

IDEAS AND CONTENT

We don't want (the writer) to describe every ride at Disneyland, or tell us that the Grand Canyon is awesome... If one of the rides at Disneyland got stuck, or if somebody fell into the awesome Grand Canyon, that would be worth hearing about.

-William Zinsser

Ideas and Content is what you have to say—the reason for writing your paper. Everything about your writing begins with that message. If you can choose your own topic, pick something important to you, that you know a lot about. If someone picks the topic for you, look for a way to connect it to your own experience. That way, you can use what you know.

This is one of the secrets—keep it small. If your topic is too big (like “Animals of Africa”) you'll wind up trying to tell too much and not be able to focus on any one idea long enough to make it clear. Skinny it down (“Why Lions Hunt in Pairs”) so you can handle it. Put in the kind of details to show you pay attention to the world and notice how it works.

Surprise your reader with what you know. Don't spend time on the things that anyone else could write. Don't say, “Cooking in a restaurant can be hard work.” Even people who don't cook can figure that out. Instead, tell what goes on in the kitchen if an angry customer sent the food back. That would be an interesting insight!

One more hint: Make your ideas crystal clear. Avoid general statements like “Our trip was exciting.” Exciting how? Instead, say “I chased two very hungry black bears away from our camping supplies.” Specific details that help the reader picture what is happening can make or break your writing.

Human beings have a great need to represent their experience through writing. We need to make our truths beautiful.

-Lucy McCormick Calkins