

HOW TO WRITE A HOW-TO ARTICLE

One of the great pleasures of this hobby is learning how other people accomplish the things that they do. The ingenuity shown by our readers is wonderful and we can all learn new and creative things. There's pleasure on the other end of the process, too—sharing with others what you've done. Writing a detailed how-to article is one of the best ways to do this.

Writing a really good how-to story—one that will truly benefit the reader and serve as a building block of the hobby—can be as involved as doing the project itself. As one author told me upon submitting his story, “This was work!” Yes, it is work, but it's satisfying work and it can really help your fellow hobbyists.

Planning

The time to start planning the story is before you begin the project. I have received any number of articles that were written after the project was finished. These usually take the form of “how I did it,” as opposed to the much more useful “how you can do it” format. While a “how I did it” article can be useful and informative, there's usually a lot missing that must be filled in by the reader. A good, step-by-step how-to story solves that problem by guiding the reader through the entire process as it happens.

When thinking about your project (and hence the story), plan it out logically so that the order that it follows makes sense to the reader. If, when in the middle of the project you realize that something was left out, it's never too late to add it back in. That's the beauty of the writing process—you can change the chronology to make more sense.

CHECKLIST

- Inquiry to editor
- Body text
- Photo captions
- Photos and illustrations numbered according to manuscript
- Materials/parts list
- Text, captions, and photos in electronic form
- Hard copy of text with your contact information
- Self-addressed envelope if you'd like materials returned

The text

The best how-to stories describe every step of the process. Don't assume that something is common knowledge—write about it anyway. It's easier for us to take away extraneous information than to add in important details when we don't know what we're talking about.

Each step should be numbered and each number should correspond with at least one photo. When I write a how-to story, I find it useful to do the writing as I do the project. That way less is lost through memory lapse. If you have a laptop, it's easy to keep it near the workbench so you can jot down notes as you go. If you just have a computer in the other room, it's a little harder but certainly not impossible. Granted, it does slow down the work time but that's part of the process of writing a good story. At the end of the day you end up with two complete creative efforts—the actual project and the story describing it.

Include a tool list, a materials list, and, if appropriate, a parts list. These will be run as sidebars, so don't include them in the body of the text. Just add them in at the end and we'll separate them out. If you found some unusual tool or material at some place most of us aren't familiar with, include that as well, with contact information. If there are several of them, they could be included in a separate “Resources” box.

Pictures

You'll find more information about [taking pictures on our website](#) but here are a few things to keep in mind.

The area in which you take photos should be well lit with one kind of light. Don't mix fluorescents with incandescents with LEDs. That messes up the color and we can't fix it. And be careful to avoid harsh shadows.

Always shoot at the highest resolution your camera is capable of.

If your camera is capable of shooting in RAW format, use that. It gives us a lot more latitude when improving photo quality, changing color balance, etc.

Make sure the shot is well focused. We can't use blurry pictures.

When you prepare your work space for the commencement of a project, also prepare a place to take photographs. This need be nothing more than a well-lit desk with a large piece of paper taped to it. You can tape part of the paper up the wall, forming an "L," to provide a contiguous background. Make sure there's a smooth curve where the paper goes from horizontal to vertical.

You can always take pictures on your work bench—many people have. However, the lighting is not always ideal there and background clutter often distracts from the subject. So, if you find that it's best for the story for the work to be photographed on the bench, be very aware of the background and clear away the clutter so that the eye focuses on the point you are trying to make with the photo.

It's sometimes useful to include callouts, or words, on top of the photos. If you do this, please send two copies of the picture—one with callouts and one without. We'll add the callouts in the style that we use for all our articles. If you don't know how to add words to your pictures, no problem. Just print out a hard copy (black and white is fine) and write in what needs to be on the photo, along with any lines and arrows.

Take a picture of every single step of the process. It's far easier to eliminate redundant photos than to have to try to recreate them after the fact. Don't worry about sending too many pictures—it's not a problem. Some authors even take multiple pictures of each step from slightly different angles.

Number your photos and reference them in the text. Make sure the actual photo files have the proper corresponding numbers so that we can find the right pictures quickly and easily. If you take multiple pictures of something for us to choose from, number them 3a, 3b, 3c, etc.

Drawings

Drawings are often useful. All illustrations are redrawn here, so you only need to send a clearly drawn sketch. Electronics projects should include a circuit diagram. If you are doing your drawings electronically in a CAD or illustration program, we may or may not be able to open it. It's probably best if you send those in PDF format.

That's the basics of writing a good how-to story. Before you get started, though, please send me a query letter describing the project. I'd hate for you to go to a lot of work if I already have something similar in the file.

**SEND ALL QUERY LETTERS
AND MANUSCRIPTS TO:**

GARDEN RAILWAYS Magazine
P.O. Box 1612
Waukesha WI 53187-1612
262-798-6556
kjohnson@gardenrailways.com