History Mysteries
Writing the story – your treasure – from clues – Part 2 of 2

Make sure you’ve read Part I: Interviewing before proceeding. You’ve collected your clues and you have all of the information you need to write your treasure. How you write the treasure is up to you.

Everyone has a different writing style, and your story does not have to fit into a particular mold. However, always remember you are writing for your audience, not for yourself. Your audience may be other people who were involved in 4-H and want to reminisce, or perhaps you’re writing a story for 4-H members with the purpose of it being educational. You must first determine your readers (your audience) before beginning your story.

A writer’s style is what makes the writing fun to read. Style results from using the right combination of voice, viewpoint, rhythm, and tone.

The first element of style is clear, concise writing. The easiest way to achieve clarity is to write short sentences, short paragraphs, and everyday words. A good sentence range in journalistic writing is 10 to 20 words, and a good paragraph range is two to five sentences.

While you can’t teach someone how to use voice, a good way to develop voice is by writing in a conversational style. Write as if you are explaining your topic to a friend.

When it comes to viewpoint, you may be tempted to write in first person (using “I”). Although first person viewpoints seem easy, they tend to create the impression that the writer thinks himself more important than he really is (Sumner, Miller). The best approach for beginning writers is third person. Third person writing follows the “he,” “she,” “it” and “they” approach to writing.

Writing basics

- Write with action verbs.
  - Example: Crash, eat, jump, write, swim.
- Avoid “dead” constructions.
  - Example: “There is,” “there are,” “it will be.”
- Use active voice.
  - Example (active): Kim forgot Lizzie.
  - Example (passive): Lizzie was forgotten by Kim.
- Use concrete words.
  - Abstract: Vegetation
  - More specific: Trees
  - Even more specific: Spruce, oak, maple
- Remember a person is a “who,” not a “that.”
  - Incorrect: People that are in 4-H have many opportunities.
  - Correct: People who are in 4-H have many opportunities.
  - If you refer to a person as a “that,” you are saying he or she is dead!
- Do a find/replace for the word “that.”
  - Many times, the word “that” is unnecessary.
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Rhythm is achieved by varying the length of sentences and paragraphs. Remember, a good sentence range is 10 to 20 words. However, if every sentence in your story is 10 words, your story will become boring. Using active voice and action verbs improves rhythm, also.

Once you pick a tone for your story, you have to stick with it. Perhaps the tone of your story is whimsical and fun, in which case you would not want the tone to later become negative and angry.

Getting started

Sometimes it’s hard to know how to start a story. One way to start your story is by writing everything you remember from your interviews without looking at your notes. Often, if it was interesting enough that you remembered it from your interview, it is interesting enough to engage your reader.

You can also begin by writing the middle or the end of the story and working backwards. Sometimes you can find clues in your already written material to use for a catchy introduction.

Another way to begin organizing your story is by arranging the quotes from your sources into a document. Sometimes, you will find a natural flow, making your story much easier to write.

Wrapping it up

A good way to identify a conclusion for your story is to look again at your lead paragraph. Sometimes stories can be brought back full-circle by returning to a question you raised in your lead, by quoting the same person quoted in the introduction, or by revealing the ending to an anecdote that you used to begin the article (Sumner, Miller).

References: