
10 WRITING THE NON-TECHNICAL ARTICLE

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Introduction

At the risk of boring you with a story which is probably familiar, I would like to draw your attention to the proud mother whose son had just started to do maths. One day when the neighbour was visiting, she could not prevent herself from displaying her motherly pride. So she called Joey from the sitting room to the kitchen and asked him to say good morning to Mrs. Jones in algebra.

I mention her because I think she typifies the extent to which the average person understands science. It is important that you keep this in mind because you must write in such a way that your reader will understand what you are saying.

For example, what is a calorie? Is it "the quantity of heat necessary to effect a rise in temperature of one degree Centigrade of a cube of water each dimension of which is one-tenth of a part of the length of a bar of platinum and irridium alloy lying in the observatory of St. Cloud?". Perhaps, it is. But if you tell that to the average person, he will either think you have flipped your lid or that you are protecting one of those new-fangled languages that the spacemen are said to be learning just in case they meet the Martians. It may not be the most exact scientific definition, but the average person will have a better idea if you explain that 100 calories of energy can be had from three lumps of sugar or a dab of butter.

The central point which you must bear in mind when writing the non-technical article is that your readers will be non-technical people who will have neither the time nor the inclination to go back to school to understand what you are trying to say. Write simply.

Types of readers

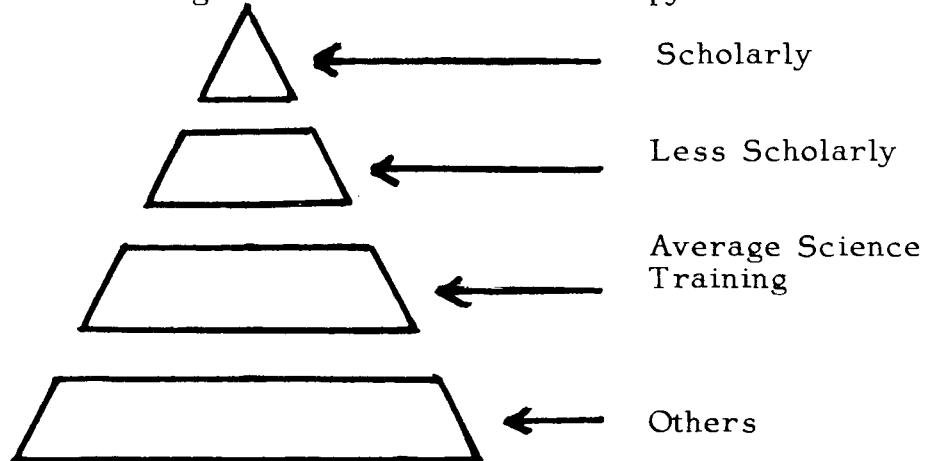
As a rule, your readers will fall into four categories:-

- (i) the scholarly readers
with advanced science education and
with highly specialised interest;
- (ii) the rather less scholarly readers
with a somewhat broader interest
base but with a high level of
education;
- (iii) the average reader without much
science education and not as

easily able to understand technical stuff as the other two groups; and

- (iv) the man, woman and child whose interest is purely that of entertainment.

These four categories can be illustrated in pyramid form



Writers use a style and language to suit the category to which they are aiming, and this can be judged by the kinds of publications for which they write. For our purposes, your writing should be directed at the mass circulation publications, such as general interest magazines and newspapers. Unlike readers of specialised-interest publications, your average reader and those with no interest in science will not be in a captive readership, and your story will compete with a lot of other stories for his limited time. Unless you are a big name in the mass media, there is no guarantee that your story will be read, or that it will be accepted for publication.

I have not conducted a survey, but I suspect that the average West Indian reader will be more inclined towards science for entertainment rather than for education: that in reading a science article, he will be arrested more if it is in an entertaining rather than an educative style.

The West Indian society is not as yet a highly technological one. Some parts of it are more technologically advanced than others, but there is no indigenous technology powerful enough to have created either a regional or a territorial technological ethic on what, I believe, is essentially an agricultural people. Most of the technology is imported along with the aura of mystery that is supposed to surround technology.

