

BTG Writers' Guidelines

By Nagaraja Dasa

This essay is a revised version of one I wrote quite a few years ago. Because times have changed, I need to make an important point that was not relevant then but is now: BTG will not publish articles that are clearly written and/or edited by AI (ChatGPT, etc.) AI-written or -edited articles tend to have a characteristic voice and style. We don't want that voice and style in BTG. If we detect AI, we won't consider the article for possible publication. Write in your own voice, which is what Srila Prabhupada expected of BTG authors.

As the editor of what we call the international edition of Back to Godhead, published in Alachua, Florida, USA, I'm writing specifically about that version of the magazine. BTG India has other editions, which may include some articles from the international edition and some written specifically for the India edition.

A note about BTG authors: While we occasionally publish articles from people outside the Krishna consciousness movement (such as an outsider looking in), we generally require that the authors be followers of Srila Prabhupada and accept his teachings. They must know and accept the philosophy of Krishna consciousness as he presented it in his books. The guidelines below are intended for such potential authors.

Following Srila Prabhupada's desire and the precedent he set, BTG does not pay authors for their articles. Writing for BTG is meant to be an act of devotional service to Lord Krishna.

BTG is intended primarily for ISKCON devotees and congregation; it's not aimed at people with no familiarity with Krishna consciousness. In this context, I'm using the word "devotees" to mean initiated members of ISKCON or non-initiated people with first-hand knowledge of ISKCON's teachings and culture. They're what we might call ISKCON insiders. I'm also using "congregation" in a broad sense, to include people who only occasionally visit our temples. Many of our readers may not yet be committed ISKCON people. They get the magazine from their temple because they're on the temple's mailing list, or they receive the magazine as a benefit for contributing to the temple.

Many devotees send us articles full of references to things only an ISKCON insider would understand. But we want as many of our readers as possible to feel that the author is writing for them, not for a select few.

I suggest that authors who want to write for BTG should read books on writing. We're competing for the reader's attention, so we should know what good writing is and should try to emulate it. Of course, the most important quality of writing is merit—it should be about something worthwhile. So on that count, anything positive written about Krishna consciousness is valuable. Still, if we can't keep the reader interested, our writing won't work. So we look for articles that not only accurately present the philosophy and

practices of Krishna consciousness, but do it in a friendly, clear, interesting way.

Writing a magazine article is not the same as writing a college term paper or writing for a professional journal. The BTG reader is not obliged to read your article. Magazine articles have to be entertaining. Not that you have to tell jokes, but the reader should find the article not only informative, but also a pleasure to read.

Suggestion: Type “what is good writing” into your online search engine. You’ll quickly find some good ideas.

Here’s some basic writing advice. Ask yourself these questions:

Is the overall theme of the article clear?

Is the topic of the article suitable for BTG?

Have I understood BTG’s audience and written for them?

Does the article flow logically? Are the transitions clear and natural?

Is there extraneous material that should be cut or made into a sidebar?

Does my voice sound intelligent and reasonable, rather than naïve or fanatical?

Be careful about using popular images or icons that only the people of your country can understand. If you’re an American, for example, know that most of BTG’s readers are not. If you’re Indian or British or whatever, the same rule applies. We have readers all over the world.

Before including a story (a pastime of Krishna’s, for example) in your article, no matter how well you think you know it, go back to the source and review it so you will be sure to get it right. Include the sources for stories or anything unusual, and before submitting an article check to make sure your sources are correct.

Finally, if you plan to write for BTG, you should be a BTG reader. You can get a sense of the audience by seeing how the current writers express themselves.

Maximum length of articles: 2,500 words (2,000 words for articles that call for several pages with photos).

Submit to: editors@krishna.com

To avoid software translation problems, please send only Word files or simple text files. Don’t do any formatting, such as extra indentation for long quotations. It’s best to just indicate such extracted text, as we call it, with a bracketed note, e.g. [begin blockquote] [end blockquote]. Unless you’re quoting some Sanksrit that we won’t be able to find in

the VedaBase, don't use diacritics. And never use Devanagari.

Members of a review board read all submissions, which I send to them via email. After reading their comments, I decide whether or not the submission is suitable for publication. Then I notify the author. If the submission is not approved, I include a summary of the comments. If an article shows potential, I'll suggest that the author submit a revised version that incorporates the reviewers' suggestions.

Perhaps the hardest part of my service is telling authors their submission was not approved. I know that rejection can be painful for the author. Be aware that even our most frequent contributors, some of whom have been writing for BTG for many years, sometimes submit articles that are rejected. Sometimes they can revise the article to deal with the reviewers' concerns; sometimes they put it aside and work on another article.

It's good to remember that since writing about Krishna consciousness is purifying, there's no loss even if your work isn't published.

There are no deadlines for submissions. Approved articles are printed as soon as possible. But because we always have a selection of unpublished articles on hand, it can take six months or more before your approved article appears in print.

We don't assign topics. Any Krishna conscious topic is ok. And BTG is not a newspaper. We're much more likely to print a full article on a temple than a report on a specific event. If you have news to report, try iskconnews.org.

Please put a title on your article, and under the title "by [your name]. If you're writing your "How I Came to Krishna Consciousness," be advised that "How I Came to Krishna Consciousness" is not the title of your article -- it's the heading that goes above the title of your article.

Here's a note from one of the devotees who reviews articles submitted to BTG:

The problems we have with most articles that get submitted:

1. Too internal: the language and topic are suitable only for people very familiar with Krishna consciousness and ISKCON.
2. Few if any references from Prabhupada or scripture.
3. Very poor writing (mostly a problem from non-native English speakers).
4. No relevance to the readers: For example, authors write about some festival they attended because it interests them, but they never connect to reader interest.

5. Little or no philosophy: Authors tell a story from scripture or their own life, with little or no philosophical connection.

6. Pushing the limits on “New Agey” or “bridge preaching” beyond what we BTG editors feel comfortable promoting to our readers as a general practice. Examples of this are describing a kirtana event that includes some non-devotee kirtana leaders where it seems BTG would be “endorsing” the other persons, or describing something from modern psychology as if it’s scriptural, or trying to stretch scripture to endorse something from modern psychology rather than starting from scripture and deriving psychology from there.

One final note: If your article is accepted for publication, we require a signed copyright agreement. You have two options. The first is to give the article to the BBT (which owns the BTG copyrights) for its unrestricted use. This agreement also entitles you to republish the article, but the BBT is the legal owner of the work and will therefore try to protect it from unauthorized use by others. The second option grants the BBT permission to print the article while you maintain ownership.

Hare Krishna.

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