

Hit the road, Jack

By Ron Meijerhof

For a lot of people, writing an article is a difficult task and not something to look forward to. Although writing is often considered to be an art, which implicates that you have to have or develop a talent for it, luckily enough there is also a great part of skills involved, which simply can be learned, trained and practiced. There are many good books written about writing, and a lot of practical information is available. My aim with this article is not to tell you all the tricks and gadgets that you can use, as there are much better books and articles on that then I can ever write, but to outline the basic principles of writing, to lower the internal threshold to do it.

In writing an article, there are two things important. First of all, a structure has to be made, that guides the reader through the article, leading him to the conclusion. The structure is the backbone of the article, and setting it up correctly is of utmost importance to get the message across. Setting up the structure requires skills and can be taught and trained. The better your structure is, the easier it becomes to write a good article, even on the most difficult subjects. All attention you pay to setting up the structure pays back in quality of writing, and makes your task easier. The more often it is practiced, the more automatically it will go and the less attention it needs. Without a good structure, either in your head or on paper, writing an article is a nuisance.

Once the structure is set up, the sentences and words have to be filled in, and especially in this part a lot of art comes in. To find the right words and construct good and logical sentences can be trained but is also partly an art and a creative talent. One of the most difficult (but also most rewarding) tasks is for instance to create a good title that “grabs” the audience. In this article I will focus especially on the structure, being the starting point and backbone of any article.

A road map for writing

To visualize the process of creating structure in an article, I often use the example of driving a car from one place to another. In a way, as a writer you take the driver (the reader) of the car along that road and guide him from starting point towards end point, as a route planner in a computer works. The way you construct the road map and the directions represents the structure of the article. In this article, I will use a practical example of writing an article on bodyweight in rearing to explain the points that I try to make.

Who is driving

The driving

The details and way you describe the road to go depends of course on the driver. If the driver is to some extend familiar with the area, you need less detailed instructions then when the person has never been there before, so when you set up road instructions you will “tailor-made” them to the actual driver. If your road directions are more detailed or less precise then what the driver needs, he will get lost quite quickly, or will not use the road directions anymore.

The writing

The big thing about writing is that you have to grab your audience, so they will read your article. That means it has to fit the expectation of the reader, give the information that he or she feels is of interest, and nothing more then that. Understand that writing is about the reader, not about the writer. If the reader thinks the information in the article is not of interest, he or she will not read it, no matter how important you as writer things it is! Before you start to write, you have to make clear for yourself who the audience will be. It will make a difference if you write for the people working in the farm of for the director of the company. Of course in practice, you articles will be read by a mixed group, so often it is difficult to pin-point your audience to one specific group. However, focus on one specific type of person, a veterinarian, a flock manager etc. If you feel that you need to write at two levels because you have two levels of primary audience, write two articles or use a specific text box giving more background on the subject. During writing, put that person in an imaginary chair next to you, so you

will always have a imaginary reference point to check if you're still on the right level for your audience.

The example

When writing about bodyweight control in rearing, you will focus more on the stress factor causing for instance lameness when your primary audience are veterinarians, where you will focus on actual handling and weighing when you write for farm workers. The basic principles are the same in both articles, but to make it interesting for your audience you have to "push other buttons" to get their interest and attention and keep them reading.

Where do you start

The driving

When you try to tell somebody how to get to a certain place, for instance Berlin, you have to know at first where to start. The road instructions will be different when you start from Amsterdam or from Paris, simply because the roads are different.

The writing

When writing, you have to realize how the expectation level and acceptance level of your primary audience will be. If the knowledge and experience with a particular subject is low, you have to spend more time on "preparing" your audience for the message

The example

If you want to write an article about bodyweight control, it makes a difference if your audience is doing it for years already but you feel they can improve the way of doing, or if they have not done it at all until so far and don't have any idea why they should want to do it. With the first audience, you will focus more on the actual fine tuning of the management and skip a lot of the facts about the importance, where in the second case the fine tuning will only be a minor part of the whole story.

Determine your goal

The driving

Your goal when driving is not the driving itself, but to get to a certain point. It is therefore very important to spend sufficient time on determining where you want to go, and also indicate to the driver where you want him to go, and to some extent why you want him to go specifically there and not to another place. What is important to realize is that it's the final destination that matters, not the road towards it. The road is just a tool to get there in a convenient way.

