



FIFTH EDITION

WRITING

FOR THE MASS MEDIA

JAMES GLEN STOVALL

Writing for the Mass Media

Fifth Edition

James Glen Stovall
University of Alabama

Allyn and Bacon

Boston • London • Toronto • Sydney • Tokyo • Singapore

This book is dedicated to
MARTHA ELIZABETH STOVALL
1914-1982
who loved books and taught others to do the same.

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Preface

Writing is one thing; writing about writing is another. Like most people, I cannot remember the first word or the first sentence that I wrote. (I am reasonably sure they were not momentous.) I can remember always being encouraged to write, however, by parents and teachers who knew the importance of writing.

I have always enjoyed and admired good writing, and I continue to be in awe of it. How Mark Twain could have created such a wonderful and timeless story as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, how Henry David Thoreau could distill his thoughts into the crisp and biting prose of *Walden*, or how Red Smith could have turned out high-quality material for his sports column day after day—all of this is continually amazing to me. I frankly admit, I don't know how they did it.

And yet, here I am writing about writing. Why should I be doing this? At least three reasons occur to me immediately. I am fascinated by the process of writing. I write about it so I can understand it better. For me, it is a process of self-education. I hope that some of the insights I have discovered will rub off on those who read this book.

I am convinced that while great writing might be a gift to a chosen few, good writing is well within the reach of the rest of us. There are things we can do to improve our writing.

I care about the language and the way it is used. Those of us fortunate enough to have English as a native language have been given a mighty tool with which to work. It is powerful and dynamic. An underlying purpose of this book is to encourage the intelligent and respectful use of this tool.

This book is the product of many people, some of whom were listed in the first three editions. For this edition, I particularly want to thank David Davies, who generously contributed many of his exercises and ideas, and Matt Bunker, who wrote the chapter on media and the law despite a very short deadline.

Renée Bangs edited and proofread the final manuscript of this

edition with much diligence and intelligence. She also created the index. Her suggestions proved very helpful, and her work has done much to improve this book. I am very grateful for her efforts.

Those who conducted a review of the third edition and gave me many helpful suggestions were Hong Cheng of Bradley University and John Palen of Central Michigan University.

I also want to thank Pam Doyle, who offered some extremely helpful suggestions on the Writing for Broadcast chapter for the third edition, and I continue to use those ideas; and Mark Arnold, who uses the book and has a unique perspective on what belongs in it.

My colleagues on the faculty of the Department of Journalism at the University of Alabama, especially Ed Mullins and David Sloan, have always supported me in the efforts that I have put into this book.

My wife, Sally, remains my chief critic and proofreader and always a source of encouragement. My son, Jefferson, as I write this, is a college sophomore making his own contributions to the world of writing.

This book, like the previous editions, is dedicated to my mother, Martha Elizabeth Stovall, who was my first editor.

James Glen Stovall

James Glen Stovall teaches journalism at the University of Alabama where he has been a faculty member since 1978. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee and is a former reporter and editor for several newspapers, including the *Chicago Tribune*. He also has more than five years of public relations experience. He is the author of a number of books, including *Infographics: A Journalist's Guide*, published by Allyn and Bacon in 1997.

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1

Sit down & write

I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man. (1800)

Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliance with none. . . . Freedom of religion; freedom of the press, and freedom of person under the protection of the habeas corpus, and trial by juries impartially selected. These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. (1801)

Enlighten the people generally and tyranny and oppressions of the body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day. (1816)

Thomas Jefferson

Introduction

Ideas carry a society forward. The ideas of freedom, independence, individualism, religion and social order first existed in the minds of men and women but are crystallized for us by great writers and thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson.

The written word is one of the most powerful forces available to humans. It has the ability to carry ideas and information, to entertain and distract, and to change the lives of individuals and nations. The person who wants to write rarely realizes the power contained in writing. Yet it is there — and available to those who have the information and ideas and who are clever and hard-working enough to learn to write well.

How do you write well?

That question defies a quick, simple answer. Yet all of us have had to consider it. We began that consideration at least by the time we were in the second grade when our teachers made us write in paragraphs. By the fourth grade, we were learning the rules of grammar and punctuation, wondering what in the world these had to do with good writing. (A lot, as it turns out, although we may be reluctant to admit it.) Outside the classroom, we were

writing in our diaries or writing thank you letters to relatives or notes to friends.

