



Ideas and the Complete Article Writer

Simon Whaley

Ideas are those pesky little things that have a habit of biting you at the most inopportune moment and then buzzing off into the ether, if you don't swat them hard enough and imprint them into some sort of permanent format. Of course, it's all well and good having a method of capturing our ideas, but we need the little blighters to show up from time to time. And if you're looking to generate a useful income stream from articles then they need to turn up on a regular basis. Think of yourself as a great explorer, rather than an armchair traveller. Don't expect the ideas to come to you; go out and find them. It's not necessary to travel to the ends of the earth though. Ideas are everywhere, once you start looking.

I used to work for a high street bank. (Please don't hold it against me.) As a result, I've used that knowledge to write articles about looking after your money and how to protect your personal data. I spent several years working for a local authority dealing with grants and European funding (yawn), but I used my knowledge and experience to write a book on the subject. My hobbies include walking, which means I've discovered lots of interesting places to go hiking, which is why I've regularly contributed to magazines like *Country Walking*, *BBC Countryfile* and *Lakeland Walker*. And as a columnist in *Writing Magazine* I need new ideas every month for that, too.

"I have two small children under five," someone once said to me in a workshop. "Going anywhere, or doing anything with them can be a complete nightmare. So what do I write about?" Easy. Ideas can be found in the mundane areas of life. Write about what you do know:

What techniques/tips have you created to help make taking the children out shopping as easy as possible?

What time of day, or day of the week, is quietest in the supermarkets?

Which are your favourite free places to take the children out to? (Children's play area, library, interactive museum, local park.)

Which shops have the best baby-changing facilities – national chains, or local independent retailers?

What are your five top distraction techniques, for when the children are misbehaving?

How do you make the most of your time when your children are asleep?

With ideas, it's not about what you know, but what others may be interested to know. It's a struggle bringing up children on your own, but you know you're not the

only one doing it. Your coping techniques could work for someone else.

The trick is to assess the idea. Our first ideas are usually too vague. They need to be fine-tuned. Article ideas fail because:

They don't have enough depth to them. Save money by always buying BOGOF (Buy One Get One Free) products with long use-by dates is not an article idea; it's a tip. It would work on a filler page, but does not work as an idea for an 800-word article. (What else is there to say?) However, *Eight Ways To Make Your Money Go Further* (of which the BOGOF is one element) could work as an article idea, because there is more to say.

It's an anecdote. We all have stories of funny things that happened to us while doing some DIY on the house. It's the sort of thing you tell your friends at the pub or over coffee. What will the reader learn from it? (Apart from the fact that you're not to be trusted with a hammer and some six-inch nails.)

It's too big an idea. Some ideas are too enormous for the article format. A complete account of *World War Two* would fill several books. It's not possible to do it justice as an article.

However, there are several techniques you can use to focus your idea and make it more suitable for an article.

Angles

When you angle an idea, you're narrowing in on a smaller element of it. This means thinking about a specific type of readership. It's tempting, when you've done lots of research and discovered a wealth of interesting facts about a particular subject matter, to want to include everything you've unearthed in your article. When you angle an idea, it forces you to choose which facts to include and which ones to leave out. What you leave out of your article is just as important as what you put in.

For example, a dog magazine might be interested in my home town as a holiday destination for dog lovers. It was recently voted the dog-friendliest town in the UK and there are some fantastic places to take your dog for a walk. So the angle of this idea is my home town as a tourist destination for dog lovers. However, I would not mention the golf course we have here, despite it being one of the most scenically outstanding courses in the country, because my target readership, dog lovers, would not be interested in this information.

Topical Hooks and Anniversaries

Timing is everything. Magazine production schedules

can extend to weeks or months, which means that editors are often working three months ahead on monthly publications and anything between four and eight weeks ahead on weekly issues. Therefore, they put a lot of work into making their issues as relevant to their publication date as possible. When the reader sits down to read it they should feel they're reading something up-to-date and relevant.

Anniversaries can be a great way to give your idea topicality and make it more interesting to an editor. They can also be written many months in advance, which is great from a writer's perspective. They take planning though, because the stronger the anniversary, the more interest an editor may have. However, more writers will want to write about the big anniversaries. First World War articles are popular at the moment because of the centenary of the event. Nice anniversary numbers are 25, 50, 75, 100, and so on.

But if the approaching anniversary is not a nice round number, don't be put off. Sometimes editors will consider any anniversary if the idea is right. I once sold an article to *The Lady* about earthquakes in Britain using the third anniversary of the last big quake to hit the country.

Consider all potential anniversary options, too. For example, if you're writing about a historical character, look at all of the dates for potential anniversaries. When were they born? When did they die? When was their first big breakthrough? If they died 78 years ago, that's not a great anniversary number, but if their big breakthrough achievement occurred 125 years ago, then use that as your anniversary hook to hang the rest of your article on. Sometimes being a writer is all about being creative with numbers.

Broadening Ideas

It's possible to generate an idea by broadening it to encompass a wider picture. Many people will have heard about the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the Battle of Hastings and the invasion by William the Conqueror. But did you know there is another tapestry depicting scenes from the last invasion of Britain (Fishguard, in February 1797)? A quick search on the Internet reveals there are other similar tapestries too. So, why do people feel the need to commemorate war with needle and thread? What are the ten top war tapestries of the world? And you don't have to stop at this world. One Internet result mentioned a tapestry depicting key battle scenes from the Star Wars films, which, as everyone knows, took place in a galaxy far, far away ...

Local Angles

Having considered a galaxy far, far away, don't ignore what's on your own doorstep. Local county magazines and local newspapers all need articles. Can you take a national story, or idea, and give it a local twist? Remember my article about earthquakes in Britain that I wrote for *The Lady*? In my research I discovered that one of the UK's biggest quakes caused damage to buildings in Derby. So, by focussing on that local angle, I sold an arti-

cle to *Derbyshire Life* magazine about earthquakes.

Although I used a bit of information about British earthquakes in general, I included everything I could find about their impact upon Derbyshire. Local readers are interested in local issues. They don't care what's happening in the county next door. Using a local angle is no different to any other angled piece: draw upon the information that's relevant to that local readership and discard the rest.

Once you start scrutinising your ideas you'll find there are gazillions of them out there. There are some writers who say they never have enough time to write up all of the ideas they have ... and this is why. So what are you waiting for? Get writing!

The Complete Article Writer draws upon Simon Whaley's own 25-year article-writing experience and is a step-by-step guide taking writers through the process of creating a publishable article, from developing an idea, angling it to a specific readership, knowing what structure to use, selling the idea before writing it, and even showing writers what to do once it has been published.

ISBN: 9781502491817

Print RRP: £7.99

eBook: £2.99

About Simon Whaley

Over 600 of Simon Whaley's articles have appeared in publications such as: BBC Countryfile, Country Walking, The Simple Things, Cumbria, Discover Britain, British Heritage, The People's Friend and Outdoor Photography. He's also the author of *The Positively Productive Writer* (ISBN: 9781846948510) and *Photography for Writers* (ISBN: 9781780999357), published by Compass Books and Compass Points respectively. For more information about Simon visit: www.simonwhaley.co.uk

