Guidelines for Critiquing Magazine Articles

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Journalism 3173: Magazine Writing

Some guidelines for critiquing magazine articles

1. **Theme or angle**: Is it stated or implied near the beginning of the article? Clear? Consistently applied throughout the article?

2. **Evidence of search strategy; sources**: Evaluate the information base of the story—the completeness of the information, the variety of sources.
   
   Identify the number and type of sources used in the story. Assess source credibility and credentials. How effectively are sources used? Are sources—both documentary and personal (interview) ones—sufficient? Remember that journalism is more than just calling up a few “talking heads.”

3. **The lead and the closing**: Consider strategy, style, vocabulary. Storytelling elements—characters, settings, conflict, suspense, resolution.
   
   Is the lead a compelling way to start the article? If the lead is a summary, is it because the material demands a summary lead? Or would another type (quotation, anecdotal, narrative, direct-address, descriptive, etc.) more effectively lead the reader into the story?

   How does the lead work with the rest of the story? Can you identify other good possibilities for a lead, perhaps buried in the article?

   Does the ending provide a satisfying way to wrap up the story? (For instance, it might summarize the key points of the story just told and/or leave the reader with a poignant reflection. Or perhaps it refers to a metaphor introduced earlier as a way to underscore the story’s theme.) Does it avoid introducing totally new information that may leave the reader with too many questions?

4. **The flow of the story**: Consider transition links and devices; repetition and key words; change of pace.
   
   Mark any spots in the story where you wanted to quit reading.

5. **Elements of audience interest**: attention-getting, focus, perspective.
Identify ways that the story develops audience interest. Underline the significant elements and state why interest is developed. Identify areas in which audience interest needs improvement.

6. **Conciseness**: Examine the story for conciseness failures. Show the grammatical patterns that lead to these conciseness problems. Some possibilities:

- Imprecise diction, such as vague verb + adverb when a single, more precise verb can suffice
- Phrases and clauses where simple modifiers can be used
- Redundancy
- Passive Voice (including superfluous “there is” and “there are” constructions)
- Meaningless modifiers such as “generally” and “basically”

7. **Simplicity**: Identify what you take to be two or three good examples of complex ideas that are stated simply.

Identify some material that needs improvement in simplification. Try to simplify effectively and accurately.

8. **Tone**: What is the tone of the article throughout? Is the tone suitable for the subject treated? Are some words, phrases, and/or passages at odds with the tone?

9. **Language**: Vocabulary choice; vocabulary level; symbolic language; metaphor; embellishment; word play.

10. **Use of literary techniques**: Does the writer use scene-setting, description, dialogue, dramatization, etc. appropriately, creatively, and effectively?

Rate the effectiveness of: examples and anecdotes; dialogue.

Quotation: Analyze indirect and direct quotes. Would some material be more effectively presented as direct quote or as indirect quote? (Note: primarily factual material need not be stated as a direct quote, as in a news story. Instead, ascertain its veracity by using multiple sources, then state as fact, perhaps with indirect attribution. Reserve direct quotes for material that is more interesting and colorful, that reveals nuances of the speaker’s character/style.)


Can you name additional audience/markets?