

FEATURE & MAGAZINE WRITING

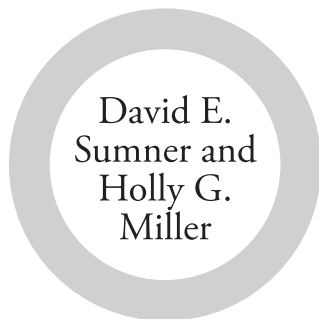
David E.
Sumner and
Holly G.
Miller

ACTION, ANGLE
AND ANECDOTES
THIRD EDITION



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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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PREFACE

FEATURE WRITING IN A DIGITAL ERA

The success of the second edition of *Feature and Magazine Writing: Action, Angle and Anecdotes* led the publisher to ask us to write a new and updated edition. The second edition's adoption by dozens of universities in the United States and its substantial sales in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia have made us recognize we write for readers worldwide. Yet, in the past five years, the breathtaking changes in delivery technology have erased geographical boundaries. Distinctions in “feature writing” for newspapers, magazines and online media have blurred and even disappeared as the mass media have developed applications to enable instant access to their content anytime, anywhere. While we continue to offer a focus on writing for magazines, we have expanded the definition of content to include feature writing for all media forms.

The power of magazines has always been the personal identity that they convey as well as their color, design and editorial tone. Magazines are the most intimate form of media because they establish a relationship with their readers unequalled by newspapers, television or radio. A magazine becomes a friend—a reflection of and integral part of the reader's personal and professional life. While print magazine circulation has declined by 5 to 10 percent in the past 10 years, it has not declined as substantially as that of newspapers. Many top consumer magazines have reported healthy gains in digital-only subscribers. *Cosmopolitan*, for example, which has the highest newsstand circulation of any American magazine, was the first to reach a milestone: 100,000 paid digital subscriptions in 2012. Condé Nast Publishing hit the 500,000 digital subscription mark among eight of its publications a few months earlier.

“A couple of years ago, the big question was what’s going to happen to magazines like *Cosmo* in the future?” Kate White, the magazine’s editor-in-chief, told *Ad Age*. “There was a little bit of anxiety. What this has done is say that our content will rule and will thrive. Women want our content, and they’ll get it on a variety of platforms.”

Content remains king in any medium.

Because we’re convinced that every good product can be better, we’ve updated this third edition with fresh facts and examples, and we’ve integrated ideas and suggestions gleaned from teachers, students, professional writers and editors. Most chapters have been strengthened with new facts and fresh examples, and we’ve added two new chapters.

“Building a Story Blog” (Chapter 17) explores how writers can create a digital presence around a story or collection of stories that extend the writing beyond the article. It examines excellent magazine writer blogs, analyzes the kinds of blogs a writer may want to build, discusses how to manage the digital community and explains how to balance long-form writing with short-form blogging and community management.

“Long-Form Digital Storytelling” (Chapter 18) explains what’s required to tell long-form stories within a tablet environment. It covers the magazine environment on the iPad and long-form writing with tablets and other digital readers. It explains the skills required to conceptualize and create this kind of story. We invited our tech-savvy colleague Brad King to share his expertise in these two chapters.

Storytelling has created universal bonds between people in all cultures and all ages. Editors will always seek original stories that inform, inspire and entertain, whether in print or online. This book is based on that long-time formula for successful feature writing: provide stories and information that readers can’t get anywhere else. Between the covers of this textbook we explain the entire process—from identifying a good idea to creating an original angle, and from finding primary sources to constructing a final draft. We focus on a basic principle: telling stories about people and putting people into every story.

Our joint experiences outside the classroom include overseeing the lifestyle section of a daily newspaper, serving as editors of an online magazine and print magazines, supervising *Ball Bearings*, an award-winning campus magazine, fulfilling hundreds of freelance feature assignments, and writing books. The chapters in this book are based on our professional experience as well as our experience teaching feature and magazine writing classes for more than 25 years. Yet writing is an indomitable challenge. The goal

of this book is to equip the next generation of feature writers with the tools to meet those challenges of writing in any medium for people anywhere.

*David E. Sumner
Holly G. Miller
August 2012*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David E. Sumner is a professor of journalism and head of the magazine journalism program at Ball State University, U.S.A. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee and is a former “Magazine Educator of the Year” in recognition of his contribution to journalism teaching. He has given papers and talks about magazines and magazine writing from Turkey to Honduras and throughout the United States. His books include *The Magazine Century: American Magazines Since 1900* (2010) and *Magazines: A Complete Guide to the Industry* (2006).

