

How I Write an Article

by Francis Wardle

A few years ago, the editor of the Community Playthings newsletter “Connect” asked me to write an article on the value of constructive play for young children (Wardle, 2015). As someone who has written and published hundreds of articles, I thought that some aspiring writers for *Exchange* and other publications might be interested in the

process I follow when I write an article. I have published articles in academic journals, glossy popular magazines, trade publications, organizational newsletters and parenting publications: local, national and international. My first article in *Exchange* was published almost 30 years ago!

Obviously there are many ways to write an article, and each writer must find the process that works best for them. The main recommendation I have for anyone who wants to write is to write—a lot! Like learning to run, taking good photographs, fixing a car, growing a garden and so on, the main thing is to actually do it (with occasional advice and coaching). Thus, the very best way to learn to write is to continually write, in all sorts of formats and for a variety of outlets (or publications).

While there are many approaches, this is the sequence I follow. Outlining my approach in this way may be helpful for novice writers until they discover which approach works best for them. I will use the article I wrote on constructive play for “Connect” to illustrate each step:

- Select a topic
- Mull over the topic for several days before starting to write
- Check editorial style/needs of the publication
- Collect ideas from publications and from your own experiences
- Plan
- Write the rough draft
- Fine-tune different sections of the manuscript
- Add references
- Fine-tune the entire paper
- Submit

Selecting a Topic

In selecting a topic, two conditions are necessary. One, the topic needs to be something that you are well-versed in; one you know a lot about. Two, you need to be passionate about the topic, and about communicating your ideas



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to the reader. When I discussed possible subjects with the editor of “Connect,” she told me to choose a topic that I was passionate about. I gave her three possibilities and then we agreed together on constructive play.

Since my first classes in the doctoral program at the University of Kansas, where I co-taught with my adviser a class on play, I have been passionate about including play in the overall curricula for young children. My interest in writing about constructive play stems both from my own enjoyment as a child in building marble shoots in school and creating ditches and dams after a heavy rain, among other kinds of constructive play, and because I have become upset about the recent focus by some early childhood experts only on dramatic/fantasy play to the exclusion of all other kinds of play (Leong & Bodrova, 2015). So I wanted to communicate to my readers the critical importance of encouraging constructive play in young children in early childhood programs and schools.

Mull Over the Topic

I mulled over the topic of constructive play in my mind—on my daily runs and while weeding and watering my garden. (I do not carry a cell phone or smart-phone, so I am free to think.) I slowly began to form certain ideas that I wished to cover in the article. One day while I was looking for a book for another article I was writing, I discovered several books and articles in my library on the importance of play, different kinds of play, and constructivist learning. I read these as I was thinking about my topic, which then expanded and enhanced my thinking.

Time enables the writer to process and digest various angles and perspectives on the topic. Seemingly extraneous events and situations can trigger new and novel ways of looking at a topic. I definitely suggest the writer wait before

putting pen to paper. Talking with colleagues about the topic can also be a good way of expanding the topic and introducing new ideas.

Check the Publication’s Style Guidelines

After the editor and I decided on the topic, I asked her about the article length, style, deadlines and anything else she felt I needed to know to write the article. Before putting too much energy into writing an article, it is important to find out the editorial style of the publication. Every publication has its own unique editorial style, so it is important to make sure to keep this in mind when planning and writing the article. I usually know the style of a publication from having read it many times, or from having written previously for the publication. A new writer should study past issues and ask the editor specific questions about the style and content needs of the publication. The editors know the style of their publications, the content they are looking for and the various perspectives of their readers.

Today most publications provide information on their websites about editorial style, content needs and the format used for references, and other mechanics. Regardless of how good a manuscript is, if it does not meet the needs of the publication, it will not be accepted.

Collect Ideas

For my article on constructive play, I used three general sources for my ideas: my own personal childhood experiences, examples of constructive play with my grandson, and academic books and journal articles. I jotted some of these ideas down, while I filed others in the back of my mind. Putting personal experiences in an article gives it life, meaning and interest; adding ideas from the existing literature on the topic not only expands the overall basis for the discus-

sion, but also gives the article credibility in the eyes of the reader. Many writers are also practitioners in the field they write about, so they use examples from their own work.

For this article I included a list of constructive materials that I developed over time while working in programs with preschool children (Wardle, 2000). You might think of ideas that work well for you in the classroom, or ask colleagues for their ideas. It is important to give credit to the people whose ideas you use, either from personal relationships, conferences, or written materials.

Planning the Article

Some people like to create a written outline for their article; others prefer a web approach. I generally write down ideas that I want to be sure not to forget. However, I do this in a spontaneous, haphazard manner. For my article on constructive play, based on my reading and prior knowledge, I decided to describe Piaget’s four kinds of cognitive play: functional, constructive, dramatic/fantasy, and games with rules (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005), and to embed my discussion of constructive play within the theory of constructivist learning (Chaille, 2008). I also began to develop a specific point of view for how I would discuss constructive play, namely to focus on the critical importance of constructive play for young children, separate and apart from other forms of play, and independent from setting the foundation for future development and learning.

