

The Genuine Article: Writing for *TCS Connections*

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Nathaniel Hawthorne, the 19th-century American author, once said that “Easy reading is damned hard writing.” He might have added, “Especially when writing short articles for publication.” Whether you’re instructing your readers in the fine points of raising prize dahlias or promoting your court’s newest program, the same basic principles apply:

- 1) **It’s all about them.** Many people approach writing an article as if it were a vehicle for self-promotion. Done skillfully, it can be – but the audience comes first. Any added glow to your reputation is a mere byproduct; keep your focus on your audience. Who are they? Why should they be interested in what you have to tell them? How can you present your topic most effectively? What does the audience need to know? What do they *not* need to know? Can photos or graphics help tell the story?
- 2) **What’s your lead?** The lead, or lede as it’s sometimes spelled, is usually the first line or paragraph in an article; a good lead quickly introduces the topic and interests readers enough to read further.
For an example of an effective lead, see Judge Elizabeth Pollard Hines’ article on pg. 7 of the summer issue of *TCS Connections*. Judge Hines opens with a rhetorical question and goals that will appeal to her chosen audience – what court wouldn’t want to reduce recidivism, etc.? – and then proposes Street Outreach Court as a vehicle to achieve those goals.
- 3) **You can’t be both the author and the source.** Yes, it’s nice to have a byline, and it’s also nice to be quoted. But when did you ever see a bylined article where the writer interviewed himself or herself? Quoting good sources – people with expertise or first-hand knowledge of your topic – lends authority to your article. You may be the best source on your topic. If so, have someone else interview you and write the article.
- 4) **Show, don’t tell.** This old adage, beloved of many generations of high school English teachers, is still true. Don’t waste the audience’s time telling them that your program is the most innovative, effective, and money-saving initiative on the planet. Instead, illustrate its successes – for example, with statistics, first-hand accounts, and studies. “In the first year alone, we saved \$X – three times as much as we invested in the program at the beginning.”
- 5) **Get to the point.** The inexperienced writer often engages in a lot of throat-clearing before introducing the actual topic – a common mistake referred to as “burying the lead.” So do not open your article with a sleep-inducing history of your organization or a lengthy discussion of the many committee meetings you held before finalizing your project. If you think the audience can benefit by reading about that process, introduce it later in the article – and keep it succinct.

“The committee concluded that good communication was critical to the program’s success, so we set up an online information center.” If you need to credit those involved, do so briefly and at or near the end of the article. “Special thanks to all who served on the task force, including”

- 6) **Know your publication.** Familiarize yourself with the publication’s standards and rules for submitting articles. For example, *TCS Connections* generally limits submissions to 500 – 750 words. Try to stick to the word limit. Also, know the publication schedule, including deadlines, and plan your submissions around that schedule. Some articles are less time-sensitive and so are appropriate for publications that come out on a monthly or quarterly basis; other articles need to be very timely to be relevant. Choose your target publication accordingly.
- 7) **No recycling.** Do not merely submit a press release, especially one you have already sent elsewhere; writing for publication is different than disseminating news. Also, do not recycle material that has already appeared in the same or another publication. If, for example, the *Detroit Legal News* has already published your article on your drug court program, but you still think the topic is of interest to *Connections* readers, find a fresh angle and rewrite the story. If you contribute regularly to the same publication, keep in mind that editors are not pleased when paragraphs five through seven of your latest submission are identical to paragraphs four through six of your article from last month’s issue.
- 8) **Get a fresh look.** Have someone else—ideally, two other people -- read your article before you submit it. And read it yourself with a critical eye. Do you have an interesting lead? Is the article clearly written and well organized? Do the quotes really support the points you want to make, or are they too general to be helpful? Ask your reviewers, “What can I do to improve this article?”
- 9) **Have your article proofed – by someone else.** Studies show that we tend to miss mistakes in documents that we have drafted, so have another person proofread. Headlines, bylines, and photo captions are often overlooked in proofreading, so be sure that your proofreader has reviewed them.
- 10) **Be open to change.** Once you submit your article, be prepared for it to be edited, with or without your input. *TCS Connections* editors will share suggested changes with you before finalizing your submission, but not all publications do this.

Take the time to craft a professional-quality article that will reflect well on you and your court. A last piece of advice: always read your target publication before writing the article. You’ll have a much better idea of the publication’s style and goals, and of how to write your article accordingly.

A shorter version of this article appeared in the summer 2011 issue of TCS Connections.