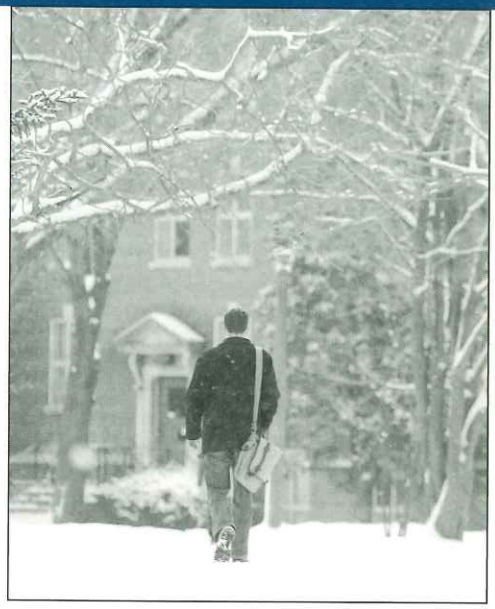
7 The Writer's Art

Preview

The well-written story:

- Makes its point clearly.
- Engages the reader, viewer or listener with human-interest material, quotations, incidents and examples.
- Sets a pace and has a style appropriate to the event or personality being described.
- Satisfies the viewer, listener or reader that the story is complete and is truthful.



Mike Roemer

Sentences clear and crisp as a winter's morn.

Journalists write to be read and to be heard. They know that unless their stories are clear, interesting and well written their readers, viewers and listeners will move on to something else. To attract, keep and satisfy this fickle public, journalists have developed ways of telling stories that make their stories compelling.

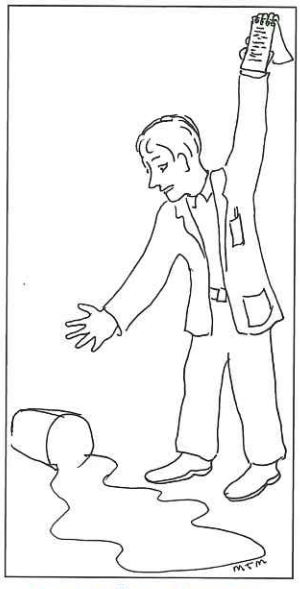
Journalists know that good writing helps people visualize the event, the personality being profiled, that good writing moves people to the scene. George Orwell, whose writing influenced and inspired many journalists, said, "Good prose is like a window pane." The window pane, unlike the stained glass window, does not call attention to itself. Good writing calls attention to the people in the story, the event, the information.

Writers Write . . . and Read, Too

The men and women who write for a living—whether journalists, poets, novelists or essayists—work at learning and mastering their trade. They have an "idea of craft," as the writer-teacher Frank Kermode puts it, a drive toward "doing things right, making them accurate and shapely, like a pot or a chair."

Every writer who is familiar with the agony of chasing elusive words knows that words can be brought to life only by strenuous and continued effort. The aim is perfection of expression, the absolute fit of words to the event. Walt Whitman, journalist and poet, described the writer's goal this way:

> A perfect writer would make words sing, dance, kiss, do the male and female act, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab, steal, fire cannon, steer ships, sack cities. . . .



Don't tell us when you can show us.

Love Affair

"Reading usually precedes writing. And the impulse to write is almost always fired by reading. Reading, the love of reading, is what makes you dream of becoming a writer."

—Susan Sontag

Poet or police reporter, the writer is engaged in a struggle to find words and phrases to match his or her observations. When Ernest Hemingway covered the police court for the *Kansas City Star,* he would take his notes home and work over them hour after hour to simplify the testimony of witnesses until he had captured in a few words the essence of the evidence. He would use the language he had heard in court. This practice, as much as the influence of Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, may have been responsible for Hemingway's objective prose, what the critic Maxwell Geismar called "his famous flat style: the literal, factual description of the 'way things are.' "

This style, more brother than cousin to journalism, is evident in the ending to *A Farewell to Arms.* Frederic has just pushed the nurses out of the room where Catherine has died so that he can be alone with her:

> But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn't any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain.

Journalists read widely to master style and technique, to learn the tricks of the writer's trade. Stephen King, the prolific writer of best-selling horror stories, says, "Writing is a matter of exercise . . . if you write for an hour and a half a day for ten years you're gonna turn into a good writer." In his book *On Writing, A Memoir of the Craft,* King lists first in his suggestions for aspiring writers, "Read a lot of books."

Doing It Right—in a Hurry

Novelist or journalist, said Hal Boyle, for years one of the AP's top reporters, the writer has the same task: "The recognition of truth and the clear statement of it are the first duties of an able and honest writer."

Unlike the novelist, the journalist cannot spend hours in the search for the right word, a couple of days to devise a beguiling beginning. The journalist is asked to write—and to write well—now, quickly, before the clock's hands sweep to the inexorable deadline. No other writer is asked to perform with such speed. Yet journalists manage to do the job, creating stories that are, in Kermode's words, "accurate and shapely."

Reach the Reader

"The key questions are: Is this stuff interesting? Does it move, touch, anger, tickle, surprise, sadden or inform? If it does you are in for a treat, a good read."

—Thomasine Berg, *The Providence Journal*

Preliminaries

It is impossible to write for the public unless you understand what you are writing about. Comprehension precedes clarity. You cannot "be wholly clear about something you don't understand," says John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard economist whose books and articles about what is called "the dismal science" of economics are models of clarity.

Once you understand the situation, you have to know just what you want to say. "You cannot start to write until you know what you want to say," the editor told his new reporter.

With a firm grip on writing mechanics and the theme clearly in mind, the story will spin out of the computer. Well, almost.

A reminder: Don't write writing. Don't make the purpose of your writing clever prose. Your job is to communicate information. "I never heard a reader praise the quality of writing," says Henry McNulty, for many years the ombudsman for *The Hartford Courant.* "They are only interested in the facts in a story and their accuracy." Write well, the best you can to attract and retain readers, listeners and viewers. But never at the expense of a truthful telling of the story.

Writers who try to write well are always asking themselves whether the words they are using make their stories clear and direct. When they are dissatisfied with the answer, they revise and rewrite. As Hemingway told an interviewer who asked him what the problem was that caused him to rewrite the last paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times: "Getting the words right."

Show, Don't Tell

In our effort to find some guides to help us write well, we might start with Leo Tolstoy who, in describing the strength of his masterwork *War and Peace,* said, "I don't tell; I don't explain. I show; I let my characters talk for me."

Journalists rediscover Tolstoy's maxim in newsrooms everywhere. Rick Bragg recalls that as a new reporter in Birmingham a senior editor would take him aside and tell him his "one basic rule of good writing: Show me, don't tell me. Let me see what you see. Paint me a picture. Then I'll follow you anywhere, even past the jump."

Make Pictures

Whether the event calls for a hard news story, a feature or a longer storytelling piece, picture-painting helps the writer make his or her point. Look at how *Daily News* reporter Dave Goldiner puts the reader at the scene of the Sept. 11 terror bombing:

Tears streaming down his face, Fire Lt. Vincent Boura stumbled yesterday out of The Pit—and wondered if anything would ever be the same.

Along with thousands of other soot-covered firefighters, Boura spent hour after exhausting hour climbing in and out of a huge hole rescuers carved into the World Trade Center rubble.

They rappelled down 30-foot ropes as bright sunshine glinted off their helmets amid smoke.

They stumbled through the debris-choked blackness that once housed stores on the concourse. They searched—mostly in vain—for any signs of life.

"I'm going to go home and kiss my daughter," said Boura, who lurched down the street, soot covering him from head to toe. "She's just starting to say 'Daddy.' Unfortunately, a lot of kids are not going to be able to say 'Daddy' anymore."

We don't have to be told how terrible the scene of death and devastation is. We are shown, and the effect is greater than if we are told.

Action Verbs

In Goldiner's story, the verbs propel the reader into the scene of destruction and death—*stumbled, carved, rappelled, glinted, searched, lurched.*

Enduring Lesson Louis Lyons, a Boston newspaperman and later curator of the Nieman Foundation for journalists at Harvard, never forgot the lesson his night editor taught him. "When I was a cub reporter I had a story to do on the quarterly report of the old Boston Elevated system, whose history then as now was a nearly unbroken record of deficits," Lyons recalled. "This time they were in the black. I knew just enough to know how extraordinary that was.

"I wrote: 'The Boston Elevated had a remarkable record for January—it showed a profit. . . .'

"The old night editor brought my copy back to my typewriter. He knew I was green. In a kindly way, quite uncharacteristic of him, he spelled out the trouble.

"He pointed out that the word remarkable 'is not a reporting word. That is an editorial word.' " Then he advised Lyons to write the story so that the reader would say, "That's remarkable."

