

# How to Become a Columnist

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 4 min read

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## How to be a columnist

A columnist is a person who has a regular spot in a publication and usually writes on the same topic each edition. Would YOU like to be a columnist? Within your journalism journey I can teach you to be a columnist. Your journalism journey has been designed to enable you to take up the satisfying and exciting position of a newspaper, magazine, newsletter or internet Columnist. If you're keen to write expressing your own opinion, become a columnist. I do not agree with negativity towards journalists expressing their own opinions. Mainstream journalism has gone heavily in favour of writers expressing personal opinions. Not all articles in all mainstream publications, mind you. But certainly expressing your own attitudes could actually brighten up your article and make it more saleable to your target publication. You wouldn't send an opinionated article to a publication that you have studied and found that few writers express their own views. So, forget the course's advice. Forget what I say. What have you found are your target publication's preferences?

You've probably already written an "opinion piece" or "essay" or "analysis". Or it could be a column which is essentially a writer's personal opinion. An article for a mainstream publication starts with an idea, then continues through research, then the gathering of quotes or the conducting of an interview with some person. It's very hard to sell opinion pieces and essays. Every freelancer would love to have a column because a column is a regular opinion piece in a regular spot in a publication and the writer can say virtually what he or she likes, without research, without back-up evidence, without any of the journalistic requirements of a normal article. A regular column means a regular set income. Many columns are written straight out of the columnist's head, and might consist of personal bias, private thoughts, old prejudices, random advices, memories and family anecdotes. If you're a respected or well-known journalist you can sometimes score a column. Or if you're an expert on something. Or if you're a journalist with a particularly attractive or entertaining writing style, you might win yourself a regular column. I wrote my first column two months after getting my first job as a cadet journalist on a country paper at age 16. The column was called Teen Topics by Simon Townsend. Since then I've written probably 20 different kinds of regular columns. I love column writing, especially if it's regular work. But as I say, it's not easy to sell opinion pieces or to wangle yourself a regular column. Quite honestly, you write so well that you should really consider concentrating on standard articles because they're easier to sell. Articles are also harder to create because you have to get on the phone and get information and fresh quotes, write it all up carefully and then offer it around for sale.

However, if you've got your heart set on writing opinion pieces, then go for it. I'll give you all the help I can. If you want to create a column, here's how to do it:

1. First and foremost, decide on your target publication.
2. Give your column a name (Chris Smith's Life or Jan Jones Speaks or whatever).

3. Write one example column (and send it to me for polishing).
4. Write a list of one-sentence descriptions of each topic for your next 20 columns.
5. Then write two more examples of your column.
6. Attach a passport-style portrait photo of you.
7. Send a short covering letter, your three columns and your list to the right person at your target publication.

This Course does not offer to make you overnight into one of Australia's \$750,000 a year Columnists. High-paid "star" Columnists are few and far between in Australia. But thousands of people enjoy fulltime, part-time and casual positions as Columnists. This Course can help you to write and sell all kinds of columns.

### **Some Possible Opinion Columns**

- Your own thoughts \* Your analysis of life's situations
- Your humour, your personality \* Your opinions on current controversies
- Your personal stories \* Your sports commentaries
- Your political opinions \* Your television comment
- Your movie reviews \* Your heartfelt beliefs
- Your sentiments on travel \* Your interpretation of change
- Your praise, your criticism \* Your reviews of food and wine
- Your estimates of new ideas \* Your propositions to those in power
- Your feelings about injustice \* Your views of individual performances
- Your support for social changes \* Your faith in your ideals
- Your opinion on books, music, art \* Your theories on a better way
- Your distrust of politicians \* Your conjecture on the future
- Your interpretations of the news \* Your reactions to local issues

### **Some Possible "Special Knowledge" Columns**

- 4WDs
- Aborigines
- Acting
- Architecture
- Astrology
- Astronomy
- Aviation
- Cats
- Children
- Computers
- Cooking

- Crime
- Design
- Dogs
- Education
- Employment
- Environment
- Family Court
- Gambling
- Gossip
- Health
- Herbal cures
- Horses
- Landscaping
- Law
- Love
- Mechanics
- Medicine
- Movies
- Music
- Outdoor life
- Pets
- Philosophy
- Racial issues
- Racing
- Religion
- Restaurants
- Retailing
- Science
- Sex
- Sport
- Stress
- Travel
- Vegetables
- Weather
- Welfare
- Wine
- Words

As one of journalism's special writers, you will enjoy the terrific prestige that comes with being a Columnist.

Your readers often agree and sometimes disagree with you.

But always, they want to know what YOU think.

They want to read the ways in which you express your opinions and communicate your special knowledge.

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Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit [simontownsendjournalist.com](http://simontownsendjournalist.com) for the full archive.