

# Anatomy of an Article

## *Seven Steps to Overcoming “Writer’s Fright” and Finally Seeing Your Name in Print!*

by Ken Lizotte, CMC

When it comes to writing articles, many otherwise top-seed consultants stop dead in their tracks, citing lack of knowledge about how to start, how to keep going, how to navigate twists and turns, and by no means least—how to finish.

Putting an article together for a trade magazine or a professional journal seems so overwhelming to many professionals that they become paralyzed by the mere thought of the overall process. Yet there are many techniques that professional writers employ (and many nonprofessional ones as well) which can make the entire process flow easier. As ghostwriter to many management consultants, I’ve written and published hundreds of articles over the years utilizing these techniques. Many survivors of writer’s fright, in fact, attest to the idea that simply understanding how the writing process can be broken down into pieces has helped them overcome this affliction. In this article, then, I’d like to share seven of the most important techniques I’ve adopted over the years and suggest that, if you practice them, they could carry you a long way toward alleviating writer’s fright.

### **Step One: Contemplate Your Message**

Some people like to begin a writing project by sketching out a detailed outline, listing all the main points, sub-points, and other relevant ideas that support their thesis. Outlining their article idea so thoroughly offers them confidence that they indeed have something worth writing about.

On the other hand, other writers (myself, for example) prefer much sketchier methods, like doodling key ideas on scratch paper, then drawing circles around the most relevant ones and thinking them through. After about 15-20 minutes of thinking about how my message will fit together, I’m ready to start writing.

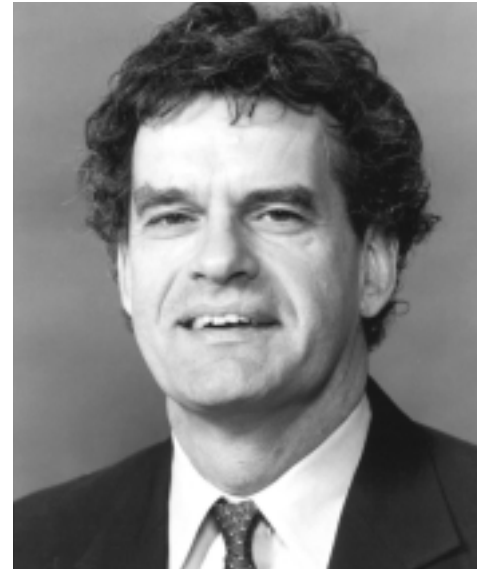
### **Step Two: Record ALL Your Ideas and Information**

Writer’s fright invariably paralyzes our efforts when we’re trying to make our writing perfect or eloquent immediately. We need first to understand that good writing almost always requires substantial re-writing. When we forget this, we keep deleting or crossing out initial sentences or paragraphs because they don’t conform to an ideal in our minds. Then we start all over again, from scratch. This frustrates us, causing us to abandon writing projects in progress and often preventing us from starting new ones in the future.

Many professional writers avoid this by writing down or typing out everything they can think of, every related idea, fact, anecdote, example. Though they still follow their outline (from Step One), they avoid trying to craft perfect poetic prose, reminding themselves they will soon be going back over each and every word and syllable in subsequent drafts until they are certain they have gotten their article just the way they want it.

### **Step 3: Shape Your Opening**

After setting down every related idea you can imagine, go to the beginning of this initial draft and shape up your opening. There are two principle ways you can accomplish this: a) with an anecdote; or b) by a straightforward discussion of your article’s message. In the case of the article you are reading now, I chose the discussion route, telling you how the very idea of writing frightens and paralyzes many people. Of course, I could have started this article differently,



**In contrast to the better-known writer’s “block,” in which writers struggle with how to put down their first words, writer’s “fright” paralyzes even earlier, preventing even the most basic of steps.**

perhaps making up a fictional story about a frustrated would-be writer/consultant. In this way, I could illustrate the problem I want this article to help you solve, then move on to define it.

If you study articles in most magazines and journals, you’ll see this in practice. Some articles begin with an anecdote and others by simply launching into a discussion of the problem to be addressed. You may then also include a statement about your qualifications for writing the article at all, as I did in this article’s second paragraph. This helps establish immediate credibility with your readers, i.e., why they should pay attention to your ideas.

Whichever way you begin, keep in mind that your opening anecdote or discussion should generally run no more than three or four paragraphs. Although length is never carved in stone, for an article under, say, eight double-spaced pages, your readers will want to move on to the next step quickly.



## Step 4: Define Your Message

What do you want your readers to learn? Above all, you want your readers to be clear about why they should want to continue to read your article at all. How will your article help them resolve the issues or problem addressed in your article? For that reason, following illustration of the problem you want to help your reader solve, it is imperative to define your principle message.

