tell the reader what the article is about
- Draw the reader into the article

The best type of magazine lead is the anecdote, which tells a story and portrays the larger theme.

9. *State the purpose of your article right after the lead.*

Newspaper writers call this the "nutgraf" while others call it the "justifier" or "theme" paragraph. Whatever you call it, let the reader know where you are going. Don't keep the reader guessing about why you wrote this article.

10. *Write with clarity – make sure readers hear what you want to say.*

"Clarity" is the noun, while "clear" is the adjective; they mean the same: What you intend to say is what gets into the reader's head. The message you send is the message received. Simple sentences with active voice, action verbs and strong nouns help create clarity.

11. *Be coherent.*

12. *Use strong, action verbs.*

13. *Use specific, concrete images – not vague generalities.*

Specific details make or break the success of an article in getting published and read. Whenever you can replace an abstract concept with a specific noun, do so. Don't write about broad issues and ideas. Anecdotes, examples and quotes are one way of providing concrete images.

14. Use plenty of examples and illustrations, which add color and human interest.

SHOW, DON'T TELL. Try to paint a picture with words that stimulate an image in the reader's mind. For example, if you're writing about unemployment, tell about the student who had to drop out of college because his father lost his job.

15. Write about people .

Why do you think People magazine is America's most profitable magazine? People like to read about people more than they like to read about ideas or concepts. If you're writing about an issue or concepts, then use people's names and quotes as often as possible.

16. Use lots of direct quotes.

One editor said, "The most common mistake I see among nonfiction writers is that they don't use quotes. If I don't see frequent quotes in an article, I will reject it." Writing about people and using quotes are related. Direct quotes breathe "life" into your article and attract and sustain the reader.

17. Do not write an article in the first-person unless you have a clear reason to do so.

The only compelling reason is that your experience offers fresh insight to the topic not possible in traditional objective style. An unknown writer shouldn't intrude upon the reader with personal experiences because it can be annoying.

18. Do your homework – verify all facts.

Check every fact, the spelling of every word and the smallest detail to make sure it is correct. Many editors will not even look at an article if you have a typo or spelling error in your cover letter or first page.

19. Give the reader a “product” in exchange for the reader's time.

That means good entertainment or solid, new information and preferably both. Writing is a product, similar to laundry detergent or stereo sets on the dealers' shelves. If you want to attract customers (readers), then you've got to create a better idea and make it easy to use.

20. Be concise.

Most sentences should vary between 15 and 25 words. If a sentence is longer, then recast it into two sentences. Examine every word, sentence or paragraph, and if you find any that aren't essential, delete them. Every word should have a job to do.

21. Vary sentence and paragraph length.

On the other hand, they all shouldn't be short. Variety adds rhythm to your writing and decreases the likelihood of boring the reader. Clue: If you use more than one comma, ask why?

22. Be simple, but not simplistic, in your style . Write for the everyday person, not for the intellectual. If the everyday person can understand you, then so will the intellectual. But

the reverse isn't true. Great and profound ideas can be communicated in simple, everyday language.

23. *Use the active voice, not the passive.*

Instead of saying, "The man was bitten by the dog," say, "The dog bit the man." A "to be" verb located next to the past perfect of another verb identifies the passive voice. For example: "were examined," "was seen," "will be fought," etc. The passive voice is clumsier, wordier and more difficult to understand than the active voice.

24. *Avoid adjectives and adverbs as much as possible .*

If you need a modifier to adjust the meaning of the noun or verb, then maybe you haven't chosen the right noun or verb to begin with. Focus on choosing the right words so that their meanings won't need "adjusting" with an adjective or adverb. For example, say "ambled," instead of "walked slowly."

25. *Listen to the tone and rhythm of your writing. Read it aloud .*

Great writers pay close attention to how their writing sounds to the inner ear. Learn to imagine how your writing sounds to the human ear. Does it sound pleasant? Is it smooth and melodic or rough and choppy?

One way to understand this is to read it aloud.

Interviewing: Steps in conducting a successful interview — adapted from The Campus Ledger's handbook of Johnson County Community College

1. **Define the purpose** of your article. Know your focus or angle.
2. **Do background research.** Read other articles written on the subject or about the person in other publications. Don't rely on your source to give you every bit of information you need for your story.
3. **Select sources carefully.** Determine who will contribute the most valuable information, color and credibility to your story.
4. **Request an appointment** with your source(s). Be prepared to overcome objections. Clearly state your focus or angle to your source and explain why it's important for you to conduct the interview for your story.
5. **Plan your interview** based on deadlines and your personal schedule. Jot down dates and times when you are available to meet with a source to avoid appearing disorganized on the phone.
6. **Make up a list of questions** for the interview. Avoid long, confusing questions. Avoid asking yes/no questions. Strategically plan your questions.
7. **Meet with the source.** Arrive on time, dressed appropriately. Introduce yourself and shake hands.

