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Column Writing

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Before we start

- Anybody can be trained to write straight news because it's very mechanical. Feature articles, though also somewhat formulaic, are harder because they require good writing.

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But column writing is the hardest type of writing of all because it requires good thinking.





Columns are the writer's opinion

- Unlike editorials, a column has the writer's byline. The writer's opinion, along with supportive facts, are the story.

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- To write a good column requires more than just the ability to articulate an opinion. Your opinions must make sense, provide insight and be convincing. And you must do all this in an entertaining way.

It requires you to be almost like a lawyer. Through your arguments, you will need to convince the jury (your readers) that your client (your viewpoint) is right. Shaping a powerful argument takes practice and requires both breadth and depth of knowledge as well as the ability to critically analyze a particular issue.





Column types

- Political commentary
- Local/metro columnist
- Business/finance/economics/ Sports
- Lifestyle/culture Humour/satire
- International affairs/politics
- Personal or Interpretive

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Personal or interpretive columns

- One of the most important types of columns observes and interprets life at school. This kind of column get meaning from everyday events on campus to tragedies the students experience.
- A column could be written about the stress of taking the ACT, how much students will miss a retiring teacher or the pain of breaking up with a boyfriend.





Humorous columns

- Sometimes the best way to make people aware of an issue is through humor. A columnist can turn a problem into a humorous story, poking fun at the circumstances.
- Using humor isn't easy. What you think is funny may not be funny to readers.
- A humorous column could be written on the difficulties of finding a parking space on campus.

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If you use humor...

- Think about whether it is appropriate to use humor for this subject.
- Tell some of the humorous items you plan to use to other journalism students and get their reaction.
- Be willing to take a hint and revise your humor, or try something else.

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Life style columns

- Professional newspapers have people who write nothing but columns about popular culture. These topics range from music to fashion, fads to TV shows.
- A lifestyle column informs readers about popular trends.
- A lifestyle column could be on lava lamps, the popularity of boy bands or finding an after school job.

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What makes a column interesting?

- A column should be written to attract many different readers. A good column “speaks” to readers in a way that they appreciate.
- The column is written casually and conversationally, as though the writer and the reader were talking over a soda.

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What NOT to do in a column

- Don't use big words and long sentences. Readers want to be able to easily understand a column.
- Don't make the column go on and on. Readers will stop reading.
- Don't patronize readers or talk down to them.





Things to remember

- **Write with conviction:** Put forward your opinion as something you truly believe in. Argue your case with conviction. Come down hard on one side of an issue. Be unequivocal. Never ever sit on the fence.
- **2. Maintain your focus:** Make your column about one thing and one thing alone. Don't muddle the message. Maintain your focus. That's the only way to make a strong impression on your readers and to convince them that your point of view is correct.
- **3. Understand opposing viewpoints:** Be mindful of the opposing argument. Anticipate objections to your point of view and deal with them convincingly with sound reasoning. If you're not familiar with the opposing view, you will not be able to argue your points well.





Things to remember

- **. Refer to facts:** Your arguments, however logical, will not carry much weight unless they are accompanied by facts that support your position. Don't overdo this and inundate your readers with statistics and figures. But do make use of facts from reputable sources.
- **5. Use analogies:** Analogies are useful for illustrating a point, especially when the topic you are writing about is somewhat complicated or technical. Using a simple analogy from everyday life makes the issue more understandable and relevant to the reader.





Things to remember

- **6. Be critical:** People like reading columnists who dare to criticize real life people – not just nameless concepts and policies. Naming names might create a bit of controversy but as long as you do not libel anyone and don't go overboard in your criticism, it works well to make your column an interesting and exciting read.
- **7. Do reporting.** It's possible to write columns without doing any reporting but the best columns typically involve some form of reporting. When you report, you get on the ground and you gain a better sense of what's really happening. When you write from an ivory tower, it shows.





Things to remember

- **8. Localize and personalize:** Localize your story whenever possible. Also tie it to some personal experience – yours or that of someone you know. This makes an otherwise esoteric and distant topic more real, relevant and memorable to the reader.
- **9. Be passionate:** Generally, people don't like to hear a soft or passive voice when they read a column. So be aggressive – even arrogant, to an extent. People want to see passion. They want to feel energized. If the issue doesn't seem to excite you, the writer, it's certainly not going to excite the reader.





Things to remember

- **10. Provide a solution:** Last but not least, don't just raise an issue. Have the conviction to suggest a solution. Columns that criticize certain policies but offer no solutions are useless. People read columns because they want to gain insight and answers. If you don't provide those, you've failed as a columnist.





Remember these tips

- Relate to your readers and share their concerns and interests.
- Shed light on issues and provoke thought. If readers respond to your column, it's a good sign that it's getting read.
- After reading a good column, the reader knows something he or she didn't know before.





First, second or third person?

- In a column, any of these is acceptable. Just be sure that you stay in first, second or third person all the way through the column. Don't begin by using "I" and jump to "you" halfway through.





Capturing attention

- The first few words of a column must get the reader's attention.
- You can start the column anyway you can think of. Sometimes one or two words can be more powerful than 20.
- You can also begin with an anecdote or story. This pulls the reader into what you are saying.

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The middle of the column

- After the beginning, the middle of the column has all the supporting material for the point you are trying to make.
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- You can use statistics, quotes or just well-thought-out arguments.
- Cover all sides of the issue, just as you would do in an editorial.





Ending with style

- Conclude the column in a way to leave the reader thinking about the topic.
- You could return to the anecdote you began with. You could just use a summarizing sentence, or make your point strongly with a suggestion of what to do.

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Remember...

- A column can be about anything that would interest readers.
- A column can be written any way you want to write it.
- Lastly, a word of advice. Be ready for criticism. If you can dish it out, you've got to be able to take as good as you got. When you take a strong stance on anything, there's bound to be someone offended by what you wrote. And they will write to you – often in less than polite language - to let you know exactly what they think of you and your opinions. It goes with the territory.



Thank you



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