

## **So you want to be a technical writer? - Part one**

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If more safe and vault practitioners were inclined to write for our trade publications, it would be better for everyone.

I thought that an article on writing articles would be a fairly short piece, until I started writing. In my outline I included such things as submission guidelines, grammar, spelling, editing, formatting and readability. I also thought I'd be derelict if I didn't cover film and digital photography. The article idea grew exponentially from there. I soon realized that this would be another gargantuan undertaking that would be best if presented as yet another multi-part affair . . . So be it!

In Part One I'll explain my opinions on what makes a good technical article.

The only two perspectives that really matter are those of first the editor and then the reader. I'm sure you've read articles you liked and articles you didn't like, but do you know why?

Ask yourself:

Is it just data you're after, or is how it is presented also important?

Do some of the articles about safe openings seem the same?

Do you find yourself ignoring the words and looking only at the photos?

Do you look up from an article, scratch your head, and wonder what the point was?

Does the quality of some of the photos scream "why bother?"

Have you combed through articles that took two pages to say what might have been said in a paragraph?

Are you having that thought as you're reading this? Good. I must be getting my point across.

## **Submission Guidelines**

Sometimes a magazine or newsletter will supply these to authors. They may include guidance on subject matter, artwork, language, and specifications on article length, copyright issues, disclaimers, compensation, and other writing and publishing issues.

An editorial calendar for the current year may also be included in the guidelines. When authors know what has been planned for upcoming issues, they can coordinate their ideas and efforts with the editor.

For example: if September's issue will feature articles and advertising regarding foreign high security safes, don't get bent out of shape when your high security safe article appears in that issue instead of January's.

## **Formats**

These vary according to the style of the article and also the style of the writer. Some in our industry have done very well by using a format that includes a series of detailed photos accompanied by captions. Others use a narrative format supported by photos and illustrations.

As pointed out earlier, many safe technicians describe their conquests in anecdotal format. This format parallels the conversational "fish stories" common to safecrackers' gatherings. Whichever format you decide to use, there are basic elements of story-telling you should adhere to in order to provide an informative and interesting reading experience.

## **Basics**

Good writers and good editors have the reader in mind at all times. A good technical article is one that gets the information across in a simple, orderly, elegant manner. Simplicity, order and elegance are very difficult things to achieve in the same article.

Basic language skills are essential to that goal. It's very important to read and re-read your work. Look for passages that don't meet your criteria for order, simplicity and readability. Eliminate anything that complicates or confuses what you're trying to say.

Don't try to write the whole article in one session. Tired minds make mistakes, ignore the obvious, limit alternatives, and overlook possibilities. A

fresh look at your material is sometimes all it takes to turn mundane prose into inspiring words of wisdom.

Find someone who is willing to read and critique your work. It doesn't matter that they know nothing about the safe and vault business. You are looking for someone who can read and form an opinion as to the form, style, clarity and readability of what you've written. It might even be more helpful if they know nothing about safes. Keep an open mind. Every reader is an expert on what he reads.

### **The outline**

One of the most important tools in technical writing is the outline. Outlining your topic before you start writing is like thinking before you speak. It is essential! Twenty minutes spent early in the pursuit of order and clarity can save you hours of rewriting and editing agony later.

### **Spelling and punctuation**

Every word processing application includes a spell-checker. Most of them also feature grammar tools. With today's computer technology there's no reason that your final draft shouldn't look like one. Even if you do your work

by hand, there's no excuse for poor punctuation or grammar. Have someone else check your work. A fresh, unbiased eye can make all the difference.

## **Words**

Ever hear the term "wordsmith"? It describes a person who uses the tools of his trade just as we use the tools of ours. Just as we wouldn't use a borescope as a punch, a writer shouldn't use words and phrases without considering their impact on his/her work.

Use a dictionary and a thesaurus. They help you select and use the proper tools to shape sentences that are clear, concise, refreshing and memorable. Overuse of long or hard to pronounce words can annoy readers. Short, descriptive words have the opposite effect, refreshing the mind and inviting readers to continue.

## **Technical Jargon**

Every industry has its own jargon of terms and nomenclature. It's important to use these terms accurately. Be sure to use and spell the term correctly.

When describing locks, safes, parts, and tools, try to use the name its manufacturer gave it. If the original manufacturer's name can't be determined, then use the most commonly accepted term to describe it. When referencing manufacturer's logotypes, be aware of and keep up with the latest spelling, capitalization and proprietary elements, i.e., Which do you think is correct: LaGard or LAGARD?

### **Sentences**

Keep sentences short and sweet. Long is OK, only if there is absolutely no other way of making your point. If a sentence seems long to you, it will seem twice as long to the reader. Go out and buy a couple of good books on the subject of clear writing and grammar. Letting your creative process be guided by information that few of us have reviewed since high school is like hiring Stevie Wonder to drive a school bus.

