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## **OWPG advice note: PITCHING to MAGAZINES**

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*You've got a great idea but how do you convert that into column centimetres and a cheque? Former TGO Deputy Editor John Manning has seen it all and guides us through the pitfalls. [Adapted from Outdoor Focus Autumn 2012]*

### **Perfect Pitch**

**Talented, likeable, punctual:** if you're any two of these, your work stands a good chance of being accepted for publication.

At last year's OWPG annual meeting I ran a workshop looking at how to successfully pitch ideas to the editors of some of the country's leading outdoor magazines. Having been deputy editor of one of them, TGO (The Great Outdoors Magazine) for 13 years I had a head start. Having been away from a production desk for five years, however, some of my ideas may be a tad archaic; but the principle of the opening paragraph should never fade.

I stumbled across the principle by chance, embedded in a diagram by fantasy author **Neil Gaiman**. It's the key to successful and continued relationships with magazines.

If you're talented and likeable, editors will forgive occasional late copy.

If you're likeable and punctual, the editor will appreciate your readiness and ability to produce work at short notice.

If your work is good and you turn it in on time, they won't care how unpleasant you are: you're helping to maintain the quality of their product without disrupting their schedules.

If you're all three – gifted, nice and on time – editors will regard you as the perfect freelance, and your children will never starve.

That simple formula nails the secret of getting regular work with the magazines – but there's still the capacity to put a little flesh on the bones. Before the workshop, I contacted editors of **TGO**, **BBC Countryfile Magazine** and **Walk** (the membership magazine of The Ramblers, the 100,000 circulation of which makes it the UK's highest-circulation walking title). These are titles I've freelanced for and which I imagine a good number of OWPG members aspire to contribute to. How do successful contributors wave feature ideas under their noses?

Even armed with the information in this advice note, bear in mind that each editor's preferences differ: it's worth contacting them to find out how they like material presented. A tedious chore, perhaps, if you've just written the finest magazine article imaginable; but, if presentation lets it down, its brilliance will remain unpublished forever.

Regard an approach to a publication as career development: if it helps get one piece published, the information will prove repeatedly useful as your relationship develops.

### **Write away?**

I like to think of OWPG members as hardened professionals whose success determines whether their families eat or starve this month. Time, therefore, is money: if you have an idea for a cracking feature it doesn't always make sense to write it up straight away. That 2,000-word masterpiece might not fit the 1,000-word hole an editor is struggling to fill. His readers might demand a snappy, concise, factual piece packed out with bullet points, not your in-depth, flowery, first-hand account of a recent holiday.

Jo Tinsley, then features editor of BBC Countryfile Magazine, told me: "Please do not send a complete manuscript unsolicited. We prefer to commission features so that they fit our tone, style and word counts and [we] do not have time to rewrite or edit unsolicited articles."

Walk editor Dominic Bates agreed: "Don't send completed work: indicate how you could rewrite and adapt a finished piece specifically for my magazine."

If what you've written doesn't fit, editors won't use it, even if it's pure poetry. As Dominic put it: "No creative writing, poems or ditties."

### **Do your homework**

Magazines invest time and money researching their readership's proclivities and you'd be well advised to do the same: buy the magazines, study their style and prepare your work accordingly. A piece on solo climbs in Yosemite won't sell to Country Walking; a three-mile ramble in the Cotswolds won't interest Dirt Bike Rider.

Familiarise yourself with magazines and their contents before pitching, if only to save yourself the embarrassment of pushing an idea that's identical to one run recently. Magazines need to present readers with fresh and varied content every month (or every four weeks); regurgitating won't win them new readers.

Don't call the magazine and beg, demand, or plead for recent copies; you'll antagonise editors and be tagged as a freeloader. Do the legwork, in your local library or newsagent's.

### **Suits you Sir...**

Many magazines template their content within sections: tailor your work accordingly.

"One of the first questions I ask is where does the writer see it fitting within the magazine," said Jo Tinsley. "Start off by telling me 'It's for the My Country Life section and it would be perfect for May because blah blah...' and you've just made life a lot easier." You've also increased the saleability of your article.

Dominic Bates: "Target your pitch for a specific section of the magazine – this shows you've read it and that your article is relevant."

### **Contact**

The most common form of contact with editors today is email. Outline proposals concisely; few editors have the time they once did to consider all submissions.

TGO's Emily Rodway: "Outline the feature concept, give up to five sample photographs and perhaps examples of, or a link to, previous work."

Walk's Dominic Bates: "Amass three or four ideas in one bullet-pointed email, rather than sending me frequent emails every week. Don't send huge attachments – anything over 1Mb is likely to be deleted as it'll max out my inbox. The best pitches are short, to the point, and don't expect or demand a reply. With photographers, I prefer a brief biog, pitch and link to their online portfolio."

