

A Beginner's

Guide to

MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS

Val Gause

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A Beginner's Guide to Media Communications

About the Author

Val Gause teaches newspaper, yearbook, and broadcast journalism in the Fort Bend Independent School District in Houston, Texas. His classes have won numerous awards in state and local journalism competition. Currently Gause's students have a weekly column in a local newspaper, where their work is published under their own bylines. Formerly news director of a Houston-area radio station, a cable television anchor, and a newspaper humor columnist, Gause also does freelance gagwriting for 30 professional cartoonists in the United States and Canada and freelance news and feature writing for publications throughout the United States.

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—V.G.

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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Writing for the Media

Professional Jargon

Piece

News or feature story; an article written for print or broadcast media

Typo

Typographical error

Dummy or Page Dummy

A layout or a model of a page with text showing pictures and artwork in position; prepared in advance of publication

Copy

Text of a news or feature story

Proofread or Proof

To read copy for errors

Graf

Abbreviation for paragraph

Word Count

The number of words in any copy

Slug

The label on the manuscript identifying the story

IT ALL STARTS AT THE KEYBOARD

Every newspaper article, book, movie, television show, or commercial started as a script that was typed or keyboarded at a computer. Most professional writers even keyboard the rough draft. Why? The answer is simple. Typing or keyboarding on a personal computer is three to four times FASTER than writing by hand, even if you're only a fair typist. Also, of course, it's more readable.

Think about the final draft of that English or science paper that took you about an hour to write by hand. Once you learn keyboarding or typing skills, that chore can be cut to fifteen minutes.

If you have ever wanted to "tell the world" what you think about something, you already understand what motivates writers, reporters, cartoonists, broadcast professionals, recording artists, actors, and even photographers. All communicate with large numbers of people through the mass media.

However, wanting to be a writer for the media and getting your work seriously considered for publication in school or in community publications are two different matters. This book is designed to show you how to communicate like a professional for newspapers, yearbooks, radio, television, and film/video production.

If you look up the word *professional* in the dictionary, you won't find any mention of age. A professional is simply anyone who knows the rules and standards of a profession—such as writing—and competently performs his or her duties. In other words, you can start becoming a professional *now*. Memorize the terms in the jargon list at the beginning of this chapter. As a "pro," you'll be expected to know them.

Many schools offer typing or keyboarding classes. You may have had one already. In any case, you will be expected to type your media communications—whether you are writing copy for your school newspaper, yearbook, radio, or for a television station. Professionals in the media are expected to have keyboarding skills.

Following are some basic guidelines for typing copy and punctuation. These rules are fairly standard. However, your school publications style may be different—in which case, follow your teacher's or adviser's instruction.

- Double-space all copy. This makes your copy easy to read and to edit.
- Indent at the beginning of each paragraph. Traditionally, on a typewriter you would be expected to indent five spaces for a paragraph indent. On a personal computer you simply press the return button twice, spacing between paragraphs.
- Leave one space after punctuation marks. Traditionally, on a typewriter you would be expected to leave two spaces after a period.
- If you are working at a typewriter, use two hyphens together to indicate a dash. (On a computer, word-processing programs often have the dash as a character.)
- When using quotation marks, include commas and periods within the quotation marks. (Our teacher says, "Leave one space after a comma that comes before a quote.")

- When quoting several uninterrupted sentences from the same source in the same paragraph or continuous paragraphs, don't type ending quotes until after the last sentence.
- Spell out numbers one through nine. Use arabic numbers from 10 on.
- Spell out "million." For example, 10 million is much easier to read quickly than 10,000,000.
- Do not use *th* or *rd* at the end of dates. (The band concert is scheduled for Sept. 4 in the gym.)
- If you begin a sentence with a number, spell it out. The only exception to this rule occurs when you are specifically naming a year. You may begin a sentence with a year written in arabic numbers. (1995 was the year my brother graduated from high school.)
- If you are enclosing an entire sentence in parentheses, place the ending punctuation within the parentheses. If only a word or phrase at the end of a sentence is to be in parentheses, the ending punctuation goes outside the closing parenthesis (period).

