Ease in Writing

Practical, Creative Ways to Enjoy Your Writing at Work

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"True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance."
—Alexander Pope

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What This Is

Process and product, in print and online—we writers need to be inspired and organized, mindful of readers yet scratching our own creative itch as we write marketing copy, technical information, or poetry. It's all in a day.

I have been a freelance writer and editor since 1996. Even before that, all my jobs involved writing—as a journalist, a communications director, and a press officer for a U.S. Embassy. I've written speeches, articles, press releases, web content—you name it, I probably have a writing sample that relates to it.

Sometimes the projects are exciting, sometimes more mundane. But I learn something during every writing project—about the topic of the piece, the best way to get the writing done, or the people or work environment in which I find myself.

A few years ago, I started to share techniques that have worked for me in a small newsletter. To create this book, I compiled tips from the last few years' newsletters. They divide into five broad areas:

- Writing Process
- Projects and Products
- Cooperating with Others
- Online Considerations
- Mechanics

Thank you to the people I interviewed for some of these articles for graciously sharing their wisdom. I invite you to visit their websites or their other resources mentioned within the articles. (A list of these great experts appears at the end of the book.) Appreciation, too, to Laurie Cullen and Joanne Lozar Glenn for helping me with editing and formatting.

With these articles I hope you find that you, too, can enjoy your writing at work—and your writing outside of work.

P.S. If you think these articles are useful, sign up for a free subscription to future issues of *Ease in Writing* at http://www.fullcircle.org

Contents

The Writing Process

"It takes a heap of sense to write good nonsense."
—Mark Twain

Launching a New Project

Let's face it: In tight economic times, you can't spend the time and money on a new project without a good deal of thought.

Here are a few ideas about the communications projects you are trying to get done:

- **Make your content work harder:** Repurpose the content you prepared for a print piece into online content, talking points for a presentation, or the topic of an op-ed or letter to the editor.
- **Share the costs:** Partner with vendors, program collaborators, or others to lower your own costs and increase distribution through their networks. (Of course, the partnership must be appropriate to your organization's values.)
- **Justify, and maybe scrap or postpone:** Take a hard look at whether the project will meet your objectives now. A tough call, especially if it's a project you had envisioned in your annual goals. But you may decide that it's best not to tackle it after all, so you have the resources for another, higher-priority item.

Once you have determined that you will undertake the project, launch it by thinking through the following questions:

- Content: What is the main point you need to make?
- Audience: Who are your target readers?
- Schedule: When must the project be done, and how much time do you have to do it well?
- Vehicles: What are the best ways to get your point across (a website, presentation, article, or blog)?
- Collaboration: Who else needs to provide information and/or approval?
- Results: How will you measure success?

Write down your answers (your understanding of the project), then consult with co-workers or clients. You may need to revise your answers—but better to find out at the start of the project than at the end!

Resource Tip: Download a reminder card with these questions from the Full Circle Communications website.

Checklist for Writers

Here's a great, all-in-one-place checklist that can turn a daunting writing assignment into a series of doable tasks. I adapted it from a handout that a teacher gave my son (now in college) when he was in fourth grade.

The advice is sound for all of us. Just substitute your next project (report, essay, speech) for the word "paper":

___ **I planned my paper before writing it.**

___ **I drafted my paper to be sure that—**

- ___ The introduction captures the reader's attention
- ___ I have a central idea that is supported with specific information and examples that will be interesting to the reader
- ___ The content relates to my central idea
- ___ Ideas are organized in a logical manner
- ___ My sentences are varied in length
- ___ My sentences are varied in the way they begin
- ___ The conclusion brings my ideas together.

___ **I revised my paper to be sure that—**

- ___ Correct grammar is used
- ___ Words are capitalized when appropriate
- ___ Sentences are punctuated correctly
- ___ Words are spelled correctly
- ___ Paragraphs are clearly indicated.

___ **I checked my paper to make sure it captures all the elements listed above.**

Resource tip: Print this out as a quick reference so your next writing assignment does not loom quite so large.

Daydreaming for Results

Turns out the "stop daydreaming!" admonishment you heard as a kid was bad advice.

According to Amy Fries, author of *Daydreams at Work*, if anything, we should be daydreaming *more*, not less. That's because daydreaming allows us to tap into parts of our brain that normally close off when we are very focused or are on deadline. Daydreaming allows us to envision and problem-solve. And she calls it the "brain's own critic-free R&D time."

I asked Fries how daydreaming can improve two main types of writing often encountered on the job—a fairly routine project like writing a report and a more creative project like coming up with a tag line for a campaign. She also had suggestions about how to use daydreams productively. Here are her main points.

For a **cut-and-dried assignment,** she says, use daydreams to—

- Plan and organize your piece. Envision all the parts you need to remember to include.
- Find a way to make it fresh (sometimes a routine piece is the biggest challenge to make fresh, yet that's what we have to do to connect with readers).
- Give yourself a break. Escapist daydreams relieve stress and give us energy to return to the task at hand.

For a **more creative writing assignment,** daydreaming helps you to—

- Germinate ideas. "A vision," she said, "is just an upscale word for daydream."
- Connect with your audience as you imagine their reaction. Great for anticipating what to ask in interviews, as well as in the writing process.
- Problem-solve. Again, by accessing more diverse regions of the brain, we make new associations when we least expect them.

So, **how can we tap into these great daydreams** to become more creative? Fries suggested—

- Notice them. Become aware of how ideas and solutions come to you on and off the job. Notice your patterns and styles.
- Make the time and space for daydreaming, especially when you recognize your creative time (walking, driving, right before bed)
- Ask "what if" questions to start thinking in more speculative ways.
- Try something new. We need to fuel our daydreams. Read a new book, listen to new music, change even little things to get out of a rut.
- Record your daydream ideas in a way that works for you. Even if you don't get a chance, however, don't worry. The good ideas that pop up in daydreams tend to pop up again.

Resource tip: Amy's Daydreams at Work website has lots more ideas about how to "productively daydream."

How Long Does It Take to Edit?

Figuring out how long a project will take to complete is critical—and hard to do. How many hours does it take to write an article? Draft web content? Edit a report? Even after years of freelancing, I sometimes stumble when trying to answer this question.

This section focuses on estimating an editing job; the next focuses on writing. Before we get down to numbers, a disclaimer: There really is no hard and fast rule. The condition and characteristics of each manuscript affect the amount of time required to whip it into shape.

Right, right, you're probably thinking—but how long does it take?

Metrics

I start with an estimate learned from an editing course long ago: 2 to 4 double-spaced, 12-point-font pages per hour for a substantive edit; 6 to 8 double-spaced pages for a copyedit. (See below for the definitions of the editing categories.) This estimate includes skimming the piece, editing the whole thing two times ("two passes"), and going back as needed to problem areas. I usually do the first pass online and the second on a printout, making changes with Track Changes turned on and inserting my queries in the Comments field in Word.

The more heads the better on a topic like this. When I asked a few colleagues for guidance, here is what I learned.

Patti Lowry told me she uses a formula of 4 to 6 double-spaced pages per hour to copyedit a report with references, footnotes, and other complicated material to double and triple check. For a simple trifold brochure, she estimates about 2 hours at most. "The problems with these sorts of things are less often with facts and more often the typeface, etc.," she said.

Mary Ellen Thirolf's average is similar: "For editing, the rule of thumb is 5 double-spaced pages per hour for a copyedit, with 2 to 3 pages per hour for a substantive edit and about 10 pages per hour for proofreading. . . . .It's amazing how close this estimate is to the actual time it takes to finish the task at hand."

Bobbie Troy edits a few sample pages to see how long it takes, which she compares against her metrics for single-column, double-spaced copy:

— Light edit: 8 pgs/hour

— Medium edit: 5 pgs/hour

— Substantive edit: 3 pgs/hour

"If the reading estimate is significantly different from my metrics," she said, "I need to identify why and make sure those special issues are in my Statement of Work."

April Davis has created an Excel spreadsheet for her estimates. "I read a few pages from several chapters to see how much editing is needed. I have an Excel

spreadsheet where I insert the total number of pages, and it will calculate the number of hours the project will take and the estimated fee for the project," she told me.

Special Considerations

Remember, every project has its own set of "interesting" challenges that can make the job more or less time than the guidelines above. Consider whether any of these apply to your project:

- Lots of acronyms to check, maybe creating an acronym list
- Text by non-native English-speaking writers
- Tables, especially those with a lot of numbers and words
- References, especially those created by someone who does not normally compile references.

Levels of Editing

I shudder to remember a document I gave an editor many years ago. It needed more than the "quick proof" that I requested (and that I had allotted time for). Part of my confusion back then was that I did not understand the different levels of editing. So you don't make the same mistake, here are some brief definitions.

- **Developmental edit:** You as editor work closely with the author on the structure, content, and organization of a piece, often when the manuscript is still in development.
- **Substantive edit:** You as editor receive a finished version and ensure the piece is smooth, logical, and well organized. You might point out confusing or overly detailed sections, places where examples are needed, or other content-related questions. Often a substantive and copyedit are part of the same assignment.
- **Copyedit:** You as editor focus on the mechanics of the piece: consistency, spelling, grammar. You refer to and/or create a style guide to determine how to handle things like capitalization and word usage throughout the piece (e.g., policy maker, policy-maker, or policymaker?)
- **Proofread:** You as editor do a final check before the piece is ready for printing or online posting. Sometimes people request a proofread for a piece, but it really needs editing first—but now you know.

Resource tip: Many books, websites, and courses explain facets of editing. Recent books I have read (or re-read) include *The Artful Edit* by Susan Bell and the older, but still relevant *Elements of Editing* by Arthur Plotnik and *Getting the Words Right* by Theodore A. Rees Cheney.

How Long Will It Take to Write?

Earlier, we looked at how to estimate the length of time to edit different products. Now, something even squishier: writing jobs.

