How to Write an F&E Article—Putting Your Ideas on Paper

By Christopher Bennett

How Do You Know If Your Article Is F&E Material?
IAAO offers many choices for aspiring authors. Determining whether your article idea fits in with the other material being published in F&E is a good way to start. (See the sidebar article for information on other places your article can appear.)

Fair & Equitable magazine is an excellent training ground for new authors. Shorter articles, how-to-do-it tips, humorous topics, human-interest stories, technology reports, legal news, office administration tips, and general reporting of events are all accepted and encouraged.

“I just sit at a typewriter and curse a bit.”

Articles can range from 500 words to 3,000 words or more. Articles submitted for F&E will typically go through a process of peer review and editing. The author has the opportunity to see comments from reviewers and editors. This feedback is an invaluable way to develop your writing skills and become a better author. Oftentimes, a small idea that is given the proper treatment has the potential to grow into an interesting and informative article. The interactive process involved in getting an article published can be a positive learning experience for the author.

Identify your audience
This is one of the most important decisions you can make. “Of course,” you say, “assessors are the audience!” Your material may be of more interest, or better suited to, a slightly different audience. It may be a special interest group within or related to the assessment profession, such as large or small jurisdictions, tax collectors, mappers, commercial property specialists, or one of the many other specialty disciplines associated with IAAO.

Your article will be that much more effective if you recognize the level of expertise that your intended reading audience has and you write the content accordingly. Does your article assume that the reader already has specific knowledge of the topic? Are you explaining the terms and acronyms sufficiently? Sometimes it is a useful technique to write your article for a very narrow target audience and then go back later and add explanations and clarifications that will make the article useful and instructive to a broader range of people. This approach is most effective when you are trying to reach more than one audience. You can write for a specific technical audience and later adapt your article for more general use. It can be more difficult to write in the other direction. If you try to write generically about a topic, it can enable you to be arbitrarily vague and you can lose your focus.

Pick your topic
There are many ways to pick a topic. One of the very best ways that articles come to life is in response to a specific need. Say you are hard at work in the office and someone makes a casual statement such as “Gee—I really wish we could find an easier way to do this,” and it is a problem...
you think you can solve. Suddenly you have the makings for an article. Document your solution to the problem and share it with everyone in the office and with IAAO members too. Co-workers are an invaluable resource to help refine the solution to a need. Input from others helps to keep you focused as you craft your solution. Some of the very best “how to do it” articles are the result of a group effort. A side benefit of this process is the fun you will have participating in an interactive process and sharing the credit when you finally get into print.

Another way to pick a topic is to document a process that is part of your job. If you have developed expertise in a specific discipline, or you have found an innovative way to perform routine administrative tasks, you can share your experience with others and provide valuable insights into issues that may have taken you years to figure out. Readers are interested in learning new ways to solve old problems. Whether or not readers agree with your techniques and solutions, writing about them stimulates thought and hopefully encourages readers to strengthen their own skills, opinions, and techniques.

Other possible writing themes include writing about the future of assessment or creating a retrospective of past events. Sometimes, writing is a simple matter of relating facts about events. Sometimes, writing is a more complex exercise in a specific discipline, or you have developed expertise in a specific discipline, or you have found an innovative way to perform routine administrative tasks, you can share your experience with others and provide valuable insights into issues that may have taken you years to figure out. Readers are interested in learning new ways to solve old problems. Whether or not readers agree with your techniques and solutions, writing about them stimulates thought and hopefully encourages readers to strengthen their own skills, opinions, and techniques.

Another excellent reason for writing an article is in response to a previous article or statement. Readers often overlook the opportunity to share their opinions about articles that affect them and their work. Whether you simply want to write a letter to the editor, or you want to respond to an issue at length, F&E is an appropriate place to get your opinion seen. Occasionally, the magazine will publish articles that are controversial in nature in order to stimulate thoughtful comment and dialog between members. If you are responding to an issue by writing a letter to the editor, be sure your comments conform to our Letters to the Editor Policy so they can be printed and read by all.

“Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors.”

John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Once you have settled on your topic, you will need to get your brain cells moving and begin collecting ideas.

