

Tips from a Pro

NINE RULES FOR GOOD WRITING

Rule 1: Use short, simple declarative sentences.

Short sentences that follow the subject-verb-object order are easily understood. Understanding decreases as writers add introductory clauses, subordinate clauses and prepositional phrases. The following sentence contains 44 words, an introductory phrase and several prepositional phrases.

Fueled by the 21-point game of senior forward Sara Watters, the Mavericks women's basketball team ended a two-game losing streak Sunday and extended its record to 17-3 by squeaking past the Spartans 62-57 in front of the largest crowd ever to watch them play.

Breaking the long sentence into shorter, simpler ones creates a more readable passage.

Forward Sara Watters scored 21 points and led the Mavericks to a 62-57 victory over the Spartans Sunday. The largest crowd ever to watch a Mavericks women's basketball game saw the team end a two-game losing streak and improve its record to 17-3.

Rule 2: Use familiar words.

Writers who try to dress up their prose with unusual words risk confusing themselves and their readers. One person wrote another, "Please accept my apologies for the deliquescence of this letter." The writer thought "deliquescence" meant "lateness," but it doesn't. The word means to melt away or, in chemistry, to become liquid by absorbing air.

Rule 3: Write concisely.

Stay away from redundant modifiers, such as "completely destroyed." Replace long phrases with short ones; for example, use "now" instead of "at this point in time." And don't use constructions that simply add words without adding meaning, such as sentences or clauses that begin with "there is" or "there are."

Rule 4: Use action verbs.

Strong action verbs eliminate the need for adverbs and other modifiers that clog sentences and steal their power. Compare these sentences:

The fast-moving bullet went through the wall quickly.

REVISED: The bullet tore through the wall.

Rule 5: Keep modifiers near the things they modify.

The writer who separates a modifier and the thing modified risks saying something silly. The first sentence below seems to say a judge will allow only blind clerks to come to the hearing. The revision makes it clear that clerks are allowed only to assist blind attorneys.

The judge forbade all attorneys from bringing clerks to the hearing, except those who are blind.

REVISED: The judge forbade all attorneys, except those who were blind, from bringing clerks to the hearing.

(continued)

Rule 6: Use specifics rather than generalities.

A sentence that describes a person as tall, fat, old or famous offers meaningless generalities. Specifics, such as a person's exact height, weight, age and accomplishments, are more interesting and informative than generalities. A sentence that describes a 65-year-old, 6-foot-5, 270-pound journalist who has won two Pulitzer Prizes gives readers the information they need to create a mental picture of that person.

Rule 7: Use concrete words rather than abstractions.

Abstract words cover many situations and convey less information than concrete ones. A "vehicle" may be a car, a train, an airplane or a space shuttle. "Station wagon" is a more concrete and informative word.

Rule 8: Put statements in the positive form, not the negative.

Don't say that something is "not important"; say it is "trifling." Similarly, replace the phrase "does not care about" with "ignores" or "does not have confidence in" with "distrusts." Notice that the positive form is shorter than the negative.

Rule 9: Inform the reader of changes in time, place and mood.

Use phrases like "before," "later" or "meanwhile" to show shifts in time. Use "elsewhere," "down the street" or similar phrases for transitions in place. "Yet," "but," "despite" and similar words indicate changes of mood.

WORDS TO AVOID

Adjectives and Adverbs

Newswriters avoid adverbs and adjectives, since they tend to be less forceful, specific and objective than nouns and verbs. William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, authors of the influential book "The Elements of Style," wrote, "The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place." Along the same lines, Mark Twain warned, "When you catch an adjective, kill it."

Most adverbs and adjectives are unnecessary. They waste space by stating the obvious, and they may unintentionally inject a reporter's opinion into the story. If you write about a child's funeral, you do not have to comment that the mourners were "sad-faced," the scene "grim" and the parents "grief-stricken." Nor is there reason to report that an author is "famous," a witness "alert" or an accident "tragic."

Adverbs and adjectives in the following sentences editorialize. Rather than simply reporting the facts, they comment on those facts:

It was not until 9 p.m. that the police were finally able to find the child.
REVISED: Police found the child at 9 p.m.