Let's look at three common projects, bearing in mind, of course, that *every assignment is different*. Based on a few assumptions, how long might each take to complete?

Web content: 150 words

Assume you have to distill a 5- to 10-page report or article into a succinct piece with a couple of links. You are fairly familiar with the content. (Note: Sometimes being *too* familiar with it is a killer because you have a harder time figuring out what to leave out!) It might take about 2 hours to figure out your main points, write them in a web-friendly way, ensure that keywords are included, take a break while you do something else, then return and take out the excess words you missed the first time around.

As for short blog entries, Tweets, Facebook comments, LinkedIn status—let's assume 10 to 15 minutes per item, and that's very generous.

Magazine article: 1,500-2,000 words

Assume you have to write an "overview" article for an association magazine or newsletter. You need to conduct 6 phone interviews—figure 1.5 to 2 hours per interview, including preparing beforehand and transcribing or cleaning up your notes afterward. You do another 1 to 2 hours of web-based research. To then write 2 drafts of the article, I would estimate about 24 work-hours for the project.

Speech: 10 minutes

For a 10-minute speech that someone else will present, assume you need to write 1,000 to 1,500 words. You need to meet with the speaker (ideally) or the person making the assignment (1 hour). You need to research or synthesize potential content and also analyze the person's speaking preferences (2 hours? depending on the source material). Ideally, you'll write an outline before going right into drafting the speech. Let's say 2 rounds of writing the speech, for about 8 to 10 hours total.

Balderdash!

You might have read this column and thought, "It takes way more (or less) time than that!" I agree completely. I've taken 5 or 6 hours to get through 1 hour of summarizing a meeting; I've whipped out web content in 20 minutes.

Each project has its unique quirks. That's a good thing. To deal with the variables, you can try to break down an assignment into pieces, then factor in a small percentage for contingencies. Consider the following:

- **Initial direction.** Do you (and the person making the assignment) have a good understanding of the objectives of the piece, the intended audience, the tone? If not, it will take more time overall, as you struggle with how to organize the content and perhaps go through more renditions.

- **Research.** Will you dig up sources or are they provided? If you need to look, can you do a straightforward Google search or is more involved searching required? How familiar is the topic to you?
- **Interviews.** How many? In person or by phone? For a 30-minute phone interview, I estimate about 90 minutes, as noted above. Factor in time to set up the interview and, if needed, time to travel.
- **Length of the piece.** Shorter does not always mean less time, but a 4-paragraph website article should take less time than a 2,000-word article with a few sidebars.
- **Number of iterations.** I factor in 2 rounds of revisions for a writing assignment. But, like you, the "first draft" that I hand in is probably about my fifth draft on my computer, as I revise right down to the push of the "Send" button.

If you keep track of your hours, you'll know, over time, how long different types of projects may take.

Resource tip: I track my time in QuickBooks. There are plenty of other free or low-cost time-tracking systems. Pick the one that works best for you.

Overcoming Writer's Block

If you are struggling with a writing project, you're not alone. Gene Fowler once wrote, "Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank piece of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead."

No bloodletting, especially when the piece is due, say, next Friday. Here are a few other techniques to help fill that blank piece of paper or computer screen:

- **Set a slightly tight deadline:** While a crunch causes carelessness, too much time leads to aimlessness.
- **Break the project into pieces:** Thinking about writing a 20-minute script or a 32-page report is scary. Setting a goal for the day to write the Introduction, or the section on [whatever] is less scary.
- **Walk away:** Not permanently. But take a short break to loosen up your ideas. Another technique that often works: Think of a part of the assignment that is causing problems before you go to bed. Sleep on it. You may wake up with your problem solved.
- **Nip around the edges:** Before you delve into the Big Ideas, or as a break from them, tackle some of the details that you'll need to deal with eventually—the correct spelling of a name, the exact date, etc. It's like dipping your toes in the ocean before taking the plunge.
- **Talk to someone else:** Check in with a colleague who is also involved in the project to test some of your ideas, make sure you understand the goals of the project, get yourself back on track. Or, if you are working alone, at least talk with someone else who understands what you're going through.
- **Turn off your email and phone:** Unless you have a pressing reason to be available, these distractions are too tempting. Next thing you know, you're forwarding bad jokes to your brother.
- **Remember the word "draft":** You are writing a draft that, in most cases, you will have another chance to revise and improve after receiving feedback. Do not let the quest for the perfect paralyze you from just . . . completing and submitting the darn thing.

Resource tip: It may help you loosen up by writing to a prompt on a completely unrelated topic. You'll find many online.

Working With a Writing Coach

A writing coach is not for everyone or for every project. But sometimes working with a coach can make the difference in getting a dissertation, book, or other big writing project done. A coach can also help you get "unstuck" to pursue creative endeavors related to work or other parts of life.

I was curious to learn more about what a writing coach does, so I talked with two experienced coaches, Nancy Whichard and Quinn McDonald. Here are a few things I learned:

What a Coach Can and Cannot Do

- A writing coach is not an editor or an instructor to improve your writing. Sometimes the coach sees your work-in-progress, sometimes not. Instead, a coach helps you set goals, then figure out how to work toward those goals, according to Whichard. "I try to keep the client in action," McDonald said, "which might involve solving problems out loud, deadlines, accountability, or creating rituals."
- While everyone can benefit from an outside perspective, "the people who benefit the most have a willingness to try something different," said Whichard. Conversely, McDonald stressed that a coach cannot get your book published or your dissertation accepted. You have to do the work.
- Both coaches emphasized that being coached is not a feel-good exercise. They ask tough questions and are attuned to when people are (my expression, not theirs) B.S.-ing them.

A Typical Coaching Session

- Both Whichard and McDonald coach on the phone, scheduling time to talk every 7 to 10 days.
- They may assign homework or request a weekly check-in by email a day or two beforehand, based on what the client needs.
- Often, it's managing the rest of one's life that needs attention. "Writing is not solitary; it can be disruptive to your family life and other responsibilities," said McDonald. Notes Whichard, "Coaches can help you figure out how to make writing a part of your life so you're not doing 'binge writing' right before a deadline."

How to Pick a Compatible Coach

- Chemistry between you and the coach is critical. They suggest talking with a prospective coach beforehand—is this who you want on the other end of the phone? Both also suggest 3 months as a good period of time to gauge the effects of the coaching.
- McDonald has compiled a list of questions to ask a coach. Among them:

  How long have you coached regularly?
  Do you give homework?
  How much do you charge?

How long will it take?

A writing coach might be what you need to move a long-delayed or difficult project forward. But—have reasonable expectations. Be open to new ways of working. Like a good athletic coach, a good writing coach won't go easy on you, but the results can make the effort worthwhile.

Resource tip: Both Whichard and McDonald have websites with more information about the coaching process.

Tighten ~~Up~~ Your Writing

Refer to this list next time you revise an email, article, briefing paper, or other piece of writing that needs to send a strong message:

- **Pluck the excess:** Strunk and White wrote in *The Elements of Style*, "Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise." Review your draft (I find hard copy easier than on-screen) to find sentences, phrases, or words to delete without losing the meaning. For example, they called out these phrases that pop up in business writing: "owing to the fact that," "in spite of the fact that," and "call your attention to the fact that." Instead: because, although, remind you/let you know.
- **Be bold:** Another Strunk and White-ism: "Put statements in positive form. Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language." Instead of "There is a shortfall in resources," could you write "We ran out of money"? (You can't always be that blunt, but you get the idea.)
- **Begin sentences with "who" and "what":** As Roy Peter Clark says in *Writing Tools*, "make meaning early" in a sentence. Increase how often you begin sentences with a subject (noun/pronoun) and verb. Decrease how often you start a sentence with "there are" and "there is," which delay your main thought.
- **Power the start and the finish:** Clark also suggests placing strong words at the beginning and end of a sentence, where the eye naturally alights. As he quotes from Macbeth: "The Queen, my lord, is dead."
- **Fall *out of love*:** Sometimes we write a phrase or an example that flows so nicely that we hate to let it go. But sometimes it must happen when briefer is better. Martin Steinmann and Michael Keller list six ways to write concisely in *NTC's Handbook for Writers*: use the shortest synonym, avoid ineffective repetition of meaning ("basic fundamentals"), eliminate nearly meaningless expressions ("for all intents and purposes"), avoid wordy jargon, and combine choppy sentences.

Tighten ~~Up~~ Your Writing, Part 2

The previous section suggested ways to tighten your writing by restructuring paragraphs and sentences.

That was the forest. Now, let's look at the trees: small words and phrases to extract or change for a stronger overall message:

- **Essentially, basically, and other "extra" adverbs:** Always question your use of "essentially," "basically," "ultimately," and "inevitably" (to which I would add "actually"), recommends Theodore A. Rees Cheney. In his book *Getting the Words Right*, he labels them "idle, nonworking words." Can you delete them without losing the sense of your thought? Then do.
- **Let verbs be verbs:** *Stabilization, indication, demonstration, renovation*—not only do you turn active verbs into wimpier nouns, but you also usually need more words to get the same thought across. ("We put on a demonstration" versus "we demonstrated.")
- **So:** Such a little word, such overuse. So have you ever noticed how many people begin a presentation or comment with it? How often people write "so as to…" when they could just write "to" ("I am writing so as to let you know…"). Its too-frequent use as an adverb? ("I am so happy to…").
- **There's no there there:** Leave "there" to Gertrude Stein. Look at every sentence that begins with "there are" or "there is," which *NTC's Handbook for Writers* calls a pseudosubject. Can you replace these weak words with "real" subjects and active predicates?
- **Write with words that people say:** Have you ever heard anyone talk about an "addressee" or "disseminator," or use "whereas" or "heretofore" in a spoken sentence? Sometimes unavoidable, but, that said, write simply to write more clearly.

