



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF ARTICLE WRITING

Synopsis first

To have an article commissioned by a journalist, you will usually be asked to provide a short synopsis detailing the main points you intend to cover. That is why we always ask clients not to draft the article first without having a commission. It is important that the article reflects exactly what the journalist has requested and isn't something drafted to your own requirements.

A synopsis should typically be between 100 – 300 words in length. It will have a brief description of what the reader will learn by reading the article, usually in bullet point form and may contain questions that the article will answer.

For example:

Any business that has been involved in a legal claim will be only too aware of the significant costs in bringing a legal action with no guarantee of a successful outcome. Yet more and more businesses are turning to litigation funding as a way of keeping risks and liabilities off their balance sheet.

In this article, [author] will examine:

- *what litigation funding is and how it works;*
- *the types of cases that appeal to funders; and*
- *the questions that every business should ask before entering into a third-party agreement.*

Writing articles

Some publications will have their own writing guidelines based on their style and readership – if they do not have a specific document, read some other articles they have published to get a feel for what they like. There will, however, be general similarities and the thoughts below offer some guidelines:

Think audience

Consider the readership of your publication. While you need to remain authoritative, writing for a trade magazine will be very different to a publication aimed at a more general audience.

Don't sell

Editors will be very quick to reject articles that appear too self-serving; they are looking for your insight and knowledge. Articles need to be impartial and not read like an advertisement for your service or product. The payoff will be that you will be positioned as a trusted and knowledgeable adviser. Keeping articles balanced from the start will also help the publication trust you so they'll be receptive to working with you in the future.

Assume nothing

Even when writing for a specialist publication, don't assume the readership knows technical terms and acronyms as well as you. However, you need to avoid 'dumbing down' while remaining easy to understand and informative. If you do use technical terms, explain what you mean so that the reader can follow and increase their own knowledge too. Most articles now appear online as well as in print, so include hyperlinks for further background and reading if appropriate.

Include useable information

Give the reader hints and tips that they can put to good use right away. Give them a little something for free and they're more likely to come back (and pay) for more. For example, let's say you're writing about a legal process – why not include a checklist or brief guide to help demystify the process?

Bring it to life

Where appropriate flavour your article with examples. Such as:

In our experience, the necessary cooperation and transparency at inquests is not happening. Legal representatives for state bodies can actually make an inquest a much more difficult experience for bereaved families by adopting a defensive attitude and seeking, as far as possible, to avoid any criticism of their client. This is certainly not conducive to learning lessons.

At one inquest where we represented the family of the deceased a prisoner had told the investigator that prison staff had told him his place in an open prison might need to be reviewed depending on what he told the investigation. This gave the impression that the prison was attempting to prevent the true circumstances surrounding the death being disclosed.

Beg, steal and borrow

Don't get us wrong, we're not suggesting for one minute that you plagiarise, but one of the wonderful things about the internet is that it can be a rich and relevant source of information for your article.

Often someone may have made your point more persuasively or they may have more authority. There may even be elements of what someone has said that you disagree with. So don't shy away from using others' quotes as part of your article. Not only do they use up some of your word length, thereby taking the pressure of you, they can really add insight and balance to your article. For example:

Richard Susskind uses the wisdom of former ice hockey player Wayne Gretzky to advise lawyers when thinking about the future, to plan for the legal market as it will be and not as it once was. The player advised "...skate where the pucks going, not where it's been." This is an approach we've very much embraced.

The facts were that we'd built up a really solid reputation as specialists in one area by having the right experts and a customer focused approach, so by keeping an eye on where the market is heading and where the work might come from, why not replicate this in other areas?

Don't just state, commentate

We write and edit articles on a daily basis and there is nothing worse than a writer who doesn't give an opinion one way or the other, or offer any advice.

A good article should take the reader on a journey but it shouldn't just be chronicling facts without offering any commentary. See which you think is best:

This week Citizens Advice launched new research into how consumers experience the justice system.

The research uses evidence from the frontline of local Citizens Advice, the Witness Service, and new online polling of adults in England and Wales. It found people worried about using the justice system and that it was unfair.

OR

It was no surprise to us that some 70% of respondents to recently conducted research by Citizens Advice said they would not be able to afford a lawyer to advise on a problem or dispute, and only about 10% were confident they could meet the cost of legal fees.

Let there be no mistake, justice is alive and well in the UK – what is missing though is the ability to access it. Driving this lack of access is the prohibitively expensive costs associated with the legal expertise required to properly run a claim, and the associated court costs to get to your day in court.

We speak to claimants every day who are put off bringing legitimate claims due to their inability to pay for legal advice, and this is further accentuated by a lack of understanding and knowledge of the litigation process. Those who suffer the most from the sky high costs are the everyday man and woman.

Many say that this is a sad indictment of a profession where only big business can litigate, and all too often they take advantage of a court process that is stacked against ordinary people. While this tells part of the story, it overlooks the many lawyers out there who are prepared to take work on at the risk of not getting paid, though these practitioners can only do so much as they need to earn a living.

Keep to the word length

When an article is commissioned, you will be given a word count which must be adhered to. While most publications will allow some flexibility, many will edit down articles that are too long. If they do this, then you risk the danger of them removing points you really want included. Giving them an article the length they ask for means it should be published exactly as written.

Meet your deadline

As well as word length, you will also be given a deadline by which the journalist will expect your article. Most journalists will usually have a number of commissioned articles to use in case they're let down by a contributor but some may be holding a slot just for your article. If you know you're not going to be able to meet their deadline or something crops up half way through writing, ensure you give the journalist as much notice as possible to avoid damaging any future relationship with them.

Be your own editor

Once you've completed your article, be sure to go back to it a few hours later, if time allows, to check it flows and whether it can be cut.

Remember, this is NOT a legal document

Do not write an article like you draft legal documents – it needs to have more life. That also means not using various drafting techniques for which you may instinctively reach, such as footnotes. See our Style Guide for further information.