

WRITING FOR DIGITAL MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, we are all consumers and producers, readers and publishers alike. The Internet has made it possible for anyone to publish his or her writing online almost instantaneously for all the world to read.

The evolution of digital media has introduced both unprecedented challenges and opportunities for media corporations and organizations. The unique way that digital media tools and technologies combine (or *converge*) skill sets—such as written, visual, and interactive storytelling—has also posed a new challenge for journalism and mass communication schools and departments training future media professionals.

This book guides students through the landscape of new media convergence, pointing them toward the best practices and techniques of writing and editing for an online audience, and helping them to take full advantage of the new opportunities offered by digital media.

Understanding our increasingly fragmented online audiences and exploring how different media behave—their unique limits and possibilities—will help students develop content that is ideally suited for digital formats and environments. Students will analyze the technical and rhetorical possibilities of online environments, including interactivity, hyperlinking, spatial orientation and non-linear storytelling. Students will also learn practical skills to help them succeed in writing and editing for specifically online environments.

First and foremost, this book is about writing—clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific audiences. Fortunately, good writing is valued online, and unfortunately it is still just as hard to find good writing online as it is in print. Specifically, this book is about writing in and for digital environments and about communicating effectively in those online environments, which often are populated with graphical content, multimedia and hypertextual, interactive elements. Learning how to achieve a careful, deliberate balance of these elements is a primary goal of this book, and accomplishing it will require new skills, intuitions and sensitivities. The premium on good writing has not changed, but the process or activity of reading has; people accessing information online are not reading as much as they are scanning, surfing, moving and navigating. Web writers, therefore, are engineers of spaces and places in addition to being communicators with and through words.

The point of view taken in this book is that we all are content creators and writers, whether or not we are part of a larger content development and management team. We are principally writers, therefore. Sometimes, though, the point of view is that of a site editor, someone charged with maintaining consistent editorial, graphic design and management policies for a Web site or group of sites. As editors, we are surrogates for the site's potential reader. As such, this book's approach is journalistic, seeing convergence and multimedia in terms of journalism first and foremost.

This book does not assume the point of view of development team members in graphic design, site architecture, code writing or marketing, therefore, though as site editors we strive for knowledge in and sensitivity to those skill sets. Whether content creators or site editors, we recognize that more than anything we are storytellers. Throughout history humans have taught, learned, entertained and communicated with stories, and this has held constant across media. Stories transmit information and transfer experience. This book, therefore, emphasizes digital storytelling and upholds the value of narrative, which also underlines the value of a journalistic approach to information-gathering, writing, editing and publishing online. Journalism, in other words, well serves the journalist and non-journalist alike, especially online, where the democracy of production and publishing is even threatening the relevance of such distinctions.

Specifically, this book aims to:

- further develop students' abilities to write clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific online audiences;
- teach journalism and communication students practical skills for writing and developing content for digital publishing and delivery;
- teach how to purposefully blend text, graphical content, multimedia and hypertextual, interactive elements;
- explore how trends in personal publishing, especially blogging, and social networking are forcing change in journalism and other information industries;
- give students a comprehensive resource for online journalism, one that deals with digital media as their own distinct forms of communication rather than merely adjuncts to print or broadcast.

Writing for Digital Media is primarily for journalism students, particularly those enrolled in courses in online journalism, but the content is also aimed at students learning to develop content, both textual and visual, for Web delivery in a variety of contexts. It is somewhat broad-based, therefore, reflecting the ongoing convergence of roles and jobs of and for content producers, online journalists, Web writers and online editors. There is no such thing as a "typical" Web writer or content developer, an ambiguity that demands fresh approaches to pedagogy and to industry practice.

A quick word on what this book is not: it is not a technical guidebook for students looking to master Flash, javascript, php or, more generally, multimedia development. (There are many other textbooks devoted to the software side of things.) Instead, this is a writing text first and last.

While placing an emphasis on understanding the fundamentals of good Web site and page design, this textbook primarily focuses on writing skills as the foundation for writing specifically for digital media, and is designed particularly for use in online journalism courses. This book comes at a time of unprecedented upheaval and change in journalism teaching and in the journalism industry itself. Journalism schools and departments are grappling with the question of how to address the shift from print and broadcast to digital delivery of converged content, and this book hopes to help educators overcome that challenge by connecting the basics of good writing and journalism with the unique challenges and opportunities of writing specifically for digital media.

Structurally, this book is divided into three sections. The first section, **Foundations (Chapters 1 through 2)**, is devoted to the fundamentals of writing well and the elements of journalism. After laying the ground rules for good writing, the second section, **Practice (Chapters 3 through 6)**, introduces students to the special skills and techniques needed to create content for digital environments and online publications. **Chapter 3: Screen Writing: Online Style and Techniques** establishes the general rules and conventions of writing for an online audience. **Chapter 4: Headlines and Hypertext** emphasizes the importance of providing good organization and clear navigation tools for online readers. **Chapter 5: Designing Places and Spaces** discusses how to plan, organize and update a Web site or online publication appropriately to attract an audience and keep readers coming back. **Chapter 6: Getting It Right: Online Editing, Designing and Publishing** focuses on the fundamentals of online editing and publishing, from copyediting to page design. The final section, **Contexts (Chapters 7 through 11)**, looks at personal publishing, citizen journalism, legal issues and questions specific to online communication, and business communication and its environments. The **Afterword: Core Values of Online Journalism** reflects upon the lessons of the book and encourages students to practice online journalism that is **accurate, reasonable, transparent, fair and independent**.