At some point, we learned that whatever else writing is — fun, exciting, rewarding — it is not easy. Writing is hard work. As Red Smith, a sports writer for the New York Times, once put it, “There’s nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.”

Smith’s point is not just that writing is hard but that it requires us to give of ourselves. Writing demands total commitment, even if it is just for a few minutes. We can think of nothing else, and do nothing else, when we are writing. The first step to good writing is recognizing this essential point.

But the question still remains. How do you gather together the words that will convey the information, ideas, or feelings you want to give to the reader? How do you write well?

What is good writing?

Good writing, especially good writing for the mass media, is clear, concise, simple, and to-the-point. It transmits information, ideas and feelings to the reader clearly but without overstatement. Good writing is writing that outlines pictures of ideas that readers can fill in with their imagination.

Good writing is efficient. It uses only the minimum number of words to make its point. It doesn’t waste the reader’s time.

Good writing is precise. Good writers use words for their exact meaning; they do not throw words around carelessly.

Good writing is clear. It leaves no doubt or confusion in the reader’s mind about its meaning.

Good writing is modest. It does not draw attention to itself. Good writing does not try to show off the intelligence of the writer. It lets the content speak for itself, and it allows readers to receive messages directly. Writing should not get in the way of what people need and want to read.

So, how do you do it? How do you write well?

The answer to these questions begins with proper preparation.

Getting ready to write

Those who would write for the mass media must understand the implications of what they do. Part of the pre-writing process is developing a sense of what it means to communicate with a mass audience. Writers should understand that they are no longer writing for individuals (an essay for an English teacher, an e-mail to a friend) but for a larger audience.

Nor are they writing for themselves. Much of the writing done in K-12 education is justified as a means of self expression for students. This kind of writing is a valuable exercise, but in the mass media environment there is relatively little room for self expression. Audiences are interested in the information and ideas

that a writer presents, not in how the writer feels or in what the writer thinks. This fact drives the spare, unadorned style of writing that the media demand.

Following closely on this lack of self expression is that in most media environments, writing is a collaborative effort. That is, writers expect to be edited. Their work is not completely their own. Someone else has the power to alter and, we hope, improve it. The editing process is inseparable from the process of writing for the mass media.

Both within their own psyches and their working environments, writers for the mass media need to develop an active sense of integrity about what they do. This sense of integrity acts as a regulator for their behavior, making them unwilling to accept inaccuracies or imprecision and unable to live with less than a very high standard of personal and intellectual honesty. They must understand and assimilate the ethical standards of their profession.

Would-be writers for the mass media should understand enough about the process of writing to know that they can always improve, that they can always do better. They must view their craft with a dose of humility. Every writer, no matter how experienced or talented, begins with a blank page or an empty computer screen. The writer must put the words there, and no amount of experience or talent guarantees success. A good writer should always be willing to do whatever it takes to improve in the craft.

Finally, the would-be writer must do four things:

Know the tools of the trade. Just as a good carpenter knows hammers and nails, good writers must also know and understand the tools with which they work. For writers, a knowledge of the rules of grammar and spelling is mandatory. (Not all writers have to be great spellers, but they should know the rules, and they should always work with a dictionary close at hand.) Writers must know the precise meanings of words and how to use words precisely; although they do not have to use every word they know, having a variety available gives the writer extra tools to use if needed. (Most of us have a vocabulary of about 5,000 to 6,000 words; one scholar estimated that William Shakespeare knew about 30,000 words.)

Writers must not only know the language, but they must understand and be genuinely interested in it. The written word is a powerful instrument with which the lives of many people can be affected. Writers who do not understand this fact do not know what they are dealing with and will not be able to use the lan-

Figure 1-1

Mark Twain on using simple words

I never write "metropolis" for seven cents because I can get the same price for "city." I never write "policeman" because I can get the same money for "cop."



guage effectively. Writers should also be caretakers of the language, unwilling to see English misused and abused.

Today's writers must also be computer-literate. They should understand the commands and details of a word processing program, the ways to change and move text, and the proper use of spelling checkers and other utility programs. Writing for the mass media today demands that writers use their time and equipment efficiently.

Know your subject. Writers must have a clear idea to guide them in their writing. If you do not understand thoroughly what you are writing about, your readers will not understand what you have written. Beginning writers frequently have trouble with this most basic requirement of good writing. They sometimes believe that they can "write" their way through a subject, that just getting the words down is enough. Even experienced media professionals sometimes fail to understand their topics. For example, some journalists try to write about events without properly researching the background or checking with enough sources. Some advertising copywriters try to compose ads without understanding the product or the audience to whom the ad is directed. In both cases, the writing misses the mark. It is often confusing and inefficient.