Human Interest Essential

The Department of Health and Human Services reported that 1.1 million minors run away or are thrown out of their homes every year. Most runaways are physically or sexually abused by a parent. About a third have an alcoholic parent, and many are from foster homes.

Troubled Teens To give the report life and meaning, Sonia L. Nazario of *The Wall Street Journal* found some troubled teenagers in California. Her account begins:

> HOLLYWOOD—Five teen-agers crouch over a candle in a dark, fetid cavern under a busy roadway. Around them, the dirt floor seems to move as rats look for food. As the teen-agers pass around a half-gallon bottle of Riesling, they talk about their latest sexual scores. This is the place the teens call, simply, the Hole. "This is my home," reads a graffito scrawled on a concrete wall.
>
> Here at the Hole, an ever-changing group of about 30 teen-agers, who have run away from home or been thrown out, have banded together to form a grotesquely modern kind of family. Predominantly white, middle-class and from troubled backgrounds, the "Trolls," as they call themselves, come to the Hole to find empathy and love. They have adopted a street father, a charismatic ex-con named John Soaring Eagle, or "Pops" to his flock. In return for his affection and discipline, the Trolls support Pops—and themselves—by panhandling, prostitution and mugging.

Critical

"Literature is not read and journalism is unreadable."

—Oscar Wilde

Teen Priorities In a three-sentence paragraph, Sam Blackwell of the Eureka, Calif., *Times-Standard* shows us a lot about teenage romance:

> They had met cruising the loop between Fourth and Fifth Streets in Eureka. She fell in love with Wes' pickup truck, then fell in love with Wes. Wes gave her an engagement ring the day she graduated from high school.

Letting Us See

"Its age is so vast that it's almost impossible to comprehend. From our planet's infancy, the atoms that held it together have held together, even as continents have been torn apart and rearranged. If you think of a year as equalling one yard of twine you'd need enough twine to stretch between the Earth and the Moon more than four and a half times to equal the age of the Acasta Rock."

—Carl Zimmer, "How Old Is It?" *National Geographic,* Sept. 2001

Visualize Showing can be accomplished even within the confines of a single sentence. Consider the science reporter who wanted to describe the size of a small worm. She wrote, "Although they strongly caution against inferring too much about human life spans from worms no bigger than a comma at the end of this clause, they say that evolution. . . ."

If one of the writer's most impelling directives is to make the reader see, then the science writer did just that. Telling not only makes for dull reading, it makes readers passive. Showing engages readers by making them visualize, draw conclusions, experience insights.

Let Them Talk, Act

"Isn't anybody in this town can beat me. I'm invincible." This is Bella Stumbo of *The Los Angeles Times* quoting a politician. She doesn't have to tell us the man has a gigantic ego.

Good writers let the words and the actions of their subjects do the work. John Ciardi says, "Make it happen; don't talk about its happening."

When the reporter makes it happen, the reader moves into the story. The writer disappears as intermediary between the event and the reader.

Covering the funeral of a child killed by a sniper, a reporter wrote, "The grief-stricken parents wept during the service." Another reporter wrote, "The parents wept quietly. Mrs. Franklin leaned against her husband for support." The first reporter **tells** us the parents are "grief-stricken." By giving us the image of Mrs. Franklin leaning against her husband, the other reporter puts us at the scene where we can see the mother's grief.

To show the effects of the disappearance of dairy farms in the northeast, the reporter wrote of the farmers who stick around after selling their farms and can be seen "in the general store buying their morning beer."

Details show us more than generalities do. A story about a former Minnesota beauty queen pleading guilty to shoplifting described her loot as "several items." When the story reached an AP editor, she found out what had been stolen and put the items in the story—a swimsuit, silk scarves and hairpieces.

Frank Sinatra Has a Cold Here's the beginning of the article *Esquire* says is the best story it ever published:

32,000 Times Better

Henry James, the writer, advised young writers that "an ounce of example is worth a ton of generalities."

People the Sentence

Frederick C. Othman, a veteran reporter for UPI, advised young reporters to put as many personal references as possible into each sentence, "he, she, uncle, boy, girl or any such word describing a human being. The more such words, the more interesting the story."

Frank Sinatra, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood in a dark corner of the bar between two attractive but fading blondes waiting for him to say something. But he said nothing; he had been silent during much of the evening, except now in his private club in Beverly Hills he seemed even more distant, staring out through the smoke and semi-darkness into a large room beyond the bar where dozens of young couples sat huddled around small tables or twisted in the center of the floor to the clamorous clang of folk-rock music blaring from the stereo. The two blondes knew, as did Sinatra's four male friends who stood nearby, that it was a bad idea to force conversation upon him when he was in this mood of sullen silence, a mood that had hardly been uncommon during this first week of November, a month before his fiftieth birthday.

Then another blockbuster paragraph about some of the reasons for his sullen mood—publicity about his dating a 20-year-old; a CBS TV documentary that speculated on "his possible friendship with Mafia leaders," and at the end of the second paragraph: "Frank Sinatra has a cold."

The third paragraph begins:

> Sinatra with a cold is Picasso without paint, Ferrari without fuel—only worse. For the common cold robs Sinatra of that uninsurable jewel, his voice, cutting into the core of his confidence. . . ."

Whew. A writer is at work here. A study of Gay Talese's *Esquire* article from 1966 is worth a week of a journalism student's time. The Sinatra article and others by Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, John Sack and Richard Ben Cramer are available at www.esquire.com.

Star Trek and Wimpy When a television reporter returned with a feature about a local store that was selling books, posters, pictures and other material based on television's "Star Trek," his editor praised his enterprise. But the tape concentrated on the material sold. There was little about the customers, the "Star Trek" fans.

"We missed," the editor said. "We should have followed a customer around and used him as the center of the story."

Sometimes reporters fail to personalize events that easily lend themselves to human interest. When a puppy fell into the shaft of an abandoned well in Carlsbad, N.M., the rescue operation became a front-page story in many newspapers. One press service story that used the name of the puppy, Wimpy, was widely preferred to the competition's story that lacked the pup's name.

Poison Center Compare these versions of an event:

All doctors hope their patients never have occasion to use the Poison Control Center recently established in the emergency room of the Community General Hospital. However, it should be reassuring to citizens, particularly parents, to know the center exists for use in an emergency.

Springfield is one of only eight cities in the state which have official "recognized" centers to handle poisoning cases. The other seven cities are. . . .

Ten Guides to Good Writing

1. Make sure you understand the event.
2. When you have found the focus for your story—when you know what you want to say—start writing.
3. Show, don't tell.
4. Put good quotes and human interest high in the story.
5. Put relevant illustrations or anecdotes up high in the story.
6. Use concrete nouns and colorful action verbs.
7. Avoid adjectival exuberance and resist propping up verbs with adverbs.
8. Avoid judgments and inferences. Let the facts talk.
9. Don't raise questions you cannot answer in your copy.
10. Write simply, succinctly, honestly and quickly.

A frantic mother called her physician and cried that her two-year-old had been at the oven cleaner. The child's lips were smudged with the liquid.

The label said poison. What should she do?

Her call set in motion a series of checks and other calls. In a short time her physician knew precisely what chemicals were in the cleaner, which were poisonous, and what should be done.

The child was treated and beyond a few small burns on the lips and tongue the toddler is doing well.

This was the first case for the Freeport Poison Information Center in the Community General Hospital.

The journalist who wrote the second piece did a better job of writing because his reporting was superior. Incidentally, he contributed a greater public service because the picture he painted of a mother and child is etched in the minds of parents. The second story is also more appropriate to the event—it *shows* what the Center does.

The style of the second piece is consistent with the event. The average sentence length of the first five sentences, which describe the poisoning incident, is around 11 words. The next three average 21 words because the reporter was seeking to give an air of calm after the frenzy of the incident. This brings us to the fourth of our guidelines for good journalistic writing.

Human Interest Up High

We try to place as close to the lead as possible the human-interest example, incident or anecdote that spotlights the theme of the story:

> The steady increase in tuition is driving some students away from the colleges of their choice and keeping them in schools close to home.
>
> Ralph Cramer, a high school senior, was admitted to an Ivy League college, but the $25,000-plus tuition was out of his family's reach. . . .

Life

William Maxwell, one of the great editors and a writer, said: "After 40 years, what I came to care about most was not style, but the breath of life."

Interesting

Dull

As you see, the example amplifies and humanizes the story theme. When delayed leads are used, the human interest incident usually begins the story. With direct leads—which often stress the formal aspect of the event—the human-impact illustration or example should be close to the lead.

We are all a little like Alice (of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). " 'What is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations?' " The print reporter lets the anecdotes serve as pictures, and the quotations as conversations.

