



Simple steps

*writing news
articles*

by JoAnne Castagna, Ed.D

Ten years ago, residents from the Claremont Housing Development in Manville, New Jersey reported seeing a black oil-like substance discharging from their basement sump pumps and other areas on their property. This substance was found to be toxic and the state asked the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District to assist with the clean up.

Eugene Urbanik led this project, the Federal Creosote Superfund Site, and many other of the nation's large-scale environmental projects as the New Jersey Area Engineer for the Corps' New York District. He not only finds it rewarding to dig up and clear out hazardous waste to make communities safe, but also uncovering project details in news articles and publishing them for communities to read, such as Claremont.

"News articles help educate the public about how the Corps is making their communities safe and putting their taxpayer money to good use," said Urbanik. "I've also been approached by colleagues and people I work with from partnering agencies who tell me they've read my published articles and enjoyed learning about my projects. In addition, I'm aware that articles about our projects have lead to future work requests from our customers."

His positive experiences has encouraged the Corps' New York District to create a news article writing course to help other personnel get the word out about their project success stories with the Corps, the largest engineering organization in the world.



As the New York District's technical writer–editor, I created the course “Engineering Effective News Articles—a course for non-writers”. It is designed for our district's technical and non-technical staff that includes engineers, biologists, geographers and archaeologists. The course combines Information Mapping news writing techniques with methods I've developed based on feedback from our technical personnel. Information Mapping is a technique of dividing and labeling information for easy comprehension, use and recall.

Objective of the course

While conducting the course, I performed a survey to ascertain why many of our technical personnel were not publishing news articles. The results revealed that most of them had not received news writing training while in college and they didn't attempt or have the “desire” to write because they didn't have the skill and felt it would take too much time.

The goal of the course is to show them an easy to follow 5-step process for quickly getting an article on paper, as well as discussing the importance of having a story idea, identifying target audiences, and article visuals. Following is information from this course that can be used to uncover and reveal success stories.

Before you write

Before you begin to write you need to know what your story idea is and who your readers are.

Your story idea should be timely, occurred recently, and discuss something that would be of interest to your readers.

Your readers may be your colleagues or individuals outside of your organization. Whichever reader you write for you need to write the article in a language they will understand.

5-Step Writing Process

Step 1: Write First Paragraph

Write the first paragraph, or Lead, to your news article. The first paragraph is called the Lead because it should capture a reader's attention and “lead” them into your story.

To create the first paragraph, you should answer the six “news” questions – Who, What, Where, Why, When, and How with short, single sentence answers.

Combine the answers to these questions to create one short paragraph. It's OK if you don't get all of the answers in the first paragraph, but you should try to get most of them. The rest of the answers can be moved to the next paragraph.

You may be wondering—why do I have to cram all of this information in the first paragraph? The reason for this is because many readers today skim the beginning of news articles and don't read them in full. If the first paragraph intrigues them, they may read more of the article. This is why it's important to get the key article information at the very beginning of the article.

Step 2: Brainstorm Questions

Brainstorm a list of questions that you feel your readers would ask you about your subject matter. Do this by thinking of several Who, What, Where, Why, When and How questions. Envision that you're speaking with someone about your project, preferably someone who isn't familiar with it. What questions would they ask you about the project? It doesn't matter how many questions you come up with or if some are redundant.

Step 3: Create Article Outline

Take your list of questions and move them into an article outline. Place the questions in the areas (paragraphs) of the outline that you feel they would best be answered. I always suggest thinking of the beginning, middle and end of your outline as the beginning, middle and end of your project. This will help you decide where to place the questions in the outline.

For example, if you're writing an article about a project you recently completed, the beginning of your outline would answer questions that pertain to the beginning of your project, such as the project's history or what initiated the project; the middle of your outline would answer questions about what occurred during the project, such as the project's construction; and the end of the outline would answer questions about the completion of the project and what's going to happen in the future.

To help you do this, I suggest placing the numbers 1, 2, or 3 next to your questions. One standing for questions that relate to the beginning of your project; two standing for questions that relate to what happened during your project, and three standing for questions that relate to what happened at the end of your project or what will happen in the future.

Place the “1” questions somewhere in the first few paragraphs of the outline; the “2” questions somewhere in the middle of the outline; and the “3” questions somewhere in the last few paragraphs of the outline.

Step 4: Write Quick Draft

Now that you've created an article outline, it's time to write a quick draft of your news article. You've already created the lead paragraph, or Lead. Now you are able to write the rest of the article. You're going to create the remaining paragraphs the same way you created the first paragraph.

Create each additional paragraph by answering the questions you've listed for the paragraph. It's OK if it takes you more than one paragraph to answer the questions. If you realize that answering a question doesn't seem suitable in an area of the

article, then put the question aside to be answered somewhere else in the article.

Your quick draft should really be performed fast. Don't stop writing to edit or look up facts, just keep on writing. You want to quickly get your thoughts down. You can edit and insert facts later.

Step 5: Edit

Now you can edit! Read your article out loud. Hearing your words will help you catch spelling and grammar errors and see where information needs to be moved, added or deleted.

Removing unnecessary information is important because most publication editors require article submissions be no more than 2-3 pages, double spaced, and 12-point font.

Make the article concise by keeping these writing tips in mind: Paragraphs should be no more than 1-2 sentences that express one thought; sentences should be short and express a single thought; and words should be simple and not hard for readers to understand.

Make sure your article flows. Paragraphs should logically transition to one another.

Your writing should be conversational. Write how you speak. In other words, how you would verbally explain something to someone is how you should write it.

Also have someone else read your article, preferably someone not in your field and unfamiliar with your subject matter, because they will be able to quickly notice when something is unclear.

Importance of photographs, maps and other images: Visuals are vital to an article's success in communicating your story. Images that show what you explain in your article will help readers grasp what you're trying to describe for them.

Photographs should be high quality digital images (300ppi for print media, less for the web) showing people in action as opposed to “posed” photos. Always use captions describing what's being shown in the photo, including the full names of individuals in the photo. Also, give credit to the photographer or if a graphic, the creator. Images obtained from other organizations may require their written permission to use.

Writing an effective article to inform others is not really that difficult, and does not require special journalistic skills. Just follow the simple steps listed above, and give it a try. Good luck! AE

Dr. JoAnne Castagna is a technical writer-editor with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District. She can be reached at joanne.castagna@usace.army.mil