How To Write a How-To Article
Part 1 of 2

1- Choose your topic carefully. The internet's already got plenty of lazy how-to articles written by under-qualified folks. If you're new to writing how-to articles, it's a good idea to start with a topic you're comfortable discussing. For instance, if you're a computer engineer, you might try writing an article as simple as "How to Build a Potato Clock" or one as technical as "How to Install a Motherboard." Now's your chance to do some serious soul-searching. Is there a topic in your mind that feels "perfect" - something you already know how to do comfortably? If not, try brainstorming possible topics while asking yourself questions like:

- "What special skills or training do I have?"
- "Have I done something that most people haven't?"
- "What do I receive compliments about (sense of humor, etc.)?"

2- Choose a clear, succinct title. You want to simply, clearly tell your reader what your article will tell them how to do. Readers are fickle and selfish with their time - most of the time, they'll pick the option that appears to be quickest and easiest. An easy-to-digest title will give your article an instant advantage over one with an overwritten title. A good title should:

- Clearly state what is being taught. An article on how to play guitar like Jimi Hendrix shouldn't be titled simply "Purple Haze." The reader can't tell from the title what kind of article this is - is it a biographical piece? An in-depth look at the song?
- Be written with good grammar (generally, capitalize every word except articles (words like "a," "an," "the," etc.), making sure to capitalize the first and last words even if they're articles.)[1]
- Convey the content of the article in as few words as possible. "How to Play Guitar like Hendrix" is much more attractive than "How to Play the Electric Guitar Like Rock Star and 27 Club Member Jimi Hendrix."
- Avoid complex jargon (for more technical topics, this may be unavoidable.)

3- Pinpoint your audience. How-to articles can be long or short, funny or serious, specific or general, technical or casual - there's no hard and fast rule. However, you'll want to tailor your article to be as legible as possible for the kinds of people who are most likely to read it. Change your writing style and even the content of your article to make it as useful as possible for your target audience without being boring.

- Here's one example: An article on making paper spitballs is going to be read mostly by bored teenage students looking for laughs and people who, for whatever reason, want to vicariously experience that frame of mind. A lengthy section about the effects of air resistance on projectile motion will bore your audience to tears. In this case, keep the article short, sweet, and lighthearted.
- An opposite example: An article on solving differential equations shouldn't have much in the way of jokes - people who read this article are likely trying to educate themselves or complete a homework assignment. They're definitely not reading this article for laughs. For this article, the tone should be academic and professional.

4- Write an introduction that summarizes your article. Readers read an article's introduction to make sure it's right for their needs. Your readers are tantalizingly close to the body of the article, so don't lose them here! Be brief - you shouldn't need more than a paragraph for basic how-tos. Also be sure to include the purpose of the article (forgetting this is a common writing pitfall.) Background information and/or scene-setting is acceptable, but try to keep it to a sentence or two. Above all, don't meander! A directionless introduction can kill an otherwise informative article.

- One well-worn trick is to include a question in the opening line to capture a reader's interest. For example: "Have you ever wondered how to write an engaging introduction?"
- It's also useful to phrase the last sentence so that it acts as a transition into the body of the article. For example: "Here's how to do it in a few easy steps:"

5- Add a list of supplies, if needed. If you're writing a how-to article about a process that requires certain tools or supplies to complete, list them before you dive in to the main instructions. Be thorough, but use common sense - for instance, you don't need to list "One oven" in the "Ingredients" section of a recipe how-to.

- Here's an example list of ingredients for an article on how to make a pesto sauce:
    - Two cups fresh basil, packed.
    - 1/2 cup pecorino cheese, grated.
    - 1/2 cup olive oil.
    - 1/4 cup pine nuts.
    - One clove garlic.
    - Salt and pepper, to taste.
- You *shouldn't* list these things:
    - One food processor (mention it in the actual instructions)
    - Pasta (you're not making a pasta dish, just the sauce)
    - A can-do attitude (things like this usually come across as cheesy)

6- Write your instructions in the form of steps. Organize your steps in chronological order. Whenever possible, try to limit each step to one idea. Use commanding action verbs, not vague phrases like "Be prepared" or "Know what you want to do." You can use sub-steps or bullet lists to add further explanation for complicated steps. As always, keep your sentences short and simple to make your instructions as easy to follow as possible.

