

Writing Articles for Magazines Transcript

This is a transcript of the audio seminar, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/nov2012

Ali: Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the November seminar for Writers' Huddle, Writing Articles for Magazines.

I'm thrilled to be joined today by Steff Metal, also known as Steff Green, it's great to have her with us as our guest speaker, so, hi Steff.

Steff: Hi Ali, hi everyone.

Introduction to Steff

Ali: And just to introduce you a little bit to Steff, she's a fantastic writer from New Zealand, so she's right across the other side of the world from me.

She's been writing for magazines for about seven years, so she has loads and loads of knowledge to share with us on this, and she does several amazing things online, I first found Steff through her site steffmetal.com, which is all about heavy metal and the heavy metal lifestyle. And it's well worth a look, even if you're not into metal, because it's just a fun read.

Steff also has gothicweddingplanner.com, and she's licensed to officiate at weddings in New Zealand, which is pretty cool, and as well as that, she has a writing business called Grymm & Epic (www.grymmandepic.com), so she offers content writing and services like that for people who need writing.

From the perspective of us writers, she also has some fantastic ebooks. She's got the Grymm & Epic Guide to Blogging, which is a really in-depth, solid

blogging guide, I've got a copy of that. She's just released the Small & Awesome Guide to Freelance Writing, which is a more compact ebook..

I think the coolest thing of all is that Steff and her husband have bought four acres of land in New Zealand, and they're currently building a castle, which just sounds like such a dream project, yes, so, welcome, Steff, is there anything you want to add or tell us before we get going?

Steff: No, that's pretty much, that's pretty much everything about me, yes,

Ali: Fantastic, well, I've obviously been stalking you quite well!

Steff: Definitely.

How Steff Got Into Magazine Writing

Ali: I thought maybe we could begin, then, with how you got into magazine writing. If you can think back to seven years ago, what got you started?

Steff: Okay, what actually got me started was that I had just finished my degree at university, which was in archaeology, and all I ever wanted to be was an archaeologist.

I had about four months at the end of my degree where I didn't have a job, and I'd been searching for a job for about three months before that. I could not get a single person anywhere to hire me, and it was largely because I have a sight condition, and I'm considered legally blind.

A lot of people were perfectly happy for me to come on the archaeological sites and dig in the dirt when I was a volunteer, but as soon as I started asking

for money, they were all saying “Oh, we don’t want you to break anything or fall down a hole.”

It was getting really frustrating, and then one day I had a particularly bad interview, with a curator from a museum I used to volunteer at. It was a living history museum, and so they had little houses everywhere, and they had a little well outside. A job had come up, and I wanted it, and the curator said to me “I can’t have you work here, Steff. I’m afraid you might fall in the well.”

I’d been volunteering there every week for six months, and had not as yet fallen down the well. It just boggled the mind, I came home, and I was really upset, and my husband was looking at me being really upset after eight months of looking for work, and he said “Look, the thing is, you’ve actually done archaeology, you’ve worked on excavations, you’ve worked in museums, you’ve done this in New Zealand, you’ve done this overseas, you’ve actually been an archaeologist, so maybe you should think about what you’d like to do next.”

That cheered me up instantly, and the obvious answer was writing, because I’ve always been a writer, and I always wrote stories or things like that, but I had no concept that you could actually make money from writing.

I started Googling” how to make money writing” and I came across the idea of writing for magazines, and I thought “Well, that sounds like something I could do,” so I started doing it.

That’s basically the long-winded version of how I started doing it – I looked up online, I figured out how to write a query letter, I started sending them off, and after sending off about 15 or 20, I got my first freelance job for a magazine.

Ali: Congratulations, I know it was a long time ago, but that first one is always a big one, and it’s very sad to hear how you suffered that prejudice because of being partially sighted.

I think one of the great things with writing is that it doesn’t really matter if you’re female or male, or young or old, or lots of things that can count against you in an interview.

You can use a pen name, you can write from behind a computer, and so on, so it's really an accessible thing for everyone, regardless of what kind of prejudice we might sadly have faced in other areas.

Steff: Yes, it is, and that's the huge appeal, that's why I'm still looking at, because, nobody can tell me "You can't write that."

Is Magazine Writing Just About the Money?

Ali: The next question I have, because this is something that's on everyone's minds a bit in the middle of a recession, is why you're doing magazine writing today, maybe it's just for the money, or is it for other business benefits than that?

