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Rise to the Occasion: Downsizing Magazines Need Your Expertise

BY JOANNE CASTAGNA

We've all seen the headlines: "Major magazine slashes staff, offers employee buy-out, announces personnel consolidation." This got me thinking—what does this mean for technical writers, like me, who pitch stories to engineering and scientific trade magazines? Will these magazines be more willing to publish my articles because they have fewer staff members?

I went straight to the source and spoke with several engineering and scientific trade magazine editors, who cover a wide range of topics including civil and military engineering, architecture, environment, archaeology, and wildlife. They told me that due to magazine staff downsizing and increased public demand for online services, many editors are now hungry for more writing from outside industry experts.

"Fewer editors on staff and expanded responsibilities for online content have increased the time demands on trade magazine editors and are leaving less time for staff-generated content," said Bob Drake, editor of *Civil Engineering (CE) News Magazine* and *Civil Connection* and *Bridges* e-newsletters, published by Zweig White Information Services, publications that cover the engineering, architecture, and environmental consulting industries. He continued, "Consequently, we more often—sometimes



exclusively—rely on editorial contributed by readers and other groups aligned with our readers and markets."

Other trades are ramping up their online content. "Our web space and reader traffic has expanded dramatically and our content needs are so much greater now. The red carpet is out for user-supplied content," said William J. Angelo, senior Northeast regional correspondent for *Engineering News-Record*, a global publication that covers the architectural, engineering, and construction industries.

Outside expert content is also in greater demand because there is less expertise on magazine editorial staffs. Fewer editors on staff are leaving "niche areas where inside knowledge is need-

ed," said Tony Slinn, editor-in-chief of Lloyd's Register-Fairplay Ltd., an international publisher of the 125-year-old weekly maritime news magazine *Fairplay*; monthlies including *Dredging and Port Construction*, *Safety at Sea International*, *Fairplay Solutions*, and *Ports & Harbors*; as well as numerous data guides for the shipping industry. "This is where editors will turn to outside specialists for help, assured that the facts and figures will be accurate and the story will appeal to readers looking for insight."

This is an ideal time for technical writers to collaborate with their subject matter experts (SMEs) to get articles published with trade magazines. Not only will trade magazines benefit by your articles, but also by you and your SMEs.

Benefits of Writer-SME

Collaborations:

- *Combine your skills:* Many SMEs who work in technical fields haven't received article-writing training in college and, because of this, they are less likely to attempt to write an article on their own. This is where they can benefit by collaborating with their technical writer(s).
- *Gain positive exposure:* SMEs have great stories to tell, and this can bring positive exposure and possibly new business opportunities for your SMEs and your organization.
- *Build a lasting relationship:* Once you successfully collaborate with an SME on an article, he or she is more likely to approach you to collaborate on future articles.

I've experienced many of the above benefits as a technical writer-editor for the US Army Corps of Engineers, New York District, and so have the SMEs I've collaborated with, including engineers, biologists, geographers, and archaeologists. Thanks to these benefits, my agency asked me to create an article-writing course to help our SMEs work with me in order to publish more articles together. The course combines information mapping news-writing techniques with methods I've developed based on feedback from our personnel. Information mapping is a technique of dividing and labeling information for easy comprehension, use, and recall. The course shows SMEs an easy-to-follow five-step process for quickly getting an article on paper. The course also discusses the importance of having a story idea, identifying target audiences, and including visuals. To follow is information from this course that will help you work with your SMEs on getting the word out about their stories.

Before You Write

Before you begin to write, you need to know what your story idea is and who your readers are.

Your story idea should be timely and should discuss something that would be of interest to your readers.

Your readers may be your colleagues or individuals outside of your organization. Whichever reader you write for,

you need to write the article in a language they will understand.

Five-Step Writing Process

To demonstrate each of the following steps, portions of a news article written by an Army Corps engineer (in collaboration with me) will be shown (Figures 1–5). He wrote an article about the recently completed Federal Creosote Superfund Site Project, an environmental cleanup project that was performed by the Army Corps' New York District.

Step 1: Write the First Paragraph

Write the first paragraph, or lead, to your news article. The first paragraph is called the lead because it should capture a reader's attention and "lead" them into your story.

To create the first paragraph, you should answer the six news questions—who, what, where, why, when, and how—with short, single-sentence answers (see Figure 1). Combine the answers to these questions to create one short paragraph. (It's OK if you don't get all of the answers in the first paragraph, but you

should try to get most of them.) The rest of the answers can be moved to the next paragraph (see Figure 2).

You may be wondering, "Why do I have to cram all of this information into the first paragraph?" The reason for this is because many readers skim the beginning of news articles and don't read them in full. If the first paragraph intrigues them, they may read more of the article. This is why it's important to get the key information at the very beginning of the article.