Quotations Are Essential

Wallace Stevens, the insurance company executive who wrote poetry that influenced a generation of poets, commented with some incredulity on events that were swirling around him: "In the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination." Fact has supplanted fiction.

Why, then, is so much journalism dull and unconvincing? Possibly because writers do not use in their stories what they see and hear. They paraphrase good quotes. They explain instead of letting the example show the reader.

Here are two paragraphs from a book by Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and What They Think of While They Do It.* Terkel, a radio reporter based in Chicago, interviewed a 14-year-old newsboy, Terry Pickens:

> I don't see where being a newsboy and learning that people are pretty mean or that people don't have enough money to buy things with is gonna make you a better person or anything. If anything, it's gonna make a worse person out of you, 'cause you're not gonna like people that don't pay you. And you're not gonna like people who act like they're doing you a big favor paying you. Yeah, it sort of molds your character, but I don't think for the better. If anybody told me being a newsboy builds character, I'd know he was a liar.
>
> I don't see where people get all this bull about the kid who's gonna be president and being a newsboy made a president out of him. It taught him how to handle his money and this bull. You know what it did? It taught him how to hate the people on his route. And the printers. And dogs. . . .

Listening Pays Off

Reporters develop an ear sensitive to the telling quote. The actress Farrah Fawcett was quoted, "The reason that the all-American boy prefers beauty to brains is that he can see better than he can think."

The astronomer James Jeans provided a reporter with this image of the universe, "Put three grains of sand inside a vast cathedral and the cathedral will be more closely packed with sand than space is with stars."

No paraphrase or summary would have the impact of Terry Pickens' own words. For that matter, few psychologists with their understanding of the problems of adolescence can express so succinctly and convincingly—and with such emotion—the realities of growing up.

When the Virginia State Bar Association voted to admit its first black member despite a determined effort by some senior members to block the move, a news story quoted a Richmond lawyer as praising the applicant as a "commendable person with a high standing as a lawyer." Then the story quoted him as adding, "But he is a Negro and therefore I am opposed to accepting him as a member of this association. . . . I have a good many Negro friends, but I don't invite any of them to my home or club to socialize with me."

In three sentences, the reporter crystallized an aspect of racism by letting one of the participants speak.

Distant Judges Sara Grimes covered juvenile court in Philadelphia. The judges were generations away from the reality of street life. Here are sections of a story Grimes wrote to show the distance between the court and the young offenders. A judge is speaking to two boys in court:

"You should stand still and be respectful when approached by a police officer. Then the officers will respect you. . . .

"I imagine they roughed you up a little bit, huh? I'd have given you a couple of good ones, too, before I took you in.

"In the old days, we used to have Irish policemen and we'd get it over the legs and then we'd get it again at home when the police took us to our fathers.

"We didn't call it police brutality then, and I'm concerned about the disrespect shown here for the policemen. . . .

"The next time you see a policeman, think positively. You can even say, 'Officer, what can I do for you?' The police are paid to protect us. When I see them I feel safe.

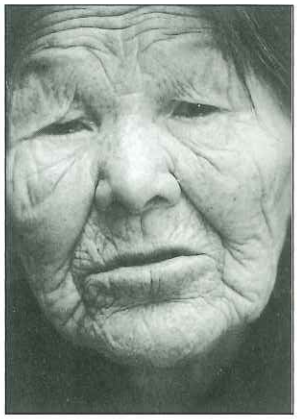
"You work, you pay taxes, the police are there to protect you."

Slaughter's Witness Let sources talk and you find a vivid image, a colorful phrase, a passionate vehemence, a deep sadness. After a riot at the New Mexico State Penitentiary during which 33 prisoners were beaten, burned and hacked to death by fellow inmates, a reporter asked what it had been like inside as prisoners wielded blowtorches, hammers and hacksaws. An inmate replied:

> Man, what can I tell you? It was like the devil had his own butcher shop and you could get any cut you wanted.

In her story in *The Washington Post* about depression among youngsters, Laura Sessions Stepp balances the statements of authorities with the comments of adolescents like Darrell.

"Right over there," she quotes Darrell as he points across the street, "some boy got shot. I was at the skate rink across the street when it happened. You never know when it's going to be pointing your way. You shouldn't have to worry about getting shot when you're a kid."



Mark Henle,
The Phoenix Gazette

'Magical Door'

"With envy, I listen to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren speak the beautiful language. Speaking English is like a magical door to anywhere for them."
—Irene Begody, 77, Navajo Reservation

Words

"Don't go for ordinary words. Pick something else. Look at each word and use another word, especially when it comes to verbs. That's something we all should do, but reporters don't have the confidence to try a new word. Some words don't work and are forced and clichéd. But take a risk."

—Anne Hull,
The Washington Post

©Greg Lovett

Taking the Gospel to College Students

The careful reporter listens closely to the message of this young evangelist as she proclaims the gospel at the University of Arkansas. The writer quotes her, describes her intensity, watches students' reactions. The reporter also interviews the students to whom she is preaching and talks to the evangelist about her successes and failures.

Good Quotes Up High

Here's how Colleen Krantz began her story about sexual predators for the *Des Moines Sunday Register:*

> CEDAR RAPIDS, IA—The growing number of computer-savvy teens are at increasing risk of being targeted online by sexual predators, federal authorities said.

> "The danger zone used to be the playground," said Rod Jensen, U.S. postal inspector who was among the federal officials who raised the issue at a news conference last week at the U.S. attorney's office in Cedar Rapids. "Now, the danger zones are Web sites, news groups and the private chat rooms."

Quotes like those Krantz used sum up the event. Quotations also help achieve conviction, that the reporter was there.

Styling the Story

The story began this way:

It was in midtown Manhattan, one of those new high-rises where the lobby rug is so thick you trip over it, and the walls are so thin you can hear the plumbing rusting. The office was on the 21st floor, at the end of a long corridor. I knocked on a door. The man who opened it looked like a private investigator. That was O.K. by me. I was there to write about private investigators.

"Joe Mullen," the man said. He stuck out a paw and I pumped it. He looked to be in his early 40s, medium height, silver hair. His eyes went with the hair, only darker. . . .

No, this isn't the beginning of one of Dashiell Hammett's hard-boiled detective novels. It's the way Carey Winfrey began his story for *The New York Times* about a real private investigator.

Every event has its own tone, texture and pace that writers try to reflect in their stories. The way a story is written is known as its *style.* An understanding of style might start with Cicero, the Roman statesman and orator: "Whatever his theme he will speak it as becomes it; neither meagerly where it is copious, nor meanly where it is ample, not in this way where it demands that; but keeping his speech level with the actual subject and adequate to it."

In the following story of a murder, the short sentences reflect the starkness of the event:

Fight for Hat Cited as Motive in Boy's Slaying

Sixteen-year-old Kenneth Richardson was killed Thursday over a floppy brown hat, police said.

"It was just a plain old hat," Metro Homicide Detective Hugo Gomez said.

Richardson was wearing it. Someone tried to take it. Richardson refused.

Others entered the fray. The youth ran. They chased him.

"It was a running and shooting type thing. They were shooting directly at him," Gomez said.

Richardson still had the hat when taken to International Hospital, where he died in surgery. Dade's 554th homicide this year.

He was shot in the parking lot of the Miami Gardens Shopping Plaza at

Quote Them

"Realistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device. It also defines character more quickly and effectively than any other single device. (Dickens has a way of fixing character in your mind so that you have the feeling he has described every inch of his appearance—only you go back and discover that he actually took care of his physical description in two or three sentences; the rest he has accomplished with dialogue.)"

—Tom Wolfe

In the Sty, On the Griddle

In his exposé of the living conditions in tenement housing owned by New York's Trinity Church, the muckraker Charles E. Russell wrote that no Iowa farmer "would house hogs the way 100,000 people are housed in New York City." The church, the city's biggest slum landlord, was forced to clean up its housing.

In his story about those who had invested in the stock of Minnie Pearl's Fried Chicken—which was to compete with Kentucky Fried Chicken—Floyd Norris wrote that they "were left holding shares worth less than a crispy gizzard."

12:15 A.M., soon after the nearby Gardens Shopping Skating Center closed for the night, police said.

No arrests have been made.

"They were all Carol City kids," Gomez said. "There was talk of several guns."

About 25 youths were in the area at the time, police say. "But there was nothing but the dust settling when we got there," Gomez said.

—*The Miami Herald*

Making Words Fit the Event

Because journalists are obliged to tell their stories briefly, they must choose words that count, words that quickly and efficiently paint pictures. The story is most effective when the journalist selects words in which the denotative and connotative meanings, the explicit and implicit meanings, mesh.