Steff: Well, initially, it was about "Can I actually make money as a writer?" and this was the way a lot of people recommended, rather than writing a novel or something like that. You write something, and then you get paid for it, and that's kind of nice!

People never become writers for the money. If you want to make money, you become an engineer or something like that. Some writers make a lot of money, but you don't do it for the money.

Benefits of Article Writing

Steff (cont): In magazine writing, there are a huge number of benefits.

For one thing, it's awesome seeing your name in magazines, especially if it's a magazine that you read all the time, that you read as a teenager or a magazine you read for your hobby or something like that. When you see your name in it, it's pretty cool.

It gives you a platform for other projects, so being published in magazines in your niche is part of becoming an expert in your area, and that can lead to other things like book deals and general world domination.

Through my wedding planner website, I've just landed a column, a regular monthly column in a New Zealand wedding magazine, and that actually came from my website, but that column in a magazine is the kind of thing that you put in the book proposal for a book, which is what I'm trying to do at the moment.

Ali: Brilliant. I think these are all stepping stones, quite often, for us in a writing career.

You can get an article in one magazine, and it helps you get in a slightly bigger magazine, like you say.

I think it is very fun to see your name in a magazine, and for me, I'm quite used to that online, my name being on a blog, but being published in a magazine, it does have a certain sort of respect attached.

I know my mum was really excited when I first had a piece in a magazine, because it was one that she subscribed to, so she opened it and there was me with a double page spread, so I think it's quite fun to do it for that.

What Magazines Pay

Ali (cont): I would agree with you that maybe just going into it with the hope of money, and without any enjoyment of the writing, or of the subject that you're writing about is probably not going to be a good strategy.

Certainly in my experience, the money is not amazing in magazine writing, I don't know if you found, if maybe you found some better markets for that?

Steff: There's a couple of magazines I write for that pay really really well.

But the thing about magazine writing is that some articles, they may pay you \$1 or \$2 a word, which is an incredible rate, but **it's less about how much you learn per word and more about how many hours it takes you to write the article.**

They are more complicated, I find, to write than blog posts, so quite often, even with a really high word rate for a magazine, you can actually earn more writing blogs or online content. You've always got to weigh that up.

But then, there's one magazine in particular I write for sometimes, and they pay me about \$800 Canadian per article, which in New Zealand dollars is like seven million dollars, and they take me two hours to write, so that's fantastic.

Ali: That's really good. So, let's hope that we've said enough to encourage people as well as caution them a little bit.

With that in mind, I think most of the people in the Huddle are at the stage where we've perhaps done one or two articles, or we're looking just how to break into this, so have you got any tips about the best way to really get that first sale, and to break into writing articles for magazines?

Breaking Into Article Writing

Steff: The best way to break in is to start writing articles for topics where you have experience.

When you start off, you don't have the clips to back you up, and that's how a lot of established writers sell their articles, they say, "Well, I've been published in these five top-level consumer magazines" and the editor goes "Well, obviously they're going to be fantastic", but you don't have that.

The way to get in is to write about what you know, because then you're building on your real life experience, rather than your writing experience.

When you write a query letter for one of your article pitches, you write a paragraph explaining why you're the perfect writer for the job, and so if you don't have the clips and the writing experience, then having that personal experience of the topic is important.

I also advise people to avoid pitching the more popular consumer magazines, which are the magazines that you see on the newsstands, like Cosmo, or Top Gear, or those kind of markets, and that's just because they're extremely

competitive, they receive literally hundreds of freelance submissions every single week.

By all means pitch them an idea, if you've got a fantastic idea that you think would be absolutely perfect for them, but then at the beginning, it's much better if you **target trade magazines (industry-specific magazines, which tend to be aimed at a business market) or specialty magazines**, which is the area that I work in.

I'm currently writing an article for a specialty magazine in the US, which is for medieval re-enactors, so they do a lot of history articles, "how to make a medieval tent" or something like that, so that's a specialty magazine.

My husband's just getting into freelance writing himself, and he makes model trains, and so he's pitching articles about the projects that he's doing for model train magazines, and that's the specialty market.

That's a much better area to get into if you've got a hobby, or particular industry experience, or some kind of interest that you want to write about, that's what I find is the best way to break in.

