



Writing for the Industrial Worker

The Industrial Worker is your newspaper.

Your newspaper not merely in the sense that as a member of the Industrial Workers of the World you own it and elect its editor — more importantly, it relies on you for coverage of significant labor news in your industry and your town. The articles in the Industrial Worker are written up by workers like you, telling about their experiences, their struggles, and the issues that confront them every day as workers.

If your job branch wages a direct action campaign against lousy conditions, you can be sure that other folks will want to know about it — perhaps to try the same thing where they work, or for inspiration, or to reassure their fellow workers that it can work. But if you don't send in the information, we won't know about it. People around the union want to know about what folks in other parts of the IWW are doing. Some activities can be covered with a few sentences for the Around Our Union column or as

part of a broader write-up of what the IWW is doing around an issue, others call for a longer article or an interview with participants. (And if a story needs a fair amount of space to be told, there are probably possibilities for photographs as well.) There's no one in a better position to write the story than you — after all, you're there on the scene, you know what's going on, you know the people involved. If you can't do the writing yourself, maybe you can line up another fellow worker or send in some notes on what happened and some clippings from the local paper (and a phone number so we can get back to you with any questions). But writing for publication is easier than you might think. This little pamphlet is intended to help you get started.

Write for your reader

The most important thing to keep in mind when writing is your audience. Often you live the story you're telling on a daily basis. You know what it's like to work in a metal-roofed warehouse in the summer, who Smith or Jones is and why every worker hates him, what a jack screw is... Some readers will too, but the *Industrial Worker* is read by workers in many different industries, and many different parts of the world. So it's important to explain specialized terms, to identify people clearly, to spell out just what conditions are like — to always ask yourself "will this make sense to someone who's never worked this job?"

If you're not sure, try showing the article to a friend, and ask her to underline everything that doesn't make sense or needs more explanation — and maybe to make a note of sections where you go overboard in the other direction as well. In the end it's your story, and you need to decide for yourself what works and what doesn't. But it needs to work not just for you and your fellow workers — it needs to work for people halfway across the globe as well.

Getting your facts straight

There's nothing easier than to misremember someone's name or title, or to get the details of something that happened a few years ago wrong; and there's no quicker way to destroy your credibility. So it's important to write down names (and check the spelling), and to go and check things for yourself rather than relying on your memory or on a comment from a co-worker. If you hear a quote you think you'll want to use, write it down right away. If you're on the picket line and something interesting happens, take notes. Collect leaflets, contracts, memos, articles from the boss press — anything that might help nail down details when it comes time to write your story. If you talk to someone, ask for their phone number so you can get back to them if necessary. A lot of the material you gather will turn out not to be useful, but there's nothing more frustrating than finding yourself in the middle of writing up a story, desperately trying to remember something

or have compatibility issues so the straight text in your message is absolutely essential. If your article uses special characters (accents, umlauts, tildes, etc.), these are often swallowed up in the process of computer transmission. A note with a straight text version of names or phrases needing special characters and a description of where the characters belong will help make sure we get it right.

Things may have changed since this pamphlet was published, so check the most recent issue of the newspaper to make sure you have the current address. We publish the date the issue went to press in the bottom of the staff box on page 2 — it's generally a pretty good bet that the next issue will go to press four weeks after the current one did. But since it takes a few days to put the paper together, you don't want your copy to reach the editor on the actual press date unless you're made special arrangements in advance and there really is no alternative.

Bundles

Once you've written an article, you might want to get some extra copies to distribute. After all, the greatest article in the world can't make much difference if your fellow workers never see it. (If you're not already getting a bundle regularly, you might want to think about doing so — many bookstores will be glad to take copies on consignment, the newspaper makes a great item for literature tables, and can be a cost-effective introduction to the union.) Bundles are available to IWW members and branches for just 20 cents a copy to help with printing and postage costs. (If that's a problem, and you have a promising opportunity to distribute the paper, let us know and we'll work something out.)