The writing

This is probably the most important part of writing and the area where many mistakes are made. People often start to write an article because they want to share their knowledge or experience, without really thinking on what the reader wants and what he or she at the end of the article should have picked up, what the "take away" message, the goal of the article must be. Often you see that more then one message is covered in the article, and that some of the messages are "hidden" somewhere halfway. Also you see often that the article leads to a slightly (or complete!) other message then where it originally started for, because during the writing the essence of the message is changing in the authors mind. This all leads to diffusion and lack of focus, and will ruin the quality of the article. If there are more messages in an article, it must be structured in such a way that these messages are leading towards the final message, that they are step stones in understanding where the article is all about, and not individual messages that are just there because you thought it fruitful that the reader would know this as well.

Start the writing with asking yourself what the goal of the article should be, what you want to achieve, and stick to that goal. And realize that everything you put in that article must have a function in getting to that goal. If not, you are diluting your goal and spoiling your article and you risk loosing the attention of the reader.

The example

If you write a message to explain why bodyweight control during rearing is so important for production results, at the end it should be clearly concluded what the relation is between bodyweight control and

production, and perhaps why it is like that. The conclusion should not be that it is very important to grade birds to keep uniformity under control. That is an important conclusion, but for another article.

Define the route in main roads

The driving

Driving from Amsterdam to Berlin, you pass several big cities. For correct driving instructions, you list the cities that one will pass, in the right order. That way the driver will look in Amsterdam for the signs indicating Hengelo, drive to Hengelo, look for signs towards Hannover, etc. There are two things important for that, first of all that all the cities are listed, and that they are put in the right order.

The writing

To bring structure in an article, it is important to list the main topics that have to be in there to get from introduction to conclusion. A handy way to work is not to start writing from scratch, but first of all list all the subjects that needs to be covered in headings. Take a critical look at that list to see if the sequence is logical, and if that sequence is complete enough to lead from start to end, without short cuts or touristic places (see the following paragraphs). Once the sequence seems logical and complete, every subject can be filled in more detailed. During this process, it will occur that the sequence has to be changed or more or less topics have to be brought in. As soon as this becomes clear, don't hesitate to change the sequence immediately and see if the new structure fits better (big advantage of word-processing!!), as this will keep the structure up to date.

The example

If the article should lead to the conclusion that body weight control is important for production results, the sequence can be the following:

1. importance of organ development for reproduction
2. effect of body development on organ formation
3. influence of body weight on body development
4. why is body weight control important for production results

Of course this is a very simple list, and it probably would be a very short article. To give it more "body", other factors can be brought in, for instance the influence of uniformity. However, if the aim of the article doesn't change, it is clear that a chapter about uniformity cannot be placed after chapter 4, but probably has to be placed somewhere between 3 and 4.

1. importance of organ development for reproduction
2. effect of body development on organ formation
3. influence of body weight on body development
4. effect of uniformity in body weight
5. why is body weight control important for production results

However, if you do that, it becomes also clear that the logical sequence from point 3 to point 4 and from point 4 to point 5 is gone, and you need to put in another chapter about the negative effect of stimulating non-mature birds.

1. importance of organ development for reproduction
2. effect of body development on organ formation
3. influence of body weight on body development
4. influence of having more and less matured birds in the same flock
5. effect of uniformity in body weight
6. body weight control is control of average weight and control of uniformity in weight
7. why is body weight control important for production results

At this moment, it becomes clear that actually the goal of the article has changed from the influence of bodyweight on reproduction (as a sort of an average bird situation) to the influence of bodyweight level and variation. This is by itself not a problem, but it has to be realized. If it was not the goal of the article, either the goal and with that the introduction has to be changed, or the structure has to be changed. In fact, looking at the sequence of chapters it becomes clear that it is more logical to put uniformity in a different article, or put it in a separate framework (a small article about uniformity in the big article on bodyweight, smaller but set up with a similar logical sequence)

Split up the main roads in short sections

The driving

If you drive from Amsterdam to Berlin, you want to guide the driver from one place to another, telling him at every cross-section where to go, which is the next road sign to be expected. That way, the driver knows always where he is, how much more he has to drive on this road and where he has to turn.

The writing

Once the chapters are identified, they have to be filled in with words. In a way, a chapter is a little article in itself, with an introduction why the chapter is of relevance, and with a number of paragraphs leading to the conclusion. This means that also the paragraphs have to have logical sequence, one following logical on the previous one. If you identify the paragraphs upfront, you avoid that you mix up the logical sequence and that you jump from one paragraph to the next one, without realizing there needs to be one in between to connect the two paragraphs. Within the paragraphs, the same method holds again, you want to take the reader through the paragraph to reach a certain point, to prepare him or her for the next paragraph, to finally reach the conclusion of the chapter. You can make this structure as detailed as you want, but especially when writing feels still more a task than a fun, it is handy to identify upfront the paragraphs in the chapter with keywords, and also eventually use keywords within the paragraph before you do the actual writing. In a way you set up a structure so detailed, that at the end you only have to fill in the words to connect the keywords with each other. This way of working assures a good quality structure. It will not bring the brightest and creative article possible, but it will guarantee a solid base.