Projects and Products

"In creating, the only hard thing's to begin:
A grass blade's no easier to make than an oak."
—James Russell Lowell

About That Annual (or Other Big Deal) Report

Staff at many organizations start the year only to face a grim reality: It's annual report time.

Remember your resolution last year that you would keep a file of ideas and good photos throughout the year?

Oh well. Let's work with what you have (or don't have) assembled. Here are a few ideas to get the process started and completed before the year ends.

And if you don't have to do an annual report, keep these suggestions in mind for the next retrospective or other big-deal publication you need to put together.

- **Dream a big idea:** Bring together a small group with at least a few people who know the organization well. Brainstorm a unifying theme for the year, something broad enough that it can encompass the disparate things your organization stands for and has accomplished.
- **Think across departments:** An annual report that summarizes the highlights by department—policy, HR, etc.—is usually only interesting to the people in that department.
- **Less Is More:** Related to the above, departments often want to pack in every accomplishment of the year. Convey a stronger message with less copy, even if it means not writing about every activity of the year. Do not succumb.
- **Marry content + design:** Always a good idea, but especially for a visual-rich piece like an annual report. Involve the designer and writer early, and together.
- **The financials:** The finance folks may have a different timeframe than you do. If you can't negotiate an earlier deadline (assuming you want one), determine their space requirements. Then finish everything else so you can drop in the numbers at the end.

With last year's report behind you, you can collect ideas and images for the next year's report. Start a file with annual reports you receive or view online for inspiration about what you like and don't like. Next year will be different. Right?

Building a Better Brochure

Do we even **need** brochures in this day of websites, Facebook pages, and phone apps?

"Brochures aren't going away," says Sally Behnam, president of the marketing and branding firm Design 4 Future. "There are times—a trade show, a visit to their office, a follow-up mailing—when your target market needs to see something tangible about your company."

If that's the case, how can we create brochures that work? Here's her advice:

- **Think small runs, refreshed frequently:** Digital printing allows you to print small quantities (up to 2,000 copies) economically. You can update the brochure more often or have different versions for different purposes. (Caveat: Digital printing cannot handle embossing, die-cuts, and other features of more high-end pieces.)
- **Coordinate print and online messaging:** Besides hard copy, post the brochure as a PDF. The brochure's content (headlines and text) and design should go hand-in-hand with as well as stay consistent with other marketing materials.
- **Use the space efficiently:** "Negative" space for easy reading, clean design, and photographs helps the reader. (In contrast, a large generic photo of a computer doesn't say anything and just diverts focus from the main message.)
- **Give a call to action:** The purpose of the brochure should be easy to figure out. Include an easy way to contact you (not just go to your website) for more information.

And here are a few ideas that I find improve the writing:

- **Don't keep the target audience a secret:** Whether you ask someone else to write the content or you do it yourself, be very clear about the target reader. This knowledge helps determine the main point of the brochure, the tone to use, and the language. It is really basic, necessary information.
- **Grab 'em:** Headlines guide the reader through the brochure. Heads and subheads like "Background" and "Services" are a wasted opportunity. On the front cover, what about something more enticing than just the name of your organization?
- **Bring in a fresh eye:** Readers notice mistakes. Ask a sharp-eyed colleague to look at every word and image before printing. After a while, your own eyes glaze over and you can miss something.

Federal Proposals That Win

John Boulware set me straight about how a federal government proposal differs from other kinds of writing. You as the writer rarely decide how to organize it, what information to include, or even the length—even if, in your professional judgment, you could think of a better way to present the information.

Instead, he stressed, your proposal is a sales and solution document, with your response as the final step in a process with substantial competition. Above all, the client needs to believe your organization can provide the best solution—not how great, unique, or wonderful you are.

In other words, not where your water comes from, not how attractive the packaging is, but are you the best choice to fill their glass?

"Reviewers or evaluators read a bunch of proposals all written with the same topic and same purpose in mind," Boulware said. "They never have enough time to read to enjoy. They tend to hurry because it is taking them away from their full-time day job.

"Thus, proposals must be written so that critical information points are easy to see and jump out at the reader."

Boulware has much more to say than can be included here (he periodically leads proposal workshops through the Alexandria Small Business Development Center), but here are a few of his pointers. Look at your next proposal draft to make sure it is—

- **Client-centered, not bidder-centered:** Your goal is to show how you can "ease their pain." How many times does your organization's name appear versus theirs?
- **Easy to read:** He urges fewer than 20 words per sentence, no compound sentences, and paragraphs no longer than four or five sentences. Avoid complex words (e.g., the infamous "utilize" instead of "use").
- **Visual, but appropriately so:** Include a table that summarizes the benefits and features you are offering. Omit photos or illustrations with no direct, obvious connection to the content.
- **Positive:** Avoid negative turns of phrase that will hurt your case (e.g., 99% accuracy, not 1% failure rate).
- **Free of unsupportable claims and superlatives:** Evaluators question all content. You must offer real and very clear proof in statements or graphics. Do not "promise," "ensure," or "guarantee" anything.
- **Targeted:** "The single biggest mistake I see in proposal writing is not tailoring résumés or past performances to the RFP," Boulware said. "That's something you can do easily before the RFP is issued."

Before it's issued? Exactly. Writing the proposal is part of a much larger process in which your organization has targeted and gotten to know potential clients and their needs. You learn about RFPs that will be issued in the next few months to a year. According to Boulware, "If the first time you see an RFP is when it's on FedBizOpps [the government's online listing of contracting opportunities], you're too late."

From Flip Chart to Finished Report

You've probably participated in a retreat or brainstorming session where all those great ideas . . . somehow get lost in the shuffle once you're back in the office. While a write-up of the action won't guarantee success, it definitely increases the chances.

"A report is a visual reminder of the changes people committed to," explained master facilitator Merianne Liteman, co-author of the book *Retreats that Work*. "If it's done right, it will let people who weren't in the room in on the ideas and serve as a way to measure progress."

Does wading through all those flip chart pages and sticky notes sound scary? Liteman recommends the following—

- **Sift as you sit:** To avoid being overwhelmed afterwards, get organized even as the meeting is going on. Be clear about decisions and other concrete actions taken. Ask for clarity, for example, for those staccato phrases that, back at your office, you have to decipher into English. During a multiday retreat, you may want to comb through and summarize the flip charts at night for key points and then check back with the group the following day on the accuracy of your summary.
- **Out the door in 24:** Prepare a 1- to 2-page summary, to be sent out under the signature of the meeting convener (usually a senior staff person), within 24 hours. Otherwise, like the game of Telephone, everyone will come out of the meeting with a different account of what happened.
- **Visual cues:** Your post-session summary can expand beyond a traditional report. Post particularly important flip charts, such as the group's commitments, in the conference room or other public place for a week, along with a blank flip-chart page so everyone can write comments and questions.
- **The longer report is still short:** A fuller report is important, but she stresses it must still focus on the "so what" rather than the "how we got there." "Put what's most important first, rather than a chronology or a blow-by-blow of what happened," she said. An executive summary and subheads ("Decisions," "Deadlines," etc.) will help. The background information goes into an appendix. But while "shorter is better," sometimes the excitement of a meeting is lost in the write-up. To add spark, Liteman suggests asking the facilitator to provide comments (maybe set apart in italics or in a box), noting, for example, parts of the meeting that generated a lot of debate, represented a breakthrough, or were noteworthy for other reasons.
- **Beware the bulleted list** (perhaps including this one!): Lists that emanate from retreats or other meetings sometimes convey a false sense of priority, in which "people assume that the top point is more important than #15, which may not be the case." One work-around is graphic-organizing software (Liteman uses Inspiration), which presents information in a nonhierarchical way.

In contrast, summarizing scientific meetings or other events that require a full record requires a different tack. More guidance on that subject appears in the next section.

Resource tip: Liteman's website Retreats that Work has lots of other good advice.

Meeting Summaries That Meet Your Needs

One output of many meetings and conferences is a summary to post on the web, publish as a special issue of a journal, or otherwise share with others. For many scientific, advisory, and other types of meetings, what is needed is something less complete than a full transcript but more robust than the short-and-sweet summary discussed in the previous section.

Here are a few suggestions if you are, or you need to assign, a meeting rapporteur:

- **Come prepared:** The rapporteur needs to know as much about the topic and presenters beforehand as possible. Try to learn about acronyms, proper names, and terms that will pop up frequently. Check out where you will sit in advance. Can you use your laptop comfortably? Is there a power outlet, or do you need extra batteries? Can you see the screen if the presenters are using one?
- **Stay alert:** Besides a laptop, I come armed with lined pads, assorted pens and pencils, and granola bars or snacks. I switch between laptop and handwriting (often on print-outs of presentations). The variety eases my hand and arm muscles and keeps me more focused.
- **Understand the format of the final product:** As a rough guide, each hour of meeting time takes two to three hours to summarize. The final product can vary considerably—from a set of minutes to a published book.
- **Make it worthwhile:** A note to writers—add value to the process. Go beyond just restating the presentations without the "ums" and "uhs." Provide the right level of detail. If appropriate, do research to fill in holes. Suggest graphics, sidebars, or other elements that can enliven the copy. A note to those who are assigning the job, whether in-house or to an outside person—use the rapporteur as a professional writer, not just a note-taker, to make the investment worthwhile.

Besides the practical tips above, expect that you can and will encounter interesting situations as a meeting rapporteur. Take them in stride.

I once served as a rapporteur for a daylong conference that ended in a formal dinner with a speaker. Everyone looked elegant—except the woman still in a business suit and flats, madly taking notes.

My most pleasurable tour of rapporteurship was a weeklong conference that brought together communications professionals from around the world. The participants were fascinating and friendly. Did I mention it took place at Bellagio, the Rockefeller Foundation conference center on Lake Como, Italy?

I've taken notes at big tables, tiny tables, and on my lap. I've heard fast speakers, monotone speakers, and speakers with very heavy accents. My toughest assignment? Probably every one when I am in the middle of it!

Resource tip: A small digital recorder (I use an Olympus) is essential for meetings that are not otherwise recorded. Just be sure that you are allowed to record the meeting.

Writing a Darn Good Speech

The audience is trickling in after a coffee break. Does the idea of stepping behind a microphone give you the willies?

Here are a few ideas to ease the pain—whether it's a speech for yourself or for someone else:

- **Consider audience and venue.** Get as much information as you can beforehand about the interest and knowledge level of the audience and the setting for the speech. You may need to do some digging, especially if you are writing the speech for someone else. This information helps determine the right tone to connect with listeners.
- **Pick one big idea you want to get across.** Write it out simply. Voilà! You have the thesis (main purpose) of your speech.
- **Take your big idea and start "populating" subsections.** A version of what I do may work for you: Take a pad of paper and write out the subtopics that support your big idea. Leave space between them, and then start outlining some of the points you can make in each one. Leave the introduction and conclusion for last.
- **Write short.** No one ever complained because a speech was shorter than expected. As a very general rule of thumb, 120 words equals 1 minute of speaking.
- **Read your drafts out loud.** I am not talking about rehearsing your delivery, which is, of course, also critical. Focus on the words themselves. Do they flow when spoken? Any unexpected tongue-twisters or double entendres? Will it take longer to deliver than you expected?

Resource tip: For tips or more tailored help with speech delivery, check out two experts I have worked with: Ann Timmons and Don Rheem. For speech writing, Painter's Keys has a link to lots of quotations to get your juices flowing.

Résumé-Writing Tips

A well-written résumé won't guarantee that you are chosen for a new job, but a poorly written one may eject you from the running.

Many people are looking for a job now; others simply want an updated résumé tucked away "just in case." Haven't updated yours in a while? Consider what several experts suggest about résumé writing for mid- to senior-level professionals.

- **Take it from the top:** When Ruth Thaler-Carter helps clients write résumés, she advises against starting with career objectives. "If they're general enough to cover any and all jobs, they are too vague; if they're detailed enough to respond to only one job title, they are too specific," she said. Both she and Sharon Armstrong, co-author of *The Essential HR Handbook*, prefer to start with a qualifications or achievements summary so that, as Armstrong put it, you can "explain your uniqueness."
- **Pare it down:** "A common problem is the tendency to include every responsibility in every job," said Armstrong. "My advice is to select a few achievements that are directly related to the job you want so the achievements resonate with the potential employer. Quantify wherever you can."
- **Improve readability:** Thaler-Carter listed three often-seen résumé weaknesses: "passive voice, too much narrative, and lack of specifics about achievements." Format-wise, she warned against fancy lines, boxes, or images. Use no more than two fonts, and select common ones that any computer will recognize. ("That probably means Times Roman and Helvetica or Arial: not very exciting, but effective.")
- **Insert the right keywords:** Résumés that are screened electronically may need specific keywords to make it through the first cut. Which ones will work? The ad, job descriptions, and the organization's annual reports will give you clues, according to Katherine Hansen, who has written several articles on the "power of keywords."
- **Make it personal:** Not surprisingly, both Armstrong and Thaler-Carter stress that a résumé is only one part of an overall strategy. "Search your network to find out who or what they know about the organization," suggested Armstrong.

Résumé-writing is not rocket science. But hiring a résumé writer who knows best practice—or at least enlisting a colleague to give your résumé a *really* piercing look—will ensure that your résumé helps, not hinders, your job search.

Writing Surveys You'll Use

Have you received a phone call or email survey to "ask your opinion" lately? Do some of the word choices in the questions or multiple-choice answers drive you nuts?

When done correctly, a survey "helps gather information for better decision-making," said Steve Raabe, president and research director of OpinionWorks.

But beware. The proliferation of online and phone surveys makes information-gathering temptingly easy. As marketing expert Pat Lovenhart, Lovenhart Research & Consulting, warns, "It's worse to have a bad survey and get deceiving information than no survey at all. You might make bad decisions based on bad data."

Although the writing is only part of what makes or breaks a survey, "good writing is key," said Raabe. "You have to engage respondents and make it interesting and friendly."

Here are experts' suggestions for writing surveys that yield useful results**:**

- **Work backwards:** "Before you write, you have to understand the business needs and what you want to do with the information you gather," said Lovenhart. "From there, drill down to specific questions. Is the information we're asking for going to help us with the main objective?"
- **Let the purpose guide the questions:** "Different types of questions lead you to the data you need to analyze and interpret," explained Stephen Rafe, Rapport Communications.
- **Stay true to the purpose:** Only include questions to elicit the information you need. "A common pitfall is to include questions hanging around the organization that are unrelated or irrelevant, but people want to tack them on, as long as you are doing a survey," said Lovenhart.
- **Keep it simple:** Once you are ready to write, "Rule #1 is to use everyday language," said Raabe. "Eliminate all jargon. Make sure it's easily understandable."
- **Lob a few softballs:** That's how Raabe suggests easing respondents into the survey. "Proceed from the general to the specific," he explained. "Make sure one question moves to the next in a logical fashion." Lovenhart notes the balance between not being too complex at the beginning of a survey but not waiting too long to ask the most important questions.
- **Engagement determines length:** Both Raabe and Lovenhart said that there is no "optimal" length for a survey. "It depends on the audience," said Raabe. "For example, an association that doesn't survey its members very often will find that the respondents will tolerate a longer survey."
- **Demographics at the end:** Best practice is usually to put these sorts of questions (age, income level, etc.) at the end of the survey.
- **Always pretest:** You and your team may think the questions are clear, but how do you know for sure? Test the survey, whether conducted online, by phone, in person, or on paper, with people who are as similar to the target respondents as possible. Avoid common question pitfalls, such as confusing language or leading questions.

"Even the best researcher always finds things to change after pretesting a survey," said Lovenhart.

Preparing a Professional Podcast

Stonehenge. Picking a good red wine. Research into an HIV vaccine. You name it, someone has podcasted about it.

Creating a podcast that holds listeners' interest takes time and care. Ari Daniel Shapiro, an independent producer who uses both narration and "acts" (actualities, or taped interviews and other sound) in his podcasts for the Encyclopedia of Life and other groups, estimates he spends from 1 to 3 hours to prepare every 1 minute of a finished piece.

Shapiro usually podcasts on science topics. Andrew Stockel produces a podcast series on business through the Mason Enterprise Center. They described to me how they prepare podcasts:

- **Write for the ear.** Most of your audience will be commuting or doing something else while they listen to your podcast. "Write and read like you talk," said Shapiro. "Create a scene with sound." Think vivid words and short sentences. Vary the pacing so, for example, the podcast is not always two sentences of narration, an actuality, two sentences of narration, and onward into tedium.
- **Let the tape speak for itself.** After Shapiro records interviews and other sound, he "writes in and out of tape" by introducing and bridging the recorded pieces he selects. If the person interviewed is dynamic and would hold listeners' attention, "I give more of the story to them." If they sound more tentative or are hard to understand, his voice as narrator or host takes up more time.
- **Know your "podcast-ee."** Stockel often records people who are not used to being interviewed. "Before the podcast starts, just talk," he said. "Find common ground. You really just want to make the speaker feel comfortable before they actually do the podcast."
- **Work with an editor.** When Shapiro writes his script, he has three windows open on his computer: a Word file to write the text, the audio, and a spreadsheet on which he has logged the recordings. A first-round edit focuses on the written words. Then, he does a "phone edit" so an editor hears what the podcast will sound like. More changes follow.
- **Tell a story.** "Make the speaker comfortable so the podcast sounds natural," said Stockel. Shapiro agreed. "At the end of the day, we are telling a story," he said. "We formalize it with a script, but radio and podcasting are primal."

How to Write an Op-Ed

Why spend the time to write (and re-write) the 700 words or so known as an op-ed?

Because you want something to change.

According to Margot Friedman, Dupont Circle Communications, an op-ed can—

- shine light on a problem not being addressed
- offer policy solutions
- persuade policy makers
- move people to action.

When you write an op-ed, think beyond the traditional piece that appears "opposite the editorial page" in a newspaper, to consider an online column (e.g., Huffington Post), on the radio (e.g., a commentary on WAMU), or elsewhere in print, online, or on air.

As with other writing, you'll want to analyze what gets published (or aired) to improve your own chances of success.

Friedman, who has written and placed many op-eds, passed on these tips and best practices:

Cut through the clutter of competing messages and issues. You must focus on something that has not been said again and again. Three ways to do this—

- **Challenge the conventional wisdom.** "It's possible to get an op-ed published, even if an issue is not top of mind, by offering a creative policy solution backed up by evidence," she said.
- **Find a surprising messenger.** For example, the "byliner" to push for an environmental issue can be a business person. Or, as Friedman brought to my attention, self-proclaimed conservative and Tea Party-er Richard Viguerie opposed the death penalty in another op-ed.
- **Draw on authentic experience.** Being a well-known expert or celebrity helps your chances, it's true. But an ordinary person who spent time in West Africa, lived through an illness, or, in an example Friedman cited, volunteered on a whale study, also has a shot.

In addition, she said to listen, *really* listen to the person whose byline tops the article. You may need to draft, or completely write, an op-ed that goes under someone else's signature. Your goal, she said, is to "capture their voice." This means reading their speeches, watching any clips on YouTube, and studying whatever else you can get your hands on.

Better yet, she advised, request direct access and ask questions. How did they get involved in this issue? What from their childhood affects what they do today? "If you pry stories out of the byliner, your writing is so much richer," she said. And, on a practical note, "it can make the difference between getting published and not."

Another caveat: Avoid "us-too" op-eds. The boss sees an op-ed from a similar organization. The boss wants one, too. Soon, you are scrambling to figure out what to say and how to say it. "An op-ed needs to be part of an overall campaign strategy," said Friedman. "Developing messages through writing an op-ed is possible—but it's not ideal."