A number of pedagogical features appear in each chapter to encourage students to further explore and build upon the lessons of the book. These features include:

- **Chapter Objectives:** These brief points clearly establish the learning goals for each chapter.
- **Chapter Introductions:** A concise paragraph at the start of each chapter outlines the major topics discussed in the chapter and how they connect to chapter objectives, along with historical and cultural context.
- **Chapter Assignments:** These writing exercises ask students to apply the skills, critical perspectives and best practices introduced in each chapter.

- **Online Resources:** These links connect students to relevant Web sites where they can learn more about the topics discussed in each chapter.

This book owes a great debt to Patrick Lynch's and Sarah Horton's *Web Style Guide 3* from Yale University Press (2009). This book refers to their text and to its companion Web site. Also important to the development of this book were *Web Writing*, *Web Designing* by Margaret W. Batschelet, from Longman (2001), and Mark Briggs's *Journalism 2.0* from the Knight Citizen News Network (2007; http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/).

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PART I

FOUNDATIONS

1 ON WRITING WELL

I sometimes think that writing is like driving sheep down a road. If there is any gate to the left or right, the readers will most certainly go into it.
C.S. Lewis, novelist

But words are things, and a small drop of ink falling like dew, upon a thought, produces that which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think . . .
Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to "normalize" formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.

Homi K. Bhabha, Professor of English, Harvard University, "Mimicry and Man"

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will understand how to:

- use the basic rules of good writing;
- determine the intended audience and write specifically for that audience;
- correctly apply the fundamentals of grammar, style, and usage;
- avoid common writing problems.

Introduction

Whether a person is writing a news story, novel, letter-to-the-editor or advertising copy, the principles of good writing are the same. Different media place different burdens and responsibilities on writers, but the reason behind writing is always to communicate ideas in your head to an audience through words. Does Professor Homi K. Bhabha's sentence above communicate his ideas clearly? Can you understand what he means by efforts to normalize the disturbance of a discourse of splitting? Perhaps that's why this sentence was

awarded second prize in the annual “Bad Writing Contest.” Bad writing, like Bhabha’s prize-winning example, obfuscates and confuses; it promotes misunderstanding and perhaps even apathy. This chapter provides a foundation for good writing, including sections on grammar, spelling and punctuation, as it aims to help students identify weaknesses in their writing, then to offer help and resources to improve in those weak areas.

The Medium is the Message: A Brief History of Writing

The writing tools of today—computers and word processing software, primarily—are a far cry from the earliest writing instrument, a caveman’s stone. Think for a moment about how the innovation of clay tablets, the first portable writing artifact, changed the written record of human history. Now consider texting, twitter or the phone-enabled mobile Web and the ways these and other Internet-enabled technologies and tools are changing the way people communicate today. The tools that we use to communicate affect *how* and *what* we communicate. This book pays special attention to writing in the digital environment, but we will look as far back as the beginning of writing itself for timeless lessons on writing well, whether you’re using a stone or a tablet PC.

In approximately 8500 BC, clay tokens were introduced to make and record transactions between people trading goods and services. An alphabet of sorts began to emerge to record what was being traded. A clay cone, for example, represented a small measure of grain. A sphere represented a larger measure. A cylinder signified the transaction of an animal. Writing evolved, therefore, by transferring literal depictions into abstract forms.

The alphabet that we would recognize today was invented around 2000 BC. Jews in Egypt used 27 hieroglyphs to produce this recognizable alphabet, assigning to each of the simple hieroglyphs a sound of speech. This phonetic alphabet led to the Phoenician alphabet, the “great-grandmother” of many Roman letters used today in roughly 100 languages worldwide (Sacks 2003).

At about the same time, papyrus and parchment were introduced as early forms of paper. The Romans wrote on papyrus with reed pens fashioned from the hollow stems of marsh grasses. The reed pen would evolve into the quill pen around AD 700. Though China had wood fiber paper in the 2nd century AD, it would be the late 14th century and the arrival of Gutenberg before paper became widely used in Europe. So what we think of as writing’s main use—language communication—was a low priority for a long, long time, in part because literacy remained so rare. Until Gutenberg, there was not much for the average person to read—mainly inscriptions on buildings and coins. When Gutenberg began printing books, scholars estimate that there were only about 30,000 books in all of Europe. Fast forward only 50 years and Europe could count between 10 million and 12 million volumes and witness a rapid increase in literacy. The democratization of knowledge generates along with it advances in literacy.

In 286 BC, Ptolemy I launched an ambitious project to archive all human knowledge. His library in Alexandria, Egypt, housed hundreds of thousands

of texts. None survive today. Invaders burned the papyrus scrolls and parchment volumes as furnace fuel in AD 681, so some of history’s lessons here should be obvious:

- Make a copy.
- Back up your data.
- Beware of invaders.

