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FINDING AND REFINING GREAT IDEAS



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Chapter 1

Finding ideas



It's important to choose the right topic for your writing. Choose topics you feel strongly about. Your writing will be better because your heart will be in it.

From your life

1. What have you learned?

- **Practical skills.** How to do or make something. Example: Teach your children to pray; explain how to lead a Bible study.
- **Relational skills.** Examples: Encourage your spouse; confront someone's sin.

- **Lessons from Scripture.** Examples: What you learned from the book of Ruth; what the Bible says about marriage.
- **Lessons from personal experience.** Examples: What I learned about forgiving; 10 things you shouldn't say to a single person.

2. What would you like to learn about?

- **A topic in Scripture.** Example: How to pray effectively.
- **A new experience/skill.** Example: How to teach your child how to go to school on the bus alone.

- **An event or person in history.** Example: A Christian imprisoned during communist years.

3. What do you feel strongly about?

- **What do you hear yourself talking about with great emotion in your voice?**

From your relative, friends, and people at church

1. What are they struggling with? Examples: Unemployment; rebellious teenagers.

2. What questions are they asking? Examples: How can I have joy when my life is so hard? Is God fair? Why should I forgive others?

3. What are they talking about? Example:

Managing money.

4. Do they have a story or testimony that would interest or encourage others?

From the news

1. How is this event affecting believers?

Examples: Threat of war—How to deal with fear; why God doesn't protect all Christians; when is it right to fight?

2. What issues does this event bring up?

Example: News event: A controversial bill is passed. Related issue: How will this affect the church?

3. Is there someone I could interview?

- A well-known person. For example, how does your denomination's leader react to the event?
- An ordinary person affected by the event?

4. What questions does this statistic or trend produce? Example: The news says divorce is increasing. You could write about: What the Bible says about divorce; how to keep your marriage happy; how divorce affects children.

Chapter 2

What to consider when selecting a topic



- **Who is your audience?** For whom are you writing?
- **What are their needs and interests?**
- **What is their preferred style of writing?**
- **What is the preferred length of article?**
Can the topic adequately be handled in the appropriate space?
- **Do you know why they would want to read about your topic?**

Chapter 3

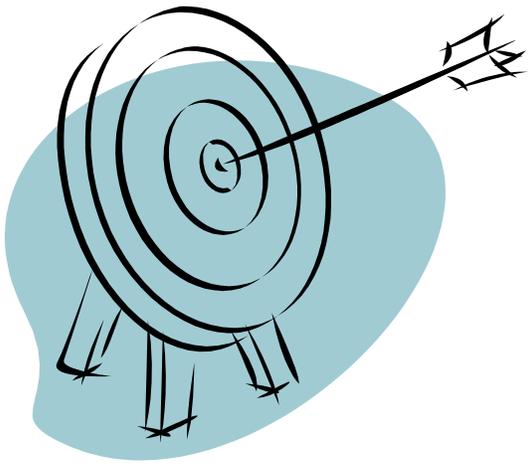
Characteristics of the topic



- **It should be worthwhile**, not trivial.
- **It should be a subject you know about or can find out about.**
- **It should be something your audience cares about.**
- **It should have “take-away” value**—Something your reader can take to heart.
- **It should NOT be a sermon**—Material meant to be spoken is in a different style than written material. It must be completely rewritten.

Chapter 4

Refine ideas to narrow the focus



- **Contains one central idea.**
You should be able to state the message of the article in one sentence. Ask yourself, what do I want the reader to learn?
- **Can be covered adequately in the space you have.**
- **Will fit the purpose and be interesting** to readers of your magazine.

Example of narrowing the focus:

How to pray → How to pray for missionaries →
10 Scriptures to pray for missionaries

Chapter 5

What makes an idea significant?

Everything put into a magazine must be of interest to as many readers as possible.

So, as you ponder the manuscript, think about interest factors. Here's a list, with explanation:



1. Competition: In sports and business, in meeting production quotas and matching votes, the human inclination to compete is shared not only by those who act, but also by those who watch (and read). Include the story of a competition or simply relate it as your story, and readers will be drawn to it.

2. Conflict: Whether between or among individuals, groups, associations, nations, or blocks of nations, a mental or military or fiscal or emotional struggle-conflict will draw attention to an article.

