

35 WRITING FOR MAGAZINES

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When you return from your expedition, your brain will be awash with wonderful stories of discovery, adventure, frustration, science and culture. But how might you convey these to a wider audience? The secret to having your findings published in a magazine is to follow the basic guidelines written below and then add a little of your own individual imagination, initiative and expertise. Remember that there are exceptions to every rule.

The difficulty is working out which magazine will be interested in what and when. *Geographical*, the official magazine of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers or IBG), is probably one of the most likely magazines to be interested in printing an article on your expedition. Stories of discovery, geography, history, science, people, culture and environment are all top priority subjects for *Geographical* to feature. And what better place to have your findings presented over beautifully designed pages with stunning photography? However, if you look on the magazine shelves in a big newsagent you will find an amazing array of publications with a global or outdoors focus. Equally, looking in the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook's* magazine listings will turn up unknown titles that may be ideal for the story you have in mind.

Magazines are the holy grail of press coverage for your expedition because you may have noticed that very few national newspapers publish stories from unknown expeditions. Certainly, it will not be an easy "sell" to most publications, because space for these types of features is extremely limited, with most of the emphasis on the travel pages being consumer-oriented pieces. If the publication cannot sell advertising on the back of your expedition piece and you are not a famous explorer, the story has to be extremely strong, as well as being well written and original.

There is no doubt that, wherever your feature finds a home, the result should be a fantastic boost for the expedition, your own portfolio, the sponsors and the next venture that you want to do. Do not expect to earn a fortune for your masterpiece, however.

EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

SELLING YOUR PIECE**Mind the gap: dealing with the media**

Strangely, and most editors moan about this, it has been very difficult to find reliable professional expeditions to write a good, relevant, interesting piece that stands out from the pile. Undoubtedly, both sides are missing something here. It is always worth remembering that we both want the same thing: a good and visually exiting result in print that readers will enjoy and come back for more. So how do we get to this point?

On the face of it, the gulf of misunderstanding between expeditions and publishing folk could not be wider. We sit in our safe offices with smug looks on our faces, avoiding your telephone calls, drinking lattes, and worrying about small things like spelling and printers. You travel all over the world, with the latest kit, boasting about how great your expedition was, what amazing things you saw and how stupid we would be not to print your story and photographs.

Quality control

First of all you must answer this question truthfully: can I write well? If you find this hard to judge yourself, ask your colleagues and friends. If they enjoy a 300-word piece that you have written from the field or even about the planning stage, the chances are that you can write. If the answer is no, you should consider either finding a good writer to come on the expedition or simply concentrate on getting your story across to another journalist or in-house staff writer who can write it up for you. In other words, you can be your best public relations officer.

Before you contact a publication, have a think about what you are trying to achieve. Remember, by making it as easy as possible for journalists, who are lazy (I mean busy), you are aiding the chances of your story being snapped up.

The press release

Basic principles of writing press releases are often not applied and as a result end up straight in the bin. You have a few seconds to get an editor's rapt attention – or at least intrigue them to want to know more. Maximise this opportunity by including the following:

- date it
- heading: always summarise the news, "hot item" or angle in a bold single statement at the top
- story first: explain in a few sentences the central theme of the feature
- hard-and-fast facts are of utmost importance
- vital pieces of information are often hidden among the hyperbole – lose it
- bullet points can help list facts/achievements/figures
- quote yourself, locals, colleagues and patrons

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- include humorous/quirky element – something that you would retell in the pub
- mention whether images are available
- include further sources of information: contact details, maps, diagrams, website, etc.
- remember to include your contact details at the bottom.

A sample press release is given in Appendix 7.

Selling features

So you can write but despise the PR role. Let's go about pitching your story idea to the editor. First of all, remember that there are often many commissioning editors on each publication, e.g. certain sections are commissioned by different staff members – with the main features usually in the editor or feature editor's realm. Research each title, paying close attention to the masthead and telephoning the editorial assistant to corroborate findings if you have any queries.