Although Korea was first to make multiple copies of a work, Johannes Gutenberg gets most of the credit in histories of printing. In 1436, he invented a printing press with movable, replaceable wood letters. How much Gutenberg knew of the movable type that first had been invented in 11th-century China is not known; it is possible he re-invented it. Regardless, these innovations, which combined to create the printing process and the subsequent proliferation of printing and printed material, also led to a codification of spelling and grammar rules, though centuries would be required to agree on most of the final rules (and we are still arguing, of course).

New communication techniques and technologies rarely eliminate the ones that preceded them, as Henry-Jean Martin pointed out in his *History and Power of Writing* (1994). The new techniques and technologies redistribute labor, however, and they influence how we think. These early tools—pen and paper—facilitated written communication, which, like new communication technologies today, arrived amidst great controversy. Plato and Socrates, for instance, argued in the 4th century BC against the use of writing altogether. Socrates favored learning through face-to-face conversation over anonymous, impersonal writing. Plato feared that writing would destroy memory. After all, why make the effort to remember or, more correctly, to memorize something when it is already written down? In Plato’s day, people could memorize tens of thousands of “lines” of poetry, a practice still common in Shakespeare’s day many centuries later. Think for a moment: What have you memorized lately? * Plato also believed that the writer’s ideas in written form would be misunderstood. When communication is spoken, the speaker is present to correct misunderstanding, and the speaker has control over who gets to hear what. If you have ever had an email terribly misunderstood—or read by entirely the wrong person—these ancient concerns might still find sympathy today.

Another ancient Greek, Aristotle, became communication’s great hero by defending writing from its early detractors. In perhaps one of the earliest versions of the “if-you-can’t-beat-’em, join-’em” argument, Aristotle argued that the best way to protect yourself and your ideas from the harmful effects of writing was to become a better writer yourself. Aristotle also saw the potential of writing as communication, as a means to truth, and therefore a skill everyone should learn. Aristotle believed that with truth at stake, honesty and clarity were paramount in writing. These values perhaps are as important, and just as rare, in the 21st century as they were in the 4th century. Aristotle also was the first to articulate the concept of “audience,” which has been

variously defined ever since. He instructed rhetoricians to consider the audience before deciding on the message (Vandenberg 1995). This consideration more than any other distinguishes communication from expression for expression's sake, a distinction perhaps best understood by comparing visual communication to art, or journalism to literature.

Printing quickly became crucial to education by making it possible to produce multiple copies of the same text. With the availability of multiple copies, you could distribute the same text to many individuals, allowing readers separated by time and space to refer to the same information. With the advent of the printing press, no longer were people primarily occupied by the task of preserving information in the form of fragile manuscripts that diminished with use.

The book changed the priorities of communication, and the book, like any communication technology, has attributes that define it. These include:

- **Fixity.** The information contained in a given text is fixed by existing in many copies of the same static text.
- **Discreteness.** The text is experienced by itself, in isolation, separated from others. If there is a footnote in a book directing a reader to a reference or source material, the reader has to go get that material, physically, by going to the library or filling out an interlibrary loan request, expending time and perhaps money.
- **Division of labor.** The author or creator and the reader or audience perform distinctly different tasks, and the gulf cannot be crossed. The book is written, published, distributed and then perhaps bought or borrowed and read.
- **Primacy for creativity and originality.** The value set embodied by books does not include collaboration, community or dialogue, values impossible in a medium that requires physical marks and symbols on physical surfaces such as paper.
- **Linearity.** Unless it is a reference book, the work likely is meant to be read from front to back, in sequence, one page at a time. After hundreds of years of familiarity with this linearity, non-linear forms have found it difficult to gain acceptance.

Compare and contrast the book's fixed attributes to Web content, for which all writing and all content development depends on a process of generating lines and lines of computer code. Web pages can be static, or writing on or for the Web can be dynamic, increasing or decreasing in size, changing in font and color and presentation. Web "pages" aren't even pages; what you are actually viewing on screen is a picture of a page.

Web space is non-linear, with changing borders and boundaries. Unlike a book, the Web is scaleable and navigable, a space people move through rather than a series of pages read in a particular order. Online readers can easily

attributes
which define
it -
what defines
a blog.

subvert planned sequences of "reading" by accessing information in any order they wish (or click). The Web also is networked. Think about how the search function alone has changed use or consumption of Web documents compared to books, with search engines allowing a viewer to navigate directly to page 323 of a document and to begin reading there. Technology changes the way an artifact is used, read, stored, searched, altered and controlled. These changes are not necessarily progress, though often they can be.

The idea that a technology is not inherently good or inherently evil, that its virtues and liabilities evolve as its contexts change, is an important assumption that this book makes, one that underpins many of the book's other assumptions. Though a commonly held view, it is not necessarily true that the book is somehow natural while the Internet is somehow unnatural. Gutenberg's printing press was revolutionary as a technology; the Internet, too, as the product of hundreds of technologies, is revolutionary.

Principles of Good Writing

When asked what he would do first were he given rule over China, Confucius is believed to have said:

To correct language . . . 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. If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate. If morals and art deteriorate, justice will go astray. If justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Therefore, there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters about everything.

This section aims to help you better understand the principles of good writing. These principles transcend any particular media, principles important no matter the medium and no matter the audience. Below is a list of some of these fundamentals, realizing that writing is a process of pre-writing, writing, editing, revising, editing again, revising again and evaluating. Each fundamental is paired with an exercise or two demonstrating the instructional point being made. The exercises are designed to help you think like a writer. The "want" to write starts now.