Many writers are knowledgeable about different ways to structure and discuss ideas: this is often called a theoretical framework. While an article does not need a theoretical framework, this can be a way of helping your readers understand the overall message of your article. A good example of this approach is to

use scaffolding to convey a complex idea or concept in the article.

Time for a Rough Draft

When I finally decided to put pen to paper—I always write my articles long-hand first—I already had three general ideas in mind that I wished to cover:

- A definition of constructive play.
- A discussion of the value and importance of constructive play for the development and education of young children.
- Suggestions for a variety of ways to encourage constructive play in early childhood programs.

I filled in the three main areas using books and articles to support and expand my views and interjecting personal examples and experiences I have had with young children to make the material more accessible to the reader. I write freely, not being concerned with grammar, structure, semantics, repetition or style. My goal is to get my ideas on paper, as spontaneously as I can, without external constraints, in order to create a document that covers all the content I feel needs to be included in the piece. To me this process is analogous to roughing in the colors and shapes for a painting.

Some writers have had successful writing experiences in school and college; some have not. Personally, I struggled both in reading and writing until my late teens. My advice for both groups is to focus on getting your ideas down on paper; structure and proof-reading come later!

As I was roughing in these three main ideas, I struggled with the best way to state my main thesis: constructive play is critically important for young children in and of itself, and not simply as a bridge towards dramatic/fantasy play,



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or as a way to prepare children for future academic success. I wanted to make the case in a way that would encourage teachers to provide all sorts of opportunities for constructive play for children, both inside and outside. Writing is about solving a bunch of little problems, and I solve them through the writing process and by mulling over them when I am not writing.

The process is what is important. Not only do I not know what my finished piece will look like when I begin, but the discovery process of writing is what I enjoy the most. For this reason, I always write an article over a period of several weeks—in fact, I usually write several articles at the same time, all at different places in their development. Thus, I have many “Eureka!” moments when I am not even writing.

I generally write the introduction and conclusion after writing the main body, with the introduction informing the reader about what the article will cover, and the conclusion summarizing the article. However, in this case I wrote the introduction as I developed the overall content. This is because I wanted the introduction to make a very strong case for my overall message: the critical importance of constructive play. However, initially I was not quite sure how to do this; as the body of the article developed, so did the introduction.

Fine Tuning

Once my rough draft is done, I fine-tune the document. However, I do not edit the entire paper at one time: I go section by section, but not from the beginning to the end. I focus on sections that I feel need more work, that are of special interest to me, or that pose unique problems. However, as I focus on one section, I am still aware of the content and structure of entire paper.

I look at language, grammar (i.e. verb tense and subject-verb agreement), style, punctuation, and headings. Using headings allows me to structure the article in a logical manner; it also makes the article easier to read. (One of the changes I have seen over my writing career is an increased use of headings and subheadings in articles). I want to make sure my arguments are logical and flow well, and the paper is well structured. I usually have several main headings and a few subheadings, depending on the article’s length. One of my main goals during the fine-tuning process is to eliminate repetition and to consolidate information that is closely related. Many writers—and I am one of them—tend to repeat information, say the same thing in different ways, and simply use too many words.

I do a lot of cutting and pasting, moving stuff around, interjecting new information and eliminating other material. Some sections are greatly expanded; some are shortened or even eliminated. I suggest that a writer revisit the paper several times as each section of the paper is fine-tuned and move content around as needed.

References for Your Article

All academic publications require references. I also like to include references in articles for trade publications (trade publications are authoritative publications produced for a specific trade or profession, such as *Exchange*,) although I try to keep the list fairly short. The main reason for including references in any article is to connect the content of the article to the body of existing knowledge, thus enabling the reader to know the scholarly rationale and background for the author’s ideas, assertions, research and best practice.

Whether the writer includes references depends both on the style of the publication, and on whether the writer believes citations will enhance the manuscript.

Practical and down-to-earth content may not benefit from citations; more academic and in-depth pieces benefit greatly. Of course, some new writers are not comfortable with the format. Most educational and early childhood publications use the APA format, which is clearly described in the American Psychological Association Manual (APA, 2010). I keep a copy next to my computer. I always write the reference list as a separate activity, focusing on APA style and on making sure the references match all of my in-text citations.

One Last Review

Once each section is fully addressed, usually several times, I will then read the entire paper, fairly quickly, once for content, clarity and flow, and at least once for form, grammar and unity. It is critically important that all of the pieces “fit” and that the entire article holds together as a unit, not simply as a collection of parts. Thus, it is important to read the entire article at one sitting. You might also ask a friend to read it over, to make sure it makes sense to a third party.