### **Paragraphs**

Nothing is more irritating to the reader than a paragraph that goes on and on forever. Trying to glean information from a page that has been presented in a gigantic glob is tiresome and frustrating. Most people like to digest

information in nice, tidy bite-sized pieces. A good writer will accommodate them.

## **Content**

Excessive editing isn't necessary unless you are a perfectionist. As long as your article is simple, accurate, to the point, readable and of great interest to safe technicians, you can't go wrong.

What constitutes "readability"? Keep it simple. A little humor is OK. Never write or type your article in all capitals. Safe and vault opening and servicing articles tend to be anecdotal by nature, but this can be carried to extremes.

If you spend more time describing the donuts you had for breakfast or the song that was playing on the radio when you drove to the job than you do describing your opening or servicing technique, then you're missing the point, and so will your reader.

Whatever you do, please don't finish your article with the phrase "the safe was open!" It's trite, and if you haven't noticed, it's been done to death!

## **Research**

We are in a technically precise industry. No one knows everything about everything. When you have the slightest doubt about a significant fact, whether it be a measurement, a date, a part number, or anything else that gives you pause, do the research and get it right. It can be very embarrassing not to!

## **Sending Articles to Safe and Vault Technology**

Apart from the above, there are some concerns regarding the dispatching of your material to your friendly and knowledgeable SAVTA editor that need to be addressed.

## **Editing**

Obviously, not all articles get published. Some may not be any good. Sometimes even the good ones don't get published right away.

Will your submission be edited? Probably! Articles considered for publication get edited for length, spelling and grammar, at the very least. Most are also edited for content and accuracy of information. Some may also be edited for style and readability.

If you're overly sensitive about having your work scrutinized, criticized, interpreted and changed, take care of all these elements before you submit it or simply supply the facts and details and let the editor put it in to readable form. That's one of the things that editors do.

That said, I've included a classic joke about rejection letters to cheer you up:

"Dear Sir,

We are in receipt of your submission. It is both original and good.

Unfortunately, the part that is original is not good, and the part that is good is not original."

The Editor

In an ideal world, an editor works with the author and makes suggestions on how to make an article better. The author considers the suggestions, makes changes, and resubmits. In the real world this doesn't always happen. Editors have to make hard choices regarding size, content, graphics, available space, deadlines, and other issues. It isn't always possible to have the kind of communications that make authors happy and content creatures.

## **Columns and line spacing**

If you submit via printed pages, here are a few simple suggestions for making your work easy to read and edit.

Most magazine and news articles are formatted into columns to make reading easier and to allow photos, illustrations and charts to be easily inserted near the text that refers to them. Text then flows around these objects easily and naturally.

Columnar formatting also lends itself to readability in that it allows the reader to scan in a linear, descending pattern with minimal distracting side to side eye movement. This allows more accurate tracking and faster progress.

For the same reasons, columns also facilitate editing. They give the editor more space for corrections, suggestions and notes. Even if you don't have the capabilities to format in columns, you can still make your submission easier to edit by using large margins, at least an inch on either side of your text.

Double spacing your printed text also makes your document more editor-friendly. It's easier on the eyes and again, leaves plenty of room for corrections and notes.

Use an easily read typeface in 12 point or larger size.

### **Text**

If you submit diskettes or by email, text can be sent in an ASCII text file (plain unformatted text) or you can send it as an MS Word document. The editor can reformat digital submissions to his own liking.

You can also just copy and paste text right into your e-mail, attach the photo files and e-mail them to S&VT's editor: Mike Oehlert ([dialcenter@aol.com](mailto:dialcenter@aol.com)) and you're done.

### **Photos intended for print publishing**

Digital photos intended for use in a magazine or newsletter should be of higher resolution than those that are only to be viewed on a computer screen.

The following are some general guidelines, but in Part 2 of this series I'll go into more detail about photography and digital photographic files. It's a lot to digest.

Published images need to have a minimum resolution of 300 dots per inch to show the intended detail. A 72 pixel per inch, 8" X 10" displayed digital image would have to be printed at 2" X 2 1/2" to show an acceptable level of detail without distortion. That's pretty small – many readers would have difficulty seeing it on a printed page.

When emailing digital photos to S&VT, use the same e-mail attachment procedures you would use when emailing photos to anyone else. S&VT prefers photo files in TIFF or EPS format, but larger high resolution JPEGs are also very acceptable and take less time to send.

When an editor reads your submission, he is working. When he sees an interesting, easy to read, easy to edit article, it makes his work more pleasant and efficient. A happy editor is an author's best friend.