Be Brief

I have made this letter longer than usual only because I have not had the time to make it shorter.

Blaise Pascal, 17th-century philosopher

Writing should be clear and concise. Readers need little reason *not* to read further, and this is especially and painfully true online. Prune your prose.

Exercise 1.1

Here are some samples of cluttered writing. Re-write the sentences to convey the same meaning, but with fewer words, perhaps using a sentence or phrase you have seen somewhere else.

Example: The essential question that must be answered, that cannot be avoided, is existential, which is, whether or not to even exist.

Solution: To be or not to be, that is the question.

Try these:

- People should not succumb to a fear of anything except being fearful in the first place; and we should stick together on this so we can't be defeated.
- The male gender is so different from the female gender that it is almost as if the two are from completely different planets.
- There were two different footpaths in the forest, one that had been cleared by foot traffic and another that obviously fewer people had used. I decided to take the one that fewer people had used, and it really made a big difference.

**Be Precise**

When I use a word it means exactly what I say, no more and no less.

Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking-Glass*

Use the precise word that your meaning requires, not one that is close or, worse, one that sounds close. A dictionary and thesaurus should never be far away (and online, they never are). Examples:

- "A sense of trust was **induced**"—no, trust is enabled or rewarded or encouraged, it is not induced.
- "Put into **affect**"—no, put it into effect, though A might affect B.
- "She was **surrounded** by messages"—perhaps she was inundated with messages, or drowning in information, but surrounded by a ring of messages? No.
- "He was **anxious** to go to the game"—he was probably eager, not anxious, unless he was playing in the game, in which case it is possible he indeed was anxious, or worried.
- "He watched a **random** TV show"—perhaps he arbitrarily chose a show to watch, but it likely wasn't "random" at all; a broadcaster determined with great precision what to air and when. Random has a specific meaning, which is that each and every unit in a population had an equal statistical chance of being selected.
- "In lieu of this new information, we should . . ."—no, *in light of* the new information . . . "In lieu of" means "in the absence of."

Exercise 1.2

Write a sentence for each of the words in the pairings of words below. The sentences should illustrate the differences in meaning or nuance in each pairing:

Example:

deduce: From the blood on the glove, he deduced that the murderer was left-handed.

infer: By leaving her bloodless glove on the table, she inferred her innocence.

- | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| • ambiguous | • healthy | • conscience |
| • ambivalent | • healthful | • conscious |
| • apprise | • disinterested | • affect |
| • appraise | • uninterested | • effect |

**Be Active**

Just do it.

Ad slogan for Nike

Though there are times when passive voice is appropriate, too much yields writing that is lifeless. Habitually writing in the passive is what we want to avoid. In the passive, which uses a form of the verb *to be* and a past participle, the subject is acted upon. An example:

- The baseball player fielded the ball (active).
- The ball was fielded by the baseball player (passive).

The second sentence is longer and therefore more difficult to read.

Exercise 1.3

Re-write the following two sentences to make them active and more descriptive.

Example: Exhausted and bleary-eyed, I somehow negotiated the winding staircase, spilling me into my bed. Work would have to wait for a fresh day.

Solution: I was tired, so I finished my work and went up to bed.

- The labor leaders were frustrated by the latest offer which forced them to go through with the strike.
- She walked into the room without saying a word, sat down and looked at me.



Be Imaginative

You have to try very hard not to imagine that the iron horse is a real creature. You hear it breathing when it rests, groaning when it has to leave, and yapping when it's under way . . . Along the track it jettisons its dung of burning coals and its urine of boiling water; . . . its breath passes over your head in beautiful clouds of white smoke which are torn to shreds on the track-side trees.

Novelist Victor Hugo, describing a train

Analogies, similes and metaphors are like sutures and scalpels. In expert hands, they can be transformative. In the hands of quacks, however, somebody is going to get hurt, to use a bad though not mixed metaphor.

For the poet Maya Angelou, social changes have appeared “as violent as electrical storms, while others creep slowly like sorghum syrup.” For French novelist Colette, the skyscrapers of Paris resembled “a grove of churches, a gothic bouquet, and remind us of that Catholic art that hurled its tapered arrow towards heaven, the steeple, stretching up in aspirations.” Dorothy Parker, a riotously funny writer, once declared, “His voice was as intimate as the rustle of sheets.” (She also wrote that “brevity is the soul of lingerie.”)

Visualize analogies and metaphors when writing them, as well as the images they conjure. Are they apt and effective in conveying their intent? Be warned, however, that mixed metaphors are not only inaccurate, they distract the reader and discredit the writer. “He smelled the jugular.” ESPN broadcaster Chris Berman actually said this in 2002 describing a playoff football game. (To hold a broadcaster to the standards of the written word is unfair, but it makes the point about how easily metaphors can go wrong.) In addition, global audiences will have great difficulty with metaphors and analogies. Great care should be exercised when employing them, using them only where they *help* communicate an idea and do not *hinder* understanding, or worse, offend and alienate.

