



Secrets of Travel Writing

10 Steps to Become a Successful Travel Writer

by Claire Scobie



Red Lily



Contents

Introduction

Step 1: Set Goals

Step 2: Know your Market

Step 3: Generate Ideas

Step 4: Understand Travel Stories

Step 5: Perfect the Pitch

Step 6: Learn the Art of the Interview

Step 7: Craft the Story

Step 8: Evoke a Sense of Place

Step 9: Revise & Edit

Step 10: Sell your Work

Resources



Introduction

Welcome to Secrets of Travel Writing.

Travel writing might seem like a dream job, but there's more to it than thinking every exotic destination is a story. For every slot in a newspaper, there are hundreds of writers trying to fill it. This 10-step workbook will give you an insider's edge. Think of it like your writer's toolkit to success.

Aside from my own experience as a travel journalist and author, I've drawn on the last five years of teaching travel writing. During my workshops I've heard from hundreds of aspiring writers and learned their hopes, fears and goals. Whether you want to be a full-time travel writer or share your experiences with the world through a personal blog, I've found what people value most is the process. It's the journey not the destination that counts.

The key principals I cover are:

- Clarifying why you want to write
- Setting goals to keep you on track
- Understanding different types of travel articles
- Learning how to market and sell your ideas
- Crafting and editing the story

To keep you motivated, I've included plenty of tips and exercises. So grab a pen and paper now and make notes as you go. You might want to read the whole book first and then come back to different exercises later. Or focus on one step and get the hang of that, before you go on to the next one.

We live in exciting times. With rapidly changing technology and the rise of new media, markets are opening up for travel writers all the time. You can keep up to date through my blog on www.clairescobie.com.

Good luck and keep dreaming!



Step 1: Set Goals

Whether you're starting out or you're a seasoned writer, ask yourself some questions to focus your intent. Spend the next few minutes doing so. Don't think about your answers - be intuitive.

five questions to ask yourself

1. Why do you want to be a travel writer?

2. What sort of travel writer would you like to be? For newspapers, the web or do you have diaries waiting to be turned into a travel memoir?

3. How much time do you have to dedicate to travel writing?

4. What challenges do you face right now in relation to writing?

5. What resources, tools or skills can you acquire to overcome these challenges?



Step 1: Set Goals

Five Tips on Goal Setting

Now you've thought about the bigger picture, spend the next few minutes focusing on your personal writing goals. Write these down in positive language and pin them up on your corkboard. I'm following the SMART goal-setting rules. This defines goals as Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound.

1. **Specific.** Rather than saying you will write every weekend. Say you will do it for two hours every Saturday.
2. **Measurable.** Think through the precise steps to attaining your goal. This clarity will help you achieve the end outcome.
3. **Attainable.** Set yourself a target that stretches you but is within reach. If you're new to this, aim to get published locally first, before you aim for a glossy high-end magazine.
4. **Relevant.** Clarify how your goals align with your life and career path. Travel writing may be a creative outlet for you. That's enough, if it inspires you.
5. **Time-bound.** Give yourself a timeframe to work towards. Writing requires self-discipline and commitment. Set yourself a deadline for finishing that next blog post.

Practical Steps to Achieving Your Goals

Once you've worked out your goals, you need an action plan. You might find that there are gaps in the process of achieving your goals and you'll need to work out how to fill them. This might be as simple as reading the travel section of the paper every week to see how your story could fit.

It's important to review your goals regularly. Stay positive and when you achieve a milestone, treat yourself with a reward. When you transfer your goals to your to-do list, treat them like other appointments in the diary and commit to them.



Step 1: Set Goals

How to Overcome Common Obstacles

1. **If you're feeling overwhelmed...** simplify your list. You might think you can whip off half-a-dozen pitches to editors before morning coffee, and at lunchtime you're still refining the first one. In time you'll work out how long a job takes you.
2. **If you're avoiding...** the hard jobs, like cold calling editors, make sure you're feeling confident. Don't do it if you're having a lousy day.
3. **If you're procrastinating...** and staring at a blank screen with your fifth cup of coffee, write a straightforward sentence to begin your story. If you're still stuck, look at travel magazines for inspiration.
4. **If you're getting interrupted...** turn off the phone ringer, tell your nearest and dearest that when the door is shut, that means shut.
5. **If you're a perfectionist...** and can't stop tweaking a story, give yourself a deadline.



Step 2: Know Your Market

This workbook focuses on editorial rather than advertorial writing. In a nutshell, if you write for travel agents, tour operators and national and regional tourist boards, you are writing advertorial. That is, you're promoting the organisation.

Editorial is when you write for a media outlet. It's supposed to be objective. I know, often it isn't. With the budget cuts in newspapers and the number of writers 'hosted' by travel companies, travel writing is increasingly consumer driven. That said, if you can master the craft of travel writing, you can turn your hand (or pen) to any style.

Good travel writing is often seen as easy but it's difficult to write. You need command of tone, structure, style and a compelling story to tell. You need to balance practical information, personal experiences and anecdotes, with literary description. Travel writers are first and foremost writers who write about travel. They use the same tools as writers to craft an engaging story – narrative, characters, dialogue, atmosphere and revelation.

So let's get going...

Traditional Media

Newspapers

Most national newspapers cover travel every weekend with a section ranging from four to 25/30 pages. As newspaper travel sections are weekly, you have more chance than if you pitch to a monthly magazine. I.e. newspapers publish 52 instead of 12 times a year. Newspaper stories tend to be shorter, more topical and newsy. They are also service-orientated: so the reader will want to follow in the writers' footsteps. Your job is to tell them how.

✦ Hot Tip

Start with regional papers and local papers as a break-in to the travel market. Local writers have an edge.



Step 2: Know Your Market

Magazines

Like most magazines, monthly travel magazines have a long lead-time and will be scheduling stories three to six months ahead. By July, editors will already be planning stories on Christmas holiday breaks, so think ahead when pitching.

Don't forget contract publishers, also known as client or customer magazines. Here, I'm talking about airline magazines: *High Life* for British Airways, *The Australian Way* for Qantas. I know what I said earlier about advertorial vs. editorial and these magazines do blur the line... But many of the articles don't promote the airline, they promote travel. The key is working out the magazine's target readership and making your story fit.

Your Turn

- *Go to your local newsagent and if your budget allows, buy a weekend paper and a couple of travel magazines you would like to write for. Or head down to your local library. Either way, spend 30 minutes analysing the publications and make notes.*
- *Work out if the travel sections are weekly or monthly. Who is the readership? Male/female, young/old. Can you identify the economic bracket, the occupation, their needs/spending power?*
- *Look at the front page of the travel section in the paper and the contents page of the magazine. Do they list contact details for the travel or features editor, also known as the commissioning editor. If so, make a note of the email or phone numbers.*
- *In a magazine they will often list contributing writers. If they do, that means they accept freelance material. If they don't, staff in-house write the stories so you'll have less chance of getting a story commissioned.*
- *Read the articles carefully. What's the cover story? Guess how many words. Do they run shorter news travel stories? How do they use photos?*
- *Take it one step further. Re-read a couple of stories. Are they written in the present or past tense? Which point of view: first, second or third person?*



Step 2: Know Your Market

✈ Hot Tip

By targeting your market accurately and knowing the publication, you're more likely to get a hit.

New Media

Today the web offers travel writers endless possibilities. As traditional media shrinks, online opportunities grow. Changes are happening so fast in the industry, it's hard to keep up.

For now, here are some options: you start your own blog, write for a travel content website or join an online travel community. The main issue with the virtual world is payment - or lack of it. Writing for free is contentious among professional travel writers. Some say it's a way to get ahead, others believe it degrades the craft.

For writers who are starting out, writing online is an ideal way to get exposure and meet like-minded travellers and travel writers. It's less about earning a crust and more about finding an audience.

Online Travel Communities

You can publish stories or give advice at online travel communities like www.bootsnall.com or www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree. Rolf Potts' www.vagablogging.net offers writers the chance to do guest posts... for free.

Online Magazines

Many print magazines also have an online version, while some are only online. A good website now drives magazine sales as www.realtravelmag.com discovered. This online and print publication aims to give readers an authentic insight into a place and the culture. The stories are written in an informal, personal style with pictures styled like holiday snapshots.

The UK's www.thetraveleditor.com aimed at the 'discerning traveller' pays its writers per number of hits for each article. Their work is also promoted via social media.



Step 2: Know Your Market

Around since 1996, www.suite101.com has over 270,000 articles on its North American and European sites. Articles are 800 words max and writers receive a share of the advertising revenue: i.e. if someone reads your story and clicks on the advert next to it, you get a small cut.

Unlike most travel content sites that are selling a product or a place, www.perceptivetravel.com specialises in narrative travel stories. To apply, you need to have already published a travel book. They do pay: US\$100 per article. Not much, but the webzine has integrity and clear writer's guidelines.

The American site www.worldhum.com has a host of interesting, well-written articles and also occasionally commissions stories. A great one to bookmark.

To Blog or not to Blog

If you crave artistic freedom and you love playing with new technology, a blog is for you. The best travel blogs are those that specialise. Find your niche, become an expert in one area and write about it with passion.

You can do crazy things with blogs. Why? Many are non-commercial. They are yours. They don't have editorial guidelines. You are the writer, editor, photographer and designer. You can bend or stretch your blog with pictures, footage, podcasts, graphics. The list is endless. They are subjective and the feedback is instant. It's all about connection with your audience. Writing on blogs doesn't need to be polished, but the better quality, the funnier or quirkier, the more likely you'll get a following. And certain rules still apply: no typos, no mistakes, check your facts.

Blogs are for getting out of the box. They've morphed from a simple online travel diary to a way for keen travellers to pay for their round-the-world journeys. See www.nomadicmatt.com. This offers backpacking tips and excellent advice about writing online while paying for Matt's travels.

Travel bloggers don't only use their site to reach an audience. They take advantage of the many social media networks including www.twitter.com, www.facebook.com, www.linkedin.com & www.stumbleupon.com. Travel PR companies now see the enormous influence bloggers have and are inviting them on press trips. In May 2010 BA's *Highlife* sent bloggers on an all-expenses paid trip to New York.

✈ Hot Tip

To increase traffic to your blog, cross-post & write on other travel blogs.



Step 2: Know Your Market

How to Start Blogging

Free blogs can be set up on countless websites such as www.blogger.com or www.wordpress.com. But Barbara Weibel, American travel writer & blogger, offers this technical advice:

‘I wouldn’t use one of the free blog services like blogger or wordpress.com. When you do, you get a second level domain URL, like ‘Barbara.blogger.com’. This means that blogger.com is the domain and you are just tacked on the front. Google doesn’t like to index second level domains; their belief is that any professional writer will have their own domain name. Instead, host your own domain name with a good hosting service and install the free wordpress software - any good host will have an install centre that can install it for you with a few simple keystrokes.’

Barbara Weibel saw the opportunities for blogging and through hard work and tenacity made her dreams come true. Four years ago she quit an unsatisfying job in the corporate world to pursue her true passions of travel, writing, and photography. As of 2010, she travels close to 10 months of the year and has no permanent home. See her blog www.holeinthedonut.com.

‘When I set out on a six-month round-the-world trip in 2006, I started the blog as a means to allow family and friends to follow my journey,’ says Weibel.

‘By the end of that trip more than 1200 readers were visiting my site each month. Since then, I’ve continued to travel and write, staying true to the writing, no matter the cost. That commitment has served me well; Hole in the Donut today attracts more than 25,000 monthly visitors and consistently ranks as one of the top 100 independent travel blogs in the world. I’m not raking in the dough, but I’m living my dream. For the first time in my life, I am truly happy.’

Weibel no longer pitches stories to editors, but writes guest posts to drive traffic to her blog. ‘This, in turn, attracts travel related companies, who pay to advertise on my site,’ she says. ‘Then I have the freedom to pursue my own itinerary and write about whatever intrigues me.’



