

So You Want to Write for Western Confluence?

Western Confluence magazine explores the western United States' most confounding natural resource issues and seeks out realistic, interdisciplinary solutions.

Our Vision: We believe that sound information shared in meaningful ways drives better decisions. Articles should bridge complicated science and policy understanding to the people who are working with natural resources on the ground and elevate the voices of innovators addressing real-world environmental challenges across the West.

Our Audience: Our primary audience is natural resource stakeholders in the Mountain West, including land managers, state and federal agencies, non-profits and interest groups, and an engaged public that lives, works, and plays as part of the landscape. Readers will often be familiar with basic natural resources issues and ecological concepts.

Our Voice: *Western Confluence* is meant to explore and explain, not to convince, advocate, or accuse. Ask good questions. Respect uncertainty by avoiding clear-cut answers where there are none. Strive for balanced perspectives and give each piece of evidence the weight that it merits.

Our Style: Writing for a magazine is different from academic or news writing. We want you to tell a story, not just relay knowledge. Acknowledge yourself as a character, bring your sources to life, and illustrate the challenges, victories, drawbacks, and implications of your topic. Guide the reader in understanding what things mean and why it all matters.

Finding your Story Angle

You may start with an idea, a question, a new piece of information, or a topic you're interested in. But eventually, you're going to have to say something about that idea. Ask yourself: Who would care about this and why? Who or what might be impacted and how? How does this relate to what we previously knew, what is happening now, or what could

develop in the future? What is the key question? Try writing a headline or a title with a subtitle to help you hone in on something specific. Don't worry if it doesn't feel right the first time; this is an iterative process.

Research and Interviews

If you're the expert, odds are you won't be interviewing anyone. Instead, you and the subject(s) of your research will be the main characters. You might tell a story about your quest for knowledge, painting vivid scenes of your research, explaining your motivation, and detailing your challenges, triumphs, and lessons learned. You might also focus on your work, describing the trials and travails of a mule deer herd, or describing who participated in the collaborative process and what was at stake. No matter what, remember that a good story will have conflict, action, resolution, and human element.

If you are not the expert, your piece will be told through the actions and voices of other people, so figure out who is important to your story. You can have sources that explain background and give context, analyze and assess the situation, or give first-hand accounts. Try to represent the fullest spectrum of thought with as few sources as possible and focus on just one, maybe two, as your main characters.

Do enough research that you can find the right sources and ask good questions, but not so much that you think you already know the answers. Visa versa, listen to what your sources have to say and be ready to fact-check them with research. As you go, continually reevaluate your story angle, asking: does this still feel like the heart of the issue?

Reliable interview questions include: What excites you about your work? Why is it important? How does this change what we thought before? What's next? What are the barriers? What are potential drawbacks? Who cares about this? Can you explain...?

Structuring your Story

Hook: This is where you pique your reader's interest and get them curious about your topic. Your first sentence should be tight and punchy to make them pay attention. Share a specific scene, action, detail, or moment that is surprising or mysterious and will make you readers want to know more.

Read Examples:

Expert-Author

- [Crouching Scientist, Hidden Dragonfly](#)
by Amber Furness
 - [Tracking Wild Horses](#)
by Jacob D. Hennig
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Reporter-Author

- [Looking Underground](#)
by Sara Teter
 - [Bullies on the Range](#)
by Nicole Korfanta
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Nut: The “nut graf,” as journalists call it, comes next (usually the second or third paragraph) and connects the hook to the rest of the story. This is also where your hard work on finding a story angle comes to fruition; the nut graf tells your readers what the article is about and why the content matters to them. It ends with the nut sentence, which puts the take-away message from your story into concise, clear language, without giving away the ending. If you can’t distill your story into one sharp sentence, then you don’t know what your article is really about, so keep working on it until you can.

Examples of Strong Nuts:

[Coping, Not Overcoming](#), by Alanna Elder

“Hall wants to know how species like the pika are trying to adjust to ... shifts in an ecosystem that have been brought on or accelerated by human activities, such as the spread of invasive species, deforestation, and climate change.”