Ali: Yes, I would agree. I think it's sometimes easy for us to underplay the experience that we've had, because to us it seems second nature. If you've had a job in IT or something, or if you've got a hobby like model trains or re-enactment, that's worth using.

One of my hobbies when I was a bit younger was dolls' houses, and collecting miniatures and things, and I know there were a lot of magazines on those topics that might seem quite niche. You'd be surprised how many specialist publications you can sometimes find.

Steff: It's crazy, yes.

Which Magazines Accept Freelance Proposals?

Ali: Something I've wondered, when thinking about writing for magazines, is how do you know whether or not they accept freelance proposals? Because they don't always seem to say that anywhere.

Steff: The first thing to do is to check the website and see if they've got writers' guidelines, freelance writer guidelines, submission guidelines somewhere on the site.

Maybe 70% of magazines have a page on their website somewhere which tells you who to contact for editorial submissions. Very often they'll tell you what kind of articles they want, how much they pay, what rights they ask for, how long you can expect to wait to hear a reply, and I mean that's the easiest way to figure it out.

You can also check the magazine itself, they normally list all the contributors inside the front cover. If there's a big section of contributing writers, that tends to be a magazine that accept freelance submissions, because those are the writers that aren't the regular columnists.

They tend to just be lumped under a "contributing writers" little category, so that's another way to tell. You can also call or email the magazine and ask them, you don't have to pitch them something, you can just ask them if they accept freelance submissions. That's a pretty easy way to find out.

I find most of my magazine markets online, either just through interest related websites for the interests that I have, or for writers' market databases.

There's a number of really good ones around:

- fundsforwriters.com is a newsletter that lists markets every week
- writersweekly.com have a big market database

Ali: Brilliant, those sound like some really handy resources, because it can be a bit difficult wading through websites if they don't have any guidelines or anything.

Writing a Great Article Pitch

Ali (cont): So, assuming that we've found a magazine that does accept freelance proposals, or we're pretty confident it will potentially accepted a freelance proposal, then obviously the next step is to pitch the article.

I wonder if you could just talk us through the pitching process: what should you include in an article pitch, and any tips on just making pitches really professional, particularly for those of us who have never done that before.

Steff: All your Writers' Huddle writers probably understand that the benefit of freelance writing is that you don't have to write the article before you sell it, you sell it on the idea, which saves you a lot of time and a lot of effort

So you have to write the article pitch, and it basically consists of four key elements. It can be essentially as long or as short as you like, you don't really want to go much over two pages, but some larger consumer magazines or really specialty publications, you need to go into a lot more depth. It depends on the topic or the magazine. Mine tend to be quite short.

Whatever the length, they should always contain these four elements:

#1: The Lead Paragraph

This is the paragraph where you basically wow the editor with a fantastic statistic, a shocking fact, a hilarious anecdote, just something like that that catches their attention.

To give you an idea of what this is like, my lead paragraphs normally end up being the first paragraph of my finished text, so it's got to be that level of engaging the editor.

#2: Your Topic Explained

Next, after that, there is a body where you flesh out the idea. You explain what exactly the topic of the article's going to be, what it's going to cover, you tell the editor exactly what you're going to write about.

You're not trying to surprise her, so let's say you're pitching an article, *Ten ways to lose weight this summer*, you list all the ten ways. You don't just say that's what you're going to list and let it be a surprise, **you tell the editor exactly what you're going to write about.**

In that paragraph I also put the projected word count of the article, where I think the article will fit in the magazine, the name of my source if I've got one, and if I'm including any sidebars or any photographs.

#3: The “Why Should I Care?” Paragraph

After that, there's the 'why should I care?' paragraph, which is basically where you explain why the article is important to the magazine readers.

Sometimes you cover that in the lead paragraph, but sometimes you need a little extra space to specifically explain why this topic would be of interest to the readers of the magazine.

#4: Your Bio

The last paragraph is your bio paragraph, and the freelance writer Kelly James-Enger calls this the “I'm so great” paragraph, which I love.

It's basically where you tell the editor why you, specifically you, are the best person to write that article, because of course the editor has got 100 freelancers on speed dial, so they could have anyone write this article, so why would it have to be you?

You highlight your relevant qualifications, any relevant writing experience you've had on the specific topic, even if it is blogs or websites, or something that's not a magazine – if it's related to the topic you write it down. Of course, if you've got personal life experience in that topic, then that's what you tell them there as well.

