

Ideas for articles and how to get them

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One of the most common things I am asked by other psychologists is where do I get the ideas for all the different things that I write about. Very occasionally - and I do mean very occasionally - I get one of those sudden flashes of inspiration that leads to a productive output of some description. However, the truth is that like most things in this life, I have to work hard at generating those ideas. I do, however, have a few tried and tested methods that I always resort to, and it is these that I am going to share with you in this article.

Research by the Roffey Park Management Institute (Innovation at the top. Where do directors get their ideas from?, 1998) claims the best ideas do not come at work but in the bath, walking the dog and driving the car. (For me it is when I'm lying awake at night unable to get to sleep, travelling on a train or bus, or sitting on the toilet). Insights tend to come to us away from work because this is the time that we let our minds drift and dream. While working on a particular project, our mind engages in very focused thinking and this might be a barrier to creativity rather

than a support for it. The report concludes that to enhance creativity, people need to escape their conventional surroundings and give themselves time and space for reflection. Most of us are so consumed with our immediate work that we barely leave our office at evenings or weekends, let alone give ourselves time for unstructured thought. I keep an idea book to hand (or at the very least a piece of blank paper) so that any idea that I get can be physically recorded. What follows is a brief list of my main sources of inspiration for articles.

- Newspapers, magazines and other media

My main sources of inspiration for article ideas comes from newspapers, magazines and other media (such as a television or radio documentary). Quite often, these outlets will come up with an idea that has no empirical support but looks true and/or is psychologically interesting. That in itself may spur me into doing some research. The fact that it has reached media outlets before empirical research has been done suggests that it is newsworthy. I also scan newspapers and magazines to see if there are articles that I can adapt and expand upon for different audiences. For instance, a lot of the advice that I have written up for the Student's page of the Psychologist has usually been inspired by something that I've seen elsewhere (e.g. articles that appear in the management sections of Sunday newspapers). The Roffey Park Management Institute state you should read one publication each week that you wouldn't normally read. The idea is that such an activity might not lead immediately to a new product or service, but it could change their view of the world in some way.

- Telephone calls from the media

I am very lucky in the fact that every week I get numerous calls from the media who want me to comment on something. Occasionally they come up with something that stirs my imagination and which gets me thinking that their story is about a really interesting topic. I usually write down a few notes and then periodically come back to them adding in the odd observation here or there. It is when I have sufficient notes (usually an A4 sheet's worth) that I think about turning it into an article of some description. It is also at that point I will decide what kind of publication do I go for (i.e. a refereed journal, a professional journal, a magazine, a newsletter etc.). Not only

do ideas from articles come via this route but occasionally whole new lines of research have emerged on the basis of a media enquiry.

- Talking to people

Sometimes somebody will say something to me which will spark me off into writing something. This could come from a throwaway comment that someone says in a drunken stupor or could be during a heated academic argument after someone has given a seminar paper. For instance, I was sitting in a bar in Norway with a Canadian colleague (don't ask!) when he posed a question for which I had no immediate answer I could give. For the next few days, this question was always at the back of my mind and I kept coming up with different alternative answers. Eventually, over a period of about two weeks, I came up with ten different explanations and wrote them up as an academic paper and presented at the next academic conference we were at together!

- Replies to other articles

One thing I have started doing more recently is to write formal responses and commentaries to already published articles in my fields of research. This is not something I do often but I have found that the occasional article published can be added to. For instance, you may spot a flaw in the author's line of argument which could affect the conclusions, or you might have a very different explanation for a finding. I find that reading articles in this constructively critical way not only hones your critical faculties but sometimes (and I do stress only sometimes!) can lead to a publication. Occasionally, someone will critically respond to one of your own articles which means at the very least you have a chance to reply (and increase your publication count!).

- Invitations to write something

This is not usually something that occurs without a history in some particular area. However, recently I have had invitations to write book chapters or articles on topics that were only peripherally associated with my research interests. However, instead of turning the chance down I have used these invitations as opportunities to write about new areas. I also get occasional commissions from newspapers and magazines to write popular accounts about some of the research that I have done.

- Write about what you do

On a very basic level, we are all shaped by our own-world perspective (i.e. by what we read, watch, listen to and experience in our private lives) and it is these close-to-home experiences that may provide all the material you need to write an article. Many of the articles that I have written come straight from my own direct experience without reference to anyone else's work (this article being a good example!). This doesn't make the article any less worthy.