Holly G. Miller is a working journalist and communications consultant with bylines in numerous publications including *Reader’s Digest*, *TV Guide* and *Indianapolis Monthly*. She has degrees from Indiana University and Ball State University, U.S.A., and teaches advanced feature-writing classes across America. In addition to writing, ghost-writing and co-authoring more than a dozen books, she has won awards from the Associated Press, the Society of American Travel Writers and the Evangelical Press Association.



PART I

READING, WRITING AND RELEVANCE

“Ninety-eight percent of the people who get the magazine say they read the cartoons first—and the other 2 percent are lying.”

David Remnick, editor
The New Yorker

The challenge of every feature writer is to find a topic that is so relevant and riveting that readers tune out all distractions—regardless how entertaining—and concentrate on the article’s content. The process begins with knowing where to look for such topics, understanding the audience that the publication serves and conducting in-depth research.

WHAT MAKES A STORY INTERESTING?

KEY POINTS

- Why action, angle and anecdotes matter
- What makes a story interesting?
- Understanding readers and reader demographics
- Five mistakes of beginning writers

“*Sálvame, por favor. Sálvame. Save me. Please save me,*” he prays to Our Lady of Guadalupe. In the chilly, early morning hours of March 24, 2009, 57-year-old José Arias fights for his life, floating in the water 66 miles from Cape May. The nearest lights are from another fishing vessel, which does not see him, anchored less than a half-mile away. A little farther out, a mammoth container ship steams toward Philadelphia. Although Arias does not know it yet, all six of his friends and fellow fishermen are dead, and the red-hulled scalloper, the *Lady Mary*, is resting, right-side up, on the sandy bottom of the Atlantic.

Thus begins “The Wreck of the *Lady Mary*,” a story that won the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing for Newark *Star-Ledger* reporter Amy Ellis Nutt. She reported a deeply probing story of the mysterious sinking of a commercial fishing boat that drowned six men in the Atlantic Ocean.¹

“The Man the White House Wakes Up To,” in the *New York Times Magazine*, profiled Mike Allen, publisher of the daily e-mail newsletter *Playbook*, which thousands of the nation’s most influential political leaders, media

Feature and Magazine Writing: Action, Angle and Anecdotes, Third Edition.

David E. Sumner and Holly G. Miller.

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executives and journalists read daily for their “insider” news about politics.² The profile, which won a National Magazine Award, told this anecdote about Allen:

In 1993, Allen was covering a trial in Richmond, Va., for *The New York Times* (as a stringer) and *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* (which employed him). He found a pay phone, darted into the street and got whacked by a car. Allen composed himself, filed stories for both papers and then found his way to the hospital with a broken elbow. This is one of the many “Mikey Stories” that Washingtonians share with awe and some concern.

“You Have Thousands of Angels Around You,” from *Atlanta Magazine*, told a heart-tugging story about Cynthia Siyomvo, a 17-year-old refugee from Burundi who, after arriving in Atlanta without any family, faced the threat of deportation. But soon she discovered a circle of new friends who helped her find a home, and she began pursuing a biology degree and a career in medicine.³

These stories, all of which won either the National Magazine Award or the Pulitzer Prize, offer rich examples of *action*, *angle* and *anecdotes*, the three primary ingredients of *interesting* writing. “There is a principle of writing so important, so fundamental that it can be appropriately called the First Law of Journalism and it is simply this: be interesting,” wrote Benton Patterson, a former *Guideposts* editor and author of *Write To Be Read*.⁴ The book you are holding includes “*Action, Angle and Anecdotes*” as a subtitle because we believe that lively action, a fresh, creative angle and lots of anecdotes characterize interesting writing that keeps readers reading.

Action. These stories tell about a mysterious sinking of a commercial fishing boat that the U.S. Coast Guard spent months investigating, a high-profile political reporter who talks daily with senior officials in the White House and Congress and a Burundi teenage girl who discovered a new circle of friends and support from a southern American city.

“Readers love action, any kind of action, and the story that does not move, that just sits there stalled while people declaim, explain, elaborate and suck their thumbs is justly labeled by some editors as MEGO—My Eyes Glaze Over,” wrote William Blundell in *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*.⁵

Angle. These stories offer an angle on specific people who have experiences to share that illuminate larger issues. An angle makes a story interesting because it provides enough detail about a subject to give the reader some fresh, original information. Broad subjects are vague, fuzzy

and boring. Fresh angles give insight into old topics. You have to discover a tiny slice that no one has yet cut from a broad topic to make a compelling and publishable story.

