Writing a Garden Column- Hints for Success

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ABSTRACT

In this project the author explored some ways in which one can create a piece of public writing. The author explored questions about the following: How does one write articles in general? What is necessary to include in writing about a specific topic of one's interest? How are articles published? The author researched these questions and those that were evoked in the process. Using the findings from this research, several examples of garden columns were created.
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INTRODUCTION

Written media is a time honored way to convey information. Because time itself is a valued and limited resource, relatively short articles or columns are a good way to reach a large audience. A writing by one author on a regular basis is a column (28). Successful columns should be both informative and unique, easily understandable and visually appealing. To reach the widest and most receptive audience the types of publication the articles should be printed in include newspapers and magazines.

There are many possible topics on which a person could write columns (30). One such topic is something people have been interested in longer even than the practice of writing, that is, gardens. The attraction of humans to gardens as more than a food source transcends nation and era, it echos back into history, and is evidenced in the gardens of emperors and kings.

Continuing this tradition of garden interest, many people seek to further their knowledge of plants by reading. That said, the purpose of this project is to investigate how to write a successful garden column. This investigation includes how articles are written in general and how garden columns are written in particular. When the writing aspect of creating a column has been covered the focus is turned to the publishing aspect. When and how the perspective columnist needs to present his or her concept or articles to a publisher, as well as what steps and manners of style are important to get to that point are additionally inspected.
LITERATURE REVIEW

**Articles in general**

The challenge of writing is to get people to read what is written (24). The way this is accomplished often depends on the topic. News type stories are often structured so as to give the reader information as quickly and succinctly as possible, while entertainment type articles are often written in a more story-like format (7).

To catch the attention of a reader, the first thing that he or she sees has to be an attention getting title (9). After the reader's attention has been attracted by the title he or she will decide whether or not to continue reading the article (24). This is where the hook or lead comes into play. This is a sentence that should attract the reader to continue reading (7). Additionally, the first paragraph often contains a sort of preview or summary of what the article will cover (9). Most importantly, the writer must hold the attention of a reader by writing well (24). Finally, in order to be taken seriously (20), a writer should consult the Associated Press Stylebook (10).

**Columns**

A type of literature where addictive writing is especially evident is in a column (17). These are articles that are published regularly, often on a weekly or monthly basis (28). A columnist's personality is expected to shine through the column in a charismatic and intriguing way (17).

A column has to be interesting enough to attract returning readers (24). A large part of that attraction is the writer's style or voice (17), but that does not come into play until a reader notices the article in the first place. For this reason an article needs to be visually attractive. Sometimes this only means having an attention grabbing title, but when possible pictures can also be used.
People can be powerfully affected by images (4,8) Ideally, a photograph should serve as more than a mere attention getting device, it should also provide useful information (18). The purpose for an article is to provide information, or to entertain(2). One of the challenges that must be overcome to accomplish this is to present the information in a way that is educated yet understandable(1).

**Readability**

Reading level, or readability, is a hotly contested topic when it comes to public writing. A search revealed that opinions vary, and it is difficult to say what reading level columns generally are. According to the New York times in education, readability “varies” between articles. The attempt to use a formula to increase readability does not necessarily help a writer communicate with his or her audience any better (27). That said, a writer should communicate in a way that the target audience will find stimulating, but not taxing, easily understandable but not patronizingly dumbed down (1, 31).

**Length**

In addition to reading complexity another important factor writers need to consider is length. As with the readability there does not seem to be any solid rules that apply to every article (24). Shorter columns could be only 300 words (5), while several opinion type articles in the New York Times were found to be over 800 words long (23). Readers of the target audience will focus as long as they are interested- the real challenge is to catch the reader's attention “in that short moment the reader gives you before deciding to move on to something else”(24). After the audience has been captured, the writer must use his or her voice to keep the audience's interest and the discretion to know when to stop (17).

**Garden column**

There are many types of articles ranging from the serious and formal research article to the
light hearted opinion commentary, (30) One specific genre of interest is the garden column. This type of writing unites the ancient human passion for learning (3) with another- perhaps equally ancient passion, gardening (6,21).

Garden columns follow the same basic rules as any other article. However there are some additional elements in many garden-type articles. They often include the scientific name of the plant being discussed (eg. 19). This is important because common names are by no means universal and having the scientific name to reference helps lessen any confusion about identification (16). Identification is also aided by pictures which are especially important in this genera (25).

