Guide to writing features

1. Types of articles

Every article should have a clear aim. Once you know what that is, you can decide what type of article is required and who is best placed to write it. To be successful, articles need at least one of the following elements of interest to our sector:

- **thought leadership** or **opinion** from a position of expertise
- new **research, policy** or **information**
- sharing best or innovative **professional practice**
- excellent **storytelling**

Article types include:

- **Opinion pieces** – best for thought leadership, advocacy and critique
- **Case studies** – useful for sharing best practice in any area of work
- **Features** – for presentation of research and information, and storytelling
- **In conversations** – for discussing issues from differing points of view

Other than written content, we are developing other media you may want to consider:

Video – can be more dynamic and visually engaging
Audio – podcast

2. Headlines

A headline is to attract readers. As search engines use headlines for indexing, include key words in your headline to appear in relevant searches.

Most importantly, a good headline draws readers in. So, use a variety of techniques in writing them:

- Use questions to address a problem
- Make a provocative statement
- Describe a reader's problem
- For SEO, restrict headlines to fewer than 70 characters
- For inspiration, try a title generator: https://www.portent.com/tools/title-maker/
- Resist a headline that is simply 'clickbait'

3. Images

Images are extremely important online – perhaps more so than the headline for calling attention. Apart from the main image, you can use images or graphics within an article to break up a large body of text or for illustration. Some points to remember:

- Provide high resolution images in JPEG, PNG or GIF format in landscape orientation
- Only provide images for which you have the rights
- Provide image credit and caption
- Articles appear across of devices, so chose images suitable for viewing on a mobile
- Avoid static, boring images eg of laptops, backs of heads
- Performances, artworks or creative activities are usually more interesting
- Remember the diversity of the sector

4. Pitfalls

Sometimes articles fail to engage audiences. There are several pitfalls to avoid.

- The content of the article is little more than a **press release** or advertisement for upcoming events.

- A complex sign-off process can lead to articles lacking an **authorial voice**, reading as if written by a committee and toeing a party line. Readers can instantly spot this.

- The language used is **jargon heavy** - or management speak – which is alienating for readers lacking expertise in your subject area.

- Likewise, **name checking**, **lists** and **hyperlinks** should be used sparingly to ensure the article reads like a story, not a shopping list, a programme or an index.

- Often too little attention is paid to images. As our readers access content through a variety of devices, a clear **engaging image** is very important to attract attention. Other **images, graphics** or **charts** within an article can also keep readers engaged.

- Some articles meet all the requirements above and avoid all the pitfalls, and still fail to fail to attract a high level of interest and that can simply be because of a lack of **targeted social media**. Do ensure you share widely among your own networks.

5. Style and tone

There is no right or wrong style or tone for articles. Authenticity and individuality are what makes articles interesting and varied and adds to credibility - readers engage more readily with a person and/or a story than with a corporate voice. But there are writing techniques, particularly with an online readership in mind, that can help you frame your story.

These include using sentences that are simply constructed and of varying length giving rhythm and punctuation to the prose, as well as helping with comprehension. Try reading the article aloud to see if it makes sense. Also, the use of shorter paragraphs than you would normally use in a book or academic article aids those reading on a smartphone, for example.

As part of AP's house style, we use subheadings throughout the article which serve the dual function of breaking up a wall of prose on a page and highlighting key thoughts.

But above all, don't be too concerned about your writing ability. That's what the editorial team here is for; to polish and refine your article while remaining as faithful as possible to the style and tone of the original.

6. What the AP editorial team contribute

The process of commissioning, writing, editing and publishing an article takes place over six weeks or so.

Once an idea has been pitched and agreed, about six weeks before publication date a formal commissioning brief will be sent, naming the author and giving details of copy submission date, word length and image requirements.

Four weeks before publication, a reminder will be sent that your article is due in one week's time, together with author headshots, bylines, social media handles and images.

Three weeks before publication is the deadline for copy. Once submitted, it goes into the editorial pipeline and one of the team will review, edit, write headlines, subheadings, a standfirst and produce a final draft. They will also write social media posts.

Unless there are queries or substantial changes required for the article, you will be informed that the article has been published, usually during the following three weeks.

Ruth Hogarth, Editor, Arts Professional 15 August 2024