

Column Writing Tips

Many young writers prefer to write columns rather than straight news or features. Straight news is deemed to be boring – covering press conferences and reporting who said what. Feature stories involve too much reporting and require discipline to follow a set structure. Columns, which are essentially opinion pieces, are much looser – and therefore easier. Or so it seems.

Anybody can be trained to write straight news because it's very mechanical. Feature articles, though also somewhat formulaic, are harder because they require good writing. But column writing is the hardest type of writing of all because it requires good thinking.

To write a good column requires more than just the ability to articulate an opinion. Your opinions must make sense, provide insight and be convincing. And you must do all this in an entertaining way.

It requires you to be almost like a lawyer. Through your arguments, you will need to convince the jury (your readers) that your client (your viewpoint) is right. Shaping a powerful argument takes practice and requires both breadth and depth of knowledge as well as the ability to critically analyze a particular issue.

So, is there a methodology for training someone to become a “good thinker”? I'm not sure about that but I'm certain it helps to be well-read, inquisitive and willing to listen to various viewpoints. If you're someone who likes to write but doesn't want to do research or think deeply about an issue, forget about column writing.

Studying your role models will help you to develop your own voice. Follow the work of several established columnists and analyze their writings to discover how they project their arguments and how they make effective use of anecdotes, quotes and statistics. From there, you can learn the tricks of the trade and eventually develop your own distinctive voice and style.

Column writing is very different from other forms of writing because unlike straight news and feature writing, columns have dedicated readerships. A columnist develops a following because his readers feel they can gain knowledge, insight and entertainment from reading his writings. It's a great honor to be given a regular column but remember, to do it well requires a great amount of dedication to the craft.

Lastly, a word of advice. Be ready for criticism. If you can dish it out, you've got to be able to take as good as you got. When you take a strong stance on anything, there's bound to be someone offended by what you wrote. And they will write to you – often in less than polite language - to let you know exactly what they think of you and your opinions. It goes with the territory.

Now, onto the tips.

- 1. Write with conviction:** Put forward your opinion as something you truly believe in. Argue your case with conviction. Come down hard on one side of an issue. Be unequivocal. Never ever sit on the fence.
- 2. Maintain your focus:** Make your column about one thing and one thing alone. Don't muddle the message. Maintain your focus. That's the only way to make a strong impression on your readers and to convince them that your point of view is correct.
- 3. Understand opposing viewpoints:** Be mindful of the opposing argument. Anticipate objections to your point of view and deal with them convincingly with sound reasoning. If you're not familiar with the opposing view, you will not be able to argue your points well.
- 4. Refer to facts:** Your arguments, however logical, will not carry much weight unless they are accompanied by facts that support your position. Don't overdo this and inundate your readers with statistics and figures. But do make use of facts from reputable sources.

5. Use analogies: Analogies are useful for illustrating a point, especially when the topic you are writing about is somewhat complicated or technical. Using a simple analogy from everyday life makes the issue more understandable and relevant to the reader.

6. Be critical: People like reading columnists who dare to criticize real life people – not just nameless concepts and policies. Naming names might create a bit of controversy but as long as you do not libel anyone and don't go overboard in your criticism, it works well to make your column an interesting and exciting read.

7. Do reporting. It's possible to write columns without doing any reporting but the best columns typically involve some form of reporting. When you report, you get on the ground and you gain a better sense of what's really happening. When you write from an ivory tower, it shows.

8. Localize and personalize: Localize your story whenever possible. Also tie it to some personal experience – yours or that of someone you know. This makes an otherwise esoteric and distant topic more real, relevant and memorable to the reader.

9. Be passionate: Generally, people don't like to hear a soft or passive voice when they read a column. So be aggressive – even arrogant, to an extent. People want to see passion. They want to feel energized. If the issue doesn't seem to excite you, the writer, it's certainly not going to excite the reader.

10. Provide a solution: Last but not least, don't just raise an issue. Have the conviction to suggest a solution. Columns that criticize certain policies but offer no solutions are useless. People read columns because they want to gain insight and answers. If you don't provide those, you've failed as a columnist.

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