

In the Spring of 2002, the Center for Community Journalism (Owasso College, New York) asked the nation's top newsroom trainers to provide their best writing advice. The result was a list of "the Greatest Writing Tips the World has Ever Seen." A panel of journalists selected this submission as the single best writing tip:

The great lead test

By: Kathy Norton, Poughkeepsie Journal

Read the lead for an article. Now ask, does this sentence make you want to read the next sentence and the rest of the story?

Finding the focus

By: Chip Scanlan, Poynter Institute

Every story is about something. The best stories have a focus and a point. Try asking these questions: What's the news? What's the story? What information surprised me the most? What will surprise my reader or viewer? What one thing does my reader need to know?

The great jargon hunt

By: David Burton, University of Missouri

Go through an article and highlight all jargon words. These are the words used by public officials, etc. that may not make any sense to the average readers. Look at those words and see if you can find a way to translate.

Active language

By: Denny Wilkins, St. Bonaventure University

Everyone tells you to write using an "active voice." Anyone ever tell you how to do that? Here's one suggestion. Try going through a story and highlighting every "are," "is," "were," and "was." Now find a way to rewrite the sentence using a stronger verb.

Southwest Region News Service

Southwest Region News Service is a weekly educational news service highlighting University of Missouri Outreach and Extension programs and events with helpful, unbiased and objective information specific to southwest Missouri. Weekly articles that make up the *Southwest Region News Service* are delivered electronically every Friday.

The personal information (or e-mail addresses) of subscribers to *Southwest Region News Service* is never shared with other organizations, subscribers are never sent advertisements, and subscribers never receive attachments (or viruses).

To receive *Southwest Region News Service* for free, and to learn more about everything from 4-H to nutrition and gardening, please subscribe by sending your name and e-mail address to: burtond@missouri.edu.

David L. Burton, Civic Communication Specialist
University of Missouri Extension,
833 Boonville, Springfield, Mo. 65802
Tel: (417) 862-9284
E-mail: burtond@missouri.edu

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI
 Extension

University of Missouri Extension does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability or status as a Vietnam era veteran in employment or programs.

The World's Greatest Writing tips



Improve your
writing with
these tips

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI
OUTREACH AND EXTENSION

The Greatest Writing Tips the World has Ever Seen

Edit your own copy

By: Denny Wilkins, St. Bonaventure University

It's almost impossible to edit your own copy. But try this out. Print a copy of your article and read it backward. This should help you see your copy through fresh eyes. Find any errors or awkward phrases?

Circling problem areas

By: Denny Wilkins, St. Bonaventure University

Go through an article and circle every period. Now look at the pattern – looking for areas with longer sentences. See if this helps you identify sentences that may be too long. Typically, longer sentences are where you find grammatical errors, needless prepositions and other impediments to good writing.

Show me the details

By: Rene Kaluza, city editor, St. Cloud Times

Show, don't tell. (But, you have to have reported the details well to be able to do that.) Go through an article and find examples where a writer could have benefited from using details to show the reader something rather than just telling them about it.

Finding the nutgraf

By: Nancy Weil, Asst. Editor, IDG News Service

Highlight the nutgraf (the sentence that provides an overview for what the story is about) or put it in bold or whatever and go back to it as you write to make certain that the story supports it.

Are your lips moving?

By: Laurie Hertzell, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Read your story out loud. You will hear awkward phrases and know if a sentence is too difficult.

Quote alert

By: Nancy Weil, Asst. Editor, IDG News Service

Go on quote alert. Make sure every quote you use is worth using. Otherwise paraphrase.

Search and destroy

By: Laurie Hertzell, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Search and destroy. That is, after your first draft do a computer search on weak words (there, that, it, etc.) or weak verbs or (in my case) adverbs (do a search on LY) or any other phrases or words you tend to use as a crutch, and then change them to something stronger.

Omit needless words

By: Nancy Weil, Asst. Editor, IDG News Service

Be on guard for words you don't need. Watch for phrases like "in order to" and others that add words without saying more.

Making a positive out of a negative

By: Laurie Hertzell, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Convert negatives to positives. Figure out a way to say what is, instead of what isn't, because it is shorter, clearer and more direct. Look for "not" and "wasn't," "isn't" or "no" and see if it makes sense to rewrite.

Examples: "The movie wasn't engaging and most people didn't stay for the end." Change to: "The movie was dull and people left early."

or,

"The City Council vote was not unanimous." change to: "The council's vote was divided."

Who's the story about?

By: Carolyn Bower, Tampa Tribune

Never assume the official view is the peg of the story.

One example: City commissioner John Higgins will apologize to the woman he ejected from a public meeting to settle her long and costly lawsuit against him, the city attorney's office said.

(Classic case of the reporter forgetting he/she gathers information and *then* determines the story direction.)

Rewritten: After two years of fighting city hall, Rita Moore, 72, is getting what she wanted: A formal apology from ex-Mayor John Higgins.

Not perfect, but much, much better.

Read!

By: Lynn Kalber, The Palm Beach Post

Read good writers. Actually, the basic is "Just READ!" – it's surprising how many reporters don't.

Tell that story in one word

By: Michelle Hiskey, reporter, Atlanta Journal Constitution

Attach a ONE WORD theme to your story – i.e. greed, monopoly, trust, hunger, etc. -- to keep you focused.

Walk away

By: Nancy Weil, Asst. Editor, IDG News Service

Provided you aren't on right-this-second deadline, leave the office if you get stuck. Likewise, get up and move around when you're working on long stories or stories with difficult topics (get away from the murder and mayhem you are writing about). Take a walk outside. Go to your favorite store and immerse yourself in the tactile pleasures of shopping for 15 or 20 minutes, relax and let your mind go where it wants with the story.

Toddler with a butcher knife

By: Lex Alexander, assistant features editor/CAR team leader, Greensboro News & Record

Trust yourself with adjectives the way you would trust a toddler with a butcher knife. Adjectives often imply subjective value judgments that your reporting might or might not support (and that readers will interpret as bias in either case).

Example: Find objective terms for what you're trying to convey. Don't call the city council member "ineffective." Say he has set a record for missed meetings, was on the winning side of only two disputed votes in the past year and hasn't gotten a single motion or resolution enacted since taking office.