



# Writing Magazine Articles for *CATO News*

by Sid Heal

I have published three books and more than 175 magazine articles. I have made many mistakes and rewritten countless articles to meet an editor's idea of what would be a "fit" for a particular publication. This little guide will help you improve your writing and get published. It is by no means comprehensive, nor is it intended to be. Just some thoughts that will help you avoid my mistakes, which in turn will put you ahead of where I left off!

First, barring some extraordinary reason, keep in mind that all magazines are purchased with the intent of being thrown away! Moreover, unlike books, magazines are rarely read "cover to cover." Instead, the reader browses through the material and reads only what catches their interest. Which brings us to our first point. You have to have a "hook" that immediately grabs a reader's interest before they'll invest the time and effort to finish reading your article. Likewise, editors who are inundated with much material will do the same and that can make the difference between getting published or not. In fact, if you aren't interested in learning to write an article, you'll not have read anything I've written below the first paragraph. Recognizing this fundamental fact, here's some things I've learned:

- Really good hooks make the reader feel. You can pique their curiosity, make them angry, sad, frustrated, vengeful, ambitious, or whatever, but the stronger they feel, the more likely they are to finish your article.
- Hooks are really limited only by the imagination of the author and so ingenuity and creativity are highly prized. Some hooks are just clever titles, while others pose a provocative question. Others may start with an anecdote or story and still others with an insightful quote. Anything that grabs a reader's attention and focuses on the remainder of the article is sufficient.



Second, shorter is better. Nearly all articles in professional magazines are less than 3,500 words and most are even less than that. Don't fool yourself. Writing shorter is harder. It requires clarity of thought and brevity of expression. Interestingly, many writers, like teachers, find that having to "encapsulate" thoughts and ideas so that they are clearly and easily understood also helps the author to understand it better as well. In this respect, writing is another method of learning. Most professional magazines will provide "writer's guidelines" to help aspiring authors. These typically include things like the desired length, deadlines, format, subject, and any editorial requirements, as well as the required format for illustrations and graphics.

Third, organize your material! No amount of clarity of expression will compensate for a disjointed presentation. You can organize your material chronologically, sequentially, from simple to complex, from concept to application, from cause to effect, and any number of other ways. The important thing is to have an identifiable method for presenting your material.

Fourth, remember the first point. Now that you've got their attention, readers have a legitimate expectation that you'll fulfill their expectations. Accordingly, ask yourself, "What is the purpose of this article?" Typically, magazine articles do one or more of four things. They entertain, persuade, inform or solve some problem. The best articles do more than one at the same time and I would submit, that if entertainment is not inherent that you may have a great handout for some class but probably not a good article.

Fifth, not everything that you know is fitting for the context of an article. We've all seen articles that were too long, too detailed, too complicated... That said, some of the "factoids" are so valuable that they deserve to be published, just not necessarily in the text of the article. Graphics, matrices, tables, charts, maps, diagrams and photographs work wonders in bringing clarity and interest to even the most mundane subject. While the editor will always have the final say, my experience is that they would much rather have an illustrated article than only text. They often use callouts and sidebars to highlight particularly interesting or important aspects of an article.

I will close this short lesson by stating something that will quickly become painfully obvious—writing is hard work! I know many great writers but no naturally great writers. Every one of them struggles and sweats. Some have quit, only to be drawn back. Good writing, like a good painting or good song, is both science and art. You can be justifiably



proud of having your knowledge, thoughts and ideas “memorialized” for the benefit of others but do not think that it is any easier than learning weak hand shooting or high risk entries. It will be worth it, however, as years later someone you never knew recognizes your name and tells you how the knowledge gained from something you’ve written has made their job easier or safer. THAT is the best compensation you’ll ever receive for making the effort.

This entire article, including the title and byline, is less than 850 words. You can do it also!

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*CATO has hired Dan Burger, a professional editor, for our magazine. While Dan is not allowed to write your article for you, he will mentor you and give you advice. Likewise, there are scads of free “how to” articles on the internet. All of us on the CATO Board want to encourage you to try. Not every expert makes the effort to be a good teacher or a good writer but those who do leave a legacy that benefits us all and those who will follow us.*