Once you have identified the title and the editor in question, ask yourself three questions:

1. Why would the editor be interested in my piece?
2. Why would he or she publish it now?
3. Does my piece suit the style and content of the publication to which I am selling?

These are all key questions that the editor has to answer – he or she has a publisher and readership to answer to and if they cannot be answered easily you do not have a chance of publication. Space is always so tight that the story has to fight its way to the top.

Presenting the story

I would always recommend writing a proposal *before* writing the whole piece. This will help with pre-selling the feature before the expedition and save an awful lot of time should the publication reject the feature outright. Also, each publication will require a different style and a different angle depending on its readership. You do not want to have to rewrite the piece each time you make a submission to an editor.

Do be prepared for rejection letters. Until you become quite experienced at selling your pieces, this will happen regularly. Simply identify another magazine, another approach and try again with another letter. In time you will find that you will succeed almost every time, but this will take a good knowledge of the market and relationship building with magazine staff over time. You do not have to know anyone in publishing to get published, but of course, once you do get to know people, this will always ease the passage of your proposal in the future.

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If you are an unknown writer, you may be asked to file your story “on spec”, which means that the editor is not bound to pay you if he or she does not publish the piece. Always follow up your letter a week or so later with emails or telephone calls. An editor is extremely busy and usually quite grateful for a reminder call to prompt a response.

If you have sold your story proposal – and it is always worth looking at the types of stories that are making it into print – you will next need to agree a word count, deadline and fee. Most magazines have set fees per 1000 words that are paid on publication, but it is always worth asking if that is their final offer, especially if it does not match your expectation.

Don't give up!

Of course if you have failed to sell a feature before leaving, you may find that you have an even better story when you return, and at this point it may be worth writing up the feature in full. This should be useful for your own reporting and lecturing that you may do on your return, and the piece may just capture the editor's imagination in a way that your proposal was unable to.

Photographs

For magazines in particular, photographs are just as important as the words. So often, a popular feature idea falls at the second hurdle because of poor quality pictures that the art director has to reject or pay vast sums of money to track down relevant images to supplement your piece. There seems to be a mismatch of expectation here. Art directors require top-quality pictures and journalists think fuzzy prints of a sunset are fabulous (see Chapter 34).

It is really worth having a good expedition photographer because good pictures in a jungle or desert are extremely difficult to achieve and, if you can offer them with your feature idea, this increases everybody's prospects of a happy result.

Websites

A good website regularly updated proves that your expedition is serious. This will help in gaining sponsorship (logos can be proudly displayed here), picking up interest from around the world, and letting the media know everything about your plans.

In addition to housing maps, facts and information, and a gallery of (high-resolution – 300 dpi – and low-res quick-loading) images, the site should be updated remotely by you or your team during the expedition. This gives people a reason to return to the site time and again to check how you are progressing.

Design and easy navigation of such a website are paramount, but it is not something that professionals alone can create. Always think of the casual user, who will not bother waiting around for intricate graphics or large files to load. A choice of text-only might be a good idea for people with slower modems.

CONCLUSION

If you do follow these common-sense guidelines and catch a publication's imagination and enthusiasm for your expedition, all there is left to do is file your copy on time, in a professional manner.

- Most editors like to receive hard copy and an electronic version if possible.
- Keep the writing style simple, succinct and factually correct.
- At the same time, readers need to laugh, cry, and be amazed and fascinated.

If you can do all this efficiently, you will have a good commercial publishing outlet for the future because the editor will trust you and your clippings portfolio will help demonstrate a proven accomplishment. Mission complete.

FURTHER READING

Writers' and Artists' Yearbook (annual), A & C Black, PO Box 19, St Neots, Cambridge PE19 8SF. Website: www.acblack.com

Gives listings of media contacts.

Geographical, Unit 11, 124–128 Barlby Road, London W10 6BL. Tel: + 44 20 8960 6400, fax + 44 20 8960 6004, email: magazine@geographical.co.uk, website: www.geographical.co.uk

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