



# NAVAL SAFETY CENTER

## MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

### INTRODUCTION TO WRITING FOR SAFETY PUBLICATIONS

#### SECTION 1: Types of Articles

1. **News.** Start with a clear, one-sentence statement of what the news is, then supply why that news is important. Decide if background information is necessary or irrelevant. Of the who-what-why-where-when information, "what" and "why" are the most important, the latter because it is the key to solutions. Usually a news article has a straight-forward, factual title.

2. **Events.** Another common article describes a mishap and offers the lesson learned. You need some detail and description to make the narrative convincing and realistic; these things are very hard to get from a message. As always, try to anticipate questions the reader might have. Because these articles are usually chronological, they are the easiest to organize.

3. **Trends.** Statistics are nice, but no reader needs undigested statistics or raw data. We have to analyze the data and explain what it means. Ideally, statistical articles point to specific actions on the part of the reader that will help them improve their local situation. These articles sometimes require charts, which can be very useful if you make them crystal clear. Get rid of "chart junk" (extra numbers, tiny labels).

4. **Problems** (a.k.a. "hazards"). Surveys uncover myriad problems covering a spectrum of urgency and severity. You can help the reader prioritize these lists. You need to state the problem and offer a reasonable solution. Documenting that a problem exists will make the reader more receptive and builds your credibility. Make sure that the solution you offer is realistic. This information would most logically come from someone who has actually solved the problem himself, as opposed to someone who just diagnoses it ("Running a marathon isn't that hard, just build your mileage up to 50 miles a week and do five 20-mile training runs"). There has to be something better that we can offer than complicated, expensive solutions to once-in-a-blue- moon problems.



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### SECTION 2: Ten Steps to Writing an Article

1. Realize that writing is a process, not a short burst of frantic activity. The usual steps are planning, research, writing a rough draft, editing, then writing a final draft.
2. Planning an article involves thinking why it is important and what information you want to include. If you decide about length, scope and focus in advance, it will save you time and effort later. You can usually make an outline before you even start doing your research.
3. Good articles are descriptive, so you will have to draw on your own experience or talk to those who have more experience or different experience than you.
4. The best articles help readers solve problems, save time, avoid mishaps and do their jobs more effectively. You can't assume that the reader shares your perception of a problem; you may have to sell them the problem before you sell them a solution.
5. Write your draft the way you would tell the story to one of your friends. It should be informal and clear. Use short words and short sentences, and don't beat around the bush.
6. Readers want articles about things they can actually control and problems they can solve. Writing an article about a huge problem that is too large or too expensive merely raises the reader's anxiety.
7. Tell real stories. Use actual examples. Readers want to hear about things that happened. They aren't interested in platitudes, cliches, lectures, or slogans. Readers want reality, not theory.
8. Magazines are a clutchplate between the way things are and the way they should be. Ideally, everyone follows all the rules all the time, and no mishaps ever happen. In reality, people cut corners, take chances, stop paying attention, fall asleep in class, drive drunk, ignore their supervisor, take the easy way out, get in a hurry, resist learning, and on and on.
9. A magazine article doesn't regurgitate procedures. Readers have the procedures already; the problem is that they don't follow them. Simply repeating the procedures avoids an important part of the problem.
10. "Why" is more interesting than "what." Defining a problem or a hazard is only the starting point.



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### SECTION 3: Template for a Basic Article

Paragraph 1: **Your lead sentence.** Can be factual, humorous, startling, colorful. Whatever will get someone's attention. Articles work better if they have a lead, but if you are out of ideas, don't worry about it and go to the next step.

Paragraph 2: **State the problem.** Describe it. Don't assume the reader will agree that it is a problem. Maybe they aren't aware of it, don't think it is that important, or don't understand it. Therefore you may need to spend a little time on it.

Paragraph 3: **Sell the problem.** Document that it exists, because the reader may be skeptical and won't necessarily take your word for it. How have you become aware of the problem? Be specific with examples: things you've seen, read, or heard about.

Paragraph 4: **Why is the problem significant?** Assume the reader will be skeptical. They already have a lot of other problems. Why should they put your issue toward the top of their priority list? In general, they'll do it because it is either very serious (i.e., there is a good chance it will kill someone) or because it is a nagging problem that is easy to fix and it will be easier to make it go away than confront it or live with it.

Paragraph 6: **Offer a realistic solution.** Ideally, something that isn't too hard and something they haven't heard a hundred times.

### SECTION 4: The Writing Process

**Planning.** Think of a topic for an article. Validate the topic with your peers, your chain of command, and the editor. Does everyone agree it is important? Are you going to cover everything that is important without going into overkill or leaving stuff out?

**Research.** Gather data, anecdotes, explanations, descriptions.

**Write a rough draft.** If you want to revise it yourself, put it aside for a few days, then reread it from the point of view of someone who is bored and in a hurry. Don't assume your reader is going to know as much as you. Also get your draft chopped to pieces by your peers or other objective readers. Expect major carnage on this draft. Don't take it personally.

**Fix the problems.** You may have to do more research or go back to your sources for follow-up.