

# How to write articles for your own business: a tutorial



By [Tiffany Markman](#)

12 Nov 2009

One of the big trends in small-to-medium business marketing at the moment is content creation: writing articles, blog posts and newsletter articles on a regular basis and using these to boost website traffic, public interest or even sales.

The idea is that, today, people like value in the form of free info on your area of expertise. [I guess that's why I write [these articles](#).] So here's a three-step tutorial, ideal for non-writers on how to write articles for your own business.

## Step 1: Get the research process right

The process of creating a feature article, a web précis or anything else begins with research - and how different people handle this process varies according to their personalities, experience, interests, technological skills - and yes, the time available. But here's a pretty research good structure to use as a base (ie when you don't know where to start):

### 1. *Create a skeleton*

Using your brief (if you have one) or your brain (in the absence of a brief), write up a skeleton structure of the piece. Start with intro, then body, then conclusion. In between, populate this with ideas on what you can talk about under each section. Slot in info you may already have at your disposal. Then, look for the information gaps. This will tell you what you may need to do research-wise.

### 2. *Get yourself online*

MY way is to start by Googling every single thing there is to know about the topic or person, and re-phrasing relevant bits and pieces as part of my skeleton. Obviously, I have no intention of using all of it, but this check-it-all approach ensures that I don't miss anything good - or leave out something critical. However, there will still be gaps...

### 3. *So make some calls*

The best way to fill a piece with good-quality, relevant, accurate, colourful stuff is to phone relevant role-players. Get quotes from them, and get off-the-record background info that you can paraphrase. By the time you've done steps 1 and 2 above, you should know enough about the topic or person not to make a tit of yourself during the phone interview...

**Tip:** When interviewing, always ask: 'Can I quote you on that?'

#### 4. ***Refine what you have***

Now is the time to start neatening things up. To create links and transitions between points. To make connections. And to chop out the extra waffle or the unnecessary detail.

Once this is done, you'll either have a big skeleton that merely needs to be written up into a coherent piece, or you'll have a few more gaps. Use Google, the telephone or your colleagues, associates and contacts to help you fill these. Or, be creative.

### **Step 2: Start each piece with a BANG!**

If you fail to hook your readers with your first few sentences, it won't matter how brilliant the rest of your piece is - because nobody's going to be paying much attention. Conversely, if you engage your audience at the very beginning, you'll increase their receptivity to everything you're trying to say.

Here are five quick and easy formulae to help you hit the ground running:

#### 1. ***Make it personal***

There is no faster way to tune readers into your message than to package that message in the form of a story. Personal accounts - whether they focus on adversity, nostalgia, or triumph - can establish an instant rapport with your audience.

#### 2. ***Use a quirky fact***

The revelation of an offbeat statistic or the unveiling of a common myth can ease the introduction to a difficult topic or even woo skeptics: "According to a recent survey, the average South African currently spends 15 minutes preparing dinner."

#### 3. ***Put them on the edge of their seats***

If you manage to stimulate your readers' curiosity in the beginning, using a rhetorical question, chances are they'll stick around for the answer to the question you raised.

#### 4. ***Create a scenario***

"Imagine a world in which a building senses earthquake vibrations and adjusts the resistance of its walls to withstand the tremors. Self-navigating cars travel the nation's highways, slowing down, changing lanes, and 'choosing' the fastest route. These might sound like ideas of a Star Trek script, but they will become realities sooner than people think."

#### 5. ***Use a relevant quote***

Although quotations generally do not make for as compelling openings as statements offered in the author's own voice, they can (particularly if they manage to invoke irony or humour) effectively set the stage for what is to follow.

Tip: Regardless of which approach you choose, the bottom line remains the same: *don't cast your line without first baiting your hook.*

### **Step 3: Write an attention-grabbing headline**

Nothing distinguishes a good, readable article from an amateur one like headline quality.