For example, in the *Good Housekeeping* feature “The (Surprising) Truth About Salt,” a National Magazine Award finalist, writer Rachael Moeller Gorman, tackled the unusual angle that salt is not necessarily “bad” for everyone. She interviewed doctors and medical researchers who said that, while it makes sense for some people with high blood pressure to lower their salt intake, current science shows that most people will reap little, if any, benefit from reducing their salt intake.⁶

Anecdotes. “The Wreck of the Lady Mary,” “The Man the White House Wakes Up To” and “You Have Thousands of Angels Around You” tell *specific* stories about *specific* people doing *specific* things at *specific* times and in *specific* places. Anecdotes make articles interesting by telling true stories about people doing things. Many articles begin with an anecdote for a good reason: anecdotes tell a story—a tiny tale that draws us into the larger one. They illustrate the meaning of the information that follows. Nothing is more involving or revealing than human drama, and anecdotes capture drama with impact.

Feature stories are sometimes called “human-interest stories.” Good writers know people as well as they know language. They are sensitive, socially connected individuals who have a talent for finding and writing stories that interest people. The more you talk to people, the more you understand what people are interested in hearing and discussing.

Successful salespersons nurture relationships with their customers. Likewise, successful writers nurture relationships with their readers. Good writers need to develop two personalities as they write. The first is the sensitive creator of words and eloquent ideas. The second is the critical editor, acting on behalf of the reader, who savagely scours the page looking for mistakes and unnecessary content. The editor part of your mind must demand perfection.

When you write, always ask yourself: “How will the reader react to this? Will this sentence cause the reader to laugh or roll his eyes? Will this paragraph fascinate the reader or send her quickly to another article?”

We frequently refer to “the reader” in this book because great writers develop a second-sense about *for whom* and *to whom* they are writing. As you build experience as a writer, you develop a sense of what interests readers and what bores them. Your readers scan their tablet computers and smartphones while they roam supermarket aisles and airport lounges. They

browse through cover lines of articles while waiting in line for the checkout or to make their plane connection. If a title attracts their attention, they read it. If it holds their attention, they read to the end. Think about this happening millions of times every week, and you get the picture. Editors are paid, writers are paid, websites stay in business and everyone is happy.

Large publishers hire research companies to determine the characteristics of their readers because advertisers demand it. Known as “demographics,” this information includes readers’ median ages, household income and gender and race percentages. You can often find this information on a publication’s website under links for advertisers. Sidebar 1.1 includes an illustration of the differing reader demographics of *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone* and *Lucky*. These magazines’ readers differ so much that an article written for one magazine could never be published in the other two.

Demographics of Magazine Readers (2012)

	<i>The New Yorker</i>	<i>Rolling Stone</i>	<i>Lucky</i>
Median age	55	33	35
Median household income	\$157,247	\$64,160	\$82,293
Male	49%	58%	6%
Female	51%	42%	94%
Graduated/attended college	81%	60%	44%

Source: Magazine websites and MRIPlus.com (Mediamark Research, Inc.).

SIDEBAR 1.1

When most people read an article, they seek diversion, entertainment or information. If a reader doesn’t finish an article, you can’t blame the reader; blame the author. You can’t argue that the reader is too lazy to understand the challenging content. If the reader feels bored, the writers didn’t do their jobs. Great writing is all about reaching the reader through the use of compelling action, an original angle and colorful anecdotes.

The best way to develop sensitivity for the reader is to read—a lot. If you are not an avid reader who reads everything you get your hands on, it’s doubtful you will ever be a great writer. Read books, blogs, bulletin boards, billboards, menus, manuals, meeting minutes, magazine articles in the doctor’s office and online articles anywhere you go. Read the fine print

before you “agree” to a download; read the junk mail before you throw it away. Even if you find it boring, you’ve improved your writing ability because you now possess a better sense of what bores people and what interests them. If you don’t read much outside classes, you may not realize that what you consider a groundbreaking idea may have already been written about dozens of times.

Great writers acquire intellectual depth from a huge amount of time spent reading. It’s not enough to know the mechanics of writing or how to put together a coherent sentence. Most college students know how to do that. To break out ahead of the journalism pack, you must acquire ideas to write about. You must possess a well of ideas drawn from reading hundreds of books and periodicals.

FIVE MISTAKES OF BEGINNING WRITERS

After reading thousands of student-written articles for more than 35 years, we’ve created a list of the most common mistakes. We will start by explaining these five common mistakes and tell you how this book will teach you to avoid them.