Brainstorm

Once you have identified the basic idea for an article it is helpful to simply collect related ideas and write them down. How many times have you found yourself full of enthusiasm for a project only to find you haven’t considered all of the details necessary to accomplish it? In the author business, this is known as the “It was a dark and stormy night...” syndrome, otherwise known as writer’s block. To get past writer’s block, you can simply begin to collect the pieces. Once you have enough pieces you can formulate them into simple ideas and standalone concepts. Each simple idea is like a pearl, it is self-contained and its value is apparent to anyone that looks at it. Once you have enough “pearls” they can be strung together to form a strand. Once you have enough strands, they can be combined to form a complete story, the value of which should be greater than that of all the individual pieces.

A word of caution: Inform your family in advance if you plan to speak your ideas and use free-association techniques as part of the brainstorming process. If you tell them that you are “brainstorming” it will save a lot of explanation later.

Once you have selected your topic, and assembled many of the pieces you will need to create it, it is time to actually attempt to put it together.

Create an Abstract

If you create a short summary of your article topic, it will help you to stay focused as you develop the details. It is far too easy to stray from your chosen topic as you think about other interesting ideas you had during the brainstorming process. Your abstract should be one or two paragraphs long and it should define the essential qualities of your article. If you can write your abstract, the chances of successfully writing your article will have increased significantly.

If some of the ideas you developed during brainstorming don’t fit with your abstract, be sure to write them down anyway, and keep them in a brainstorming file. They may provide the basis for a future article or even for a series of related articles.

Create an Outline

Start by listing bullet points of key ideas related to your topic. Be sure to include an introduction and conclusion as part of your outline. Once you have an outline you should review the sequence of ideas to make sure it makes sense in the order it is presented. Each bullet point should be a summary of a basic concept in your article. The bullet points should follow the names of your “containers” if necessary.
Put It on Paper

Determine the tone of your article

Is your article intended to relate facts, tell a colorful story about an experience, or report about a recent event? Is your article about a technical topic with defined procedures and approaches? It is important to establish the tone of your article early in the process. Telling a joke or relating an anecdote in the middle of an article about ratio studies is probably not going to work well for you. Likewise, if you are telling a humorous tale, inserting a lengthy data table can seriously break the rhythm and continuity of your story.

Sorting & organizing

As you sort through your ideas, think about what prompted you to write an article in the first place. If you can identify what motivated you to put it on paper, then you have a basis for your introduction. It is always helpful to set the stage and let your readers know why you think a topic is important.

Now, it is time to begin sorting the ideas you’ve collected then place each one into the best position in your outline. As you insert each idea it helps to think about how it relates to the surrounding ideas. If an idea does not fit, or sounds awkward, consider either moving it to a better location or writing a transition that ties it into the surrounding ideas. Once you have completed a section of your outline, it is time to move on to the next section. Consider the transitions from one outline item to the next as well. The more you tie things together the better your final article will be. Keep adding to your sections until every thing has been transferred from your brainstorming notes into the outline document. At this point in the writing process you should have most of your article entered into a word processing file (or as my editor points out, it may be written on a yellow pad!). You can now breath a sigh of relief and say to your self, “Yes, I do have it after all!” It may even be permissible to let friends and relatives know that you have written a manuscript and that you are aspiring to become a published author.

Revise, Revise, Revise

Congratulations, at last you have a tangible manuscript. You can print it, hold it, and, if nothing else, you have a new topic of conversation for cocktail parties and family gatherings. Take a moment to enjoy the rewarding glow of your newfound writing ability. Okay, enough of that...it’s time to wake up and get back to work!

The next step is the decidedly unglamorous, but absolutely essential, process of revision. Depending on your style, and comfort level with a computer, you can either begin revising your article directly in the word processor or you can sit down at the kitchen table, have a cup of coffee, and review your work in printed form. Personally, I favor the second approach. Working from a printed manuscript provides another way to look at your article as a whole and make sure that you are saying all the important things you want to say. As you review the manuscript, you will find that some of the things you wrote at midnight, in a state of creative zeal, do not seem quite so stunning and polished over morning coffee. Instead, they may resemble a surreal dream scene from Alice in Wonderland.