Ali: I like it that you put the bio last, because I think that a lot of people are tempted to tell editors “This is all about me” right at the start of the letter, and I think, for me, that’s not such an engaging opening as just going with a really killer lead paragraph.

Pitching Your Expertise to Trade Magazines

Steff: No, it’s definitely about the idea, you’re definitely trying to sell the idea. **The only exception to that is with trade magazines.**

Very often with trade magazines what you’re actually trying to sell is your expertise on specific topics, so instead of writing a query where you’re pitching an idea, you often pitch yourself as a writer. You explain your experience, and that you are available to write freelance articles.

They’ll get back to you with a list of articles they want written, or they’ll get back to you and ask you to pitch some articles. That’s the only real exception to that.

Being Professional in your Pitch

As for creating a professional pitch, it’s really about following that formula and making sure you do the little things. You make sure you call the editor by their name, so none of this “To whom it may concern.”

You make sure you’re giving them something that their readers would enjoy, that it’s a personalised pitch. You don’t accidentally leave the name of another magazine in the middle of the pitch – I’ve done that far too many times!

You check the spelling and grammar, of course, and you always reply in a timely manner if they either email you back and ask you questions, which sometimes they will.

I’ve been having a back and forth question and answer session with an editor from Gretsche magazine for about four weeks now, so you’ve just got to keep that dialogue going.

Ali: I like the fact that you've given us a structure for the pitch, because I think that can floor people a bit.

So let's proceed on the happy assumption that the pitch has been accepted, and we're sitting down to write an article.

How to Present a Sidebar

Ali (cont): Something that came up in the Huddle was, how do you present a sidebar for an article? So, when you want one of those boxes with a different coloured background, maybe with some bullet points, maybe with some sort of additional information that's not quite part of the flow of the article.

Is there a standard format for presenting that in your article that you send, or do different magazines do different things?

Steff: What I pretty much do always – I'm trying to think of an exception, but I can't think of any – is I write the article, and then down the bottom of the article, I put sidebar, and then the name of the sidebar, and if there's a second one, sidebar two, and then the name of the sidebar, and follow it on there.

It's up to them to decide the formatting of it, where it's going to go on the page, whether it's bullet points, or whatnot, but I just put it at the bottom of the article.

When I do the article, I just put the word count for the article and then the word count for each sidebar, so they're all separate. I put that in at the top of the page so they can see exactly what they're getting, they're getting this many words as an article, and that many words as a sidebar.

Ali: Okay, that makes good sense, that seems to me like the most straightforward way to do it. When I've done this for a magazine article, or certainly when I did this with my For Dummies book, I just put "Sidebar" and the text and left it to the designer to figure out exactly how that was going to be formatted.

Steff: Yes, it's their job.

Planning, Researching and Writing

Ali: So, thinking of the whole article, once you've got the pitch accepted, that's great, but where do you go from there?, I wondered if you had a particular system for the article planning, and doing the research and the writing and then editing it and so on.

Steff: Um... (laughs)

Ali: Maybe some of that comes into the pitch as well. I'm thinking you probably have to plan it quite a bit just to do the pitch, so you've already got a start on the article.

Steff: Yes. When I write an article, I copy the pitch into a word file, so that I'm always working from the original pitch that I sent.

Then I do my interviews with my sources, and I form a structure based on what they've told me, and the structure that I've pitched.

After that, it's just fill in the blanks I guess, because I'm not really much of a planner. I have a system for tracking my submissions and that kind of thing, but yes, I tend to be kind of on the seat of my pants about it a bit.

Ali: I think this is one where everyone's a bit different. Some people like to plan every single paragraph before they write it, and some people just want to launch on in there and see where it goes.

Steff: Definitely. It's in the editing that I hone it down into something that's readable.

Ali: Yes, I think editing is always a crucial part of the writing process, but perhaps particularly when you're trying to sell something to a magazine where they've probably got quite high standards.

I know I've got away with blog posts that were perhaps not brilliantly edited, but with a magazine there is a higher barrier to cross.

Steff: **Yes, you really have to be top of your game, and catching your spelling and grammar mistakes.** I use a lot of my energy doing that, because I'm really bad with typos and mistakes and stuff, and I let more creep onto my websites than I ever let go into my pitches and magazine articles, because you just can't.

Ali: Yes, the best thing with a website is that when you spot one you can just go in and fix it, whereas once it's printed in a magazine, it's a bit late!

