

Writing columns in third person one way to eliminate bias

A “column” is not a news article, but it should contain news. A column is generally written with a personal tone, using the first and second person. A column, especially when written in first-person, often states an opinion. In most publications, a column also has a standard heading, called a title, and normally a by-line that identifies the column writer.

From 1990 to 2000, I wrote an opinion column that appeared in several southwest Missouri newspapers. In those columns, I clearly stated opinion. Starting in 2002, I was asked to begin writing a weekly column in the *Springfield News-Leader* entitled "Agriculture in the Ozarks." I write the *News-Leader* "column" as a third person news article, which makes it more like a news article with a by-line. It is more difficult to write in third person but I felt strongly about not wanting it to be perceived as “opinion,” and I wanted to be able to easily quote other topical experts.

If you want to be perceived as providing unbiased information, don't put it in an “opinion” column! It seems extreme, but that is why I recommend to extension specialists (who present unbiased, research-based information) that if they write a dedicated "column" in a local newspaper, they should use “third person.” Otherwise, it is too easy and too tempting to let statements that are pure opinion make it into print.

Newspaper readers have been conditioned to believe that columns (like those on the editorial page) present opinions. If polled, I think this would be the belief of a majority of readers even if the "column" they were reading was from an extension specialist and specific to the specialist's area of work.

By David L. Burton
Civic Communication Specialist
University Outreach and Extension
(417) 862-9284, ext. 16

When writing a column, DO:

- Give the reader timely, helpful information.
- Develop a structure (like questions and answer) and keep it.
- Write on a regular schedule.
- Use simple, short sentences and paragraphs.
- Try to use local names and places.
- Let others speak for you by use of quotes and references.
- Write in first person and include opinion in a column but never include opinion in a third-person news story. At the same time, columns don't have to contain opinion.

When writing a column, DON'T:

- Use technical or complex words.
- Talk about one topic constantly.
- Include too much detail or material; don't simply exhaust a subject.
- Refer to yourself as a third person (this author, your reporter) or quote yourself (Jimmy Jones said). Instead use **mine**.

David L. Burton, Civic Communication Specialist
University of Missouri Extension,
833 Boonville, Springfield, Mo. 65802
Tel: (417) 862-9284
E-mail: burtond@missouri.edu

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI
 Extension

University of Missouri Extension does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability or status as a Vietnam era veteran in employment or programs.

Writing a column



Hints for
writing a first-
person column

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI
OUTREACH AND EXTENSION

How do you write a column?

Before writing a column, think about purpose, audience, content and structure.

Purpose: Why are you writing a column? Are you entertaining, informing or educating? Be sure and write with your purpose in mind.

Audience: Who are you reaching (consider topics and publication)? Write in the language of your audience, at their level, about things the audience needs or wants to know.

Content: What will your column discuss? Columns should be based on facts and should be accurate. Personal columns may be informal; yet accuracy and sourcing material counts.

Structure: There are other types of columns besides the personal column. They can be question and answer, how-to-do-it pieces or community calendars.

Styleguide available online:

A version of the University Outreach and Extension style guide, which provides a set of basic information helpful to anyone writing a news release or story, can be found online at: <http://outreach.missouri.edu/>

SAMPLES OF GREAT MEDIA RELEASES

Get your free e-mailed subscription to the Southwest Region News Service by contacting David Burton via e-mail at Burtond@missouri.edu.



Tips on column writing

- Write the way you talk. Don't discard good English usage and grammar by being friendly and informal.
- Try to uncover an opening that will catch the interest of your readers.
- Use a variety of material, not just one subject over and over.
- Write about people. When using subject matter, try to tell the story through the experiences of local people.
- Write simply. Avoid technical or difficult words, long sentences, and long paragraphs.
- Don't weigh your column down with too much detail. Try to stimulate interest in a subject, but don't exhaust the subject.
- Jot down ideas, names, figures, impressions, in a note pad while visiting other people and places. This provides the very best column material.
- Be timely. Keep up with the effect of weather conditions, seasons, pointing out the significance of these conditions locally.
- Remember the people you're talking to and give them information that will benefit them in a way they can understand.
- Always get your column to the editor on schedule.

What about editorials?

An editorial is a column written by the editor of a publication for the purpose of expressing an opinion. There are several different types:

The **Persuasive Editorial** (most common) attempts to sway the reader to a particular point of view. It may support or oppose a current view or action, and then recommend a course of action.

The **Explanatory Editorial** is tied to an event, an action taken, or a proposed action. The main purpose is to explain causes of an event, or reasons behind a proposed action and possible effects of the situation. In many instances, the editorial tells what has or will happen, or it may call for further study of the situation.

The **Critical Editorial** (which is easily abused) should use a reasonable tone, logical thinking, and offer solutions, suggestions, or alternatives. The weak ones, are irrational, harsh, poorly researched, and offer no solutions or alternatives.

Members of a community often do commendable deeds, yet receive little or no recognition. A **Laudatory Editorial** praises or thanks an individual or group for accomplishments or actions.

The **Editorial Commentary** usually takes the form of an editor's column however, the commentary can represent the staff's opinion and be unsigned (printed without a byline).

A **Leadership Editorial** seeks to initiate programs, actions, new policies, or changes in attitudes or direction.

To keep an editorial honest, be sure to do your homework. Know what you're talking about before you state any opinion. Nothing can beat taking the time to do good solid research on a topic prior to writing an editorial.