

# Writing for Magazines

## Richard Hill



### About me

Hi. I'm a 68-year-old disabled part-time amateur writer living and writing in Slough, Berkshire.

I began writing in 1996 after having to take early retirement due to health issues. I worked as a Medical Technician at St. Thomas' Hospital in London. It was a job I loved and sorry to have to retire at the age of 39.

Before I retired, in late 1995 I entered a competition '*The Lord Brock Memorial Historical Essay Prize - Guy's Hospital.*' I had worked on various types of artificial respirators, including Iron Lungs. I decided to write an essay on the '*History of the British Iron Lung.*' I won joint first!

When I retired, in January 1996, I suddenly found myself at a loss. Previously, I'd always been 'something'; An electrician, a vending machine engineer and medical technician amongst other things. Now I was nothing.

However, a valued friend of mine asked me what I'd like to do. Following my recent essay success, I told him I'd like to be a writer. He replied, "Don't just want it - do it!".

Later that year, I nervously went to the annual '*Writers Conference*' at *the University of Winchester.* I'd 'prior booked' a 1-2-1 with one of the speakers, Gordon Wells, who wrote for magazines. I told him about my essay on the history of British iron lungs. He said that it was a fascinating story, but that it wouldn't be suitable for a magazine. He suggested that I should make a list of everyone I knew, or had known, and I'd be likely to find a few interesting topics that I could write about.

I made such a list and found a few things that I could write about. I learned that my late grandfather, George Wiseman, had a horse-drawn narrowboat in the 1920's. He would collect milk, in churns, from local farms along the Shropshire Union canal, and take it to the *Cadbury* processing plant at Knighton in Shropshire. More on that later.

## Getting started

You've decided that you want to write for a magazine. Where do you start?

Forget the old saying 'Write about what you know.' It's too restricting. Sure, there are a few things of which you know that you could write about. I suggest that you turn it around to 'Know about what you write.' This way, you can write about so many things. (It's what journalists have to do).

## Find a market.

Find a magazine that will take work from freelance writers. Study magazines on the stationers' shelves, but a useful way is to invest in the 'Writers & Artists Yearbook'. It costs around £30 but is well worth the investment. Look up all the magazines that might publish the type of article that you're going to write.

## Research.

Study each magazine and ask questions. Study their contributors guidelines if they have them. (Samples are on my website at <http://richardhill.co.uk/respect/>) Do they accept work from freelancers? How many words are they looking for in an article? What's the 'lead time' on articles (e.g. If you're writing an article on volunteering for example, would it fit best in an issue in National Volunteers Week' (June)? How long do you need to submit it beforehand (usually 2 - 3 months).

My story about my grandfather and his narrowboat wasn't 'time sensitive', but it did have to fit in a magazine for canal enthusiasts. I found three in the 'Writers & Artists Yearbook.' They were *Waterways World*, *Canal Boat*, and *Canal & Riverboat* magazines. I found that the latter was the magazine that published a) 'Historical' features, and b) accepted work from freelance (and novice) contributors.

We had a family photograph of my grandfather on his narrowboat 'Bournville 5' and I went along and took a photograph of the canal side processing plant as it is today. I contacted the press office at *Cadbury* to enquire if they had any archive photographs of the plant in the 1920's? They sent me two. I also had to ask permission to publish these (with an acknowledgement). (See 'Photographs' below.)

You should also read as many recent back copies as possible. Make notes of the style, length etc. of features in the category your article will fit into. If the author of articles in your chosen category is usually the same, this may indicate that there may not be an opportunity for you. But not always. The editor may be recycling old articles and would welcome a new contributor.

## Writing your article.

Now, you're ready to write. Check in the W&A yearbook for the required word count. If they don't give it, get the approximate word count from a similar article where yours will fit.

### Start writing.

You need to write a 'beginning', 'middle', and 'end'. Write tight. Every word must earn its place on the page. In the opening paragraph you must grab your reader's attention. The first few words are the decider as to whether your reader wants to read on or not.