Friedman called a letter to the editor the "little sister" of op-eds. The same rules apply, with three main differences:

- **Length:** 150 to 250 words maximum, usually no more than three sentence per paragraph.
- **Trigger:** You respond to a news story or column, rather than propose your own topic.
- **Speed:** Ideally, you email the letter the very day the story runs. The Washington Post ombudsman quoted the newspaper's letters editor as saying the huge volume of responses on some topics may mean the **first**, well-written letter received is published. "A lot of organizations are not nimble enough to write and get approvals in that time frame," Friedman acknowledged. "But if responding to media reports is a priority, that's what they have to do. Sending a letter three days later is too late."

Amplify the impact. Finally, after all that hard work, extend the message. Post a link on your website and Facebook page, Tweet, and take advantage of whatever other social media you use. If it's published on a media website, encourage supporters to post comments. "Online publications give greater prominence to op-eds that generate the most comments," Friedman said.

Resource tip: Friedman has set up an Op-ed community on Facebook.

Cooperating With Others

"We are all dependent on each other, every one of us on Earth."
—George Bernard Shaw

Interviewing

"An interview is just a conversation between a writer and somebody who knows something the writer does not," wrote Philip Gerard in his book *Creative Nonfiction*.

You as the writer need to make the best use of the "conversation." Chances are, you have limited time, may even be under a deadline. Moreover, you don't want to come off as an idiot or end up with information that is irrelevant or redundant for your final piece—whether it's an article that uses direct quotes or a report that indirectly uses what you have gleaned.

The most important thing to do is to **listen**. Not try to impress the interviewee. Not think ahead to the next question. Not worry if your tape recorder will run out of battery power or your pen will run out of ink.

In addition, a few techniques that have worked for me:

- **Give your subject a general idea** of what you will be asking about, but not a specific list of questions. They can focus their thoughts beforehand but not overly so. You have more freedom, rather than having your subject finish question #2, for instance, and then move on to question #3. (Of course, you will prepare for the interview and not assume you can go in and wing it in a casual give-and-take.)
- **Combine closed- and open-ended questions.** Just as a written piece encompasses sentences of different lengths, an interview needs different punctuation. For example, in moving to a new topic, you might establish where or when something took place (a closed question), then start probing about his or her reaction to the event.
- **Do not fill every silence.** Our tendency is to jump in with another question. Resist. Give your subjects time. Give them the opportunity to add to what they said. A gentle "anything else?" sometimes elicits the most interesting responses.

I am continually learning how to improve my interviews. Sometimes they are great, sometimes a little mundane, depending on the "somebody," the topic, my own preparation, the time constraints, and other variables. In search of wisdom from others, I asked Mary Collins, a nonfiction writing professor and author of books that have required extensive interviewing, for some tips. Here's what she said—

- I let them know early on that I know about their subject or work. For example, **I cite a passage from their work** or make it clear I have interviewed others on the same topic.
- I open with a few questions to which I know the answers, **to know how candid they are** being with me.
- I bring up something personal, even if not relevant to the interview, so **we start to make a personal connection.**
- I make clear **the interview is just a start**, and the odds are high I will contact them again.

Resource tip: Gerard's book has a chapter on interviewing. Other resources on my shelf include *The Craft of Interviewing* by John Brady and *Doing Oral History* by Donald A. Ritchie.

May I Quote You?

How can you use those great quotes you dutifully wrote down or recorded (more about that later) during an interview?

Sparingly.

Like a good spice, they enhance in small amount but overwhelm when added too liberally.

Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Have a good reason to use a direct quote.** Two good reasons—
  Your source's comment is particularly colorful, insightful, poignant, or otherwise memorable, and the reader needs to see it in the source's own words;
  Your source is a recognized expert, the CEO, a celebrity, or other VIP, and you need a few direct quotes to enhance the credibility of your piece and to show readers the style in which the VIP speaks.
- **Decide how you will revise (if at all) quotes.** What, you say, change a quote? Blasphemous. I do not mean altering the meaning and certainly not making something up. But what about fixing a grammatical error? Or what if two relevant points are interspersed with a side conversation about the weather? If your publication does not have a clear guideline, use your professional discretion. William Zinsser, in *On Writing Well*, counsels brevity and fair play in making adjustments. I consider that sound advice.
- **A related problem: the emailed quote.** If the only way you can conduct an interview is via email, the result is often long paragraphs as responses. Do your source a favor and make any direct quotes sound like they came from the mouth of a human being. You can email the revised version back for approval.
- **This, in turn, brings us to another sticky situation—**when your source asks to vet your finished piece. Some publications have strict rules about this, which, of course, you will follow. Otherwise, consider sending the excerpt with the source's quotes, but not the whole article. An exception might be a technical topic outside your usual expertise that could benefit from the source's review.
- **Finally, should you take notes or record the interview?** The situation dictates your choice. If you have only one chance to talk to your source, and you must capture his or her exact words, use a recorder. Ask permission, and practice using the machine without freaking out. If you can return to the source and you want more of a casual conversation, stick with notes.

Direct and Indirect Quotes

In case you have forgotten,

A **direct quote** is the words from a source, contained within quotation marks: "Our goal is to get a path on these streets by the morning rush hour," said Joan Morris, a spokeswoman for Virginia's Department of Transportation.

An **indirect quote** paraphrases what the source says. The above might read something like this: Joan Morris, a spokeswoman for Virginia's Department of Transportation, said the department hoped to clear a path through the neighborhood streets by early tomorrow morning.

How to Make Sure a Quotation Doesn't Embarrass You

A good quotation from a famous person is a great way to lead into a speech or essay. It can become an effective visual when presented in a large font in a brochure, provide motivation or reinforce a learning objective in a training session, or bolster an argument in an advocacy piece.

But before you go copying and pasting willy-nilly from quotations.com, consider the—

- **Source.** Could you pinpoint the location of the quotation if you had to? In most popular writing, the exact citation is not needed, but you should be able to find it if challenged. Some books and especially websites do not provide complete information—just knowing that Martin Luther King, Jr., said it at some point in his life is not sufficient. Warning: if you insert the phrase in Google, you may find *anyone* who has used the quotation, and not necessarily the originator. This means that your search may involve several steps to reach the source.
- **Wording.** Do you have the wording exactly correct? Often, a quotation gets changed over time. Example: I planned to use George Santayana's quotation, "Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it." Only problem is that he actually wrote, "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it."
- **Credibility of the speaker.** Will the readers or listeners be inspired or horrified when they learn who originated the phrase? Shakespeare or Mark Twain—usually good. Richard Nixon—not so good. The Bible or Bill Clinton—very dependent on the audience (and when in doubt . . . do not include).

Resource tip: *The Quote Verifier* by Ralph Keyes (St. Martin's, 2006) tracks down lots of oft-repeated, seldom-cited quotations. *Cassell Companion to Quotations* by Nigel Rees (Cassell, 1997) provides context to make an informed call about whether or not to use a particular quotation.

Writing in Someone Else's Voice

When you write for yourself, you need to find your voice—your own, authentic way of expressing your thoughts.

But when you are writing something that goes under another person's or organization's name, you have to write in his/her/its voice.

Every person and organization has a distinct communications style, often without consciously thinking about it. Some are breezy, some more formal. Certain words and phrases are favored, others are political minefields. For example, should you refer to patients, victims, clients, individuals with [. . .], or some other word?

If you have an assignment to write in someone else's voice, you have to capture it as closely as you can. How? For simplicity's sake, I assume we're talking about a person in the suggestions below, but remember that an organization or company also has a voice.

- **Immerse yourself.** Read everything you can that he or she has written or presented, especially about the topic. Ideally, meet with the person and listen closely for turns of phrases and favorite anecdotes. Just think how different your piece would be if you wrote for the President versus the Vice President.
- **Read and listen to others in the field.** Become familiar with how the issue is covered elsewhere. The topic will govern where you look—financial websites, mommy blogs, direct-mail letters, etc.
- **Marry what you glean with what the piece calls for.** Each type of writing has conventions that supersede individual style. An article on education will be different in an academic journal versus a newsletter for teachers or one for high school students.
- **Get feedback and revise.** Test your draft on others who know the voice you are trying to capture. Plan for time to revise. The person may create a final version, based on your draft but sprinkled with his or her own preferences. So be it.
- **Clear the brain.** If you have two assignments to write in two different voices, don't expect to move seamlessly from one to the other. Work on one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Or on different days. Or at least take a walk around the building between tasks.

A note about editing

As editors, we often work on pieces in which the author has a very different voice or style from our own. Although we are occasionally asked to overhaul the writing, more likely we need to respect the author's voice. Of course, question unclear passages. But respect the voice.

If you find it difficult, edit for a while, then go create your own piece—in your "uniquely you" voice!

Co-Authoring Without Going Crazy

If two heads are better than one, why is it twice as much work to co-author or co-write a book or other project with someone else than to do it yourself?

Dealing with another person's quirks (and the other person's having to deal with yours) can slow down a project, but it can also result in a richer final product.

Here are five considerations to make the process go smoother. No right answers to the questions—just some ways to make the arrangement work or to decide it may not be such a great idea after all.

1. Confirm that co-authoring makes sense.

Co-authoring implies that two (or more, but let's stick with two here) people have a reason to share a writing assignment. Why are you considering it? Do you have complementary areas of knowledge so that working together is a value-added idea? Will the other person's involvement guarantee a better chance of publication or acceptance by your target audience? Do you have the same level of passion and time for the project—or, if you have unequal amounts, is that okay? In other words, make sure you both agree that co-authoring is the best route before you start. Be honest.

2. Define your roles.

Is there a first among equals, in terms of who has final say about what to include in the final project or any conclusions that will be drawn? If not, how will you resolve disagreements? What happens if one of you thinks the other is not pulling his or her weight?

