

A handout from

JPROF

the web site for teaching journalism



Principles of clear, effective writing

1. Use short words rather than long ones.
2. Prefer familiar words over unfamiliar ones.
3. Be precise. Be sure that each word conveys its precise meaning. Use your dictionary and thesaurus.
4. Use strong verbs, and prefer active over passive voice.
5. Watch use of qualifying words and phrases. Check your adjectives, adverbs and prepositional phrases. Are they needed? If not, strike them out. Be especially alert for long strings of prepositional phrases. Prefer the use of nouns and verbs to adjectives and adverbs.
6. Use short sentences. Try not to average more than 20 words a sentence.
7. Vary sentence length. Balance long sentences with short ones. Monotony in sentence length puts the reader to sleep.
8. Be straightforward. Rambling sentences, filled with qualifying clauses, cause the reader to lose the train of thought. You should take the most direct route between subject, verb and object.
9. Avoid wordiness, jargon, pompous phrases and generalities.
10. Use restraint. Sound facts speak for themselves. An understatement is often more effective than flamboyant words and phrases.
11. Revise. Read and reread what you have written. Then revise and rewrite until you have achieved clarity and a pleasing style.
12. Use transitions. Weave the copy into a coherent whole by using transitional words, phrases and paragraphs to bridge any gaps that would jar the reader. Avoid abrupt shifts from one topic to another in a story.
13. Read your story aloud. This will help you hear how the story will sound to the reader and make it easier to catch lapses in grammar or phrasing.
14. Before turning your story in and after you've completed all of your revisions, read your masterpiece one final time for grammar and style only. Often grammar and style errors that may have crept into your copy in the heat of composition will be corrected on this final read-through.