It's generally a good idea to get your bundle order in the same time as your article. That gives us time to adjust the press run, if necessary, and to make sure we have the information in time to send your papers out with the regular mailing. (Mailing the papers with the regular mailing is much, much cheaper, as we can go periodicals rate instead of Priority or Parcel Post.)

Many branches take 25 or 50 copies of the paper, and report that it's a great outreach tool; a few take 200 copies on a regular basis (and more for special projects). Why not start with a bundle of 10 (that's \$2 a month), and see how it goes? To order a bundle of papers, it's best to write to the editor and to also call General Headquarters at 215-222-1905.

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that should have been in your notes.

You want to be careful to make sure you write what you mean to say as well. A lot of people — including many professional reporters — throw words more or less randomly on the page, figuring that it's close enough to get the gist of what they want to say across. Big newspapers have lost many libel suits because some copy editor tried to figure out what an incoherent sentence meant and guessed wrong. Some years back an IWW organizer was sued based on a press release that allegedly (we never saw a copy) said the boss had been found guilty of unfair labor practice charges, when what had actually happened was that the National Labor Relations Board had decided to prosecute them. The organizer then sent in an article for the *Industrial Worker* in which he vehemently denied that the press release said any such thing, attributing the problem to a local reporter who didn't understand NLRB procedures — but in the course of the article (which we fixed before publication) he went on to say that the Board had found the boss guilty of unfair labor practices. The boss was eventually found guilty and the lawsuit dismissed, but careless writing remains the enemy of writers everywhere.

Don't worry about getting too much information, there's always time to winnow it down later. Just make sure that you understand the information completely, well enough to be able to explain it to someone else. On a more complicated story it's often a good idea to draw up a list of the main points you need to address in your story in advance. Then look the list over, and ask yourself if you have the information you need to make each point stick.

When you have the information you need, it's time to sit down and write. Don't put this off to the last minute — often in the process of writing it will become obvious that you forgot to interview someone, or that some important fact is fuzzy in your mind, or that you just don't understand why someone was so adamant over a particular point. So you need to allow a little time to get back to people, and to nail down those pesky facts.

Good writing is like cutting a diamond

Some people get all worked up over writing, trying to get everything clear in their head before putting anything down on paper. That's a big mistake. The thing to do is to sit down and write. Let the words flow naturally, like you're talking to someone, making your feelings and ideas as specific and vivid as possible.

The first draft won't be perfect. Some sentences just won't flow, some ideas won't be clear, and maybe you'll need to reorganize things a bit. Entire paragraphs may need to be cut out. Often you'll have taken on too much, and you'll need to prune a couple of side issues off so that you can bring the key issues to the fore. If the article needs a lot of work, you don't have to show that draft to anyone. Every writer turns out some pretty rough prose on their first take; good writers take the time to look over what

they've written and revise it so it says exactly what they want to say, as clearly and vividly as possible. The point is to get something down on paper, so that you can work with it, refining that rough material into the story you want to tell.

Establishing credibility

Don't expect people to believe you just because you're sincere. Prove each point you're trying to make with specific facts, your own experience, interviews with other workers, and such.

Facts are tricky things, and you need to be very careful with them. While an editor can work on a sentence that doesn't quite flow or fix sloppy punctuation, she can't know how that name really should have been spelled or what department the job action started in. Nothing discredits a newspaper quicker than for readers to notice that it's wrong on things they know from personal experience. You are our first, and often only, line of defense to make sure we get things straight. Writing from memory is a sure-fire way to make mistakes. If you know you're going to be writing a story, take a note pad with you. Write down people's names (and titles), how many people were there, what the issues were, what any interesting signs or speakers say, the name of the company, etc. If there's any chance at all you might want to refer to it later, write it down now. If you didn't get a chance to write things down at the time, you'll probably need to go back out and get the information later.

