

Rick Wilber

# Magazine Feature Writing



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MAGAZINE  
FEATURE  
WRITING



Rick Wilber

*University of South Florida*

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This book is dedicated to my family. My wife Robin's support, advice, and encouragement were crucial during the long months of interviewing, writing, and polishing. My fine son, Richard Jr., offered innumerable happy smiles and pats on the back, and my bright, beautiful, and delightful daughter, Samantha, already a voracious magazine reader at age three, always seemed ready with a hug when the work went slowly.

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#### *Acknowledgments*

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## PREFACE

*Magazine Feature Writing* introduces beginning writers to the craft and art of writing for magazines. It is filled with examples from published writers, some of them beginners when these stories first appeared in print, some of them award-winning writers whose work is nationally known and respected. In addition to presenting this broad spectrum of work, this book also includes interviews in which most of these writers speak about how they wrote their articles. These interviews serve to reinforce concepts and give students a sense of magazine writing and editing as a career.

The book helps beginning writers move from the basics through increasingly advanced forms of magazine writing, and even includes material on some of the techniques used by successful poets and short-story writers that are valuable for the ambitious nonfiction writer. Increased interest from magazine and newspaper editors in the narrative form of storytelling makes this material particularly useful.

To provide the comprehensive instruction needed to prepare staff writers and freelancers for both today's magazines and those of the future, the book follows a certain logic in its organization; however, you may choose to change the order of the chapters to suit your own needs or to use chapters as a source for particular material.

I have chosen to begin with chapters on interviewing and research since they cover the background preparation needed before the actual writing begins. These tools are immensely important, and how well writers use them to acquire information can help determine the quality of the final story.

Chapters three and four deal with basic writing necessities, including one standard story format, reminders about the importance of grammar and spelling, and guidance on getting your reader involved in the story right from the start by using a powerful hook.

As a college journalism professor, I hope that students at the college level won't need much of a reminder about the importance of clean copy and a professional appearance. But this book is aimed at nonacademic beginning writers, too, and most of those beginners may well benefit from a chapter that highlights certain essentials, such as spelling, agreement, and punctuation.

Chapter five gives solid structural guidance on building a story. It discusses anecdotes, transitions, background, and quotes, along with other critical elements, and tells how to weave them together into a marketable story.

Chapter six takes the reader to the next level of writing, discussing the techniques an ambitious writer can use to strive for real style and write stories that go beyond the basics.

Chapter seven closes out the book's broad discussion of research and writing skills by addressing not only how writers can revise their own work but also how they can work effectively with an editor during the revision process.

Chapter eight explains the process of marketing a story, focusing on query and cover letters and their crucial function for freelance writers.

Chapter nine is the first that focuses on a particular kind of story—the travel piece. Travel writing holds special appeal for many beginners (and veterans as well!), and the chapter describes the three kinds of travel writing most typically available to writers. In addition, it should be noted that the skills practiced by the successful travel writer—such as the use of vivid description, accuracy of detail, characterization, and revealing anecdotes—are applicable to most magazine stories. Writing a few travel stories is good practice for any beginner, whether interested in the field as a career or not.

Similarly, chapter ten's discussion of personality profiles has a use for beginners far beyond its immediate focus on writing entertaining, informative profiles. This chapter helps beginning writers to discover those people worth writing about and then to find the best ways to write about them. Skills that help a writer uncover what makes someone—or something—special are useful to magazine writers for most of the stories they will write. So, like travel stories, in-depth personality profiles provide good practice for any beginner.

Chapter eleven, about essay writing, discusses a form that offers an elevated, challenging task for the nonfiction writer, requiring special concentration and attention to detail. Understanding how the mind of the

essayist works is crucial to learning how the essay is written. Again, the skills learned in essay writing can be carried over to general feature writing.

Chapter twelve is a preliminary career guide for students interested in magazine writing, and discusses both staff and freelance opportunities. It includes some thoughtful advice from several top editors and writers.

Chapter thirteen is an introduction to the future of the magazine business, a future that is likely to bring profound change to the current production and distribution systems of most magazines. A beginning writer needs to be both aware of those upcoming changes and ready to take full advantage of them.

Chapter fourteen is a necessary basic primer on copyright, libel, and ethics for the beginning magazine writer.