If you are writing about something you do not understand, stop writing and find out what you need to know. Ask questions of people who do know. Look things up. Or just think the subject through more thoroughly. Writing without understanding or without having your subject firmly in your own mind is like writing with a broken pencil.

Write it down. This may be the most basic point of all: You cannot be a writer unless you put words on paper or on a computer screen. People can think, talk, and agonize all night about what they would like to write. They can read and discuss; they can do research and even make notes. But no one is a writer until ideas become words, and sentences become paragraphs. At some point, the writer must sit down and write.

Writing is very hard work for most people, and few have the tenacity to stick with it. Anthony Trollope, a nineteenth-century English novelist, would begin writing at 5:30 a.m. He would write for two and a half hours, producing at least 250 words every fifteen minutes. Trollope responded to the demands of writing with a strict routine. So did Isaac Asimov, a man who wrote books on subjects ranging from Shakespeare to the Bible to science fiction. Asimov would wake up every morning at 6 a.m. and be at his typewriter writing by 7:30 a.m. He would then work until 10 p.m. He wrote more than 500 books in his lifetime.

Writing is physically difficult because it demands maintaining a stationary position and concentrating for a long time. Writing is mentally difficult because of the effort it takes to know a subject well enough and to think clearly enough to put it down on paper.

In addition, writing involves some risk. We can never be certain that we will be successful in our writing. Something happens to our beautiful thoughts when we try to confine them to com-

plete sentences, and what happens is not always good. Writers must take the chance of failure.

Writers for the mass media have an advantage in overcoming this tendency. Their job is to write, and their circumstances force them to write. They must meet deadlines, often on a daily basis. Working effectively in the mass media environment often requires more discipline than that required of the casual or occasional writer.

Rewrite what you have written. Writing is such hard work that most of us want to do it and forget it. That's natural, but good writers don't give in to this tendency. Good writers have the discipline to reread, edit, and rewrite.

Rewriting requires that a writer reread critically. Writers cannot go through this process patting themselves on the back for all the fine phrases they have produced. Writers must constantly ask if the writing can be clearer, more precise, and more readable. And writers should have the courage to say, "This isn't what I wanted to say," or even, "This isn't very good."

Writers for the mass media often work in circumstances that dictate that someone else read what they have written and make judgments about it. Having another person read what you have written and then give you an honest evaluation of it usually makes for better writing. But writers for the mass media are also at a disadvantage because their deadline pressures often prevent thorough rereading and rewriting.

Figure 1-2

Rewriting and editing

An early draft of text from Chapter 1 is at the right. Note how the editing process changed and improved the final copy.

4. Sit Down and Write

tionary position and concentrating a long time. Writing is mentally difficult because of the effort it takes to know a subject well enough and to think clearly enough to put it down on paper. ~~It's one of the reasons we're using the telephone more and writing letters less.~~

In addition, writing involves some risk. We can never be certain that we ~~will be successful in our writing~~. Something happens to ~~all of our beautiful thoughts when we try to put them on paper~~, and what happens is not always good. Writers must take the chance of failure.

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Techniques for good writing

The following are some suggestions for improving your writing. Many of them are useful at the rewriting stage of your work, but you should try to keep them in mind as your words are going down on paper for the first time. Not all of these suggestions fit every piece of writing you will do, so they need not be considered a strict set of rules. They do constitute a good set of habits for a writer to develop, however.

Let's have the complete sentence

phrases

Should have the courage

edit

after working

Figure 1-3

Isaac Asimov on writing

try only to write clearly, and I have the very good fortune to think clearly so that the writing comes out as I think, in satisfactory shape.



Techniques for good writing

The following are some suggestions for improving your writing. Many of them are useful at the rewriting stage of your work, but you should try to keep them in mind as your words are going down on paper or on the computer screen for the first time. Not all of these suggestions fit every piece of writing you will do, so they need not be considered a strict set of rules. They do constitute a good set of habits for a writer to develop, however.