Other information content in garden articles is not standardized, but often they include such things as how plants look together, soil, sun, pests, care (pruning, protection from disease and pests) eg: Organic gardening (12, 13, 19, 26). Occasionally one finds an article about what flowers are edible (13), but information about usability is often only found in the book form of publication. The history of plants can be found from time to time, however it is altogether too rare an occurrence.

The proposed column combines the traditional care-type information with the less common use and history information. Additionally the plants being highlighted in each column will come from three different categories. These categories are: plants that people likely already have in their yard (11), plants people could grow (11), and plants people wish they did not have (15).

**Printing- Where and Who**

Where an article is printed is as important how it is written. The first step is to decide on an appropriate publisher (14). This is important for two reasons, first of all the article needs to reach its target audience (29). In this case the target audience is plant lovers, curious minds, and anyone who enjoys an intellectual dose of fun facts.
Secondly the article has to be accepted by a publisher. There are a couple of ways for a writer to get his or her work published in a column. One way is for a writer to be hired first, and then write as the publisher chooses, another is to take a pre-formed idea to publishers and sell them on the idea (32). In this scenario the topic and need come into play. There is a need for this type of column and it is evidenced by the profusion of writing on the topic but proportional lack in monthly or weekly publications of this particular mix of information.

**Submission**

Some publications will want to see articles the perspective columnist has already published. For this reason the writer should try to build a portfolio of his or her work. To do this he or she should try to get published first in smaller publications. School newspapers for example (20). A writer has to keep in mind is that the articles he or she is proposing to write for a publisher should fit with the rest of the publication (20, 29). Articles submitted by the prospective columnist should have the same flavor or mood as the rest of the articles in the publication (20).

Finally, the publisher may have its own standards for length and readability.
Materials and Methods

Writing

When deciding to write something that will be published, one must first consider what kind of writing to spend time composing. This choice will affect many things, including: how long or often an author must write, what style to accommodate, and the audience the publication will reach.

If the desired type of publication is an article, there are several things a writer must include or consider. The first two go hand in hand. The foundational question of “what topic does the perspective author wish to write about?”, and the follow up question of “who is the audience the article is trying to reach?” Ideally one should write about something one has an interest or background in.

Once the subject matter to be pursued has been decided one must learn how articles in general are constructed. Then research the topic. After the topic has been researched, the author can implement what was learned earlier about how to construct an article.

The article should begin with an attention grabbing first sentence, and a first paragraph that contains an sort of summary or hint of what the rest of the story will be about. What follows in terms of the length of the body, depends on the chosen topic and how talented the author is at keeping the audience's attention for any span of time. This is where knowing the target audience is necessary. Once the article is written an author should title it in a way that is both interesting and clear as to what the article will be about.

In addition to writing a fascinating article and titling it well, an author must also consider whether to use a photograph or illustration to make the article more visually appealing. Any pictures used must be both informative and eye catching.
After learning in general how to create articles, one must decide how often to write. If the desire is to publish something on a regular basis, this is considered a column. To be a columnist, the author must learn in what ways writing a column may be different than an article. One very important feature that sets columns apart from articles, is that, the writer must use an engaging “voice” or style of writing.

When an author has gained an idea of how articles, and more specifically columns, are written, the next step is to investigate how the desired type of column is generally composed. How are columns (or written media in general) about the chosen topic usually written? If the column is to be about garden-type topics, for example, some elements of that kind of writing should be observed. A person writing these columns should include the Latin name of the plant under scrutiny, a common name, and aspects of care and maintenance. Additionally, a person writing about plants should not underestimate the power or usefulness of an appropriate photo.

In addition to following the lead set by other writers, a perspective columnist should attempt to bring something new and interesting to the genera. Some topics infrequently found in garden columns include history and uses of plants. These items should be combined with the care and maintenance angle for a more interesting column.

**Publishing**

The first step in the publishing process is to familiarize oneself with the printing options; local publishers as well as those with a broader circulation.

The submission itself can be a two part process because some publications will want to see articles the perspective columnist has already published. For this reason the writer should build a portfolio. To do this one should try to get printed first in smaller publications; school newspapers, for example. The second thing a writer has to keep in mind is that purposed articles
should fit with the rest of the publication. In other words, articles submitted by the prospective columnist should have the same flavor or mood as the rest of the articles in the publication.

Finally, the publisher may have its own standards for length and readability.

