

TALK ABOUT

Preparing a Sidebar Feast

Planning, Writing, and Submitting Sidebars

by Carolyn Short

If your magazine article is the entrée, then sidebars are the hors d'oeuvres, dessert, and side dishes that accompany the meal—whetting the appetite, enhancing the taste, and delighting the eye. The ever-growing popularity of these self-contained, highly focused nuggets of information makes it imperative that every writer knows how to plan, write, and submit sidebars.

Editors appreciate sidebars because they catch readers' attention, and editors will often purchase an article that includes sidebars over an article that is equally good, but without sidebars. Many publications pay extra for sidebars, so you not only increase your possibility of making a sale, but you also increase your paycheck.

What Is a Sidebar?

A sidebar is a related, separate piece of writing (usually less than 500 words) that accompanies an article or story. Often a sidebar will appear in a box or bar placed at the side of the page, hence the name "sidebar," but you might also see sidebars printed within a photograph or illustration, placed in the midst of the text, or fashioned into non-rectangular shapes. Vibrant colors and eye-catching graphics often set this shorter piece apart from the main text.



After graduating from the Institute's magazine writing course, Carolyn Short's fiction and nonfiction appeared in *Highlights for Children*, *Pockets*, *Junior Trails*, *Turtle*, *My Friend*, *Focus on the Family Clubhouse Junior*, *Touch*, *Ranger Rick*, *Cricket*, and others. She created her first sidebars when writing educational materials for Augsburg-Fortress

Publishers. Now, as an Institute instructor, she encourages her students to write sidebars to enhance their article submissions.

Sidebars Come in Many Varieties

While working on an article, you may discover interesting supplemental information you'd like to include, but doing so would slow the pace of the article. List these fascinating facts in a sidebar. "Ten Strange Shark Facts" could accompany an article on sharks, for example. After reading an article, readers often want to know more, so provide a sidebar with a list of resources and references, such as Internet sites or books on whale watching with your article on that subject.

There are ways you can use attention-grabbing quotes in a sidebar. A parenting article on discipline could include a sidebar with a collection of quotes from parents on ways they discipline their children in public places. A sidebar of quotes from soldiers who stormed Normandy would make a historical article on the invasion even more exciting.

Interviews usually consist of a collection of quotes in a question-and-answer format. Although interviews are more commonly found within articles, they can be placed in a sidebar. If your article tells about teens who build doghouses for dog owners who can't afford them, include a short sidebar interview with one of the owners along with a photo.

Children's magazines sometimes place a poem or song within a sidebar. A sidebar poem about bees would enhance an article on honey. An article on Francis Scott Key would go well with a sidebar containing "The Star Spangled Banner."

Lists rank high in popularity. They're prominent in craft or cooking articles where the necessary materials or ingredients are listed within a sidebar. You've probably noticed checklists alongside many articles. Checklists work well with articles involving some kind of preparation. Strengthen an article on how to find summer employment with a checklist of things to do before applying for a job.

You may have seen forms as sidebars. An

article on babysitting could include a checklist teens could copy and use to keep track of information on each child they baby-sit.

Provide Explanations and Definitions in Your Sidebar

An explanatory sidebar explores some facet of an article in depth. An article about the invention of the roller coaster could be enhanced by a sidebar describing the physics that keep the cars on the track.

Articles containing unfamiliar terms often include glossary sidebars—that way the article doesn't get bogged down with definitions. For example, use a glossary sidebar to define the scientific terms you used in "Manned Mission to Mars."

Add a sidebar with related historical or scientific facts to your article to extend the learning opportunities. An article about Mount Rushmore might include a short biographical sidebar for each of the four presidents. Take the reader one step further: Was there opposition to Mount Rushmore? Answer the question in a sidebar.

A how-to sidebar encourages the reader to use the information presented in the article. If your article discusses the health benefits of eating onions, provide a sidebar with a recipe using onions.

Entertaining or informative quiz sidebars draw readers into articles. "How Safe Would You Be in A Tornado?" could accompany an article on tornado safety. Quizzes placed at the end of an article help the reader remember what he or she read.

What's the Best Way to Present Your Sidebar Information?

One of the more popular methods to format your sidebar is the bulleted or numbered list. A narrative format is another possibility. A question-and-answer format works well for an interview. And don't forget maps, charts, and diagrams—effective ways to present information.

Let Your Market Guide You

To decide what types of sidebars to use and their formatting, study your markets. Analyze current issues of each magazine you're considering.

STUDYING SIDEBARS

When reviewing a magazine's sidebars, consider these questions:

- Do sidebars appear with only nonfiction? Does every article (or story) include sidebars? How many does each have?
- What types of sidebars appear? i.e., how-to, explanatory, glossary, quizzes, checklists, resource quotes, interviews. Which types are most common?
- How are they formatted? i.e., bulleted, numerals, Q&A, charts, maps, diagrams. What formats are used most often?
- What is the word count of each sidebar?
- Do they have titles? How long are the titles? Do the titles have anything in common?
- What kinds of sentences are used? How long are they? How do they compare with the sentences used in the story or article? Are sentence fragments used?

