

Know about what you write

Richard Hill

Introduction

You will be conversant with the adage '**Write about what you know**' which is of course, good advice, but I'm suggesting that if you turn it around to '**Know about what you write**' you can write about a whole range of topics about which you possibly had little or no previous knowledge.

A good example of this is journalism. Journalists must be adept at writing on a whole range of subjects. One day they could be writing about the latest innovations in electric cars, and the next writing about the latest parliamentary white papers on people living with learning disabilities.

Ideas

So, where do you get ideas from? There are a number of ways, some of which include:-

- Personal knowledge
- The 'expertise' experiences of family, acquaintances and friends.
- Stories from the local or national press, television and radio.
- Press or news releases.
- 'Spidergrams' or 'Brainstorming' techniques.
- Excerpts from previously written and/or published articles.
- Online e.g. '12 things to write about when you're fresh out of ideas.'
- Items in your kitchen cupboards (The story behind...)

The list is almost endless.

My examples

I've written about a whole range of ideas about which I had no previous knowledge. These include: Inland Waterways, Websites, Bonsai, Veterinary Practice, Japanese Gardens etc.

I began by getting an article published in *Canal & Riverboat* magazine, about my grandfather who had a horse-drawn narrowboat in the 1920's. I then asked the editor if he'd be interested in a feature about '*Canals on the Internet*' which he accepted. This got me thinking that if I could write an article about canals on the internet, then I could probably do such an article on a whole range of subjects.

I read through the *Writers & Artists Handbook* and made a list of magazines I might be interested in writing for. I found around 15 that accepted work from freelancers. I got copies of each and studied them. I wrote each of them (the editor) an unsolicited approach enquiry letter and included a copy of the published article '*Canals on the Internet*'. Out of the 15, eight accepted and commissioned me. Some of these went on to commission me about other aspects of their speciality.

Research

Once you have found a publication that you would like to write for, and have checked that they accept work from freelancers, and studied their requirements, you can go ahead and do your research.

- Get yourself a copy of '*Research for Writers*' by Ann Hoffman.
- Use your local library and research your topic using the *Dewey Decimal Classification system*. (Those numbers that appear on the spine of library books).
- Use specialist libraries and museums etc.
- Get familiar with carrying out effective research on the internet*.
- Keep scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings, photocopies etc. of things you have come across. These will become invaluable as your writing journey progresses.
- Find people knowledgeable in your chosen subject whom you can interview. If you don't do shorthand, invest in a digital voice recorder.

* Be sure you cross-check the information you get from the internet. There is much 'mis-information' on the world wide web.

You should have, by now, **a)** have selected a magazine you want to write for and **b)** quite a lot of information about the subject that you plan to write about.

Knowing your reader

In the UK alone, there are approximately 8000 different magazine titles for general sale so you have many to choose from. Magazines can be general interest for *mainstream* audiences or specialist interest for *niche* audiences.

You should get to know as much about the magazine's typical reader. Your article should:

- a) Give fresh information to someone who's been reading the magazine for years.
- b) Be enlightening, educational and entertaining to readers who are reading the magazine for the first time.
- c) Have a basic understanding of the *demographic audience profile of your chosen magazine (if applicable). A demographic audience profile defines groups based on things like age, gender, income, education and occupation.

*Demographic profiles (general):

- A Upper middle class.
- B Middle class.
- C1 Lower middle class.
- C2 Skilled working class.
- D Working class.
- E Those at the lowest level of subsistence.

Stating the obvious: A magazine like *Vogue*, which targets female readers, would not be the place for articles written for men.

Checklist

- From your notes, make a list of topics you could write about.
- Who would want to read it?
- What magazines would they read?
- What magazines (for this topic) accept work from freelancers.
- Which magazine/s will take this?
- Research the topic in-depth.
- Find interviewees with expert or personal knowledge.
- Will it work?
- Go back to my article 'Writing for Magazines'.

Now you '*Know about what you write*'!