

Writing for the popular press: to inform and entertain

Carol Cooper

Many doctors write for consumer publications. Even more would like the chance to do so. This article explains how to bridge the gap between writing scientific papers and writing for the popular press, and offers realistic guidance on how to find a way into this competitive market.

WHY WRITE FOR THE POPULAR PRESS

Samuel Johnson said: 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money'. Writing for the papers can be lucrative, but in reality there are few doctors who make a comfortable living solely from writing. The thrill of seeing your name in print on the newsstands usually exceeds the thrill of seeing your name on the cheque.

One rewarding aspect of writing is that you can communicate with many more people than you can even in the busiest outpatient clinic. Patients attending your clinic may read your articles too, of course, and it can be amusing to hear patients quote your wise words on irritable bowel syndrome (usually incorrectly).

Writing is also something interesting to include in your CV. Whether the appointments panel approves of the *Sunday Mirror* or not, you can bet it will attract comment.

These reasons alone, however, are not enough. You should only write for the press if you really enjoy it. As with all extra-curricular activities, it is time-consuming. It can also be inconvenient. Are you prepared to forgo an evening with the children to scribble frantically for a 9pm deadline? Are you still happy to do it when you know your efforts will end up forgotten in cat litter trays?

HOW TO WRITE

Medics have a huge advantage in writing on health — they know the

subject already, which means that they can often produce a good piece quickly without having to look anything up. Fields with an obvious advantage to the papers are paediatrics, psychiatry, general practice, obstetrics and gynaecology, but the human body is endlessly fascinating and few branches of medicine or surgery are totally devoid of interest to lay readers.

On the whole, doctors are intelligent, and some are good communicators. A few even write very well. Even so, a lot of good writers do not succeed in writing well for the popular press.

One difficulty is that medics sometimes know their subject too well, and forget that a layman or woman may find the same facts hard going. Writing is easy if you bear in mind that people read papers and magazines for entertainment. Whatever you write has to be easy and fun to read. If you want to expound your latest theory, a lecture at the Royal College of Physicians might be more appropriate than the pages of a tabloid.

All of us tend subconsciously to mirror the style of the material we read. If you are heavily into Proust, your writing may not appeal much to the *Daily Mail*. Pore over Proust if you must, but also spend time reading the publication you are aiming at.

Once you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, bear in mind that your first sentence is your most important. Aim to grab the reader's attention in 10 words or less (some say three words, but they probably have the *Daily Sport* in mind). You may not decide on your first sentence until you have written most of the piece, but spend some time on it. The

opening few words have to be strong enough to lure the reader away from doing anything other than read the rest of your article. 'Your mobile phone could make you infertile' would be an arresting opener. If it were true, it would be even better.

A word about headlines — the editor or sub-editor chooses these, not the author of the feature. By all means give your article a title that reflects its content, but it is pointless spending hours thinking up something witty because it will probably be changed.

Keep all your sentences short and clear. Some writers pitch their features to appeal to an intelligent 14-year-old, but in doing so try not to patronise. You are aiming to entertain and educate (so-called 'infotain') readers, not show them up.

Working out the Gunning fog index (Gunning, 1971) can help keep things accessible. Take 100 words of your article and count the number of sentences within them, then calculate the average sentence length. Add this to the number of complex words (usually taken to be three syllables or longer) within your 100-word passage. Multiply this by 0.4, which gives the fog index. The lower the fog index, the clearer the writing. As a rough guide, tabloids usually score between 8 and 10, more serious newspapers average 12 to 14, and many medical journals have a fog index of 14 to 16. Really abstruse publications will easily exceed 16. (While *Hospital Medicine* usually scores about 13, the fog index of this piece is around 9.)

If you can't be bothered with Gunning's calculation, just look at your sentence length and try to keep each one well under 30 words.

