

Writing for MF: an idiot's guide (written by one, that is)

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For those of you fancy putting pen to paper to write dazzling features for the magazine, here are a few handy hints taken from a one-day feature writing course I run for an organisation called Mightier Than The Sword. They normally cost £500, which divided by 4,000 of you works out at 12.5p each. Bargain, if you ask me.

Just send your cheques to the normal place, and bills to the other place. I hope you find it useful. If not, no harm done, and you can always tear out the page and make a paper aeroplane with it.

1. Question: What's the purpose of writing?

As Sol Stein, the American editor whose book I recommend at the end, says: "To tell the truth in an interesting way."

2. The killer introduction

This is an opening paragraph that grabs the reader and won't let them go, or to put it another way, that makes your audience go "Guess what?" then "Blimey!"

Some examples:

From the Times report on the cremation of Nehru in 1964
On the banks of the Ganges yesterday, a small boy stepped forward and lovingly set his grandfather on fire.

From Earthly Powers, by Anthony Burgess - his 22nd novel
It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced the archbishop had come to see me.

Question: Why do we need a killer intro, and why do we need it now more than ever?

Answer: Elia Kazan, the brilliant stage and screen director, once said that audiences give a film seven minutes. And that was several decades ago. Today, it's reckoned to be as little as three seconds, and research on public speaking shows that audiences make up their mind whether they like the speaker even before he's opened his mouth. Sorry, what was I saying?

Why do people have the attention span of a gnat? It could be the invention of the remote control, but think how long you give a book in a bookshop when you're deciding to buy it. Probably enough time to look at the front cover, then the back cover blurb, and maybe the first page. And that's for a book that's taken maybe a year to write. How long do you

give a feature in a newspaper or magazine before deciding either to keep reading or turn the page?

Try this exercise: the next time you read a newspaper or magazine, have a look at opening paragraphs which catch your attention, then have a think why they do that. It's likely to be one of the following:

a) Unusual. eg the Anthony Burgess example above.

b) The introduction of conflict or drama.

The theory that all stories have an introduction, a conflict and a resolution was first mooted by Aristotle, and is still at the heart of all novels, plays, films and, of course, great features today. For example, when was the last time you read the blurb for a novel which said: "Jim and Jane Smith lived a happily married life with their two children, a Labrador and a Volvo in a 17th Century mill in Surrey"?

The only thing that would make you buy the novel is if it went on:

"However, their rural idyll was just about to be shattered by the arrival of Max, the motorbike-riding, dope-smoking, sexually voracious illegitimate son from Jim's first marriage. The one he had never quite got around to telling Jane about."

A flying example would be if you were writing about a trip, eg a story which began like this:

The engine coughed once, then caught again. I looked down at the lonely mountains below, and thought, not for the first time, that I should have stayed in bed this morning.

is much more interesting than:

Jim and I got up at half eight, drove to the airfield, had a cup of tea, pulled the plane out of the hangar, did our pre-flight checks, taxied out to 08 and took off.

Followed by...and then we did this, and then we did that etc etc etc

c) The omen, or drop intro. The sense that something is about to happen. eg here's one I did for the opening of IKEA in Belfast:

Yesterday morning, an ordinary couple in an ordinary house in Northern Ireland woke up and were overcome by an irresistible desire to go out and buy five billion tealights for 50p.

That creates the sense that something not ordinary is about to happen, and the next par was.

Only for their irresistible urge to be met soon after by the immovable object of the traffic jam caused by every other couple in Northern Ireland having had exactly the same thought at exactly the same time.

d) Turning on the engine. As Sol Stein says, a story is like a car: it won't go anywhere until you turn on the engine. The engine of a story is the point at which the reader makes the decision not to put the story down. This can be as little as a single word: eg in the Nehru example above, lovingly is the one that does it.

e) Sometimes you'll think of the intro before you write the story. Sometimes it will come to you as you're making your notes on eg a flying trip. A good practical way of dealing with this is to use an A5 rather than standard reporter's notebook. Write the narrative on the right hand pages, and leave the left free for marking in potential intros.

3. Structure:

Aristotle called this introduction, conflict, resolution: introduce your characters, create conflict then bring about a resolution.

Another way of thinking of it is like cooking a three-course meal. If you have a great starter and a fabulous pudding, that's what people will remember.

4. Show, don't tell. Use action, not description.

Eg: rather than writing: Jim was tall, write: Jim banged his head on the top of the clubhouse door – again. “You'd think I'd have learned to duck by now,” he said, rubbing it ruefully.

5. Less is more.

Describing something in one word is better than three. Yes, yes, never mind the example above...

Let the reader use their imagination.

Question: What's your favourite book that's been turned into a movie? Was the movie a disappointment? If so, why?

Answer: Because you've written your own movie of the book in your imagination.

You don't need to write down everything that happens, just the interesting bits. That way the story stays interesting for you, and is more likely to do for the reader.

6. Revise.

As Ernest Hemingway said in his usual succinct way: “First drafts are shit.”

He should know, since he rewrote the end of A Farewell to Arms 39 times before he was satisfied.

As Sol Stein says, even best-selling authors who come to him will, on average, go through 11 or 12 drafts before their manuscript is ready.

You don't have to go quite that far, but when you've finished a feature, go through it again and cut everything that doesn't move the story along.

Make every word count. If you've time, get someone else to read it.

7. Checklist:

- * Read through any notes you've made before you start writing. Is there one anecdote or incident that sums up the spirit of the story and which you can use as the intro?
- * Before you decide on your intro, make sure it contains the engine - the point that will keep the reader reading.
- * Does your feature simply make one point after another, rather than building towards a climax?
- * Have you created suspense by raising a question then holding off the

answer for a while?

- * Have you used action rather than description?
- * Have you enough visual elements in it, that the reader can see in their mind?
- * If you were someone else reading it, what would you pick as the weakest part? Can you eliminate, or at least condense it?
- * What's the strongest part? Does that give a clue as to what you might do with the weaker parts?
- * Have you cut the flab - ie any unnecessary adjectives or adverbs, or similes or metaphors that don't work?
- * Have you avoided clichés like the plague?
- * And finally, read other newspapers and magazines assiduously, examining them critically for examples of great writing.

8. How to turn good features into great ones.

a) Be interested. You can only be interesting about life if you're interested in it.

Or, to put it another way, keep your eyes and ears open, and try to look at the world as if you were five again. You only write well if you see and hear well.

b) Be different. If you can find a different way of looking at things, you'll write features that get noticed and remembered.

eg I did a Day in the Life series for a newspaper once for a daily paper, and one of those was a day in the life of the Irish Guards ceremonial wolfhound. Except I did it from the dog's point of view. I found it disturbingly easy.

9. Recommended reading:

Solutions for Writers: Practical Craft Techniques for Fiction and Nonfiction by Sol Stein, £9.09 from amazon.co.uk.

10. Pictures:

These should be in jpeg format and at least 1MB.

11. Non-members:

They may submit stories and pictures to MF, but only members may win BMAA awards for same. The deadline for every issue is the third of the month.