3. Get organized.

How will you share the researching and writing? One person can make the first pass and then have the other go through it. Or you can divvy up the chapters if they cover discrete topics. Will you have regular meetings? How will you share research and interview notes and pass drafts back and forth for critiquing?

4. Put aside egos.

Critiquing and revising each other's work will be tricky. What if you make a suggestion and your co-author disagrees? How will you deal with hurt feelings?

5. Consult a lawyer or at least have an agreement in writing, depending on the project.

You do not need legal advice when you are co-authoring a report for your nonprofit, but you may for a book that you hope to sell. How will you divide your (hoped-for) revenue? How will you deal with requests for reprints, speaking engagements, or other spillover activity?

It may be that you cannot work out these five issues successfully. If not, better to know at the outset and not when you are enmeshed in a distressing situation.

What Worked for Two Co-Authors

Merianne Liteman and Sheila Campbell were friends and occasional professional collaborators when they wrote a book, together with Merianne's husband, Jeff Liteman, called Retreats That Work.

They still work and socialize together and have even co-authored a second edition. When I asked them what made the arrangement work, here's what they told me:

- We liked each other and admired one another's areas of complementary expertise from the start.
- We were working on something we were both excited to be working on and we thought we had something to contribute.
- We wrote an overall outline of the book, and each of us had discrete areas of primary responsibility for writing about what we included in the outline.
- We started off writing on laptops in the same room, where we could talk things over on the spot. And we traded off sections when we got stuck. That deepened our trust in each other, which then allowed us to work separately later.

Giving—and Asking for—Good Feedback

A colleague asks you to review a draft. It doesn't wow you, but you don't have a lot of time to think about why, so you just say, "Looks good, except I caught a few misspelled words." You can do better than that, even in the limited time available, can't you?

Or you have a memo, fact sheet, article, or other piece of writing that you need to make sure you get right. You ask a few people to review it. You get back vague comments like "This doesn't really work for me." If you are more specific about what you are asking for, chances are you will get more useful feedback.

Here are a few suggestions to make the exchange more useful for everyone.

To Give Useful Feedback, Ask Yourself:

- **What should I be looking for?** To answer that, you need to ask your colleague what she intends to accomplish with the piece. Who is the audience? How familiar are they with the topic? Is she asking you for feedback about the content or the way her content is expressed—or both?
- **What do I like about the piece?** Start with the parts of the document that you think are strong. Be specific about why you think so.
- **What questions do I still have?** Turn to the weaker parts. But be specific about why you don't like them and suggest ways to improve them. For example, you may not understand one of the arguments. Would an example help? If so, what kind of example?
- **When do I need to respond?** If your colleague has asked you to respond by Thursday morning, he does not want your feedback, however insightful, on Friday afternoon.

To Receive Useful Feedback, Ask Your Reviewers:

- **Can you review this by my deadline?** Make sure your colleagues can provide feedback within your time frame. Be realistic and allow them enough time to juggle your request with other work.
- **Will you focus on the conclusion (or some other part)?** Be specific about the parts of the piece that you are most unsure of. Or maybe your reviewers have different areas of expertise, and you can take advantage of their individual strengths.
- **What do you think is my main point?** If your reviewer is not clear about the main point or call to action, you probably need to revise and reorder. Then, ask again.

Finally, don't get defensive when a reviewer gives you less-than-glowing feedback. The point isn't just to get a pat on the back. Consider each comment carefully, particularly if several people have the same reaction.

Writers Working With Designers

In the best print and online publications, content and design work together seamlessly. The end-product exceeds its objectives. The client (whether it's someone who hired you based on an RFP or someone who sits down the hall from you) is happy. Audience feedback is positive.

The chance of serendipity happening improves when writers and designers collaborate. Below, three designers share what they need from writers to help the design process.

Know the Client

"One of the things that would help me when I work with writers is to have them really take the time to understand—and even research—the tone and style I am looking for. Depending on the client and type of publication, some projects may take on a serious tone, while others a more humorous or a more academic one. It usually comes down to the basics—whatever part of the communications spectrum you fall on—know your client!"

—Julian Kiganga, Vibrant Design Group

Learn about the Brand

"We specialize in brand development, and many times, we are working primarily on the visual brand elements. It is very helpful when a copywriter spends the time to read our brand briefs or other brand guidelines and incorporates words and elements into content. We find that when a copywriter spends five or ten minutes to talk with the designer or brand strategist, they both benefit from the pooled knowledge and perspectives."

—Joey Tackett, Clear Sky Creative

Consider Organization and Structure

Another note from Tackett: "If we have already designed a visual concept for the marketing or communication tool, it is helpful for the copywriter to consider the determined space and write within these parameters. Other times, we develop a visual layout based on the provided content. In these cases, the intention the copywriter has for the order, flow, and general structure are important to know. We like it when a copywriter provides notes in text, or provides an additional page that explains the vision for the text. Many times, a designer can accentuate text a different way to empower the copywriter's original vision."

Communicate With Consistency

"When the writer is working directly with the client, remember to keep the designer posted about where the project is in the process. The writer and designer need to be consistent in their communication with the client, such as not giving conflicting information about deadlines."

—Sue Hoffmeyer, sjz design

Revise Files With Caution

Hoffmeyer also advises "providing files to the designer that are completely worked through before having them placed into the design template—otherwise, it creates the need to reflow the text because of different word and paragraph breaks, etc." Of course, sometimes later-stage revisions can't be helped. In those cases, Tackett said "each designer is different, but we generally ask copywriters to use the Track Changes feature in Microsoft® Word or a similar text editor, or to provide a list of the edits, additions, and rewrites."

Online Considerations

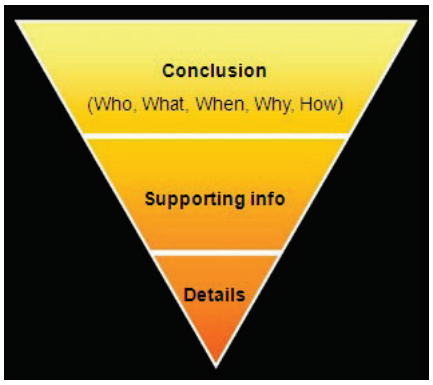
"The web of our life is a mingled yarn, good and ill together."
—William Shakespeare

Web Writing Revisited

You know by now that the Web requires clear writing, "chunked" paragraphs, and brevity. But, wait, there's more.

Is it time to look at some of your pages that have been up for (ahem) a while?

Rachel Pastirik, president and lead architect of Netdrafter, uses this graphic to explain how to organize content for a website.



Take-away message: Don't save your best stuff for last. Most visitors are skimmers who will move on if you don't catch their attention immediately.

She passed on a few other pointers:

- **4 main audiences:** You have to know your audience—but what does that mean in a practical way? As a doable task, she suggests planning for four types of users (for example, vendors, customers, competitors, staff members). Use focus groups or informal feedback to ensure they can easily find what they need on your site.
- **335 words:** Very roughly, that's the "sweet spot" for word length per page. Too many words loses readers and dilutes search engine rankings. Too few words, especially on the home page (think all-graphic splash pages), means a search engine "misses" the page entirely.
- **3 keywords:** Three keywords per page is, at this point, the optimum for search engines. Remember that search engines look at each page separately (versus an overall site). Don't put all your energy into the "About Us" page and skimp on everything else.
- **85% of traffic:** According to Pastirik, 85% of search traffic is targeted. When people have searched and clicked on your URL, they already are interested in what you have to offer. As she noted, "Engage them when they get there—don't turn them off."
- **1 domain:** Blogs are an inexpensive way to update content, engage readers, and, not incidentally, help with search engine rankings. Pastirik recommends integrating the blog within a website. Why direct visitors away to Blogger, WordPress, or someplace else? Again, having all of your content under the same domain helps with search engine rankings.
- **Quarterly or more:** Small organizations and businesses should update, or at least review, their site at least once a quarter. Larger organizations will have the need and the resources to update more frequently, perhaps weekly or even daily.

Resource tip: Online resources abound. Pastirik recommends web-writing guides on useit and grokdotcom.com. To these, I would add the Web Style Guide and content-strategy.com

SEO Basics

Search Engine Optimization encompasses techniques to structure websites, blogs, and other online vehicles so they rank as high up as possible in the major search engines—especially Google. It's a question of balancing the needs of search engine "spiders" with those of your human readers.

Current best practices include—

- **Choose one keyword phrase per page,** which you can sprinkle on (not bombard!) the page to describe your product or services. Research shows people usually use 3 to 5 words in a search phrase. And don't use the same ones on each page of your site—you'll only be competing against yourself for search engine placement.
- **Think narrow (ish).** The keywords need to be general enough that someone besides you will search on them but not so broad that you do not have a realistic shot at a high SE rank. Many services offer basic keyword analysis for free, and then charge more for premium assistance. The basic stuff is fine for a start.
- **Use the keywords in the page title and the headlines.** Help the search engines find you! Example: A headline could read "Hand-Delivered Gourmet Fruit Baskets," rather than "A Great Gift."
- **Label your graphics.** Use the ALT image tag (your web developer will know about this if you do not) to describe your images in words. Helps the spiders and makes your page more accessible to the visually impaired or those with text-only capability.

Although content is paramount for search engine placement, other factors play a role, too, including links, design, and server issues.

Resource tip: Check out WordTracker (free trial requires registration) or Overture to give you an idea of the keyword density of your current pages, competitors' pages, or new pages you create. Google has a tool that suggests phrases people used—some are ridiculous but some will catch your interest.

Writing for Mobile Devices

Usability expert Jakob Nielsen points out a paradox: People read on their smart phones or other mobile devices when they are waiting, commuting, or otherwise have time to spare, yet they still expect content to be short and to the point.

In many cases, they seek very local information: the nearest Starbucks, the pharmacy's hours, a restaurant review. But even if your organization doesn't deal in such nuts-and-bolts information, you can provide a useful "mobile experience."

