

So you want to be a motoring writer



INFINITI



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want to be
a motoring
writer**

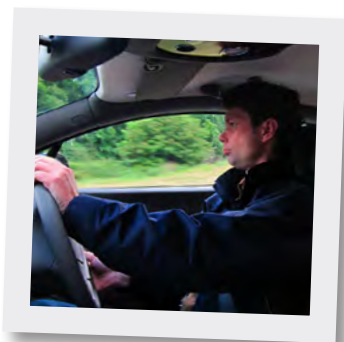
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About the author

Andrew Noakes is an award-winning* motoring writer, editor, photographer and author. He trained as an automotive engineer at Loughborough University, then joined *Fast Car* as a technical writer. He was founding editor of *Classics Magazine* in 1997. Freelance since 2002, he has written for a wide range of automotive magazines and websites and has written or contributed to more than a dozen books on cars and motorsport. He also teaches on Coventry University's Automotive Journalism MA course. You can find out more about Andrew at his website, www.andrewnoakes.com.

* Winner of The Guild of Motor Writers' Timo Makinen Trophy for the book *Ford Cosworth DFV*



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Few motoring journalists need top-drawer track-driving ability, but experienced road testers are often very fine drivers – with well honed analytical skills.

You're reading this because you think that being paid to write about cars must be just about the best way to earn a living yet invented.

Years ago, when I decided I wanted to be a motoring writer, I have to admit that I thought the same.

I still do.

It's a job where you hear all the motor industry news before it hits the public domain. Where you are given exclusive access to new car models and to the engineers and designers who made them. Where you can talk to the

captains of the automotive industry and to the teams and drivers who are at the pinnacle of motorsport. All this would be the stuff of dreams for any petrol-head – or the equivalent in an era of alternative fuels and electric vehicles.

Undoubtedly motoring journalism is a job that looks glamorous from the outside. And sometimes – however much some of us who do the job might try not to admit it – motoring journalism really can be glamorous. Some days, you really will get to sip somebody else's champagne while the dust cover is slipped off their latest concept

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Sometimes travelling to an exotic location, staying in a fine hotel and driving a powerful car are just part of the job – but focus on getting the story for the reader.

car. You will be flown to exotic locations, booked into great hotels, thrown the keys to brand new cars and given the run of a sinuous mountain road or an empty race track. You will get the kind of insider access to motor industry leaders, top designers and world champions that many car enthusiasts would cheerfully donate bodily organs for.

But that's only one aspect of the job, and there's another aspect to consider. You are not there solely to enjoy this

privileged access to people, places and cars but to use it to get a story and deliver it to your reader. Sometimes it can be difficult to avoid being distracted by the fine hospitality and remember what you came for. But even if it means tearing yourself away from the cocktail reception to pound away at a laptop keyboard in

your room, that's what you have to do, because in this multimedia age deadlines come more frequently than ever. And sometimes conditions are

“You have to be just as interested and excited about writing as you are about cars”



less than conducive to crafting fine copy: veteran motorsport journalist Simon Taylor recalls typing a 4,000-word report on a Formula 1 race in a French hotel toilet at 4am. “I was in the lavatory because, when I tried to do it in my hotel room, a Frenchman who was a lot bigger than I am banged on the wall and told me to shut up, and the loo was the only place where I could type undisturbed.”

Another drawback is that you’re unlikely to make your fortune in automotive journalism. But if you are fascinated by the design and the technology that goes into modern vehicles, intrigued by the history behind old ones, by the passion that they generate and by the fascinating stories of the people who design and make them, the job of a motoring writer will offer you far more than just financial rewards.

Not that it’s an easy job to get. *Top Gear’s* Jeremy Clarkson once said there are more astronauts than car-magazine journalists. Include all journalists who write about cars – for

newspapers, websites, lifestyle magazines and business-to-business publications and so on – and you are still talking about no more than a few hundred UK jobs. Staff roles on car magazines, particularly the best-known ones, do not come up that often and when they do the competition is intense: there can be hundreds of applications for every job. So what do you need to stand out from the crowd?



Steve Cropley

Editor in Chief, *Autocar*

“Always remember you work for the reader. You do not work for the proprietor, you certainly don’t work for the advertising department, you don’t even work for the editor. And remember your job is to keep your reader enthralled right up to the last line of your copy. If you don’t do that, you have failed.”

Essential skills

You’re interested and excited by your subject, and that’s a good start. As a result you’ll probably be well informed and effective in your analysis. But endless enthusiasm for the subject is not enough on its own. One of the most important parts of understanding how to get into writing about cars at a professional level, and then to succeed at it, is to realise that you have to be just as interested and excited about the writing as you are about the cars.

