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The Feel-No-Pain Guide to Writing an Article

If you’d rather get root canal than write an article, you’re not alone. The thought of putting pen to paper can incite fear in even the most articulate, well-educated professionals. But you can kiss your fears goodbye. This tip sheet will give you the tools and tricks you need to help you write a clear, concise, compelling article.

Before you write

- **Write with a clear purpose.** Are you trying to inform your readers? Entertain them? Persuade them? Motivate them? Know what communication goal you want to achieve, then stick to your plan. Trying to accomplish too many objectives dilutes the strength of your message.
Tip: Finish the following statement before you begin any writing project: “After readers read this, I hope they” Then plan your content accordingly.
- **Make an outline.** Don’t plunge into a writing project without a beginning and end in mind. Write down the key points you want to cover. Prioritize them, expand upon them and then wrap it all up with a solid conclusion or summary.
Tip: Compose the headline first to help you determine the main focus of the article.
- **Adopt the *USA Today* approach.** As you gather information, think of interesting graphs, charts, illustrations and photos you can include to make your message visually appealing.

Make every word count

- **Focus on your audience.** This is truly the key to effective writing. Bring the content to your readers’ level. Science is fascinating, but it’s easy to get caught up in the technical details when you’re trying to explain it. If you’re writing for *SCOPE*, gear your content to OSC members — mostly moms and dads who bring their kids when they visit.
Tip: Ask an eighth-grader to read your article. If he or she doesn’t understand it, you need to make your content more “reader friendly.”
- **Watch your approach.** If you clutter your writing with run-on sentences, stuffy words and a dry delivery, you’ll lose your audience in the first few seconds. You need to snare readers’ attention from start to finish, so keep this in mind as you try to pull together interesting facts, quotable quotes, clear explanations and fun trivia.
Tip: Adopt a conversational tone by pretending you’re talking with a good friend.
- **Master the basics.** Use simple, familiar words — not scientific jargon — to ensure readers understand your message. Use specific, concrete words to create visual images in your readers’ minds. Use strong, active verbs to convey vitality, and avoid using the passive voice (i.e., “It was decided by the committee...”). Keep your sentences relatively short, striving for an average length of 17 words.
- **Quit when you’re finished.** How do you determine if you’ve written enough — or too much? Ask yourself these questions: Did I provide readers with the information they need to make a decision, come to a conclusion or take action? Did I achieve the communication goal I outlined? If yes, you’re done!