Writing the personal experience article
Magazine Training International

...encourages, strengthens, and provides resources to Christian magazines in the Developing World.
“Writing the Personal Experience Article” is a unit in the “Writing Effective Magazine Articles” manual. The entire manual may be purchased at www.magazinetraining.com.
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What is a personal experience article?
What is a personal experience article?

A personal experience article is one in which the author tells the story of something she/he learned from a personal experience. It may be the author’s experience or someone else’s. The focus of the article is on the lesson that was learned. The article can be humorous, sad, informative, or thought-provoking.

The purpose

The personal experience article should not focus on the author, but on the reader. What experience can you share that will improve readers’ lives, relationships, skills, or knowledge? The purpose of the article is to reach people and touch them in a meaningful way by relating an experience, conveying an idea, passing on a lesson, making a statement, or entertaining.

While it may be easier to research a topic instead of exposing your past, readers like to hear tales of first person triumph and struggle.
What is a personal experience article?

Preparation

Study other published personal experience articles (see sample in Chapter 4) for clues on structure, topics, voice, and style.

As you prepare:

1. Ask yourself if the story is important

2. Discover the answers, or takeaways, you want to convey.

3. Write the piece. Sometimes it can be difficult to go deeply into a personal experience. So write your story and then take time to reformat the structure of the article. Getting your story on paper may give you the clarity needed to draw out the importance to readers and takeaways to emphasize.
What is a personal experience article?

Ask yourself if the personal experience you wish to write about is one that the reader:

- Might wish to share or enjoy
- Can learn or benefit from
- Might wish to avoid
- Can use to cope with a difficulty

Getting your story on paper may give you clarity.
CHAPTER 2

The structure of an effective personal experience article
An effective personal experience article can be told in one of two ways:

1. **Chronological**—The events are told in the order they happened. *Example: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 →*

2. **Flashback**—The article begins with a scene of crisis, then goes backward in time to show the circumstances that led up to the crisis, then moves forward and shows how the crisis was resolved. *Example: 3 - 1 - 2 - 4 - 5*

   a. **Point of Crisis**: Description of a dramatic moment that symbolizes or draws attention to the problem. *Example: In an article on forgiveness, it might be the moment the author learned of a betrayal.*

   b. **Flashback/Background**: Describes the events or situation that led up to the point of crisis, then leads up to the moment of insight.
c. **Moment of Insight**: The author comes upon the truth that will help her with the crisis.

* Insight can come from:
  — Something the author realizes, or feels that God is saying
  — Scripture
  — Someone’s advice

* It may be a process instead of one moment

* There can be more than one insight, if more than one lesson was learned.

d. **Resolution**: How you applied the insight to the problem.

e. **Lessons Learned**:

* Summarize what you learned from the situation OR

* Tell how the insight has affected your life OR

* Predict how the solution is going to affect your life.
The structure of an effective personal experience article

- **POINT OF CRISIS (LEAD)**
- **FLASHBACK/BACKGROUND**
- **MOMENT OF INSIGHT**
- **RESOLUTION**
- **LESSONS LEARNED**
Think of what kind of personal experience articles would be appropriate for your magazine. *Ex: Salvation testimony, how they learned to forgive, or overcome sinful attitudes, or trust God, etc.*

Write a sentence or two describing each of the following:
1. The point of crisis
2. What you would include in the flashback/background
3. Your moment of insight
4. What you would write under lessons learned
Typical topics expressed through a personal experience article include:

- Salvation
- Dealing with sinful attitudes
- Dealing with problems

Tip:

1. Choose a situation that many readers (1) can identify with or (2) would be curious about.
2. Before beginning, focus on the lesson(s) you want the reader to learn. Reduce this to one sentence per lesson.
3. Tell the story using fiction techniques: describe scenes in detail, repeat dialogue, etc.
4. Describe the emotions you experienced as you dealt with the problem.
5. Focus on teaching the reader—not on expressing yourself.
Personal experience articles offer hope. For this reason, you should have concluded your own experience before writing about it. Know how the story ends. If you’ve reached a point of resolution you can help the reader reach it as well. The article should provide an attainable goal—an experience the reader can attain—with steps to achievement.

Some painful or traumatic experiences may only be endured, but not yet concluded. In order to write about them you at least need a sense of closure. Readers want to hear from someone else who understands their pain, who knows how it feels, and can offer heartfelt advice and comfort.
Regardless of the topic, a personal experience article can be lighthearted or serious. Some experiences need to be handled with sensitivity, while others can be looked back on and laughed at despite their severity.

The experience you share doesn’t have to be life-changing, earthshaking, or catastrophic. It can be simple. If something is going well in your life, share it with your readers. They may be wishing they could say the same.

Bring your unique angle to the topic, reveal your heart, convey your personal discovery, and show the road to victory.
CHAPTER 4

Sample personal experience article
Tears ran down my face as I stared into the mirror, studying each imperfection with critical eyes: my short, misshapen legs, stubby fingers and knobby wrists. I was disgusted with my 12-year-old body, several inches under four feet. Because I was born with achondroplasia—the most common form of dwarfism—even getting a drink of water was a chore for me.