Finally, the afterword contains various thoughts on magazine writing, including discussions about other specific kinds of articles that can be written and about the merits of reading and writing fiction and poetry as well as nonfiction. The writer who takes on the challenge of producing fiction and poetry, the afterword points out, will gain much from the experience. A reprinted short story and a few reprinted poems are included at the end of the afterword, and are referred to in several of the exercise and discussion sections in earlier chapters.

At the end of each chapter, there are exercises to help beginners put into practice the techniques and information garnered from the text. There are also discussion points, which should prompt beginning writers to deal with some of the field's pressing issues, as well as to discuss their own work and their careers.

I offer my deepest thanks and gratitude to all the writers and editors who were so willing to share their work with beginning writers by taking part in *Magazine Feature Writing*. Each one of them found the time to wade through lengthy telephone interviews with me and then to read and revise chapters in which their work was mentioned. Many of them offered me advice and encouragement as the manuscript progressed, and I deeply appreciate their comments.

I wish to thank Donna Dickerson, Director of the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida, for her complete support of the time and effort involved in my work on this text. Professor Randy Miller of the School of Mass Communications at USF was always willing to read through any number of drafts, chapter after chapter, and deserves special thanks (and some pity). Faculty member Tilden Counts and editor/writer Richard Gilliam were also extremely helpful, offering thoughtful comments and useful advice. An editor who offered especially insightful guidance was the late Murray Cox of *Omni* magazine.

At St. Martin's Press, I thank editors Suzanne Phelps Weir, Nancy

Lyman, Jane Lambert, and, most especially, Cathy Pusateri; Cathy started the whole process during a meeting in my office in which she convinced me that with my background in fiction and nonfiction I ought to write this book.

A special word of thanks is due to associate editor Elizabeth Toomey, who worked closely with me to develop the manuscript, offering wise suggestions and helping to shape its final form. Project editor Diana Puglisi made valuable contributions during the final stages of production as well. Elizabeth's and Diana's sharp eyes, calm demeanors, and judicious advice in the face of impending deadlines helped me immeasurably. The conscientious efforts of the copyeditor, Paula Williams, are also appreciated.

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Finally, a full teaching load and the normal faculty duties of committee service, advising, and creative activity meant that the bulk of this text was written over a wealth of weekends and semester breaks. A very special thanks, therefore, to a most understanding and supportive family.

Rick Wilber

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## INTRODUCTION

There are more than 11,000 magazines published in the United States, with a total circulation of some 350 million. Those numbers are a bit inexact, not only because circulations rise and fall but also because dozens of new magazines start up every year and a dismayingly large number of magazines fail, too. But despite the losses, the magazine industry is a healthy one, with a generally steady rise in the number of magazines since 1952—a handy year to use as a starting point for a brief history of the contemporary magazine.

In 1952, the Federal Communications Commission ended a four-year freeze on new station allocations for the then new medium of television, and TV started its rapid rise to mass media dominance. As a result of television's success, other media, including magazines, were forced to change. The general interest magazine, for instance, had been an American staple for a century or more, but didn't last long as a competitor for advertising dollars against television's broad-based appeal. And the fiction that many magazines offered prior to 1952 made less and less sense to most magazine editors as television began to offer a wide range of visual fiction—situation comedies, dramas, westerns, science fiction, and many more.<sup>1</sup>

So magazines changed and, for reasons primarily economic, became increasingly specialized, appealing to narrower and narrower audiences.

<sup>1</sup>The other major media went through similar changes. Radio dropped its drama content and went to the playing of music. Newspapers became more visually appealing. Movies tried everything from 3-D productions to wide-screen extravaganzas. All of these media survived, but they had to accommodate to the reality of television to do so.

The logic was simple. While magazines couldn't offer the huge numbers that television could to advertisers, magazines *could* offer something even better: a select readership that meant very little waste of the advertising dollar. Here's why. An advertiser interested in selling widgets knew that most of television's viewers were never going to be interested in widgets, and so the ad was wasted on most of the people viewing it. A full-page ad in *Widget International* magazine, however, might reach far fewer people, but every one of those readers was a potential customer.

Specialization worked.

