

How To Write Articles

A Suggested Approach

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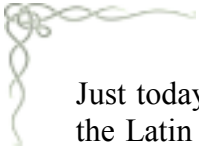
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ScrawlBug

Tips, advice and resources for the fledgeling freelancer.





Just today, I saw another request for guidance on this subject on one of the forums (or fora for the Latin speakers) I frequent. The call for help usually comes from new writers or people who do not have English as their first language. I thought I'd lay out one method of writing articles, which works for me.

Five Preparative Steps

Firstly, I make sure I remove distractions. This may seem a funny place to start and blindingly obvious, but it's very difficult to write properly if you're hungry, sitting in a very noisy room, have half a dozen web-games running or the neighbour's dog is biting your foot. By removing the distracting factors, it's easier to focus.

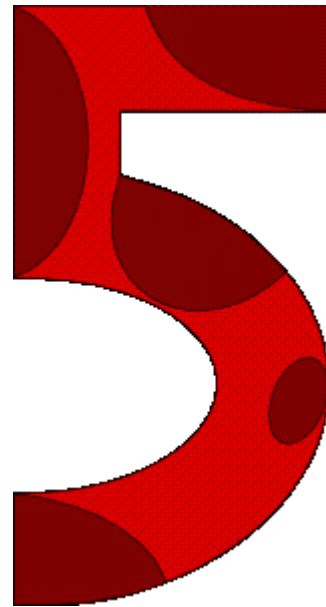
Secondly, I choose my subject. Normally this is the reason for sitting down to write in the first place: there's an idea already there. However, if you find yourself a bit lost, a quick trawl of the web can provide easy inspiration: forums, discussions, news and other blogs can all provide an idea for a post (cf. this one!).

Thirdly, I'll do a little research. In many cases, this isn't necessary, since the subject's been bouncing around inside my skull anyway, but it's always worth double-checking facts. It can also lead to wonderful discoveries, such as a superb piece on writing articles that I found while looking into this post. Make sure you keep track of anything you'll be referencing, so you can quote your sources properly.

Fourthly, choose a style. In the case of a blog post, it's easy enough - since your style is already established, the new article will follow suit. If you're writing a stand-alone piece, though, there is a question of whether you prefer it to be serious, literary, conversational, instructional, argumentative or another style entirely. Looking at the target audience helps a lot here: writing a piece on legal issues generally requires a more serious approach than a discussion of the latest "phat lewt" in a game, for example.

The fifth step is to jot down a quick list of points to make in the piece of work. This can be as simple as scribbling on a piece of paper or typing a few guide words into Notepad (which is what I did for this post). If the article is long and involved, it may be better to come up with a more definite plan, though: start with a quick summary, present the arguments, move on through the logical debate and facts, then reach the conclusion.

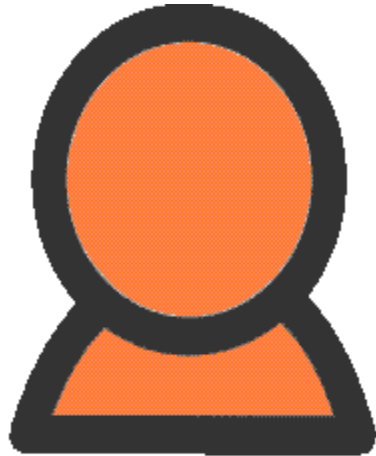
Only then will I move on to the actual writing. Those first steps should have taken about five minutes or so, with additional research time if needed.





Editing and Proofing

Once the piece is written, I'll leave it for a few minutes. Play a game of Solitaire or something. Then I'll come back and try to eliminate the waffling, but also make sure the important points are defined and described properly - especially if there are technical terms, buzzwords or slang. This is also a good time to check the word count.



edit

Now that the piece is a bit 'tighter', it's time to run it through the spelling, punctuation and grammar checks. This is more important if you're writing for publishing by a third party, where you won't be able to edit it later.

Finally, I'll put the article to one side and go do something else.

If it's just a blog post or a simple article, I'll return to it a bit later and re-read it, just to make sure it makes sense. Then it goes off for public viewing!

On the other hand, if it's an important piece – especially if it's freelance work for which I'm being paid by a third party – it needs another couple of checks. First off, it needs to be edited backwards. Yes, I'm serious! Starting with the last sentence, I'll read the entire thing backwards, one sentence at a time. The idea is to make it disjointed, to remove the 'expected' flow of words so that my brain looks at each phrase separately and spots errors.

Once that's done, I'll take some more of my own advice and read it out loud. Every word. Every sentence. This is a great way of spotting phrases that are messy or unclear, too long or redundant. It's even better if you can find someone else to read the work to, or who will read it themselves.

It may seem like a lot of paranoia for one article, but a happy client is a *future* client and worth the effort.