Berman's example points to another danger— clichés. It is easy to settle for a cliché, but doing so is like arriving a day late and a dollar short, like taking candy from a baby, like picking low-hanging fruit. Because at the end of the day, when all is said and done, laziness is perhaps the writer's greatest enemy.

Avoid these clichés like the plague:

- last but not least;
- give 110 percent;
- untimely death (think about this one just for a moment);
- brutal rape (what would its opposite be, a friendly rape?);
- few and far between;
- stick to the game plan;
- off the wagon, on the wagon or circling the wagons.

Exercise 1.4

Think of some more clichés—the more the merrier. If you need inspiration, more clichés than you can shake a stick at can be found at the American Copy Editors Society Web site, <http://www.copydesk.org/words/cliches.htm>.

Exercise 1.5

Describe the Internet using analogy in two different sentences, each with a different emphasis in meaning. For attempts at this from the past, think information superhighway, cyberspace or getting a Second Life.

Example: As an information superhighway, the Internet too often resembles a Los Angeles cloverleaf during rush hour.



Be Direct

I am hurt. A plague o' both your houses! I am sped.

Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare knew how to deliver a verbal punch with a stab of brevity. The short sentence can affect emphasis and power in writing. Ernest Hemingway perfected this skill: “*He knew at least twenty good stories . . . and he had never written one. Why?*” And an example from another rhetorical master, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “*This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.*”

In King's quote, the brief introductory sentence sets up the sentence of normal length following. In Hemingway's, the abrupt question “Why?” adds emphasis to the character's flaw under examination. The short sentence (Hemingway's was one word) also can be used for transition. For Shakespeare, Mercutio's words are his last, like final, choking gasps for air.



Be Consistent

Failing to use parallel structure is one of the most common problems in writing. Here are some examples of this:

Good: One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.

Bad: One cannot think well, have love, fall asleep, if dinner was bad.

Good: Jane likes hunting and fishing.

Bad: Jane likes to hunt and fishing.

Sentences should be balanced and faithful to a reader's subconscious expectations in terms of the physical act of reading. Parts of a sentence with coordinating conjunctions (*and, but or for, nor, yet, so*), therefore, should be joined in consistent fashion.

Exercise 1.6

Re-write the following sentences to make them parallel in structure.

- Delta promises a bounty of flights that are on time, have convenient connections and offer a well-balanced in-flight meal.
- Heroes in movies are always wealthy, always get the girl, wear high fashion and usually arrive at the scene about two seconds after the bad guy has left.
- Speaking of movies, telephones in movies are always knocked over if they wake up a character, never ring more than three times before getting answered, and get restored by frantically tapping on the cradle and shouting, "Hello? Hello?"

Just as laziness or lack of care prevents good parallel structure, verb tenses should not mysteriously change mid-sentence, nor should the singularity or plurality of subjects or objects being described or discussed.



Be Aware

Here are some common pitfalls you'll want to be sure to avoid when writing:

- **plagiarism**—both intentional and inadvertent; it is almost impossible to over-cite, so when in doubt, cite the source;
- **stereotyping**—"journalists are cynical";
- **oversimplifying**—rarely is a choice either/or; rarely does a question or issue have *only* two sides;
- **generalizing**—"All computer users struggle with addiction." Every last one of them? Be wary of *all, none, nobody, always, everything*;
- **jumping to conclusions**—see *generalizing*;
- **faulty logic or circular arguments**—using the Bible, for example, to justify one's Christian faith; however the Bible is fine for *explaining* Christian faith;
- **overuse of pronouns and articles**—"this," "these," "those," "he" or "she." Which one(s)? Who? What are you talking about? Don't risk confusing the reader.



Be Concise

What difference does it make if you live in a picturesque little outhouse surrounded by 300 feeble minded goats and your faithful dog ...? The question is: Can you write?

Ernest Hemingway

Exercise 1.7

Hemingway could write, obviously. He once wrote a short story in six words. "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." He called it his best work. The task in this exercise is to do as Hemingway did, to write a short story in just six words. This will force you to be most judicious and deliberate in choosing your words. Here are some examples, from *Wired* magazine's November 2006 issue:

"Failed SAT. Lost scholarship. Invented rocket."—William Shatner.

"Computer, did we bring batteries? Computer?"—Eileen Gunn.

"Vacuum collision. Orbits diverge. Farewell, Love."—David Brin.

"Gown removed carelessly. Head, less so."—Joss Whedon.

An example of good writing

To consider how to improve your own writing (and thinking), consider some of the problems in writing George Orwell observed in his essay, "Politics and the English Language," an essay as timely today as the day it was published more than 50 years ago:

- staleness of imagery;
- lack of precision or concreteness;
- use of dying (or dead) metaphors;
- use of "verbal false limbs," such as "render inoperative" or "militate against";
- pretentious diction (words like *phenomenon, element, individual*);
- use of meaningless words.

