

gibb
basics, part II

Writers should never be satisfied with their first draft, their first stab at a lead, or quotes that seem never to end.

They shouldn't be satisfied with unexplained jargon or a weak nut graf. Likewise for lack of context or lack of balance.

And it's a crime to be boring.

The list goes on. So to add to a checklist of basics begun in the winter 2010 edition of *Media* magazine – everything writers should consider with every story -- here is Part II.

SHORTER SENTENCES

Too many long sentences in a row make life miserable for readers. They have to work too hard to read and comprehend your story. Broadcasters know the merit of short sentences or have it knocked into them quickly. Listen to how they do it.

A writing coach once said if you give readers a long sentence, treat them to a short one. Varying the length of sentences adds rhythm and flow to a story. If you find yourself stuck with too many long sentences, consider breaking them into two or three by using periods. The lowly period is the simplest tool to break up the congestion.

If you read your story aloud, you will likely pick up on sentences that are too cumbersome. Try this one without coming up for breath:

After Israeli Major-General Amos Gilad met Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan on Saturday, their subordinates met into the early hours of this morning to work out details of a plan under which Israel gradually would withdraw from Bethlehem and parts of the Gaza Strip, putting security back in the hands of Palestinians after months of Israeli occupation, the Israeli Defence Ministry said. (62 words)

With minor alterations, you can break this into three, easier-to-digest sentences.

TRANSITIONS

These are simple devices that make a story move along smoothly from one topic to another, one person to another, one place to another, one time to another. Readers shouldn't feel lost or left behind when you make a sudden turn without warning.

Tell them when you have a change in location, a change of speakers, a change in time. Keep the reader informed with every move.

USE ACTIVE VOICE

Simply put, it is more direct. “City council met last night” is more concise and direct than “a meeting was held by city council last night.” Strong sentences follow the traditional format of subject-verb-object. Never say never to the passive voice. It has its place, but not as a dominant force dulling down a story or a broadcast.

SHOW RATHER THAN TELL

Easy to say, harder to do. Avoid saying something was “fun” or “awesome” or “difficult.” Show the fun – the giggling youngster splashing in the pool. Show the difficulty – the cross-country runner gasping for air as she climbs the hill. Showing takes readers right to the heart of your story. It helps them to visualize and feel a part of it. Look for specific details. Telling rather than showing is more abstract and passive.

Krystal Wilhelm crouches on the seventh stair of the Merlin Apartments, thin knees pulled against her 16-year-old stomach, insides cramping. She’s dope sick. ... She rocks with cramps.

When you think of showing, you want to capture key moments, just like Wilhelm’s dope sickness.

As Rene Cappon (*The Word*) notes, “colour is a matter of detail – those details that make *this* story different from any other stories.” Avoid the predictable (sandy beaches, posh resort, tony neighbourhood, urban sprawl). They are well-worn descriptives applicable to many scenes. Search for the right word(s) for your story.

OBSERVE

This is a close cousin of showing. Reporters, in my mind, are among the best observers. But because we’ve been trained to record what other people say, we tend to pay less attention to what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Sometimes what *you* see (or hear) is your lead. Take the time to record observations in your notes – just as you do quotes and comments from those you interview – so you have the details when it’s time to write. Don’t rely on memory. Be careful, however, not to interpret what you see ... but just report what you see.

When the late Pierre Trudeau turned 80, he guarded his privacy and refused to talk to a reporter. But she caught up with him at a lunch counter and wrote the following observations, no doubt aided by some information from those who serve Trudeau every week:

He inches ahead at the Lebanese fast-food counter, reaching for his plastic cutlery with slow and deliberate hands. He orders his usual – chicken in pita bread with mild sauce – and graciously smiles at the staff. It's a lunch-time routine several days a week.

Then all eyes in the room follow him as he moves off to a remote corner to eat by himself.

AVOID WARM BODIES

Reporters often show and tell their stories through someone they interview. For example, the impact of a new government policy on ordinary people. By using one person through whom to tell a complex story, you make it easier for readers to grasp the significance of that new policy.

However, you need to develop such a person beyond one-dimensional – otherwise, the person becomes a “warm body” used simply as a prop. Such stories often drop the person around paragraph four with a simple transitional line like, “So-and-so is not alone.” Or: “So-and-so is one of 500,000 Canadians who ...”

The person leaves the story, never to be seen again. Unless, of course, the reporter brings the person back for one last, unremarkable gasp at the end.

If you are going to use people to illustrate stories, develop *their* personal story. Make them real. Show their personality. Make them people with whom readers can identify.

WRITE TIGHT

This takes discipline and requires writers to exercise good judgment. As *Boston Globe* writing coach Don Murray has observed, writers are territorial animals with a primitive instinct to use up as much newsprint (or air time?) as possible. “But the stories that survive,” he says, “are usually short, precisely limited and clearly focused.”

William Zinsser (*On Writing Well*), adds, “Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out that shouldn't be there.”

A few quick tips:

- 1) Watch for a sentence that repeats what a previous sentence or quote said.
- 2) Justify the need for everything in your story: Why is this important? Does the reader need to know this? Does this advance the story?
- 3) Fight clutter – due to the fact that (because); at this point in time (now); for the purpose of (for); in order to (to).
- 4) Look for sections to delete – an anecdote that doesn't advance your story or perhaps an interviewee repeating what another interviewee has already said.