NOW TRY WRITING LIKE A PRO

The following exercises may be done by using the lines provided. Your teacher may instruct you to use a typewriter or personal computer. Follow the rules above for this exercise.

1. Write a sentence using the numbers 9, 10, and 5,000,000.

2. Write a sentence in which you name a news source, such as a coach, and quote something he or she said during an interview. Follow this with another sentence quoted from the same source.

3. Write a sentence beginning with a number.

4. Write a sentence in which you quote a news source, but do not name the source until the end of the quotation.

MAKING A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

Many writers in the media communications field started their careers by writing for their school and community newspapers.

If the editor of your school or community newspaper agrees to consider publishing one of your articles, you will want to prepare the assignment to his/her specifications. In the newspaper business, you may be able to convince an editor over the phone to give your proposed story idea a try. However, in the publishing industry in general, editors prefer to receive proposals in writing. Whatever the situation, you will want to prepare your manuscript so that it makes a good impression. When giving assignments, many newspaper editors will tell you how long your news story should be—in words, not pages. Length is an important consideration in the media communications industry.

The standard word count rule is that there are 250 words on a double-spaced page, with 1.5-inch margins on all four sides. Incidentally, never submit a piece that isn't double-spaced. That's a sure sign of an amateur.

So if an editor wants 500 words, that's the equivalent of two typewritten pages—"equivalent" because the format preferred for the first page will make a 500-word story spill over onto a third page.

On the first page, start with your headline centered about one-third of the way down the page. (This allows the editor plenty of room for any notes he or she might write about where to place your story in the paper, etc.)

Next, press the return key and center the word "by."

Hit the return key again and center your name.

Press the return key again, indent for a paragraph, and begin your copy. Don't use all capitals for headlines or gimmicky spacing ideas to "dress up" your manuscript. Once again, such gimmicks are sure signs of an amateur.

After typing your first page, you'll notice that the copy covers roughly half the page, equaling about 125 words. If you follow the 1.5-inch margin guidelines, the second page will be about 250 words. Thus, your 500-word piece will cover half the first page, all of the second, and about half of a third page.

Don't get out a ruler to see if you've covered exactly half the page, and for sanity's sake, don't go through the mind-numbingly boring ordeal of actually counting each word. Word count estimates are just that—estimates. They are not meant to be taken literally. These are just standard guidelines used by everyone in the business.

There are two other items you should include on each page of your manuscript. The first one is called the *slug*, and it is written in the upper left-hand corner of the page, as close to the edge as possible. The slug consists of your last name, followed by a slash mark and the first word, or the first important word, in your headline. (Don't use *a*, *an*, or *the* in your slug.)

You need not bother with the page number on the first page. Slug all subsequent pages the same way, but add the page number, two spaces after the slug.

A piece titled "HBMS Artists Win at Rodeo," written by Emily Howard of Hodges Bend Middle School, would have the following slug: Howard/HBMS. The second page slug would read: Howard/HBMS 2. Some editors request additional information in the slug, but this is generally all you need.

The last item is written near the bottom of the page. After typing your last line of copy, press Return and center the word "more" inside parentheses. Do

this on every page until you reach the last page. End the last page with “30” centered on the line immediately below your last line of copy.

Typing “30” at the end of a piece is a tradition in journalism equivalent to writing “THE END.” There are more than a dozen explanations of how this tradition originated. A widely held theory, according to William Metz, author of *Newswriting: From Lead to “30,”* is that “the first message sent by telegraph to a press association in this country—during the Civil War—contained 30 words. The number of words, the word ‘goodnight,’ and the operator’s name were sent at the end of the message.” The practice of writing “30” at the end of news stories is still widespread in professional journalism, although it is becoming less common with computer-generated stories.