Write simply. This is a thought you'll see repeatedly in this book. The key to clarity is simplicity. A clear, simple writing style is not the exclusive possession of a few gifted writers. It can be achieved by students who are just beginning a writing career if some of the following suggestions are kept in mind. The following phrases are famous because they convey powerful messages in clear and simple language:

These are the times that try men's souls. (Thomas Paine, 1776)

A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. (Gertrude Stein, 1913)

I have a dream. (Martin Luther King Jr., 1963)

Use simple words. "It is a general truth," Henry Fowler wrote in *Modern English Usage*, "that short words are not only handier to use but more powerful in effect; extra syllables reduce, not increase, vigour." Fowler was talking about the modern tendency to use facilitate instead of ease, numerous instead of many, utilize instead of use, etc. Many people try to use big or complicated words, thinking it will impress the reader. It doesn't; it has the

opposite effect. Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “To write clearly, not only the most expressive, but the plainest words should be chosen.”

Use simple sentences. Not every sentence you write should be in the simple sentence format (subject-predicate or subject-verb-object), but the simple sentence is a good tool for cleaning up muddy writing. For example, take the following sentence (which appeared in a large daily newspaper): “She was shot through the right lung after confronting a woman married to her ex-husband inside the Food World store on Bankhead Highway shortly before 1 p.m.” The confusion could be lessened by breaking this one sentence into three simple sentences: “She was in the Food World store on Bankhead Highway shortly before 1 p.m. She confronted a woman married to her ex-husband. She was shot through the right lung.”

Don’t use one word more than is necessary. Almost every writer uses too many words on occasion. Even the best writers need to be edited. Go back a couple of paragraphs and look at the Fowler quote; it has at least two unnecessary words. Writers should use the minimum number of words necessary to express their ideas and information.

Simple, straightforward prose is mandatory for writing for the mass media. It has no substitute, and its absence will not be excused by readers or listeners.

A first cousin to simplicity is brevity. Writers should never use one more word than is necessary in their writing. They should be on the lookout for words, phrases, and sentences that do not add substantially to the content of what they are writing. They should also guard against those fancy phrases that draw attention to the writing and the writer — and take away from the content.

Eliminate jargon, clichés, and “bureaucratese.” Jargon is the technical language that is used in specialized fields or among a small group of people. Scientists, sportswriters, and even students have their own jargon. Good writers, especially those for the mass media, should use words and phrases commonly understood by most people. It makes no sense to cut people off from receiving your ideas by using language that they cannot understand.

Clichés are overused words and phrases. They are phrases that have ceased to be meaningful and have become trite and tiresome. For example, “dire straits,” “he’s got his act together,” “it’s a small world,” “par for the course,” “you don’t want to go there” and “vast wasteland” have been used so much that they have lost their original luster. All of us have our favorite clichés; the trick is not to use them.

Bureaucratese is a general name for a serious misuse of the language. In order to make themselves or what they write sound more important, many people try to lather their writing with unnecessary and imprecise phrasing. A speechwriter once handed President Franklin Roosevelt a draft of a speech with the following sentence: “We are endeavoring to construct a more

inclusive society.” Roosevelt changed it to say: “We are going to make a country in which no one is left out.” Roosevelt’s simple words carry far more weight than those of his speechwriter.

Once, a football coach at a major state university was on a recruiting trip and heard over the radio that he had been fired. The next day, the athletic director at the school issued the following statement: “I regret the premature publication of the decision before appropriate notification could be made to all parties involved.” The athletic director would not have sounded like such a fool if he had simply said, “I’m sorry we didn’t get to tell him before the story got out.”

Use familiar words rather than unfamiliar words or foreign phrases. William F. Buckley, the conservative newspaper columnist, tries to include at least one or two words that will send his readers scurrying to a dictionary. Readers expect this of Buckley and seem to accept it. Buckley is the exception, however. There are times when a writer must use a word that is not known by all of a mass audience, but those times are rare. Writers should not try to educate the masses by introducing them to new words. Such writing slows the reader down; it makes the reader think about the writing rather than the content; and it eventually drives the reader away.

Foreign phrases often have the same effect. They add little to the content and are often irritating to the reader. At times they may even be insulting, particularly when the writer does not bother to translate them.

Vary sentence type and length. There are four kinds of sentence structures: simple, complex, compound, and compound-complex. Using only one kind of sentence is boring. A good variety of types and lengths of sentences gives pace to writing. It allows the reader’s mind to “breathe,” to take in ideas and information in small doses.

Such variation also helps the writer. Writers often get so involved in what they are writing that they have trouble expressing their ideas clearly. They try to pack too much into one sentence or one paragraph. Breaking down complex and compound sentences into simple sentences, and then putting these sentences back into a variety of forms, often promotes clarity in writing.