You also need to make sure the facts will be clear when the story reaches the editor and the reader. Even simple facts can become confused in transmission. If you write that something happened "yesterday" or "Tuesday" then we have to guess as to what you mean. Use the date instead. Once a writer used a newspaper clipping to get someone's title – unfortunately, they had recently been promoted from organizing director to president.

Colorful writing

Many people learned to write in school, trying to impress teachers with complicated sentences, big words, and extra pages to show that you put in a lot of work. The longer and less engaging the paper, the higher the grade. To communicate with your fellow workers about what's important to you takes a different kind of writing – something much closer to how you talk with your friends. Your writing should be direct and enthusiastic, specific and colorful.

Readers don't want to read an endless stream of vague generalities or a lot of empty rhetoric. Give them word pictures – describe events or conditions with enough detail that they can imagine seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling or touching as they read along. Talk about real people's lives. Adjectives won't generally do the trick, instead give specific details, little facts that capture the essence of what you're writing about and help the

Try not to take pictures of people shaking hands or posing in front of a room. Sometimes there's no alternative, but grip and grin photos are usually boring. If you think about what you want to say with a photo, you can set up the shot to say it. Capture pickets in front of the company's sign. If you're doing a story about the boss's captive meeting, a photo of someone snoozing might be the perfect illustration. If you're happy with the turnout for your event, frame the shot to include as many people as possible. If you're upset that there weren't more people, frame the shot to include some empty chairs.

If you don't think before you shoot, all your photos will look the same. Too many photos show speakers hugging the podium, the same old officials holding awards, people staring right into the camera, and committees sitting behind long tables. Look for action. Photograph people on the job or talking to someone. If you're shooting a speech, try to get a shot that includes the audience with the speaker. If you're too far away from the action, it's hard to capture gestures and faces. Try not to rely on zoom lenses, it's better to get up close, and to shoot photos from a variety of angles. If you're shooting a crowd, try to set up so you can catch them when they're moving, not when they're standing around listening to speeches. Try for a mix of close-ups and wide angle shots that show the vastness of the crowd. Ideally, you'd have a shot where a few people stand out in the foreground while the hugeness of the crowd fills in the background, though getting such a shot requires that you get a little bit of height so you can see behind the first row.

Sending in copy

It's generally best to write up a story as soon after it happens as possible, and then to send it in right away. That way, things will be fresh in your mind as you write, and the article will arrive at the editor's desk while it's still timely. But it's important to have a sense of the Industrial Worker's deadlines so that you can make sure your article arrives on time and so that you can plan out when to write up continuing stories such as a strike or organizing campaign. At the present time, the Industrial Worker is produced 10 times a year, generally on the second weekend of the month. While some space can be held for late-breaking stories if we know they're coming, it's generally best to have everything in a few days ahead of time so there's time to look it over, ask any questions we might have, and consult you on revisions. Email the editor if you know you're going to be getting something in at the last moment so we can plan.

Articles can be sent as hard copy (i.e., typed or printed out on paper), on computer disk (please include a print-out, in case we have trouble with the disk or the program), or by email. If you send your article in by email, please paste the text into the body of your email message. You can attach a formatted file as well, if you'd like, but these often don't download cleanly

In covering a demonstration, your lead should probably focus on how many people were there and what they demanded, unless there's something more compelling (demonstrators stormed the building, throwing the boss on the street; police killed two people when they opened fire on the crowd; the heads of the city's largest unions called a general strike). You should look at banners and signs to get an idea of who is there, and talk with people about why they came. Take notes of the chants. If speakers say something truly interesting take note of that as well, but we certainly don't need transcripts of every boring speech by every piecard and politrickster in the land.