Enthusiasm is not enough because, for one thing, all of those hundreds of people applying

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for the same automotive journalism jobs as you also have that same degree of enthusiasm. It isn't difficult to find people who can recite all Ferrari's road cars in chronological order or recall Sebastian Vettel's fastest lap time from the 2008 Italian Grand Prix. It's not even all that hard to find people who can powerslide to order. What makes you stand out is having a healthy knowledge of cars and the motor industry, and perhaps some skill as a driver, *and* being able to communicate.

So consume everything you can about cars and how they are designed and built. Learn about the history of cars, even if you are only really interested in new ones: without understanding what's gone before, you'll find it hard to put the latest machines into an educated context. Learn about modern technology, and keep abreast of new developments in the automotive industry – particularly important in an era when automotive technology is undergoing fundamental and far-reaching changes. But alongside all of that, learn about writing, too.



The Guild of Motoring Writers

The leading association for motoring editorial professionals

The Guild aims to raise the standard of motoring journalism and to assist automotive journalists, broadcasters, authors and photographers in their work. Benefits include a directory of motoring contacts, special discounts and eligibility for the Guild's £20,000 annual awards. Associate membership is available for those who work partially in automotive media. More details at www.gomw.co.uk, Twitter @gomw_uk and facebook.com/gomwuk

Plenty of good books have been written about journalism (some are listed on page 14) and these will introduce you to the fundamentals of writing for publication. But the best way to learn is to read good writing – just as an aspiring musician will try to understand the details of a performance, or an art student will study the brushwork in great paintings.

Read newspapers, magazines, books, websites – the medium doesn't matter. What does matter is that you read the text analytically. What's well written and what isn't, and why? What was it about the way a particular newspaper story was written that made you read it? Why did you skim over the middle of a magazine

feature then read the ending? What made you give up half-way through reading a blog post?

The ability to catch and keep the reader's interest is important in any form of writing, but particularly so in automotive journalism where the competition between writers and between



publications is so great. One of the biggest hurdles new writers of any sort have to overcome is ridding themselves of the idea that just because they have something they want to write, there will be people out there who are ready and waiting to read it. Assuming that is fatal: it leads to the kind of self-indulgent waffle that ultimately engages only one person – the writer. Instead you need to remind yourself as you write that your reader is only ever a few seconds away from

“Consume everything you can about cars. But learn about writing, too”

turning the page or clicking a link and abandoning your article for something else. Work hard to make the start of your story interesting so that they read on, then keep them interested all the way to the end. Always remember that you are writing for your reader, not for yourself: give them what they want to read, which is not necessarily the same as what you really want to write. That’s one of the biggest differences between writing a personal blog and writing professionally.



A motorsport journalist can get to the heart of a story thanks largely to gaining privileged access to teams and drivers.

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Another difference between the amateur scribbler and the professional wordsmith – and that’s what you should aspire to be – is the precision with which they write. Every word must work for its living. Don’t write that a car is “currently on sale” when “on sale” means the same. You should also aim to write for one reader. Think of your article as a conversation, not as a lecture delivered to a crowd. You reader will engage more with your article as a result.

“Local newspapers now expect their young reporters to arrive with a degree in journalism”

It isn’t even enough to concentrate on writing, because there are many more aspects to the job of a journalist. Learn as much as you can about interviewing, about page layout in print magazines and content management for websites, how to use social media, how audio and video are recorded and edited. Journalists who once worked exclusively for print are increasingly involved in other media, and so it pays to know something about them.



You could be one of the first to see what’s under that dust sheet: motor show ‘reveals’ are a regular feature of many motoring journalists’ lives.



Routes into motoring journalism

The last few years have seen two revolutions in journalism which have changed for ever the ways of getting a start as a motoring writer.

A generation ago, if you wanted to be a journalist you would join a local newspaper as a cub reporter, and the paper would train you up through a combination of day release training at a local college, shadowing established reporters and working on real stories. Many established motoring writers began their careers as trainee reporters on local newspapers, and later became the paper's motoring correspondent or moved across to a specialist car publication.

That route is practically non-existent today: in-house training programmes have largely disappeared, and instead local newspapers now expect their young reporters to arrive with a degree in journalism. More than 40 British universities now offer undergraduate courses in journalism, the best of them



Charlotte Blight

The Guild of Motoring Writers chairman 2010-11

“There are many opportunities beyond road testing, so investigate and use your initiative. Focus on making the most of our exceptionally rich language to relay impartial, educated information.