- A good step for an article about brewing your own wine: **"Pick high-quality grapes."** A bad step for the same article: **"Know what you're getting yourself in to."**
- Avoid first person reference. Replace "I, me, my, mine, we, our or us" with "you or your" to address the reader directly.
- If your article details a particularly long or complex process, you can divide your steps into two or more "parts," each containing steps for a distinct part of the process. An article on farming corn, for instance, might have separate parts for the sowing process, caring for the corn as it grows, harvesting the corn, etc.
- Alternatively, if your process can be done in more than one way, you may want to divide your steps into multiple "methods," each explaining a specific way that the process can be done. For instance, an article on changing gears while driving might contain two methods - one for automatic transmissions and one for manual transmissions.

Part 2 of 2: Taking Your How-To to the Next Level

1- Cite any sources you've consulted. When writing, you should always express ideas in your own words. However, even if you completely understand the process you're writing about, how-to articles will often require you to research outside sources for specific information. Always credit any sources you used to [avoid plagiarism](). If you must reprint copyrighted content verbatim, obtain explicit permission from the original author.

- One general rule when researching for an article is to preferentially consult **primary** (rather than secondary or tertiary) sources. For a good guide on understanding primary sources, see our article on [finding primary source documents.]()
- Many publications have specific procedure for properly citing and attributing sources.

2- Add additional tips or advice. After the main steps, you have an opportunity to add tidbits that didn't warrant a place in the body of the article. Provide alternative supplies or solutions to common problems with the process. Clarify common mistakes or misconceptions. Warn the reader about any potential danger involved with the process.

- Tips and warnings should be as explicit as possible, especially if your process is potentially dangerous. You can even use bolded text to call extra attention to especially important warnings.

- Here's an example warning for an article on how to install a fan in a computer: **Caution.** Turn the power off and disconnect the power cable before removing the exterior casing. Serious electric shock can result if the computer isn't completely powered down.

3- Add photographs or drawings to enhance your steps.

Pictures in a how-to article can range from "nice to have, but not essential" to "absolutely vital." Many articles must use a visual reference to clarify certain concepts. An article on building a chair **needs** pictures - it's very difficult to convey the precise positions of the interlocking wood pieces through text.

- If you have a good-quality camera or know how to draw, you can provide pictures for the article yourself. If you can't draw, don't have a good camera, or the process is too complicated to recreate for the purpose of obtaining pictures, you might want to hire a professional illustrator.

4- Edit (proofread) for errors.

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously said, "There is no great writing, only great rewriting." No first draft has ever existed that didn't benefit from intelligent editing. Review your spelling, punctuation, grammar, and overall style. Omit any information that isn't necessary. Pare your article down to the bare minimum necessary to convey your information.

- It can be difficult to see flaws in your work immediately after you've written it. Take a break for a few hours or go to sleep before editing. When you return to your work, you may find that immediately see improvements that can be made.
- Get a friend whose opinion you respect to proofread your work. See if they can understand your instructions - a good how-to article should make sense to people besides its author.

5- Direct users to other articles.

A well-written how-to will pique readers' interest in the article's subject, while a poorly-written one will send readers running for other sources of information. In either case, it can be useful to include links to other how-to articles that cover related topics. Generally, these links will be in the form of a short list at or near the end of the article. These articles should cover articles whose information overlaps with your own and/or articles about processes from the same general field. For instance, an article about how to "perm" hair might include links to articles on how to:

- Care for permed hair
- Get rid of a perm
- Braid Hair
- Give someone a Jeri Curl
- Use a curling iron
- Apply mousse