

How To Write Non-Fiction That Sells

By Louise Dop

Nothing turns a reader off more quickly than a list of dry facts and figures. Good fiction writers always show rather than tell but it's worth remembering that the technique can work for non-fiction too. Follow this advice and your articles will make compulsive reading.

When writing general interest material, often you can't avoid dealing in numbers. How big? How heavy? How many miles? To help the reader to absorb this information, why not make it more enticing? I could tell you that a dripping tap can waste 1,800 litres of water per month but wouldn't you be more amazed to learn that this is equivalent to twelve full baths? When you do quantify your data, choose the appropriate units of measurement. While a contemporary (or European) audience will appreciate the fact that the largest recorded snake, an Indonesian reticulated python, measured 10 metres long, the over sixties market might be more impressed by its length of 32 feet and nine and a half inches. In certain cases you could even decide to leave the measurements out all together - "the record breaking snake stretched further than five tall men lying head to toe!"

Write about the past using dates and well known events to put the information into a historical context. The birth of your subject in 1620 may not mean much to readers. Point out that he was working in London at the time of the Great Fire of London in 1666 and the day to day reality of his life comes into focus. Timescales are another handy tool, especially for illustrating the effort involved in great human achievement. Most people know that Sir Christopher Wren was responsible for the beauty of St. Paul's cathedral in London. The fact that the building took over 35 years to complete emphasises the enormity of his vision.

Travel writing is one area that requires hard facts but these can best be supplied using fact boxes (known as sidebars). The heart of the article should concentrate on bringing the destination directly to the audience. Use all of your senses to report on the surroundings and remember that every detail counts. Prospective travellers will want to know that baths in the hotel are dirty or that Spiro's restaurant serves the juiciest kebabs. Add dialogue to the mix with a few local phrases spoken by well defined characters. Travel writing is your chance to be creative as skilful imagery will capture the scenery but beware of clichés. Rather than "the sun went down like a fiery red ball", try "the sunset spread across the clouds like spilt wine over crisp linen."

Human interest sells so be prepared to use it. Interview real people and let them build up your topic. Direct quotes uplift a feature in the way that dialogue enlivens fiction. Give your spokesmen character. While you might not take the tabloid route of "busty blue-eyed twenty something", readers will gain insight on learning that a quote came from a forty two year old nurse with six children

or a silverware expert from Colchester. Don't forget to humanise dusty historical figures with personal details. The scientifically minded can appreciate Sir Isaac Newton's grasp of gravitational forces. Who can resist the suggestion that when engrossed in a challenging problem he sometimes forgot to get out of bed for days at a time?

Marketable non-fiction is tight on word count and heavy on facts. Add value to a piece by referencing further sources of information. A list of relevant books, websites, stores, addresses or telephone numbers doesn't take up much space but gives your article depth and keeps the reader thinking about the subject long after they've reached the last sentence. The work is also more likely to be retained for future reference - a plus point for the publisher.

If you apply these principles to your non-fiction writing, it won't only be readers who can't put it down - editors will be hooked too.

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