Step 2: Know Your Market

A few more sites to look at:

- www.travelblogs.com – best travel blogs
- www.travelblogexchange.com – community of new media travel writers
- www.travelblather.com – Jeremy Head writes on the future of travel journalism
- www.asianramblings.com – China travel & blog
- www.travelsavvymom.com – blog written by Mums for Mums
- www.tims-boot.blogspot.com – about the business of online travel
- www.grumpytraveller.com – travel journalist David Whitley pushes boundaries
- <http://grantourismotravels.com> – Lara Dunston and Terence Carter write about their grand tour of the globe in partnership with HomeAway Holiday-Rentals

Your Turn

- *Grab a coffee and spend the next 30 minutes looking at some of these websites. Have a play. Which do you like? Why? The graphics or words or the combination? Are they functional and user-friendly? Within a few minutes of looking at one site, you can guarantee you'll be surfing to the next, and the next, following the links.*
- *Before your eyes start glazing over, take a few minutes to imagine what your blog would look like. You might never have thought you could do a blog. Be bold. What aspect of your travelling life would you like to share with the world? Who is your audience? Friends or family?*
- *If you already have a blog, ask yourself. What is my point of difference? With 100 million blogs out there, does yours stand out from the crowd? Jot down five ideas on how to improve it.*



Step 3: Generate Ideas

Now we've had a look around the market place, the next step is refining your product. Many writers new to the business think they need to write the story first and send it to a newspaper in the hope an editor will run it. Editors receive hundreds of these unsolicited manuscripts and most end up in the bin. Yes, you might be lucky, but this option is risky & time-consuming; if you do try it, keep the article less than 1000 words.

Next option is you write 'on spec'. You contact the travel editor before you travel, he/she expresses an interest and agrees to read your story on your return without any guarantee of publishing it. Many freelance travel writers start out this way.

Lastly, you pitch an idea or 'query letter'. Before we go into pitching, let's look at where ideas for travel stories come from:

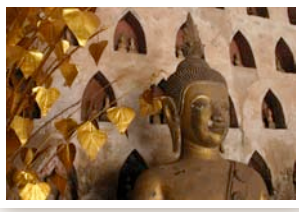
- **The travel industry.** Keep informed by reading the travel sections of papers, mags & online.
- **Follow trends.** See which crazes are in, what tourists love/loathe.
- **Get on press mailing lists** for local & state tourist boards, travel companies and major tour operators to receive press releases.
- **Network.** Develop contacts with publicists in the industry.
- **Specialise.** Become an expert on a region/a country/an obscure hobby.

✈ Hot Tip

Keep an idea's notebook handy to jot down thoughts. Turn your passion into an idea.

Your Turn

- *As you can see, it's crucial to know the publication or website you want to write for. Spend the next 15 minutes brainstorming some ideas you could imagine yourself writing for your chosen outlet. Make them realistic. Perhaps you've just been on the yoga holiday from hell and you could write a funny 500-word piece for a wellbeing magazine. Or did you discover the best cupcake shop in Manhattan's Lower East Side which you could pitch to a local paper?*
- *Get your creative juices flowing.*



Step 4: Understand Travel Stories

Whether you're writing for print media or online, you need to know the types of travel stories out there. Online content will always be shorter. In print, you have the luxury of the longer form.

Short newsy articles are in the 'round-up' of the travel section in a newspaper or 'front-of-book' in the first pages of a magazine. 150 – 500 words.

It pays to get good at short, informative stories. If editors know you can write succinctly, they will trust you with bigger commissions.

✦ Hot Tip

Think laterally: a news event can make your unsold travel story timely. Be prepared to react quickly to current events & then pitch to a newspaper.

Consumer articles are usually photo-led and cover anything from equipment to the latest gadget to types of travel insurance. 250 – 1000 words.

Service stories fill the bulk of newspapers. They cover how a reader can travel more pleasurably & easily and give lots of practical information. 300 – 1500+ words.

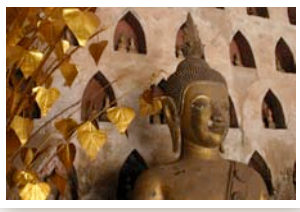
Service stories are often 'how-to' stories, 'round-ups' or 'guides to'. They also include hotel reviews, travel industry news and thematic pieces.

Three Service Story Ideas

- The top 10 hotels in Melbourne for under \$150.
- Taking the kids river rafting in New Zealand.
- How to travel with your pet

✦ Hot Tip

Service stories are popular for editors to run because they are cheaper than sending a journalist on location. They are easier to write because you use quotes from experts & research online, as well as from the location.



Step 4: Understand Travel Stories

Destination Features are the stories we love to write. The subjects range from a personal narrative to eco-tourism to island hopping to adventure travel and anything in between.

All aim to give the reader a clear idea of what a place is like & how to travel there. In newspapers and online from 800 – 2000 words, up to 4000 words in magazines.

Destination stories used to be the main way a travel writer made money. These days the cheaper-to-run stories, often on thematic lines, are being commissioned. Most destination articles include a **Fact Box or Fact File** (also known as a ‘break out box’) with essential travel information. This may include when to visit, what to bring, some history or geography about the place. It will also cover how to travel, which airline, cost and give contact details of hotels and resorts. Check past issues of the publication to ensure you follow the same format.

✦ Hot Tip

Destination stories are not about the writer going somewhere exotic: they tell the reader about what his/her holiday could be like. Spot the difference!

Travel Essays are a rare species these days and tend to be personal or thematic.



Step 5: Perfect the Pitch

Six ways to Develop your Story

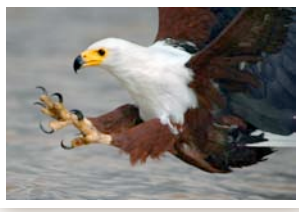
1. **Find a 'peg'.** This is a reason to publish and could be a date or an event.
2. **Link to a travel trend.** Current popular trends include eco-tourism, 'bleisure' – the rise of business and leisure - budget travel, voluntourism.
3. **Nail a strong angle.** Every travel story has been written before. It's your job to bring something new to the streets of Paris or the beaches of Bali.
4. **Research the idea.** Look in papers, guidebooks & online.
5. **Think like a journalist.** Have a sellable idea not subject matter. An editor will want his/her readers to think that this is a manageable trip they could do.
6. **Be specific.** Don't go to Spain, go in search of the perfect Sangria.

✈ Hot Tip

Explain why now. What is the hook for your story? A festival? An anniversary?

