

Nutshell Writing

Tips for getting your writing read, understood, and enjoyed!

Introductory anecdote

In 1963 I was a reporter for the Rochester (NY) Democrat and Chronicle, anchor newspaper for the Gannett chain. My wife Jolie thought she'd finished her master's thesis and asked me to "take a look" at it before she turned it in. That look almost broke up our young marriage. I'd taken her seriously.

When she calmed down, I explained each red mark and comment on the paper. There were three categories:

- **Grammatical errors** -- non-negotiable;
- **Preferable usage** -- nuances of acceptable style for strong, clear writing -- somewhat negotiable; and
- **Personal preferences** -- word choice, sentence structure, and general organization for smooth flow – arguable, but completely negotiable. (*De gustibus non est disputandum.*)

We repeated the exercise once or twice before she handed it in. Later the readers at the library told her it was the best-written thesis submitted that spring. She's spent the last six decades avenging herself as my editor.

Other basic principles

The essence of any writing is the subject-verb combo, bones of the structure. Classic newspaper guidance calls for the five W's: Who, What, When, Where, sometimes Why, and even How. The first two are the subject-verb combo; the second two, the time-space elements. The rest is information that may or may not be necessary. The How and Why also contain some of the first four W's: Who (subject) did What (verb), When, and Where, followed by explanatory modifiers. *Active voice is*

usually stronger than, and preferable to, *passive*. Bloviated prose doesn't sit well with editors, nor does stream-of-consciousness run-on. Above all, eschew obfuscation!

Personal Biases

A lot of my writing/editing is gut-level, based on experience and a good foundation in basic grammar and style.

Pet peeves

- **Adverbs** – Used sparingly they contribute substance to clear writing, but they often clutter. Rare usage is better in clean writing. “Very” clarifies and enhances -- occasionally. The old president used “very” often. To be fair, many others do also. A common example is its use with “unique,” a characteristic that either is or isn't. The remedy is to use strong, unequivocal verbs and strong adjectives, words that require no further modification.
- **Unnecessary verbiage** – Strong writing is explicit, often terse. Unnecessary verbiage forces readers to slog through slushy prose. The following two sentences convey the same information. One does it with many modifiers; the other encapsulates the idea succinctly: (1) “The withered, feeble old woman limped unsteadily, and with difficulty, through the dimly lit alley.” (2) “The crone hobbled through the dark alley.” The strength of the second derives from its specificity. Minimizing verbiage strengthens prose and helps meet word limitations.
- **“The”** – This definite article is often superfluous. It tends to lard prose and slow the reader. I try to purge my writing of “the's” unless they clarify. Use of “the” comes down to personal preference.
- **Weak modifiers** -- Adjectives and adverbs are both overused. They're definitely useful, but should be chosen judiciously and used sparingly.
- **Gerunds and infinitives** – These verbs used as nouns are useful, but it's important to understand how they differ. Here's a good explanatory link:
<https://www.edexlive.com/opinion/2018/apr/08/how-and-where-to-use-it-the-difference-between-the-gerund-and-the-infinitive-words-in-english-2432.html>

When possible, use the verb itself rather than the noun form. For example, improve the phrase, “In these days of electronics *vying* for attention...” by making it stronger, as: “In these days, when electronics *vie* for attention...” It’s stronger as a subject-verb combination.

Personal preferences:

- **Strong verbs** – These are the heartbeat of any narrative. Nouns and pronouns are things involved in the action (doing or being done to), but verbs are the *doing*, the action. The example of the crone illustrates this. A herculean verb will cut through turgid prose directly to the chase. This is a good link:
<https://justpublishingadvice.com/how-to-use-strong-verbs-to-sharpen-your-writing/>
- **Short sentences** – Sentences should be short but not choppy, each focusing on a single idea. This allows the writer to throw in an occasional longer sentence that links closely related ideas. In this day of electronics that vie for our attention, shorter sentences are more likely to be read, especially if they create a narrative that engages the reader.

Putting these ideas into practice

I’d like to thank a friend for agreeing to provide our example exercise. He asked me to help him with a brief (150-word) letter to the editor. The original letter was coherent and had some excellent ideas, but it needed polishing. Both letters are included below, followed by a description of what I did and why.

Original - Title: “Full steam ahead?”

