

How to Write for Magazines

by

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2: Finding Article Ideas

One of the most common complaints of newer writers is “I don’t have anything to write about” or “I don’t have any ideas.” This isn’t true. Everyone has *lots* of things to write about; the key is to identify them, and figure out how to convert one’s life experiences into marketable article topics.

The first step is determining where to look for “ideas.” At this point, I’m not talking about ideas for specific articles, but rather, ideas about broad subject areas that you may be able to *mine* for article topics. (There is a difference between an idea, a subject, and a topic, which we’ll get to later.)

Here are some areas that everyone can “mine” for article ideas:

- Your personal life—your home, your family, your personal history, your life experiences
- Your interests and hobbies
- Your workplace, professional expertise, or professional background
- Your education
- Your memories—whether nostalgic or traumatic
- Your activities—vacations, family events, community activities, etc.
- Your observations of people, places, and things around you
- Your interests—things that intrigue you, even if you don’t know much about them (yet)

Ideas also come from the very *process* of developing ideas:

- From brainstorming a topic
- From reviewing magazines and looking at articles
- From researching market sources
- From researching a topic (i.e., your research for one article can lead to “spinoff” articles for other markets)
- From journal-keeping and note-taking

Now comes the million-dollar question: *Do I have to write about what I know?*

To answer that, let’s look at some of the advantages and disadvantages of sticking to “what you know” when developing ideas.

Advantages

- Writing about what you already know saves you work.
- It calls upon your existing expertise; often, it enables you to use your own experience or expertise as a credential
- You generally know where to look for more information
- You may feel more comfortable sticking to “what you know” until you have built the confidence to branch out into other areas.

Disadvantages

- We often forget or take for granted what we actually “know”—and so have difficulty really mining this area for article topics.
- We often consider “what we know” to be boring—the “known” tends to be much less interesting than the “unknown.” Consequently, we may assume (incorrectly) that it will be boring to other. Worse, if we’re not excited about a topic, it’s hard to write an exciting article.
- It’s easy to get trapped in “writing what you know” and fail to branch out into other areas—thus not expanding one’s knowledge base or market potential.

Writing about what you know has applications beyond mere “subjects,” however. You also “know” various skills and techniques that can be applied to other topics. For example, if you were writing a short story about, say, the difficulties experienced by a space colony, you might wonder, “how can I write about this when I don’t ‘know’ any-

thing about living in space?” Take a look, instead, at what you *do* know. Let’s say that you’re a teacher. Now imagine that you’re trying to teach children in a colony that is beset by various difficulties. What would your challenges be? What would you want your students to learn? Writing about “what you know” doesn’t mean that you have to already know everything about which you write!

You also “know” feelings, images, and impressions that you can build into other topics. Sometimes, what you “know” comes across in *how* you write rather than *what* you write. If you know what it feels like to be afraid, for example, you’ll have a much better ability to express that sense of fear when writing about someone else’s experience—even if you’re not expressing your *own* fear.

Writing About What You Don’t Know

One of the things you “know”, but may not have thought about, is “what interests you.” You know what intrigues you, what you’d like to learn more about, what you find absolutely fascinating. (Chances are, some of this is reflected in your choice of magazines and books.) One alternative to “writing about what you know” is to “write about what you *don’t* know — but wish you did!”

No matter what you write, you’re going to end up doing a fair amount of research. So why not research subjects that are of interest to you? You don’t have to know a lot about them to start with. You simply need to have a sense that, because this fascinates you, there’s a good chance that it might fascinate someone else. Research techniques will be covered in a later chapter.

Brainstorming Ideas

The process of developing ideas for articles is a curious mixture of “zooming in” and “zooming out.” Imagine that your mind is working like a telephoto lens. Sometimes you want to “zoom out” to get the “big picture” — to see all the details, the perspective, the surroundings. At other times you need to “zoom in” to sharpen your focus, to make sure that you are concentrating on the most *important* details. This process goes back and forth, zooming in and zooming out, as you work your way from “idea” to “article topic.”

A good way to start is with a wide-angle focus. Take another look at the list of “idea sources” I provided earlier. Jot down the areas from that list that you would particularly like to explore for article ideas. For the purposes of discussion, I’ll pick “personal life.”

If I were “brainstorming,” I’d write this topic at the top of a piece of paper (or a computer file). By the way, sometimes ideas flow better when you use old-fashioned approaches—if you find that you’re not getting anywhere by staring at the computer screen, take a pad of paper and a pencil to another room, get comfortable, and work there. Sometimes the computer brings out our “inner editor” (it’s so easy to get into the mechanics of cutting-and-pasting)—and we need to just “shut that off” by going back to a more physical approach to writing.

Anyway—you’ve now put “personal life” at the top of your “idea” page. Now, shut down that inner voice that is whispering, “No one wants to know about your personal life!” This is true, actually—I’ve already mentioned the perils of writing about personal experiences—but that’s not what we’re here for. We’re here to find out what aspects of your personal life might lead to articles that people *will* want to read. So let’s jot down a few things about “personal life.”