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ON BEING A TRUE PROFESSIONAL

As a doctor, you must stick to General Medical Council (GMC) guidelines (GMC, 1995). Those who write for lay readers must never purport to be the best in their field (even if they are). Always make it clear that you cannot see patients as a result of anything you have written. There is more GMC advice on writing and broadcasting, but at this point I would like to add a humane consideration: do not tell every reader to see his/her GP without delay.

Be professional in your dealings with editors and respect deadlines. An aortic aneurysm may well have kept you away from the word processor, but the editor cannot go to press with a blank page. And deadlines can be very tight. I well recall the tabloid features editor who wanted me to produce a 600-word piece on exercise and reassured me with: 'Don't worry — you've got bags of time. Forty minutes, if you need it'.

Accept changes. The sub-editor who deletes the odd comma or adjective is not an infanticidal maniac flourishing a knife at your babies. You can avoid errors creeping in at the sub-editing stage if you are faxed a copy of the final page proof before it goes to press. There isn't always time in the publishing schedule to allow this, but you can ask.

BREAKING INTO THE MARKET

This is the hardest part because it takes luck as well as talent and perseverance. If you can arrange to be famous first, editors will beat a path to your door. Most of us are less fortunate and have to make our own way in. The best way to approach an editor is still by letter (rather than fax or e-mail) with a few words about yourself and an idea or two for articles.

Sometimes a sycophantic letter does the trick. ('I always enjoy reading *Baby's Bottom Monthly*, but I notice you do not have a paediatrician advising readers on thrush in the nappy area.') Enclose copies of some of the articles you have published. Sadly, 'Simultaneous turnover of normal and dysfunctional C1 inhibitor as a probe of in vivo activation of C1 and contact-activatable proteases' (Woo et al, 1985) may not help your

cause. If you have not already written for lay readers, you can build up a useful portfolio by writing first for some of the softer publications, such as the freebies you and your colleagues receive, or for newspapers aimed at GPs or nurses. Fillers for the *British Medical Journal* can also be a good starting-point.

Getting the right idea may seem daunting but does not have to be. Just think of a topic which might appeal to readers of that paper. I cannot stress strongly enough that you must study the publication in detail first. It may not matter if the editor rejects your idea — if he/she likes the sound of you, he/she may commission you to write on a different subject.

Consider joining the Medical Journalists' Association (see *Useful address*). This is the national organization for people who write on health and medicine and organizes a number of events and seminars. It will help you meet other writers and get known. Most doctors who write qualify for affiliate rather than full membership. However, this still gets them into the directory of members and onto the list of freelancers, which can be a rich source of new work.

Once you have got your first commission for the popular press, you are nearly there. Establish what you will be paid for a piece, but do not be fussy about rates. When you are better known, you can afford to tell the editor laughingly: 'You jest. That's the kind of money I used to write for 10 years ago.' **HM**

Conflict of interest: none

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Further reading

Albert T (2000) *The A to Z of Medical Writing*. BMJ Books, London
Strunk W, White EB (2000) *The Elements of Style*. 4th edn. Allyn & Bacon, Boston

Useful address

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TABLE 1.
Style in a nutshell

By all means start sentences with conjunctions. But stay out of these traps:
Try to avoid passive verbs and constructions. If these are used, it is suspected that life could be sapped from your writing.
Leave out redundant phrases and any other expressions that add little or nothing to the meaning you are trying to impart.
Remember to always delete split infinitives.
Banish footnotes. They are usually useless.
Avoid clichés like the plague.
Never drop names, as Somerset Maugham was wont to say.
Steer clear of foreign words. Editors think they're de trop.
Like this one

KEY POINTS

- Writing for the popular press is time-consuming but can be fun for the writer and informative for readers.
- Whatever your topic, the article has to be entertaining.
- You may need to re-examine your notion of a good writing style.
- One can still be a real professional, both as a doctor and as a tabloid hack.
- Getting ideas into print requires strategy and hard work.
- There is no substitute for in-depth study of your target publications.