Write, reflect and edit as the person with whom the reader, viewer or listener chooses to engage, be clear, authoritative and accurate.”

teaching a careful blend of theory and practice. These courses give you a grounding in the fundamentals of journalism and a chance to try out print, online and broadcast media.

More recently, automotive journalism teaching has been introduced into courses at Cardiff University and UCA Farnham, and there is the Automotive Journalism postgrad course at Coventry University where I teach. All these inform students about key aspects of journalism and educate them about the motor industry, and graduates from these courses stand out from the crowd when it comes to applying for automotive media jobs.

But there are other ways to learn the multi-discipline craft of journalism, and these are opportunities that have been brought about by the other media revolution of recent years: the internet. It's now easier than it has ever been for anybody to become a published writer – on a blog, on a website, on Twitter or Facebook. There's no shortage of

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opportunities for online exposure, so use them. Create your own automotive blog and develop a Twitter feed to go with it. You don't need sophisticated or expensive recording and editing gear to make simple videos or podcasts, so make some with a motoring flavour. Use the opportunities available online to show what you can do, and to develop and then demonstrate your skills.

Vehicle manufacturers have fleets of cars which they will lend to journalists, but such a loan can easily cost the company £1,000. Even established journalists justify to the manufacturer why a press loan is in their interest. You're unlikely to get access to press fleet cars just because you've set up an automotive blog, nor can you expect press accreditation to report on a grand prix from the pitlane. But resourcefulness is another essential quality for a journalist, and there are plenty of stories you can cover which don't involve VIP trips to Maranello or one-on-one interviews with motor industry CEOs.

You can write perfectly good reports on club

motor racing from the public enclosure. You can talk to local motor clubs, report on their events and interview their members about the cars they own – you're virtually certain to find fascinating stories worth following up.

Write all these up for your blog, but think about where else you could send them. There are around 100 specialist car magazines in Britain, and many of them use freelance contributors to write at least some of their news and feature material. There are thousands of motoring websites, all crying out for articles. The secret to getting published is to send the right story to the right place: *Autosport* deals exclusively with motorsport, so it won't be interested in an interview with a car designer, however well written it is, unless there is a motorsport connection. *Classic Cars* is unlikely to be interested in a story about a new car. *Car Mechanics* is all about maintenance and repair. And so on. Read the magazines and websites and understand the kind of content they publish: offer them more in



Sir William Lyons & Phil Llewellyn Awards

Prestigious awards for new motoring writers

The Sir William Lyons Award is for writers under 23. Winners include Tim Pollard, Jonathan Noble, Tony Dron and Alastair Weaver – all now respected motoring writers. The Phil Llewellyn Award is open to students on automotive journalism courses. The 2009 winner, Rhian Jones, is now an established automotive writer. See www.gomw.co.uk for more details of both awards.



To report from a motor show requires attending an endless succession of new model launches and press briefings – it’s a tough job, but often a rewarding one.

the same mould and you stand a much better chance of getting your name into a publication.

You can also learn a great deal about automotive journalism – and put yourself in a good position to be offered a full-time job – through work experience. Many media companies now offer such internships and placements. Nowadays recruitment to editorial teams comes not from reviewing applications generated by expensive ads in the media

“There’s no shortage of opportunities for online exposure, so use them”

pages of the newspapers but by looking at how recent ‘workies’ performed. Work experience gives an employer a chance to see if you have what it takes, and whether or not you fit in with the existing team. It gives you the opportunity to make some contacts and to find out more about how motoring journalism operates.

Don’t expect to receive a constant stream of support, encouragement, training and advice while you’re there, though. Motor magazine people are

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Technology briefings are essential for learning what manufacturers are working on, and how they intend to apply their innovations.

not by nature surly or unco-operative – most of them, anyway – but they are busy. You need to work out a lot of things on your own, and learn when to ask for advice – don't sit and wait for someone to help you.

The way to get work experience to work for you is to make sure you are consistently useful. One of the biggest mistakes is to do nothing because nobody gave you something to do. In a newsroom, there's always something to do. Find it. If you can't

***“In a newsroom,
there's always
something to do.
Find it”***

think of anything better, read the last issue of the publication you're working on – or proofs of the next issue if they're available – and try to understand better how that publication engages with its readers. Read competing titles and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Scribble down feature ideas for the next issue.

Steve Cropley, editor in chief of *Autocar*, recounts stories of two 'workies' who really made an excellent impression. One arrived carrying



a bucket and sponge, and offered to wash whichever cars were being photographed that day, giving a hard-pressed journo a break from one of the more tedious tasks a motoring writer faces on a regular basis. Another liked to ask, 'Anyone got a job they don't want to do?'.