The Art of Pitching

- Pitches work best when they are focused. Apply the 'Hollywood Elevator Rule' where you have 30 seconds to deliver a pitch. In an email, this equals three to five lines for your idea.
- Grab attention quickly and utilize the strap-line of the email with a pithy title. Then in the email, give the subject of your story in four or five words.
- List your credentials and any privileged information or connection you have to the destination. You could be a local. Or you could be a salsa dancer going to the Rio Carnival who knows the best dance teacher in town. You need to show the editor why you are the best person for the story.
- If you have space, include estimated word count, type of article – service or destination – and any extra features you'll include such as a Fact Box.
- Send up to three ideas in the body of an email, not as an attachment.
- If you have photos, tell the editor. I don't include any photos in my initial pitch as an email with attachments is more likely to be spammed. Once an editor is interested, you can send a few photos at low-resolution (75 pixels or 75 dpi). For print purposes, you will then need to email your final selection of photos at 300 dpi.



Step 5: Perfect the Pitch

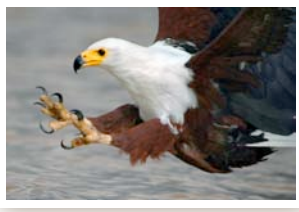
- See if the publication has contributor guidelines on the web; if so, read before you pitch.
- Editors dislike receiving queries from writers who obviously aren't familiar with their publication. Tailor your story to suit the readership. Better still, make it fit a 'regular slot'. A regular slot is exactly that: it features the same type of article in the travel section every issue.

Three Regular Slots

- **'Room with a View'**. An 800-word hotel review + photo in the *Weekend Australian*.
- **'36 Hours in...'** A full-page on how to spend 36 hours in a city in the *New York Times*.
- **'Portrait of a City'**. A one-page personal account of a city in the *BA's High Life*.

Six Tips on Approaching a Travel Editor

1. Find the contact details for the travel editor, usually listed in the paper/magazine. If not, call the switchboard and speak to the editorial assistant and ask for the name, email and if possible, direct line of the commissioning editor.
2. Once you've sent in your pitch, follow up after a few days with another email. You can also phone. Remember that editors have stacks of writers pitching to them and your email is a low priority. Be gently persistent. The onus is on you to chase up, but don't hassle the editor.
3. Keep a record of the queries you send out (as it can take weeks for a reply).
4. Send the story out to different publications simultaneously in the hope one 'bites'. If you do, try to ensure the publications aren't in direct competition with each other.
5. Some editors will want to see your previous clippings to prove you can write before they commission you. This is where having a blog or articles online can help if you haven't been published before in print.
6. If you call up an editor and he/she has time to talk to you, have a couple of other ideas you can discuss. Show how you know a region.



Step 5: Perfect the Pitch

✦ Hot Tip

Approach editors with stories about unusual places to visit close to home – cheaper to write and popular among readers.

What to do if your idea is rejected. Firstly, don't take it personally. There are often many reasons why your story isn't suitable. These days it comes down to tight budgets that means fewer stories are published and more are written in-house. You need to develop a thick skin, keep refining your pitch and don't give up.

Your Turn

- In step 3 you brainstormed some ideas. Now focus on one. Decide where you want to pitch it. Take 30 minutes to hone down the idea. You'll probably find it isn't as straightforward as you thought. Maybe you are trying to write too much or make the idea too wide. Say you wanted to write about going to the Amazon. It's better to be specific and write about the new trek that has just opened for city slickers along the Inca trail.
- Re-read the steps on how to perfect your pitch. Can you improve your idea by linking it to a travel trend? Can you find a peg? Maybe the Amazon idea is also an eco-tourism venture best experienced during the spring festival.
- For the next 30 minutes, refine your idea. See if you can think of a title. If you can't, look at some websites to give you ideas.
- Then find the name and email of the editor. While you are at it, see if there are any contributor guidelines or any regular slots your story could fill. You're now ready to write your email. Don't forget to include relevant personal information and contact details.
- If you feel confident that your idea is sharp and hits the target, send it off. If not, leave it for a while and come back and re-read it. Double-check your spelling.



Step 6: Learn the Art of the Interview

Travel is about people, not just place

When you go somewhere, however beautiful, it's the people you meet who will make a difference. Whether it's the craggy-faced Vietnamese woman who sits down and shares her noodles, or the Punjabi farmer who falls asleep and snores on your shoulder, people bring travel writing alive. They bring colour to your words and can become characters in your narrative.

When you're a traveller, don't be shy. Step out of your comfort zone and talk to strangers. Start with taxi drivers and the hotel receptionist. You don't always need to share the same language, what's crucial is the connection you make with the person who, in turn, can humanise your story.

Travel writer, Pico Iyer says, 'We build places through people, and the challenge is to find a person who will stand for something more than just himself, and who will become a kind of representative man, in Emerson's phrase.'

From *The Writer's Reader* edited by Susie Eisenhuth & Willa McDonald.

Eight Ways to Conduct an Interview

1. If it's a formal interview with the chef of a hotel & he's the focus of your story, record it.
2. If it's with a tour operator or publicist, be a bit sceptical. Don't believe all the hype.
3. When it's informal, say, with a Thai fisherman, and you aren't quoting him directly or using his name, make notes straight after the conversation.
4. If you're going to quote a person by name, it's polite to tell him/her before you begin. Then make notes throughout. Write down things about the person, not just their answers. As you need to listen and write, it's helpful to develop your own shorthand.
5. Build a rapport with your interviewee but guide the conversation.
6. Ask open-ended and leading questions – to bring out anecdotes.
7. If you don't understand, ask.
8. Double check spellings of names or places.



Step 6: Learn the Art of the Interview

To make someone come alive for the reader, you often need to write a ‘thumb-nail description’ of the person. This includes their appearance, facial features and the tone of his or her voice. You need to look for the telling details. Too many will obscure; too few will render the person opaque.

You can also use ‘stage directions’ to show how a person speaks and any gestures they use.

In the excerpt below, from the article ‘Trailfinder’ by *Sunday Times* travel writer Chris Haslam, see how Haslam builds up the character of the outback guide, Sab Lord.