In writing up the event, don't be afraid to be critical. Quite often we go to demonstrations because we support the workers who are struggling, but have major criticisms of their officials or tactics. If the speakers platform is filled with labor fakers pledging their support to striking workers even as their unions engage in union scabbing, it's important to criticize that. In the recent Detroit Newspaper Strike, unions organized rallies and other symbolic events, but refused to take direct action to shut down the scab papers. And many sweatshop actions implicitly call for solidarity with the domestic bosses (many of them running sweatshops themselves), rather than with the exploited workers. It's not very helpful to our fellow workers to turn a blind eye to such mistakes. We should support workers' struggles, while pointing out possibilities for more effective action.

Photos help tell the story

If you can send a photo, do. While black and white photos work best, but not every film developer can handle developing the film. Color photos work pretty well, as long as they have good contrast. Lots of Wobs like to make red & black banners, which look fine in the color photo. But when you convert to black and white, red comes out black, rendering the whole thing unreadable. Faces against colored backgrounds (or shadows) can do the same thing. Yellow letters on black backgrounds stand out very nicely, though. (If you're in doubt about how the colors will translate, put it on a photocopy machine; but by then it's usually too late to get the printable photos you need.) Film is cheap enough that you can afford to shoot a roll or two on a single action. If possible try to get a variety of photos, some vertical, some horizontal, with different backgrounds and signs. That increases the possibility of a photo working. (Make sure to include the date the photo was taken, and the names of the people depicted if possible. But don't write on the photos with markers – they often bleed through the print, if it's not a fast-drying ink the ink can also transfer to the photo behind it.) We need actual prints. While lots of people swear by digital photos, but at the Industrial Worker we've learned to swear at them instead. It's virtually impossible with the printing technology we use to get decent reproduction from a digital or digitized photo.

reader 'see' what happened.

Often you'll be surrounded by people speaking in jargon – union bureaucrats are just as capable of sounding pompous as the boss is. Vague bureaucratic language is often used to make concrete events (like a worker's death or mass firings) vague, and to strip them of their human consequences. Just because the people you're talking to or the documents you're using as sources are filled with jargon and double-speak doesn't mean you have to do the same. While you will sometimes want to quote the jargon to show readers how heartless or stupid the bosses can be, generally you want to translate jargon into plain English so everyone knows just what's being said.

Writing in active voice

Voice refers to the form of the verb. The subject *acts* when you use the active voice verb form. When you use passive voice, the person performing the action becomes the object of the sentence. It does not act; it is *acted upon*.

The Borders warehouse was closed for a week when 80 workers struck.

Eighty workers at the Borders warehouse struck April 30, rebelling against both their employer and Teamsters Local 89.

The first sentence is about the company, pushing the workers into the background. The second sentence is about the workers. It is in active voice. Most fuzzy writing uses passive sentences instead of active ones. Passive sentences remove the actor from the action. "Supervisor Jones turned on the machine while it was being worked on" is an active sentence. "X did Y" is an active sentence. But "This happened," "That was done," "There was this" are all passive sentences that make the action vague and dull. And when you write up the story (the way the official report probably does) to say "The machine was turned on while it was being worked on," you've let the supervisor off the hook.

Use adjectives with care. A lot of writers use words like obviously, clearly and of course. But if it's really clear, it should be clear in your article. If it's not obvious for all to see, then you need to go back and put more facts in your article, so that readers will get the point. Banging them over the head with adjectives won't make them see things your way, quite the opposite.

Speaking in tongues

Be careful with abbreviations. If you're all the time talking about a Paragraph 76 violation with your fellow shop stewards, all of whom know the contract by heart, that's fine. But in your article you'll need to spell it out for the vast majority of your fellow workers who've never even seen the con-

tract. (And once you've spelled it out, there's probably no reason to mention Paragraph 76 at all — of course, if you were writing the same story up for a shop newsletter you'd want to discuss Paragraph 76 in some detail, so your coworkers would learn more about their specific rights on the job and how to exercise them.) While most readers know what OSHA or UAW stand for, some don't, so you'll want to spell it out the first time.

After you've finished writing, look your story over to see if you can find long, complicated sentences which you could rewrite into two or three simpler sentences that would be easier to read and would give readers a chance to catch their breath between ideas. But don't make every sentence the same length and structure. Don't use the same word over and over again either. Mix things up to keep them interesting.