Summary

• Decide what kind of writing to produce.
• If the desire is to produce *articles*, decide the topic and define the corresponding target audience.
• Research how such articles in general are written.
• Research the topic one desires to write about.
• Use findings to compose article.
• Decide how often to write.
• If the desire is to write on a regular basis, research how writing a column may differ than writing other kinds of article.
• Research how columns about the chosen topic are generally written; what elements or information they generally include.
• Bring something new and interesting into the genre.
• Investigate publishing options.
• Get printed in smaller publications first.
• Compile portfolio of work.
• Submit articles written with a tone that fits with the rest of the publication of choice.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There is something special about being able to express something one is interested in to other people. People do this in many ways, but one way in particular is through writing. When a person decides to make his or her thoughts known publicly by writing, the first step is to decide what kind of writing to produce. In the instance of this project the author decided that her medium of choice would be article-type writing. She chose this kind of public writing because articles are generally widely accessible, and short enough that many people can take time to read them.

Another question that follows closely behind (or sometimes precedes) that of “what kind of writing” is “what topic to write about?” In this case the author wanted to write about garden-type topics because she had an interest as well as a background in that area.

Before beginning the actual writing process the author had to define what kind of people she would be writing to in her article, that is, who was her target audience? The reasons the target audience should be identified are many. The author wanted to have a vision of what people her article should reach, how she would have to write to interest these people, and what kinds of things would interest these people. Knowing the target audience would help the author get into the right frame of mind concerning anything written for them. The need defined, the people the author wanted to write for include plant and garden lovers as well as any person who finds fun-fact type information interesting. In other words, lovers of the green world and those with curious minds. The desire of the author was that her readers would feel like they were easily reading something interesting, and intelligent- not difficult to understand, but not patronizingly simple.
Next the author decided that because she did not have experience writing articles she needed to research how they were generally written. Several things stood out during that search because they were frequently mentioned in the literature. Such things were understood to be necessary rules, these include: attention grabbing title and first sentence, among others. One element of article construction that did not appear static was article length. No source would commit to one number; some said that articles needed to be short, while others insisted that an audience would stick with a writer for as long as they were interested. This would foundationally depended on the writer’s skill. This author decided that once again, knowing the target audience would be useful. She decided that the length of the articles would not be fixed, but would only be as long as necessary to convey their information in an interesting way.

One other element of article construction was even more contested than length. This was readability. The author found in her research that there have been several different formulas and opinions concerning how to write so that most people understood, or what was appropriate to the target audience. In the end the author sided with the opinion that an audience will read whatever they are interested in, not simply because it does not challenge them mentally.

One question that had to be asked is how often the author planned on writing. It was decided that the most preferable would be on a regular basis, rather than every so often or as needed. It was discovered that when a person composes an article on a regular basis it is considered a column. This discovery lead to the question of what else might make a column different than an article. Some of the differences include that a columnist often has more freedom in terms of general structure- especially once a loyal following is secured. The main way a columnist attracts a returning audience is also the thing that really makes columns different than most other types of articles i.e. voice. One’s voice is the tone or personality conveyed in ones writing.

In order to give the column more direction the author decided to next investigate the types of
topics they could be written. As one may expect there are nearly infinite possibilities in this area, likely as many possible topics as readers have interests. The author decided that once a topic had been decided on, a writer should investigate other writings about that topic. In the case of this project the author wanted to create a column about garden and landscape plants. Therefore she began to research literature about that topic. She did not limit her search to columns—or even articles about these plants, she also studied books, magazines, and online sources. It was found that often literature concerning garden and landscape plants included care and maintenance instruction, a common name as well as the Latin name. Another commonality was that often a photo accompanied the writing. Given that these things are so often found in plant-type writings they must be important for readers as well as writers. The writer decided that to attract as many readers as possible a new column should contain the information that had been proven to be popular—but that in order to make her column unique and interesting, and to encourage return readers, she needed to also write about new aspects of plants. Plant history and unexpected use are subjects not commonly seen in literature in comparison to care and maintenance, especially in articles or columns. The author had long had an interest in these subjects, and so it was decided that they should be included in any columns that might be written.

Once the author had decided how to write her column, the next question was how to get the column published. The author decided it would be a good idea to familiarize oneself with local publishers as well as those with a wider circulation. After talking with one source the author decided that the first step in publication would be to get printed in a smaller publication to build up a portfolio. One would use the examples in a portfolio to show a larger publication what kind of work one had done. Before going to publishers however, one must take some time to read what they publish. This is so that when writing one can cater to the style of the publication.

