



Writing for the media

TN75 Training Notes series: Communication

These notes were first published on the website in June 2013 and updated with a complete rewrite in June 2021 and again in June 2025. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

Local newspapers (where they still exist) continue to reach large audiences. Most also have busy websites and social media channels that increase their readerships.

The local media often welcome well-written topical, locally-relevant comment columns from a range of contributors – including faith groups.

So these notes have been prepared with four groups of churches in mind.

- 1 Those who have the opportunity to write a regular or occasional column in a local newspaper. The examples cited come from one such feature.
- 2 Other churches, to encourage them to pursue this possibility whether in print or in a 'Thought for today' feature on local radio.
- 3 Churches that put out media releases. But see also Training Notes TN89 for this.
- 4 Any church seeking to write material for those who are not members.

The particular examples given come from St Albans in Hertfordshire where *The Herts Advertiser*, carries a weekly column entitled *Faith Focus*.^{*} A team of about ten regular contributors write the column. The author of these notes has had the privilege of being part of this team for over 25 years.

It is a brilliant discipline to write for people who do not necessarily have any links with a church and to say something that would interest them in only a few words.

The team consists of members of various local churches (of different denominations) and a local Rabbi. The editor of the paper is happy to host the column because of the high quality

of the writing and the professional way in which the team is led and co-ordinated (by someone who has been a comms professional).

*Until 2019 the column was titled *Public Pulpit* and appeared in another free newspaper in St Albans, *The Review*.

How it's done

Here are the guidance notes that present contributors of the column work to (written by the team's co-ordinator who checks each contribution before submission). They provide a clear idea of the technique required and how this differs so markedly from the way many churches write material to be circulated outside their membership.

- “1 **Make it local.** Earth it in our local community. Try to include the words ‘St Albans and Harpenden’ (or another part of the local district) *in the first paragraph or two* or cite something clearly local in the piece.
- 2 **Make it relevant to local people.** You are not writing just for your own church or faith community but also for those with no faith. So copying something you have already written for your church etc. is unlikely to work. Avoid ‘jargon’ that only the ‘in crowd’ would understand.
- 3 **Make it punchy.** You only have 370 words so you can only make one point or tell one story. Cut out unnecessary words as you edit your piece before submitting it. Please don’t feel you have to explain everything by the end. A final sentence to make the reader think can be good.
- 4 **Make an impact.** But do so gently, as if you are speaking to someone in their front room, not standing on a soapbox. Please don’t be afraid to be controversial but, if so, do make it clear it’s your personal opinion and be true to the beliefs and values of the faith you represent.
- 5 Articles need to be submitted to (the [Co-ordinator] on [email address] who will forward them to the *Herts Advertiser*, who will publish them in print.
- 6 The deadline is Thursday evening the week before publication so please don’t be late. The deadline will be one or two days earlier when a bank holiday occurs before the publication date.
- 7 Break your piece at one or sometimes two sentences per paragraph. You are not writing prose! Occasional sentences can be devoid of a verb for impact.
- 8 Try to find a national or local story that will still be around next week, a national date that applies next week, or something that will not look silly if the paper is behind schedule. It needs to be relevant the following Thursday.
- 9 If your place of worship has done something unusual or special, it is fine to use the column to tell the story. Try to make a comment or create a challenge.
- 10 Please pray for all of the *Faith Focus* team on a regular basis: that we may write in a way that is interesting and provocative, and make people consider their beliefs.”

These ideas mean that writers have to 'unlearn' some of what may come naturally to them. Most newspaper items have only one or sometimes two sentences per paragraph which feels strange when writing like this for the first time. The point is to hold people's interest with frequent breaks.

You have to put yourself in your readers' shoes as you write because most of them will make no claim to be Christians and what interests you may well not be what interests them. Crucially, 370 words is not very much. There is no space for wasted phrases.

What does it look like?

Here now are two examples from the author's contributions since the column switched to *The Herts Advertiser* to show how one writer has tried to follow these guidelines. The first was written during the Covid pandemic as will become obvious. The second, in 2025.

Exercise 1: you are the (Christian) editor of this column. How would you improve this piece to fit the guidelines given above?