Steff: Exactly, exactly.

Structuring Articles

Ali: With that in mind, let's talk a little about the writing. Do you find that there's a particular structure that you use, even if that's fairly intuitive, or does it vary a lot?

I know in, say, news journalism, there's the pyramid structure where they put all the important points first and then they add more detail. But obviously with magazine writing there's, I'm sure, a bit more flexibility than that with structure.

Steff: It really does depend on the magazine, the particular assignment you've been given and the subject matter that you're covering. It depends, for example, on whether it's an interview piece, a column, or a lifestyle article.

I find I do a lot of studying previous issues of a magazine to give myself an idea of the kind of content and structure that the editor's actually looking for.

The layout of the magazine can also play a huge part in how you structure an article. Online, you're quite limited. You have that one block of text and you've gotta make sure you break it up with headings and lists, so it's got that scannability. You've got the short paragraphs and it's quite snippy and go-go-go.

Magazine readers tend to savour every word. They're less likely to care about the sentence and the paragraph lengths. They love quotes and facts and statistics and you can just shove them in till the cows come home.

You've got the opportunity to play with boxes, splitting up text, having text over images, all the sorts of stuff you don't get to do online, which brings another dimension to it, especially with magazines which are quite keen to play with those kind of things themselves.

The magazine *Coilhouse* is quite a good demonstration of using really innovative page layouts and things like that.

Ali: It sounds to me like there isn't maybe one specific structure that you have, but one of the nice things about writing for magazines is that flexibility of structure. It's not quite like a blog post where you have to have your numbered list or whatever it might be.

I really liked your suggestion to read other articles from the magazine, because I know one of the complaints I've heard from magazine editors is that they get pitches from people who've never read one issue of their magazine. They've got no clue about what sort of articles the magazine normally runs.

I do think it really helps if you show that you've read the magazine and then you can use that in the pitch, but also in the article.

Steff: Yes, it's very, very important. 'Cos it's just things you don't even really think of if you've never read the magazine. Like, do they want writers to talk in the first person, or the third person, or the second person? Just those stylistic things that you don't get if you haven't read the magazine.

And that doesn't necessarily come across in a pitch, and then if the editor never accepts articles where the author talks in the first person, and then you hand one of those in, they're not going to accept yours.

Ali: Or they're going to want the whole thing to be completely rewritten, which is a pain for you to have to do.

Steff: True. Yeah. Exactly. And an article that you've pitched, written in one style versus a different style, can be completely different.. So you've got to write for that specific magazine.

Ali: I think that's a really crucial thing to keep in mind.

We've covered a huge amount, pretty much the whole process from starting to think about article writing to actually writing one and submitting it and so on. Do you have any other tips that you just wanted to give us to finish off with?

Steff: I think we've got it covered.

If you're trying to be serious about magazine writing, one of the best things to do is to set yourself a query schedule or a goal for your queries every week.

For the first year I wrote freelance, I tried to send off one query every single weekday, so five queries a week. I had a much higher miss rate back then: I get maybe 40% now, of hits, but there was a much higher miss rate back then.

But even then five queries a week quickly got my publications up to about 100 published articles. After that things become much easier and you start getting those bigger and bigger markets.

Setting yourself a query schedule just really helps you to push yourself forward.

The other thing is to always be looking for ways that you can earn more money as a freelancer by doing this work.

That means selling additional content with an article. So sidebars, photographs, content for the magazine blog, all those can add a little bit more money to your paycheque for not much extra work.

You want to sell reprints of your articles and to reslant the same ideas, or your same research, for different magazines. I talk about those a lot in the *Small & Awesome Guide to Freelance Writing*.

The other one is whenever I hear a 'no' from an editor, 'no, this article isn't right for us', I always send them back an email saying 'oh, that one's not right for you but what about this one?' I always send them an alternative query, because you gotta keep plugging away.

Ali: Definitely. Well, thank you so much, Steff. It's been fantastic to have you with us.

I'm really hoping this will just give us a bit of a boost for those in the Huddle who are hoping to get into writing for magazines, or who at least just wanted to know a bit more about it.

Thank you so much Steff for joining us today – it's been really great to talk to you. And very best of luck with the castle!

Steff: Thank you Ali, and it's been wonderful to talk to you, and I hope everyone in the Huddle – I wish you all the best of luck for all your writing pursuits.