Staying safe in your own backyard

A newspaper editor once joked to a group of journalists at a workshop that “News is what happens to or near the editor.” Many new writers, unfortunately, develop their story ideas based on what happens to or near them. They rely on home-grown situations for article ideas and personal connections for interviews. They write stories about themselves or their parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, or grandparents. That’s a good start. Probably every person has a few good stories that originate among relatives or friends. But, once you’ve written those stories, your tank is empty. You can’t become a successful writer by staying in your own backyard.

The main problem with writing about friends or family members is your lack of objectivity and detachment. For example, what seems fascinating to you about your father may, in fact, be common and bore most readers. The *Model Code of Ethics* published by the Associated Collegiate Press says collegiate journalists “Should not cover . . . or make news judgments about family members or persons with whom they have a financial, adversarial

or close sexual or platonic relationship.”⁷ Another reason to avoid these convenient sources is that they fail to challenge you to venture outside your backyard.

Introduce yourself to a stranger, join a club or listen to a visiting speaker. Visit a museum or browse the stacks in the library for new experiences and ideas. Listen to a politician whose views differ from your own. If you are a Christian, visit a synagogue or mosque. If you are a Muslim, visit a church or synagogue. If you are a Jew, visit a church or mosque. If you are not religious, visit any house of worship.

Call a stranger and ask for an interview. If you can't do that, your future in journalism is doubtful. Meg Grant, an editor for *AARP* magazine, says: “You really have to be fearless about approaching people and getting them to give you what you need. I think they will often give it to you if you ask them.” She says that years ago, when she worked for *People* magazine, an editor assigned her to interview the families of three children killed by a drunk driver who was also a celebrity athlete:

The editor told me, “You have to knock on their door and talk to some of these victims’ families. I know you think they don’t want to talk to you, but the truth is they do. They want to talk to someone and they want to tell you about their kids.” So I had to go bang on those people’s doors and say, “Would you talk to me?” And he was right. They did want to talk.⁸

Choosing a broad topic that lacks an angle

Second, beginning writers often want to write about a vague topic without an angle. When we ask students for proposals for story ideas, many come up with a vague topic that interests them—but not a story idea. For example, here are six of the most over-worked topics that students frequently propose:

- getting along with a roommate
- tips for healthy eating
- how to lose weight
- stress prevention for college students
- exercise tips to stay fit
- fashion trends and advice

Besides lacking a specific angle, these topics originate in the “backyard” of college students. Even a more specific topic such as “the benefits of vegetari-

anism” is too broad. “What can you tell us about this subject that we haven’t read before?” and “What is your specific angle?” are always the first questions we ask when someone comes up with an unfocused idea like this. Instead of writing about “the benefits of vegetarianism,” we’d rather see a narrower angle on “the best vegetarian choices in fast-food restaurants.”

Many magazines and newspapers have published stories about the advantages or disadvantages of alternative medicine. *Cat Fancy* took this same topic and gave it an angle aimed directly at its niche readership: In “Traditional vs. Alternative Medicine: Which Is Best for Your Cat?” the writer wrote, “You might be able to improve your cat’s quality of life and hasten recovery from illness by including complementary and alternative medicine.”⁹

The prevalence of this second mistake is why we’re spending two chapters on developing and focusing ideas. Chapter 2 contains a dozen specific ways to come up with an idea while Chapter 3 gives some suggestions for whittling it down to a publishable angle.

Failing to dig deep

Strong, creative writers dig deep. They aggressively locate experts, request interviews and ask probing questions. Jack Kelley, a former senior editor for *People*, says:

Many of the best magazine writers liken their work to mining. They chip and chip until they extract a nugget. Then they chip some more. They are not embarrassed to keep asking questions until they hear what they need. Gold is in the details, and compelling color, quote and detail do not simply materialize.¹⁰

One academic study found that Pulitzer Prize-winning feature stories were, on average, based on interviews with 53 people.

Some articles by beginning writers exhibit a credibility problem. These authors write in their own voices, failing to give any examples, illustrations or quotes. For example, one student wrote about how to use proper nutrition and vitamins to solve common medical problems. Since this college student lacked training in either medicine or nutrition, the reader would have had a problem recognizing her as an authority on the topic. Therefore, the reader wouldn’t have been sure whether to trust the information.

If you aren't an expert on the topic you write about, you have to quote experts, as well as give examples and everyday illustrations. You have to interview several people and dig deep to find these expert sources. These people don't just appear in your life or knock on your door. The time to start is when you are doing the research, not after you sit down to write.

Some student writers constantly check the word counts on their computers because their goal is to reach the word count that a professor requires. Professional writers typically have the opposite problem. They do enough research to assemble more than enough good material. Their main problem is "editing down" rather than "pumping up" a manuscript.