The first was Gavin Conway, who rose to a senior role on *Autocar* and then became a very successful car magazine editor in the US and UK. The second was Chris Harris, later an *Autocar* columnist and now one of the best-known motoring writers in the UK.

These stories prove that even the humblest start can be a great opportunity. Your first experience of motoring journalism isn't likely to be a supercar group test at the Nürburgring. It's far more likely to be working as a caffeinated-beverage operative in an airless room full of over-worked hacks. But grab the opportunities when you see them, because they could lead to much greater things.

Motoring journalism as a career

The highest-profile motoring writers are those working for national newspapers and big-name new-car titles. Specialist magazines focussed on such topics as motorsport, classics, motorcycles and commercial vehicles

have smaller teams. As a result, even junior staffers can get involved in major decisions such as cover design. There are also business-to-business titles covering the motor industry or fleet management and they provide another good route into motoring journalism, not least because fewer people think of approaching them, so competition for jobs is less fierce.

New-car road-testing is the area of motoring journalism that excites more people than any other: many petrolheads want the job of **road tester**. They will appraise and 'figure' a car, that is perform the acceleration tests which provide all the performance figures printed in the magazine, using the test straights at proving



Tim Pollard

**Associate Editor,
CAR Magazine**

"*CAR Magazine* receives hundreds of requests a year from aspiring motoring journalists. My advice is to stand out from the crowd. Have proof you've tried writing about cars already, whether work experience at an established mag or writing for your college magazine. An engaging blog will catch my eye more than a round-robin letter."

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grounds such as Millbrook and MIRA. Road testers will drive hundreds of different cars in a typical year – and have to find time to write about them. It's a demanding role.

Entry level **staff writer** roles can encompass all sorts of tasks, depending on the type of publication: dealing with readers' letters, writing news and features, investigating stories with industry or consumer angles, or production tasks such as page layout and sub-editing. The latter is more often the job of a **sub-editor**, who looks at every word and every sentence that goes into a publication. The sub makes sure the spelling, grammar and punctuation are flawless, checks dubious facts, catches copy with legal implications and ensures consistency is maintained throughout the publication. It's a role that needs an eye for detail and an excellent grasp of written English.

Succeed in one of these roles and you might be promoted to **road-test, features** or **production editor**, leading a team of people all working on a specific section of the publication.

Where to find more information

ONLINE

www.gomw.co.uk,
twitter.com/gomw_uk,
facebook.com/gomwuk
Guild of Motoring Writers

www.infinitipress.eu
Infiniti Europe's press site

www.coventry.ac.uk
Automotive Journalism
MA degree course

www.cardiff.ac.uk
MA in journalism with
automotive module

www.ucreative.ac.uk
Journalism degrees with
automotive input

BOOKS

Journalism: Principles and Practice Tony Harcup (Sage)

The Online Journalism Handbook Paul Bradshaw/Liisa Rohumaa (Longman)

Ultimately there is the job of **editor**, one of the most demanding – and rewarding – in the business. The editor is the captain of the team, the one everyone turns to when there's a decision to be made, or a problem to solve. It's demanding because a team of people relies on your leadership, and because your decisions are clear for all to see when your magazine comes back from the printer, or when a reader visits your website. There's no place to hide. But it also enables you to put your creative stamp on every aspect of the product, and that can be enormously satisfying.

There are two common career paths from there. One is to take on the responsibility of ensuring

the commercial success of a publication by managing both editorial and advertising sales teams as a **publisher**. The other is to strike out beyond a single publication by going **freelance**, which brings the opportunity to take on a wider range of work for a wider range of readers. Both routes have their own challenges.



The future of automotive journalism

In an era when the very essence of what a car is – its looks, what powers it, how it's made – is rapidly changing, it's hard to know what kind of vehicles we'll be writing about a few years from now. Journalism and publishing are changing rapidly, too, with new content platforms appearing almost daily. So it's doubly difficult to predict the future for motoring writers.

“The next few years will be fascinating for anyone writing about cars”

What's certain is that, for all sorts of reasons, the next few years will be a fascinating era of change for anyone writing about cars. The profession will need to attract the kind of person who has a real enthusiasm for this new era motoring, along with the potential to communicate in an ever-increasing variety of ways. The future of motoring journalism will be steered by the kind of person who thinks that sounds like the best job in the world. And that kind of person, I hope, is you.



As with any journalist, a motoring writer needs to be able to find the right sources and ask the questions that the reader wants answered.

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