

THE UNITED CHURCH
OBSERVER

Submission Guidelines

1. Getting started

The majority of articles published in *The Observer* are assigned to professional writers. However, on occasion we accept unsolicited but exceptionally well-written articles submitted by readers. It is a real treat for us to receive something that stands out from the dozens of other submissions sent to us each week. If you have something to submit, here are a few questions to consider:

- 1) Is your idea fresh?
- 2) Is it broad enough to appeal to most readers, yet tailored enough to suit *Observer* readers?
- 3) Is it up to the standards of other articles published in the magazine?
- 4) Can you see a section in the magazine where it might fit?
- 5) Are you comfortable with the likelihood it will be edited for structure, length and style, or the possibility that you will be asked to make revisions?
- 6) And most importantly: Why this story in this magazine at this time?

The best approach is to send a query note to us before you put pen to paper. That way we will be able to tell whether your idea has possibilities as a stand-alone article or as part of a larger story for one of our regular sections. Your query should briefly summarize what you want to say in your article and provide us with some idea how you propose to tell the story.

Whether or not we accept your idea, be assured that we appreciate your interest in the magazine and value your continued loyalty. Unfortunately, given the volume of submissions we receive, we are not always able to respond to each one.

2. What is *The Observer* all about?

This magazine is published 11 times per year by Observer Publications, Inc. Founded in 1829, *The Observer* is the oldest continuously published magazine in North America and the second oldest in the English-speaking world. It has won international acclaim for journalistic excellence and garnered more awards for writing than any other Canadian religious publication.

Since 1986, *The Observer* has been independently incorporated, which makes it unique among major North American denominational publications. The magazine sets its own editorial policies and program and is overseen by its own board of directors. While it maintains a healthy relationship with The United Church of Canada, it does not speak as the denomination's official voice, receiving only about seven percent of its funding from the United Church's General Council.

Editor David Wilson says of his mandate for the publication: “We seek to offer the United Church and Canadians generally a church magazine that exceeds people’s expectations of church magazines. As we move forward into a new era and style of faith-based publishing, we are constantly mindful of the traditions into which we are anchored.”

3. How do I submit an idea?

All queries and manuscripts should be sent, preferably by email, to David Wilson, Editor

At: dnwilson@ucobserver.org

Or: The United Church Observer
177 Danforth Ave., Suite 304
Toronto, ON
M4K 1N2

4. What happens after I send in my idea?

The magazine’s full-time editorial staff makes decisions on editorial content. We receive several story pitches each day and regret that we cannot respond to all of them. If we like your idea, you will hear from us within a week or two.

5. What are you looking for?

We are interested in stories about faith, ethics, social justice, living and the United Church. Stories should target the interests and ethos of our readers (see section 6). They can be investigative reports, engaging profiles, first-person narratives, short features, essays, photo essays, interviews or how-to pieces. We like queries that demonstrate familiarity with *The Observer*’s “architecture” by suggesting specific sections of the magazine.

We plan our issues four to six months in advance; please keep this in mind when suggesting time-sensitive pieces.

We rarely cover events because of our long lead times. That means an event that happens in May wouldn’t make it into the magazine until September, and loses relevance as time passes.

We almost never publish poetry or fiction. We are happy to receive review suggestions, but usually only commission reviews that fit within the designated theme of our Culture section in a given month.

6. Who are your readers?

Our readers *read*. They are intensely loyal to this magazine. Eighty percent look into every issue, and 60 percent read more than half the magazine. Four out of five look forward to receiving the magazine every month.

Most of our readers have a college education or more. Nearly half have an undergraduate or post-graduate degree.

The typical *Observer* reader is a woman who is 65 or older living in a community of 100,000 or less. She was raised in the United Church, attends a United church weekly and contributes to the United Church regularly. She helps out at church whenever needed and regularly takes part in a group, such as a Bible study. She believes the Bible is a book that documents our historical relationships with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

— and *not* the literal word of God. She's comfortable discussing her faith with friends and family and with members of her church.

7. What style guide do you use?

The Observer follows Canadian Press style guidelines and the Canadian Oxford Dictionary. We encourage writers to use gender-neutral language.

Please submit copy in Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced. Please include a brief bio-note (1-2 sentences) at the end of your story. It should include where you live, what you do for a living and which United Church you attend (if any).

8. What are my rights?

We assume all articles submitted are original and unpublished, and submitted exclusively to us. If your material is copyrighted, we assume you are authorizing us to publish it.

If we accept your idea and publish the finished piece, *The Observer* buys first North American rights in English and French to your story, plus the right to archive your story and post it on our website at ucobserver.org.

9. When can I expect to be paid?

Fees are negotiated story by story. Normally we pay by the word. You will be paid only for the words you have been assigned, unless a revised word length has been agreed upon. We pay within 30 days of receipt of an invoice. You should submit your invoice with the first draft of your assigned story.

Your invoice can be emailed to us, and should contain the following information: Your name; your mailing address; the date of your invoice; the assignment completed; the issue in which it will be published; the amount owed.

By cashing your freelancer's cheque, you are affirming the terms of your assignment.

10. Dos and don'ts

- **Do** meet your assigned deadline. But let us know if your story will be late. We may be able to arrange a deadline extension, but we get nervous if we don't hear from you.
- **Do** write to your assigned word count, or a little bit over. Going over by 20 or 30 percent is acceptable as it gives us room to edit. Going over by 50 percent or more creates a lot of editing work. Going under your assigned word count means we may not be able to fill the page, and will likely send your story back to you for more copy.
- **Do** fact-check your own work. We fact-check all features. If you have been assigned a feature, you will also receive a document detailing how you can assist us in this procedure. Unfortunately, we don't have the resources to formally fact-check the rest of the magazine. Although we will query anything that seems odd, we rely on your professionalism to ensure that the facts and spellings are correct.

- **Do** expect to be edited. We love it when writers slave over their first drafts and submit a polished piece. But even these articles can go through two, three or sometimes four rewrites. Then, after your assigning editor shows you the final edit and “signs off” on the piece, two more editors will read it, and may make minor changes. Cuts often have to be made to fit a story onto the page. It’s the nature of magazine journalism, and it’s one of the reasons *The Observer* wins awards.
- **Do** use subjects’ first and last names. Even in personal stories. Even when the subject is a close friend or family member. First and last names are a baseline of credible journalism across all story genres. If there’s a compelling reason why you’d prefer to withhold your subject’s name, the onus is on you to explain to your handling editor why it’s necessary – and obtain his/her consent in advance of your first-draft deadline. Very rarely, the editors will make an exception and grant an anonymous or first-name-only subject. We’ll reserve this privilege for subjects who have revealed something that could significantly damage their familial or work relationships, could cost them their job or immigration status, could put them in physical jeopardy, could compound a mental health issue, and so on.
- **Don’t** show your draft to sources in your story. Often, interview subjects or other officials will ask to see the copy before it’s published. Sometimes they’re anxious about being in print, and sometimes they want to help ensure the facts are correct. Either way, the answer is always no, as allowing sources to vet your copy undermines our editorial independence. You can, however, offer to fact-check those parts of your story that pertain directly to the source. Negotiating with a source can be tricky, and there is a technique to fact-checking, so please involve your assigning editor if anyone asks to see your copy prior to publication.
- **Do** write with our audience in mind. (For a description of our average reader, see point 6, above.) Sometimes writers want to impress their own colleagues, or feel they owe it to so-and-so to mention that person in the piece. But if our average reader can’t understand or connect with your story, then it isn’t a successful story.

Thank you for your interest in *The Observer*.