By taking a break and then revisiting the manuscript, you will have a fresh perspective, which will help you to sort through what you have written and find better ways to frame your thoughts. As the author, you know exactly what you are trying to say. The reader, on the other hand, may not grasp all the complexities and subtle nuances that you have interspersed throughout your creation.

During the revision process you should also check that all terms and acronyms are sufficiently explained so that everyone can understand them. A good test is to ask a friend who is not an assessment professional to read your article and point out areas that are confusing or unclear. This “reality check” is an important step in making sure that what you have written is the same thing as what you meant to say. This is a perfect opportunity to check your manuscript against the Do’s and Don’ts in table 1.

Check your story for basic flaws that can be the difference between a mediocre article and a stunning masterpiece. During the revision process, it is usually necessary to read through the article several times in order to check for specific types of problems. An effective basic approach is to:

- Perform a general read-through to make sure everything makes sense and that you have caught obvious problems. Identify words and phrases that sound awkward and look for other ways to say the same thing. Check any questionable words using a dictionary or thesaurus.
- Search for typos and basic grammar problems using a spell-check utility.
- Perform another read-through to check for grammar and style errors. If necessary, you can recruit someone to assist you with this step.
- Perform yet another read-through to look for exaggerations and extreme words (e.g., gazillion, all, none, always, never). Consider modifying such words to be more realistic—unless of course what you are saying is ALWAYS, ABSOLUTELY true and will NEVER change in a GAZILLION-MILLION years.
- If you haven’t given up in despair, check that pronouns (e.g., it, they, them, him, her) clearly refer back to the correct person, group, or thing. Here’s an example: Mr. Jones,
the field appraiser, had a long day and so did his office support person, Mr. Smiffly. He was tired and ready to go home. Does “He” refer to the field appraiser or Mr. Smiffly? Fixing vague pronouns will add to the clarity of your writing.

Finally, if you want to add a little more spice to your article, you can add quotes from historical or notable figures to establish the context of your topic. If you can relate your writing to a quote from a notable person it can add to the final result. Quotes are easily accessible from reference books such as Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations (Bartlett 2002).

You can also find numerous sources for quotes on the Internet such as http://www.brainyquote.com and http://www.quoteshead.com. Also check the cover story in the February issue of F&E, “A Brief History of the Property Tax,” for other useful references to sources for quotes.

Robert Louis Stevenson, author of the classics Treasure Island (1882), Kidnapped (1887), and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), provided a perspective regarding the use of clichés when he said “Man is a creature who lives not upon bread alone, but primarily by catchwords.” It can be difficult to avoid the use of catchwords so an author should be vigilant about seeking out tired or repetitive phrases and removing them during the self-editing process.

The Ultimate Manuscript Test

When your article is the best you can make it, have a friend read your story. This accomplishes two important things. You get valuable suggestions to improve your writing, and you find out just how good your friendship really is. If you are nervous about others reading your writing, then try reading it out loud to an assembly of your relatives. Nothing will get you past author’s jitters quicker than the brutally candid evaluations offered by this tough group.

Table 1. Do’s and Don’ts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do’s</th>
<th>Don’ts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use examples and comparisons (e.g., like, such as, for example).</td>
<td>Don’t use off-color and sexist humor. It has no place in any professional publication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be specific.</td>
<td>Don’t make personal references and judgmental statements about others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include photos and illustrations.</td>
<td>Don’t use clichés, and coined phrases. They can be hazardous to your manuscript. You need clichés in your writing like you need a hole in the head! Don’t let them define your writing style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include tables and figures to relate organized information.</td>
<td>Don’t use words that exaggerate or express questionable extremes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State your position positively.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create context using historical facts or related information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use anecdotes and quotes to support your story.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include references for source information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide definitions for terms that may be unfamiliar to your readers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spell out acronyms the first time they are mentioned.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check your facts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use your spell-check utility and then proofread your article.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask someone who matters to critique your work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Submitting Your Story

At last you have your manuscript complete and ready to go. All that remains is to send it to the editor and wait by the phone (or computer) to hear if it will be accepted. During the initial editing process there are several steps that need to happen before you are immortalized in print. First, your article is sent out to at least one and usually two or more reviewers. These members of the IAAO Editorial Review Board perform a basic check of your article to determine if it is technically accurate, reflects sound thinking, and contains information of interest to IAAO members. Once the article is reviewed, the notes are forwarded back to you, the author, so you can address any suggestions that the reviewers have made. This first round of peer review is an invaluable feedback tool that provides you with real-world suggestions on ways to improve your article and fix weak points. Now that you are on a roll, it is a simple matter to fix flaws, fill in missing details, and further support and strengthen your ideas.