‘I’ve already heard a lot about Lord: from Darwin through 200 miles of wilderness to the gates of the Kakadu National Park, waitresses, petrol-pump attendants and the men who scratch a living from the region’s controversial uranium mines were in agreement that the man is something of a myth. He’s also the spitting image of Ray Winstone – only tougher-looking – dressed in khaki shorts, snake gaiters and a slouch hat.’

In a few brush-strokes, Haslam paints a picture of Lord and in the last sentence gives a ‘thumb-nail’ description of the man.

Your turn

Take at least 30 minutes for this exercise. Think of someone memorable you’ve met on a journey. Or if you can’t, think of someone you’ve met in your hometown. Not a friend, a stranger.

- *Using concrete sensory details describe that person and make them as vivid as you can. Bring the character to life by showing, not telling what he/she is like. Include physical details, their clothes, if possible, a scrap of dialogue. Include anything significant that reflects a deeper aspect of their character.*
- *Let yourself go. Enjoy the process.*
- *Once you’ve written a few paragraphs, re-read them. Now zero in on the convincing details and in one or two sentences **only** describe that person. This is ‘the thumb-nail’ technique. If you’re writing an 800-word story, you won’t have the luxury of pages to describe someone.*
- *Get used to doing this as often as you can. When you’re on the bus, on the street, in a café. Look at people, eavesdrop, observe and think how you would describe them. Then try it. Put pen to paper.*



Step 6: Learn the Art of the Interview

At your Destination

- Once you arrive at your destination, it's helpful to make a plan. Work out where you want to visit, who you want to speak to, how long you have in each place.
- Go to the tourist information, pick up all the leaflets & speak to any tour guides.
- Read the local newspapers for funny stories or ideas.
- Then, follow your nose. If you see an interesting street, go down it. Get lost. Chat to people as you go. Find somewhere or someone that encapsulates the place you are in. Sit in a café and take time to write about that place or person.
- Take lots of photos to supplement your work and to refer to later as visual prompts. Photos can help jog your memory when you are crafting your story.

✦ Hot Tip

Make notes at the time. Capture where you are with brief details: slate floor, scarlet curtain; outside, lorikeets screech. Record how your body responds to different places – are you sweaty or shivering?



Step 7: Craft the Story

The Writing Process

If you're working to an editor's brief, you'll have a clear idea on what the story is, the word length and your readership. Some professional travel writers work on location, so by the time they board the plane home, they've completed much of the story. Taking your laptop and typing up your notes at the end of each day saves time.

Other writers like to write in longhand at the destination and then wait until they return home to write up the story. The benefit of this approach is that distance can often help you decide what's at the heart of your narrative.

If you're blogging your way around the world, you will obviously need to write in situ. This will give your blog entries an immediacy of being there, which will connect you to your audience.

Nine Ways to Organise your Material

1. **Think like your reader.** Work out what their travel aspirations might be.
2. **Write out the key points.** Put these in a logical sequence and/or order of importance.
3. **Divide your topics into separate 'blocks'.** Each block may include facts, description, information and interviews.
4. **Find a case study or an interview.** This brings out the human angle.
5. **Work out the themes of the story.** Good travel stories have a definite, central theme.
6. **Be selective.** You are writing an article not a diary entry. See what is significant, what details should come to the foreground and what should stay in the background.
7. **Discriminate ruthlessly.** You cannot include every detail: it slows down the narrative. Leave out the boring stuff.
8. **Think about your tone.** Travel writing is often light and can be funny. Include mishaps – lost luggage, camera overboard – to add humour.
9. **Use a mind map.** If linear thinking doesn't work for you, you can also use a mind map (see p. 24). You don't need a computer for this, just a piece of paper and some coloured pens. This is helpful if your story has many themes and you're trying to work out what should lead.



Step 7: Craft the Story

Learn to Edit your Reality

- When crafting a 1500-article about a month-long trip, you have to edit your reality.
- Think about the best scenes, the key moments of the journey and choose a few to illuminate your main points. This means playing with time.
- Your narrative focus will move in and out, like a camera lens, so one morning spent scuba-diving may take up an entire page and then you will skim over the next two days. Cut out entire days by saying, ‘By evening we were at the coast...’
- Whatever you describe, include specific details – so the reader has a sense of being there.

✦ Hot Tip

Writing about a journey gives you a head start because you have your narrative thread: a beginning, an end and a clear path that takes you from one to the other.



Step 7: Craft the Story

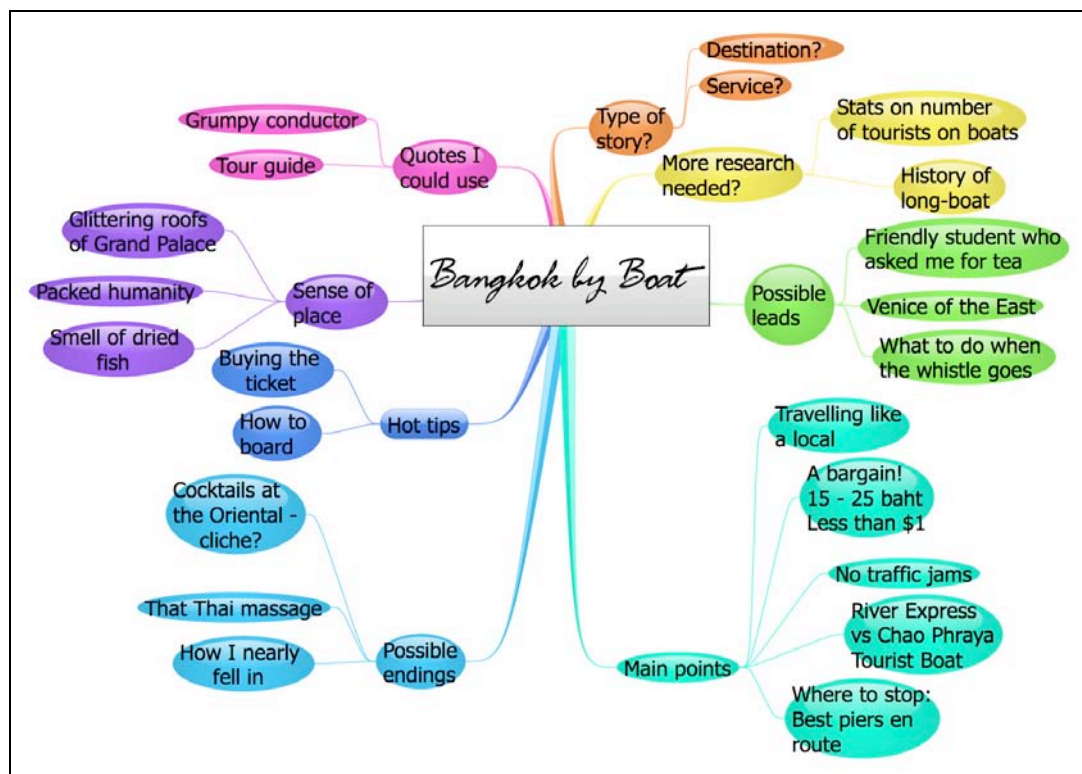
How to write about Seeing Bangkok by Boat

