

gibb
column on basics

I had the pleasure (?) of being the first victim to fly with my son after he had earned his small-plane pilot's licence.

At the time, I didn't know it would prompt a comparison to writing.

I watched him go through an extensive checklist that included pre-flight ("got enough fuel?"), takeoff, climb, cruise, descent and landing ("are you sure you have the right runway?"). Each of these categories and more come with a checklist of as many as 20 items. From the moment he pulled the plane from the hangar to the moment he returned it there, he followed a lengthy script. Every pilot goes through the same procedure on every flight.

So it brought to mind the extensive checklist writers need to review every time they write. Much of it seems basic – as do the checks made by pilots – but we need to remind ourselves often so we don't fall into bad routines or bad habits.

So here's a primer on some of the basics of writing – a checklist, if you will, that always needs our attention.

Focus.

Stories with one well-developed focus or theme work better than those that try to tackle too much. Multi-focused stories tend to be superficial because they flit from one topic to another, never developing anything to its full extent.

Writing coach Don Murray (*The Boston Globe*) says, "Most good stories say one thing. They talk not of a battle, but of a soldier."

So before you begin to write, ask yourself: What's my story? The answer should be no more than a few words – preferably one word.

Here's an example. A couple who lost their only son in a car accident were interviewed a year after the ordeal. They were working hard to save their marriage, to overcome guilt and blame, to deal with friends who thought their grieving should be over, to cope with highs and lows every day, and to try to concentrate on their jobs. The common thread throughout the story revolved around one word -- surviving. This was the focus.

Find the one word that best describes the story you are about to tell and chances are you will stay focused.

Story outline.

Few of us take time to *think* about the story before we begin to write. Smart writers build in time to sketch out a brief outline – a road map to give them a sense of direction. It helps set up your story in terms of your theme and sub-themes. It helps keep related material together.

You can decide: What's my opening? Where do I go from there? What individual issues or topics need to be addressed? What's my ending?

This is more efficient than fumbling around in your notebook, replaying your digital recording or dumping everything onto the computer. By writing a brief outline, you quickly determine what's important and what's not, what you're using and what you're not. Wish I could convince writers this actually *saves* time.

Structure.

Buildings have a basic structure. Stories need the same. Once the basic structure is established, then you provide the creative element that makes it different from another building or another story.

Structure is about finding the right “form” through which to tell your story.

Here are a few of the more common forms:

Chronological. This allows you to tell the story beginning at the beginning and moving to the end in linear fashion. It has a sense of order and relies heavily on good storytelling skills to keep it moving. You can also open with a particularly dramatic part of a story before moving into straight chronology with this happened, then this, followed by this, this and this ...

Block or chapter. This form allows you to divide a story into specific chapters. In a story about the death of a pastry chef at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, the opening “chapter” dealt with the details of his death that day. The next chapter told readers his life story – from growing up in Puerto Rico to his arrival in America. That was followed by preparations for his funeral.

This form forces you to decide what goes into your story (and each chapter) and what gets left out.

Classic feature. This form is probably the most common. It often involves finding someone through whom to tell the story and it often opens with an anecdote that speaks to the theme or focus. The story ends by coming full circle, returning to the central character in your lead. The classic feature is most successful when the person who opens your story continues to be woven through the story. If a person deserves to be the lead, they likely deserve to be a more significant part of the entire story

Leads.

We agonize over the first sentence because we've been told that unless we hook readers and listeners, they won't stick with us. So here's my advice.

Shorter leads work better (under 30 words) because studies have shown that reader comprehension drops off after 25 words. Broadcasters are better at this than print people.

Leave lengthy job titles for later.

Deal with one item in your lead rather than two or more. An opening sentence that tackles two or more items is called a double-barrelled lead.

Use strong, active verbs. Try to avoid "there is" leads.

Watch for clichés, too many numbers, and jargon.

Backing up the lead.

The idea here is to let your second sentence flow from the first and your third flow from the second. In other words, allow yourself time to develop and strengthen your lead (focus) before charging ahead with background.

The biggest weakness – after writing the opening sentence – is moving directly into background or jumping immediately into a quote before readers fully understand what the story is about. Background can wait until your nut graf. (paragraph), which is usually paragraph three, or four, or maybe even five.

Nut graf.

This is the sentence or paragraph that tells readers **what** the story is about and **why** they should read it. It usually appears by the fourth paragraph. And it can be as simple as telling readers this (is a story about) National Procrastinators Week

Some of you hate the nut graf. because you think it interferes with the rhythm or flow of your story. But once you get used to the fact that stories need this essential element, your challenge is to make it fit seamlessly into your story.

