

Opinions, columns

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

You seem keen to write expressing your own opinion. I do not agree with your journalism journey which expresses a lot of 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?

Essentially, you've sent me an extremely well written "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 because 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 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 a list of one-sentence descriptions of each topic for your next 20 columns.
4. Write one example column. Happy?
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 using my FactSheet instructions "How to sell your article" (ask for it ONLY by email).

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