

# How To Write Articles

## A Suggested Approach

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The original version of the latter part was published at  
<http://www.wordophilia.com> on March 29, 2009.

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# ScrawlBug

Tips, advice and resources for the fledgeling freelancer.





## Article Structure

The vast majority of standard-length online articles are based on a very simple structure:

- An opening paragraph that introduces the topic
- The information or arguments
- The counter-argument, rebuttal or opposing information
- The conclusion and call to action
- Any references

### The opening paragraph

Apart from the title, the opening paragraph is the most important part of the article if you're writing for the web. Most visitors arrive at your content because they're interested in the title but, if you don't hook them with your first few sentences, they'll quickly leave.

The introductory paragraph should be two or three sentences long. It must sum up what the content is about, without giving away everything you're going to say. You want to grab the reader's attention and pique their curiosity at the same time.

For example, an opening that says something like "This article is about six different ways to write interesting titles for your blog entries" is descriptive but it's about as interesting as picking up sawdust a grain at a time!

How about something like "The title is one of the most important elements of every blog entry: a good headline grabs your reader and forces them to visit so they can find out more. How can you write traffic-generating titles that stand out among the millions of other blog entries posted every day? Here are six excellent ideas...?"

### The information or arguments

The body of the work contains everything you want to convey to your readers. It's definitely worth noting down the points you want to cover, unless you have a very organized brain. Walk through them logically and try to stay focussed on the subject: an occasional digression can be useful or fun but too much loses the thread.

Keep your sentences fairly short and the paragraphs small – a few phrases in friendly-looking chunks are much easier to digest than a massive block of text.

Speaking of short phrases, don't be overly literate. The majority of audiences want something that's conversational, not the Great American Novel. Keep it simple unless you're writing for a well-educated, analytical audience who understand all the big words you want to use!

Bullets and lists make your content easier to read; they also make the important points stand out. Sub-headings break up the flow if they're used appropriately. Use both methods sparingly: putting headings and bullets all over the place can make the article very clunky.





## **The rebuttal**

An optional element, depending on the type of article, the rebuttal is the counter-argument. This is particularly important in analytical pieces where both sides of the debate should be mentioned. You don't need to go into great detail – especially if you want people to comment – but you do need to mention that there are opposing views. Anything else just makes you look closed-minded, unless the piece is pure opinion.

On another note, marketing content rarely has a rebuttal. Marketing's job is to promote what you do, not to put forth reasonable, well-considered arguments.

## **The conclusion**

You should always sum up what you've said so that the reader leaves with a clear idea of the main point you've tried to convey. Before you write the conclusion, stop for a moment: what do you want the reader thinking about as they leave or prepare to type a comment?

The same goes for calls to action. These are the marketing sign-offs that prompt the reader to click an offer, read more, visit a site, send an email, subscribe to a list... whatever it is. In the same way as for an analytical conclusion, you need to consider the message you want your reader to have in their mind when they move on from the page.

## **References**

Whenever you refer to statistics, quotes, an article, an information source or anything else, you should provide a reference. There is an enormous amount of content on the Internet which says things like "Most people think that..." – unless you provide a reference to statistics, this is purely opinion and the phrase should be avoided for accuracy's sake.

Of course, the opposite goes for marketing. You're better off stating things like that and letting people assume they're a fact rather than your opinion. They're more likely to buy.





## The Process

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.

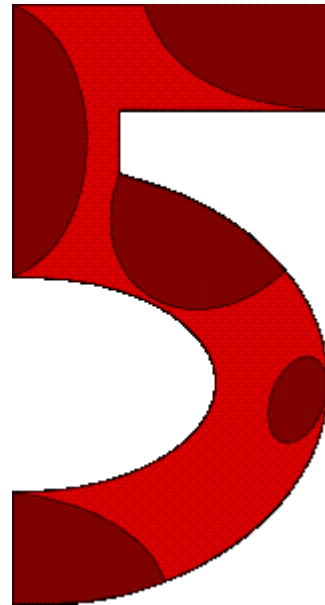
Secondly, I choose my subject. Normally this is the reason for sitting down to write in the first place: there's an idea already there. However, if you find yourself a bit lost, a quick trawl of the web can provide easy inspiration: forums, discussions, news and other blogs can all provide an idea for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

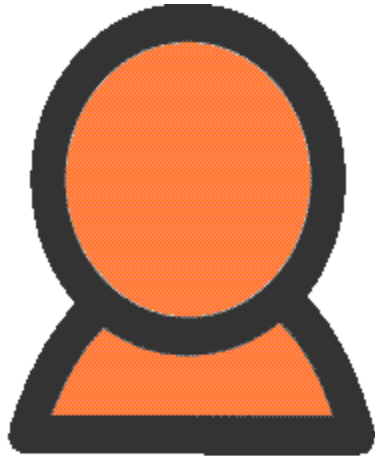
Only then will I move on to the actual writing. Those first steps should have taken about five minutes or so, with additional research time if needed.





## 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.