Some beginners write articles full of generalizations but lacking in detailed evidence that backs them up. Writing skill, while essential, can never carry the article without strong content. Editors want facts, and they love to break stories with news their competitors have missed. Few writers have opinions or personal experiences that are in great demand.

Digging Deep

Here is an excerpt from the Newark *Star-Ledger's* published report about how its Pulitzer Prize-winning story, "The Wreck of the Lady Mary," was researched:

Reporting began in January after the U.S. Coast Guard finished its investigative hearings. For the next seven months, Amy Ellis Nutt made dozens of trips, to Cape May, Philadelphia, Atlantic City and North Carolina. Those interviewed included: the co-owner of the Lady Mary; the boat's sole survivor; family members and friends of the six men who died in the sinking; scallop fishermen, especially those working within six miles of the Lady Mary the night she disappeared; the divers who explored the sunken wreck; officials from the Coast Guard and the rescue crew who saved José Arias; and the dock manager for Hamburg Sud, the shipping company that leases the container ship Cap Beatrice.

Some 800 pages of testimony from Coast Guard hearings were reviewed, navigation and vessel tracking records studied, and nearly two dozen marine experts interviewed, a number of whom had specific training in shipwreck forensics. Two sources with direct access to the investigation also provided documents the Coast Guard refused to make public because it has not yet released its report. In addition to evidence from the sinking of the Lady Mary, the *Star-Ledger* also combed through more than 2,500 Coast Guard incident reports from 2002 through 2007.¹¹

Writing without anecdotes

The fourth mistake is failing to use anecdotes. Anecdotes tell true stories that illustrate the writer's main theme. Some editors call them the "chocolate chips" of writing because they whet readers' appetites and keep them reading. Anecdotes add credibility because they give real-life examples to the claims and generalizations made by the writer. The reason that anecdotes and examples increase credibility with readers is that they give true examples of the point you make. They tell a story about a specific person doing a specific thing in a specific place at a specific time.

Anecdotes are so essential and so difficult to find that they deserve their own chapter in this book. Anecdotes come from the people you interview. Chapter 10 explains how to find sources and phrase questions that will bring out the most humorous and compelling anecdotes.

Writing boring articles

Boring, windy articles lacking any action constitute the fifth mistake. We have read dozens of student articles that sound like condensed research papers or encyclopedia articles. Many beginning writers use stiff, bloated content that doesn't fit the tone of today's magazines. Other symptoms of this malady are the use of too many passive-voice verbs, long and convoluted sentences, runaway adjectives and adverbs, and an academic tone.

Editors eagerly look for stories that move, outrage, alarm, delight or inspire readers. They want to make their readers laugh, cry or get angry. They prefer angry letters to the editor than none at all because that means people are at least reading their publication. A plodding, formal style is a turnoff to every editor.

Chapter 9 tells you how to avoid boring stories by building action into characters and content. It shows you how to create action by increasing the use of tension, using people to illustrate abstract ideas and increasing the use of narrative, dialogue, action verbs and active voice.

You will succeed as a writer if you assume that people who might read your work are:

- *Busy.* People are not forced to read magazines, newspapers or Internet content. People use their discretionary time to read feature articles. It's your job to attract their attention and sustain it.

- *Knowledgeable.* People who frequently read books and articles are generally more educated than the general public. Therefore, you must work hard and dig deep to give them information they haven't read before.
- *Easily distracted.* In today's digital world, readers can choose from hundreds of sources of information. You can't assume they will finish reading what they begin. You have to find color and human-interest material to sustain readers to the end.

These characteristics may not describe each reader. If you assume that they do, however, you will work harder and get published more quickly than your peers.

What makes a story interesting? The most interesting stories are original; they captivate the hearts of readers as well as their minds. They tell readers something they've never read before because they have an unusual angle. They sustain the reader's attention because they are full of action and anecdotes.

IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES

Instructor: Ask students to bring a favorite feature article to class. Students: Write a 50-word summary of the article you find the most interesting. Read the summaries in class and discuss the action, angle and anecdotes contained in the stories.

Instructor: Ask each student to recall a humorous or dramatic experience he or she has had during the past five years. Discuss these stories from the perspective of "action, angle and anecdotes" explained in this chapter.

ASSIGNMENTS

Students: Find 10 stories with an anecdotal lead. Remember that an anecdote should tell a story about a specific person at a specific place and time. Explain how each anecdote introduces the angle and main idea of the story that follows.

Students: Interview five random people, asking these two questions and recording the answers: “What characteristics of any article you read make it interesting to you?” and “What characteristics of any article you read make it boring?” Bring the results of your survey to class. In small groups, determine common characteristics of interesting and boring articles.