Specialization didn't necessarily mean small circulation, or small profits, by the way. In a country as huge as the United States, even a relatively narrow market can hold millions of readers. *Modern Maturity* magazine's circulation, for instance, is more than 22 million—and yet the readership is specialized in the sense that it is composed primarily of people older than 55 years of age.

Over the years, that trend toward specialized magazines has continued. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, readers interested in sports had a number of magazines that catered to them. Later, even more narrowly specialized magazines were added to the field, appealing specifically to fans of a particular sport. Today, many of those sports magazines are still around and there are new ones, too—magazines that have narrowed the target yet again by appealing to fans of particular teams. In fact, some of the established magazines now produce various versions of their current issue for different regions, appealing to particular regional interests.

And the future seems to promise more of the same trend. The new technologies offer the possibility of magazines aimed directly at the interests of a specific fan, for example, individualized publications appealing directly to the sports interests of a particular reader. You may well be able to tell your home computer what kind of sports stories you'd like to read and in a few minutes' time have those stories available to you.

Obviously, these new technologies—on-line magazines, home access to databases, interactive CD-ROMs, and more—apply to much more than just the area of sports. They cover the whole spectrum of magazine writing. So the homemaker, the working woman, the amateur athlete, the priest, the CEO of a large corporation, the student, the teacher—everyone—will have access to a huge range of magazines. Some of these will be new publications, aimed directly at readers in the new Information Age. Others will be new versions of current magazines, many of which are on-line now or have plans to get on-line soon.

It's an exciting future, but what do the coming changes mean for the writer of magazine features? Happily, for writers they mean a steady increase in the number of magazines and, perhaps, a great increase in the



number of stories (and in the depth of each story) that a magazine can offer.

Unhappily, by the way, the pay scale for freelancers hasn't improved much over the years, and the future doesn't seem to hold much change in that regard. The magazines that commonly paid a few hundred dollars for a story still seem to pay the same, even though those dollars aren't worth what they were in, say, the mid-1970s. Regrettably, the magazines that pay thousands of dollars for a story remain relatively rare.

Still, for the beginner, the thought that the markets are out there is enough to keep up the hopes of making a sale. Though the competition is tough—there are many, many thousands of writers or would-be writers—the opportunities exist if you have talent, are willing to learn, and continue to work hard to improve.

And the changes in technology, at least for the near future, do not change the basic skills you need as a magazine writer: interviewing and research skills, writing skills, a willingness to revise, and some ability to market your work.

*Magazine Feature Writing* is meant to give you a good start on a magazine article writing career, part-time or full-time. It offers advice by a variety of professional writers and editors, from major award winners to raw beginners who have made that all-important first sale.

There is logic to the order of the chapters, beginning with reporting skills, moving on to writing skills, adding in some marketing skills, turning then to some particular types of stories, and ending with career advice and the legal and ethical information that every magazine writer should know.

The idea is to prepare you for a start in the field, and in that sense this text is meant to be useful for any beginning writer, from a typical traditional undergraduate college student to a determined retiree eager to begin telling a lifetime of accumulated stories.

But this is only the beginning, of course. By the time you are done with this text, you will have done some research and interviewing, written a few stories, prepared a few queries, worked on your revision skills, and shared a few months of useful discourse with your classmates or others in your writing group. With a little luck you may have sold a story or had a positive response to a query. If not, you will at least have begun trying, and learning, and improving.

And that is the key, ultimately, to writing successful magazine features. Get started, and keep trying.

## **|N-DEPTH INTERVIEWING FOR MAGAZINES**

DO YOUR HOMEWORK FIRST  
REMEMBER WHO'S IN CHARGE  
GET THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS  
FOLLOW UP

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's technique for in-depth interviewing is to ask the subject to help her find the truth.

John Calderazzo talks to people on their own turf, raising their comfort level and getting better quotes as a result.

Karima A. Haynes spends long hours preparing before the interview ever takes place. When there isn't a lot of time available for interviewing, she will be able to ask the right questions.

And Michael Bane establishes a relationship with the subject. Bane would like it to be friendship, but hatred will do just as well.

There is nothing more important to the beginning magazine writer than learning how to run an effective in-depth interview. The process, after all, is at the very core of information gathering for the writer. A great interview leaves the writer with a wealth of material that can be built into an entertaining and informative story. A poor interview leaves the writer gasping for something to say.