After receiving the frightening report, the mayor made it quite clear that she is concerned about the program's outrageous costs.

REVISED: After receiving the report, the mayor said she is concerned about the program's costs.

The word "finally" in the first sentence suggests that the police were negligent and should have found the child sooner. Similarly, if you report the facts in the second story clearly and concisely, you should not have to add that the report was "frightening" and the costs "outrageous." Also avoid concluding that the mayor made anything "clear."

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

Sentences that use the subject-verb-object order are active-voice sentences. A passive-voice sentence turns that order around. The direct object of the active-voice sentence becomes the subject of the passive-voice sentence; the subject becomes part of a prepositional phrase or disappears altogether; and the verb is replaced with its past participle and some form of the verb "to be." When converted to the passive voice, the sentence "The batter hit the ball" would look like this:

The ball was hit by the batter.

Notice that the passive-voice sentence is two words longer than the active-voice sentence, but it says the same thing. Those extra words are wasted words and are stumbling blocks for readers. Notice, too, that the actor can disappear from a passive-voice sentence. In some cases, the identity of the actor is clear from the context. The sentence "The ball was hit" is probably as clear as the sentence "The ball was hit by the batter."

In other cases, the passive voice camouflages responsibility. If a disaster strikes or someone is injured by a defective product, then government or business officials may admit "mistakes were made," but that passive construction reveals nothing about who made the mistakes or why. The passive voice is the ally of all who seek to evade responsibility; it is the enemy of all who seek clarity.

The passive voice also lends itself to grammatical errors. One of these is the false passive, which occurs most often with the verbs "give," "award" or "present." The error consists of using the indirect object, instead of the direct object, as the subject of the passive-voice sentence.

ACTIVE VOICE: The president gave an award to Smith.

TRUE PASSIVE: An award was given to Smith.

FALSE PASSIVE: Smith was given an award.

The trouble with the false passive is that it implies Smith was given to the award rather than the award being given to Smith.

CLICHÉS

There are thousands of clichés and slang phrases that reporters must learn to recognize and avoid. Some of the most common are listed here.

a keen mind	few and far between	pitched battle
ambulance rushed	foreseeable future	police dragnet
around the clock	gained ground	pose a challenge
arrived at the scene	gave it their blessing	proud parents
at long last	get a good look	proves conclusively
at this point in time	go to the polls	pushed for legislation
baptism by fire	got off to a good start	quick thinking
bare minimum	grief-stricken	real challenge
beginning a new life	ground to a halt	reign of terror
behind the wheel	hail of bullets	see-saw battle
benefit of the doubt	heated argument	set to work
bigger and better	heed the warning	smell a rat
blanket of snow	high-speed chase	sped to the scene
blessing in disguise	hits the spot	spread like wildfire
called to the scene	in his new position	start their mission
calm before the storm	in the wake of	still at large
came to their rescue	landed the job	stranger than fiction
came to rest	last but not least	strike a nerve
came under attack	last-ditch stand	sudden death
came under fire	left their mark	sweep under the rug
cast aside	leveled an attack	take it easy
caught red-handed	limped into port	talk is cheap
clear-cut issue	line of fire	tempers flared
colorful scene	lingering illness	time will tell
complete stranger	lodge a complaint	tip of the iceberg
complete success	lucky to be alive	tipped the scales
coveted title	made off with	took its toll
crystal clear	made their escape	too late to turn back
dead and buried	made their way home	tower of strength
decide the fate	miraculous escape	tracked down
devoured by flames	Mother Nature	traveled the globe
dime a dozen	necessary evil	tried their luck
doomed to failure	never a dull moment	under siege
dread disease	no relief in sight	under their noses
dream come true	notified next of kin	undertaking a study
drop in the bucket	once in a lifetime	up in the air
dying breed	one step closer	view with alarm
erupted in violence	in the mix	went to great lengths
escaped death	opened fire	won a reputation
exchanged gunfire	paved the way	word of caution
faced an uphill battle	pillar of strength	words of wisdom
fell on deaf ears	pinpointed the cause	word to the wise