NOTES

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HOW TO FIND AN ORIGINAL IDEA

KEY POINTS

- Determining your audience
- Determining your angle
- Ten places to find ideas

Most writers naturally start out by wanting to write articles for people like themselves. They stay in their own backyards. College students want to write articles for college students; those interested in fashion want to write about fashion; and those interested in sports want to write for sports fans. As you progress in your writing experience, however, you learn to detach yourself from your personal interests and write articles that will interest people of vastly differing ages, professions and outlooks.

The first step in developing an idea is figuring out for whom you want to write. Beginners often don't try to find an outlet for the article until after they've written it. Student writers, if they consider audience characteristics at all, begin with some vague, amorphous concept of readers exactly like themselves—other college students. In news-writing courses, you learn to write one way for a standard, vaguely defined audience. Among the first tasks when you create a magazine article idea is deciding who your readers are and which magazines or websites you are aiming for. Here are some possible audiences and some sample magazine titles that serve them:

Feature and Magazine Writing: Action, Angle and Anecdotes, Third Edition.

David E. Sumner and Holly G. Miller.

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- college-aged males (*Maxim*)
- single women (*Cosmopolitan*)
- middle-aged women (*More*)
- business entrepreneurs (*Entrepreneur*)
- pro-football fans (*Pro Football Weekly*)
- turkey hunters (*Turkey and Turkey Hunting*)
- adherents of specific religions and faiths (*U.S. Catholic*)
- managers of printing businesses (*Printing Impressions*)
- restaurant owners and managers (*Nation's Restaurant News*)
- residents of the South or New England (*Southern Living* or *Yankee*)

While the cliché “write what you know” has merit, it only takes you so far and often will fail to pay the bills. Professional writers take assignments on topics in which they have no personal interest. Even professional writers could not write more than a few articles based solely on what they already know. This is part of what we mean when advising you to get outside your own backyard. Not many magazines or websites will pay you for writing about what’s in your backyard.

Sidebar 2.1 illustrates how beginning writers differ from professional writers in finding a place to publish their articles. Professional writers typically choose magazines or websites they want to write for. They study the audiences who read those publications, study the guidelines for writers, and come up with ideas that fit those publications and audiences. Beginning writers choose a topic that interests them, write the articles and then hope someone will be interested. Professional writers do enough research to enable them to choose a topic they already know will interest a particular publication or group of readers. They begin and end with the reader in mind.

Notice the basic differences as you progress up the ladder. The beginner writes an article and then tries to figure out where to send it. The professional writer understands a few favorite markets and develops ideas and writes articles based on those markets’ needs.

DETERMINE YOUR ANGLE

The most difficult task beginning writers face is finding an original idea with a clearly focused angle. Many can organize words, sentences and

The Ladder of Success for Publishing Magazine Articles

SIDEBAR 2.1

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
The typical beginner	Get an idea	Write the article	Send to favorite magazine or website	Wait	Get rejected
The aspiring writer	Get an idea	Write the article	Study writers' guidelines	Send to more appropriate choice	Probably get rejected
The seasoned novice	Get an idea	Study writers' guidelines and archives of magazines and websites	Write article based on targeted market	Send query letter to targeted choice	Perhaps get your article accepted
The semi-pro	Choose some magazines you want to write for	Study writers' guidelines and archives of magazines and websites	Develop idea based on content and needs of these publications	Send query letter or e-mail to targeted choice	Very likely get your articles accepted
The professional writer	Repeat Step 4 until you find an editor who likes your work	Editor contacts you and gives you assignments	Write the articles	Send the articles in	Cash your checks

paragraphs using good punctuation and grammar. What most struggle with, however, is coming up with a strong angle that has a chance of being published.

Editors today insist on new material because they know their readers don't want a rehash of what's already out there. *Woman's Day* advises prospective writers in its guidelines: "We want fresh articles based on new material—new studies, new statistics, new theories, new insights—especially when the subject itself has received wide coverage. Any article that could have been published three years ago is not for *Woman's Day*."

Ellen Levine, former editor of *Good Housekeeping*, advises writers: "Give readers information unavailable elsewhere" and "strive for exclusive

stories.”¹ Everything a writer produces needs an original angle supported by information not already in print. Being original means that each article should “smell fresh” when it arrives in front of the reader. It shouldn’t sound like it’s been pulled from an “article warehouse” shelf somewhere. That’s why you can’t write an original article simply by regurgitating material from existing online articles.

