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Writing For Mass Communications (Part 4)

Making Words Work For You

By

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You can read the first part of this series about ‘writing for mass communications’ [here](#), the second part [here](#), and the third part [here](#). The points I’m sharing are from seminars I taught for radio and television news departments during my career as a news manager. I also recommend these points for anyone who works in any area of mass communications.

Making The News Clear And Easy To Understand

1. Choose words that accurately reflect the person or event being described in the story. Don't make things bigger or worse than they are in reality.
2. Adhere to the rules of grammar — a verb must agree in number with its subject .. a word, phrase, or clause dangles when it 'floats' in a sentence without clearly referring to some other word: "While in school, my father took sick and died." (Dangling) "While I was in school, my father took sick and died." (Correct)
3. Related parts of the sentence should not be separated. When they are, the sentence loses clarity.
4. Adverbs should be placed before the words they modify: "He only wanted three days off." (Separated) "He wanted only three days off." (Correct)
5. Avoid splitting the subject and verb: "She, to make her point, shouted at the mayor." (Awkward) "She shouted at the mayor to make her point." (Clear)
6. Do not separate parts of verb phrases: "The governor said he had last year seen the document." (Awkward)

“The governor said he had seen the document last year.”
(Clear)

7. Avoid split infinitives: “She offered to personally give him the note.” (Awkward) “She offered to give him the note personally.” (Clear)
8. The parts of a sentence that express parallel thoughts should be balanced in grammatical form: “The people started to shove and crowding each other.” (Unbalanced) “The people started to shove and crowd each other.” (Balanced)
9. A phrase of a subordinate clause should not be used as a complete sentence: “The book was long. And dull.” (Fragment) “The book was long and dull.” (Correct)
10. Maintain a logical order of tenses. Keep an eye on the verb in the principal clause as a guide. “We wrote him when he had heard of his unhappiness.” (Wrong) We wrote him when we heard of his unhappiness.” (Right)
11. Collective nouns (e.g. committee, jury, herd, group, family) are single units; give them singular verbs.
12. Indefinite pronouns (e.g. each, neither, anyone, everyone, nobody) are singular in idea; give them singular verbs.

13. Don't mix active and passive voice: "As he entered the room, voices were heard." (Mixed) "As he entered the room, he heard voices." (Active)
14. Modify your nouns with adjectives. Modify everything else with adverbs.
15. Punctuation leads to the correct meaning of a sentence: "The boy turned to his family and said, 'Let's eat Grandma.'" (Wrong) "The boy turned to his family and said, 'Let's eat, Grandma.'" (Right)
16. Good spellers use the dictionary. Poor spellers do not.
17. Avoid using the wrong word. Examples include 'accept, except,' 'advice, advise,' 'affect, effect,' 'can, may,' 'capital, capitol,' 'censor, censure,' 'cite, site, sight,' 'complement, compliment,' 'council, counsel,' 'either, neither,' 'farther, further,' 'fewer, less,' 'hanged, hung,' 'irregardless (not even a word),' 'lay, lie,' 'lend, loan,' 'lose, loose,' 'medium, media,' 'over, more than,' 'principle, principal,' 'proof, evidence,' 'rise, raise,' 'set, sit,' 'toward, towards (toward is better),' 'who, whom'
18. Avoid unnecessary words and confusing phrases. Examples include 'and etc.,' 'can't hardly, can scarcely, can't only, can't but,' 'could of, may of, might of, must

of, should of, would of, might could,' 'could care less,' 'definitely (overused),' 'eminent, imminent, immanent,' 'field of,' 'funeral service (a funeral is a service)' 'in advance of, prior to,' 'off of,' 'on the part of,' 'regards to,' 'mad (when you mean angry),' 'interesting,' 'now (reporters often use it as a crutch word to start live shots,' ('like' (overused, usually without purpose, used as a crutch by journalists),' 'over with,' 'per (jargon),' 'plan on,' 'presently (when you mean now)',' 'providing that,' 'put in,' 'rarely ever,' 'similar to,' 'sort of, kind of,' 'the fact that,' 'try and,' 'very (overused and unnecessary),' 'you know,' 'ways (use 'way' for distance)

19. Avoid cliches. Stay away from stale and tired expressions: 'tried and true,' 'sadder but wiser,' 'apple of his eye,' 'quick as a flash,' 'the not too distant future,' 'long in the tooth,' 'sharp as a tack.'

20. Avoid redundancies. Examples include 'absolutely necessary,' 'refuse and decline,' 'at a later day,' 'send in,' 'of great importance,' 'biggest and largest,' 'true facts,' 'honest truth,' 'assemble together,' 'serious crisis,' 'gathered together,' 'recorded history,' 'just merely,' 'pair of twins,' 'final completion,' 'attach

together,' 'partially destroyed,' 'completely destroyed,' 'in many instances,' 'first beginnings,' 'fall down,' 'first annual,' 'exactly identical,' 'close proximity,' 'cancelled out,' 'temporarily suspended,' 'long in size,' 'friend of mine,' 'right and proper,' refer back,' 'ask the question,' 'advance planning,' 'major catastrophe,' 'poor in quality,' 'equally as good,' 'mix together,' 'sufficient enough,' 'days in a row,' 'postpone until later,' open up,' 'various and sundry,' 'totally unnecessary.'

21. Avoid journalese. Examples include 'costs are skyrocketing,' 'officials raised the red flag,' 'here are the cold facts,' 'the election was a cliff-hanger,' 'she kicked off the campaign,' 'the plane impacted the ground,' 'it is a total of seven,' 'at this point in time,' 'credited with the murder,' 'thanks to the recent storm,' 'his whereabouts is not yet known.'

Next Time

Part five of “Writing for Mass Communications” — *Fine Tuning Your Writing*.