

Writing for the paper

We want more comrades to write for the paper, the website and other publications. This briefing will give you ideas about what you can write and some tips about how to write.

Don't worry if you are not yet confident about your grammar, punctuation and style. The important thing is to get an article that sounds like you care and makes the points you want to make in an easily understandable way.

What you can write

The simplest articles to write are:

1. Letters. It is our policy to have an "open press", to give space to debate about AWL policy. But there is room for many other kinds of letters which could, for example, take up small points of disagreement, or expand and update on articles that have already been published.

2. Industrial reports. Comrades should always report on local strikes and industrial disputes, or disputes involving members of their own union. We always want reports of union conferences. You are the best person to write these reports. You know your union and your local area far better than the people who work on the paper. If you are involved in a dispute the paper can help you to organise around it.

We also want to "deepen" our industrial coverage, to cover major union issues in more detail: this could be about mergers or fighting partnership and privatisation etc. AWL union fractions should discuss what they can contribute.

3. Campaign reports. We want to improve our coverage of local campaigns with which we are involved in or know about — e.g. anti-deportation campaigns, housing and cuts campaigns, anti-Academy etc.

4. Reviews of all sorts — TV, theatre, film, books, exhibitions, music. It is good to have something political to say about what you are reviewing, but it is not essential.

Once you have had some practice you may feel ready to write something more substantial about a subject which interests you, on a topic for which you have done some research, or have given a talk about in your branch.

These could be: longer reviews (especially of political books and Marxist classics); domestic or international features; anti-sweatshop features (for the No Sweat page in the paper), in depth interviews, basic accounts of historical events or aspects of socialist history.

Some practical information

The paper is printed fortnightly except over the July-August period and the December/Xmas period.

The copy day for all articles is Monday except for last minute reports and news. Please stick to this deadline.

Email articles to: solidarity@actionforsolidarity.org.uk only.

Please send longer articles as attachments in Word (no particular format).

You can also fax articles to 0207 207 4673.

Send hard copies (if you must) to PO Box 823, London, SE15 4NA.

Please advise us of where and when you can be contacted by phone.

Send in pictures as illustrations if you can. Email pictures in jpegs or tiff formats as attachments. We can also use PDFs as illustrations. Or provide links to high resolution pictures from the internet. (Google image search has a facility to search for high resolution pictures.)

Post pictures you cull from newspapers, magazines and books to us at the address above.

Some basic dos and don'ts

Keeping it short

There are just three rules of writing for the paper. Keep it short, keep it short and keep it short.

1. Keep the article short. The following word limits are a guide.

Simple industrial reports: 3-400 words

Conference reports/disputes: 600 words.

Simple letters: 3-400 words

Discussion letters: 7-800 words

Reviews: 6-700 words

News reports (eg page 2): 5-600 words.

Features (one page): 1900 words

Longer (e.g. long discussion piece, history, 2 pages): 2,600 words.

It is a good idea to stick to the word count, as cuts in articles often offend. If you think you need more space discuss what you want to do with us before you send it in. We also regularly publish much longer "magazine" articles. Ideas and volunteers for such articles are always very welcome.

2. Keep your sentences short. Only very good writers can get away with writing long sentences. Using shorter sentences will mean you are less likely to start using bad grammar. Bad grammar leads to rewriting and that means getting things wrong.

3. Keep your paragraphs short. Especially in short articles. This helps to make your article more readable and exciting.

One thing not to keep short however is the names of organisations which can be initialised. Always spell out and explain at least once who you are writing about. For instance, in a report on the Unison conference, the first time you introduce the subject, you would say something like, "At last month's conference of the local government and health workers' union, Unison..."

Accuracy and completeness

Always make sure that names are correctly spelled.

Always provide a contact address (especially website addresses) and phone number for campaigns; always provide solidarity information.

Always check dates and facts.

Getting down to it

The first paragraph.

Try to start with the most interesting fact or point of interest. For instance if you were writing about a group of workers winning a strike, you might start with that fact. Try not to start with some background information —e.g. about how long the workers have been on strike or what they were striking for.

A bland first paragraph:

"Lecturers at Hackney Community College have taken strike action over planned redundancies."

A better first paragraph:

"Strike action by lecturers at Hackney Community College has forced managers to postpone sending out redundancy notices."

Industrial reports.

The purpose of short industrial reports is to provide brief facts, news and sometimes opinion. Many industrial reports these days are about pay claims, other disputes and union conferences. There are fewer strikes However there are many small, quick and local strikes that occur that comrades could report on. Such reports would add interest to the paper.

