

Writing news, features and columns



I hope this short guide can be of assistance to members who are keen to write for their branch or regional publications or websites, or who want to write more widely.

This is structured into three main sub-categories – but many of the basic principles apply to all three and, my suggestion is, if possible, to try to start with news writing first.

From my own experience, I think this gives a strong grounding in some of the methods and self-disciplines which are so helpful for writing longer pieces.

And remember, whether for online or print publication, writing an article is writing an article. So, best of luck and again, I hope you find this useful.

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NEWS WRITING

Reporting news – accurate information about something that's just happened – is the most common form of journalism and it's normally what a journalist learns to do first.

Here are the basic steps or stages:

1. News judgement

Someone's alerted you to a potentially interesting story. Do you think it could be of interest to members of your branch, or to the wider public? Is it something unusual, original, of great importance, or amusing? Does it promote a good cause? Does it portray the union/our members in a positive light?

2. Information gathering and noting

If our answer is Yes, then let's start gathering information. Identify the key person or persons involved, arrange to speak to them, face-to-face or by phone, take your notebook and pen and make notes while you're speaking, ask them if they mind you recording the conversation for reference.

3. What information do we want?

We want to know *Who? What? When? Where? Why?* So we want to know *who* the key person (or persons) in the story is (are) – make sure we get the correct spelling. Their job, branch, any position held, we might also ask their age and length of service.

What's the story? *What* happened, *when* did it happen and *where? Why* did it happen?

Get the person talking and ask questions to clarify any points you're not sure of. Prepare your questions before the conversation – remember this person is probably busy with lots of other things going on and so make full use of the time they give you and try to keep the conversation reasonably brief.

Towards the end of this conversation, ask for a photo – a nice photo of the person is really important to making your story work well.

4. Putting our information together

OK, so let's imagine we've got two potential (fictional) story ideas and we've had some conversations and made some notes.

A postwoman, Mary May, is running in the London Marathon this coming weekend. She works at Rosetown Delivery Office in Kent and she's raising money for Hospice Care UK in memory of her grandad who passed away a few months ago. She's running in a 'Wonder Woman' costume – not just for fun, but also because this was a nickname her 'Gramps' called her. She's on target to raise over £1,000 in donations from colleagues, friends and relatives. You've asked her for a photo in the outfit on the marathon and you've arranged to catch up with her as soon as possible after the event. You've also spoken to Mary's D.O. rep Sarah Smith, who's told you they're all proud of her and she's known as the fastest postie in town.

A telephone engineer, Fred Flynn, saved a young child from a park lake in Newcastle. You've spoken to him and his colleague Bob Billman – who was also present. They've explained how they were taking their lunch break in Oldcity Park after repairing a telephone fault nearby when they heard a splash and saw a young child in the water in the deep part of the lake. Fred and Bob said how Fred jumped in and got hold of the child and took him back the water's edge. Bob, meanwhile noticed a woman shouting out 'Harry' and realised she was the mum. She told Bob how Harry had been playing football and that she'd been distracted by another of her children and then couldn't see Harry when she looked back. And then saw him in the water. She said how grateful she was when Fred brought him back and that he was a hero. You've asked for a photo – and luckily, Bob took a great photo of Fred, Harry and his mum, Lucy, just after the rescue!

5. Constructing our story

- i. Intro Par: Our introductory paragraph (our 'intro-par') comes first – this is the most important part of a news story and it needs to answer the five questions: Who? What? Where? Why? When?

Royal Mail delivery worker Mary 'Wonder Woman' May raised over £1,000 for Hospice Care UK when she ran the London Marathon yesterday.

Openreach engineer Fred Flynn was hailed a hero yesterday, after jumping into a park lake in Newcastle to rescue eight-year-old Harry, who had fallen out of a rowing boat.

Do these intro pars answer those five questions? Let's check.

Who? Mary May, Fred Flynn

What? Running a Marathon, rescuing a child

Where? London, Newcastle

When? This weekend, Yesterday

Why? To raise money for charity, to stop the child drowning

- ii. The details of the story: Three or four paragraphs which tell the story and include some direct quotes from the key person and, preferably, at least one other person too.

"The run was exhausting," says Mary. "I belong to my local athletics club and I've done half-marathons before, but this was my first full marathon, so I was pleased to finish in a reasonable time.

"But what I really wanted to do was to help hospices because our local one took such loving care of my dear old Grandad in his last few weeks," she explains.

"I called him 'Gramps' and he called me his 'little Wonder Woman' so that's why I wore the costume for the marathon – and I'm so grateful to my colleagues at work and friends and neighbours for their donations."

Sarah Smith, CWU rep at the Rosetown Delivery Office in Kent where Mary works, said: "We're all so proud of her – in our D.O. they're all calling Mary the fastest postie in town."

Fred says: "Me and Bob were taking our lunch break by the Oldcity Lake when I heard a loud 'splash' and I looked up and could see a child in the water. I know it's quite deep in the middle, so I jumped in and swam over to him."