Tighter writing means understanding your story and having the confidence to write it without resorting to over-explanation and long, cumbersome quotes.

Take time to self-edit before handing in your story. Accept the challenge of making your writing crisper by cutting and eliminating needless material.

Just because you gather it, doesn't mean you have to use it. What you leave out is just as important as what you put in.

REWRITE

It's your chance to recheck some basics. Have you backed up your lead? Have you buried a better angle? Are your quotes punchy? What about sentences that are too long or a point that needs more explanation? Rewriting makes you a better writer because *you* are the one fixing before handing off to an editor.

UNDERSTAND NUMBERS

A writing coach who taught engineering students said they didn't realize that 60 per cent of their time would be spent writing. Reporters, she said, don't realize the 60 per cent of *their* time could be spent translating and analyzing numbers.

Like it or not, numbers are a big part of journalism and writers need to understand some basics such as figuring out a percentage, making sure numbers add up, or understanding the difference between average and median.

Scary stuff for writers who say they got into journalism because they hated math. But there's nothing wrong with calling on outside sources – business professors, accountants, high school math teachers – to help translate what the numbers mean. It's best if they have no vested interest in the story on which you are seeking help.

MASTER THE COMPLEX

You have to explain technical, complex material in simple terms. Slow down how much and how fast you feed information to readers. Short, simple sentences are often best to describe long, complicated issues. And know when enough is enough. The key is that *you* have to understand all of it, but give readers only as much as they need to know to understand the topic. Remember, you're not writing it for the doctor, lawyer, or engineer you interviewed. You're writing it for ordinary readers and that will be less technical than the doctor, lawyer or engineer might prefer. Accurately conveying complex material is always your goal, but you have to work at making it understandable.

TAKE READERS THERE

Give readers a sense of place. Where are you? What do you see? Here's an example where a reporter returns to Kelowna, B.C., a year after a forest fire destroyed more than 200 homes and forced 30,000 to flee their town:

You can smell the burned forest on Okanagan Mountain before you see it. Hiking up an old railway bed surrounded by green pines, you wonder, was this really where, one year ago this weekend, a massive fire threatened to engulf an entire city?

Then the heavy smell of charcoal hits you. Turning a corner you see where the fire raged on the mountain, a black tongue licking down the hillside, consuming everything in its path. Marching off to the summit, stuck like spears into the soil, are thousands of dead, black trees.

ENDINGS

Just as important as beginnings. In fact, Justice Denise Bellamy, of the Ontario Superior Court, says she was taught in “judgment writing school” that the opening paragraph is prime real estate. “Why would you put a hot dog stand there?”

Why, indeed? And while you’re at it, think of your ending before you get there. Endings shouldn’t leave readers hanging over the edge of a cliff, unless you’re running a series and want to entice them back for more tomorrow or next week.

Here’s a writer who has a catchy lead and an excellent ending as he circles back to the beginning to complete his story in a natural and charming way:

Opening

Susan Wright’s life of crime began about two weeks ago, on a sunny Sunday afternoon. She stood at the corner of Bathurst Street, just south of Dupont Street. The coast was clear. Ms. Wright went ahead with her plan.

A minute later, as she headed west on Olive Avenue, a police car pulled up next to her. Ms. Wright had joined the ranks of Toronto’s fastest-growing criminal class – the jaywalker.

“I couldn’t believe it,” said Ms. Wright, who lives downtown and owns a business called Tree Hugger Puppets. “Who gets busted for jaywalking?”

Ending

This week, Ms. Wright went to the courthouse to fight her ticket, arguing that the fine was excessive. The justice of the peace agreed, and dropped it to \$20 from \$50.

Ms. Wright described the trip from her home to the court: “I jaywalked seven times to get there,” she said. “I just didn’t get caught.”

In the end, your task is simple. Tell stories. Tell them well.

William Blundell (*The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*) says nothing is easier than to stop reading. “We fail to heed the unspoken commandment that undergirds all others, the only common demand of readers everywhere: For Pete’s sake, make it interesting. Tell me a story.”

That’s the real challenge every day. Do not approach any story with complacency and for heaven’s sake, accept the challenge every story has to offer, no matter how mundane it seems at the time. Bad attitude kills more good stories. Instead of being negative going in, look for the gem in every story. It *is* there. (Thus endeth the preachy part.)

No doubt you can add more to this checklist of basics, but the list should serve as a reminder to constantly stay on top of the tools that make for excellence in writing. Just as airline pilots make the same checks over and over again on every flight, writers need to do the same on every story. It will keep you sharp, help you avoid or overcome lazy habits, and exercise your mind.

While you’re at it, take some risks. Better writing comes from leaving the comfort of the safe or routine approach. It also means accepting, if necessary, failure. We learn from our mistakes and we are better for it.

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(Part I of this two-part column appeared in the winter 2010 edition of Media magazine. It covered the following basics: Focus, story outline, structure, leads, backing up the lead, nut graf., context, use of quotes, attribution, balance and interviewing.)