Your report should be understandable to both the general reader as well as trade union activists. Phrases like "staff side", "booking on" or the many and varied train-related jargon words are banned.

What should you include:

Pay: what the pay is now, what the demand is, what is in any offer. Don't mix figures with percentages.

Unions: what unions are involved, is the dispute/strike official, is there strike pay.

Conferences/general union issues: who is involved on the "left" and what are they arguing about, what is the political composition of a union executive.

Work conditions: get a picture of or description of the work conditions, even if they are not part of the dispute.

The workplace: where is it? is it part of a bigger company and which one?

It is good to use quotes from union members or strikers to explain part of the story. It is much better if you, the reporter, rather than the office, ring up or speak to the people involved. Find out as much as you

can about the issue before you speak to your interviewee, but don't worry if you can't find out everything. Most people are more than willing to explain the issues if they can. On the other hand rank and file workers do not always know precisely what their union leaders are up to!

If the dispute or issue continues, send an update on what is happening. Recap briefly (but not in the first paragraph!) on the issues so far.

Reviews and other "opinion" articles.

In general reviews are less about facts and more about your ideas and opinions. There are exceptions. If you are reviewing a book or factual TV programme you may decide to convey a lot of the salient facts to create an informative article.

Your opinions don't have to be directly political but you need to be able to substantiate them. On the other hand if there are political points to be made you should make them.

You will probably be writing a review about something you like, something that has caught your notice (e.g. a TV programme), or something you know about anyway. But is still worth researching or re-reading about what you are writing about, to get ideas and to help you process your ideas.

Longer articles.

The rules here are similar to writing essays in school or college —except we still want "journalistic" articles.

There are many guides for writing essays/articles, planning and creating a structure and so on and some are available on the internet. Here is a basic, short guide.

1. Make notes about what you want to say, the facts you wish to include and the ideas you want to convey.
2. Make a list of headings for each 'part' of your article and arrange them in the order you think most logical. If the article is an historical narrative your job will be easier as you will probably end up with a list of events and dates.
3. Write an introductory paragraph summarising what you will be saying in your article. Your article, the subjects and order, should "flow" out of your introductory paragraph. But avoid a long-winded essay-style.

Essay style:

"In this article I will be critically examining whether the President of Venezuela Hugo Chavez has embraced socialist theory and practice. I will then will review the experience of his 'Bolivarian revolution' over the last five years. Finally I will critically discuss the responses of the international left to the Chavez government."

A better, crisper, more accessible and interesting paragraph would be:

"Has Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela, embraced socialism? Is his 'Bolivarian revolution' about to grow over into socialist revolution? Wide sections of the international left seem to think so."

Comment. There is hardly ever any need for "running commentary"—e.g. "how I will go on to explain"; "I have dealt with x, now I will turn to y." That's okay for essays at school where you have to "pad out" to reach the word length. When you're writing for the paper you will almost certainly have to squeeze and cut what want to say in order to stay within the word limit.

4. Edit your article. The purpose of editing is to ensure you use as few words as possible to make your point and that what you do say is clear and understandable.

After writing read your work, preferably on a printed-out 'hard copy'. Cut out the repetition. Cut out the less important points. Rewrite the sentences that don't make sense. Make the changes. Print it out again. Read your article again. Does it still make sense and is it the right number of words? Edit it again.

Now check your facts and amend as necessary.

Give up and send it in before you get too paranoid.

5. Help us by thinking about illustrations we could use with your article.

Some other style points.

It is very easy to repeat yourself. Don't use the same adjective or noun in the same sentence. If something is "outrageous" in the first half of your sentence don't make something else also "outrageous" in the second half. Make it "abominable" instead. Try not to use the same adjectives and verbs throughout your article.

Try not to over use adjectives like savage, brutal, huge and outrageous. The facts often speak for themselves. For example does "£9 billion of cuts" need to be described as "savage" or "huge"? On the other hand if we don't "sound off" a bit in our articles we won't show that we care.

References. If you use a quote from a book, cite the title and author of the book but don't bother with the publisher, edition or page number(s).

If your information has been gleaned from newspapers, BBC website etc, unless you are making a direct quote, don't say where you got your information from.

Don't say "According to the BBC News website the number of asylum applications went down last month."

Do say "The number of asylum applications went down last month."

Or better still, find out where the BBC got their information from and say, "According to the Government, asylum applications went down last month." But don't say "According to the Government's Office of National Statistics asylum applications went down last month." (We don't need all that detail.)

Just try to keep it as simple as you can and you can't go wrong!