1) Family. Do you have a spouse? Children? In-laws? Parents? Grandparents? Siblings? Extended family? Family members that don’t speak to each other? Family members in other countries, or of other cultures? Are you adopted? Is anyone in your family adopted? Getting more personal, what about topics like marriage, divorce, child-birth, or death in the family?

2) Holidays. Thinking about “family” might make one think about times when families get together, such as holidays. Jot down a list of the holidays you celebrate. Does your family have special ways of celebrating particular holidays? Or does it avoid certain holidays for some reason? Does your family celebrate holidays that are less familiar to the general public? Are holidays a good time or a bad time? Do you find holidays joyful or stressful? What are some of the activities that you share with your children during a particular holiday? (This category might include “birthdays” as well.)

3) Pets. Do you have a family pet (or more than one)? How about past pets? Pets of your childhood? What type of pet do you have, and how do you take care of it? What problems do you experience with your pets? What activities do you pursue with your pets? What challenges have you faced and overcome? What tragedies have you endured? How do your pets interact with your children?

And so on....

This is part of the “zooming out” process. Notice that we started with a single idea—“personal life”—and expanded that idea into at least three subtopics (family, holidays, pets). We then expanded each of *those* topics into a variety of more specific areas. If you try this exercise with all eight of the subject areas proposed at the beginning, you may find yourself with literally dozens of potential topics by now.

By the way, this is a good exercise to do with a partner—a spouse, significant other, or writing buddy—who can help you come up with ideas you might otherwise miss. Someone who knows you well is likely to think of things that you might overlook simply because they are so “familiar” that they don’t come to mind as potential topics.

Focus and Expand

So far, none of the subjects listed above are sufficiently focused to serve as article topics. The next step, therefore, is to focus in even more closely—and then to expand once again.

On another sheet of paper (or in another computer file), select just *one* of the topics that you generated. For example, you might select “holiday activities” as an interesting area to explore further. Obviously, however, “holiday activities” is far too general a subject to make into an article. It’s time to zoom that lens in a bit further: What holiday? What activities?

The immediate temptation is to tackle “Christmas,” because it offers so many topics. On the other hand, it’s also the holiday that gets the most “ink”—which means you’re competing against a lot of other writers who want to cover this holiday. So let’s focus on a holiday that tends to get a little less press: Easter. It’s time to brainstorm again, jotting down everything you associate with Easter. Here’s my list:

- Eggs
- Bunnies
- Easter baskets
- Easter egg hunts
- Onion-skin Easter eggs
- Rabbits—good for pets?
- Chicks—same question
- Easter history/folklore
- Easter in other countries: Greek Easter candles
- Easter trees

Now we're getting somewhere. Some of these topics are still a bit vague (what about Easter eggs, exactly?), but others are ripe for the plucking. Let's see what articles we might be able to generate from this list:

Easter baskets—Is there someone in your town who makes fancy, unique Easter baskets? (Check your local classifieds for a “gift basket” store.) That might make a good profile for a local paper.

Onion-skin Easter eggs—If you don't know how to make these, don't worry; sooner or later, I'll get around to writing *my* holiday article on this family tradition.

Rabbits/chicks: Good for pets?—Again, this would be a good feature for a local paper, explaining why it's *not* a good idea to get your kids an “Easter bunny”. All you'll need is an interview with a representative of your local humane society; you might also check online to see if you can find any statistics on how many bunnies are sold in pet shops at this time of year.

Easter history/folklore—This is a perennial favorite. I know, because one of the very first articles I ever sold to a newspaper was on this topic—and I am still selling that exact same article today, nearly 20 years after I first wrote it. No reason why you can't do a bit of research and sell something on this topic too!

Easter in other countries—We visited Greece on our honeymoon, and I remember seeing families returning to the islands after shopping on the mainland, all carrying elaborately decorated Easter candles. Might make a good article someday, but it would need more research than I want to do just now.

Easter trees—Never seen one? These are very popular in Germany, and have made a limited appearance in the U.S., but haven't really caught on yet. This could be a nice, crafty “how-to” article on how to make your own “Easter tree”—something one could sell to a local paper, or possibly to a crafts or home-decorating magazine. Or maybe you could slant this as a children's activity—how kids can make an Easter tree—and aim for a family publication such as *Family Circle*.

I've just identified five articles that I might be able to write, with very little effort, from this one subject: Easter. Easter, however, was itself a subtopic of a larger category—holiday activities. Imagine how many more article ideas I could generate if I go back to “holiday activities” and look at other holidays? If I take a step further back, to “holidays,” I can follow other branches—holiday foods, holiday safety, holiday reminiscences, nontraditional holidays—and develop dozens of additional possibilities. Or I can go further back up the tree to “Personal Life” and try another major branch—e.g., “family”—and start exploring *those* subtopics.

