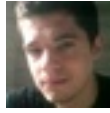




# How to Write Opinion Columns that Keep the Reader Engaged



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A lot of people seem to assume that the job and life of a top newspaper columnist is easy, and that if they had the same job, they could bang out a column by noon and then take off to the mall to spend some of those bundles of money good columnists

tend to make.

But good columns are far tougher to write than they look. In a marquee (public) column, every word will be scrutinized by the reader, and every word has to count because columnists typically only get one small column that doesn't allow for a lot of space to expound on thoughts.

I took a column-writing class in college at The University of Michigan-Dearborn, and my teacher did an excellent job of helping me and the rest of the class see just how difficult it can be to write good columns. His name was Tim Kiska and he had been the television critic at the Detroit News and later the Detroit Free Press, so he certainly knew his way around a good column.

He constantly pushed us to revise and re-think every word in our columns, and re-writes were a common practice that helped us get better as writers each time.

That brings me to my first tip when writing a column: re-writes and revisions are often necessary to make sure everything's nice and tight, and to make sure that you are being as precise as possible with the words you use, especially the verbs. Your use of spot-on vocabulary is of the utmost importance when you're working with a small writing space, especially when compared to a longer, more straightforward article.

Writer's block can creep up on column writers very easily because they are worried about making everything perfect the first time around, but if you approach the column like that, you can end up sounding boring and mechanical as you focus on the technical aspects of the writing above everything else.

The key for a column writer is get across as much emotion as possible. You are charged with developing your own "voice;" that is to say that you want to try and sound as much like *yourself* as you possibly can, as if you were having an everyday conversation with a friend.

To that point, you should start off by just sitting down and shooting from the hip, writing down what you feel and what your perspective is on the topic. After that, you can then go back in and tighten things up.

Another important aspect of column writing is to keep things short and interesting. Don't write in long paragraphs or the reader will get bored easily. You want to keep the piece light and conversational, not long-

winded and informative. Columns are about expressing opinions more so than anything else. You can back them up with facts, but you don't want to come across sounding like an encyclopedia.

The opening paragraph of your column should be short and eye-catching. Put something outlandish or remarkable in there and then explain more as the column goes on. There will be plenty of time to tie up all of the loose ends later on.

You can also throw in some good anecdotes, but you want to keep the reader on edge waiting for the next part of the story, which brings me to my next point: writing your column with a narrative kind of style is always a good idea. It's the same concept as a novel: you keep the reader guessing by revealing parts of your story one at a time while building up to an ending. This style can be employed for all types of columns. A good way to break up different parts of your narrative is with a bold sub-headline separating each different portion of your column.

Finally, the most important advice I can give about column writing is that it takes a lot of work and practice before most people can finally begin to establish their "voice." You need to get to the point where you are just as comfortable expressing yourself in writing as you are in person talking with your best friend.

Columns are not like articles in that they are not the be-all, end-all. Their goal is to express opinions, to entertain, and to get the reader to see things in a different perspective. They may not agree with you, but if you make them think, they'll probably keep coming back for more.