As elements of article composition were investigated, the author discovered that many of
those elements were entire areas research in and of themselves (e.g. readability and the importance of visual framing). Because of this, the project resulted in the education of the author, as well as the creation of sample columns. These sample columns (found in the appendices) were created using what the author learned in the literature review, and following suggestions from the materials and methods section. Sample columns such as these would comprise an upcoming author’s portfolio, and would be presented to prospective publishers. Additionally, they demonstrate one possible result of following the authors outline (materials and methods) concerning how to construct a column.
CONCLUSION

Having followed the recommended course of action, the author has created a portfolio, which can be found in the appendices. In Appendix A sources are cited within the text although they would not be printed that way, Appendix B shows what an article without in-line citation would look like.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A.

NUTSEDGE

Bane of Gardeners, Food of Pharos
Elizabeth Adee

Those of you who know of this interesting plant have likely heard its name muttered darkly in anger or despair,- like a curse in the world of gardening. There is good reason for this. Yellow Nutsedge, or *Cyperus esculentus*, is a plant made to survive. This makes it both a difficult pest and a hardy food producer.

There are several reasons this plant is so difficult to control. Nutsedge spreads using tubers, creeping rhizomes, and seeds (7, 8).

The nutlets that this plant produces often break off in the soil if the plant is pulled out (3) Each nutlet can grow into a new plant. Since each plant is capable of producing hundreds or even thousands of these tubers in a season (6), hand weeding can be a challenge. These tenacious individuals can also re-sprout(7). Some ways to control a yellow nutsedge invasion include reducing the mowing height, making sure the soil is well aerated and not over watered, or using pre (or post) emergent herbicide. Interestingly, one (less aggressive) variety of nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus*, var. *sativus*) called “Chufa” is purposely cultivated as a food crop in “southwestern Europe, Africa, and parts of Asia.(4)

It is thought that they may have been one of the oldest foods cultivated in ancient Egypt.

(5) Nutlets can be eaten raw or cooked in various ways(1)- unlike many wild foods they taste
pleasant, having an almondy- cocoanut kind of flavor. To sample this ancient staple, look for unsprayed plants, gently pull a couple up and wash the nutlets before tasting. Enjoy!
NUTSEDGE SOURCES


<http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/pests/weeds/hgic2312.html>.


APPENDIX B.
CAMPHOR TREE

Arabian Nights
Elizabeth Adee

This beautiful tree proves once again that it is often the less flamboyant of plants which have the most interesting stories. *Cinnamomum Camphora* has a surprising history of ornamental and medicinal uses.

It was reading Arabian Nights as a child that I first heard about this tree. To me it was imbued with the spice of enchantment that permeates those stories.

“*At length we arrived in a garden in a great and beautiful island, wherein were camphor trees, and under the shade of each, a hundred men might rest.*”

One day I was thrilled to discover that a tree which I had passed almost without notice for years was none other than that same kind. It turns out that this tree is is from the tropical and
subtropical jungles of Asia. It is known as “Japan’s largest hardwood”, and ancient trees grace more than one temple there. When the climate is to the trees liking- it can grow to be up to 100 ft tall, forming a graceful spreading canopy.

Although it is often planted for shade, the camphor tree has other properties that make it interesting. The name *Cinnamomum camphora* gives a hint as to its relations. The camphor tree is related to the cinnamon tree, and like many members of that genus is highly aromatic. Camphor trees, are actually named for the camphor they produce. This aromatic oil seems to have boundless uses; it is used on the skin to relieve pain and reduce itching, in perfumes and insecticides, as well as in Japanese and South Asian foods- to name just a few. There is some debate as to whether actually ingesting it is a good idea- but the consensus seems to be that small amounts are not generally dangerous.

When deciding whether or not to add a camphor tree to your landscape one thing is important to keep in mind- these plants grow very well in wet, warm climates- a little too well in fact. Australia and Florida have had problems in some areas trying to control invasive incidents. However, in climates that are either cool or dry, camphors abandon ideas of world domination (and also grow much more slowly). In such regions owners can simply enjoy their tree’s gentle shade and bright green leaves, pondering the adventures seen, the medicine made, and the woodland giants that this tree is responsible for.
CAMPHOR SOURCES

