

Top Tips for Writers

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Getting started

- You can't get going: your bin is full of screwed-up scraps. The screen's blank. Don't panic: jot down the points you want to make, put them in order of importance. Take a break. Talk to colleagues. Have a drink. Now for a first draft. If deadline looms, think of the journalist who has a far worse problem. At press time in a busy newsroom the reporter may have only minutes, you have hours.

Think of the reader

- You don't have to prove you can write like a best-selling author or gain prizes for intellectual ability. Your job is to communicate effectively to a variety of audiences. In public relations terms, that means brevity, accuracy, simplicity. It means knowing your audience and thinking of the reader from the word go. Put your points in a logical sequence. For a release, give the facts in a descending order of importance. Give it a present tense headline. For articles give the piece a beginning, a middle and an end.

Brevity rules OK

- Line after line of text unrelieved by paragraph breaks is boring. Keep sentences to 25-30 words, slightly more for articles and reports. At the 50-word mark you are being long-winded. Split up into sections. Insert a paragraph break after a change of thought or tack. Aim to keep paragraphs to three or four sentences. Only let paragraphs run longer for a detailed or technical explanation. Keep quotes short too: cut the rambling comment. See the 'PR Guide on news releases' by John Foster.

Plain is best

- Plain, simple, English gets your message over best. Go for the short word rather than the long. Avoid foreign words and phrases unless you need them for 'colour' in a feature article. Don't go Latin. Don't use flowery adjectives and adverbs, particularly in news items: qualifiers upset the flow and are mostly unnecessary. Avoid double negatives. Stick to the facts. Let verbs and nouns do the work.

Write tight

- Avoid repetition. Check for synonyms. Don't insert words that add little or nothing to sense or meaning. Don't put i.e., e.g. or etc. Don't start two sentences the same way. Use bullet points for long lists or put them under separate headings. Don't use an ampersand in text: reserve for company names. Study newspapers to see how journalists condense a mass of facts. For articles, follow the style of the publication.

Get the grammar right

- Keep to the rules of grammar. But don't be pedantic. Don't be afraid to introduce journalistic licence for internal communications. Be lively even if this means using nouns as verbs,

adjectives for adverbs. Ensure that the verb agrees with the subject. Language evolves: what is frowned upon today may be everyday usage tomorrow.

Punctuation essentials

- Use commas sparingly: three in a sentence may be one too many. Get the apostrophe (if one is needed) in the right place. Use a colon to introduce a quote, not a comma. Don't overuse brackets. Don't use a hyphen for a dash which is twice as long. Only hyphenate when two words are read as one. An exclamation mark is hardly ever necessary. Use double quote marks for releases and news-type publications, single elsewhere. For quoted speech, the marks go at the beginning of each paragraph and only appear at the end of the quote.

Out with clichés

- Learn to recognise the cliché. Don't acknowledge you have written one by putting it in quotes. Out go *having said that* and hundreds of other worn words and catch phrases. As soon as you realise you have used an expression you have heard before which sounds just slightly clever, think of something original instead.

Kill the gobbledegook

- Much the same goes for jargon, the language of a trade, business or profession. Write with words and expressions your readers will understand: what makes sense to a particular group may be gibberish to others. Information for wide distribution – annual reports, brochures and releases – must be clear to all audiences.

Slang is out too

- Much slang comes from jargon. You can get away with it in speech, say at a conference, but not in print. Some comes from advertising and is accepted as part of modern culture, but is often criticised. The best place for slang is the sales leaflet or staff memo. Stick to formal language for the corporate brochure, report, release and website.

Style matters

- Decide when and when not to use capitals, whether your organisation is read as singular or plural: XYZ company have or has. Settle on style for dates, job titles and abbreviations. Set down rules for dealing with -ise or -ize endings. Decide how you will deal with figures. Maintain consistency throughout. It's a sign of professionalism not only for the printed word but for e-mails, website and for all verbal communication – from switchboard to conference platform.

Make it readable

- If your words are hard to read you've wasted your time. For double column formats in text type, restrict line widths to 40 or 50 characters (including spaces), up to 75-80 for type across the page. Introduce inter-line spacing, insert sub-headings and draw-down quotes, set ragged right to avoid hyphenation at line-ends. Put facts in vertical lists instead of writing a narrative. Headlines, sub-headings and captions all help to liven the page. Make reading as effortless as possible. A tired eye means a lost reader. For good.

Beware watchwords

- > Some words recently, lots of/many - are imprecise. Note the spellings of licence/practice (nouns) and license/practise (verbs), the difference between principal and principle. There is only one 't' in benefiting, targeting; stationary and stationery have different meanings. There's a difference between forever and for ever, don't write under way as one word. You try to do something, not and do it; you shouldn't hope to do something, for it may never be done. Drop the st in whilst/amongst. There are two 'i's in liaison. Have a good dictionary and an electronic pocket thesaurus when you are out of the office. Put your copy through a spellchecker – but don't always rely on it.

Accuracy first

- > Be extra careful with names, figures and with unfamiliar or technical words. Check that days of the week coincide with dates. If you say a certain number of points follow, ensure there are that number. Make sure you do not infringe copyright or libel laws. If you make a mistake in a publication see if the printer will bear part of the reprint costs: it might be worth it to them to keep the business. Ensure releases and captions for photographs are right – once mailed, there's little you can do. Except panic.

Writing presentations

- > Concentrate on facts, put the stress on achievements, new developments and future plans. Don't be afraid to repeat a point for emphasis. Make references to people as well as things. Be active and positive, not waffly and indecisive. Draft and redraft. Visual aids should follow corporate style in typeface and colour. Text should be large and with bullet points in case you get stuck.

And lastly...

- > Once you head for home, don't switch off. Think about the words and phrases you need in the bus, train or car and store them in your head. Save them for typing time. When you've got that first draft, it's polish, edit, cut for as long as time allows. Don't be overruled by a boss who doesn't understand the needs of journalists, knows even less about style. Have your dictionary and style book handy to prove your point. It will all be worth it when you see your work in print.