

WRITING FOR PRINT AND DIGITAL MEDIA

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ries, which has been translated into four languages and is now in its fifth edition; and a co-author with Pamela Shoemaker and Dominic Lasorsa of the recently published *How to Build Social Science Theories*.

PREFACE

Mass media are among the most exciting, important and dynamic institutions in communities around the globe. Careers in mass communication provide opportunities for those so inclined to have positive, profound impacts on social, political, cultural and economic conditions wherever they live. The responsibilities of journalists and public relations practitioners are great, but the rewards are, too.

WRITING

This book is designed to assist readers who want to make the most of these opportunities. Writing for Print and Digital Media helps students develop the superb writing skills they'll need to succeed as media professionals. We're not talking only about a writer's knowledge of grammar, spelling, punctuation and style, although these fundamentals are critical.

Our vision of writing is much broader and much deeper than that. Stated most simply, good writers produce copy that is accurate, compelling, fair, balanced, complete, clear and concise—and they do that within laws, professional standards and ethical codes of conduct that inform *all* of their work. They have mastered a complex array of skills and know how to apply them, often under difficult circumstances. Here are some of the characteristics that we hope readers of this book will develop as they study and apply the concepts outlined here and by their teachers:

- Good writers are critical thinkers who can effectively use the research tools discussed in this book to analyze problems and find solutions. If they want to know, for example, whether a community's police department is unfairly targeting minorities in a traffic control program, they know how to do a systematic study of records. If they need information on which to construct a public relations campaign and they can get it only by doing a social science study, they know how to do that. They have the critical thinking skills necessary to analyze, to synthesize and to interpret information so that it makes sense to them and to their audiences.
- Good writers try to adopt the objective approach and all that entails. They are, for example, skeptical of authority; dedicated to accuracy, completeness, precision and clarity; creative; consistent in making strategic decisions; fair

and impartial; unwilling to support any political, social, cultural or economic interests that conflict with public or professional interests; ethical in their professional and personal lives; and honest about their own preferences and idiosyncrasies.

- Good writers understand the social, political, legal, economic and cultural contexts within which they work. They realize that nothing is more important to a free society than the free flow of accurate and useful information and that journalists and public relations practitioners are responsible for protecting that free flow against those who would limit or pollute it.
- Good writers understand the communication context within which they work and try to minimize the worst aspects of mass communication while maximizing the best aspects. Journalists need to understand how the drive for profits influences the media for which they work, and public relations practitioners need to understand that the interests of their organizations and of society will occasionally conflict, sometimes in fundamental ways.
- Good writers are interested in *everything*, from politics to farming to science to art to poetry and all things between and beyond. They want to know how the powerless get by when times are tough and how the powerful exercise their power; why some public school children don't learn and why some do; how language shapes our lives and determines our futures. They have the skills to find answers to these and thousands of other questions.
- Good writers strive to rise continuously and relentlessly to new levels of competence and creativity. This requires that they read constantly and that they write constantly. It takes practice, practice, practice. A good teacher helps.
- Good writers can write for any medium and any purpose using any format, for they have mastered the fundamentals, and those don't change—regardless of medium or purpose. Good writing is good writing, whether one is producing a novel, a news release, a documentary film, a feature story, a love letter or anything else. A writer who knows the fundamentals can produce copy for a newspaper, a public relations agency, a Web site or a broadcast outlet. The format differences are easy to master.

SELF-EDITING

Many bad writers just bang out stories and then turn them in without reading them over—good writers don't do that unless they are working under extreme deadline pressure. Media writers turn their copy over to editors when they are done, but that doesn't mean they aren't editors—or that editors cannot profit from the principles outlined in this book.

The best writers are good self-editors. That means they finish first drafts and then go to work on them all over again. They make sure that the mechanics are right and the style rules are used correctly; that the lead is clear, concise, com-

pelling and to the point; that the story is organized well; that the facts are complete and accurate; and that they have attributed carefully.

We have included sections about self-editing in chapters 3, 4 and 5, but even where we have not incorporated a separate section, it's important to think in terms of self-editing, for the ability to self-edit effectively and efficiently is one of the things that separates mediocre writers from good writers.

It's possible to hang on to a story too long, of course. A good rule of thumb is for a writer to turn in the story when he or she starts editing sentences that have already been edited.

RESEARCH, THEORY AND OTHER WRITINGS

Writing for Print and Digital Media contains many references to some of the latest (and some of the classic) research, commentary and theory in mass communication. Media professionals can learn a great deal from the critical theorists' analyses of power and the media; the social scientists' studies of media effects; the cultural theorists' investigations of the media's portrayals of marginalized groups; and the media professionals' descriptions of tough assignments they've handled.

This body of knowledge, accumulated over several decades, is important to those who want to understand how communication works (and doesn't work), who want to change mass media for the better and who want to be better professionals.

This book does contain chapter endnotes. Some may object on principle to notes in textbooks, and readers can ignore them if they so choose. But we hope they won't. We try to cite literature that is easy to find (we frequently cite more than one source for important information) and that elaborates on points we can cover only superficially. The notes are here not only to document assertions but also as suggested readings. These valuable materials really will expand horizons and help make readers better writers and better citizens.

We hope this book, in combination with the classroom teachers who are working hard to teach writing, will help students change the ways they view the world and their places in it. We hope, too, that each reader becomes a better writer.

STRUCTURE

This book is designed primarily for a semester-long class in beginning media writing with lecture-laboratory format. The class meets for six to eight contact hours each week for roughly 16 weeks. Experience shows the book works well with this format.

However, mass communication programs schedule courses in many different ways and in many different formats (semester versus quarter system, for example). Further, some teachers cover information collection before writing fundamentals, and some cover writing before information collection. There are many other variations.

We have organized Writing for Print and Digital Media to maximize flexibility. If a program schedules writing in one term and information collection in another, the book would fit that format. A teacher could assign chapters 1–7 in the first term and chapters 8–12 in the second term. Chapters 13–15 could be assigned in either term. If a teacher wants to discuss attribution and quotation before lead writing, he or she can assign Chapter 7 before Chapter 5.

All of this is probably obvious. Our point is simply that we have tried to arrange the book so that it can fit conveniently into almost any format. We hope it works for yours.

STYLE

Style, in this context, refers to the standards of language usage that a medium adopts as it tries to ensure consistency in everything it publishes or broadcasts. A medium's editors, for example, must decide whether courtesy titles (Mrs., Mr., Ms.) will be used in the stories they print or air. When the style is decided, all writers and editors follow that style, and readers and listeners become accustomed to that format. Literally hundreds of decisions are made as editors develop their style sheets.

The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law is the standard in the news industry. Many newspapers, Web sites, magazines, public relations offices and broadcast outlets use the style manual and nothing else. Others incorporate many of the rules into their own style manuals—but with some changes.

We have mostly followed The Associated Press' style in preparing this book because AP style is so widely used. We have made one alteration, however. The names of newspapers, magazines, television programs, books, films and similar content are set in italic type, as are court cases. The Associated Press does not use italic type for technical reasons, but italic type is used by most media. We decided to use it here whenever it would ordinarily be used in a textbook.

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