Legal Information Management, 24 (2024), pp. 175–179
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doi:10.1017/S1472669624000392

How to Write an Article

Abstract: Legal Information Management Co-Editor and experienced professional journalist and author **Mike Breslin** offers up some personal tips on writing an article, including how to plan, how to work through it in stages and how to write copy specifically for LIM.
Keywords: professional development; publishing

There's not much that's quite as scary as a blank screen – except perhaps tax returns or dentists dressed as clowns – and after more than 30 years of writing features even now I have to steel myself and take a deep breath before putting fingers to keyboard. So, I can well understand why it might be even more worrying for someone who does not do this for a living, someone who has perhaps not previously written much beyond essays at university and reports at work.

With the above in mind, in this article I intend to walk you through the process I use in the hope that it may help. It's very much my way of doing things, which I've developed over the years, so it might not work for everyone, but hopefully there will be something in this that will help you start and finish that article you're longing to write – or maybe promised someone you will write. I will also include some pointers on writing for LIM.

THE SKELETON

My regular writing differs greatly from the sort of thing we publish in LIM, but when it comes to getting down to work and organising the process, it's pretty much the same job. To begin with, I need to gather material. As I mostly write about motorsport – and sometimes travel and regular motoring – for me this usually means a series of interviews, usually conducted at a race circuit, or at a racing team's base or over the telephone or Zoom etc. This will probably not be the case if you're writing something for LIM, though, as it's your expertise that we're after.

But even if you have all the info in your head, rather than on a digital recorder or a pad, you still need to organise it before you set it out in an article. This means planning your piece. There are a number of ways of doing this, some people like to map it out in a notebook, for instance, while others will do a spider diagram or something similar, or simply a list of all the points they intend to make. But I actually plan as a part of the writing process. By this I don't mean that I make it up as I go along, it's more that I always get the intro and second paragraph down first, and then I sketch out the rest of the article on the screen from there in what I've always called a skeleton – I'm not sure why, though maybe it's because I then add the 'body' of the piece, 'flesh' it out if you will.

I will usually give far more thought to the first paragraph – the intro – and the second, and the link between them, than any other part of the feature. Indeed, when I've written these two paragraphs I always feel that the hard part is done, and it's just a matter of knitting the information together from there. Which is where the skeleton clatters into the picture.

The skeleton is just a series of notes showing how the feature will progress and the points it will pass through, and once this is done I will often put the work aside for a day (if the deadline allows). Below is an example, which is the early stages of a short feature on the INEOS Grenadier and its suitability for use in Africa that I wrote for a magazine that specialises in African travel.

There was a time when you were either a Land Rover Defender type or a Land Cruiser type. Feelings ran deep, too, with many an argument around African campfires extolling the virtues of coil springs (Defender) over leaf springs (Toyota). This has recently become a little academic, though, because since 2016 Land Rover no longer makes the Defender – well, not as we know it, there is a new car bearing the name but to be honest it's more likely to be seen on the school run than fording a river.

But among the many people sad to see the demise of the original was Sir Jim Ratcliffe and, being a billionaire, he was able to do something about it; starting a company to make his own Defender-inspired car, the INEOS Grenadier, which hit the road in 2022.

Link to but it's not the road that matters, it's the bush ….

Link from challenging off-road course to solid structure …

Link from reliability to BMW engines (and then the quote from KT) …

Link from torque to off-road prowess …

Link with counterpoint that road performance still required then KT quote …

Link from quality to price …

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669624000392 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Link to aesthetics and then quote from RP …

Link to only time will tell conclusion.

By leaving it for a day after writing the introduction, second paragraph and skeleton plan I've given myself a little reward, in a way, and it's always good to know that the hard part is done and it's now just a matter of colouring it all in. And that's important. Allow yourself plenty of time – we usually give people very generous deadlines for LIM – and break up the process into manageable lumps. Now I know some people say they can't do this. They insist that they need to leave it until the last minute – just like with an essay at college – otherwise they simply can't get down to it. That's fair enough, but it's far less stressful if you break down the process, and if you really do need the pressure then why not put your own deadline on to each and every part of that process?

Related to the above, a good way to get yourself to spill the words is to promise yourself a reward if, for example, you finish one stage of the article: a glass of wine, a cup of coffee or a bar of chocolate – or why not all three?

The different parts of the process require different skills, too, and it really does make a difference if you approach each with the right hat on: your writing beret, your editing trilby or your fact checking flat cap (these are figurative, but feel free to wear them if you think it will help). This is another reason why it's good to break up the process over a few days. When you write you can use the more creative part of your brain, go with the flow, but then the editing is more sober: does that paragraph really belong there, why not move it up a bit? That bit sounds nice, but does it actually contribute anything? Is this too controversial; should I lose it?

On that last point, incidentally, the best sub editing advice I ever had was 'if in doubt, leave it out'. Fact checking is more sober still, but I don't feel I need to talk legal information professionals through that.