When New York City was close to bankruptcy, the city appealed for federal aid. President Ford brusquely said no, that the city's profligacy and incompetence had caused its fiscal misery and that it had to put its house in order itself. Pondering the story on the president's refusal, William Brink, the managing editor of the *Daily News,* cast about for the five or six words he could fit into the *News'* page 1 headline for the story. He tried:

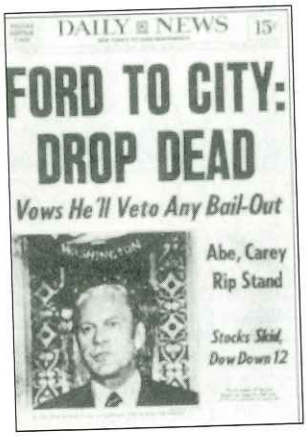
FORD REFUSES AID TO CITY

The headline was dull, and the top line was half a unit too long. He tried again:

FORD SAYS NO TO CITY AID

This fit, but it was as dull as the first. Brink recalls that in the back of his mind was the idea that "Ford hadn't just declined to help us. He had, in effect, consigned us to the scrap heap." He then wrote two words on a piece of copy paper. After a few moments, he put three other words above them.

The headline in the margin here was instantly famous. Television news stations displayed it that night, and *Time* and *Newsweek* ran it in their summaries of the city's plight. It not only presented the information succinctly (denotative), it also suggested the president's disdain for New York (connotative) in language New Yorkers understand. The headline was appropriate to the subject.


DAILY NEWS 15¢

FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD

Vows He'll Veto Any Bail-Out

Abe, Carey Rip Stand

Stocks Skid, Dow Down 12

Historic Headline

The *Daily News* headline is recognized as the height of the art. Contrast it with this headline from a competing morning newspaper: Ford, Castigating City, Asserts He'd Veto Fund Guarantee This headline was in *The New York Times.*

Vocabulary Helps The key to stylistic excellence is a wide vocabulary and a sensitivity to language that guides word choice. For instance, when the treasurer of a large utility is convicted of stealing $25,000 in company funds, a reporter can write:

- The *employee* was xxx.
- The *official* was xxx.
- The *executive* was xxx.

Each noun has a different connotation. *Employee* would be appropriate for a lower-ranking worker. Although he is an *official* of the company, the word usually is used in connection with public officials. *Executive* seems most appropriate.

Let us look at some verbs:

- He *pilfered* $25,000 xxx.
- He *took* $25,000 xxx.
- He *appropriated* $25,000 for his own use.
- He *embezzled* $25,000 xxx.
- He *stole* $25,000 xxx.

Pilfered seems to trivialize the event. *Took* is prosaic: We *take* a rest, *take* cream in our coffee. *Appropriated* suggests an official action: Congress *appropriates* funds. *Embezzled* and *stole* are strong words and probably the best to use.

Good writing is anchored in control, but sometimes the words take off on their own:

> Thoughts flew like spaghetti in his brain.
> "Marvin," she hissed.
> The muscles on his arms rose slowly, like a loaf of bread taking shape.

The Stylist

The stylist is prized in every newsroom, just as an individual style is valued in every field. Yet reporters often are unimaginative in their selection of facts, and too often their writing is uninspired. A vapid writing style begets stereotyped observations and vice versa. Compare the beginnings of these two stories about Memorial Day. Which one is more appropriate to the event?

Topeka Reminded of Debts to Dead

An Army general officer and a Navy lieutenant commander reminded Topekans of their debt and responsibility to America's war dead in two Memorial Day services Tuesday morning.

Brig. Gen. John A. Berry, commanding general of Fort Riley, spoke to representatives of 18 veterans organizations at ceremonies at Mount Hope Cemetery.

Earlier, Lt. Cmdr. John G. Tilghman, U.S. Navy Reserve, talked briefly at services on the Topeka Avenue Bridge.

"It is good for us to gather this morning to think of—and thank—those men and women who gave their lives in wars past that you and I may have the full benefits and privileges and responsibilities of our American heritage," said Cmdr. Tilghman.

"Many men in our wars did not always understand all the causes behind the war in which they fought, but they were sure they wanted those of us at home to continue to enjoy the birthright and heritage which is ours, and gave their lives that we might do so.

—*The State Journal*

Fresno Rites Honor Fallen War Heroes

Walk with me early this Memorial Day through the Liberty Cemetery before the ceremonies begin and a thousand feet scatter the dust over these quiet gravestones.

Here are the dead of many of our nation's wars.

A Flag flutters beside each grave and flowers grace them all. No one is forgotten.

Too Much

Columnists are allowed more leeway than newswriters, but sometimes they are checked, even when their reputations are based on colorful writing. Molly Ivins, whose column is written from Texas, wrote of a local politician that "if his IQ slips any lower, we'll have to water him twice a day." But when she wrote of "a fella . . . havin' a beer-gut that belongs in the Smithsonian," her editors made it read, "a man with a protuberant abdomen."

Objectivity = Credibility

Primo Levi, an Italian chemist, was sent to a concentration camp by the Nazis. On his return to Italy, he decided to write of his experiences. Asked why his books seem so dispassionate, lacking any anger or desire for revenge, he replied:

> I have deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of the witness, not the lamenting tones of the victim or the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge. I thought that my account would be more credible and useful the more it appeared objective, the less it sounded overly emotional; only in this way does a witness in matters of justice perform his task, that of preparing the ground for the judge. The judges are my readers.

Some died in uniform. Others, like Sergeant William J. Dallas of the 2nd Tennessee Infantry in the Spanish-American War, went to war and returned to live a long life—80 years long.

Many stones stand upright, their marble veined with the passage of time. What stories lie behind some of these stones? The passerby cannot tell. The inscriptions simply say:

Michael O'Connor, US Navy, Spanish-American War.

Or, in the Civil War section: Isaac N. Ulsh, Company B, 13th Kansas infantry.

Other markers tell more:

Jack T. Martin, Jr., 1922–1942, USS Langley, Lost At Sea.

James S. Waggoner, CEM, USN, USS Kete, 1917–1945, Lost at Sea. . . .

—*The Fresno Bee*

The first story is like dozens of Memorial Day stories. The oratory, although perhaps passionately uttered, has little emotional impact because it ignores those the event commemorates—the victims of war. The second story teeters on the edge of sentimentality in the lead, but soon settles into understated narrative that seeks to match the solemn nature of the event.

Changing Styles

Journalistic writing is an evolving, changing form of writing. It has been at times lush and imaginative, then spare and direct. Writers now are searching for ways to tell stories that will grab and hold the attention of people increasingly distracted by the clamor of everyday life and the enticements of an entertainment culture.

Tom Wolfe Over the past 45 years, journalistic style embraced the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and other rule-breakers. In a review of an anthology of Wolfe's journalism, *The Purple Decades: A Reader,* Ellen Wilson describes Wolfe's inspiration for this new way of writing:

> In the early Sixties, Tom Wolfe went to the New York Coliseum to cover a Hot Rod and Custom Car show, and came back with the New Journalism. As he tells it in the introduction to "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby," he felt frustrated by his inability to recreate the atmosphere of the show, with its "nutty-looking, crazy baroque custom cars, sitting in little nests of pink angora angels hair," in standard journalese. He needed a style flexible and uninhibited enough to capture everything a straight news story would miss: the carnival atmosphere and the thoughts and emotions of the participants.
>
> He came up with a style incorporating slang and contemporary speech patterns, stream of consciousness and abrupt switches in perspective. The first step was painstaking research and close attention to detail. After that, he was free to select from the novelist's whole bag of tricks.

Technique

"Sometimes the eye too narrowed on technique misses the point of purpose and content."

—William Safire

"Technique holds a reader from sentence to sentence, but only content will stay in his mind."

—Joyce Carol Oates

Storytelling The New Journalism has been succeeded by narrative writing, storytelling that takes some of its components from the techniques of fiction writers, as Wolfe recommended. These tools include emphasis on individuals through whom the action is advanced, dialogue, scene-setting, suspense. It takes to the outer limit the injunction "show me, don't tell me."

The storytelling form, some critics argue, tends to overstate the dramatic and the colorful, sometimes at the expense of nuance and ambiguity, the irritating details that complicate the story line. Others, such as Jack Lule in his book *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism,* counter that the news media are in trouble because they have strayed from storytelling. The result, says Lule, is that "news has become less valuable, less central."

Clearly, some events are best told using the standard news form of direct lead and then the body of the story that buttresses the lead. Some events lend themselves to the storytelling form.

When the police finally solved a triple murder in Florida and put the killer on trial, Tom French of the *St. Petersburg Times* knew that he had the makings of a narrative.

French spent three years on and off to gather information about the disappearance and death of a woman and her two daughters while they were on vacation in Florida. His work led to a seven-part series and the Pulitzer Prize. For excerpts from French's narratives, see **Angels & Demons** in *NRW Plus.*

Writing for the Medium

Much of what we have been discussing seems to be print-centered. Actually, the concepts are applicable to all the media. But broadcast reporting and writing for online outlets do have special requirements.

