

# Writing a Column

A column is not a news article, but it is news. It generally answers why and how. It often is personal, using the first and second person (I and you). A column often states an opinion. It is said to be like writing an open letter. A column also has a standard head, called a title, and a by-line (name) at the top. These identify you and your column for the reader. A column is written weekly, monthly or bi-monthly, and must be focused on one particular topic. You have to be consistent in what you write, maintain the same tone of voice, and stay focused on the issue at hand.

A column can last from three to four months to 10 or maybe even 20. Many prolific column writers write a column in a leading daily for more than 20 years. When you decide to write a column, make sure that the topic you choose is of interest to readers and will keep them coming back for more, week after week. If your topic is boring or uninteresting, chances are you'll have no readers, and the editor will soon wrap up your column with a short goodbye note.

**How to write a column:** Before writing a column, think about purpose, audience, content and structure.

**Purpose:** **Why** are you writing? Is it to inform the community about an event? Does the paper's editor, the community or co-workers want it? Are you entertaining, informing or educating? Do you seek an identity or exposure?

**Audience:** **Whom** are you trying to reach? Who are you reaching? Decide on your audience. Write in their language, at their level, about things the audience needs to know or wants to know.

**Content:** **What** will your column discuss? How will you discuss it? Answering why and how will help determine what. Remember, columns should be based on facts and should be accurate. Names are crucial in a personal column. Personal columns may be informal; yet accuracy and sourcing material counts.

**Structure:** **How** will your message get to your audience? There are other types of columns besides the personal column, too. Some of these cover specific topics or types of information. They can be "question and answer," "new ideas," "how-to-do-it" pieces or "calendars." Personal columns often have departments. These departments help you to write your column. Departments can be "coming events," applications, notes or some of the categories suggested for the non-personal columns. Before writing, decide on the purpose, content, audience and structure. Personal columns should have many local names. They also use words like: "I," "we" or "you."

## **Column suggestions: Do**

- Give the reader timely, helpful information.
- Develop a **structure** and keep it. Write on a regular schedule.
- Write simple and short sentences and paragraphs.
- In personal columns, use local names and places.
- Let others speak for you by use of quotes and references.
- Learn the difference between a column and a news story.

## **Column suggestions: Don't**

- Use technical or complex words.
- Talk in jargon or unfamiliar terms.
- Talk about one topic constantly.
- Include too much detail or material. You should be stimulating interest, not exhausting a subject.
- Refer to yourself as a third person (this author, your reporter) or quote yourself (Jimmy Jones said). Instead use **mine**.

## Tips on column writing

- Write the way you talk. But don't discard good English usage and grammar by being friendly and informal.
- Try to uncover a "lead" or opening that will catch the interest of your readers.
- Use a variety of material, not just one subject.
- Write about people. Keep heavy subject matter to a minimum. When using subject matter, try to tell the story through the experiences of local people.
- Write simply. Avoid technical or difficult words, long sentences, long paragraphs.
- Don't weigh your column down with too much detail. Try to stimulate interest in a subject, but don't exhaust the subject.
- Jot down ideas, names, figures, impressions, etc., in a note pad while visiting farms and homes. This provides the very best column material.
- Be timely. Keep up with the effect of weather conditions, seasons, etc., pointing out the significance of these conditions locally.
- Remember the people you're talking to and give them information that will benefit them in a way they can understand.
- Always get your column to the editor on schedule. Remember, the editor is holding space for it.

Make sure that you can keep the commitment: Writing a column takes more than a bright idea and good writing. It needs dedication, discipline and the ability to meet deadlines. If you can't meet deadlines, you'll soon be out of a job, and out of the publication—for good. A columnist must provide an on-topic, interesting, timely article each week (or month), interesting enough to make the reader come back to read it.

If you decide to delve into the world of column writing, your best bet would be to start with a regional daily or weekly newspaper. Not only will this market be easier to break into, but will give you a lot of exposure. Columns for cooking, astrology, inspiration and living in the city run frequently in newspapers and are the best places for starting off. However, try to avoid topics that have been done to death. Put a unique and interesting spin to a topic, and you're bound to get the editor's interest.

Websites too are now beginning to open up to columns. Just like their print counterparts, Websites, e-zines and even online versions of print magazines ask for original material on a weekly or monthly basis. The biggest advantage of writing online is the short acceptance and publication period.

The best way to query an editor about writing a column is by sending clips of your work and your column topic. If the editor likes your query, you'll be asked to send in an article, and you'll soon be on your way to publishing glory. Keep in mind though, that column writing is not like writing an article—it's not \*your\* convenience and \*your\* time constraints that matter. The only thing the editor wants from you is a good quality article each week, submitted on time. Do that, and you'll have a regular income from at least one source.

### An example

The first steps to column writing are remembering why you are writing and your audience. In the sample column, "Helpful Hints," the columnist has a general homemaker audience in mind. The style is light with personal pronouns (I, you, your) liberally included. The lead sentence clues the reader to the column's tone. The rest should continue to develop this tone.

Notice the entire name is given the first time. After that, it is only a first-name basis. Sentences are short and so are paragraphs. Credit is given when the columnist is quoting another source.

One topic has been given primary emphasis. Shorter topics follow this lead topic. That means this column can be shortened by cutting paragraphs from the bottom up, just like a news story.