Here's advice from Ahava Leibtag, principal of the web consulting firm Aha Media Group, and Nam-ho Park, director of mobile services for Forum One Communications, a digital communications firm that works on many social issues.

Initial Considerations

For Leibtag, three things influence decisions about content for a mobile device:

- **Your business strategy,** which determines the relevant content to make mobile. What do you need to communicate that people are more apt to seek on a mobile device than on their desktop/laptop?
- **When and how users will access the content,** whether they need it ASAP or over time. Her example: A public health agency might answer "What should I do if my condom breaks" on a simple website, with clear steps to take. In contrast, tips for a healthy pregnancy might be texted weekly.
- **Level of interactivity,** if you need users to fill out forms or otherwise communicate back to you.

Before writing, she develops user scenarios in this early stage—defining the target users and then working through the information they might seek via a mobile device and how (while they commute? walking through a mall? alone or in a crowd?).

As Park told me, "People aren't browsing and researching on mobile devices like they are on their desktop or laptop. The headline, first paragraph, and image must tell the story."

Five Writing Implications

- **Brief, packed headlines:** "BBC is a master of the 5-word headline," said Park.
- **Mobile-tailored keywords:** "SEO is different on a mobile device and is constantly changing," said Leibtag, noting that Google had seven SEO-related updates in the past four months alone. If ranking high is a priority, get yourself up to speed or hire someone who already is.
- **The first paragraph:** "The first paragraph should offer a summary of the whole," said Park. No holding back your best stuff in hopes people will be so intrigued they keep reading.
- **Well-explained links:** Because pages load slower on a mobile device, clearly describe what the link is so people can decide if they want to go there.

- **Provocative images:** Work with the designer on small but interesting images. Park pointed to Mashable's mobile site as a good example.

Changes Ahead

Both Leibtag and Park stress that many changes lie ahead for mobile technology. "When is the last time you had to re-learn something on your desktop or laptop?" asked Leibtag. "Mobile is constantly shifting, and we are far from the end of the changes."

And we will go beyond mobile, said Park. A McKinsey report, The Internet of Things, foresees a world in which connectivity is ubiquitous.

E-Newsletter Best Practices

E-newsletters can provide timely content, remind customers and colleagues about you, and do double-duty as part of your archives. Here are some best practices.

Content

- Short articles, option to click for more information
  - A 100-word synopsis, with a link to a longer article of maybe 750 words
  - Written with scanning and screen-reading in mind: not like "regular" newsletter articles.
  - Lots of subheadings, bulleted lists, and other chunks of text
- Clear calls to action, reasons to click
  - To get more information, request a copy of something, sign up, provide feedback, etc. Most email services provide a way to track click rates, which are interesting to analyze over time
- Consistent "sections" in each issue. One possible structure:
  - Feature (again, short)
  - In the News
  - Quick Q and A (a mini, one-question poll or a way for readers to ask a question to encourage more interaction)
  - Resources
- Friendly language (as marketing expert Michael Katz, Blue Penguin Development, wrote, "pick one idea, boil it down, speak like a human being.")
- Searchable
  - In the archives, by topic, possibly geographic area, or other relevant-to-you filter
  - Note: Most email services let you maintain an archive, but the one in Constant Contact is not searchable nor does it show up in search engines. However, when the newsletters are archived on your own site, they *are* searchable. Mail Chimp, another popular service, has a plug-in to transfer an archived newsletter to a WordPress blog, which is also searchable.

Design

- Lots of white space, very easy to scan
- Appealing images
- Check that the top of the newsletter that people view in their "preview pane" has something interesting to encourage continued reading—not a huge graphic
- Colorful (without going overboard) and approachable, design consistent with the overall brand
- Easy-to-find links to website, social media sites, archives, forward to a friend, subscribe, back issues.

Delivery

- Consistent time when it is sent—consider shorter, more frequent issues than quarterly
- Subject lines with no more than 50 characters. Rule of thumb is not to use the same subject line every time (e.g., "Ease in Writing, September issue") and to focus on the issue's main topic except when readers are more likely to open the email because of your brand name (e.g., an e-newsletter from your alma mater).
- Consider segmenting your list and running some tests, such as sending at different times or with different subject lines.

Writing Website Bios

Bio Style #1:

Dr. Sanchez oversees customer engagement from the enterprise and infrastructure perspectives.

Bio Style #2:

Jeannie holds our customers' hands when she's not knitting or scuba diving.

Bio Style #3:

Some combination of #1 and #2 that makes sense for your organization.

If you are drafting a bio:

- Keep it short. It is different from the bio you might include in proposals that require lengthy lists of accomplishments. It is not a résumé.
- Minimize the hype. Readers want a sense of your team's capabilities and what it would be like to work with you. Don't be falsely modest, but don't lay on the "best in class," "uniquely qualified," and other superlatives too thickly.
- Don't lie or embellish. That should be obvious, but a reminder just in case.

If you are deciding how to compile a collection of bios for your organization:

- Match the tone to your brand. Informal style (first names, conversational) fits many organizations; others feel more comfortable with a more formal style (Ms. Johnson).
- Determine whom to include. Some organizations post bios of the whole staff, from receptionist to CEO. Others limit the bios to the senior leadership team or some other smaller set. No right or wrong answer, but make it a conscious decision, not a default.
- Determine what to include. Do you want the bios to include family and personal interests? Volunteer positions? Academic degrees? Or just stick to information related to the job? Try to be consistent across bios.
- Photos or not? When I read a website bio before meeting someone in person, I like seeing his or her photo. But you may disagree. If you include photos, they should be professional—not necessarily a formal head shot but not the kind that teens post on Facebook.
- Proof the bios carefully. For example, if you include academic background, be consistent with how you present the information across multiple bios. (Did they major in Psychology or psychology?)

If you are asking your colleagues for their bios:

- Give them clear guidelines. Outside-of-work information or not, previous jobs before coming to your organization or not? Decide beforehand so you don't waste people's time (and good will).

- Run the bio past its owner. It's his or her life on public display. Asking for a sign-off is considerate.

Writing Fabulous FAQs

Okay, the headline exaggerates. Your FAQs—the "frequently asked questions" on your website—don't have to be ***fabulous***. But they ***do*** need to be clear, free of hype, and reflect questions that users have in real life.

Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

- **Include real questions:** An FAQ list should not start with a softball question like, "What are the benefits of using your [fill-in-the-blank product or service]?" unless you frequently are truly asked this question and it is not answered elsewhere on the site.
- **Make the questions short:** "Are my tickets refundable?"
- **No sales talk:** The FAQ page is not the place for self-promotional writing. People come to the page because they have a question that needs answering.
- **No legalese:** In an effort to tone down the hype, however, don't get too technical or formal. A conversational tone is good. (As Ginny Radish notes in her book ***Letting Go of the Words***, "Show that you are a person and that your organization includes people.")
- **Organize the questions:** If you have a long list of questions, organize them by category. You can also list the questions at the top, with anchor tags to take users to their specific question with its answer.
- **Provide an easy way to get a more complete answer:** Many questions require more nuanced answers that go beyond a few sentences. Make it easy for users to contact you for a more information.
- **Provide an easy way to ask a different question:** Likewise, the user may find his or her question is not included. Make it easy to ask other questions through a form or an email link. (You may even find that you get a question often enough that you add it to your FAQs.)

Building a Better Blog

How many blogs have you started and not kept up? If you're like me, the answer is a few over the years. I have a good idea, write a few posts, don't get any comments, and then allow other things in life take over.

I talked to two bloggers about how it ***should*** be done. Ray Sidney-Smith, W3 Consulting, helps businesses and organizations use web and digital technology better, including blogs. Patrick Ross, in addition to writing The Artist's Road, teaches a course on blogging at the Writer's Center in Bethesda.

It's not everything there is to know about blogging, of course, but I share a few particularly "aha!" points.

Showing Yourself, Telling a Story

One suggestion from both Ross and Sidney-Smith surprised me: the importance of vulnerability.

What have you been struggling with? What is a challenge you've had to overcome? A lesson learned? That's the kind of compelling content that interests readers.

Corporate blogs, in particular, are often so rah-rah that they're just another form of a press release. For example, instead of a post about how wildly successful your last event was, why not post about how you dealt with attracting attendees on a Sunday night or choosing entertainment that fit your budget?

This does ***not*** mean dissecting every failure and weakness or spilling every secret into cyberspace.

As Ross noted when I met him at a meeting of the Capitol Creativity Network, vulnerability is important in blogging, but you still control how much of yourself to show. Sidney-Smith agreed, "You should be honest, but don't go overboard."

We know the importance of narrative in writing strong prose. Ross explained what that means for blogging. "Every story begins with dialogue with yourself," he said. Invite the reader into that dialogue—what have you been thinking about? He said he started *The Artist's Road* literally to travel and interview artists. But the posts that have proven the most popular center on his own thoughts and experiences.

Planning It Out

Both Ross and Sidney-Smith warned against jumping in to start a blog. Plan out the content and get in the habit of posting before you commit. Since, as Ross put it, "a blog is as good as your worst post," make sure you have it down.

Sidney-Smith advises would-be bloggers to set up an editorial calendar and write 5 to 10 weeks' worth of posts in advance. He breaks down the process into six steps:

- Brainstorm
- Research

- Organize and outline
- Draft
- Edit
- Publish

Brainstorm or research a few posts at a time, he suggested, to build up an inventory. Think ahead to seasonal themes that affect your organization.

Ross advised blogging for a while without publishing the posts. Not only will you experiment with finding your voice and getting into a blogging habit, you'll have a stockpile of posts to draw from when you do go online.

Reviving a Moribund Blog

This gets us back to those abandoned blogs. Should we revive them or relegate them to forgotten corners of cyberspace (except that no corner of cyberspace is truly forgotten)?

