

Your Moment of Zen: An Article on Writing Articles

By Mitchell Stephenson

Have you ever been interested in writing articles for an actuarial publication, but not sure where to start? Do you think it's not something you have the skills to do? Well, it may not be as hard as you think. Many articles written on forums such as LinkedIn, or in publications like The Stepping Stone, follow a basic cadence, which, if you see it enough, can help guide you to publish your own work. Once you've got the cadence, you only need a good idea to get you started.

If you're on the fence about contributing to a future publication, consider this quote from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, regarding writing: "Anything is better than stagnation." Or perhaps this gem from W. Somerset Maugham, a British playwright, novelist and short story writer, who said: "There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are." Fortunately, there are some guidelines you can follow if you want to write a short article. Here are some of them:

- Capture the reader's attention in the opening of the piece through a question, or statement they may find relevant. Many of today's news and publications are read online, and it is helpful to create an opening sentence that will draw people in, or make them want to click on it.
- Follow your opening with a fact, some statistics, or quote from a relevant source to add credibility to your piece. It is always good, especially for an audience of actuaries, to provide some background and evidence about how you are presenting your case and drawing conclusions.
- Give some clear, tangible steps for addressing the problem you identified in the beginning of the piece, in the form of three to five bullets, or short statements. These should each stand alone as a separate piece of advice, guidance, or supporting evidence of the main conclusion you are looking to draw. If you create too many bullets, the reader may lose interest, and if you include too few, he or she may decide the piece is not substantial enough.
- Finish with a solid conclusion that briefly summarizes the context, ties it together, and gives the reader confidence that he or she will walk away having read something that addressed the initial opening statement. Make the reader feel optimistic that the problem you identified at the onset can be addressed through the outlined steps.

If you follow this approach, you can take almost any topic of interest and turn it in to a brief article. Keep it simple, focused, and on point. You may find that the words flow more easily than you suspected or that you already knew what you wanted to say, and only needed to organize it. Most importantly – just try. In the words of Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, "You, yourself, will never rest until you've tried!"

To submit an article for The Stepping Stone, contact: Jane Lesch at JLesch@soa.org.

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