Orwell wrote that a scrupulous writer will ask himself at least four questions in every sentence that he writes:

- 1 What am I trying to say?
- 2 What words will express it?
- 3 What image or idiom will make it clearer?
- 4 Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

- 1 Could I put it more shortly?
- 2 Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

Finally, in cautioning against "prefabricated phrases" and "humbug and vagueness generally," Orwell's essay provides writers with several points of advice:

- 1 Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- 2 Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3 If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4 Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

To Orwell's last point, take a look at a concurring judicial opinion written by Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson in a First Amendment case from 1945, *Thomas v. Collins*. Revel in Jackson's directness, in how accessible the language is compared to the legal jargon that characterizes many if not most court opinions. The case had to do with the constitutionality of a Texas law requiring labor organizers to register with the state before soliciting memberships in a union. From p. 323 of the decision:

As frequently is the case, this controversy is determined as soon as it is decided which of two well established, but at times overlapping, constitutional principles will be applied to it. The State of Texas stands on its well settled right reasonably to regulate the pursuit of a vocation, including—we may assume—the occupation of labor organizer. Thomas, on the other hand, stands on the equally clear proposition that Texas may not interfere with the right of any person peaceably and freely to address a lawful assemblage of workmen intent on considering labor grievances.

Though the one may shade into the other, a rough distinction always exists, I think, which is more shortly illustrated than explained. A state may forbid one without its license to practice law as a vocation, but I think it could not stop an unlicensed person from making a speech about the rights of man or the rights of labor, or any other kind of right, including recommending that his hearers organize to support his views. Likewise, the state may prohibit the pursuit of medicine as an occupation without its license, but I do not think it could make it a crime publicly or privately to speak urging persons to follow or reject any school of medical thought. So the state, to an extent not necessary now to determine, may regulate one who makes a business or a livelihood of soliciting funds or memberships for unions. But I do not think it can prohibit one, even if he is a

salaried labor leader, from making an address to a public meeting of workmen, telling them their rights as he sees them and urging them to unite in general or to join a specific union.

This wider range of power over pursuit of a calling than over speech-making is due to the different effects which the two have on interests which the state is empowered to protect. The modern state owes and attempts to perform a duty to protect the public from those who seek for one purpose or another to obtain its money. When one does so through the practice of a calling, the state may have an interest in shielding the public against the untrustworthy, the incompetent, or the irresponsible, or against unauthorized representation of agency. A usual method of performing this function is through a licensing system.

But it cannot be the duty, because it is not the right, of the state to protect the public against false doctrine. The very purpose of the First Amendment is to foreclose public authority from assuming a guardianship of the public mind through regulating the press, speech, and religion. In this field, every person must be his own watchman for truth, because the forefathers did not trust any government to separate the true from the false for us (*West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624). Nor would I. Very many are the interests which the state may protect against the practice of an occupation, very few are those it may assume to protect against the practice of propagandizing by speech or press. These are thereby left great range of freedom.

This liberty was not protected because the forefathers expected its use would always be agreeable to those in authority, or that its exercise always would be wise, temperate, or useful to society. As I read their intentions, this liberty was protected because they knew of no other way by which free men could conduct representative democracy.

(Opinion available: <http://supreme.justia.com/us/323/516/case.html>)

The first thing you may notice is how Jackson is present with you through his writing. He is speaking to you, you right there. He isn't "performing," trying to impress you with rhetorical flourishes.

Jackson's intellect as a jurist is on display here, as are his voice and method of thinking. He first identifies what he sees as the core issue. He presents the facts. He identifies the principles by which he will decide. He decides, then he explains in such a way that we non-lawyers can understand him. In short, Jackson says what he means and means what he says. Sherwood Anderson wrote that "the danger lies in the emptiness of so many of the words we use."

Getting Started: Putting Your Ideas in Words

Mindful of how writing has evolved (and why), inspired by Pascal, Hemingway, Shakespeare and Orwell, finally it is time to write. The following steps will help us get started.

A. Get the Idea: Determine Your Purpose

- **Brainstorm:** write down whatever might be related to the task, even if it seems irrelevant at the moment. There is no judgment in brainstorming, which, to use a sailing metaphor, is akin to producing your own wind. As the Latin proverb goes, "If there is no wind, row!" The best way to get some ideas, at least one good idea, is to generate a lot of ideas.
- **Cluster:** similar to brainstorming, this is more for visual people. Put the main idea in the middle of the page, then link related ideas, then related ideas to those related ideas, and so on. The ideas should radiate out from a conceptual center.
- **Free write:** write down the thesis or purpose statement at the top of the page, then write under it all the ideas that flow from that thesis, including sources, questions to pursue and things *not* to do.

B. Map It Out

- What is the topic?
- What is/are the main point(s)?
- Who is the primary audience? Are there secondary audiences?
- What is the specific purpose of the writing? (What is the goal?)
- What sources will be used?
- What method will be used to gather the information?

A word about audience: There is much more on audience in Chapter 5, but even now it is critical to know who the readers will be or to whom the content is being targeted. This knowledge should influence topic, tone, complexity and a host of other content issues. To help, here are some things to think about adapted from a worksheet put together by long-time literary agent Laurie Rozakis (1997):

- 1 How old are your readers?
- 2 What is their gender?
- 3 How much education do they have?
- 4 Are they mainly urban, rural or suburban?
- 5 In which country were they born? How much is known about their culture and heritage?
- 6 What is their socio-economic status?
- 7 How much does the audience already know about the topic?
- 8 How do they feel about the topic? Will they be neutral, oppositional, or will this be more like preaching to the choir?