Broadcast writing, which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 9, is more condensed than print writing. The reader can always go back to reread unclear print material. The radio listener and the TV viewer have to grasp meaning now. This means broadcast writing does not have much detail, few complications.

The TV newswriter often will write to pictures, which are left to speak for themselves, whereas the print writer must paint pictures with her words.

Tribute

"His writing always sparkled. He liked concrete nouns and active verbs, and each paragraph was solid as a brick."

—Pete Hamill, an obituary of Lars-Erik Nelson of the *Daily News* and *Newsday*

Convergence A growing number of media companies have been using a one-style-fits-all form of writing in their converged newsrooms. The same story is supposed to be used for print, broadcast and online outlets. More common, however, in the converged newsroom is the requirement that the reporter write separate versions of the story for each of the media.

This means that present-day newswriters must be familiar with all forms of newswriting. In some newsrooms, print reporters also go on air to discuss their stories.

Before we go on, a reminder and a qualifier.

The reminder: A great deal of work is done before the reporter writes. Good journalistic writing is the result of good reporting and clear thinking. Clever writing cannot conceal a paucity of facts, stale observations or insensitive reactions to people. But bad writing can nullify superior reporting.

The qualifier: In the rest of this chapter—and in other chapters, too—rules, formulas and injunctions are presented. They are offered as guidelines, as ways

to get going. They should not be considered inviolate laws. But it is best for the beginner to accept them for the time being, until his or her competence is proved. After this apprenticeship has been served, the experienced journalist can heed Anton Chekhov's comments about writing in his play *The Seagull.* "I'm coming more and more to believe that it isn't old or new forms that matter. What matters is that one should write without thinking about forms at all. Whatever one has to say should come straight from the heart."

Plain Talk

"If any man were to ask me what I would suppose to be a perfect style of language, I would answer, that in which a man speaking to five hundred people, of all common and various capacities, idiots or lunatics excepted, should be understood by them all, and in the same sense which the speaker intended to be understood."

—Daniel Defoe

"If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone."

—Confucius

Advisory

Newcomers to the *St. Petersburg Times* newsroom are told to "get the name of the dog, the brand of the beer, the color and make of the sports car."

Reporting

The journalist uses details to build a picture that shows us what is going on and that convinces us of the truth of the account. The journalist's eye catches the tears of the child whose puppy takes third place instead of first at the dog show. Such specific observations convince the reader that the reporter's account can be trusted.

Details, Specifics

In his series about the shooting of a policeman, Robert L. Kaiser of the *Chicago Tribune* put his readers on the scene with these details:

As they prepared for their shift, one of the officers put his "9 mm SIG-Sauer P22—black and silver with a 13-shot magazine" in his holster. They rode in a "Ford Crown Victoria." The radio "crackled with news of a shooting near 43rd and State Streets" and the driver "mashed the accelerator with his size 9 boot and headed north." A gang member in a housing project notorious for drug dealing fired his gun, "a .357 can travel up to 1,350 feet per second—faster than the speed of sound. This one seared at least 60 feet in less than a heartbeat. With a muffled thump it tore into Ceriale. The bullet had a copper jacket and a core of lead. It opened a half inch hole in the lower left abdomen just below the protective vest, flattening as it burrowed down below the pubic bone toward the hip."

A victim of sniper shootings in the Washington, D.C., area was given individuality by the reporter's use of detail. Premuwar Walekar, a taxi driver from Pune, India, was shot while pumping gas "moments after buying a newspaper, a lottery ticket and a pack of gum," the reporter wrote.

Authoritative Sources

Readers and listeners find some news unconvincing because the sources that journalists use are officials or so-called experts who have not experienced the situations they are describing. A local story about unemployment that quotes only officials and data is inadequate. Unemployment is more than figures released by an official sitting at a desk. It is men and women standing idle on street corners or waiting anxiously in front offices day after day for job interviews.

In his article "Nobodies" about the exploitation of Mexican immigrant farm labor that appeared in *The New Yorker,* John Bowe asks Adan Ortiz if he had ever owned any land. Ortiz answers, "I don't even own the dirt under my fingernails."

Conviction

Some people find the news they read, hear and see as unconvincing as some of the advertising that accompanies it.

"What's the real story?" reporters are asked, as though they were prevented from revealing the truth by powerful advertisers or friends of the publisher or station manager. These pressures rarely influence reporters. More often, the pressures of time and the inaccessibility of documents and sources impede truth telling, and just as often, reporting and writing failures get in the way of the real story. Here are the components of a story that is accurate, complete and credible:

Reporting:

1. Relevant factual material from personal observation and physical sources. Details, specifics.
2. Authoritative and knowledgeable human sources for additional information.
3. Significant and complete background information.

Writing:

1. Simple language.
2. Illustrations, examples and quotes that document the lead.
3. Human interest.
4. Appropriate style.

Next, let's look at how journalists use—and misuse—their basic tool, words.

Details, Details

When reporting a murder, Edna Buchanan says she wants to know "what movie they saw before they got gunned down.

"What were they wearing? What did they have in their pockets? What was cooking on the stove? What song was playing on the jukebox?"

"I always ask what the dog's name is, what the cat's name is."

Journalism

"See a thing clearly and describe it simply. That is the essence of good newspaper work."

—Arthur Brisbane

Accuracy of Language

The city editor of a medium-size Iowa daily stared at the lead in disbelief. A reporter who had covered a city commission meeting the night before had written that the commission adopted a controversial resolution "with one descending vote." The proper word is *dissenting,* the city editor informed his errant reporter.

Without accuracy of language, the journalist cannot make the story match the event. The obvious way to check words for accuracy is to use the dictionary.

Ernest Hemingway's writing was simple, but it was not simplistic. He shaved language to the bone, but at no sacrifice to meaning. This required hard work. Reaching for a baseball metaphor, Hemingway said of the writer that "he has to go the full nine even if it kills him."

The Right Word

Here are Mark Twain's observations about word usage:

> A powerful agent is the right word. Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words . . . the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt.
>
> The difference between the right word and the almost right word is really a large matter—the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

Use Words with Referents

A reporter's vocabulary comes from a feel for words, for the way people use language, which sometimes differs from dictionary usage. "The true meaning of a term is to be found by observing what a man does with it, not by what he says about it," says the scientist P.W. Bridgeman.

Journalists use words that correspond to specific objects. When the journalist writes about the state treasurer's annual report, she is describing a specific person who has issued a document that can be examined. But when the reporter takes it upon herself to describe the report as *sketchy* or *optimistic,* she is moving into an area in which there are no physical referents. She may use such words in an interpretative story, but only if she anchors them to specific facts and figures.

Words such as *progress, freedom, liberal, conservative, patriotism, big business* cause trouble because they float off in space without being anchored to anything specific, concrete or identifiable. Reporters do quote sources who use these words and phrases, but they make sure to ask sources to explain just how they are using these vague terms.

Unwary reporters can become accomplices in brainwashing by using vague language. When an oil company distributed a press release announcing the construction of an "oil farm" outside a Massachusetts town and the reporter dutifully wrote in her lead that the "oil farm will occupy a tract southeast of the city," the reporter was not only using language inaccurately, but helping the oil firm obscure reality. The so-called farm was to be used for oil storage tanks, which have a grimy image. A farm, with visions of white barns and green pastures, is what the oil company wanted readers to imagine so that potential opposition would be diverted. *Farm* as used by the oil company and the reporter is a euphemism.

Euphemisms

When Congress was discussing *taxes,* it sought to soften the impact of that dread word by substituting the words *revenue enhancement.* In Northern California, where marijuana is a major agricultural product, the polite term for its cultivation is *cash-intensive horticulture.* A company does not demote an employee; it hands him or her a *negative advancement.* When the *Challenger* shuttle exploded, the bodies were placed not in coffins but in *crew transfer containers.*

When a pleasant word or phrase is used in place of one that may be grim, the substitute is called a *euphemism.*

Some journalists may consider themselves compassionate for letting euphemisms slip by. After all, what is the harm in permitting people who work with convicts to describe prisoners as the *consumers of criminal justice services?* What, for that matter, is wrong with *senior citizens* for older people or *sight deprived* for the blind? Surely, these euphemisms hurt no one.

Actually, they do damage us because they turn us away from reality. If the journalist's task can be reduced to a single idea, it is to point to reality. Words should describe the real, not blunt, blur or distort it.

Veiling Reality

The State Department said that it would no longer use the word *killing* in its reports on human rights. In its place, the department said, will be "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life."

For its program to train dolphins to kill enemy swimmers, the Navy said the purpose was "swimmer nullification."