So, the process for me, if time allows, will be something like this:

1. Write first and second paragraph and skeleton plan and leave for a day
2. Add the flesh to the skeleton – the linked paragraphs – and leave for a day
3. Edit, check facts and cut down the material to required word count and leave for a day
4. Final read through and polish and then file copy

This is in an ideal world and there's usually not the time for all of these steps on different days, to be honest. That said, if I have a few features on the go at the same time this approach works very well. Related to this, one very useful tip I was given many years ago was to always try to finish the piece so that you have the time to leave it for one night at least before filing, then give it a final check in the morning before you send it in. You will be surprised how much you will be able to improve the article after sleeping on it.

Another useful tip, when it comes to the all-important first paragraph, try deleting it and see what you're left with. Very often the second paragraph will stand alone as an introduction, and with a little tweaking will be a far more effective opening to your article. You will be amazed at how often this works, too.

One more piece of advice, read it out aloud. There's a rhythm to a good article, and you really need to hear it.

VOICE

Related to the above, it's interesting that some of the best pieces we've published in LIM since we've been at the helm over the last two years have been those based on papers presented at the BIALL Conference. These often read a little more naturally, and this is perhaps because they were originally conceived as talks. People like to feel they're in a conversation when they're reading, they like to imagine a real person is behind the piece – with the advent of ChatGPT this is possibly even more so now – so having a 'voice' is good. Again, by reading your piece out loud you will get an idea of how natural it all sounds.

Reading your piece out loud will also help highlight any clumsy passages – you trip over words as you speak in a way that you don't when you read – while you will also become acutely aware of how long your paragraphs are. There are really no set rules for this, beyond the fact that they should deal with distinct aspects of the article, but short paragraphs are certainly easier to digest.

This is important, too. You want your readers to get the message you're relaying, so make it easy for them. Smaller paragraphs are one way to help with the flow of the piece, as are paragraph links.

LINKS

A paragraph, however long or short it is, is still part of the larger piece and it's not just a matter of writing up the paragraphs as individual points without a connection to what's gone before or comes after, so it's always good to link them. Nothing turns a reader off more than one paragraph after another with no flow between them. Below is a nice example of a link (underlined).

…. but if I had one problem with it, it would be the aesthetics, particularly from the front. That said, it couldn't really be a direct copy of the Defender.

And that's the point, it's not a Defender. It's actually much better than the older car in very many ways …

It's worth mentioning here that conjunctions often make for good links, as in the example above, yet another reason to forget the very dated practice of not using these to start a paragraph or indeed a sentence. It's important not to overdo it, though, partly because it's always good to make sure that consecutive paragraphs don't start with the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669624000392 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same word – this is the sort of thing the reader will half notice, and it will hinder the flow of the article.

Paragraph links are not always easy, to be honest, especially when you're transitioning from one very distinct point to another, but for articles for LIM and similar publications there is another way of separating chunks of information on different themes, and that's by using subheadings or 'crossheads'. These can also be used with links, too, if you like. Crossheads also help from a design standpoint, breaking up dense blocks of text, and they are especially useful if the piece has no images. The next paragraph starts with a crosshead – now there's a stroke of luck!

CONCLUSION

No, we're not at the end already (sorry!), but when you do get there it's nice to finish with something that completes the circle, by referring to the intro, or with a quote that encapsulates the essence of the feature. But for LIM a synopsis of the article will also work well, with some conclusions or thoughts on the most important points that have been covered. Often a crosshead of 'conclusion', like the confusing one above, is useful, too.

ABSTRACTS

For magazines and newspapers, the earliest stages of planning will also mean coming up with an angle, which will often also be contained in your standfirst, the standalone introduction to the piece. These tend to be quite short, so what you're going to write about needs to be clear, and they are actually a very useful aid in planning the shape and thrust of the feature. Below is an example of a standfirst.

Can the INEOS Grenadier really take the place of the old Land Rover Defender? Mike Breslin drove one on and off road to find out

You might be pleased to hear that with LIM and similar publications there's no call for a standfirst and an abstract can be far longer than the 30 words or fewer which is ideal for these – I have no idea where this figure comes from, by the way, but it does seem to work. As far as an abstract is concerned it's probably best to write it once you have finished the main article. There is no real rule as to how long they should be, but we prefer them to be around 100 to 200 words. They can be shorter, but when they're so long they start to fill half a page or more they do start to look a bit odd.

Generally, the abstract should tell the reader what the article is about, the message the writer is trying to put across, and how they will go about doing this. Below is a nice sized abstract from the Winter 2023 edition of LIM.

***Abstract**: The International Law Book Facility (ILBF) ships donated law books to organisations across the globe which require good quality legal publications. Since its inception in 2005 it has delivered over 80,000 books to more than 250 organisations in 56 countries. Here **Katrina Crossley**, the Chief Executive of the ILBF, explains why it is so important and how it works, giving some examples of how the project has eased the way for people training in the law in Africa. The importance of law librarians in all of this is discussed too. Katrina also outlines how ILBF has worked with BIALL in the course of its law librarian training schemes in Sierra Leone and Ghana, and will continue to do so in other countries in Africa as this is expanded.*

Note that we incorporate the byline (that is who's written the piece) in the abstract in LIM, but because this is outside of the body copy it's much better if the writer refers to themselves in the third person here.