After my opening in this article, for example, I explained that I wanted to share with you some techniques many professional writers have learned to employ. Pay attention to these techniques, I added, and you'll likely go a long way toward alleviating writer's fright. That, in one simple sentence, is my principle message. It's what I hope to show you and teach you.

Next comes a need to more completely understand the implications of living with the problems associated with failing to heed the principle message.

## Step Five: Illustrate Issues and Problems

At this point in your article, expand and deepen your explanation of issues and problems by elaborating key points in ways that will ultimately support your principle message. This segment becomes the body of the overall piece, its guts, primary content, central text. Here you'll educate your readers by detailing and emphasizing why these issues are intrinsically problematic. You might even offer solutions here too, though these can be held until a later segment as well.

One structure you might wish to use in your central text is a format that combines your examination of issues and problems with recommendations and proposed solutions. I'm in fact doing that now by listing steps which allow me to discuss both problem and solution together.

One word of caution, however: whatever format you choose, allow your instinctive story-telling or presentation style to present itself naturally. If you overstructure your central text, you may end up frustrating the flow and passion of your unique writing style. Maintain confidence that your later shaping, editing, revising will smooth out whatever you write and give your initial instinctive structurings free rein.

## Step Six: Dispense Advice

This one's the "What to Do About It" section. If you haven't already, you'll offer your readers at this point your best recommendation(s) for a course of action. You may either list them one by one or simply explain. Note, however, that this section will typically

be much shorter than your central text, perhaps only a third as long because by this point your readers will be ready for your final summary.

## Step Seven: Sum It All Up

In this section you once again define your principle message and project its effect on your readers in the future. You want to leave your readers, after all, with some kind of motivating perspective to help them put all or many of your recommendations into action. Be careful, of course, to limit your summary section to three or four paragraphs at most, about the same length as the opening. Your readers are ready to leave you at this point and only want to hear from you a few insightful parting words.

Of course, you may also want to include in this section a caveat of some kind to help your readers maintain perspective. As there will be exceptions to every rule, your article's end would be a good place to note any that apply in your case. For example, in this article, though I've outlined carefully how a successful article might be formatted, a caveat might be to embrace only those ideas presented here that make sense to you. As a veteran journalist once told me, back when I was just starting out as a professional writer, "There's no 'right' way to do an article. You get started, see what comes out, then revise, revise, revise."

So don't cut off your natural self-expression by enslaving yourself to anyone's "expert" formula. As with your central text, integrate all ideas I've outlined in this article with your own preferred way of doing things. It can't be said too often: In matters of writing, above all, trust your instincts.

In summary (here's my official "Step Seven"), view your writing as a work-in-progress and you'll worry a lot less about the end-result. You'll also release yourself so you can finally get your article started. After my initial draft for this article (Step Two), for example, I re-worked it from beginning to end about ten times. Whenever deadline permits, in fact, I don't stop revising until I literally can't find anything more I can imagine changing. Then I send it on to my editor, thinking, "OK, now I'll find out what's 'wrong' with it." By that, I don't mean an editor's criticism or suggestions indicates anything intrinsically "wrong" with my work or my ability. Rather I simply like to prepare myself for the inevitable feedback, adopting the attitude that it's the job of an editor (or friend, colleague, whomever) to give me reactions, no matter how perfect a job I thought I'd done in the first place.

Writing by definition is a process that automatically provokes opinions from others, both positive and negative, THRIVING on continuous improvement. When you remember this, it's likely you will more

readily commit to it, begin it, struggle with it, see it through to publication. It's a bit like the joke about the struggling musician who arrives in New York City and immediately wants to see its world-renowned concert hall. "Excuse me," he asks a taxicab driver, "Could you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?" The driver, eyeing the musician's guitar case, instantly replies, "No problem, kid: Practice, practice, practice." As regards writing, music, management consulting or virtually anything else of value in life, just getting yourself going, then working at it until you've practiced to a level of acceptability, always proves the best mentor. Your byline—maybe even Carnegie Hall itself!—will be sure to follow.

## The Seven Steps

**Step One: Contemplate Your Message**—outline beforehand what you want your article to say.

**Step Two: Record ALL Your Ideas and Information**—put down every piece of information you can think of.

**Step Three: Shape Your Opening**—begin your article in a way that grabs your readers' attention.

**Step Four: Define Your Message**—clearly state what your article will teach the reader.

**Step Five: Illustrate Issues and Problems**—educate your readers why your message is important.

**Step Six: Dispense Advice**—offer solutions and a course of action.

**Step Seven: Sum It All Up**—reiterate your message so your readers can put your recommendations into action.

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