8. **Ask your questions.** Don't be afraid to ask questions when you don't understand theory, calculation, terminology, etc. If you don't understand it, how can you expect to write about it?
9. **End the interview.** Double-check everything, including names, titles, concepts, formulas, figure, etc. Ask the source if you may call if you have any additional questions.
10. **Follow up the interview with a short note** thanking the source for granting the interview. Send a clip of the story or copy of the magazine if appropriate or requested.

A few important tips ...

- Always, always, always ask your source if you may tape record the interview before you begin.
- Take advantage of any "ins" you have. Many times, it's whom you know that makes all of the difference.
- Start by telling your name, whom you represent and what information you seek. Address the person you are interviewing by name often, and make eye contact.
- Try not to look at your notebook too often when taking notes. Be watchful and interested in everything the source says.
- Get direct quotes. They are best for injecting opinion in to the story without editorializing. Ask questions that require a thorough answer.

Lead Writing: If you don't grab the reader's attention at the start, you've wasted their time — and yours!

- **Consider the department store analogy.** Both the reader and the shopper are in a hurry. Both have lots of other places to go if the store(y) doesn't interest them. Think of the lead as a department store window display. The window provides just a tantalizing, tiny glimpse of everything the store has to offer. If the store manager is smart, the display window will reflect the most timely, most attractive, most apt to be noticed merchandise in the store. Make an effort to show the best up front!
- **Remember that the lead has four basic functions:** to attract attention, establish the subject, set the tone and guide the reader into the story smoothly and directly.

Ask yourself why anyone should care about this story. What's it got to do with the overall mission of Ball State? What's it got to do with college students? Why would Ball State students be interested? Once you've thought about the "who cares?" factor, logical organization of the story is easy.

Writing Stories: a checklist

- **Keep verbs in active voice.** Use action verbs.
- **Avoid fuzzy words.** Select words carefully, and be precise.
- **Use understandable, everyday language.** Tell your reader the story in the same way you would tell it to your best friend. Don't write over your reader's head.
- **Make sure sentences are tight — not wordy or confusing to the reader.**
- **Never use a long, complicated word when a short, simple one will suffice.**
- **Use direct quotes for color and to attribute information to a specific source.** This is the only place where opinion may appear in a story, excepting editorials. Quote your sources accurately, and be certain the quotes are in context.
- **Avoid use of first- and second-person pronouns, except in quotes.**
- **Select adjectives and adverbs carefully.** When you use them, be specific. To say “big” means nothing, but to describe someone as 6-foot-7 and 250 pounds is specific and allows readers to draw their own conclusions.
- **Make your stories interesting.** Write stories you would want to read.
- **Rewrite.** Rewrite some more. First, second and even 10th drafts can always be improved.
- **Check all facts.** Do not hesitate to go back to your sources to verify names, spelling or other information.
- **Don't editorialize.** Never write “he is well-qualified” or “the movie was enjoyable for everyone.” Tell readers the facts, and let them make up their own minds.
- **Avoid vague word and opinion words:** many, numerous, various, very, nice, enjoyable, beautiful, interesting, diligent and strive.
- **Decide what is most newsworthy.** “What's in it for my reader?” is the most important question to ask yourself. Remember that readers want to be entertained as much as they want to be informed.
- **Copy edit your stories before you give them to the editor.**
- **Stories may be written in any form and style.** However, form and style must be appropriate to the content and the purpose of the story.
- **Stories should be:**
 - i. **Well-organized** and always written from a carefully constructed plan or outline.
 - ii. **Simply written** because the reader wants to be entertained.
 - iii. **Effectively written** by applying unity, coherence and emphasis
 - iv. **Full of specific nouns, adjectives and verbs** to create vivid images, sounds and feeling for readers
 - v. **Able to bring the reader** as close as possible to the experience or idea related by the story.

Story Organization Checklist

Use the following questions to review your story information and order following the first draft.

1. What questions will readers have as they read the story? Put the material in the order that will make the most sense to the reader and answer his questions in the order they're asked.
2. Have I substantiated each point with a quote, explanatory material or other information?
3. Do I need more information?
4. Can I delete any information?
5. Can I state the theme of the story in one sentence?
6. Does the story drag when I read it aloud? Does it make sense?
7. Have I kept my verb tenses consistent? (used "said" throughout)
8. Do the sentences and paragraphs vary in length and structure?
9. Are the verbs and sentences in active voice?
10. Have I avoided vague adjectives?
11. Are there repetitious sentences or paragraphs?
12. Are there quotes that repeat the previous paragraph? Are there paragraphs that repeat the previous quote?
13. Are the names and titles accurate? Is the spelling correct? Did I remember to ask how names are spelled?
14. Is the story interesting?
15. Are there any typos or misspelled words? Did I remember to use the spell-check?