After the abstract we will insert the keywords, but that's done here at LIM Towers, simply because we have access to the taxonomy.

HEADERS

Of course, before the abstract comes the header, or headline if you prefer. While I actually prefer short and snappy headers, for LIM it's best if the thrust of the article is contained within the headline, so that it is easier to find it if searching for the subject. But if you do have a nice short and sharp headline, then you can still use it with the help of a colon. So, you might go for something like this example, which accompanied Beth Flerlage's piece in the Winter 2023 edition:

Short but Sweet: How Nano-Training Expanded Our Reach

LIM headlines can also be fun as well as descriptive, though, and it's good to have something that will draw the reader in, and puns are always great for this. For instance, who can forget this headline from an article on how to use the Moys classification scheme by Helen Garner and Felicity Staveley-Taylor that was in the Summer 2023 edition:

C'mon Feel the Moys: a Trip Through the Orange Book

BOX OUTS

While a headline always has its place at the top of the article, sometimes it's difficult to figure out where some pieces of information can be placed. It might feel like something needs to be put in a parenthesis, but perhaps simply shovelling paragraphs of text into a pair of brackets doesn't look, or read, great. Similarly, sometimes you will find that there's just a little bit too much on a periphery point to get away with something like "incidentally", yet you still want to use the information.

This is where a 'box out' can help – these are sometimes also called panels. A simple "see box out" in brackets can send the reader to another part of the page, or even a following page, where the information is contained in its own baby feature, encased in a bold-lined box, hence the name, and complete with a headline. Usually, an upper limit of about 400 words is about right for these. As a bonus they liven up the layout, acting a little like a table or even a picture.

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IMAGES

Talking of pictures, while this piece is about writing, nothing lifts an article as much as a good image and we always like to include them if we can. If possible, high-resolution pictures are best (usually referred to as hi res), but we've found that with LIM we have been able to get away with lower res images on occasion, so send what you have. These days, most smartphones and certainly iPhones will take perfectly adequate pictures. One tip, if the size of the image is 1MB or over, then it will almost certainly be usable.

Captions are usually written here at LIM Towers, but we do need to know what's going on in the image, and especially the identity of any people pictured, so please make sure this is marked up somewhere. If you are supplying full captions, then try to keep them short if you can.



Figure 1: A rare picture of Mike, in the black jumper, actually working

Arguably, for a publication like LIM, even better than photos are tables, charts and diagrams. We love them and they're very easy to put together these days thanks to packages such as Excel. If you have a lot of data to present, then this is the way to go. One thing to bear in mind, though, at the time of writing the hard copy of the journal is still only available in black and white, so if you're using something like a pie chart or a bar chart, try to make sure the different colours contrast enough to be seen in various shades of grey.

ENDNOTES

For LIM we use endnotes rather than footnotes, and the preferred format is the Oxford University Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities (OSCOLA, 4th ed.), which is available online.[1]

BIOGRAPHY

Finally, we also include author biographies at the end of each article. This is the opportunity for the writer to tell the readers a little bit about themselves. These are written in the third person, and they tend to be small CVs, in a way, so they are great for shouting about yourself and letting the wider profession know what you've achieved in your career. But there is scope for a bit of humour, too, as Carolyn Rampling demonstrated in the Autumn 2023 edition (Ancient and Modern: Digitising Manuscripts and Archives at Lincoln's Inn):

A native of Pasadena (where grass is greener), ***Carolyn Rampling*** *worked with such Hollywood greats as Walt Disney before relocating to London. Her career saw a number of glass ceilings smashed, before she was prohibited from practising tennis serves in the Palm House of Kew Gardens. A new door opened and Carolyn joined Lincoln's Inn as Assistant Librarian and part-time Ambassador for California. Outside the workplace Carolyn's interests include collecting shoes and campaigning for California's secession from the United States and for better weather in London.*

CONCLUSION (THIS TIME FOR REAL!)

To recap, then, the main thing is to give yourself time, and then use that time well, working on the article in stages and remembering that each stage – planning, writing, editing, fact checking – is very different and requires a different approach. Also, try to leave the finished piece for a day before sending it in, or at least overnight. But the best bit of advice comes from Nike: Just do it!

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669624000392 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Endnote

[1] OSCOLA (4th edn, Hart Publishing) <www.law.ox.ac.uk/oscola> Accessed 11 August 2024

Biography

Mike Breslin is a professional journalist and author specialising in motorsport and travel. During a 35-year career he has worked in newspapers and magazines and has published five books. Since 2023 he has been the Co-Editor of LIM alongside his wife, Jas. Mike's never worked as a librarian, although he did set up a picture library for a magazine many years ago. He has also had some adventures in libraries, including helping a bird to escape from his university library and having a nosebleed in the British Library while doing some research with an extremely rare book (don't worry, the splat of blood landed on the desk and not the page). He has also developed a great deal of respect for law librarians, who seem to him to be a very clever bunch of people, as well as great fun to be around.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669624000392 Published online by Cambridge University Press