

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Non-Fiction Track

Step Two: Organizing Material and Making a To-Do List

Now that you've decided on what type of article you're going to write, you now need to narrow down a subject/topic and create an overall to-do list that you'll need to complete over the course of preparing to write your story.

1. Define a Subject

- Your topic needs to be broad enough that it appeals to many sorts of readers, while at the same time be specific enough so that the writer can adequately cover the entirety of the story within the space provided. For example, instead of an article over the US Army, a story over how a one-year tour of duty changed the life of a person just 14 months out of high school. Instead of a story about the government, a story about how major contributors to a local congressional campaign may have affected a voting decision in the US House of Representatives. These topics are much more specific and allow for precise investigations. Readers come away with increased knowledge about one aspect of a subject instead of having to search for meaning in an extremely broad article.

2. Identify a Message

- While your article should be well-researched and fact-driven, you still need to consider the message you wish to convey. This is something that you may only know in part now until you do more research. When you research a subject thoroughly, you may be surprised how a message often emerges as the article comes together. It's almost like it "reveals itself" to you. Thorough research brings on a true feel for a subject. You may find that your "gut feelings" were good ones.

3. Read Up on Your Subject

- First, explore what, if anything, has been written about the person, place, or thing. If a story on the subject already exists, check it out. What kind of perspective does the story take? Is there anything in it that's quote-worthy? What information can you use from this research? What information is still lacking?

4. Contact the Main Characters

- Once you've completed your initial research, you'll need to contact the people most central to the story. By conducting careful interviews with each source, you'll see patterns emerge. Ask for copies of any written documents that are important to your story. Check the statements of each source against the statements of others. Ask about discrepancies. What contrasts emerge?

5. Prepare an Outline

- After key issues have been identified, construct a rough outline of the story. We'll spend more time on this later after you have a chance to do some research, but for now you need a "jumping off" point of how you initially think the story will be structured. Of course, the most pressing issues will drive the story, but what information will help fill in the cracks and make the story as complete as possible? Consider the following three questions: 1) How will the story begin and how will it build? 2) are Facts present that facilitate writing the story a certain way? 3) What significant changes has the subject experienced?
6. **Use Strong Quotes**
- Strong quotes are an integral part of a good story. If a source says something controversial, sensitive, or highly insightful, put it to use in a quote where you can. A good quote adds punch to the story and let's the reader know that an issue really does exist. In a standard story, five to seven quotes can turn a dull piece into a compelling article.
7. **Tell a Good Story**
- Good writing is, ultimately, about good storytelling. The writer provides a comfortable narrative, using facts, quotes, and observation to craft a compelling tale. The piece should flow from one paragraph to the next and not wander aimlessly. This is why it'll be important for you to create a detailed outline before you begin writing: it will keep your writing focused and flowing well.

With these steps in mind, think through the logistics of what you'll need to specifically do to make your story come alive. In your journal or on your laptop create a to-do list to keep you focused over the coming days and make sure you've overturned all rocks you need to.