Fred's companion Bob Billman – another Openreach engineer who had been assisting Fred on a customer repair nearby – explains that, luckily, Fred was able to grab the boy and get him back to the water's edge.

“I saw a lady shouting out: ‘Harry’ and I realised she was the mum,” recalls Bob. “She was so relieved when Fred saved him – she gave him a big hug and told him he was a hero.

“Fred was embarrassed – but he certainly is a hero.”

Direct quotes from the key participants explain the story in more detail and bring the story to life.

This is also first-hand testimony of the event and it’s always good to get another person quoted as well – it’s extra confirmation of what’s happened and it adds a bit more interest to have the reaction of someone else.

So getting Mary’s rep and Fred’s colleague into the story as well is helpful.

- iii. **Headline:** We always want our headline to be attention-grabbing. For a news story in particular, it’s preferable to make our headline present-tense and active. So, let’s go back to those intro pars and use some of that basic information.

Wonder Woman postie runs London Marathon

Hero engineer Fred saves drowning child

In each example, we have an active word – ‘saves’ and ‘runs’.

We also give the most basic information of the story and so hopefully, with the nice photos we’ve got, this will interest the reader.

- iv. **Proofreading & clearance:** Now we’ve got two completed news stories, with nice photos. Before we send it for publishing, have a quick check for any spelling mistakes (‘typos’) or anything else that’s wrong. Make sure the quotes you’re using are accurate and that the names are spelt correctly.

It’s a really good idea to ask someone else – a fresh pair of eyes – to give your article a quick ‘proof’ if possible.

If you’ve been asked by your interviewees to send them your copy before publishing, now’s the time to do that.

And if your story requires clearance-approval from your branch secretary (particularly if the subject is less light-hearted than these examples and perhaps reports on an IR issue or a political subject for example) now’s the time to do that as well.

WONDER WOMAN POSTIE RUNS LONDON MARATHON

Royal Mail delivery worker Mary ‘Wonder Woman’ May raised over £1,000 for Hospice Care UK when she ran the London Marathon yesterday.

“The run was exhausting,” says Mary. “I belong to my local athletics club and I’ve done half-marathons before, but this was my first full marathon, so I was pleased to finish in a reasonable time.

“But what I really wanted to do was to help hospices because our local one took such loving care of my dear old Grandad in his last few weeks,” she explains.

“I called him ‘Gramps’ and he called me his ‘little Wonder Woman’ so that’s why I wore the costume for the marathon – and I’m so grateful to my colleagues at work and friends and neighbours for their donations.”

Sarah Smith, CWU rep at the Rosetown Delivery Office in Kent where Mary works, said: “We’re all so proud of her – in our D.O. they’re all calling Mary the fastest postie in town.”

HERO ENGINEER FRED SAVES DROWNING CHILD

Openreach engineer Fred Flynn was hailed a hero yesterday, after jumping into a park lake to rescue eight-year-old Harry Heath, who had fallen out of a rowing boat.

Fred says: "Me and Bob were taking our lunch break by the Oldcity Lake when I heard a loud 'splash' and I looked up and could see a child in the water. I know it's quite deep in the middle, so I jumped in and swam over to him."

Fred's companion Bob Billman – another Openreach engineer who had been assisting Fred on a customer repair nearby – explains that, luckily, Fred was able to grab the boy and get him back to the water's edge.

"I saw a lady shouting out: 'Harry' and I realised she was the mum," recalls Bob. "She was so relieved when Fred saved him – she gave him a big hug and told him he was a hero.

"Fred was embarrassed – but he certainly is a hero."

So that's method and structure for writing news copy. And it's also a basic foundation for writing features and columns.

FEATURE WRITING

A feature is longer, more detailed and more diverse in terms of subject matter than a news story.

We're looking at a subject in a more considered way and while it can be a current topic – such as a campaign or a new work activity for example – it can also focus on something from the past.

Some examples

Rather than constructing an imaginary feature article here – I'll instead cite a few examples of

some features which I think highlight some of the important aspects of this type of writing.

In the Voice, we've carried topical industrial features – such as one on a new safe-ladder-climbing kit called 'Tetra' (Autumn 2019 P12&13) and another one on the 'Do The Job Properly' initiative in Royal Mail (Autumn 2019 P14&15).

And online, industrial features have looked at our Royal Mail members' efforts helping with the national Covid-19 home testing campaign, and have highlighted the effects of some of the nasty 'conspiracy-theory' rumours concerning 5G installations on our frontline Openreach engineers.

<https://www.cwu.org/news/postal-workers-crucial-to-the-national-testing-programme/>

<https://www.cwu.org/news/postmen-and-postwomen-collecting-britains-test-kits/>

<https://www.cwu.org/news/cwu-protecting-our-openreach-engineers/>

Most of the basic principles set out in the 'news writing' section apply here – judgement, information-gathering, interviewing, photos, checking, clearance, proofing for example.

Structure as well is similar – we still need attention-grabbing headlines, but they need not be present-tense or active, but more of a statement or a theme.

Our intro-par is still there in essence, but it becomes a 'standfirst' – it introduces and sets the tone for the feature and we often put this into bold.

