**10 top tips for writing inspiring travel articles**

Want to transform your trip into a feature that demands to be read? Start with some expert advice – from having a clear storyline and using dialogue, to beginning with a killer first paragraph

## **1. Have a clear storyline**

A trip is not a story in itself, it’s just a series of events. Some of these events will be interesting (you made it up Kilimanjaro!) and some will not (you arrived back at the airport on time\*). As a writer, your first job is to decide on the particular story you want to tell, and the events which make up that story.

To see the kinds of stories that get published, look at the bold line of introductory copy (known as ‘standfirsts’ in the trade) of articles in papers, magazines and websites. Try writing the standfirst for your own story, and then use it as your brief.

\*Actually, that might be interesting, but only if your story was about how everything ran late in Tanzania.

## **2. Have a goal**

Some trips have a physical objective (reaching the top of Kilimanjaro, crossing Costa Rica, seeing a tiger) that gives your article direction and purpose. The reader (hopefully) sticks with you because they want to know if you’ll achieve your goal.

But many trips don’t have an obvious goal; they are more about discovering a place, unpicking its history or meeting its people. In this case, create a personal goal to give your reader a sense of where you’re taking them. Sentences like “I wanted to discover…” or “I was keen to understand…” give readers an idea of what’s to come, instead of you simply plunging them into the unknown.

## **3. Edit your experience to fit your story**

Stories have characters, dialogue, pace, plot, suspense, drama – they need shaping and organizing to hold the reader's attention. Once you know your storyline, gather the experiences that fit it – and dump the rest. Your travel article will be 700 words.. You don’t have time for detours.

## **4. Write an irresistible first paragraph**

You can start a travel article any way you like, as long as it grabs the reader’s attention. You can use drama, humor, dialogue, (or all three) – but those first sentences must grip like glue. Most travel articles start in media res – in the thick of the story – and then backtrack to explain how you happened to be in this situation.

## **5. Include dialogue**

“Look! There! The lions are on the prowl,” whispered Joseph. Or: "we could see the lions heading off hunting." Which sentence is more interesting to read?

Dialogue brings a scene to life, gives personality to the people in your story, and allows you to convey important information in a punchy way. Whenever you travel, make notes of what people say and how they say it.

## **6. Show and tell**

‘Showing’ and ‘telling’ are two everyday storytelling techniques you probably use without realizing. Showing is when you slow down your writing and describe a scene in detail – what you saw, tasted, heard, felt – you are showing the reader the world through your eyes. Telling is simply moving the story along: "We returned to the tents for a well-earned rest."

Articles typically switch repeatedly between the drama of ‘showing’ and the practical economy of ‘telling’ – you need both.

## **7. Aim to entertain, not impress**

Novice writers often try to pack their writing with literary phrases or recherché nomenclature (like that). Good writers tend more to follow Hemingway’s maxim: “My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way.” That doesn’t mean you can’t be playful and experimental – just don’t do it at the reader’s expense.

## **8. Use vivid language**

Travel articles are peppered with meaningless words and phrases: stunning, incredible, pretty, diverse; ‘land of contrasts’, ‘melting pot’, ‘bustling’. Any of these could be applied to thousands of destinations worldwide. Try to use language that is specific to what you’re describing, and which allows readers to paint a picture in their mind’s eye.

## **9. Leave signposts**

If you’re wandering around a strange country without a guidebook, you look for signposts. So do readers as they travel through your story. Every few paragraphs tell them where you’re going next and remind them of your ultimate goal.

For example, you could write: ‘The next day we travelled from Tokyo to Hirosaki.’ Or you could signpost things a little, by writing: "It was tempting to linger in Tokyo’s restaurants, but my search for Japan’s best sake would next take me deep into the countryside." 'Aha', thinks the reader: I can see where this is going, and why – I’ll keep tagging along.

## **10. Give yourself time to finish**

In an effort to include every fascinating tidbit, too may travel articles finish like a high-speed train hitting the buffers, leaving readers dazed and confused. With a paragraph to spare, put the brakes on and start setting up your conclusion.

Show your readers that the end is nigh. Think about where you started and reflect on the journey. Try to sum up the experience. And – please – come up with something more inspiring than ‘I would just have to come back another time.’

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