How to Write Better

There’s a knack to putting words together in a way that will draw readers in and keep them interested and reading to the last period.

BY GENE ROSE

Whether writing a press release, an op-ed piece, a newsletter article or a letter to the editor, using language that people will want to read is essential. Too often, jargon and complicated phrases creep into our writing and that turns the reader off. If you follow these ten simple steps, your writing might just win you a Pulitzer prize.

MAKE THE LEAD EXCITING.

Determine what the most important part of your story is and make it your lead. This may mean not mentioning your legislative chamber in the first paragraph. Take a day and read The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. See how creative their writers are and how they get you into the stories. A good lead establishes the subject, sets the tone, attracts attention and guides the reader into what follows. Don’t waste people’s time. They lead busy lives. If you don’t capture their attention in the first two paragraphs, you are certainly not going to with the remaining ones.

Compare the following:

ORIGINAL: On Aug. 5, running through Aug. 29, Washington Hall will present an exciting one-man exhibition of 50 photographs by James Jones.

IMPROVED: In one photograph, the fabrics burst with the rich colors of Africa. In another, penguins prance on a pebbled beach. Fifty such photographs by James Jones, exploring the colors and textures of South Africa, will be on view at Washington Hall Aug. 5 through Aug. 29.

MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A ‘NUT GRAPH.’

Too many press releases and articles don’t have a sentence or paragraph that’s essentially the sound bite of your article. Make sure one of your top four paragraphs tells the reader what the story is all about. Writing a nut graph helps you, the writer, clarify and focus your piece. Stick to the main point and let the writing of the rest of the piece support it.

Tell a Compelling Story.

Former “60 Minutes” producer Don Hewit says every one of the pieces that aired on his program had to meet one criterion. “Tell me a story.” Does your piece tell a compelling tale? According to the PR firm Fleishman-Hillard, the media like stories about:

- Winners and losers.
- Heroes and villains.
- Criticism, conflict and controversy.
- Trends or change.
- Something new, unusual or different.

The media likes these stories because experience tells them that the public likes these kinds of stories. Give your audience what they want.

Use Vivid Images and Simple Language.

Pacific Vision’s Val Marmillion explains why a highway wreck involving a truck load of pigs makes a compelling story on TV. “Everyone knows what a truck is, everyone knows what a highway is and everyone knows what a pig is.” Even when writing a story about sewer bonds, you have to make it appeal to as broad an audience as possible, he says, and make sure it is in language people understand.

Short words and short sentences make a strong point. Take a tip from William Strunk and E.B. White in The Elements of Style. “Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy and the cute,” they say. “Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able.” For example,

Instead of

Afford an opportunity
Close proximity
Due to the fact that
For the purpose of
Has the capability
In accordance with
In the near future
Pertaining to

Try

allow
near
since
to
can
by
soon
about

Go to School. Junior High School.

Did you know that most major publications write at a seventh grade level? If it’s good enough for Time magazine and National Geographic, it should be good enough for you. This means also avoiding acronyms and ‘inside baseball’ terminology that are understood only in the halls of the Capitol. Do your
constituents really know what ERISA means or NCLB?
Avoid superlatives and modifiers like ‘the most important,’ ‘brightest’ and ‘proudly.’ Self-congratulatory language is a tip-off to readers that this is ‘spin.’ Oversaturing puts readers on guard, and, according to Strunk and White, will cause them to lose confidence in your judgment.

WRITE IN THE ACTIVE VOICE.
The active voice is direct and bold and leaves no doubt about who did what to whom.

PASSIVE: It is believed by Senator Jones that a bill must be passed by the legislature.

ACTIVE: Senator Jones believes the legislature must pass a bill this session.

PASSIVE: At yesterday’s meeting, it was demonstrated that the committee is taking strong action.

ACTIVE: The committee’s strong action yesterday demonstrates its commitment to education.

Also, avoid ‘would’ and words ending in ‘-ing.’ A strong verb produces a strong sentence. Weak verbs destroy sentences. Explicit nouns and verbs rarely need a bunch of adjectives or adverbs to intensify their meaning. Strunk and White write: “Rather, very, little, pretty—these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words.”

AVOID WEAK WORDS.
Too many press releases contain the phrases ‘it is,’ ‘there is’ and ‘there are.’ Again, these words weaken writing and bore the reader:

OLD: There are likely to be many citizens concerned about the latest state agency action.

NEW: Citizens likely will raise questions about the latest state agency action.

OLD: It is accepted practice to allow four public hearings on new transportation proposals.

NEW: Tradition allows four public hearings on new transportation proposals.

BE ACCURATE.
A mistake, either factual or grammatical,
can make an entire article worthless. Bad grammar and misspellings suggest a writer is careless. Factual errors suggest the writer is ignorant. Don’t depend on your computer to spell check or your memory to proofread. Make sure at least two other people review your work before you send it out.

THINK OF YOUR GRANDPA.
Pick out a family member who is not politically savvy and determine if he would understand what you just wrote. Would he understand the main point of the article? Would he have a clear idea of the direction the article is taking right from the beginning? Or better yet, if you have time, send it to grandpa and get his opinion.

REVISE, REVISE, REVISE.
You often don’t have time for a lot of rewrites, but don’t assume you can nail it the first time around either. Few writers can produce the perfect piece the first try. Take a break and review it later. This gives you a fresh look at your writing and inspires changes that will improve your work.

BONUS TIP:
ADOPT A MODEL WRITER.
Think of the authors, columnists and writers that you enjoy. Look at their writing style and analyze what you like about it. Do you like their word choice, the pacing of the writing or the way they tell a story? Are you more likely to read Maya Angelou or Mitch Albom? Thomas Friedman or George Will? Superman or Archie? Chances are that your writing can reflect the style of those you admire.

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