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Writing For Mass Communications (Part 1)

Basics for Writing for Broadcast

By

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This is the first in a special series that will focus on how to improve your writing in the world of mass communications. I'm thankful to my professors, news directors, senior journalists, and seasoned speakers at multiple conferences I attended during my career. They all helped me become a better writer. I'm pleased to pass along what I learned in hopes it will help you as well.

Becoming a 'great writer' takes time. That's true whether you're writing for broadcast news, print news, online news, public relations, mass media, social media, or any other type of mass communications.

I'm taking these points from seminars I taught for radio and television news departments during my career as a news manager. I compiled most of the information from printed seminar notes, team handouts, and staff emails. Every day in a newsroom or communication's office is an opportunity for managers to help their team members get better. I eventually used those handouts, emails, and seminar notes to publish manuals that we gave to new employees.

My focus for those seminars and manuals was primarily for broadcast news, but I later used the same writing principles after retiring from television news (1967 - 2009). I spent the next 15 years working in corporate communications for a natural health and nutrition company (2009 - 2024). My job was to act as a communication's director, researcher, writer, and producer in addition to meeting with doctors, nutritionists, and other experts in the fields of health and nutrition. We developed a weekly Internet TV program that

ran for many years. The company CEO and I also interviewed many top-ranked athletes who used our products and believed they had played an important role in their athletic success.

Communicating in the corporate world included publishing books, writing brochures and print and online ads, plus using social media, radio, television, newspapers, and podcasts to ‘tell our company’s story.’ I learned that the years I spent as a journalist and news manager prepared me to work in the world of corporate communications. I think anyone who writes for a living will find something in this series that will help them in their career.

I. Writing Style for News

When writing a news story, it is important that you strive for four important aspects:

a. **Accuracy** — This is first and foremost. Make sure what you tell your viewers is correct. If there is ever any question in your mind, discuss the story with the News Director, Executive Producer, Show Producer, or Assignment Editor.

b. **Objectivity** — Make sure your coverage is fair to all sides of a story. If there is ever any question in your mind, discuss the story with the News Director, Executive Producer, Show Producer, or Assignment Editor.

c. **Easy To Read** — You may have the greatest story in the world. However, if an anchor stumbles over your copy because it is too wordy, you may lose the whole point of the story. Choose your words carefully. Write short sentences.

d. **Easy To Understand** — Nothing is worse than having a viewer listen to your story and then think, what? Not only have you lost the viewer for your story, you have lost them for the stories following because they are trying to understand

your story. Don't overwhelm the viewer with multi-syllable words.

II. Active vs. Passive

Strive to write newscasts in active voice. Simply put, the Active Voice always places the actor (noun) before the action (verb).

Example:

Scenes of the history meeting were watched by viewers around the world. (passive voice)

Viewers around the world watched scenes of the historic meeting. (active voice)

A sign of passive voice: using the 'to be' verb. The eight parts of the 'to be' verb:

1. is
2. are
3. am
4. was

5. were
6. be
7. being
8. been

If you use any of these in your sentence, chances are it is a passive sentence.

Example:

Sorrow was missed with hope today. (passive voice)

Sorrow mixed with hope today. (active voice)

Very important — Passive voice does not mean past tense.

All three of the following sentences are active voice.

Example:

The Senate votes. (present tense)

The Senate has voted. (present perfect)

The Senate voted this afternoon. (past tense)

I use S-V-O when teaching basic writing — Subject - Verb - Object. You can add adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, etc., as needed to fill out a sentence for detail and clarity. The key is to keep the subject in front of the verb.

III. Length of Written Material

Have a standard length for all forms of writing in your newscasts.

a. **Readers and VOs** — The standard length of copy is 20 seconds or less.

b. **VOBITE** — The standard length of copy is 40 seconds or less. This includes a straight bite with copy.

c. **Packages** — The standard length of copy is 1:30 or less.

Please note: These lengths are what producers plan for in their shows. If you deviate from these times, your first responsibility is to ask the producer if you can have extra time. If approved, print copy as written. If not approved, rewrite to fit into these guidelines.

Note: these were time standards for television news more than 40 years ago. They may be different now, so check with your news managers. Standard times for radio are usually different than television. Print and online copy standards differ as well.

IV. Preparing Your Copy for the Newscast

a. **For whom am I writing?** Know your audience (e.g. morning, noon, evening, late night, etc.)

b. **Ties to adjacent stories** — Your story will rarely stand alone in a newscast. You need to communicate with the writer of the previous story (or show producer). That will help you know how you can tie into that story. Your story is one of many in a newscast. You want your newscast to ‘flow’ for the audience’s understanding in addition to doing good television. Knowing where and how your story fits in a segment will help provide that flow.

c. **How do I use the scripting system?** As a new employee, you will learn how to use the computer system. Ask a show producer or news manager for help as you are learning the system.

d. **Creating your story in the computer** — When you create a script, the first thing you need to do is give your script a file name. You should find the name in your show rundown. Ask the show producer if you don't find it.

e. **How do I tell the director to roll video, etc.?** You will find specific instructions later in this manual. You can also check with the show producer.

V. Package Outcues — They are not all the same

Each of your shows is under the umbrella of this news department. However, each show has a specific name.

Example:

John Jones, Channel 2 News Morning

Jane Jones, Channel 2 News at 5

Check with your show producer or news manager if you have questions about which outcue to use for your package.

VI. I wrote my story – now what?

All scripts need approval. That approval comes from one of the following people in this order:

Executive Producer

Show Producer

News Director

Anchor in show for which you are writing

[Your station may have a different order depending on staff size, corporate preference, etc.]

VII. My script is approved, revisions made, what's next?

a. Print your final draft.

b. Fonts, who gets them? Turn your completed font sheets to the show producer. If you leave work before knowing which show it will run, leave your font sheet and completed script with the Executive Producer.

c. When do I have to turn in my script? The optimum time for this is one hour before air. That way, anchors and/or the

Managing Editor have a chance to proofread the script. This is not always possible due to late-breaking stories. However, if you have an early story, there is no excuse for turning in a late script.

d. **Who is responsible?** You are! It is your responsibility as the writer of the story to make sure the script is written, approved, video is cut, font sheet is in, and the final script is printed. This is your product. Be proud of it from conception to the time it makes air.

Next Time

Part two of 'Writing for Mass Communications' — *Writing Goals*.