At the same time, the West Indian is highly literate, with some level of education, and a well-developed native intelligence. So, on the one hand, a science writer finds himself aiming at a readership that is generally not scientifically-minded or trained, while, on the other hand, this readership

is at least adequately and intelligent. Your writing should not be technical, and it should not be condescending to the point where it makes the reader feel angry that he did not have the privilege of going to a science school. You can perhaps remember the advice of journalist Neale Copple: "The difference between a list of facts and a story is style".

Writing Assets

I do not know if it is true, but I understand, as a layman, that a sound science education is not necessarily indicative of a sound grasp of language. However, if you are to write for non-technical readers, you need a good command of language in order to communicate effectively. You need a good grasp and command of English.

Secondly, you need a good knowledge of the subject on which you are writing. This should not be too difficult if you are writing on a subject in the field in which you specialise. If not, research properly.

Thirdly, you may want to convey a particular viewpoint or have some definite purpose in writing the article. You need to have it clear in your mind before you begin to write. If you do not have it clear, it is unlikely that the reader will.

Writing the Article

It would be good if you pay attention to the following hints:-

- (a) Before you start writing, think out a suitable title for your story. This will help you keep the central point in mind. Your title can be in one of several forms: a statement that will create interest, a statement that will arouse curiosity, a label, a declaration, telling how, why, what, a question, a quotation, an exclamation, and so on.
- (b) Think out a good opening. Chances are that whether or not your story will be published, much less read, depends on the extent to which you capture the interest of your reader from the beginning - and hold it. Here again, you can choose one of several ways in which to start. Take, as an example, the opening for a story attempting to explain the relationship between the non-technical nature of the Guyanese society and the high road fatality rate:-
 - (i) make a striking statement: "Guyana's road fatality per capita is the world's highest";
 - (ii) give a summary: "With a better under-

standing of how a car functions, motorists will be more aware of the dangers involved in driving and be more careful";

- (iii) address the reader directly: "If you drive a car, then you can improve your chances of living to an old age by learning how a car works";
 - (iv) ask a question: "Should people be licensed to drive a car without first knowing how it works?";
 - (v) begin by a narrative: "A young couple, newly-wed, was driving to their honeymoon hotel when it happened";
 - (vi) describe something: "The automobile can be a most lethal weapon in the hands of the uninformed";
 - (vii) give a quotation: "You don't know how dangerous driving is until you begin to understand just what you are driving", the man said.
- (c) At the time, you are thinking out your opening, think out suitable ending as well. This will give you two definite points to connect in the article;
 - (d) Use illustrations or photographs to liven up the story. This should be noted particularly by science writers because they can thus help the average reader to understand some difficult points. Illustrations can also take the form of tables;
 - (e) Try to humanise your story as much as possible. To humanise it means to bring it down to the level of human beings, giving it a human appeal and make it easy for them to identify with it. You can humanise your article in several ways:
 - (i) making it clear to the reader how he is affected or will be, by what you are saying;
 - (ii) linking the story with a news item which the reader has already seen and for which he will probably expect a follow-up story;
 - (iii) use photos and illustrations;
 - (vi) use a narrative (story telling) style;
 - (v) use humour; and
 - (vi) give typical examples of what you are saying.

Bear These in Mind

Because you are science people and are writing for non-technical readers, you need to keep in mind the demands of non-technical writing. Some of the points you need to remember at all times are:

- (i) your readers have not had a high level of science education, but they are intelligent people;
- (ii) you should select facts you want to write in your 500-800 words article (average length) and not try to write everything that you know in it;
- (iii) your readers do not necessarily know about something just because it was around for some time. You need to explain it;
- (iv) your reader is not obliged to read your article. you must make him want to;
- (v) humanise your article;
- (vi) your reader will be curious about points which you raise. Don't leave this curiosity unsatisfied;
- (vii) your reader will appreciate a style which helps them to follow your story easily;
- (viii) remember who your readers are;
- (ix) your reader will not appreciate it if you define a hard word by a harder one. (Remember the calorie).