[Net Zero Energy Homes in Wyoming](#), by Kit Freedman

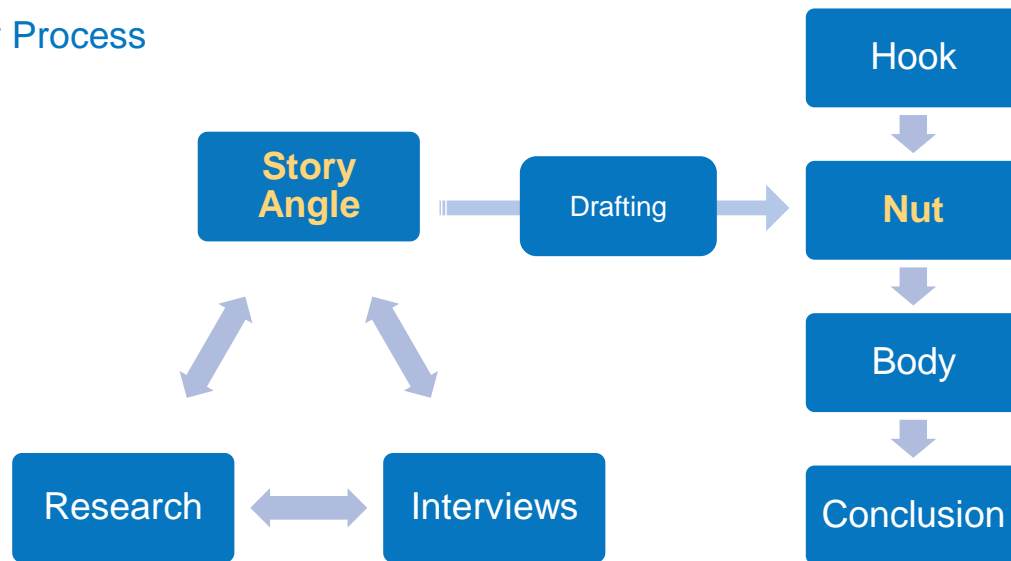
“But what’s different about the Fox place is that, when it’s all said and done, the home won’t generate a utility bill. That’s because it was engineered to produce as much energy as it consumes on an annual basis. It’s what’s known as a net-zero energy home. And if all goes as planned, it will be one of many in Wyoming.”

Body: The rest of your article builds a case around the nut with logically arranged details, background information, evidence, anecdotes, scenes, characters, and quotes. First think what the organizing principle of your piece is: chronological? three different perspectives? Then start building the body out, remembering to check in—does this information support your nut? If not, it might not belong in the article (or your nut might not be quite right, so keep working it).

Follow and animate your characters: Sources deliver information, but characters have motives, interests, and context. Creating rich, believable characters will draw readers into the story and model why someone should be invested in the topic. You can also use characters to liven up an otherwise dry scene by showing them in action. Describe someone slamming a truck door or fiddling with a scientific instrument or kicking a burned stump or anything else that puts them in motion and builds a scene.

Conclusion: This part brings the reader back to the nut (and maybe the hook), emphasizes the specific idea that you have built a case for throughout the story. Ideally, while the nut gets the reader curious and committed to following through to the end of the story, the conclusion delivers the punch line, a clear take-away that satisfies the readers’ cravings you set up at the outset.

Story Process



A clear and specific story angle is central to your article. In story development, it informs and is informed by research and interviews. Once you start writing, it will help you craft a strong “nut,” the story’s *raison d’être* that all the characters and evidence should be connected to.

Honing your language

- > Use **active voice** in all of your sentences, converting anything like “It was found that 20% of people...” to something like “Researchers found that 20% of people...”
- > Show, don’t tell. Use **vibrant, lively verbs** to replace flat, generic, verbs or an excess adjectives and adverbs.
- > Search your draft for **jargon** (or enlist a non-specialist friend to help). In rare cases, it’s worth explaining a key term you’ll use throughout the piece. Most of the time, find replacement words or substitute short descriptors.
- > Make your **numbers** relatable with benchmarks and analogies, and get creative!
- > Unless your piece is very long, you probably don’t need **headings**. Instead, highlight the logical links between sections, guiding your reader from one point to the next.
- > Don’t worry about **citations**. If it’s essential to your piece, is especially controversial, or would be a great resource for you reader, you can hyperlink a source. Otherwise, practice good attribution, focusing on what will help establish credibility with your reader (usually how and when information was acquired, i.e. “A 2017 survey of 113 Wyoming residents...”).
- > **Trim, trim, and trim**. When you think you’re done, try to reduce your word count by another 10%. It will force you to streamline sentences and eliminate excess wordiness.