Jo Tinsley: "It's not very useful to send in pitches by post, as it can get lost, or just chat over the phone, as you can forget important details. Keep the pitch concise but make sure you tell us: where would your article fit within the magazine? What is its unique angle – why should we publish it? Who you are and why are you qualified to write on this subject? How would you illustrate your article? How would you structure the piece? Suggest a couple of box-outs, interviewees, ways to hook the reader..."

### **Rattle or roll?**

How long should you wait before following up a pitch?

"There's nothing more annoying than a pushy contributor," said Jo. "Busy editors often need a little push to get a commission written but I've had people harassing me in October to commission a feature that wouldn't go into the magazine until the next summer."

Dominic Bates agrees: "Don't call to check up on a pitch – it's time-consuming and frustrating if I'm feeling hassled. If I like an idea I'll acknowledge it in a brief email reply. But be patient – I forward plan by a year in some cases."

For Emily, however, a reminder can be a good thing: "It is definitely worth chasing up. Our workload is massive and it's hard to keep on top of emails, which can sometimes get filed for 'later attention'."

### **House style**

Publishing house staff numbers are being slashed all the time and sub-editors are increasingly rare. A speculative piece written in a magazine's house style is therefore attractive: it's virtually press-ready and might be accepted instantly to cover a sudden shortfall, even if it's not the greatest work ever written.

Study house style: does a magazine use metric or imperial measurements? Does it refer to OS, the OS, or the Ordnance Survey? A walk's distance or its length? *Start and finish* points, *start & finish* points or *start/finish* points? First person accounts or third person?

Win yourself a reputation for submitting in house style and an editor will look out for your work again.

### **Deliverance**

Preferences differ when it comes to your delivery method.

"For commissioned articles we tend to prefer a CD of pictures and words along with a printout of the copy, rather than an email submission," said Emily. "[For photographs] we definitely prefer digital, submitted at as high a resolution as available (although low res versions are useful for reference)."

Dominic prefers text as a Word file attached to an email – "anything else is unnecessary" – while images should be sent on a disc or via a weblink. "Contact sheets are redundant these days," he added.

How would I want unsolicited features to land on my desk if I was fortunate enough to sit at an editor's chair?

**Text-only features:** Word doc attached to a covering email

**Words & few pictures:** Word doc and high res images attached to a minimal number of emails

**Words & more pictures:** Word doc attached to a covering email; link to download high-res images via an online delivery system such as [YouSendIt](#) or [WeTransfer.com](#) (both free, WeTransfer currently accepts bigger files), or direct into the magazine's own ftp site.

**Words & many pictures:** an envelope in the mail containing:

Covering letter

Disc bearing all images & quick reference PDF contact sheets; text and captions as Word docs; other documents such as maps as PDFs

A4 print-outs of text and captions, one-sided, double spaced (not all editors want to sit at a screen while they consider submissions)

**Commissions:** I'd deliver everything digitally, with the editor's prior agreement. Text and captions would be sent as email attachments, images in a compressed folder via a delivery system such as YouSendIt. When YouSendIt delivers the download link to my email inbox, I forward a copy to the editor even though they should have already received an automatically generated copy from YouSendIt; there's no telling how efficient their office spam filter is.

If requested, I pop everything on a disc as back-up – editors notoriously fail to download image folders before YouSendIt's seven-day limit expires!

### **Pictures & captions**

- Provide captions for all images at the time of submission: offering to supply them later wastes production time and risks non-publication if you're not around at the crucial moment.
- Provide captions in a Word document: most editors are wordsmiths and won't necessarily have the software (or the knowledge) to access metadata.
- At the risk of contradicting Dominic, I'd include a contact sheet – either a print-out or a PDF – for editors who prefer to review speculative submissions away from their desks.
- If you trust the editor, send ready-to-use images rather than watermarked images or low-res samples. If she'd like to use one of them instantly as a cover and you're at the supermarket, the moment (and the dosh) is lost.

### **Golden Rules**

- Be aware of lead times: most monthlies are put together at least two months before their cover date.
- Look for topical hooks – anniversaries, current news stories, seasonal content.
- Be concise: outline pitches briefly and attractively, tell the editor where it will fit in the magazine, how it could be illustrated. Spare them having to think!
- Be honest – don't offer a 15-mile walk and deliver a 5-mile bumble.
- Be courteous – advise an editor if you're pitching the same idea to more than one title.
- Be more courteous – don't pitch the same idea to more than one title!
- Be fresh – you'll only get away with recycling copy for so long.
- Get the name and address right... I still receive emails which begin "Hi Jonathan, I love Country Walking to bits and have a feature idea..." No, I'm not Jonathan Manning.