Sidney-Smith recommends being up front—and discussing it in your blog (again, within reason, but you are showing your vulnerability!). Talk about why you didn't stick with it. Bring people up to date about what you are doing.

Another point to consider: While you bemoan your absence from the blogging scene, the reality is that most people didn't notice.

Remember, though, that a blog, like most organisms, can only be resuscitated so many times. Are you are willing and able to sustain the blog if you decide to create or re-create it? If not, wait until you are.

Where to Find Ross and Sidney-Smith

Patrick Ross' blog, named a "Top Ten for Writers 2011-2012, The Artist's Road

Ray Sidney-Smith's blog The Web and Beyond

Note: Both are on Twitter and other social media. You will find the links on their blogs.

Building an Audience for Your Blog

Based on the previous section, maybe you were inspired to launch or re-launch a blog, or maybe the idea is still lingering on a to-do list.

No matter the timeline, the reason to devote the time to a blog is because you want others to read it.

How to do that?

Bloggers Ray Sidney-Smith, W3 Consulting, and Patrick Ross, The Artist's Road, both stressed that it takes a while to build readership—perhaps as long as six months to a year.

Search engines will eventually "find" the content. The good news is that, once they do, they see each blog entry as a separate webpage. Thus, someone may enter your blog because of a search for a specific topic (e.g., "How to Increase Meeting Attendance" or "Best Types of Tomatoes for Dry Climates") and then become a regular reader. Incorporating good keywords in the headline and text makes the blog more visible through Google or other searches.

Don't Just Wait, Do Something

But you want to do more than just wait until readers happen upon your creation. Here are a few suggestions from Sidney-Smith:

- **Go to your readers.** Find other blogs related to your topic. Comment on what you read, ask a question, generally participate. Don't blatantly promote your blog, but include the URL in your signature or, if it's an option, in your profile.
- **Ask questions, be provocative.** In your posts, ask questions—"What do you think?" "How does this strike you?" "That's my take on it. Do you agree?" If no one is reading or commenting, Sidney-Smith suggests reassessing and tweaking the content to make it more interactive.
- **"Market the heck out of it."** Let people in your existing circles know about the blog. Add a link to your email signature. List the URL on your business cards, in ads, and everyplace else. Gently ask your friends to post a comment to start building up reader contributions.
- **Link to social media.** Don't just post the URL, let prospective readers know about something interesting they'll find when they go there. Use a subject hashtag in Twitter to go beyond your followers to people who are seeking information on the topic (e.g., #writingtips). Summarize a post in a sentence or two with a link to the full text in an e-newsletter.

You may have already searched to know that blogs abound about how to build blog readership (this can all get a bit circular). A few other tips I've picked up and their sources:

- **Contribute as a guest** to a blog that seems to attract the types of readers you seek. You help the other blogger; the blogger helps you. As a start, a website called MyBlogGuest connects guests with those looking for them. Source: SEOmoz
- **Have a "blog buddy"** so you get outside feedback and perhaps better adhere to a writing schedule. Source: Heidi Cohen
- **Set up your blog** so readers automatically receive updated content. Save them a step. Source: Entrepreneur magazine

One Step at a Time

You've probably heard at least some of this advice already. Start slowly so you don't get overwhelmed. Add a new promotional technique—just one or a few at a time. Both Ross and Sidney-Smith have been successful in getting people involved in their blogs, but it took a while.

Mechanics

"A flake of snow brought the avalanche down."
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Three Punctuation Problems—Solved!

Recently, readers have asked me some interesting questions about punctuation that frequently trips them up. They're not the only ones. We don't learn about the finer points of bulleted lists in school, for example, yet aren't they a staple of many office communications?

Here, I set out some rules, acknowledging that custom sometimes trumps purity. Examples are in *italics*.

Where to Put Quotation Marks

Placement with straightforward dialogue is easy. (***He said, "I'm in."***) Things get tricky in situations like the ones below.

1. Place a period and a comma inside quotation marks, even when not part of the quote itself.

The operative word was "forbidden."

He said, "Yes, please," and then he took four cookies.

2. Place semicolons and colons outside quotation marks.

I love the song "Yesterday"; he hates it.

She asked for the following "volunteers": Tom, Dick, and Harry.

3. Place question marks and exclamation marks outside quotation marks when not part of the quote.

Who wrote, "Quoth the raven, nevermore"?

When she took the money, she didn't even say, "Thank you"!

By the way, British style is to place the punctuation mark outside the quotation marks in all three cases.

How to Punctuate (or Not) a Bulleted List

Many years ago in a scientific and technical editing course, my instructor sighed and said, "And now we get to the bulleted list."

The bulleted list—such a cause of consternation.

1a. When you introduce a list with a full sentence, use a colon.

The main areas of concern are as follows:

1b. When you introduce a list with a phrase, use an em-dash or nothing at all.

The main areas of concern are

We have a hard time launching a list without a colon. It "looks" wrong. Depending on your tolerance level, this may be one of those instances where custom trumps purity, in my opinion.

2a. When list items are short, no punctuation is needed in Chicago style; APA style prefers commas and a period.

Bring these documents:

- Picture ID
- Appointment letter
- Insurance card

Bring these documents

- Picture ID,
- Appointment letter,
- Insurance card.

Whichever style you choose, remain consistent within your organization or, at least, within your document or website.

2b. When list items contain full sentences, use a semicolon or period after each item, with a period at the end of the list.

She described several problems that could lead to accidents:

- It is impossible to take a left onto Duke Street at rush hour;
- Traffic lights are often not working on Quaker Lane;
- Recent construction has left the road pitted with potholes;
- Most motorists are unaware of these problems and drive too fast.

When each bullet has several sentences within, periods are normally used.

3. It is okay to have bulleted lists with different end-punctuation within the same document.

So if you have some of 2a and some of 2b, relax.

Finally, more a stylistic than grammatical point: Bulleted lists help the reader, but only when they are not overused.

How to Punctuate Parentheses

Our last problem of the day: punctuation with parentheses.

1. Place a parenthetical phrase within a sentence and punctuate outside the close-parenthesis.

She couldn't believe her luck (and didn't bother to ask any further questions).

2. Use punctuation within parentheses with a full sentence. Note in this example that no punctuation directly follows the close-parenthesis.

She couldn't believe her luck. (And she decided not to ask any further questions.)

Resource tip: The APA and Chicago Manual of Style guides deal with many gnarly situations. Their websites have useful summaries, tips, and tutorials.

Five Common Word Mix-Ups

I marvel at how non-native English speakers handle our homophones (too/to/two), pronunciation (rough/through/though/ought), and other linguistic eccentricities.

Even we native speakers have our challenges. Here are five that have bedeviled clients, colleagues, and me in recent months:

1. Discrete/Discreet

"Discrete" means separate or unconnected. "Discreet" means tactful or careful to avoid upsetting or embarrassing others.

He had two discrete ways of dealing with his children, but he was discreet in not letting on about the two systems.

2. Born/Borne

"Born" means brought into life or begun. "Borne" is the past participle of the verb "bear"; when related to birth, it's used when the mother, not the infant, is the subject.

She had already borne a son when Lulu was born in 2005.

3. Defuse/Diffuse

"Defuse" means to make something less dangerous or tense. "Diffuse" means to spread or scatter.

He defused a tense situation when he cracked a joke. Suddenly, good will was diffused throughout the crowd.

4. Compliment/Complement

"Compliment" means to praise. "Complement" means to complete or perfect something.

She complimented me on my new shoes, telling me that they complemented the rest of my outfit.

5. Principle/Principal

"Principle" means a theory, standard, or way of working. "Principal" means primary or most significant.

Her principles are the principal reason she cannot get involved in the project.

A Final Word

Many tips in this book come from my own experience, while others are from outside experts. You'll find links and basic information about those experts in the individual sections. Here is an alphabetical list of them, along with where their advice appears.

Some of these people are long-standing friends; others responded graciously when I called or emailed them for information.

Sharon Armstrong (Résumé-Writing Tips)
Sally Behnam (Building a Better Brochure)
John Boulware (Federal Proposals That Win)
Mary Collins (Interviewing)
April Davis (How Long Does It Take to Edit?)
Margot Friedman (How to Write an Op-Ed)
Amy Fries (Daydreaming for Results)
Sue Hoffmeyer (Writers Working With Designers)
Michael Katz (E-Newsletter Best Practices)
Julian Kiganga (Writers Working With Designers)
Ahava Leibtag (Writing for Mobile Devices)
Merianne Liteman (From Flip Chart to Finished Report; Co-Authoring Without Going Crazy)
Pat Lovenhart (Writing Surveys You'll Use)
Patti Lowry (How Long Does It Take to Edit?)
Quinn McDonald (Working with a Writing Coach)
Rachel Pastirik (Web Writing Revisited)
Steve Raabe (Writing Surveys You'll Use)
Stephen Rafe (Writing Surveys You'll Use)
Don Rheem (Writing a Darn Good Speech)
Ruth Thaler-Carter (Résumé-Writing Tips)
Nam-ho Park (Writing for Mobile Devices)
Patrick Ross (Building a Better Blog; Building an Audience for Your Blog)
Ari Daniel Shapiro (Preparing a Professional Podcast)
Ray Sidney-Smith (Building a Better Blog; Building an Audience for Your Blog)
Andrew Stockel (Preparing a Professional Podcast)
Joey Tackett (Writers Working with Designers)
Mary Ellen Thirolf (How Long Does It Take to Edit?)
Ann Timmons (Writing a Darn Good Speech)
Bobbie Troy (How Long Does It Take to Edit?)
Nancy Whichard (Working with a Writing Coach)

Also thanks to two friends (both excellent freelance editors) who helped me format and edit these pages:

Laurie Cullen

Joanne Lozar Glenn

I hope these tips are useful as you continue to write, no matter your final project. Please suggest topics you would like to see covered in future issues of the newsletter *Ease in Writing* or editions of this e-book.

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