Check your facts, grammar, and spelling as you go. In my article, I misspelled Bournville (Bourneville)! (Only one reader noticed my error and wrote in!)

If your required word count is, for example, 1000 words, write 1,500 and edit 500 out. This will make sure your writing is tight. Never write less trying to 'pad it out' to fill your required word count.

Lay out your manuscript in a clear way. Here are some pointers:

- Number your pages in the header including the total number of pages e.g. Page 3 of 4. Include your real name (To whom the cheque will be made payable to) and the title of the article.
- Leave a left and right margin of at least 1.5 cm and double space your lines (This leaves room for the editor to mark-up your copy).
- After the end of the article in the centre type '-ENDS-' . Beneath this, on the left, include the word count in italics and underlined e.g. 989 words.

Print out your manuscript and read it, preferably aloud. Mark out any alterations or corrections before you edit the word processing copy. (I can't edit 'on-screen'. It may look correct, but when I read the printed copy, I spot mistakes that I hadn't seen 'on screen'.) Is it easy to read?

*Leave it alone!* I often find that if you leave it alone for a few days, then come back to it with fresh eyes, you can often spot 'room for improvement'.

### Photographs.

Features/articles often 'sell' better if the words are accompanied by good photographs. If you don't think of yourself as a competent photographer, I recommend taking a basic photography course.

### Archive Photographs.

If you feel your article would benefit from some 'archive' photographs, this is the time where more research comes into play. 'Archive' doesn't necessarily mean 'old' photographs. I wrote about a dog that helped save his owner's life. When I went to interview them, I found out that the *Western Mail* had recently done a piece on them and had taken a photograph of them in hospital. I really wanted to use this photograph so I contacted the picture editor and asked if I could use it in my article for my article in '*Mad About Dogs*' magazine. They said yes, for a small fee.

You can also obtain archive photographs from organisations' linked to the subject of your article. I mentioned earlier, the article I wrote about my grandfather and his horse-drawn narrowboat. As

mentioned, the *Cadbury* press office gave me two archive photographs which showed the processing plant in the 1920's.

#### Captioning your images.

You should rename your images with numbers such as 001.jpg, 002.jpg, 003.jpg etc. Then after the word count on your manuscript, you should caption and acknowledge the photographer or supplier. This is how your list should appear:

001.jpg The house, built in 1921, as it appears today. (Photographer: Joe Bloggs.)

002.jpg The house as it was in 1925. (Courtesy of the Slough Observer)

003.jpg The flooding of 1967. (Courtesy of the Environment Agency)

If you're sending prints, don't write on the back of them. Write your name and address and photograph number on an adhesive label and stick it on the back of the photograph. If required stick on another sticker with the caption on.

In this way, you make the editors job much easier.

#### Bite the bullet!

Now is the time to 'bite the bullet'.

It's always a daunting moment calling the editor. Get the editor's name from the latest issue of the publication you're hoping to sell it to. You should be able to get the phone number from here.

When you call, ask for the editor by name. Address him or her politely. Explain that you are a new writer and why you think he/she may be interested. Your research from the W&A yearbook should roughly state how much the publication pays. Discuss this with the editor. One publication I wrote for paid £50 per printed page (text and images), while another paid £100 per thousand words and £30 per image.

You may prefer to make your initial approach via email. You should find the email address in the magazine. In the body of your email, you should include a short summary about what your article is about and why their readers might be interested. Be polite. Ask him/her how much, if accepted, you would be paid. You should attach your article (In Word format) and your photographs (Numbered as above).

#### Multiple Markets.

Don't make multiple submissions to competing publications. However, you might find that you can use the same material and photographs for two or more differing non-competing publications. A good example of this is when I wrote articles about a gay hotel narrowboat holiday. I sold one article to '*Canal & Riverboat*' magazine and another to the travel section of '*Gay Times*' magazine.

Study the magazines' '*Contributor Guidelines*' and their '*Media Packs/Kits*' if they have them. For examples of these, visit my web page at <http://richardhill.co.uk/respect/> [ENDS]