Imagine taking a time machine onto the Titanic and asking the captain to slow the ship. But, instead of listening to your warning, the captain starts ranting, “I don’t believe in icebergs, and one of my crew agrees with me... We like traveling fast... Are you a communist? Ships sink all the time; it’s natural... God won’t let anything bad happen.”

Our hypothetical captain sounds insane, yet some people use similar arguments against climate change mitigation. So which is the more significant threat, the iceberg or the flawed thinking?

Michigan Senator William Alden Smith, who chaired the 1912 US Titanic investigation committee, concluded, “indifference to danger was one of the direct and contributing causes of this unnecessary tragedy.”

Contact your representatives and senators and ask them to slow our ship by putting a price on carbon to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and buy ourselves some time.

Edited version (Same headline)

Let’s time-travel onto the bridge of the unsinkable Titanic. We’ll warn the captain to slow down, but he replies. “We like traveling fast! I don’t believe in icebergs, and a crew member agrees with me. Ships sink all the time. It’s natural. Besides, God won’t let anything bad happen to us.” The reply sounds absurd.

In 1912, Michigan Senator William Alden Smith chaired the Titanic investigation committee. He concluded, “indifference to danger was one of the direct and contributing causes of this unnecessary tragedy.” Which was the real threat, iceberg or flawed thinking?

When people today argue against mitigating climate change, the far-reaching consequences of their flawed, indifferent thinking are infinitely more serious.

Ask your representatives and senators to protect our spaceship Earth by putting a price on carbon to reduce emissions, slow and reverse climate change, and buy ourselves some time. Please. For the sake of our grandkids.

Comments

This is how and why I modified the original. It’s important to note that it wasn’t done in a single pass, but required maybe four times through before it flowed smoothly. Texts are italicized.

Original: *Imagine taking a time machine onto the Titanic and asking the captain to slow the ship.*

Rewrite: *Let’s time-travel onto the bridge of the unsinkable Titanic. We’ll warn the captain to slow down, but he replies,*

“Let’s” immediately involves the reader with the writer. It invokes imagination without mentioning it directly. The verb “time-travel” is succinct, stronger, and replaces “taking a time machine.” It buys us three words to use elsewhere – like “unsinkable”, a specific adjective that catches the reader’s attention early on. The sentence then stops abruptly. The next sentence introduces the captain, whom we “warn,” a stronger verb, instead of “asking” him. The second part of the sentence leads the reader directly to the captain’s reply.

Except for removing the “communist” reference, I left the captain’s quote intact. This was 1912, five years before the Russian revolution, and it’s irrelevant. The rest was fine, a good sequence of replies from the captain.

Removing the captain’s “ranting” changes the focus from the captain to the response itself, as does changing “insane” to “absurd.” This has nothing to do with our mythical Titanic captain, but rather focuses on the “indifference” our society has toward the “danger” of climate change, really the point you are trying to make.

I re-cast the next paragraph to open with the year of the sinking and let readers know that Sen. Smith’s hearing took place that same year. I also broke a long sentence into two shorter ones and added a third.

Original: *Michigan Senator William Alden Smith, who chaired the 1912 US Titanic investigation committee, concluded, “indifference to danger was one of the direct and contributing causes of this unnecessary tragedy.”*

Rewrite: *In 1912, Michigan Senator William Alden Smith chaired the Titanic investigation committee. He concluded, “indifference to danger was one of the direct and contributing causes of this unnecessary tragedy.” Which was the real threat, iceberg or flawed thinking?*

Adding the third sentence (using words gained by tightening the narrative above), we can raise the specific question at the heart of the letter and use it to segue into the

next paragraph, which leads front and center into a serious contemporary problem much larger than the sinking of a single ship.

Though we replaced “ask” in the first paragraph with the stronger “warn,” in this context, “ask,” requiring a response, is stronger than “contact.” Because we had some extra words available, we were able to insert “spaceship Earth,” another kind of ship, to drive the point home. And it was Christmas time, so we considered the grandkids!

Final comment

When we change something in a narrative, it often affects what we’ve said elsewhere. When I write columns, I re-read them over and over, and at different times of day, before submitting them. It’s rare that I don’t change a word or two, even on the last pass. And that’s after Jolie has had her say.

Pete Haug

petes.pen9@gmail.com