Let’s put it this way: if you don’t do any background reading before you develop an idea, you’re likely to come up with an unoriginal idea. The best way to find an original idea is to read. If you don’t know what’s been published in magazines, websites and books, you have no way of recognizing an original idea. Successful feature writers have an insatiable appetite for reading. If you don’t, you should question whether journalism right for you.

For example, suppose you’re interested in writing an article about the benefits of cat ownership. So you read through some back issues of *Cat Fancy* to get some ideas. In one issue, you find “Clergy Cats: An Exclusive Look into the Lives of Religious Leaders and Their Feline Companions.” The writer interviewed a Catholic bishop, a rabbi and two Protestant ministers about their cats.² About a year later, the same magazine ran an article titled “The Writer’s Muse: Cats Help Inspire Their Owners’ Creativity.” This writer interviewed two professional writers about their cats and how cats inspire their creativity.³ These two articles suggest that *Cat Fancy* likes to run articles about how and why people in particular kinds of work like cats. So why not propose a story about “Firefighters and Their Cats” or “Police Officers and Their Cats”?

“The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and intimacy with the process of writing,” wrote Stephen King. “It also offers you a constantly growing knowledge of what has been done and what hasn’t, what is trite and what is fresh, what works and what just lies there dying (or dead) on the page.”⁴

NINE PLACES TO FIND IDEAS

A few years ago, David E. Sumner interviewed 15 syndicated magazine and newspaper columnists about their craft. Each one was asked: “Where do you get ideas for your columns?” Almost all of them cited “reading” as the most frequent source for new ideas. Anyone who hopes to maintain a

How to Know Whether You Have an Original Article Idea

You should be able to answer “yes” to at least the majority of the following 10 questions:

- 1 Is this topic so new and original that you can’t find any books written on the subject?
- 2 Will your topic appeal to the special-interest group who read the magazine you are interested in writing for? Or is there a magazine that focuses on what you are interested in writing about?
- 3 Does this topic deal with fundamental life issues such as death, love, sickness, money, careers, health—issues that affect millions of people?
- 4 Do you have a strong, central unifying theme?
- 5 Can you state your theme in one sentence using an action verb?
- 6 Does your angle allow you to offer intelligent insight—as opposed to saying something that’s obvious, that’s commonsense or that readers have read about many times?
- 7 Are there elements of drama or conflict to attract and sustain the reader?
- 8 Will your topic generate several colorful and compelling anecdotes from your sources? Can you find human-interest stories about it?
- 9 Does your theme question or contradict what most people think or assume? The best articles question the conventional wisdom about a subject.
- 10 Do you have access to the sources you need to write this article? These sources should be participants, keen observers or experts on the topic you are writing about.

SIDEBAR 2.2

steady flow of ideas has to read continually, including publications that few others read. Ideas may come from unexpected sources: professional quarterlies, association newsletters, academic journals, annual reports and almanacs. While they seem boring, such sources often contain the most original thinking and latest developments long before they reach the general public. Here are more specific items to read or places to look as you dig for ideas for your feature articles.

1. Yellow Pages of telephone directories

The Yellow Pages of small and large communities offer a plethora of businesses and individuals who can lead you to dozens of ideas. The best place to start is the “A” listings and browse until an inspiration hits you. However, here are some tips:

- Profiles of successful businesses or professionals. Every business, industry and profession has at least one magazine for people who work in that field. These magazines look for profiles of people in their field with unusual accomplishments or innovations.
- Profiles of people engaged in out-of-the-ordinary endeavors. General-interest magazines may have an interest in profiles of practitioners of unusual jobs, such as magicians, horse breeders, dieticians or international trade consultants. Look under “paternity testing and services” and find out why some people need these services.
- Look for practitioners to interview for expert advice for a “how-to” article. For example, you can interview apartment building managers for advice on questions to ask before you sign a lease. You can interview auto dealers for advice on the most reliable used-car models or how to negotiate the best deal. You can interview dermatologists about the dangers and risks of tanning salons.
- Think about “what’s up” and “what’s down.” All business cycles produce winners and losers, and even a dismal economy has some who profit from the downturn. R.V. and luxury car sales suffer with high gasoline prices, while train and bus travel increases. In recessionary times, thrift, discount and second-hand stores do well. Think about trends or cycles in your local economy and write about businesses affected by them in positive or negative ways.
- Look under “social service organizations” for details on groups that serve the underprivileged or engage in humanitarian causes that interest you. Call and ask about notable volunteers or recipients of their services who have inspiring or newsworthy stories. For example, our community has a place called “Stepping Stones for Veterans,” which provides a residence for veterans who are unemployed or face substance-abuse problems.