Said

These misuses of language are dangerous shoals on which many reporters have run aground. If we could mark the reefs that threaten writers, the most dangerous would be where reporters have gone under while fishing for synonyms for the verb *to say.*

Michael Gartner, editor of *The Daily Tribune* in Ames, Iowa, tells of his experiences with his editor as a young reporter. Bill Kreger, a news editor at *The Wall Street Journal,* would spot a "he laughed," "he sputtered," "he grimaced" in the attribution. He would call Gartner, or the other miscreant, to his desk.

"Laugh me this sentence," he would say. "Sputter me this sentence." Or: "Grimace me this sentence."

Then he would make the copy read, "he said."

In Stephen King's five suggestions to aspiring writers, he says, "Use *said* and *says* for attributing in dialogue."

Let it be said at once, loud and clear, the word *said* cannot be overused for attribution. If tempted to replace it with *affirmed, alleged, asserted, contended, declared, pointed out, shouted, stated* or *whispered,* see the dictionary first. Better still, recall Ring Lardner's line: "Shut up he explained."

Use the Senses

"Generally speaking, if he can't see it, hear it, feel it and smell it, he can't write it."

—William Burroughs

Facts First, Words Second

One of the impediments to accuracy stems from the reporter's unceasing desire for language that will perk up the reader. The desire is healthy, but it can lead to the selection of words—as well as facts—that are more colorful and exciting than the event merits.

To some writers, words are ends in themselves. But the objective is to communicate information accurately, not to display technical brilliance with the zoom lens or tape splicer, not to play with words. Technique has its place; its proper role is to aid in accurate communication. As Pauline Kael, the movie critic, put it, "Technique is hardly worth talking about unless it's used for something worth doing."

So There

When Harvard awarded Andrew Jackson an honorary degree, John Quincy Adams boycotted the ceremonies, describing Jackson, known as the people's president, as "a barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar." Jackson replied, "It is a damn poor mind indeed which can't think of at least two ways to spell any word."

Spelling

A few words about the bane of the copy editor, the misspelled word. A word incorrectly spelled is a gross inaccuracy. It is like a flaw in a crystal bowl. No matter how handsome the bowl, the eye and mind drift from the sweeping curves to the mistake. A spelling error screams for attention, almost as loudly as an obscenity in print.

Maybe not. These days we read *its* for it's, *cemetary* for cemetery. Even *The New York Times,* surely one of the most scrupulously edited newspapers, has its share of misspellings. A story about nuns who support the ordination of women stated, "They want nuns to have a visible role at the *alter.*"

Spell-Check Limited Some reporters put their trust in computer programs that check spelling. But such programs will not flag correctly spelled words that are misused, such as *alter* for *altar.* The program was of no use to the student journalists who wrote these headlines for the Columbia University daily student newspaper:

Baker Field Sight of Football Triumph

Soccer Hopes for Tourney Birth after 2–1 Win

R. L. Chambers

Oops

The city parks department needs to invest in a dictionary, and learn how to use it.

Check the Spellcheck

The campus newspaper heard that the midterm for Psych I consisted of a short-answer quiz and an essay question and was a killer. But most students interviewed felt they had done OK. The reporter wrote:

> Most students said the testes were very hard but that they managed to pass them.

Intelligent reporters—good spellers or bad spellers—use the dictionary. Many editors associate intelligence with spelling ability because they consider the persistent poor speller to be stupid for not consulting the dictionary—whatever his or her native intelligence.

The saying has it that doctors bury their mistakes and architects cover them with ivy. Journalists have no such luck. Their blunders are forever committed to public view:

> Letters must be signed and should include address and phone number. The Monitor reserves the right to edit letters for spelling, grammer and punctuation, as well as possibly libelous material.
>
> —*The Monitor*

Question is, how to tell roommates your gay

—*Forum* (Fargo, N.D.)

Blind girl servives first round of bee

—*Gazette* (Indiana, Pa.)

Internet Spelling

Patricia T. O'Conner, author of a grammar book *Woe Is I,* trolled Internet newsgroups to check on spelling and grammar. She landed a boatload. "Leaving aside the misuse of *its,* the misspelling of *grammar* seemed to be the most common mistake of all," she says.

Clarity

The words and phrases the journalist selects must be put into a setting, into sentences and paragraphs that make sense to readers. "If you're going to be a newspaper writer you've got to put the hay down where the mules can reach it," said Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution.* Although his reporting ranged over subjects as complex as race relations and foreign affairs, McGill's writing was clear to all the paper's readers. A reader of the King James version of the Bible, he learned early the strength, vigor and clarity of the precise word in the simple declarative sentence.

"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver," McGill said of the journalist's craft, quoting from Proverbs in the Old Testament. We know several ways to make these pictures—these sentences and paragraphs—clear to our readers.

Required

"The newspaper writer's first obligation is to be clear."

—Saul Pett, AP

Grammar

First, there are the essentials of grammar and punctuation. In our grandparents' day, students stood at the blackboard and diagrammed sentences. They broke sentences down into nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections. From there, they went into phrases—verbal, prepositional, participial, gerund and infinitive. Then they examined clauses—main and subordinate. This is how they learned sentence construction. In most schools today, the only grammar students learn is taught in foreign language classes. For a journalist, this is inadequate training.

One way the beginning journalist can cope with this inadequacy is to invest in a handbook of grammar.

Five Fatal Flaws

After reading through dozens of freshman compositions, Loretta M. Shpunt, an English teacher at Trinity College in Washington, D.C., said she seriously considered buying a red ink pad and a set of rubber stamps that read:

Not a Sentence
"It's" Equals "It Is"
"Its" Is Possessive
Dangling Participle
"I" Before "E" Except After "C"

Punctuation

Punctuation is the writer's substitute for the storyteller's pauses, stops and changes in voice level. The proper use of punctuation is essential to clarity. Misuse can change emphasis or meaning:

"Let's eat, Grandma."

"Let's eat Grandma."

We know that readers pause at the ends of sentences and paragraphs. These short intervals in the flow of the story help readers absorb what they have read. Broadcast copy needs even shorter sentences, because the listener cannot reread material he finds unclear.

Sentence Length

Spurred by an anxiety to cram facts into sentences, some inexperienced reporters write blockbuster sentences. When you have a sentence running three lines or more, think of the self-editing of Isaac Babel, a Russian writer whose short stories are highly polished gems:

> I go over each sentence, time and again. I start by cutting all the words it can do without. You have to keep your eye on the job because words are very sly. The rubbishy ones go into hiding and you have to dig them out—repetitions, synonyms, things that simply don't mean anything.
>
> Before I take out the rubbish, I break up the text into shorter sentences. The more full stops the better. I'd like to have that passed as a law. Not more than one idea and one image to a sentence.
>
> A paragraph is a wonderful thing. It lets you quietly change the rhythm, and it can be like a flash of lightning that shows the landscape from a different perspective. There are writers, even good ones, who scatter paragraphs and punctuation marks all over the place.

The maxim that each sentence should, if possible, carry only one idea has been assumed to be an injunction limited to journalism. Not so, as we see from Babel's comment. Good journalistic writing is based upon the principles of good writing. Journalism is a part of the world of letters.

Punctuation Pains

It is said of the novelist Gustave Flaubert that he spent an entire morning laboring over where to place a comma, then took the afternoon to fret about whether to remove it.

James Thurber, the great *New Yorker* writer, said of his editor Harold Ross, "He used to fuss for an hour over a comma. He'd call me in for lengthy discussions about the Thurber colon."

Guide The press associations have concluded after a number of studies that one of the keys to readable stories is the short sentence. Here is a readability chart:

Average Sentence Length	Readability
8 words or less	Very easy to read
11 words	Easy to read
14 words	Fairly easy to read
17 words	Standard
21 words	Fairly difficult to read
25 words	Difficult to read
29 words or more	Very difficult to read

One sentence after another under 17 words would make readers and listeners feel as though they were being peppered with bird shot. The key to good writing is variety, rhythm, balance. Short and long sentences are balanced. Also, a long sentence that is well-written can be as understandable as an eight-word sentence, if it is broken, usually by punctuation, into short clauses and phrases.

Quickie

Groucho Marx uttered the most succinct transition ever made: "Hello, I must be going."

Transitions

Some reporters have trouble writing short sentences because they cannot handle transitions, the links between sentences and paragraphs. Because these reporters have no mastery of the device that enables a writer to move smoothly from sentence to sentence, their tendency is to think in large clots of words. The journalist with control of transitions thinks in smaller sentence clusters.

There are four major types of transitions:

1. **Pronouns:** Use pronouns to refer to nouns in previous sentences and paragraphs:

   Dr. Braun began teaching history in 1977. *He* took *his* Ph.D. that year. *His* dissertation subject was the French Impressionists.