Once the review process is done, you may also get an e-mail from the editor, asking questions and recommending presentation and writing style changes. Interacting with an editor can be a helpful way for an author to learn, from a professional, some of the tricks of the trade.

Conclusion

Finally, your work is done. You have put your heart and soul into your writing and you have survived the process. You emerge from your self-imposed writer’s exile to find out if your family is still speaking to you. All that remains is to await the arrival of the next issue of F&E and bask in the glory from your newfound avocation. Already, you feel the new ideas stream into your consciousness—as you confidently plan your next article!
Author’s Note
While writing this article, I followed the writing process as it is explained above.

Just as every psychoanalyst should have access to the services of another psychoanalyst, every editor should have access to the services of another editor. I would like to thank Sandra Patterson, editor, for her expertise and invaluable suggestions during the editing process. Her guidance and candid comments made this a better article. The Publications & Marketing staff looks forward to doing the same with your article.

References
http://www.brainyquote.com
http://www.quoteshead.com

Chris Bennett is the Director of Publications & Marketing for IAAO. He has extensive business writing experience and has written articles on association management topics. Chris has worked in the association management business for 23 years.

Other Publication Opportunities?
In “How to Write an Article—Putting your Ideas On Paper,” we looked at writing for Fair & Equitable magazine. There are also other IAAO publications that aspiring authors can write for. Knowing the differences between each authoring choice can help you to better craft your article for the specific audience.

IAAO and the International Property Tax Institute jointly publish the Journal of Property Tax Assessment & Administration. It is oriented to lengthier, more academic and research-oriented articles that are usually about more serious topics. If you tend to write lengthy analytical articles that are filled with charts, tables, and a significant list of references, then this is the forum for you. Authors for this publication are required to have established credentials and advanced knowledge about their chosen topic. If you are a writer with significant practical work experience, then you may want to consider submitting an article to the managing editor or a member of the Communications Committee for consideration in this program. Writing at this level involves a more rigorous review process and a more lengthy development timeline than what is required for Fair & Equitable. More about writing for the Journal will be covered in a future article.

IAAO also produces educational textbooks about specific topics useful to assessment professionals. Established authors are usually invited to write about a specific topic for which there is an existing, and established, need.

IAAO textbooks are designed as a reference resource. The information contained in them is designed for long-term use. Occasionally, authors have proposed book projects that the Communications Committee has considered for publication. If you have a topic that you think might fit in this category, contact a member of the Communications Committee and discuss it with them. You can contact a committee member by accessing the committee directory under the leadership tab on the IAAO Web site, www.iaao.org.

Another path towards getting published is to prepare and submit a presentation for the IAAO Annual Conference (or similar professional events). This is a great forum for presenting new ideas and getting feedback from your peers. The process of submitting your presentation idea to the conference content committee, getting it accepted, and preparing it for presentation can be very exciting and rewarding. You will get positive feedback from the committee about the viability of your topic and invaluable feedback from the audience when you make your presentation.

If you write your conference presentation in a narrative style, or if it can be adapted to a narrative style, then you should consider preparing it with eventual publication in mind. Once your ideas have gone through the somewhat less formal peer review process that an audience provides, it’s time to go back to your office and incorporate all of the great suggestions you received and start writing and revising for print. Eventually, you may accumulate so much knowledge from talking to others that you will come to be regarded as a specialist on your particular writing topic.

Call for Reviewers
Would you like to participate in IAAO’s publishing process but are fresh out of writing ideas? Don’t despair. We still need your expertise on the IAAO Editorial Review Board. If you have technical editing experience or are knowledgeable in a specific topic area, you can help colleagues strengthen their writing by offering your valuable insight. Contact Chris Bennett at bennett@iaao.org for further details.