You can also browse through the business directories for any city in the United States through online services such as Switchboard.com,

Yellowpages.com and Yellowbook.com. These are excellent resources for finding ideas and sources for articles outside your immediate geographic area.

2. Small-town newspapers (print and online)

Check local and area newspapers for small news items that you can develop into long feature stories for a magazine. Focus on locally written stories, not Associated Press or national stories. Look for brief articles about people who have received awards. The award itself may simply culminate an interesting series of events or achievements leading up to it. Many of our students have found their story ideas in small-town weekly newspapers. “Newspapers are filled with undeveloped stories, announcements of meetings and events, or tiny clues that could lead to interesting narratives,” says Roy Peter Clark, senior scholar at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.⁵

3. Old magazines and magazine archives

Magazines have certain perennial or evergreen topics that they revisit at least once a year. Look for seasonal articles related to holidays and anniversaries of major events. If you browse through enough issues, you can discover their perennial topics and come up with a fresh angle. Even if you don’t think you have a chance of selling that idea to a prestigious magazine, you can send a query on a similar topic to a competing but lesser-known publication.

Remember that you can’t copyright the *idea* for an article—only the particular way in which you write it. If you take an article as inspiration and develop it into something else, you haven’t committed plagiarism. Plagiarism only occurs when you use words from another article without giving credit.

Editors frequently complain that freelance writers don’t study their publications before they submit unsolicited ideas and manuscripts. Experienced freelance writers pick the magazine or group of magazines they want to write for before they decide on an idea for a story. Then they study dozens of back issues at a library or online archive. That’s because the best ideas will come from seeing the types of articles that those particular periodicals publish.

Here are some advantages to choosing your target publications first and reading through some of their previous issues:

- You know what topics have been covered and therefore can recognize an original idea when you see it.
- You know about current trends within the field of interest you want to write about and can pick a topic related to one of those trends.
- You become able to recognize the types of articles most frequently published in these magazines. For example, some magazines never publish profiles, poetry or personal experience articles.
- You become familiar with the writing style, tone and “personality” of the magazine (see Chapter 6 for more details).

Another advantage to reading old issues of some of your favorite magazines is that you can discover their evergreen topics. Susan Ungaro, former editor of *Family Circle*, once said:

Certain “evergreen” articles are published in every magazine over and over again. For instance, we constantly tell readers different ways to make the most of their money or to take charge of their health. I do a story every spring and fall on spring-cleaning your house, how to get organized, how to deal with clutter in your life. Romance and marriage secrets—how to make your marriage closer, more intimate, more loving—are probably addressed in every issue of every women’s magazine.⁶

4. Bulletin boards

The curious writer never passes a bulletin board without stopping to look at it. Campus bulletin boards contain notices of future events, concerts, speakers or meetings of organizations. Musical performers or nationally known speakers may be visiting your area. You may find them more accessible to an interview than you expect. Visiting performers and speakers may have “down time” before and after their engagements. To obtain an interview, contact the sponsoring group for contact information on people you wish to interview. One advantage to old-fashioned bulletin boards is that they contain “grassroots” information. Accessible to anyone and everyone with their posters and flyers, bulletin boards may lead you to scoops and news tips before they get published anywhere.

5. Events calendars

Most universities, cities, towns and their TV and radio stations publish an online calendar of upcoming events. Websites sponsored by city governments and visitors' bureaus contain the same information. A hobby or trade show, for example, will give you access to dozens of experts. These listings may also publicize meetings of self-help groups and hobby and service clubs, and may include meeting times and contact numbers. For example, support groups exist for families of murder victims, the mentally ill and drug abusers. These groups may allow you to visit if you promise to protect individual identities.

6. Faculty biographies on university websites

Go to any university's website and look for biographical sketches and research interests of faculty members. Colleges are the homes of some of the nation's best minds, and the writer who doesn't tap this source of free information will miss a great opportunity. For example, a Florida zoology professor is an expert on alligators and often treks through the state's swamps with a camera and notebook. After getting an idea through reading faculty biographies, you can follow up with a telephone call to the professor. Many professors are nationally known experts in their subject areas and are flattered by requests for interviews. To find them, click on the "academic programs" link on any university's website and then find a department that interests you. Most departmental websites will list the books, articles and accomplishments of their faculty members along with telephone and e-mail addresses.

Look up professors that you know and find out their special expertise and research interests. Some universities have searchable databases for the media to use in finding faculty experts on particular topics.

7. Association directories

The *Encyclopedia of Associations: Regional, State and Local Organizations* contains names, descriptions and contact information for more than 100,000 groups that serve every conceivable occupational and special-