The answers to all of these questions might not yet be available, which is fine. The point is to consider the readers or users* as completely as possible before

writing. (*A better term for readers/users/consumers is desperately needed. Online, we do not merely read. Presumably most of us are not addicted to the Net. And content online is not like a bag of potato chips. What do we call the people who visit our blogs and Web sites and interact with our content? Inter-actors, perhaps? Hmm . . .)

C. Outline and Storyboard It

Outlining helped prepare this very section on writing. After answering the basic questions, it makes sense to then organize how the content will be presented to readers. Similar to home-building, the outline or blueprint can be used to organize the work, especially when different pieces of the project are being done at different times by different people. This blueprint can always be changed, and it does not have to be an elaborate outline replete with Roman numerals and series of alphabetized lists. Even a visual map, using circles, for example, might do the trick. Reverse-outlining, or outlining after the piece is written, can also be very useful, revealing structural flaws or a better order for the information.

Before getting to work, writing students are advised to buy or borrow a writing handbook like the one most of us used in English composition as first-year undergraduates. Examples include *The Everyday Writer*, by Andrea A. Lunsford (this book's author's favorite); *The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers*; *Rules for Writers*; or *When Words Collide* (Lunsford 2009; Anson and Schwegler 2009; Hacker 2009; Kessler and McDonald 1984). Most every major publisher has one.

D. Revise It. Then Revise It Again

Plan time for revisions. As Hemingway famously said, "All first drafts are [crap]," so give yourself time and room to fail. The only reason for a first draft is to have something to revise. And be tenacious! Editing and revising takes patience and perseverance.

During the revision process, question the decisions you made in writing the first draft. Re-consider, critique and question:

- Your first paragraph. Re-write your first paragraph from an entirely different perspective, sit back and see which beginning you like better. For that alternate beginning, try thinking sideways! In other words, come at the subject from an entirely different angle.
- Your last paragraph. Re-write your last paragraph, your landing, as well.
- The one or two sentences you absolutely love. Highlight these and delete them. Is your writing stronger without your precious darlings there preening for attention? (The lesson here is to remove anything that is merely for effect, to impress, to be admired as witty or clever. Hemingway described prose not as interior decoration but as architecture.)

- Your adjectives. Look for redundancy, for empty descriptives, like “the long hallway” or “the deep, blue ocean.”
- Your adverbs. Often one good verb is far better than a verb-adverb combination. Example: “He ran briskly across the field.” Try: “He galloped in pursuit.” While revising for adverbs, you might also reconsider your verb choices. Highlight all your verbs in one color and all of your adverbs in another. Re-think your choices.
- Clichés. Get rid of them.
- Ambiguity, vagueness, generalities. If you are not quite sure what a passage means, your reader most definitely won’t either. Cut it out.

You might also read your piece with the following catalog of common writing problems at hand. The product of years of grading and editing undergraduate student writing, this list, which is in no particular order, will keep your writing out of potholes.

- 1 “Media” is a plural term. “Medium” is singular. So media *are*; a medium *is*. Even senior journalism and mass communication students haplessly struggle with this basic usage.
- 2 Avoid ethnocentric references such as “we” or “our” or “us” or “our country.” It assumes too much, and it communicates exclusivity. Assume as little as possible. Many readers might not consider themselves members of any one person’s “us” or “we” or “our.” What of immigrants, green card aliens, international students? What does “us” even mean? Be precise instead.
- 3 Singular-plural agreement is a very common writing problem.
 - Example 1: “The government is wrong when they tell us what to do.” The government is an “it.” People who work for governments are a “they.”
 - Example 2: “A, B and C are a predictor of future behavior.” No, they are predictors. There are three of them.
 - Example 3: “The surfer is able to read the article themselves.” Word processing makes moving words around so easy—too easy, in fact. Writers oftentimes lose track of agreement with so much cutting and pasting.
- 4 Beware of imprecise, even reckless use of personal pronouns such as “they,” “their,” “them” and “it.” Often these are used at the sacrifice of clarity. Which “they” is being referenced? Most articles include discussion of more than one group. Which “them”? What “it”? “Their” refers to ownership, but by whom? The writer knows the words’ references because they flowed from the writer’s head. The reader, however, likely will be confused. A second reading or edit can reveal the vagueness of many of these usages. Night-before or on-deadline writing is notorious for producing this kind of carelessness and imprecision.