Use this information to guide you to create sidebars that will match the style of your chosen market.

Once you've studied your markets, look through your research notes and consider possible sidebars. Are you planning a general article? Include sidebars that show specific examples or applications. An article on photosynthesis could include a sidebar on how that process applies to growing houseplants. If you're writing a specific article, include a general sidebar. An article on hibernating frogs might contain a general sidebar showing other ways animals cope with cold.

Spice up a factual article by including a related human interest story. Such sidebars help your article appeal to a broader audience. An article on Pearl Harbor would be enhanced with a sidebar sharing a survivor's memories of the bombing.

Sidebars give you an opportunity to cover your topic from a different angle. A sidebar with the remembrances of a Japanese pilot or sailor involved in Pearl Harbor would give the reader another perspective. If your article features a person, a related factual sidebar would be beneficial. For example, a profile

of Orville and Wilbur Wright might include a sidebar explaining the mysteries of flight.

Where Can You Find Sidebar Ideas?

Some sidebar ideas will pop into your head during the research, planning, and writing phase. Jot them down before you forget them. After writing your article, you may be left with related information from your research that didn't fit into your article. Perhaps, it could be formatted into a sidebar.

Keep your eyes open for market possibilities. Many magazines use fillers, and sidebars are usually just the right length. Or you might expand leftovers into articles and write new sidebars to go with them.

What Should You Remember As You Write Your Sidebars?

You're writing for the same audience as you did your article, so keep your vocabulary, sentences, and complexity of thought appropriate for that audience. Write in a tight, lively way, using sparkling language. Your sidebars should entice the reader just as your article does.

WOULD YOUR INFORMATION MAKE A GOOD SIDEBAR?

Not all information creates a satisfying sidebar. Before including information in a sidebar, make sure it will accomplish at least one of the following objectives:

- Increase the number of readers who will read the article.
- Enable readers to better understand the article.
- Help readers to more fully appreciate the subject.
- Satisfy readers' hunger for more information.
- Give readers a hands-on activity to complement the article's information.
- Entertain, motivate, or inspire readers.
- Remind readers of the article's key points.

Can the information be presented in a brief, informative, entertaining style that fits the requirements of your chosen audience and markets? If so, you have a sidebar opportunity!

How Should You Introduce Your Sidebar Ideas in a Query Letter?

Present your article proposal first. In a separate paragraph, briefly describe the sidebar possibilities. If your market usually uses three sidebars per article, give three or four ideas. If your market never uses more than one sidebar per article, present one or two ideas.

What if the magazine you choose doesn't use sidebars? Go ahead and suggest a sidebar. You never know when a magazine might decide to start using them, and you might be the one who convinces them that it's a good idea. For each idea, briefly explain how that sidebar would enhance the article.

How Should Your Sidebars Be Formatted for Submission?

Check to see if your market has specific guidelines for formatting sidebars. If so, follow them. If not, follow the general formatting instructions in the accompanying sidebar.

FORMATTING YOUR SIDEBAR FOR SUBMISSION

1. Place each sidebar on a separate page or pages with your name and article title noted at the top of each page.
2. Number the pages consecutively, following the article's page numbers.
3. Place each sidebar's word count in the upper right corner of the page.
4. Space down one-third of a page. Type SIDEBAR in the center.
5. Double-space twice. Type the sidebar's title in the center. Give each sidebar its own title.
6. Double-space twice and type the sidebar's text. Double-space the text.

Even if your article is rejected, the editor may decide to purchase one of your sidebars as a filler, or request that you expand it into an article. Better yet, the editor may purchase your article and ask you to expand a sidebar into a new article. Your article

could be accepted and your sidebars rejected. Or the editor might accept your article and sidebars, and you've made a sale!

What's the Recipe for Sidebar Success?

Analyze your markets. Think sidebars as you research and write. Choose ideas that enhance your articles and fit your markets. Present them in the preferred format of your chosen magazines. Serve them with confidence, and readers will soon be feasting on your sidebars.

Here's a sidebar that could appear with a teen girl's article on building strong friendships.

5 Cool Gifts That Cost Virtually Nothing

by Jan Fields

- An attractive sweet potato vine in a hand-painted 50-cent terra-cotta pot makes a great gift for green-thumb friendships.
- A handmade set of worry dolls for the friend you fret with—make dolls by wrapping toothpick “bodies” with scraps of embroidery floss for clothes. Pack dolls into a decorated box along with printed directions for telling them your worries at night before you go to sleep.
- A memory in a jar—immortalize the beach trip you took with a friend by putting sand, shells, water, and sparkles in a decorated glass jar. Other memory jars can be made with plastic charms to represent the memory along with colored sand for a gift that reveals a new treasure every time your friend turns the jar.
- Mini-event scrapbook—commemorate a good time together with a mini-scrapbook made from construction paper pages and a decorated cover cut from recycled cereal boxes—bind with yarn run through holes you punch along the edge.
- Write a poem about your friend, print it out on your computer in fancy script, then make an “antiqued” silver frame from recycled cardboard with scrap yarn glued on to make interesting designs. Cover frame with aluminum foil and “antique” with thin black paint—paint it on and rub it off for a fancy look.