Keep in mind, too, that you're likely to find ways that your categories overlap. If you have children, it's going to be easy to put together topics that combine “holidays” and “children”—crafts, safety tips, inspirational stories, etc. Or you might combine “holidays” and “grandparents” for a nostalgic look at holidays in your past. And so on...

Don't Eliminate the Negative

Chances are that the things that first strike you as food for articles are positive. Maybe some of the more negative things that came out on your list made you shudder and move on quickly. But don't overlook the value of “negative experiences” in this exercise either. Let's say, for example, that you hate Christmas because that's when the entire “clan” gets together—and everyone picks up the old fights right where they left off the previous year. No one gets along, and by the time the holiday is over, you're so stressed that you wish Christmas could be banned forever.

Not a very happy picture, right? Besides, who wants to hear about your troubles? No one, perhaps—but do you suppose that you're the only family with this problem? Or might there be hundreds of families who go through something similar every year, and hate it just as much as you do? Can you write something that speaks to those families?

Here's where “writing what you know” meets “writing what you don't know.” What you know is that you hate Christmas because it involves a huge, stressful family gathering. What you don't know is how to change that. If you could find out, you could share that information with other families—and write an article that might make a profound difference in many lives!

So you've decided to write about stressful family holiday gatherings. What do you want to say? A rant about your horrible family might not get an editor's attention—unless you could make it humor-

ous! Can you portray your family in such a way that many others see *their* families in your experience—and find a way, at last, to laugh about it?

Or, perhaps you'd like to help people avoid this type of horrible gathering, but you don't know how. That's OK—all you need to do is find someone who does! Try running a search that combines terms like “holiday stress” and “family gathering” and see what comes up; chances are, you'll be able to track down (a) some excellent resource materials and (b) an expert you can interview on this topic.

When “What You Know” Isn't Enough

There's an important point to keep in mind when generating ideas based on “what you know.” Note that this chapter is about *ideas*—it is not about how you turn those ideas into actual articles. “What you know” is an excellent place to *start*. However, it is not necessarily enough to develop a complete, marketable article.

For example, let's say that you are a parent. You have children, you've raised children through various experiences, you've dealt with health crises and school and nutrition and a host of other things. And perhaps you also have a *passion* for children—a desire to communicate some of the things you've learned and experienced along the way. This is a wonderful place to start your search for article ideas.

However, “being a parent” is rarely, in itself, a sufficient credential to actually sell an article. Consider this: A major parenting magazine may go out to several hundred thousand parents—so its editors aren't going to consider the status of “being a parent,” by itself, to be particularly impressive. Instead, they are going to look for other credentials—for example, if you wished to write about child nutrition, the editor might be impressed to learn that you have a background in nutrition or dietary studies. If you don't, you're almost certainly going to have to find someone with appropriate credentials to interview.

Another common error is to attempt to write articles that are, basically, one's personal opinion. For example, in one of my classes, a student wanted to write about the harmful nature of reality shows. Such an article might be marketable if it reflects the opinions of experts, such as child psychologists. It will not be marketable, however, if it is based simply on the author's viewpoint—no matter how *valid* that viewpoint may be! Be very cautious, therefore, about article ideas that are based on an opinion—something that you believe is good, or bad, or should be changed.

Again, personal experience is one of the best places to come up with ideas for articles. When it comes to developing those articles, however, you may have to go *beyond* that experience—as you’ll see in later chapters.

Summing Up

The process of developing ideas is a process of “zooming in” and “zooming out,” changing your focus by brainstorming to develop a “big picture” or by selecting specific details to develop a focused topic.

You can begin by selecting broad areas of your life and experience—the “big picture”. Then “zoom in” to select a specific area—e.g., “family.” This is too general a subject for an article, so you’ll need to zoom out again to brainstorm all the topics you can think of that relate to “family.” Zoom in on one of those—e.g., children. Still too general for an article! Zoom out to brainstorm everything you can think of that you might have to say about children. Now zoom in on one of *those* topics—e.g., preparing a child for the first day of school—and voila! You have an article idea. Zoom *out* to brainstorm all the things that are involved in preparing a child for the first day of school, and you have the points you’re likely to cover in your article.

Exercise

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Let’s put it to the test. For this exercise, come up with five article ideas—ideas that are specific enough to take to the “drafting table,” so to speak. Don’t just say that you want to write about “Easter,” for example; decide what, exactly, you would write about Easter. For each idea, explain why you would like to write about the topic and/or why you feel able or qualified to write about it.

For “extra credit,” come up with a potential market (or more than one) for each of your article ideas. Try to at least come up with a *type* of market (e.g., “craft magazines”); if you can be more specific (*Country Crafts*), that’s even better. Jot down why you think this idea would be appropriate for the market. (You’re going to need that information for your query letter!)