Step 2: Brainstorm Questions

Brainstorm a list of questions you feel your readers would ask about your subject matter. Do this by thinking of several who, what, where, why, when, and how questions.

Envision that you're speaking with someone about your project, preferably someone who isn't familiar with it. What questions would they ask you about the project?

It doesn't matter how many questions you come up with or if some are redundant (see Figure 3).

Figure 1. Answers to the six news questions as they pertain to the Federal Creosote Superfund Site project.

Answer News Questions	
WHO:	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New York District.
WHAT:	Completed Federal Creosote Superfund Site Project
WHERE:	Manville, N.J.
WHY:	To clean-up and remove hazardous material.
WHEN:	January 2008.
HOW:	Demolition of buildings, and removal and transfer of hazardous material.

Figure 2. The first paragraph of the Federal Creosote Superfund Site Project article. The paragraph was created by combining the answers to the six news questions.

Paragraph 1

This winter, the Corps' New York District completed the Federal Creosote Superfund Site Project in Manville, N.J.

The project involved the clean up and off-site removal of hazardous material.

Step 3: Create an Article Outline

Take your list of questions and move them into an article outline. Place the questions in the areas (paragraphs) of the outline that you feel they would best be answered (see Figure 4).

I always suggest thinking of the beginning, middle, and end of your outline as the beginning, middle, and end of your project. This will help you decide where to place the questions in the outline.

For example, if you're writing an article about a project you recently completed, the beginning of your outline would answer questions that pertain to the beginning of your project, such as the project's history or what initiated the project; the middle of your outline would answer questions about what occurred during the project, such as the project's construction; and the end of the outline would answer questions

Figure 3. A few of the brainstormed questions developed by the Army Corps engineer who managed the Federal Creosote Superfund Site project.

Brainstorm Questions

- WHO:**
Who were the parties involved?
Who is the customer?
- WHAT:**
What was the Corps' role?
What type of work was performed?
- WHERE:**
Where is the site location?
- WHY:**
Why is this project needed?
- WHEN:**
When did the project begin?
When will the project end?
- HOW:**
How was the work performed?
How close do residents live to the site?

about the completion of the project and what's going to happen in the future.

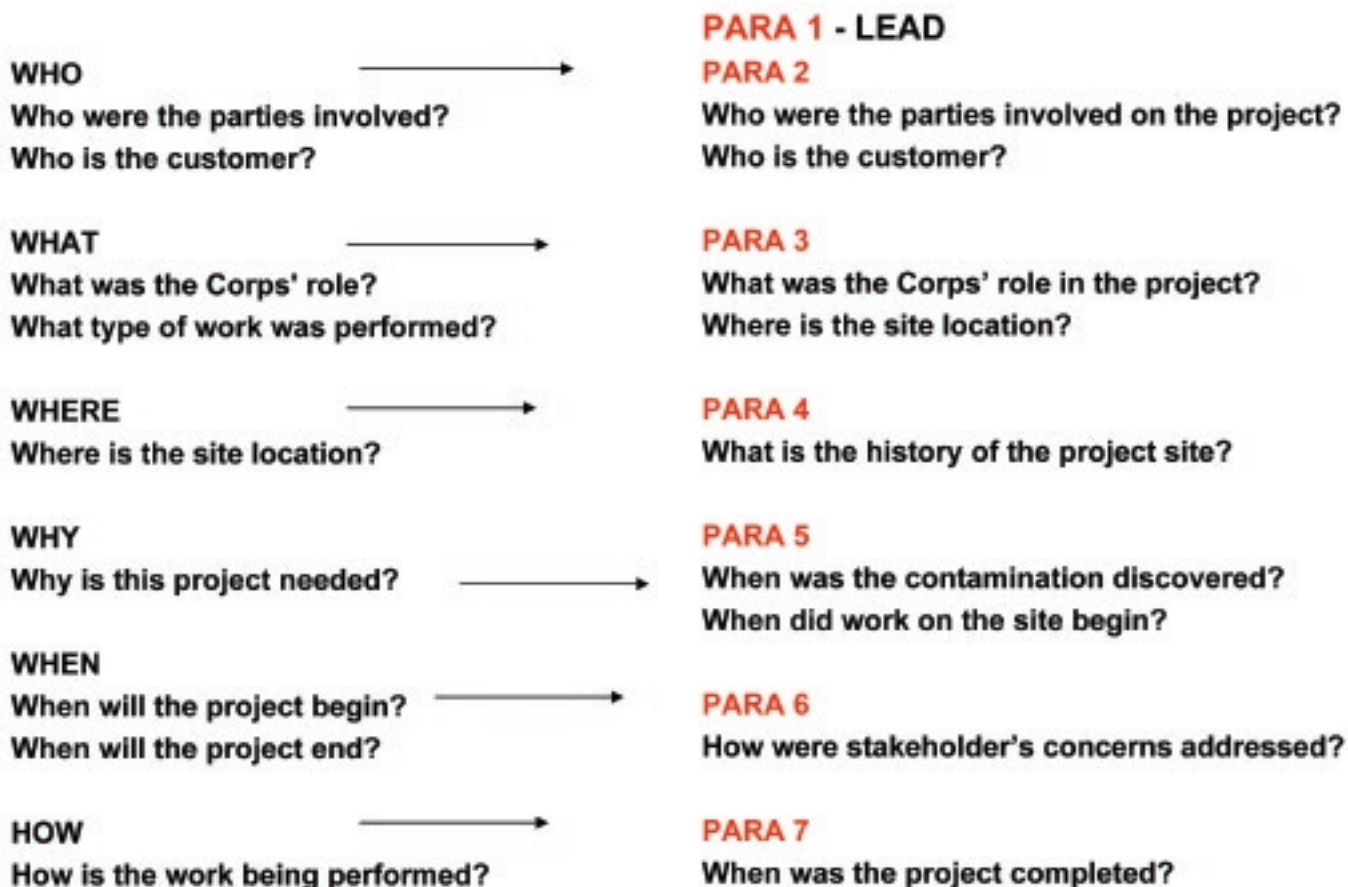
To help you do this, I suggest placing the numbers 1, 2, or 3 next to your questions ("1" standing for questions that relate to the beginning of your project; "2" standing for questions that relate to what happened during your project, and "3" standing for questions that relate to what happened at the end of your project or what will happen in the future). Place the "1" questions somewhere in the first few paragraphs of the outline; the "2" questions somewhere in the middle of the outline; and the "3" questions somewhere in the last few paragraphs of the outline.