2. **Key words and ideas:** Repeat words and ideas in preceding sentences and paragraphs:

   He has been accused of being an *academic purist. Those words* make him shudder. "*Academic purist* is made to sound like an epithet," he said.

3. **Transitional expressions:** Use connecting words that link sentences. A large array of expressions function as connectors. Here are most of the major categories of conjunctions and some of the words in each category that can be used as transitions:

   Additives: again, also, and, finally, furthermore, in addition, next, thus, so, moreover, as well.

Contrasts: but, however, nevertheless, instead, on the other hand, otherwise, yet, nonetheless, farther.

Comparisons: likewise, similarly.

Place: adjacent to, beyond, here, near, opposite.

Time: afterward, in the meantime, later, meanwhile, soon.

He tried twice to obtain permission to see the paintings in the private museum. *Finally,* he gave up.

Dr. Braun's *next* project centered on the music of Berlioz. *But* his luck remained bad. An attempt to locate a missing manuscript proved a *similar* failure.

In the meantime, he continued his study of Spanish so that he would be able to do research in Spain.

4. **Parallel structure.** Sentences and paragraphs are linked by repeating the sentence pattern:

No one dared speak in his classes. *No one* ventured to address him in any but the most formal manner. *No one,* for that matter, had the courage to ask questions in class. His lectures were nonstop monologues.

Transitions link major story elements as well as the smaller units, the sentences. Transitions are the mortar that holds the story together so that the story is a single unit.

Logical Order

A news story should move smoothly. When natural sequence is disrupted, the story loses clarity. Here are two paragraphs from a story in an Oklahoma daily newspaper:

> "There is nothing new in the allegations," Bartlett said. "We've heard them all before."
>
> "When we first heard them we thought there was nothing to it, but then we had a second look," Tillman said.

Although the first paragraph is closed by quotation marks, which means that the speaker (Bartlett) is finished, most readers jump ahead to the next quote and presume that Bartlett is still talking. They are jolted when they find that Tillman is speaking. The solution is simple: When you introduce a new speaker, begin the sentence or paragraph with his or her name. Also, jumps in time and place must be handled carefully to avoid confusion:

NEW YORK (April 13)—A criminal court judge who last month ruled that a waiter had seduced but not raped a college student sent the man to jail for a year **yesterday** on a charge of escaping from the police after his arrest.

On March 19, Justice Albert S. Hess acquitted Phillip Blau of raping a 20-year-old

A Pulitzer Prize Story: Workings of the Brain

Here is the beginning of the first story in a series by Jon Franklin that won a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism for *The Evening Sun*. The word count in these 12 sentences runs 16, 24, 34, 9, 13, 18, 14, 21, 19, 5, 13, 21. The average sentence length is 17 words, standard reading fare. Notice the way Franklin varies the length of his sentences to set up a rhythm—long, short. The longest sentence in the sample—the third, 34 words—is followed by a short sentence—9 words.

Since the days of Sigmund Freud the practice of psychiatry has been more art than science. Surrounded by an aura of witchcraft, proceeding on impression and hunch, often ineffective, it was the bumbling and sometimes humorous stepchild of modern science.

But for a decade and more, research psychiatrists have been working quietly in laboratories, dissecting the brains of mice and men and teasing out the chemical formulas that unlock the secrets of the mind.

Now, in the 1980s, their work is paying off.

They are rapidly identifying the interlocking molecules that produce human thought and emotion. They have devised new scanners that trace the flickering web of personality as it dances through the brain. Armed with those scanners, they are mapping out the terrain of the human psyche.

As a result, psychiatry today stands on the threshold of becoming an exact science, as precise and quantifiable as molecular genetics. Ahead lies an era of psychic engineering, and the development of specialized drugs and therapies to heal sick minds.

But that's only the beginning: The potential of brain chemistry extends far beyond the confines of classic psychiatry.

Many molecular psychiatrists, for instance, believe they may soon have the ability to untangle the ancient enigma of violence and criminality.

Painful

"Writing is so difficult that I often feel that writers, having had their hell on earth, will escape punishment thereafter."

—Jessamyn West

Pembroke College student. The judge said a man could use guile, scheme, and be deceitful, but so long as he did not use violence, rape did not occur.

At that time, women's groups protested the decision.

"Despite the protests of outraged feminists who demand your head, or other and possibly more appropriate parts of your anatomy," the judge told Blau **yesterday,** "I shall punish you only for crimes of which you have been found guilty."

The changes in time are clearly indicated at the start of the second and third paragraphs. From "yesterday" in the lead, the reader is taken to "March 19" in the second paragraph and is kept there in the third paragraph by the transition "At that time" beginning the paragraph. When the quote begins the fourth paragraph, the reader is still back in March with the women. Midway through the paragraph the reader suddenly realizes the judge is speaking and that he spoke yesterday. The jolts in time and place could have been avoided with a transition at the beginning of the fourth paragraph:

> In sentencing Blau **yesterday,** Justice Hess commented on the protests. He said: . . .

This may seem to be nitpicking. It is not. The journalist knows that every sentence, every word, even every punctuation mark must be carefully selected. Read-

ers read from word to word, and are maneuvered, teased, pushed, sped and slowed through the story by the way it is written. Major disturbances of logic and order in the story confuse readers, just as a quick jump cut on television can destroy the continuity of the story for the viewer.

Chronological Order The most common organizing principle is chronology. The chronological approach has two forms. The writer can use the storytelling approach by beginning sometime before the climax:

> Two Mallory College sophomores began the day yesterday in a hurry.
>
> Judy Abrams had studied late the night before and had slept late. She gulped her breakfast of coffee and jumped into her car, five minutes before her 9 A.M. class.
>
> Franklin Starrett did not have time for breakfast before he, too, sped off in his car for the campus. He had an appointment with his English instructor at 9 A.M.
>
> Within minutes of their departures, the cars they were driving collided on Stanford Avenue south of the campus. . . .

Or the writer can put a direct news lead on the story and then, a few paragraphs down in the story, begin the chronological account:

> Two Mallory College students were critically injured when the cars they were driving collided head-on yesterday morning on Stanford Avenue south of the campus.
>
> Community Hospital officials said the students suffered multiple fractures and internal injuries. They called on students to volunteer blood for transfusions.
>
> The students began the day in a hurry. . . .

Now that we are clear about word usage and how to string these words together with appropriate punctuation and transitions, let's step back and look at the story as a whole. The first and most important requirement is that the piece flows smoothly.

Movement

Stories must move along, and the nature of the event determines the pace at which the story progresses. A story about a tornado or hurricane striking a community will move at the speed of the wind, but the piece about the burial service for the victims will follow the deliberate cadence of the prayers of the minister as he speaks of those called too soon to their maker.

News story or feature, short story or essay, play or movie, the work must have momentum, as Spike Lee points out in a profile by Stan Grosfield of *The Boston Globe,* who was watching Lee film a movie:

> In the opening scene, which was shot but later cut, Lee descends in front of the Brooklyn Bridge on a crane and announces, "All you people who think I'm anti-Semitic can kiss my black ass two times."
>
> Lee said the scene was extraneous: "When you write a script, you think everything's gonna be great, but once the film is shot and put together, sometimes a lot of the stuff is redundant. We had a whole subplot

AP Photo by Jerome Delay

Mourners

Schoolchildren weep outside St. Martin Bascilica in Liege, Belgium, for two slain classmates who were kidnapped by a child rapist. The story of the funeral had longer-than-average sentences, muted verbs.

Reach the Reader

"The key questions are: Is this stuff interesting? Does it move, touch, anger, tickle, surprise, sadden or inform? If it does, you are in for a treat, a good read."

—Thomasine Berg, *The Providence Journal*

between me and my wife, eight scenes that had to go, 'cause it wasn't moving the plot forward. It didn't matter that I was in the scene, the [expletive] had to go."

Write . . . and Rewrite

Someone said nothing good was ever written as a first draft. Journalists often do not have the leisure of a second look at their copy. Too often, the job requires writing on the run, doing a story with facts gathered close to the deadline. Nothing can be done about that. But when there is time, the rewrite is almost always a good idea and usually necessary.

With practice, writing comes easier and is accomplished with less anguish and more speed. But every writer knows that his or her work can be improved with rewriting, and even the veteran journalists rewrite when they have time. The discipline of editing your own words is handy. When Jan Wong was writing a book about her experiences in China, *Red China Blues,* she was worried about putting together her many experiences.

"As a reporter, I sometimes got bogged down structuring a thousand-word article. Would I be able to put together 150 times that much—and still make the words flow?" she wondered.

Not to worry. She wrote . . . and rewrote. "I rewrote some chapters many times," she says. "But I enjoyed that. Rewriting was a skill I had honed as a journalist."