One thing writers should not overuse is the inverted sentence. A good example of this kind of sentence is the previous sentence—and this sentence. The inverted sentence is not a good idea in writing for the mass media. Writers want to get ideas and information to readers quickly and efficiently.

Nouns and verbs are the strongest words in the language. Sentences should be built around nouns and verbs; adjectives and adverbs, when they are used, should support the nouns and verbs. Relying on adjectives and adverbs, particularly in writing for the mass media, is a mistake.

Verbs are the most important words that a writer will use. A good verb denotes action; a better verb denotes action and description. While adjectives and adverbs modify (that is, they

limit), verbs expand the writing. They get the reader involved in the writing as no other part of speech does.

A good writer pays close attention to the verbs that he or she uses.

Transitions tie together what you have written. Readers should be able to read through a piece of writing without stops or surprises. Introducing a new idea or piece of information without adequately tying it to other parts of a story is one way to stop a reader cold.

Writing for the mass media

Good writing can go anywhere. The good English theme has much in common with the good news story or the good letter to Mom or the informative label on a bottle of aspirin. All of these pieces of writing have different purposes and different audiences, and they express different ideas. But good writing is good writing.

Writing for the mass media differs from other forms of writing in several aspects:

Subject matter. Writers for the mass media must take on a wide variety of subjects, including news stories, feature stories, advertisements, letters, editorials, and so on.

Purpose. Writing for the mass media has three major purposes: to inform, entertain, and persuade.

Audience. Mass media writing is often directed to a wide audience, and this fact dictates not only the subject matter but the way in which something is written.

Circumstances of the writing. Writing for the mass media often takes place in the presence of others who are doing the same thing. The writing is frequently done under deadline pressure, and many times several people will have a hand in writing and editing a particular item for the mass media.

Becoming a professional

Much of what has been discussed in this chapter has revolved around the qualities and skills necessary to be a professional writer. Those who want to make a career of writing in a media environment have to develop these personal and professional qualities and must hone their skills.

One quality that we have not discussed yet is versatility. Rarely do media professionals stay with their first job. Even more rarely does their career involve just one type of writing. Most professionals will have a variety of jobs throughout their career, and they will be called upon to write in various forms and structures.

Developing a professional agility will be a valuable asset to anyone pursuing a writing career.

This book, in fact, is based on the assumption that all writers need to learn a variety of forms to survive in the mass media. Here students will learn some of the basic principles of good writing — techniques that we have already reviewed in this chapter. Students will read about the importance of using standard English well and the vital role that a stylebook plays in their daily work. They will also be introduced to some of the basic forms of writing.

One of the most important is the inverted pyramid structure of news writing. This structure demands that information be presented in order of its importance rather than in chronological order. The writing must also conform to certain journalistic conventions, such as attribution and proper identification of persons mentioned in the story.

Broadcast writing — writing that is written to be read aloud and hear — demands a different structure, dramatic unity, that emphasizes simplicity and efficiency.

Writing advertising copy requires that writers have a facility with the language so they can use information for persuasive effects.

Writing for public relations calls for wide versatility on the part of practitioners. In most public relations jobs, writers must use the inverted pyramid, good letter writing structures, and broadcast and advertising techniques.

Writing for the World Wide Web combines all of these structures, techniques, and forms. Still, there is a type of writing on the Web that is almost peculiarly its own. That type of writing has its base in a concept called hypertext. Prose writing is linear — that is, you begin at the beginning and read through to the end. Hypertext is non-linear. The text is broken into bits and structured so that a reader can begin at any number of points and decide which sequence suits his or her purposes. These bits of writing should relate to the whole, but they also need to stand by themselves within the context of the entire article or web site. They are generally hierarchical; that is, they go from the general to the specific. But because the Web offers readers the opportunity to move quickly from one item to another, the writer must also look for opportunities to “link” parts of the writing with other parts to make it easier for the reader to move around. This means the writer needs to anticipate how the reader might navigate within a Web site.

Another demand on writers using the hypertext structure is the ability to write headlines, subheads, and summaries. Writing headlines and subheads for the Web is far less restrictive than writing them for newspapers or magazines in terms of making them fit into a certain space. Web writers are likely to have many more options and fewer typographical rules than the headline writer for newspapers. But their abilities to summarize, whether in headline, subhead or summary form, will be severely tested, just as they are in traditional media. Summaries demand precise and concise use of the language. They also demand that the writer understand the material being summarized so well that he