

Write Like the News

8 Journalism Skills to Transform Your Business Writing

Plain Language Action and Information Network

Wed., July 13, 2011, 2 p.m. (This program was originally set for the Apr. 13 PLAIN meeting, which was canceled to let PLAIN members focus on agency exigencies right after the government's near shutdown.)

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3/21/11. This booklet is available as a color PDF.

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Seminars and consulting on business writing and speaking

1. Lead with the future

Inform from the start.

Emulate:

Statute of Liberty crown to **reopen** July 4

The crown of the Statue of Liberty will reopen July 4 for the first time since the **Sept. 11, 2001**, terrorist attacks, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced Friday.

Associated Press, 5/8/09. <http://washingtontimes.com/news/2009/may/8/statue-liberty-crown-reopen-july-4> .

“Zag” before you “zig.”

- Business writing shouldn’t be a “good news, bad news” joke.

Improve:

The test tubes arrived this morning for today’s experiment. But they were all broken, so unfortunately we have to postpone it to tomorrow.

- Nor should business writing be a “bad news, good news” joke.

Improve:

A virus erased all your files in our computer last night. Fortunately though, all those files are on a backup hard drive, and I’ll have them back online by noon.

Lead with the future—especially in a crisis.

Improve:

A virus just entered our computer network. So immediately unhook all networked computers and back up all files.

2. Write your **reader's** language

Emulate:

Anything Can Change, It Seems, Even an Immutable Law of Nature

...

It is to be published on Aug. 27 in **the field's most prestigious journal**, Physical Review Letters.

New York Times, 8/15/01, A1. <http://nytimes.com/2001/08/15/us/anything-can-change-it-seems-even-an-immutable-law-of-nature.html> .

Emulate:

FCC Approves AT&T Plan for Mobile Radio System

Cellular Network in Chicago to be Nation's First

The **Federal Communications Commission** gave American Telephone & Telegraph Co. the go-ahead yesterday to build the first commercial "cellular" mobile radio system in the United States.

[The "FCC Approves . . ." headline stood over this sidebar:]

Cable Stations' Copyright Royalties Are Raised

In a ruling expected to cost the cable television industry millions of dollars, a **government agency** has adopted new royalty rates for local cable stations to import programming from far-off cities.

The 4-0 decision Wednesday by the **Copyright Royalty Tribunal** could cost cable operators as much as \$20 million more per year in royalties paid to copyright owners.

Washington Post, 10/22/82, C14.

Emulate:

G.M. to **Triple** Investment in European Turnaround

...

The company said it now will pitch in [euro]1.9 billion, or \$2.6 billion . . . G.M. had previously said it would provide [euro]600 million.

International Herald Tribune, 3/3/10, 16.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/03/business/global/03opel.html> .

3. Be positive

Preempt errors.

Improve:

The way it's been sold to date has not demonstrated that value to consumers.

An article in Business Day on Monday about the fallout from a possible merger of XM Satellite Radio and Sirius Satellite Radio omitted the word “not” in a quotation from Susan Kevorkian, an analyst with IDC, about the marketing of satellite radio to users. She said, “The way it's been sold to date has *not* demonstrated that value to consumers.”

Correction, New York Times, 2/28/07, A2, italic preserved.
<http://nytimes.com/2007/02/26/technology/26satellite.html> .

Exploit “power percentage.”

Improve:

Kids who learn about the risk of drugs from their parents are **36% less** likely to smoke marijuana than kids who learn nothing from them . . . If you don't know what to say, visit www.theantidrug.com.

Ad, Partnership for a Drug-Free America, 1999.

Convert negatives accurately—and safely.

Improve:

While you're wearing your contact lenses, don't moisten them except with wetting solution.

4. Lay out logically

Micro-layout: promote with dashes, demote with parentheses.

Emulate:

Concept cars— one-of-a-kind engineering experiments like a 2003 Jeep that can spin in circles and drive sideways, and a 1958 nuclear-powered Ford— frequently become the stars of an auto show, drawing crowds and building plenty of buzz for their brand.

New York Times, 1/10/09, B3. <http://nytimes.com/2009/01/10/business/10concept.html> .

Emulate:

The search for intent can be confined by specific rules designed to ensure uniform treatment. The want of those rules here has led to unequal evaluation of ballots in various respects. See *Gore v. Harris*, ___ So. 2d, at ___ (slip op., at 51) (Wells, J., dissenting) (“Should a county canvassing board count or not count a ‘dimpled chad’ where the voter is able to successfully dislodge the chad in every other contest on the ballot? Here, the county canvassing boards disagree”).

Bush v. Gore, U.S. Supreme Court, 12/12/00, underlined blank spaces preserved.
<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=531&invol=98> .

5. Be consistent

Show the hierarchy of a sub-series within a series.

Improve:

The term “plain writing” means writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience.

Plain Writing Act of 2010.

Emulate:

writing that:

— is clear, **concise [and] well-organized,**

and

— **follows** other best practices

6. Be precise

Report about both the important “trees” and the general “forest.”

Emulate:

States Move to Close Tax Shelter That Benefits **Wal-Mart, Others**

Wall Street Journal, 3/7/07, A2.

Emulate:

Citi Weighs Its **Options, Including Firm’s Sale**

Wall Street Journal, 11/21/08, A1.

Emulate:

Important and other general: Biology and the other sciences will be our focus.

General—including important: The sciences—including biology—will be our focus.

7. Be brief

Use contractions to be brief—and to avoid errors.

Emulate:

Hezbollah **Won't** Topple the Lebanese Government, **Its** Leader Says

New York Times, 1/25/07, A9.

<http://nytimes.com/2007/01/25/world/middleeast/25hezbollah.html> .

8. Choose strong verbs

Emulate:

We simplify the memo tomorrow.

Improve:

Simplification of the memo will be effected by us tomorrow.

Prefer present tense.

Emulate:

Today, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates **comes** to Washington to participate in a panel at the White House and to meet with members of Congress.

Washington Post, 4/5/00, E10.

Be clear you're reporting the *current* state of the law.

Improve:

After the storms, the Legislature passed a constitutional amendment consolidating many of the New Orleans-area boards into just two regional boards. The law **required** that members, who are appointed by the governor, have expertise in fields like engineering, hydrology, geology and law.

New York Times, 4/18/07, A14. <http://nytimes.com/2007/04/18/us/18levee.html> .

Emulate this excerpt from a datelined article:

Under the 2002 McCain-Feingold campaign finance law, groups wanting to broadcast advertisements that name federal candidates within 60 days before a general election, or 30 days before a primary, **are** required to follow strict rules on how they pay for them. The law **requires** that donors be disclosed and **caps** contributions to prevent secretive groups from advocating for or against candidates in thinly disguised advertisements known as issue ads.

*New York Times, 12/22/06, A24.
<http://nytimes.com/2006/12/22/washington/22campaign.html> .*