- 5 Use the right word, not just a good word. This was discussed earlier in the chapter.
- 6 A related issue, imprecision with adjectives. “A lot” . . . “more and more” . . . “massive amounts” . . . “very detrimental” . . . “a great deal.” None of these suffice. Instead be specific, precise and show supporting evidence for such statements and judgments.
- 7 Do your part to prevent semi-colon abuse! Semi-colons, colons, commas, hyphens and dashes each have their own specific purposes. A writer’s handbook is valuable in figuring them out. The comma, for example, is “a small crooked point, which in writing followeth some branch of the sentence & in reading warneth us to rest there, & to help our breth a little” (Richard Mulcaster, writing in his 1582 volume, *The First Part of the Elementarie*). A common apostrophe problem pits “its” v. “it’s.” “It’s” is a contraction. “Its” is possessive.
- 8 After beginning a quote, make sure you end it, somewhere, sometime. It is a common mistake to begin a quote but then to forget the close quotes, effectively putting the rest of the treatise into the quotation. This is the writing equivalent of flicking on your turn signal, turning, then leaving it blinking the rest of the way down the highway. Other motorists are laughing at you!
- 9 A related issue, orphaning quotes. Quotes should all have parents, so be sure to identify this parentage. Orphan quotes are quotations dropped into an article without identification of the speaker or writer or source. There should be a source in the narrative (“said the inspections officer” or “the Civil War historian wrote”).
- 10 Another related issue, stringing quotations together. The writing can quickly become a very thin piece of string merely holding other people’s work together. The writer should be providing some pearls, as well, which means taking the time to integrate and weave the parts into a coherent, meaningful whole. Rarely is there benefit in merely grafting in quoted material just because it is on topic and seems worded more ably than the writer thinks he or she could pull off him- or herself. Writers should avoid subletting their space to others.
- 11 Hyphens pull together, like staples; dashes separate. “Twin-engine plane”: hyphen, for a compound adjective. “She was—if you can believe this—trying to jump out of the car!”: dashes, to separate the parenthetical phrase. In general, dashes should be avoided. They have no agreed upon rules and therefore are or can be a sign of laziness.
- 12 More editing required. After something has been written, long or short, even a single blog post, walk away. Go to the coffee shop and sip a latte. Go for a jog. Once refreshed, return to the writing and edit. Revise. Re-work. Improve. All good writers do this. Of course, it takes planning.

The Online Effect

Email, texting, social networking, IM and chat arguably are having a corrosive effect on writing. The informality of writing for these online environments is "seeping into . . . schoolwork," according to a study by the Pew Internet & America Life Project, in partnership with the College Board's National Commission on Writing. Nearly two-thirds of 700 students surveyed acknowledged that their electronic communication style, which primarily is an informal, interpersonal style, found its way into school assignments. About half said they sometimes omitted proper punctuation and capitalization in their schoolwork, while a quarter said they used emoticons. These are alarming trends, calling for more education on the different styles that should be employed for different forms or kinds of communication.

Chapter Assignments

- 1 Produce a writing sample. The choice of subject is entirely yours. You could, for example, write a short travelogue piece about somewhere you have recently visited. An opinion piece on some question or issue of the day, such as U.S. immigration policy or whether online communication has eroded language skills, also is an option. You could even review a movie, play or book.

Length: about 700 words.

Be sure to include:

- (a) a headline summarizing the work;
- (b) identification of the audience(s) for whom it is intended;
- (c) an abstract (a one- or two-sentence summary of your piece);
- (d) a list of key words a search engine might use to find this writing piece online.

- 2 Students should pair up and work together to improve the writing of one another. This exercise can be extremely valuable, and from both perspectives, that of being critiqued and that of (gently) critiquing. Some might be nervous or uncomfortable critiquing a classmate, especially early in a course, but students should not fret. Be civil and constructive, and demonstrate that you have or are developing a tough skin. Writing improvement demands a great deal of constructive criticism and therefore an increasingly thick skin and short memory.

Workshop partners should have at their disposal a writing handbook and this text. It does not matter which handbook; they cover the same general topics. Each student will use the handbook to analyze his or her own writing and that of the assigned workshop partner(s).

Length: about 500 words, but this word count is admittedly arbitrary.

Online Resources

Elements of Style (original 1918 ed.) by William Strunk, Jr.
<http://www.bartleby.com/141>

A free, online edition of *the* classic guide to writing well.

"More Clichés Than You Can Shake a Stick At"

<http://www.copydesk.org/words/cliches.htm>

A list of journalistic clichés compiled by Mimi Burkhardt on the Web site for the American Copy Editors Society.

Poynter Institute's Writer's Toolbox

<http://poynter.org/subject.asp?id=2>

Tips and best practices from, and blogs by, some of Poynter's writing faculty, including Roy Peter Clark and Chip Scanlan.

Purdue University's Online Writing Lab

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

Style guides, writing and teaching helps, and resources for grammar and writing mechanics.

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2 DIGITAL MEDIA VERSUS ANALOG MEDIA

The Web is jam-packed with empty, incoherent, ill-organized, meaningless, repetitive pages. Gunk. Spam. Junk. Crap. It gives the Web a bad name.

Rachel McAlpine, Web designer and author

If you don't know how to communicate with words, you're in the wrong business.

Don Hewitt, executive producer of CBS-TV's *60 Minutes*

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- understand the similarities and differences in reading styles for Web audiences and print media audiences;
- evaluate credibility in digital media;
- write in such a way that facilitates online reading through scanning;
- encourage and enhance readership through interactive, multimedia pages;
- explain what XHTML is and how it works.

Introduction

In this chapter, writing for the Web and the credibility of information on the Web are compared with writing for and credibility in traditional print media. Web users do not merely *read* online content, they *interact* with it, because unlike print media, online media are not static or one-way, or at least they shouldn't be. Hypertext allows this interaction, or "reading," to be non-hierarchical and non-linear, more like entering a matrix and moving around within it than reading left to right, line by line. "Writers of hypertext . . . might be described as the designers and builders of an information 'space' to be explored by their readers," Carolyn Dowling wrote in 1999, when new media were in fact new. Interactivity, multimedia, space-building and the credibility of these information *spaces* are the emphases here. HTML and XHTML, the languages of Web page construction, are also introduced.