While I do not intend to make wholesale changes at this point in the writing process, I sometimes do, and certainly I am always open to moving major parts around. A writer must be open to making changes up until the end; and also be open to the possibility that some parts simply do not fit, and will need to be rejected. However, most changes at this juncture are minor.

Submitting Your Work

Since my piece for Community Playthings was solicited, I was confident that it would be accepted. However, even after I submit my article, I am open to making changes based on feedback from the editor to improve the finished product. Many articles, of course, are submitted without having been solicited,

and some are accepted while others are rejected.

In my experience, rarely have editors asked me to radically change the content of a finished manuscript that they solicited. In fact, I can only remember two such instances, and in both cases the problem was a result of miscommunication.

New writers have to develop a thick skin when it comes to rejections. However, an article that one publication may reject might be exactly what another one is looking for. And, with the advent of online publications, there are many possible outlets for the beginning writer.

In writing an article about constructive play for the Community Plaything's website "Connect," I wondered whether *Exchange* readers would like to know how a seasoned writer goes about the process of writing an article for publication. Here I have briefly covered the

process I follow. However, I realize that writing is a unique activity that differs from person to person, and therefore each writer needs to find the process that works best for them. The secret is to write a lot for many different outlets, and to not allow the mechanics of writing and planning to inhibit the free flow of ideas and the expression of important content. Ultimately, for me, writing is all about the process: a creative act that takes many interesting twists and turns before the finished product is submitted for publication.

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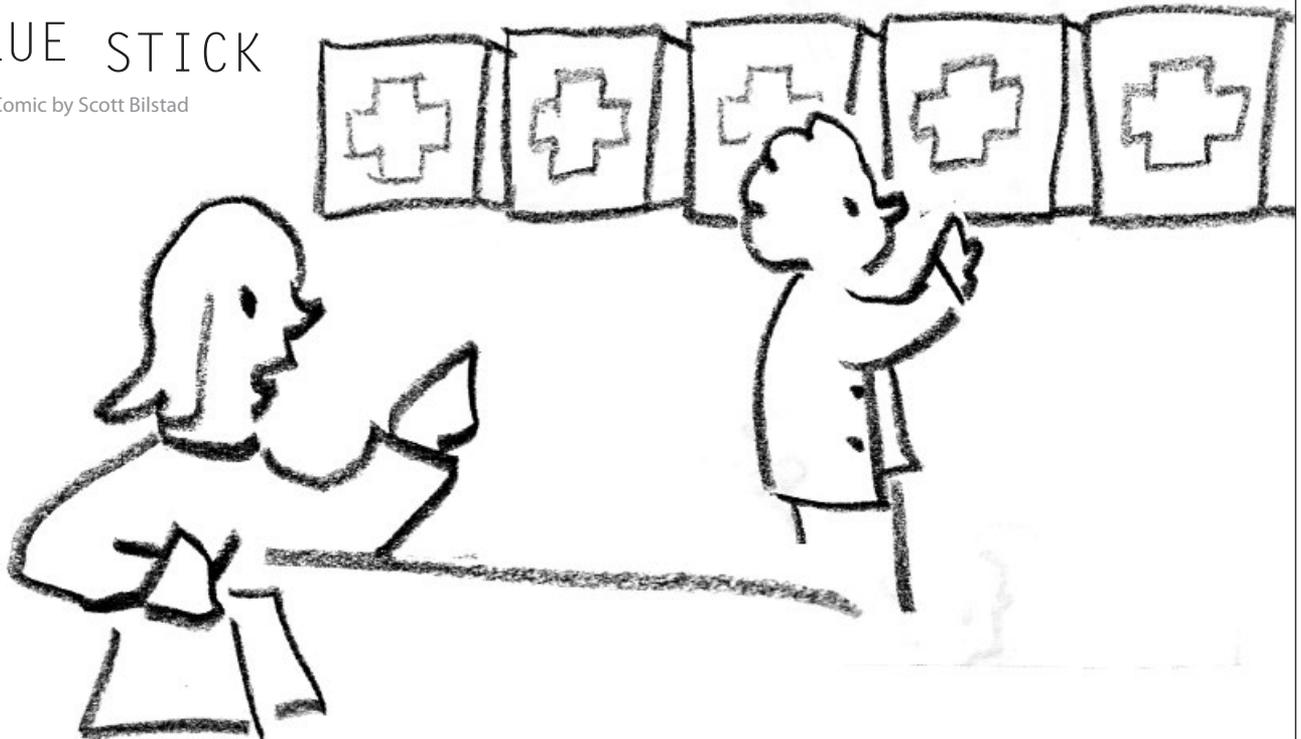
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GLUE STICK

A Comic by Scott Bilstad



It goes: emergency First Aid, emergency bubbles, emergency goldfish crackers, emergency wet wipes, and then emergency coffee!