Here's an example of a seamless nut graf. – paragraphs three and four from a *New York Times* story (Rick Bragg) about a black washerwoman who donated her life savings to the local university (nut graf. in italics):

She spent almost nothing, living in her old family home, cutting the toes out of shoes if they did not fit right and binding her ragged Bible with scotch tape to keep Corinthians from falling out. Over the decades, her pay – mostly dollar bills and change – grew to more than \$150,000. "More than I could ever use," Miss McCarty said the other day without a trace of self-pity. *So she is giving her money away, to finance scholarships for black students at the University of Southern Mississippi here in her hometown, where tuition is \$2,400 a year.*

Context. Stories often need background. To understand your story, readers and listeners need to know its history (the past), where it stands today (present) and where it goes from here (future). Without context, readers and listeners are left to wonder what the story is all about and why it is important or relevant.

Use of quotes.

Keep them short, make them lively, and don't overuse them. Long-winded quotes are a problem, especially if you rely heavily on digital recorders and insist on playing back the entire interview or worse, dumping everything onto your computer screen.

The recorder is a wonderful tool, but you need to show discipline in using it. Notetaking should not be sacrificed in favour of recording alone. Notetaking should be your primary source in writing a story; the digital recorder is your backup.

Here's a guideline: Quotes should run no longer than one or two sentences. It better be fantastic to run three. And when you have a quote where the interview subject has so garbled the language or takes too long to make the point, paraphrase.

William Zinsser (*On Writing Well*) puts it this way:

People who you think have been talking into the tape recorder with linear precision turn out, when your interview is transcribed, to have been stumbling so aimlessly over the sand of language that they haven't completed a decent sentence.

If your interview is on tape you become a listener, forever fussing with the machine, running it backward to find the brilliant remark you can never find, running it forward, stopping, starting, driving yourself crazy.

Be a writer. Write things down.

Attribution.

It can be overused. When it is obvious who is speaking, writers need not use "he said" or "she said." Attribution can often be deleted following a quote where you have already introduced the speaker in a previous sentence or paragraph.

"Said" or "says" are the most neutral and serviceable attributives in your vocabulary. Yet some of you strive to introduce many variations in your stories to avoid – what? – monotony. Often substitutions for said or says are used incorrectly.

The Canadian Press Stylebook makes this valid point: "Admit" implies confession, "affirm" states a fact, "assert" declares strongly, "claim" and "maintain" hint of doubt, "confide" implies a confidence, "disclose" and "reveal" presume earlier concealment.

All good reasons to stick to "said" or "says."

So how do you make stories appear less formal or stodgy when you have to keep saying he said, she said? Leave it out when it's obvious who's doing the saying or move attribution around – the beginning, middle and end of sentences -- so that every paragraph doesn't begin with he said or she said.

Balance.

Most writers know the importance of getting all sides of a story. Sometimes that means little more than a “no comment” or telling readers and listeners that important sources were not available.

It’s fine for one side of the story to be given prominence, but the other side (or sides) should not be relegated to near the bottom of the story. It’s important early in the story to tell readers and listeners there *is* another side – and the “other side” should be flagged high in the story. Then you can develop it in more detail later in the story.

Interviewing.

This is an entire book, but here are four key points.

1) Ask follow-up questions as a matter of habit. Do not leave a topic until you have explored it fully and understood it fully. If you do this, your questions will become sharper and more focused as the interview progresses and you begin to better understand the story at hand.

2) Ask open-ended questions. The “why,” “how,” and “what” questions will generate more detailed answers. If you find yourself sweating through a series of “yes” or “no” responses, regroup and start asking why and how.

3) Don’t be afraid to ask challenging or tough questions. Writers often tell me they have trouble “going for the jugular.” Well ... when you put it *that way!* It’s not about going for the jugular, it’s about getting beyond pat and rehearsed answers. This isn’t to say you will get your subject off message track, but you stand a better chance of redirecting an interview by asking questions that challenge. Examples: What would you say to those who think your idea won’t work? How do you know that? Why should people care? What do you gain from this? As well, know why you are asking your questions. If your subject reacts angrily, you take the pressure off yourself by explaining why you think the question is important.

4) Ask story-ending questions. These are questions that might give you a natural ending to your story. Examples: What have you learned from this experience? Where do you go from here? What message would you give others? Endings are just as important as your openings.

Is this it? Are we finished? No. We’re actually in mid-flight. This is the first of two parts, to be continued in the next issue of *Media Magazine*.

This, however, should give you a better appreciation of how much we need to remember every time we begin the process of gathering information and writing a story. Every story, like every flight, requires a concentrated review of the basics.

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