Reading for Writers

"You can't write well if you don't read," says veteran reporter Joe Galloway. "Don't show me your resumé," he says of job applicants. "Show me your library card." Wide reading—novels, essays, the work of journalists—helps writers learn to write, a task that is never-ending. The writing coach Don Murray says, "Professional writers never learn to write; they continue to learn writing all their professional lives. The good writer is forever a student of writing."

One journalist whose work would repay study is Ernie Pyle, a Scripps Howard newsman who wrote features for the news organization, then requested to be sent to cover World War II for the United Press.

Reporter's Reporter

One of Pyle's memorable dispatches was of the death of Captain Waskow during the Italian campaign of 1944. It has become a journalistic classic. Here is part of Pyle's story:

Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer, and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tenderly, and he said:

"I sure am sorry, sir."

Then the first man squatted down, and he reached down, took the dead hand, and sat there for a full five minutes, holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face, and he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there.

And finally he put the hand down, and then reached up and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then

Mencken on Writing

H.L. Mencken was a master of invective. A columnist for *The Baltimore Sun,* he was never so masterfully abusive as when skewering writing he considered contemptible. Here is perhaps the most famous bashing on record. Mencken is commenting on the writing of President Warren G. Harding:

> I rise to pay my small tribute to Dr. Harding. Setting aside a college professor or two and a half a dozen dipsomaniacal newspaper reporters, he takes the first place in my Valhalla of literati. That is to say, he writes the worst English that I have ever encountered. It reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean-soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it. It drags itself out of the dark abysm (I was about to write abscess!) of pish, and crawls insanely up to the topmost pinnacle of posh. It is rumble and bumble. It is balder and dash.

he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of his uniform around the wound. And then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone.

The Army Signal Corps operator who sent Pyle's dispatch over shortwave radio to United Press headquarters in New York told Pyle's biographer, "I had to struggle through that piece to make my voice override my tears." (*Ernie Pyle's War: America's Eyewitness to World War II,* James Tobin.)

For the full story, see **Captain Waskow** in *NRW Plus.*

With the Troops Murray Kempton, the reporter and columnist admired by many journalists for his dogged reporting and distinct writing style, paid homage to Pyle who, Kempton wrote, "stands above the rest because he most fully incarnated what a reporter ought to be. Pyle went again and again wherever the worst extremes waited, the unconscripted man bound by conscience to the comradeship of the conscripted and enduring by free will what they were compelled to endure by necessity."

Pyle understood the use of understatement. Reread the four paragraphs about Captain Waskow's death. The emotion comes from you, the reader. When he went ashore with the troops on D-Day, Pyle wrote of what he saw strewn on Omaha Beach as men were mowed down—socks, sewing kits, family pictures. The details gave a personal cast to the body counts.

Jack Foisie, also a World War II combat correspondent, said of Pyle that he "seldom injected himself into his writings. He never mentioned his own close calls with death, although he had a number of them."

Scripps Howard Foundation

Ernie Pyle

With the Navy When the war in Europe ended, Pyle went to the Pacific to cover the sea war against Japan. There, Pyle felt uncomfortable about what he saw as the Navy caste system.

Intrepid

". . . the never-ending tension of deadlines and the piles upon piles of corpses rendered him almost continually sick, sleepless . . . to millions of Americans he was their eyes and ears on the war . . . thousands wrote to him to look up their sons as he made his way through Europe."

—Raymond A. Schroth

Soon after he was aboard a ship he found that his dispatches were being censored. The names of the sailors he had written about were deleted and only the names of high-ranking officers were left untouched. He also balked at the system that relegated black sailors to the food services. Pyle was able to change the first by threatening to abandon Navy coverage for the Marine and Army GIs, and the Navy gave in and stopped censoring his stories.

But he could not change the discrimination against black servicemen. That took three more years and the action of President Truman in 1948.

The Pyle Style Malcolm W. Browne, who served as a war correspondent in Indochina, Pakistan and the Persian Gulf, says that Pyle was "a master of language, the equal of any first-rank novelist. He constantly struggled for the precise phrase and the telling verb; whereas a less careful correspondent might write that a shell 'howled' or 'screamed' overhead, Pyle wrote that it 'rustled.'"

The writer John Hersey said of Pyle that he was "the great artist" of the "human aspects of warfare—of bravery, loss, wounds, humor, self-sacrifice, pain and yes, death—and, by the way, he always added the name and home address of the person he was talking about."

The End The death of good men haunted Pyle, and when he was shot by a sniper on Ie Shima in 1945, the soldiers who had risked their lives to bring back his body found in his pocket a column he had written for the end of the fighting in Europe. Here is some of it:

> Those who are gone would not wish themselves to be a millstone of gloom around our necks.
>
> But there are many of the living who have had burned into their brains forever the unnatural sight of cold dead men scattered over the hillsides and in the ditches along the high rows of hedge throughout the world.
>
> Dead men by mass production—in one country after another—month after month and year after year. Dead men in winter and dead men in summer.
>
> Dead men in such familiar promiscuity that they become monotonous.
>
> Dead men in such monstrous infinity that you come almost to hate them.

For the entire column Pyle wrote, see **Cold Dead Men** in *NRW Plus*.

Pyle is buried beside GIs in the Punchbowl Cemetery in Hawaii.

Let's see if we can wrap up this long chapter with a few conclusions about the art of writing.

Word Choice

Here is some practical advice from John Ciardi, poet, essayist and writer on writing:

> Count the adjectives and verbs; good writing (active writing) will almost invariably have more verbs. . . . A diction in which every noun is propped up by an adjective may be almost flatly said to be a bad one.

Mark Twain advised, "Whenever you see an adjective, kill it." And that vast source of material, Anonymous, is quoted on writing as saying, "The adjective is the enemy of the noun."

As for verbs, the action verb is our object. Mervin Block, the television writing coach, received a script with this lead: "The Dow was down more than 62 points." Block commented: "The verb *was* doesn't convey any action. The writer needs a vigorous verb like *fell.* Or *sank.* Or *slid.* Or *skidded.* Or *dropped.* Or *plunged.* Or *tumbled.* But *was* doesn't move."

Sentences

Red Smith's teacher at Notre Dame, John Michael Cooney, wanted sentences from his students that were "so definite they would cast a shadow." He was an enemy of vague writing and began class by intoning, "Let us pray for sense."

Sense for whom? Harold Ross, the founder and longtime editor of *The New Yorker* wanted his magazine never to contain "a sentence that would puzzle an intelligent 14-year-old."

The sentences should be put to good use, and that means using them for quotations, anecdotes and illustrations. Donald Murray, the writer and writing coach, comments on the use of examples, illustrations and anecdotes:

> You tell them the anecdote and they say, "Boy, this is a bad situation." That's the art in it—not to tell the reader how to think, how to feel, but to give the reader the old Mark Twain thing, "Don't say the old lady screamed. Drag her on stage and make her scream."

Two Essentials

Writers talk about "concrete nouns and action verbs," by which they mean nouns that represent something physical that can be pointed to, something specific and action verbs that move.

The 6-year-old sprinted home is better than *The boy went home.*

She wept is better than *She is sad.*

Advice

Perhaps the next to last word should be given to the copy editor. Here's Joel Rawson's lament about the copy he sometimes read when he was a copy editor at the *Providence Journal Bulletin:*

> The thing that I resent most is sloppiness. I resent getting a story with misspellings in leads and errors of fact, and I resent getting a story that I know somebody didn't sit down and reread. Even on deadline I expect somebody to go back and reread that story and fix up what is obviously wrong with it. You're taking up a lot of people's time and you're also ruining your credibility and mine if work like that goes through the copy desk or other editors on this newspaper. And if somebody else doesn't catch (the mistakes) and they go into print, it hurts us all.

The final bit of advice comes from an assistant city editor on the now-defunct *Kansas City Times* via William F. Woo, then a young reporter on the staff. Woo

was struggling to write an obituary for page 1. His effort was visible to Ray Lyle, the assistant city editor.

"Bill," he told Woo, "just write what happened."

Summing Up

Those who write for a living strive to blend a bit of artistry with information-giving. Here is some advice from a writer who wrote well and thought a lot about the writing craft, Robert Louis Stevenson:

- **Accuracy:** ". . . there is only one way to be clever and that is to be exact. To be vivid is a secondary quality which must presuppose the first; for vividly to convey a wrong impression is only to make failure conspicuous. . . ."
- **Brevity:** ". . . the artist has one main and necessary resource which he must, in every case and upon any theory, employ. He must, that is, suppress much and omit more. He must omit what is tedious or irrelevant. . . ." But he must retain the material essential to the "main design."
- **Language:** The words with which the writer works should be from "the dialect of life."
- **Structure:** ". . . every word, phrase, sentence and paragraph must move in a logical procession." No word or phrase is selected unless it is "what is wanted to forward and illustrate" the work.

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