However, it is helpful to end each page with either “more” or “30” for one good reason. Newsrooms are incredibly hectic places, where copy can easily get mislaid. If you don’t indicate there’s more to come at the end of the page, someone can easily assume that your second page is the last page of your piece. Page three will likely end up in the trash.

To see precisely how the first page of your piece should look, study the following example of a first page by eighth-grader Emily Howard.

Another helpful reminder is to prepare your story carefully. Remember to prevent careless typing from making you look like an amateur when your piece finally gets into print or is read on the air. *Never end a line with a hyphen unless you want the hyphen to appear in printed copy.*

If you’re writing a piece about a 10-foot alligator, it’s fine to leave the hyphen in, because that’s the way the copy should be written anyway. However, if you come to the end of a line using a word that is so long it needs to be hyphenated and carried on to the next line, just press Return, and type the entire word on the next line. Otherwise, a careless typist will hyphenate the word in the middle of a line—and it’s your name on the byline, so you’ll be the one who looks silly.

Unless your teacher or adviser supplies different rules, use these guidelines for everything you turn in. Make them habitual. Even if most of the copy you turn in is handwritten, slug every page, and end each page with either (*more*) or 30. With few exceptions, these are the standards used throughout the newspaper profession.

As mentioned earlier, there are no age restrictions for professional writers. You can get published at age 13. If you think like a pro and write like a pro, eventually you’ll get published like a pro—a professional freelance writer.

HOW TO GET RID OF THOSE TYPOS!

Here’s a nightmare scenario. When it finally get printed in the student newspaper, your hot news scoop, clever feature, or brilliant editorial is greeted with snickers instead of praise. And it’s all because of those typos (typographical errors)—misspelled words, misspelled names, poor grammar, or incorrect punctuation.

If it’s any consolation, most publications have occasional typos. But you’ll find a lot more of them in your student publication—unless you use the techniques listed on page 7, techniques employed by the pros.

HBMS Artists Win at Rodeo

by

Emily Howard

Four HBMS art students won first place at this year's Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Art Show.

The winners, eighth-grader Kristina Walton, seventh-graders Michael Berry and Thomas Campbell, and sixth-grader Desiree Lunsford, are all students of Ms. Hanley and Ms. Nedrud. In all, 24 HBMS students entered. Four won first place, 10 won second place and 10 won third.

All of the first-place winners enjoy art, and most plan on continuing to pursue it, although Kristina Walton is "... not sure right now."

All four have been drawing since elementary school, and Thomas Campbell, whose entry was titled "Stages," admits that "I draw any time I have a chance."

(more)

Proofread the page twice—once backward. That's right, backward. When proofreading a piece in the normal manner, you can get so interested in the story that you miss spelling errors. That's because you mentally "see" what you expect to see. You expect to see *receive* spelled correctly. Therefore, you don't notice that the keyboard operator typed *recieve* instead of spelling it the right way.

When reading a piece backward, there is no continuity, nothing to distract you from checking the spelling of every single word. You'll even notice punctuation errors that you might otherwise have missed.

Of course, this method won't help catch grammatical errors or misspelled names. You'll still have to read each piece in the normal way to check for content, questionable grammar, and punctuation.

To check the spelling of names, last year's yearbook is a great time-saver. It's also a good idea to have at least two people proof each piece.

There's one more pitfall to avoid. Don't rely solely on computer "spell-check" programs. The computer doesn't know whether you meant to write *there*, *their*, or *they're*. So you can still end up with misspellings that only a front-to-back proofreading can spot.

Another method of double-checking a rough draft is to underline every word you suspect might be misspelled. (Use a different color ink, so the suspect words will be obvious.) Then look up every dubious spelling in a dictionary.

Using all these professional techniques with *every piece you write* will put you well on the road to becoming a pro yourself.

NOW TRY IT

Proofread the following two pieces of student work for content, grammar, and punctuation. Both pieces are double-spaced so you can make corrections above the lines. Note: The students who wrote the following pieces actually turned in clean copy. The mistakes were added for the sake of this practice exercise.