Say your story is about one day in Bangkok. Rather than try and see all the tourist sites, you decide to choose one or two and spend the rest of the day exploring the city through its waterways.

When you come to write it, where do you start?

Is it with a description of the Chao Phraya River? Or the difference between a 'river express' and a canal boat? Perhaps you want to begin with the conductor who shouts at you for holding everyone up? Or with the friendly student who practises her English on you. If it was for a budget magazine, you might begin with how you can save money by travelling like a local. Or you might decide to kick-off with a warning about the dangers of jumping on a long-tail boat.

A mind-map can help your work out which is the strongest angle. I often get a sense of which part has the most 'juice.' As you piece your material together remember to draw the reader in and take him or her on your journey.





Step 7: Craft the Story

What to do if you are stuck

- **If you can't think of a good opening line**, don't stare at the blank screen. Write a summary: 'The river boat was packed, not a spare seat. I thought I would have missed rush hour. A hawkker tried to sell me cheap sunglasses...' As you write, an idea will come.
- **If you're still stuck**, write about why you're stuck. This is '**mental flossing**'. 'I feel tired because the next-door neighbour's dog woke me at 3am. I don't feel like doing this...' Sometimes unlocking the mundane daily problems can allow deeper memories to surface. You'll be surprised what comes out. Give yourself permission to write off topic. Then, once you are writing, gently guide yourself back to the story and try again.
- **If nothing is happening**, read other travel articles. Get motivated by someone else's writing.
- **If you're feeling paralysed**, go for a 10-minute walk, jump up and down, shake your body. Come back to your desk, take a deep breath and ask yourself, what's the worst that could happen? Look over your notes and intuitively see which words jump out. Start there. You can change it all later. That's the wonderful thing about writing, nothing is set in stone and you are the artist of your canvas. You choose the palette, you decide the paint colours, and you work out the brush strokes.

✦ Hot Tip

Don't give up – the first draft is often lousy. Keep stripping back to find the real story.



Step 7: Craft the Story

How to structure a Travel Story

Once you've clarified the order of your story, think about the hook that will draw your reader in. This is called the lead.

- **In a travel news piece** the lead or opening line is often no more than 25 - 30 words. It answers the five journalistic questions - who, what, where, when and why.
- **In a service or destination story** there are several ways to write a lead. Decide which is the strongest element in your story: the place, narrative, character or theme.

Five Ways to Lead

1. **Narrative:** based on story-telling techniques, this pulls the reader in.
2. **Descriptive:** paints the scene, so the reader feels impelled to read on.
3. **The dramatic plunge:** pushes the reader right into the middle of things.
4. **The strong quote** or fact or anecdote sets up the story.
5. **Opinionated comment:** aimed to annoy, entertain or perplex.

✂ Hot Tip

After the lead, the second or third paragraph is known as the 'nut paragraph'. This sets the scene and frames the story: it gives an overview.

Breaking down the Writing Process

In 2008 I wrote a story called 'Tall Tales from the Buccaneer Archipelago' for the UK's *Daily Telegraph*. It was about staying at an Aboriginal owned wilderness camp in the Kimberley in Western Australia.

This was my brief: 'Please would you do it as 1,200 words and focus on it being a good green eco-story.'

This is what I wrote.



Step 7: Craft the Story

The Lead

‘The skipper wasn’t optimistic about seeing a humpback. We were too late in the season, he reckoned. The mothers and calves would already have started the long journey south from their breeding grounds off north-western Australia. With the approach of the wet season in the Buccaneer Archipelago, the air was sticky and the water a ‘cool’ 29 degrees -- bath temperature.

Second paragraph of Lead

‘Then on the horizon, a faint splutter. With the twin-engine into full throttle, we sped in pursuit. For minutes, nothing. Then a gleaming black-and-white humpback torpedoed out of the water, landing on its back with a loud smack. As the whale breached less than 100-ft away, a wave of rank fishy odour engulfed the boat. With each leap the pong grew stronger and the whoops on board louder. There is nothing like a close encounter with a 35-ton whale for an intoxicating high.

Third paragraph – the ‘Nut Paragraph’

‘Such an intimate encounter with wildlife is what a stay at Kooljaman on Cape Leveque is all about. This eco-wilderness camp located on the tip of the Dampier Peninsula in Australia’s far north-west is only three hours drive from the pearling town of Broome, but it feels like the final frontier...’

Here I started with a dramatic moment. In the first paragraph, I didn’t give away too many details about the Buccaneer Archipelago – except that it was in ‘north-western Australia’. In an earlier draft I quoted the skipper, but decided it slowed down the lead, so instead I paraphrased what he said and tried to give a sense of his character with the word ‘reckoned’. I also used senses to anchor my descriptions. In the first lines of the third – nut – paragraph I summarised where the story was set and what it was about.