Because headlines are prominent, the reader's eye goes to them first. In the first few seconds, the reader's first impression of the piece is formed, so taking the time to write good headlines can't be overstated. Well-written headlines distill the essence of a story. They are positive and specific; they contain strong, active verbs and short, simple words.

To put it plainly, an arresting headline:

- **Gets attention.** The first function of a good headline is to get the reader's attention. That's why it's printed in larger type. That's why its few words must be carefully chosen.
- **Tells the story.** A good headline tells readers what an article is about. It induces them to read on. Even if they don't, however, they can catch the essence. Readers should be able to pick up the main news by scanning only the headline.
- **Classifies the story.** The size and style of a headline give readers some idea of the importance of the story. They show the relation of this story to others. The bigger the head and the more prominence it is given on a page, the more important the story.

Here are eight simple ways to write more powerful headlines for your articles:

#### 1. Use active voice.

The active voice saves words. 'Man Bites Dog' is livelier than 'Dog is Bitten by Man'. The subject and verb act as one. Also, the passive voice costs extra words and often makes a headline too long to fit the space available.

#### 2. Use present tense.

To convey a feeling of immediacy, write headlines in the present tense, even if the story reports something that happened in the past. Write 'We Win Award' rather than 'We Won Award'. Use the infinitive to announce a future event: 'Team to Develop New Product'.

#### 3. Use short words.

Use short synonyms for long words. 'Panel' or 'group' will more likely fit into a headline than 'committee'. Adjectives are seldom needed in headlines, and there's seldom room for them.

#### 4. Be specific.

Use precise words. 'Editor Named Employee-of-the-Month' communicates a more concrete idea than 'Woman Named Employee-of-the-Month'. If readers know the editor, write 'Janice Wright Named Employee-of-the-Month'. (Headlines that name a person work especially well with a photo.) Being specific does not include putting insignificant or outdated matter in a headline. The specific date, for instance, does not matter much after an event.

#### 5. Omit articles.

Generally, the articles 'a', 'an' and 'the' are omitted to improve action and to save space.

## 6. Avoid punctuation.

In almost all instances, exclamation marks don't have the effect you imagine - they squeak like adolescent cheerleaders instead of commanding attention like good broadcasters. Replace them with strong, accurate verbs. Also use commas sparingly, (although the comma is often used in place of 'and' in headlines: 'CEO, MD Praised by Media').

## 7. Use important numbers only.

Except for 'one', numbers should be written as numerals: '23 Leave Head Office for Indaba'.

## 8. Avoid puns and rhymes.

Too often people go for 'cute and clever' when trying to write headlines. Above all else, your headline needs to *work* and so cute and clever can easily be misconstrued. People don't get the pun or don't understand how it relates, and won't stick around to figure it out.

Tip: A list of short headline words is available in *Headlines and Deadlines* by Garst & Bernstein. It provides synonyms for long words and is a good tool for making headlines fit.

## The bottom line

Now you have the basics. All that's left is to find relevant, interesting and compelling topics to develop in line with the above steps. Remember: your readers want good-quality, well-written, well-considered information and if you can give it to them, for free, in nice palatable chunks, you'll have done your business, your brand and your credibility a great service.

[If, however, you don't have the time, don't have the inclination or couldn't be bothered to write your own pieces, email me on . This is, after all, my day job...]

## ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

Tiffany Markman ([www.tiffanymarkman.co.za](http://www.tiffanymarkman.co.za)) is a highly opinionated freelance copywriter, copy editor and corporate trainer/writing coach who has worked for over 180 clients in South Africa and across the world. She hates misplaced apostrophes. For Tiffany, the words are the sales engine - which is why she spends all of her waking hours writing, or teaching others to write. Tiffany is also an EMPOWERDEX-certified EME (Level 4). Email her anytime on [tiffany@tiffanymarkman.co.za](mailto:tiffany@tiffanymarkman.co.za).

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