

Writing for Publication

NANPA presentation February 2006

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I. Introduction

- Not your English class
- No "I can't"
- Keep an attitude of "I can"
- Keeping reader with you vs. putting them to sleep (this goes for editors, too)
- Write, write, write

II. Non-Fiction Writing

- A technical craft
- AND you have to have something to say

III. Getting Started – The Lead

- Grabbing your reader (and your editor's) attention
- What's interesting/exciting/fun about your subject?
- Why should your reader care?
- An attitude about reaching your reader
- Not a summary of the article
- Review examples

IV. Technical craft

- Active voice
- Clarity
- Core writing standards:
 - Spelling
 - Grammar
 - Punctuation
- Short paragraphs for magazines
- Longer paragraphs work for books

- Short sentences with longer ones for variety
- Use concrete ("solid") examples (e.g., bald eagle vs. bird)
- Edit for content, clarity and words that matter

V. Organization

- Choosing content
- Outline key points
- Do they make sense
- Purpose
- Consistency

VI. Accuracy

- Very important
- Confirm details
- Do your research
- Use the Internet, but beware – double and triple check

VII. Voice and tone

- Colloquial, friendly
- Your point of view
- Related to needs of publication
- Purpose
- No pedantic text
- Read it aloud; if you get tongue-tied, fix it
- Speak it as if explaining to a friend

VIII. Researching publication

- Understanding its audiences:
 - readers
 - advertisers
 - internal
- Personality of the publication

IX. Query letters

- Short (1-page maximum)
- Give a reason for editor to care (like a lead!)
- Briefly tell who you are
- Never tell an editor that you know this is perfect for the publication

Quote Robert Adams:

There aren't any rules, just the final test of whether a specific piece of writing or picture-making is effective. Assuming that the main challenge of life is to love life – to see it clearly and accept it and be thankful for it – then any activity that helps us do that is worthwhile, and its form is the right form.

Quote Ann Bird by Bird:

[Writing and reading matter because] they deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.

Hang in there: *Rotten Reviews:*

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad: "It would be useless to pretend that this can be very widely read." *Manchester Guardian* 1902

On Charles Dickens: "We do not believe in the permanence of his reputation...Fifty years hence and our children will wonder what their ancestors could have meant by putting Mr. Dickens at the head of the novelists of his day." *Saturday Review* 1858

Catch-22 by Joseph Heller: "... it gasps for want of craft and sensibility ... The book is an emotional hodgepodge; no mood is sustained long enough to register for more than a chapter." *New York Times Book Review* 1961.

On Rudyard Kipling: "I'm sorry, Mr. Kipling, but you just don't know how to use the English language." *San Francisco Examiner* rejection letter to Kipling 1889

Hamlet by William Shakespeare: "It is a vulgar and barbarous drama, which would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France or Italy ... one would imagine this piece to be the work of a drunken savage." Voltaire 1768

Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman: "Whitman is as unacquainted with art as a hog is with mathematics." *The London Critic* 1855

Books:

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

On Writing Well by William Zinsser

Eats, Shoots and Leaves by Lynne Truss

The Singing Wilderness by Sigurd F. Olson

A Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold

Wild Moments by Ted Williams

How to Be a (Bad) Birdwatcher by Simon Barnes

Keys to Great Writing by Stephen Wilbers (JC)

Writing about Nature: A Creative Guide – by John A. Murray (JC)

Writer's Digest books

Leads and more

NANPA presentation:

Pedantic (avoid this):

The lichen is an organism made up of a fungus and a blue-green alga in a symbiotic relationship. To be sure, it comes in many shapes and forms, from crustose to foliose, and in a variety of colors. Since this is a ubiquitous life form to many ecosystems throughout the world, and because it is very sensitive to air pollution of many types, it is very important for anyone who is really concerned about our environment to care about lichens. This alone makes it a great subject for the photographer who wants to do something to protect the environment. In this essay, I will give you more information about this organism so you will want to better appreciate the reasons why they are important and you will want to understand why you may want to photograph it. I will explain more about the unique symbiosis that makes up and defines a lichen, how to identify the different types of lichens by looking at a number of characteristics, and summarize the research about lichens and air pollution.

In the late 20th century, biologists examined the classification of life again and decided it did not clearly explain the variety of life on earth. Flowering plants did not seem to have much in common with fungi, for example, and neither group was much like the algae. So, the experts split up the former plant kingdom into four groups: the flowering plants, fungi, algae and blue-green algae (technically, the latter are called cyanobacteria).

Magazine-style – one approach:

Consider this: a single living thing that is actually made up of two completely different organisms growing as one. That sure sounds like something from Star Trek or Star Wars, but it actually is quite common on earth.

What are we talking about? The lichen. Lichens are those common crusty growths that enliven photographs of bark and gravestones, make great leafy-looking close-ups on rocks, and really add atmosphere to photographs of forests along the West Coast with the way they drape from branches of trees where there is fog and other moisture.

And the lichen is truly a unique organism, though you wouldn't know that as you focus on one in your viewfinder. It looks like a plant, yet it represents an intricate relationship between a fungus and an algae. It is not a plant as neither fungi nor algae are classified as plants anymore. Even if they were, what would you call something that exists only because two other organisms found out how to live together in a symbiotic relationship?

Magazine style – another approach:

I love Arches National Park in Utah. I often go there and find some steeply sloping rock to cling to, staying flat, gripping the sandstone with my whole body. I'm no extreme rock climber, so I look for places that don't have a huge drop below me by Arches standards, maximum twenty feet or so, though if I would fall from such a spot, I would definitely have broken something.

Arches is known for its fantastic rock formations, and I love to photograph them. But my rock clinging activities are for something else ... lichen photos.

The crusty, flat-growing lichens of these Utah rocks offer incredible colors and patterns that I cannot resist examining closer. The Museum of Modern Art holds no finer abstract patterns than what grows here. I could easily see sections of this rock magnified and put on display for the New York art crowd to marvel at. Some remind me of Miro or Klee paintings. Every one is different and they all together made a stunning tapestry that can only be appreciated from inches away.

Lichens tend to be overlooked in favor of more dramatic life, yet they offer color and texture to many, many landscapes. My fascination with them tends to put me on my belly, although not usually in such a precarious location. In another park, this time thousands of miles away, I peer from ground level at the reindeer moss (not really a moss, but a lichen) of Acadia National Park. These are wonderful little mounds of gray-green on the forest floor, almost like miniature shrubs.