

# Don't be Afraid to Write Your Own Articles

*Shôn Ellerton, February 10, 2019*

*In a world infested with memes, tweets and one-line posts, we need more of us to take the time and gather courage to write longform articles.*



One day, I discovered a good friend of mine started to write and post longform articles on LinkedIn. Considering that he suffers from dyslexia, a debilitating condition which makes all forms of writing and reading comprehension vastly more difficult than for the rest of us, I was suitably impressed when he took the time and effort to take on the challenge of writing.

Many friends and colleagues of mine have had very interesting experiences but somehow, none of them, bar two of them, have taken the plunge to put ‘pen to paper’ and publish an article to share; at least not to my knowledge or within close friends in social media circles.

Here are 10 questions that sometimes arise when I ask someone why they do not take on an article.

## 1. What if someone points out my writing mistakes?

Nobody is a perfect writer. Let it be known that practically all the books, professional articles and journal writings that you have read in your lifetime have had third-party professional editors who have meticulously wormed their way through the publication looking for typos, grammatical mistakes, inconsistencies with past, present and future tense; you name it. This article, no doubt, would have its share of red-pen corrections if given to a professional editor!

Go for it. Yes, you may receive commentary by pedants who have cravings for pointing out mistakes, but does it really matter? In most cases, it's better to get something over to the audience than not at all.

## 2. What if English is not my first language?

There is, no doubt, that English is used the most extensively when it comes down to article-writing. This presents an enormous challenge to those whose native language is not English as writing in most other languages significantly reduces the potential number of readers who may stumble across it.

Most readers are far more interested in the content of your article rather than your competency in spelling and grammar. As in the above, be prepared for the occasional derisory comment about your spelling or grammatical mistakes. It is often those who never write and contribute who dish out these comments. If English *really* is a struggle, there are many tools online that can help. Sometimes, writers start with a brief statement alluding to where they are from to deter would-be pedants.

## 3. Don't you have to be fully knowledgeable in what you write about?

Why do you have to be a subject expert to write what you want to write about? Remember, we're not writing academic journals here. Think about this for a moment or two. How much credence do you place on the expertise written about various topics, say, in your local, or even national newspaper for example? Most articles are written, not directly by the experts themselves, but by the newspaper who rely on their reporters, writers and editors to publish the article, of which many are 'spiced up' to fit the readers of that newspaper. Another example, do you really believe the top stories on major social media sites and those found by popular search engines are placed purely at the top of the list because of the number of readers who liked it? I recently had a friend who had an article

removed because the content mentioned a few unpopular facts about one specific country which, it seems, had those with enough clout to influence the platform the article was published on. I won't say which one.

I'm not suggesting that one should go write about a subject which they have absolutely no knowledge of. Nothing of the sort. However, the grey area is what constitutes as being knowledgeable enough to write about the subject. Do you have to have an academic degree in it? Or should you have worked in that industry for years? I don't think so. It's *your* story and you want to share your experiences or interest in that subject. Don't be afraid.

#### 4. What if my facts are wrong?

Rule of thumb. Don't make up stuff. If the article you are intending to write requires backing it up with factual data, try to obtain the data from several sources, if possible, making references to these sources. I am not an expert in statistics; however, be attentive when it comes to drawing a picture based on statistical data. Here's an example. In my immediate neighbourhood, there was a publication by a realtor describing the demographics of my local suburbs. One aspect of the report described how crowded the suburb is by citing how many people lived there per square kilometre. The suburb just north of me, a suburb called Marino in South Australia, is far less dense with under half the same number of people per square kilometre than my own suburb, Hallett Cove. Based on the content of the publication, it made Marino seem far less crowded. Truth is, most of Marino is a conservation park and a quarry! It is just as crowded as Hallett Cove where the houses are built. Be careful with statistics.

What *is* factual, indisputable and less prone to misconstrued interpretation are your real-life experiences on the subject you are writing about. Provided you are not making it up, stories based on your experience *did* happen. Moreover, many readers *like* to read up on real-life experiences from others.

#### 5. Can I express my opinions?

Why not? I do not agree that every article written should be bone-dry objective. There are certain well-established publications that strive to be as objective as possible; for example, *The Economist*, *National Geographic*, *New Scientist*, and the *Financial Times*. These are, among many respectable publications, very good sources of information; however, the format with which they are written are carefully curated to be as objective as possible stating the facts clearly with the least amount of ambiguity. Everyone has an opinion, and it is what makes reading articles from different perspectives more interesting to the reader. Don't worry

too much about comments from those who disagree about your opinions. After all, it is human nature for us to far more easily criticise than to praise. Why do you think bad news sells? If we are too scared to express our opinions out of fear that we are offending, then we're truly out of the Age of Enlightenment, are we not?