Start with writing down a number of headings for the paragraphs that you feel should be in the chapter, then sort them out, put them in the right order, see if you have to combine headings or split some up, until you have the feeling that the headings cover the issues you want to cover in the chapter. Then fill in each heading with a limited number of keywords. Even by doing that, you will experience that you can combine or split some paragraphs, or that some keywords you find necessary in that chapter don't fit well into any of the headings, so you have to slip in another heading. This is the part where the article really starts from being a rough framework towards becoming a complete article that just have to be filled in with words.

The example

If the chapter is about the influence of body weight on body development, some paragraphs could be:

Body weight and development are not the same

Body development is controlled by growth

Growth is measured by weighing birds at fixed intervals

The aim of weighing birds is more to identify growth than to identify bodyweight.

Avoid tourist places

The driving

Giving road directions, you know very well that close to that highway, there is that very nice little city, worthwhile to have a look at. However, if the aim of the driver is not to have a tourist tour but to go to Berlin, he will probably not appreciate the detour.

The writing

Often in articles you see subjects slipping in, not because they are so important to understand the message, but because the writer is aware of them and wants to share the information. Although in some cases it can make the article more enjoyable to read, you should be very careful with putting it in. Although it is very understandable that the writer wants to put in his message, if it is not helping the author in better understanding the goal of the article, it should not be put in as it distracts attention. If you want to put it in, consider if it wouldn't be better to put it in a separate framework. In that way, the reader can decide for himself if he wants to read it or not, but it will not set him on the wrong foot and distract his attention. As said before, writing is not about the writer, but about the reader. More often an article becomes more readable when you leave things out than when you put things in. Try to be short and to the point, with a clear direction towards the message you want to give. Don't be afraid an article is not long enough, just be afraid it is too long. Nobel prizes have been given on articles covering just a few pages.

The example

A good example of a tourist place when writing about bodyweight control is for instance feather pecking behavior. This is related to bodyweight control and feed restriction and is an interesting and important subject, but is not necessary to understand why bodyweight control is important for reproduction. It will distract attention and set the reader on the wrong foot, not knowing where the writer wants to go. The reader expected something about growth and production, and all of a sudden we are talking about behavior. If it is so important to put it in, consider writing a separate article or put it in a separate framework.

Check if you arrived where you intended to go when you started

The driving

When all the instructions and roads are followed, you expect to be at the place where you intended to go in the first place. But you better check the signs on the road to see if that is true...

The writing

This is the final check to see if you arrived at your final destination, if you have arrived where you wanted to go and created an expectation for in your introduction. As said before, always check if the final message is in agreement with the introduction and the title, because that is where you promised the reader to bring him. Be aware that the mismatch between goal of the article and final conclusion can sometimes be very subtle. Especially in this stage it is of big help if you let somebody else look at your article.

The example

If the introduction of the article and the title suggest it handles about the importance of body weight control in rearing on reproduction later on, the final conclusion should not be you that need proper equipment for weighing the birds. That topic can be an important subject in a chapter, but if that is the conclusion then the introduction should be about the easiest way of obtaining accurate bodyweights, not about the importance of it for later reproduction.

To conclude

This guideline is put together to be of help in constructing an article, to get a clear structure that can act as a backbone for it. Starting with a good structure will help to keep a clear focus on the goal of the article, and will lower the threshold for writing. To get a better feel for it, check the structure every time you are reading an article, to see if you think it makes sense, to see if you would have taken the same approach, to see if the conclusion is matching the introduction. Writing articles is partly about developing the skills to set up a good structure. The rest is the art of practicing...

Steps to be taken

1. Identify your primary audience, seat a virtual person in the chair next to you to check regularly if your writing matches the audience
2. Identify what you want to achieve, what is the message that you want to bring across, what is the goal of the article. Check if there is one single message or if there tend to be more messages. If so, identify the most important one and use that for constructing the backbone of your article.
3. Identify what the main interest and background level for your subject is with your audience
4. Split up your article in main parts by writing down chapter names. Fill in the chapters with paragraphs in the form of heading titles. Juggle around with the headings until it seems there is a logical sequence. Fill in the paragraphs with keywords and juggle them around.
5. Check the structure to see if there are any unnecessary side steps in there that don't contribute to the goal of the article, that can be left out without hurting the message.
6. Check if the final conclusion still matches the initial goal of the article.