This first example, from 2021, was written just after a funeral for a loyal church member. It seeks to make its point by telling a human-interest story.

The secret I never guessed

I was one of the permitted 30 people at a funeral in St Albans last week.

The lady who had died was 97. Covid had got her, appalling thing that it is, and she died without friends around her in Watford General.

I thought I knew her. How wrong I was!

She was an inspiration. We often gave her a lift to the early Sunday morning service at our church.

She loved being there – and over coffee afterwards she was all smiles, interested in everyone.

Dear Alice. What a lovely person. Few worries it would seem.

The tribute at her funeral was read by a cousin. Then came the bombshell.

Her mother died giving birth to her youngest sister. Then her father died when Alice was seven.

All the children were sent to an orphanage where they were separated so they did not see each other. Alice was brought up there until she was 11, and then in a school which took some orphans in.

But it was all rather cold – never a cuddle for a poor, lonely child.

Aged 16 she had to leave with all her possessions in one bag in the middle of the Second World War to make her way in life.

Amazingly things went well for her. After the war she went on to become a telephonist at the GPO.

Her enunciation was so good they played a recording of her voice to new recruits as an example of the standard expected!

She then worked at St Albans Police Station until she retired.

So here was someone who always saw the positive side of life, who radiated joy, who had a firm Christian faith, but whose early life was so tough.

It made me think.

Why do I moan at minor inconveniences in my relatively easy life?

Why am I so self-centred?

Why did she not tell me what she had been through?

But Alice would have smiled at that last question and have told me that God had been good to her. That Jesus was her friend.

I made assumptions so I never discovered her secret story. What else in life have I missed?

The second example comes from 2025 and picks up on a national story at the time that had very general interest that went far beyond its original city.

Exercise 2: again, you are the (Christian) editor of this column. How would you improve it to fit the guidelines given above?

Thank God for those who empty our bins!

The Birmingham bin strike, which makes the national news every few days, is a standoff between members of the Unite union and the City Council.

The strike began on 11th March due to a dispute over pay and the elimination of Waste Recycling and Collection Officer roles among the workforce.

'That hardly affects those of us living in St Albans and Harpenden,' I hear you say. But it should make us grateful for those who empty our bins: green, black and brown, plus our paper boxes and waste food caddies.

The lorries back up the road I live in each week and then edge forwards as the bins are dragged to the back of the vehicle, hoisted and tipped.

Have you tried dragging two full green bins along the road, and then repeating that for the best part of a day? Their weight is not insignificant.

Or have you tried emptying waste food caddies with smelly muck inside them hour after hour?

I'm really grateful for those who do this work. I always try to say 'Thank you' if I see them as a small recognition of their labours and out of a sense of gratitude that I do not have that job myself.

I am also grateful that our streets are not populated by rats tearing open black sacks. I do not wish to judge the Birmingham situation as I know too little about the issues, but I so hope it will not happen here.

We are still in the season of Easter. Christians believe that God has dealt with the rubbish in our lives through Jesus' death on the cross and his glorious resurrection.

We can say 'Thank you' not by seeking to earn our cleansing but by acknowledging Jesus as Lord of our lives and living under his rule.

So every time I get stuck behind a bin lorry in a narrow street, or hear the sound of bins being hoisted and tipped, I will thank God for those who do this work.

I also thank God that he takes away all the rubbish in my life as I seek to live as a disciple of his in the mess of today's world.

So how about trying your local newspaper or local radio station? If you already do something like this, please email me so I can share your experiences through the 'Author's notes' box for this item on the website.

If you write columns like this, do flag them up on your church's website, X-feed and Facebook page. It's worth using every channel that is available.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes> then TN75. John is grateful to Peter Crumpler, who co-ordinates the *Faith Focus* writers' team, for his permission to use the set of guidelines printed here and for all his wisdom and support for the column.

See also Training Notes TN39, *We've got news for you!*, TN63, *How not to write a newsletter*, and TN89, *Hold the front page!*, which should be read with these notes. Also Articles A21, *The use of print in outreach* and A39, *A plan for your communications*, plus DIY Workshop W3, *How to get a message across*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN75 under Communication.

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