Drag a chair (scrape!) across the kitchen floor. Climb up to open the cabinet. Grab a glass and climb down. Another horrendous scrape to the freezer for ice. Climb up. Balance to reach for ice. Climb down. Drag the chair back. The rest of my family could have drained their glasses before I had moistened my lips. This task—and so many others like it—frustrated and discouraged me.

I had watched with envy as my seven-year-old sister grew perfect long legs and shot past me, while a huge, heavy brick seemed to press on my head, refusing to let me grow like everyone else. I felt almost claustrophobic in my body. Friends carried on conversations above my head. In the first grade kids began calling me names like “midget.” I quickly got tired of being asked “How’s the weather down there?” and struggled to give cute, funny answers.

“Look, Mommy, look at her!” I heard at the mall, and eyes like laser beams followed me wherever I went. At times like that I felt self-conscious and struggled to maintain steady control over every movement of my body. I smiled, but inside I fumed as a tempest formed in my heart.
Sample personal experience article

Sometimes when people stared I pretended it was because I was beautiful. Yet now, as I looked in the mirror, I gave up my pretending and cried bitter tears, frustrated that I was born ugly. Pretending I was beautiful was just a game I had been playing.

This was how my entire life was going to be. I would always need a stool to reach things. I would always have to look up at my friends’ faces instead of straight at them. I would always be stared at...and the only one who could have prevented or changed this was God.

My stomach boiled in anger at him for allowing this to happen. Spitting words like fiery nails, I angrily demanded, “Why me? God, why am I so small? Why didn’t you allow me to look like everyone else?” I was furious with him. It was so unjust! I heard other girls complain about their bodies. Yet they had bodies I would have loved to have. I knew I needed something to believe in, something to encourage me, but each day that image in the mirror stayed the same.

The summer of my thirteenth birthday came, bringing with it our church youth group’s yearly trip to camp at Forest Home. Tall, green pine trees greeted us as we drove up the mountain. Away from the city, immersed in the beauty of God’s creation, my spirits began to lighten. We walked roads dappled in golden sunlight, and as the light sneaked past the branches of the trees, God’s love began to make its way back into my heart.

It was Thursday, nearing the end of a wonderful week, when I joined other girls at a morning discussion session. We sat together and listened as Julie, one of the counselors, began speaking. As the breeze braided her hair, she told of a time when she was saddened by the fact that her younger sister was prettier than she was, and guys Julie liked noticed her sister more. “Our bodies are a gift, like...”
jewelry handmade just for us by a best friend,” I heard Julie say. “If we reject the way God has made us, it is as if we had said to our best friend, ‘Take it back! I don’t like it! Why didn’t you paint it blue instead of pink?’”

Julie stressed that God has a purpose in allowing us to look the way we do. With fingers still curled around my pen, I stopped taking notes. I sat spellbound. Could something that seemed to be a curse actually be a gift from God? I was saddened as I realized how I had treated his gift. The warmth of the sun embraced me, and I began praying silently, Lord I’m so sorry for being angry at you. It hurt me knowing I’ll have to go through life this way. I didn’t understand that you have a reason and that my body is a gift from you.

Today I can actually thank God for allowing me to be a little person. He has promised that for those who love the Lord, hardships can be used by him for good. I understand what it’s like to be faced with the problems that come with being different. Rejection, surgeries, and other difficulties related to my dwarfism have taught me to be more understanding and encouraging, able to lend a sympathetic ear. My body, though different from the world’s view of a gift, is truly a special gift from God because it has made me become a loving person. When others stare, I still smile at them, but this smile comes from my heart. I don’t need to pretend that they stare because I’m beautiful. I know I am. Now when I look in the mirror, I know God the creator is looking at me too, and together we both see the same thing. Someone beautiful.

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Publishing resources available from Magazine Training International

Manuals (available in print or in PDF format on CD):

- **Managing the Magazine with Confidence and Skill**
  English Bulgarian
  Chinese (simplified) Chinese
  (traditional)
  Korean Romanian
  Russian Spanish

- **Advanced Business of Magazine Publishing**
  English Russian

- **Editing the Magazine**
  English Bulgarian
  Romanian

- **Design for Magazines**
  English Bulgarian
  Chinese (simplified) Chinese
  (traditional)
  Croatian Romanian
  Russian Spanish

- **Writing Effective Magazine Articles**
  English French
  Polish Romanian
  Russian

Audio/Visual resources:

- **DVD course: Managing the Magazine with Confidence and Skill**
  Subtitles available in:
  Chinese (simplified) Chinese
  (traditional)
  Russian Spanish

- **DVD course: Design for Magazines**
  Subtitles available in:
  Chinese (simplified) Chinese
  (traditional)
  Russian Spanish

- **MP3 audio course: Writing Effective Magazine Articles**