Step 4: Write a Quick Draft

Now that you've created an article outline, it's time to write a quick draft of your news article.

Figure 4. How the brainstormed questions were used to create an article outline.

Create Article Outline



Visuals are vital to an article's success in communicating your story. Images that show what you explain in your article will help readers grasp what you're trying to describe.

Photographs should be high-quality digital images showing people in action instead of posed photos. Always use captions describing what's being shown in the photo, including the full names of individuals in the photo. Also give credit to the photographer or, if the image is a graphic, the creator. Images obtained from other organizations require their written permission.



You've already created the lead paragraph; now you are able to write the rest of the article. You're going to create the

remaining paragraphs the same way you created the first paragraph.

Create each additional paragraph by

Figure 5. Create each of the article's paragraphs just like you created the lead paragraph, by taking the answers to that paragraph's questions and folding them into a paragraph.

Paragraph 2

Questions:

Who were the parties involved in the project?
Who is the customer?

Paragraph:

The project was performed for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) – Region 2 and overseen by the Army Corps' New York District with the support from the Army Corps' Kansas City, Baltimore and New England Districts.

Figure 6. The key things to remember—post this by your computer!

Steps to revealing your accomplishments

1. What is your story & audience?
2. Write the first paragraph by answering the 6 news questions.
3. Brainstorm questions that your readers would ask you.
4. Create an outline by moving your questions into the areas (paragraphs) of your outline that you feel they would best be answered.
5. Write a quick draft by answering the questions you placed for each paragraph in your outline. Don't stop to edit or get information!
6. Edit your draft.
7. Include visuals that help tell your story.

answering the questions you've listed for the paragraph. It's OK if it takes you more than one paragraph to answer the questions.

As an example, let's look at the questions our engineer selected for his second paragraph. He answered these questions and created this paragraph (see Figure 5).

If you realize that answering a question doesn't seem suitable in an area of the article, then put the question aside to be answered elsewhere in the article.

Your quick draft should really be performed fast. Don't stop writing to edit or look up facts, just keep on writing. You want to get your thoughts down quickly; you can edit and insert facts later.

Step 5: Edit

Now you can edit! Read your article aloud. Hearing your words will help you catch spelling and grammar errors and see where information needs to be moved, added, or deleted.

Make the article concise by keeping these writing tips for engineering and scientific trade magazines in mind: Paragraphs should be somewhat short, generally no more than one to two sentences that express one thought; and words should be simple and easy for readers to understand.

Make sure your article flows—paragraphs should logically transition to one another.

Your writing should be conversational. Write how you speak; in other words, how you would verbally explain something to someone is how you should write it.

Ask someone else to read your article, preferably someone not in your field and unfamiliar with your subject matter, because he or she will be able to quickly notice when something is unclear. **i**

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