- 3. Controversy:** Whenever people disagree or argue—if that debate has at least a potential impact on others, those others suddenly become interested.
- 4. Consequence:** If readers consider the story important, they'll give it their time. Family and community, home and school, food and shelter, jobs and leisure, health and looks, ethnicity and electricity, weather and water are of consequence.
- 5. Familiar or famous persons:** The President makes a plea for donations of human organs; or five movie stars and entertainers perform to save the barracuda—and suddenly a public takes notice.
- 6. Fear:** It's a negative, granted, and many folks aren't drawn to negatives. But those shadows and forces, visible and invisible, that threaten or harm us definitely attract our attention.

- 7. Heart stirring:** The race against death from a killer disease; a homeless child finding love and a family; a jobless and aging couple receiving comfort or help. These may not be important stories, but they're magnets for most readers.
- 8. Humor:** If the situation calls for it and writer/editor knows how to handle it, why not? Humor makes people laugh or chuckle, and that's good.
- 9. Problem:** Discover something that your readership deems a problem, and you've got yourself a built-in audience for the article that covers it.
- 10. Progress:** We're thrilled by it, or at least encouraged. Progress against disease and raging elements, against unemployment and illiteracy, against discomfort and hatred makes us feel better. We like to read about what makes us feel better.

11. Solution or success: The victory, the triumph over odds, the race won, the mess cleaned, the confusion cleared: Editors should seek to chronicle such encouraging events.

12. The unknown: The mysteries of a vast universe and mini-micro-subatomic things intrigue us. From ocean deep to heaven high we're inquisitive about what we do not know.

13. The unusual: The old "man bites dog" principle that journalists have traditionally followed still works. A cheating business magnate is sentenced to endow a chair in ethics at a near-by university; a girl writes the president of Russia about peace and love and is invited to see him.

Of course these things interest us. The eccentricities, the departures from the norm, make pleasurable or adventurous reading.



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14. Wants and needs: Anything your readers believe they want or actually do want or need they'll read about. You can count on it.

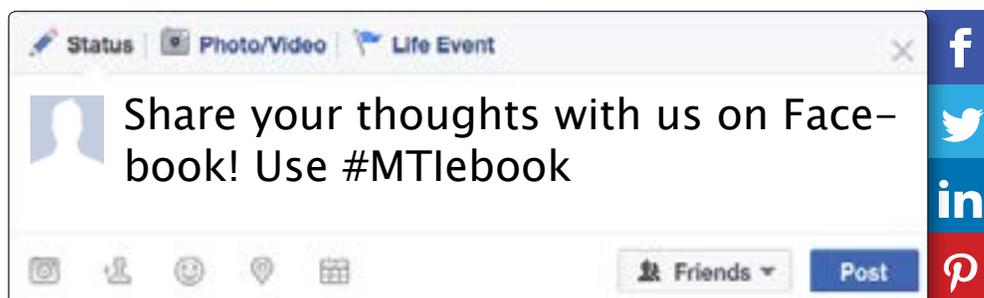
From "Words" by Peter P. Jacobi, FOLIO magazine, April 1984.

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Beyond the book

After each major section in Chapter 1 (from your life, from your relatives and friends, from the news), write down a few ideas under each category. Tip: Carry a notebook with you to write down ideas when they come to you.

More information on writing for magazines can be found in the “Writing Effective Magazine Articles” training manual. To purchase the complete manual, visit: www.magazinettraining.com.



About the author



Susan Maycinik Nikaido served as editor and senior editor of the award-winning *Discipleship Journal* for over 15 years. She has published articles in magazines such as *Today's Christian Woman*, *Decision*, *Leadership*, *Campus Life*, *New Man*, and *Christian History*. She has written for a daily newspaper and has worked as an editor at Purdue University, editing books and promotional materials, and at Indiana University, editing study guides for correspondence courses. She is the author of the Bible study guides *Growing Deeper with God* and *Building Better Relationships*. She served on the board of the Evangelical Press Association and drafted that organization's guidelines for working with freelance writers. Susan holds a B.A. in journalism from Indiana University and an M.A. in communications from Wheaton College Graduate School. She has taught writing and editing seminars in the U.S. and internationally, and has also written a manual on magazine editing for Magazine Training International.

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