

Generating Ideas for Features

Being a successful, freelance writer is only partly to do with being good at writing – your success will mostly depend on thinking up lots of ideas and then selling these to the right magazines. Caroline Deacon explains.

It doesn't matter how wonderful a writer you are, if you don't have enough commissions, you won't make a living. And until you are in the enviable position of having editors ring you up and ask you to write for them (it does happen!) you need to approach editors yourself with suggestions.

Even if all your ideas are ideal for the magazine in question, the likelihood is that most of them won't be chosen, at least not the first time of trying. The reasons for rejection are many and various – 'we've just commissioned a similar idea', 'we have enough articles to see us through the next few issues'; the main thing is not to get despondent, but to make sure that you have more ideas in circulation at any one time than you can possibly hope to write. Seriously!

Say your aim is to write one article a week. In order to get this commissioned, you will probably need to approach at least two magazines, with three ideas for each. So you need to write two letters a week, with a total of six new ideas per week, to make that happen. After two months you are going to have 16 letters on editors' desks, with a staggering 48 possible articles!

Sounds daunting? If each idea is just that – an idea, expressed in an outline of 100 words or so, it doesn't take long to write, and if you are analysing the magazines correctly, commissions are bound to follow.

Researching your market

Obviously you are going to have to research your market properly before you approach them. You should always read at least three recent issues of the magazine to get a flavour of the types of articles they use, and if they have a website, take some time to study this. Every publication will have a "USP" – unique selling point; try to work out what it is. The easiest way is to write and request writers' guidelines, enclosing an SAE of course, but not all

magazines will supply these. To get an idea of the USP, look at the adverts the publication carries; these will be sold on the basis of the USP, and advertisers will only buy space in magazines which specifically target the consumers they want.

Having got a general feel for the magazine and having identified who reads it, look at the features they have run recently, and think sideways. All magazines have certain topics which are pretty much at the core of what they cover. You need to be looking to cover these too, but with a new and unique slant. The more unusual your angle, and perhaps the narrower your focus, the more likely is success. For instance, when I first tried to write for a parenting magazine, I noticed that they all covered breastfeeding. I wrote suggesting an article about how to choose a feeding bra, and this was commissioned.

Brainstorming

Look at the index; most magazines divide the contents into sections. Summarise the topics covered in each section over the last three issues. Now focus on one of these sections and brainstorm. This means sitting with a blank piece of paper and scribbling down words as they occur to you – no matter how absurd these may seem. At this stage just write them all down. Try to let your mind wander, while still focusing on your summaries. When you have at least twenty words on your piece of paper, stop brainstorming and start focusing. Pull the words together into groups – and create a spider diagram where any of these seem promising.

Spider diagrams

Take one of your promising words, and see which new ideas this word sparks off. For each new idea, draw a line off your central word, and write the new word alongside this. You can keep developing off this line, and when you run out of steam, come back to the original and see if you can generate a new branch. When you have finished, you will have something that looks like a spider, or network of roots, and hopefully, this can be worked into a useable plan for an article.

Outside sources

When you are stuck for ideas, spend an afternoon trawling the Internet, or get out and visit the library. Whole books on subjects are a great resource for short features, and obscure websites can also spark off new ideas.

For instance, I was a bit stuck one day for ideas, so I spent an afternoon browsing in my local library. In the natural history section, I noticed there were several books on snakes as well as several on spiders – both of which I find pretty repelling. Armed with a large stack of books on each subject, I skim read them and discovered all sorts of weird and wonderful facts.

From an afternoon's browsing, I sold several wildly different articles. *Scuttle and Slither* to Home & Country about phobias, focusing particularly on fear of snakes & spiders. *Creepy Crawlies* I sold to Junior magazine, about how we teach children to be scared of spiders and other insects. I also sold an article about myths and legends in the British Isles – yes you guessed it, looking at snakes and spiders in particular. I didn't need any great expertise for a 1,000 word article, and as I was only taking brief notes from larger books, I wasn't plagiarising.

Friends and family are full of interesting tales for personal experience articles, and most are pleased to have their stories told. One of my friends was adopted as a child, and I told her story to a woman's magazine. Short anecdotes and funny stories make great fillers, for which Readers' Digest will pay huge sums. Parenting magazines are always looking out for birth stories, so talk to your friends with young children – see if they would like to tell their story!

New for old

You can rework old ideas, coming up with a new angle. There are two ways of doing this, depending on whether the magazine has a *floating* or *loyal* readership.

Some magazines have an extremely short readership history – bridal magazines and pregnancy magazines for example, would only

Caroline Deacon is a tutor for the Writers Bureau, having started her freelance career as one of their students. Combining her freelance writing career with raising a young family she writes regularly for mother and baby magazines, as well as contributing to a variety of publications such as The Guardian, women's magazines as well as sports and travel titles. She is currently writing a non-fiction book for Hodder & Stoughton.

hope to sell one or possibly two issues to the same reader. These magazines will offer the same core subjects each time – can you find a new angle on them? Naming your baby or honeymoon locations for instance, come up each time – what unique angle could you run on this?

Other magazines have long-standing, loyal readerships. This is where the doctor's waiting room comes in handy as a source of out-of-date magazines! Have a look at old editions, see what they have not covered for over a year, and think of a new way of doing it. You will still need to see a recent edition, so you can be up to date in your approach. You can even remind the editor in your spec letter that the topic has not been covered since November 1999 – he will be terribly impressed that you have been following his magazine for so long!

Incidentally, you don't need to spend a fortune on magazines; use your friends! They can:

- lend you copies of magazines they subscribe to – especially hobby or special interest publications
- bring back in-flight magazines from their holidays
- send you copies of their local or county magazines
- pass on freebies they get from shops, or through the door.

Remember – always have more spec letters out than you can handle – activity leads to success!