The Lead

In newspapering, the first sentence of an article is called the "Lead." Start your article with something that grabs readers, that shows them what the story is about. (We don't want a theme sentence that introduces the story in general terms, rather we're looking for a snappy sentence with specific information that engages the reader's interest and shows, not tells, them where the story is going.) Don't clog your lead with the names and dates of everything and everyone. Put yourself in the shoes of your readers and ask "Why should anyone care about this article?" Many experienced writers write the story first, and then come back to the opening. Look for a startling fact or quote that captures the essence of the story, or a familiar experience that will resonate with your readers. Some leads ask a question, others introduce a theme that will organize the writer's ideas throughout the article. But a good lead is specific; you don't want one of those theme sentences your high school English teacher was so fond of — you want to bring readers right into the story.

Here's an example of a lead that doesn't work:

At London City Hospital, employees have expressed growing concern about security. Two nurses were robbed on the way to their cars during the month of August; one of those women had to be hospitalized.

In this example, you'll get a snappy lead if you cross out the first sentence. Once you've gotten readers into the story, you'll have plenty of opportunities to throw names and dates and such at them.

Don't let your article dwindle off at the end either. Leave people with a new idea, a quote that sums up the situation, or possible solutions. Try not to go out with a bunch of sloganeering about how your story proves the need for One Big Union. The same can be said for a lot of the stories we publish, and folks will get bored if we say so over and over again. If you

can't resist writing a "conclusion" then write it, but ask yourself whether the story might be better lopping it off once you're done.

Many, many articles read like they were spit out from an automated boredom inducer. "On Tuesday, July 20, a dozen Wobblies met to discuss local organizing possibilities." Change the date, and that lead could run atop dozens of stories. That may be efficient, but it's not very interesting. Other times writers try to imitate "objective" newspaper style, turning to passive voice and generalities to conceal the fact that they're writing about their own situations. This is always a mistake. It's much more effective to write a personal story that lets readers see events through your eyes.

Other writers tell the story as if they were writing minutes. First we get a list of who was present, where they met, and the time the event started. Then they go through speaker by speaker, with a summary of what each had to say. And at the end of the story, we learn that members voted to strike. That's fine for the branch minutes book, but it just won't do for our newspaper. Instead, you want to open with the most important part of your story (in this instance the decision to strike). Then you want to explain why. Then some background is fine for those who haven't been following the story, and maybe a few quotes from the speakers. But there's no need to quote everyone who spoke, or to list the people who set up the chairs and chaired the meeting.

You also want to avoid glory hogging. Certainly you should mention the fact that Wobblies were on the line, or organized a soup kitchen. But if two Wobblies join a demonstration of thousands of people, a lead about how Wobblies mobilized to support striking workers isn't fair to those who did the actual work, and will ultimately tend to discredit us. Similarly, the IWW didn't invent direct action, so there's no reason to claim "Wobbly tactics" anytime workers slow down on the job. Wobblies are by and large pretty active, so there's plenty of legitimate opportunities to plug ourselves without stealing credit for events we were at best peripheral to.

If you're writing about conditions on the job, it's usually best to tell the story up close and personal (it could be you talking about your job, or you could tell the story by interviewing a fellow worker and telling the story through her eyes). If you're writing up a picket line or a demonstration, often a more detached third-person voice will do the trick. But even if you focus on the personal in such a story, make sure you tell us the basics — why you were there, when, how many people went, what happened, what was accomplished. We once got an article about a major protest that started with events that had happened years before, not getting to the ostensible subject at hand until half-way through the piece. That just won't do. Another article had vivid descriptions of encounters with the police, but never got around to discussing why Wobblies were there in the first place. That might be fine for the boss press, which loves action and violence and hates context and explanation, but we're trying to educate our fellow workers about the issues and to build a movement.