Step 7: Craft the Story

Your Turn

- *Take 30 minutes for this exercise. If you are already working on a story, re-read your lead. Are you happy with it? Now read the rest of your story. Is there another line or paragraph buried further down that would make a stronger opening. Have a play. Try the story with three different leads. You might go back to your original one, or you might find that a new beginning changes the entire story and works better.*
- *If you haven't got a story in progress, go back to the idea you were working on earlier. How could you begin to write it? Again, write three very different sentences. Which one jumps out? If you have a writing buddy, ask him or her. With practise you'll find that the right opening line will 'sing' to you... Then you'll know you've framed your story in the best way you can.*

After the Lead, comes the Tight Middle

- Take the plunge and write four to six points that outline the key aspects of the story. If you used a mind map, refer to this. These points should provide a logical structure so one idea leads to the next.
- With paragraphs consisting of one idea – block paragraphs – you need to use transitions: words or phrases that link two ideas. These include conjunctions like 'and' or 'but' and tags such as 'therefore', 'next' and 'however'. Transitions can also be details – descriptive or factual – that take you from one topic to another and create a natural flow.
- Chronology also provides an obvious thread between paragraphs. But avoid making it sound like a diary entry.
- Think of signposts that will lead the reader through. Often these signposts are the first line of each paragraph which you then expand in the rest of the paragraph.
- Description isn't enough: you must tell a story.
- If you're lucky enough to be hosted for free, you still can be critical of a destination – as long as it's objective and backed up. Your editor won't want you to rubbish a place, but they will expect some objectivity.



Step 7: Craft the Story

✦ Hot Tip

If you're writing a 1000-word story, break it down. 150 words for the lead, 100 words for the end. This leaves 750 words for the middle: six to seven key points.

Then a Strong Ending

- An ending must feel like a satisfying conclusion which links back to the introduction.
- It can be negative or positive, funny or serious, a quote or a description. It could be a summary or recap of the main theme or a striking statement or poignant image. It must leave the reader with a sense of completion.
- When you are writing, think of how you can use your material to get to the end by the most direct, logical route.

✦ Hot Tip

Use the 'circle trick': end at the place or scene where you opened the story.



Step 8: Evoke a Sense of Place

Editors are looking for a sense of place. You must take the reader by the hand so they feel they are at the scene of the action. Creating a sense of place is the best way to allow a reader to visualise and experience the subject.

‘Two or three critical pieces of information – tactile, sensual, physical pieces of information make the place familiar and immediate,’ says travel writer Ashley Hay in *The Writer’s Reader*.

- Use all five senses – sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. When you use sensory description, it forces you to show, not tell.
- Develop characters from people you have met or interviewed, who symbolise the place.
- Use fresh metaphors and similes.
- Don’t summarise scenes, dialogue or action. Recreate them.
- Be specific with your descriptions. Vladimir Nabokov once said, ‘If you don’t know the names of trees, you’re not a writer.’

Compare the following: which sentence is more vivid?

- i) That horse was enormous.
- ii) That horse had the strength of a buffalo.
- iii) A car sat in the driveway.
- iv) A cherry-red Merc sat in the driveway.

See how Alexander Frater captures the qualities of rain in the opening paragraph of his travel memoir, *Chasing the Monsoon*.

‘The first sounds I ever heard were those of falling rain. It was tropical, the kind that seems to possess a metallic weight and mass, and it began bucketing down... Drumming on the galvanized iron roof, swishing through the heavy foliage outside. It knocked flowers of trees and washed away topsoil; our little island was carpeted with fallen blossoms, damp and sweet smelling, the surrounding lagoon darkened by tons of earth floating in suspension.’



Step 8: Evoke a Sense of Place

Your Turn

- *Why not go outside for this one, even if it is raining. Find a place you can sit and write. Close your eyes and visualise somewhere that you've travelled to and enjoyed. Be there, see the details.*
- *It could be a Himalayan mountain village, a nearby camping-ground. What are the colours? Smells? Sounds? Is there a person you associate with that place who could have a cameo appearance?*
- *Now write a paragraph without telling the reader directly that you like being there. This is the art of showing not telling. When someone else reads it he/she should know what it is like to be there and how you feel about it.*



Step 9: Revise and Edit

How to Edit your Story

If you're writing a short news story, your first draft might be strong enough to print. For longer features, you will probably need to edit it and do several drafts.

If you're working to a brief, write to length. This takes discipline and skill. If an editor wants 800 words, submit no more than 820.

Four Tips on Revising

1. Write, revise, rewrite.
2. It can take time to truly know what the story is about. Once you have done a good first draft, leave it. Re-read the following day.
3. When you're satisfied read your story out loud – to a friend, if you can – if not, yourself. The French author, Gustave Flaubert, used to read his work aloud every evening in his garden. It's the best method of spotting punctuation errors and seeing where the writing doesn't flow.
4. At the end, polish your feature by going through it meticulously. Double-check the facts, dates, names, figures and quotes.

Style Advice

Style is personal and every writer will follow his/her own rules. Still, it's crucial to check your writing matches your chosen publication or website.

- Don't write about yourself too much (unless it's a personal blog). A newspaper or magazine article is about the place, not you.
- Avoid clichés – breathtaking view, sun-kissed beaches, tropical paradise.
- Choose your voice – generally warm for travel writing, neither gushing nor dry.
- Clarity is key. Use short subject-verb-object sentences and consistent verb tense.
- The verb is the engine of the sentence. Keep it working overtime and always use active rather than passive constructions. E.g. 'The fisherman said nothing' not 'nothing was said by the fisherman.'
- Avoid excessive adjectives and adverbs – they weaken and slow down a narrative. Your job is to find new ways of describing familiar destinations.



Step 9: Revise and Edit

- When using quotes, change as little as possible. A direct quote repeats exactly what the interviewee said. If you don't have a person's precise words, paraphrase without changing the meaning of what someone said. When you paraphrase, never use quotation marks.
- Try to write with rhythm or pace. The impact of a short sentence will be greater if it comes before or after several long ones. Think about the punch line of your sentences.
- Be accurate, not only with facts but how you describe the place: the type of trees, the texture of fields, the quality of the air.

✦ Hot Tip

The link between the spoken word and travel writing is strong – think of your writing like a conversation with the reader. You begin with the most interesting piece of information or a summary of the highlights and work your way down. Allow for the odd literary technique.

Your turn

This could take 30 minutes to one hour, depending on the length of your story... and whether or not you're a perfectionist. Make a cup of tea before your start.

- Take a piece of writing you're satisfied with. Print it out, double-spaced and get a red pen or pencil.
- Go through every line and see how you can improve it, shorten it, hone it down. Cut out as many adjectives and adverbs – those modifiers with 'ly' on the end – as you can. See if you can describe your experiences using strong verbs instead. If you have quotes, check the punctuation. If you don't know how to use a semi-colon, look it up online. See if you can cut the story back by 10 – 20 per cent.
- Then type in the changes. Print it out again and re-read it. Is the story better for this final polish? Back to the idea of you as the artist, this is where you are giving your canvas the final touches, getting ready to send it on its way and out into the world (or your bottom drawer).



