

Writing for a Magazine

Analysing a magazine

The secret of successful writing is marketing, and the first step in marketing is to know how to analyse the magazines you want to write for. This is simple, whether you want to sell short stories or articles.

Short Stories

If you're submitting a short story (or stories), check first that:

- The magazine actually publishes fiction.
- The magazine publishes fiction by freelance contributors.

Before you write for any magazine, you should read it regularly. All editors need to know that you are familiar with their publication, and small press magazines give preference to subscribers. You can get old copies from friends, etc., or borrow from the library. However, you should buy and closely analyse at least three subsequent issues before you write a story (or submit a query letter concerning an article.)

Create an index card or database entry for each magazine that you intend to write for, with information as follows:

TITLE Frequency:

Postal Address:

EDITORS*

Name Dept. Contact Details:

ph

fax

e-mail

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

*This says 'editors', not editor, because you must target your contact specifically - a story must go to the fiction editor by name, for instance. You would send a poem separately to the poetry editor.

Readership

Who buys the magazine? Know that, and you will understand the readership - for whom you will be writing. You can begin to find this out who they are by close study of individual copies. Do this in three stages:

- Read the editorial.
- Check the contents.
- Analyse the ads.

Editors are concerned to establish a relationship with the readers as they rely on repeat purchases to build circulation. The contents give you some idea of whom the market is aimed at, and the ads endorse this. Magazines rely on advertising, and advertisers consider very carefully where to get the best response for their products. If the ads are for condoms,

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beer and uni courses, it's likely to be a younger readership than if they're for retirement homes, suppositories or dental glue.

Try and get a picture in your mind of the typical reader for that magazine. To be truly professional, you can check out the magazine further in the Media Directory, where they state what readership they're aiming at. Check again in the New Zealand Writer's Handbook, where a brief description is included in the entry.

Editors

Please make sure that you fully understand the editorial requirements before you approach a magazine. Don't send your erotic short story to the editor of The Christian Monthly (unless you know something about him that we don't.)

Professional writing is always done to:

- a theme
- a length
- a deadline.

(This is why competitions are so helpful to the new writer.) Make sure you know exactly what these must be for a particular magazine.

What kind of story will you send to the editor? Check out the fiction, and analyse. This means that you:

- think about plot.
- think about characters.
- think about dialogue.

It would be helpful if you wrote a brief description of the story or stories in the magazine, in terms of content and delivery. Content is what it's about. Delivery is how it is told. This will help you to understand what the editor is looking for.

A useful exercise now would be to choose a magazine and write three brief outlines (max. 150 words) of a short story that you think will appeal to the editor. Choose one to work on and then submit it.

Articles

Most short stories are submitted as a finished piece of work. The procedure for articles is somewhat different, as each is usually preceded by a query letter.

Repeat your analysis of any magazine you want to write for, concentrating this time on those articles you think have been written by freelance contributors. Beginners should look out especially for those which readers are invited to write - opinion pieces, 'true stories', childhood memories, etc. If they like what you've got to offer, you benefit because:

- An editor will help you write your story.
- You get paid for telling it.
- You can add them as a publishing credit to your portfolio.

Do not set out to sell a finished article. This wastes your time, and time is money. Instead,

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sell the idea - through a query letter. Only write the article when an editor expresses interest. This will not be a firm offer. You must still deliver the goods. A query letter sells you as much as it sells the article.

Here are some vital last points to remember when writing your query letter:

- Presentation is important.
- Sending it to a named editor is important.
- The 'hook' is important.
- Keeping it brief and to the point is important.
- Your outline is important.
- It is the idea and why you are the best person to write it that is most important.