Feature articles like these are similar to news reports – but more and longer interviews, more narrative and more slowly paced - they're essentially articles inspired by a news item, but a more detailed and perhaps more analytical look at the subject.

Other features are more investigative – less reliant on interviews and more source-based, such as Norman Candy's historical piece

in Voice (Winter edition P26&27) about our members' contribution to the national effort during WWII and the article for the CWU Young Workers website by Luke Elgar from Essex Amal Branch on the 'Truth About Zane' campaign

<https://yw.cwu.org/blog/heartbeak-tragedy-and-the-search-for-answers/>

Norman researched his article by looking through some of the publications our predecessor unions produced way back in 1939 and 1940 and used photos from those journals as well as others reproduced with the permission of the Post Office Museum.

Luke gathered his information by speaking with a member of the family for background, and by sourcing and citing all of the various claims and counter-claims related to his subject – and for images, he used a main photo from the campaign web-page and another with permission of a professional photographer. An important aspect to this type of more investigative writing is the need to source and cite the references we use – as well as getting appropriate permission for photos we use that are not our own – i.e. that are not the property of the union – and appropriately crediting them too.

So if feature-writing interests you, I'd suggest taking a detailed look at these examples, think of applying those basic principles outlined in the first section – and modified for a feature.

COLUMN WRITING

These come in several different formats and types, with the key similarity being that they are essentially 'monologues' – a leader's briefing or update, a viewpoint being aired, a persuasion being attempted, or a mobilisation being called – from one 'side' or from one person or organisation.

1. The editorial or 'leader'

In a newspaper or magazine, this is the main topical comment of that particular publication in each edition. It sets out the policy and position of that publication – or

the organisation it represents. In Voice and Frontline, our editorial/leader is our general secretary's piece either on our Page Two or Page Three.

2. The regular column

Newspapers and magazines have their regular writers, often a writer, or 'desk editor', who specialises in a particular discipline – political editor/correspondent, business, sport, music, travel, fashion, for example. Our Voice/Frontline equivalents are the columns by our senior national industrial officers Terry Pullinger and Andy Kerr, or our EED officer Kate Hudson, or Brian Lee the NEC retired members' representative or our other strand leads.

These are often updates from the previous period and some 'flagging-up' of events to come. They're normally written in a similar style to the editorial – although a 'diary' style can be a more engaging presentation in an online context.

If you're involved with, or responsible for, your branch or regional website or publication; then our 'Type One' and 'Type Two' columns – an editorial, or a regular column – would probably be something you might not write yourself, but that you'd perhaps ask your branch or regional secretary, political officer or other senior representative for.

So, your job here is more likely to be advising them of your deadline, giving them a proposed word-length, and editing/proofing the copy they send you.

If they ask you for tips, then as a guide, editorials and regular columns in Voice/Frontline or other publications are useful reference points.

But here, it's equally important to remember that these are specifically their contributions and so your role should focus on proofing, keeping them (more or less) within the word-count guide and obviously the 'chasing up' (in the nicest possible way of course!).

3. The 'op-ed'

This is a polemical piece, the name of which derives from its traditional placing in a newspaper opposite the editorial. Although this is by no means a rule and op-eds can be, and often are, situated on other pages.

These articles are often 'one-offs' and are often written by a guest columnist and they specifically advocate a particular viewpoint – the intention being to persuade and to spark further debate.

This is a type of column that, if you're involved with, or responsible for your branch or regional website or publications, you might seek a specialist guest writer for – locally, perhaps someone leading a campaign to save the local hospital, or perhaps a community fighting to keep their primary school open. Your guest writer will probably just need a brief chat about subject matter, deadline and word count – (and maybe a bit of 'chasing-up!').

If you want to have a go at an op-ed yourself, then here are some useful tips:

- i. Use evidence to substantiate your arguments – expressing an opinion, even expressing it well, will not convince people unless you can also cite some key sources to back up the claims you're making.

For example, if you're calling for action on jobs, quote a credible source for any claims you're making about unemployment or about jobs in different sectors – the Office for National Statistics is a respected information source, or a study carried out by a sectoral body such as the Society of Motor Manufacturers.

If you want to encourage your readers to support a campaign to save a local primary school from closure, cite some evidence, some studies or examples showing how children benefit from being educated locally rather than having to travel long distances to school.

- ii. Critique the opposing viewpoint: Summarise the other viewpoint and explain why you think it's wrong. Don't be tempted to mis-represent your opponents – again use citations and source what you say they say. But take their position apart methodically, showing where they are wrong and why. Be robust, but also be honest – and bear in mind that your opponent may be invited to respond with a similar article of their own.
- iii. Ask yourself which op-eds have you read recently that you enjoyed reading? Which did you find persuasive, or well-argued even if you disagreed with their viewpoint? Why were they persuasive?
- iv. Use the basic steps from our first section to decide what it is you want to write about and then to gather the information that you need and then to construct your piece.
- vi. And again, check, clear, edit and proof.

And again, please get in touch with me if I can help or assist.

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