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Writing and Editing Tips

From James K.A. Smith

Know What Your Article Should Accomplish

- 1) Option 1: Thoughtful Christian engagement with perennial question in academy or with challenge in contemporary culture. Show that being Christian doesn't mean kissing your brains goodbye. Christian tradition has something nuanced and complex to say.
- 2) Option 2: Educate about Christianity. Show people why Athanasius or Julian of Norwich is cool, and make them want to know more.
- 3) Option 3: Defend the Faith. Invite non-Christian to consider the Christian worldview in ways they hadn't before. Be winsome, insightful, compelling.
- 4) These options aren't exhaustive. Fiction, poetry, and personal testimony can all have places, too, along with other types of pieces.
- 5) A single article won't do *all* these things, but the *Ichthus* wants to have some of each.

Know Your Audience

- 1) There is no "general audience." An audience always has a profile.
- 2) The *Ichthus*' audience: Harvard undergraduates.
- 3) Good to concretize audience as specific person. Jamie has thought of David Brooks, Alvin Plantinga, and two Wisconsin farmers as his concrete audience at points.

- 4) Concretizing reminds us what we can take for granted, what questions they'll have, what they'll be suspicious about, and what we want to change their minds or hearts about.
- 5) Good to have readers you disagree with read your stuff as you work on it!

Answer a Question

- 1) Doesn't have to be explicit, but article has a question in view.
- 2) Question should *matter*. It has existential import. It has bite. Some people in audience should actually have this question.
- 3) Could be perennial question ("Why does God allow evil?") or occasional question ("What does Christianity say about #blacklivesmatter?")
- 4) Question should be specific, so that you can actually answer it, but can't be *too* specific.

Have a Hook

- 1) Hook reader in first two paragraphs. Reader should know what piece is about, and want to read it.
- 2) "Don't bury the lead."

Have the Right Tone

- 1) Confidence, but also charity.
- 2) Have a voice that commands attention. Show you have something to say. This is often a difficulty for younger, tentative writers.

Use a "Handle" Ending

- 1) End with "a handle the reader can hold onto." The reader should finish the article and say, "This article was about X."

Remember the Writing Process

- 1) It starts before actual writing. Requires thinking, note-taking, reading, saving articles, making observations, and sharing ideas in conversation.
- 2) Then, one might start writing by taking an argument outline and filling in the outline.
- 3) Or, one could start with a word-picture or metaphor and keep going.
- 4) Key: "Mush on!" Keep writing until you have a finished draft. You might not know what you'll say at the end when you start writing at the beginning. Embrace the surprise.
- 5) You can edit yourself some after you've written a full draft.

Know that Editing Is Necessary

- 1) Writers should *expect* to be edited by others.
- 2) Magazines with little editing aren't legitimate.
- 3) Any writer who doesn't want to be edited doesn't really want to write, he or she just wants to pontificate.
- 4) Being edited means you are part of the guild of writers.

Don't Do Too Much

- 1) Don't do too much in a single article. If you do, your article fails.
- 2) Don't write an article that doesn't ask a question. Such an article fails. When editing, ask, "What is this article about, in one sentence?" Should be able to answer this. If not, kill the article.