Step 10: Sell Your Work

How to Syndicate or Sell your Story

- A full-time travel writer may sell up to eight pieces from a one-week trip. These could include a destination feature, a hotel review, a neighbourhood walk, a quirky museum story and an interview with a tour guide. Travel writers who don't, can't make a decent living.
- To do this, you only need to have one commission. The other stories are up to you to organise beforehand, or find once you are there.
- Some magazines have an embargo of three to six months. This means you can't resell your story until that time has lapsed. Others will reject any story that has appeared elsewhere.
- Newspapers don't usually have an embargo so you recycle immediately: this is how writers make money. You can send the story (like you can send your idea) to multiple newspaper markets in non-competing circulation areas.
- Re-package the story. If you have done a service feature for one magazine, you may be able to turn the key points into a travel news story for your local paper. Or vice versa.
- As a freelance travel writer, copyright belongs to you. However, a number of media companies, such as Fairfax, ACP Magazines & Pacific Publications in Australia, and others in Canada, are now asking contributors to sign over their copyright. This is hugely contentious and means a contributor can't resell their work.
- For more details, get advice from the relevant union, such as the Media Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) in Australia at www.alliance.org.au.
- Be wary of handing over your copyright. This belongs to you.

Payment

Once an editor has accepted your story, send an invoice. Some pay immediately, others won't pay until the story has been published.

You usually have to check with the editor first if they will cover expenses. If they do, keep all receipts and include them with your invoice.

If they don't cover expenses and they accept 'hosted' trips, you need to arrange that with the tour company, hotel and airline beforehand. If you have a commission to write about a new resort in Malaysia, you can approach Malaysia Airlines to see if they



Step 10: Sell Your Work

will cover some or all of your flight cost. You need to credit resort and airline at the bottom of your article.

- **In Australia** writers are paid 50 – 70 cents a word for newspapers. Magazines vary from \$350 for an entire article to \$1 a word for high-end publications.
- Many papers like *The Sun-Herald* pay a flat rate of \$400 for 800 words + pictures. *The Sunday Mail* in Brisbane pays \$250 for any length story including photos.
- **In Britain** writers are paid £200 – £500 per article for newspapers. Travel magazines range from £150 – £400 per 1000 words. ABTA Magazine pays only £185 per 1000; CNN Traveller offers £275-300 per 1000.
- **In America**, newspapers pay US\$200 - \$500 for articles of 1000 – 2500 words. Magazines pay per word and vary from 20 cents a word, to the reasonable \$1 a word. DEPARTURES magazine pays 75 cents a word.
- **Some websites** pay per article. Others per hit. www.thetraveleditor.com pays per 1000 hits & start at £2 per 1000, rising to £4 per 1000 if you become really popular.

Lastly, Things to Know about the Travel Business

If you want to make travel writing more than a hobby, it pays to develop contacts with editors and build links with publicists. The more you do, the more likely you will get invited on a free press trip. Send publicists your clippings, invite them for coffee, show you know about the region or product they promote.

Most publicists will need a confirmed assignment from a travel magazine, newspaper or website before you can join a 'junket' (free travel trip). Be professional – have business cards.

If you do get asked, be a good guest. At the end, send them the story. Then hope you get asked on the next one...

To finish, I include some online resources to look at and a selection of great travel writing.

Bon voyage and good luck!



Resources

Useful Websites

www.travelerstailes.com – best travel writing published in anthologies

www.travelclassics.com – network for travel writers

www.satw.org – society of American travel writers

www.bgtw.org – British Guild of travel writers

www.astw.org.au – Australian society of travel writers

www.travelwriters.com – resource for travel writers

www.travelmag.co.uk – magazine for independent traveller

www.ttgweb.com – travel industry news

www.worldtravelwatch.com – travel warnings & safety

<http://ehotelier.com/browse/magazines.php> – website for hoteliers

www.writtenroad.com – resources for travel writers

www.elliott.org – travel expert Chris Elliot's website



Resources

A Brief Library of Great Travel Writing

- *Sea and Sardinia* by D.H. Lawrence
- *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* by Lawrence Durrell
- *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* by Eric Newby
- *Video Night in Kathmandu* by Pico Iyer
- *The Great Railway Bazaar* by Paul Theroux
- *Notes from a Small Island* by Bill Bryson
- *Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin
- *The Art of Travel* by Alain de Botton
- *Bad Land* by Jonathan Raban
- *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard
- *In Tasmania* by Nicholas Shakespeare
- *Behind the Wall* by Colin Thubron
- *Holidays in Hell* by P.J. O'Rourke
- *Hold the Enlightenment* by Tim Cahill

Novelists can also be excellent travel writers – Graham Greene, John Le Carré, William Golding, Hunter S. Thompson, Isabel Allende, Carlos Fuentes...

Anthologies

- *The Travel Writer's Handbook* by Louise Purwin Zobel
- *A Book of Travellers' Tales* edited by Eric Newby
- *The Picador Book of Journeys* edited by Robyn Davidson
- *Wanderlust* edited by Don George Macmillan
- *The Best American Travel Writing* (published yearly)
- *Granta 94: On the Road Again* by various authors (or any Granta travel anthology)



About the Author

Claire Scobie is a journalist and author of the award-winning travel memoir *Last Seen in Lhasa*, which chronicles her seven trips to Tibet. Known for her travel writing that transcends formula and explores character, she writes for numerous publications including the *Daily Telegraph*, *Destinasian*, *Marie Claire Australia* and the Qantas inflight magazine, *The Australian Way*. She runs sell-out travel writing workshops across Australia, mentors writers and is a regular guest at writers' festivals. In September 2010 she appeared on Australia's ABC1 television show for book lovers, *Jennifer Bryne Presents: On the Road*.

For more information, contact Claire at www.clairescobie.com.

All copyright in this ebook belongs to Claire Scobie. It cannot be reproduced in any form without the author's prior permission.

© Claire Scobie.