## 6. Why should I write about something if someone else already did?

Just because there are others who are writing about the same thing does not mean that it is pointless or worthless to write something in a similar vein. Of course, if you are writing something very specific or unusual, the chances are, is that your publication may stand out more prominently across the crowded seas out there. Remember to add your own story as well. Don't just read another article and regurgitate it as your own. You might as well just share that article rather than trying to re-write it. I really like to read articles that integrate a little personal story about the author as well.

## 7. Why should I take extra time to write an article?

Hands down, yes, writing an article takes far more time than writing a short blip or paragraph on social media but it is ultimately more rewarding. Moreover, it gives you practice on your writing skills much like reading books improves your reading skills. We often think ourselves as being too time-poor, but if you add up all the time one watches TV or browsing and commenting across social media posts, that time could be put to use in creating new material for others to share. Another factor worthy of mentioning is that when one spends time to write, correct, re-read and format an article, impulsive statements generated by a sudden emotional response or reaction, often those found in short social media posts, are far less likely to occur.

## 8. Why should I write articles in the first place?

You don't have to, but it's a great gesture to contribute new material out there for others to consume and share. Broadly speaking, there are three activities in social media: *consuming*, *sharing*, and *contributing*. For most of us, *consuming* represents the lion's share of the three activities for most of us, followed by *sharing* and then, finally, by *contributing*, if at all. A sensible ratio to achieve could be 75% *consuming*, 15-20% *sharing*, and 5-10% *contribution*, for example. It differs from individual to individual. The level of contribution in article writing is significantly lower in reality; far less than 1%, at least from what I deduce from

contributions in my social networks. The upshot is, that much of the stuff we read is simply regurgitated over and over. I always look forward to the extremely rare occasion where a friend or colleague I know personally manage to take their time to write and publish an article.

## 9. What if my material is too offensive?

What is considered offensive is largely subjective; however, there are specific topics you may want to avoid. Any material which has the potential to start violence or fuel hatred is best avoided. The problem, of course, is that what may seem totally benign to others may be utterly abhorrent to others. It *is* important that we view differing opinions; however, it should never be the intention to alienate a whole group of people and most definitely, not one particular individual. Some articles may contain expletives, disturbing material or may contain adult content; however, there are specific circumstances where this may be needed to deliver the content of the article. If that is the case, it is certainly a good idea to warn the reader at the *beginning* of the article. In any case, use ‘bad language’ sparingly if possible.

## 10. What platform should I use to share my article?

Deciding which platform to use to publish your articles is really down to personal preference. If you wish to have the widest audience possible, then you will need to either host your article on a social media platform in which you have already created a large personal network or host your article on another platform or your own website and then point your article from the social media platform which you intend to use. For example, if you have a large following in Twitter, you may want to host your article on another platform like Medium. If you have a large following on LinkedIn, then you can natively host articles there and share your article through other social media outlets. Facebook, to my knowledge, does not support longform articles although they were talking about it back in 2015, so you will need to host your articles elsewhere and then point to them in Facebook if you have a large following there. If you do intend to use your own website, make sure you have the bandwidth and speed to make it a reliable source for others to use. Personally, I tend to publish most of my articles on LinkedIn and Medium and then, share these articles through Facebook and Twitter.

**Important note on platforms.** Be thoughtful and host your article on a non-subscription platform. There is nothing more irksome than to click on a link to an article on social media only to find out that you have to subscribe to the publication beforehand.

## Conclusion

Without new articles being written, we will, eventually, become stale with many of the same articles being passed around endlessly within social media circles. Quite often, I come across many individuals who claim that they will start writing articles about something or another or about themselves only to never commit to starting it. This is sad in a way, insofar that so many of us have so much to share and talk about. Perhaps we are scared to breach topics or express opinions which may openly offend someone else. Perhaps we dread the thought of being hounded by a pedant correcting your typos. Far more new material would be made available for others if many of these thoughts are cast aside and we overcome many of these fears, or if we choose to set a little bit of time to write instead of continually ploughing through social media posts or watching TV. I recently came across my grandfather's archives of his sugar beet business during WWII and it proved to be a very interesting read. If he did not write and leave a journal of his happenings, then all that he did would be lost in the annals of time.