

## From the Editor's Side of the Desk: Writing for Publication

Often I'm asked to speak on writing for publication. Below you'll find my best tips. I begin with a favorite writing quote that summarizes my philosophy:

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*: I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her.

Most of writing is re-writing. Your first draft is not your final draft. I usually go through seven drafts. I begin with my top three tips for self-editing:

### Use the active voice.

- Passive voice (PV) is used to make writing dull. (You inform of action without having to know who did it.)
- PV dehumanizes writing by eliminating people.
- PV is legit to add variety or emphasis, and certainly to emphasize passivity, but it saps writing of color, power.
- Active Voice
  - The subject does the action rather than receiving the action.
  - "He trained" vs. "he was trained."
  - Passive usually has form of "to be" verb + "-ed."
  - "She was coerced" vs. "they coerced her."
  - "I was awakened" becomes "I awoke."

### Use strong verbs.

- Verbs should make up 10% of your writing.
- Strengthen forms of "to be."
  - "opposes," not "is in opposition"
  - "insisted," not "was adamant"

Russian, Hebrew allow sentences w/out "is."

- Blessed [is] the man who... (Psa 1)

### To "Be" ... Or Not

- As part of editing, run "search" on be, is, are, am, was, were.
- Exception: "equals" (Darth Vader is Luke's dad). "Is" beats "begat."

## Turn negations into assertions.

- Why? Because the mind takes 48 percent longer to process a negation. Using negations makes the reader have to concentrate harder and forget that he or she is in that mental zone of the story world.
- Eliminate no, not, don't, can't when possible.
  - It did not seem possible = it seemed impossible.
  - She was not happy = she felt unhappy = she frowned.
  - Don't shop there = avoid that store.

Applying these three will strengthen your writing immediately. But below you'll find some of my other favorite writing techniques, tips, and secrets.

*Select a style manual.*

For some questions, English has no absolute right or writing. How you format will depend on the style manual you use. Turabian? AP? MLA? *Chicago Manual of Style*?

- Do you place commas in a series here, here, and here, or here, here and here?
- Is it biblical or Biblical? Is it scripture or Scripture?
- Are pronouns for God His or his?
- Is it PhD or Ph.D.?
- NIV or N.I.V.?
- Jesus' name or Jesus's name?
- What version of the Bible will you use? Will you limit yourself to one?

DTS began with a sampling of ten Christian publications; six were educational institutions. Six used AP style, or a variation of it; four used *Chicago Manual of Style*. We selected *Chicago* for our magazine, but use AP for everything else. Most popular-market mags use *Chicago*. We have a DTS manual that covers the rest.

- Recommended resource: *The Christian Writer's Manual of Style* (Zondervan)

*Know the rules for writing good cutlines, crafting good headlines, and selecting effective pull quotes.* (Cutlines= The lines of type under the picture. Also called captions.)

- Know that people read headlines/titles, pull quotes, and cutlines more than any other part of your article.
- Pull quotes: When you have more than one line, keep prepositional phrases together/undivided.

(Wrong)

Jesus, the Son of God  
is my Lord and I will  
praise Him in the  
morning and at night.

(Right)  
Jesus, the Son of God  
is my Lord  
and I will praise Him  
in the morning and at night.

- Keep Prepositions Lowercase in Titles

No: "A Visit With Howard Hendricks"  
Yes: "A Visit with Howard Hendricks"

- Cutlines:
  - Tell stories. Use group photos to communicate more than names. Provide stats or a quick story.
  - Use sans serif for titles; use serif for copy.
  - As with pull quotes, keep prepositional phrases undivided.
- Headlines/titles
  - Embrace metaphor
  - Talk to the reader (imperative)
  - Put a new spin on the familiar
  - Use alliteration

Example from a church bulletin announcement:

- Photo of kids' faces
- Title: You Don't Have to Go to Afghanistan
- Cutline: In a survey of ages at which people became Christians, two out of three said they believed before age eight. Last year Alex and Jon came to Christ on the playground during the Sunday school hour. Mary Sue Evans, primary coordinator said, "Sometimes the fruit falls right off the tree and into your hands." Will you pray about helping us reach the next generation? Training provided. Contact Mary Sue at 214-555-1234 for more information.
- Pull quotes
  - Goal: Intrigue the reader so he/she will want to read the article.

- Take it from the middle somewhere. Don't steal it from the end of the article.

*Embrace metaphor.*

- A mighty fortress is our God.
- Our Father, who art in heaven...
- "My life has been a tapestry..."

"The metaphor is probably the most fertile power possessed by man."

--Ortega y Gasset

*Revise clichés.*

Build a better mousetrap. – No Build a better mouse. - Yes

Churchill saw Cripps (his political opponent) passing by and remarked, "There, but for the grace of God...goes God."

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever's right...it won't get high ratings on prime time. --Phil Callahan, *Servant Magazine*

Silent Night, Holy Cow! —*Rev. magazine title for article about the carol being translated into 140 languages*

Wish I had made these up:

**New Twists on 'Net Growth**

Home is where you hang your @.

The e-mail of the species is deadlier than the mail.

Speak softly and carry a cell phone.

Modulation in all things.

The modem is the message.

What boots up must come down.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to use the 'Net and he won't bother you for weeks.

*Write good titles.*

It takes time to craft good ones. Always include a title option or two on articles you submit.

When Using Numbers . . .

•Choose “round numbers”

- Five Ways to Improve Your Income
- The Ten Commandments of Youth Work

•Or use numbers with strong associations

The One, Two, Three's of Teaching

Twelve Steps to Sales Success

Seven Perfect Reasons to Buy

Sometimes ask questions; they involve the reader.

- Who Is Jesus? (Article on Gnosticism)
- Who Do You Say That I Am? (Article on human/divine nature of Jesus)
- Vindicate the Villain? (Article on the Gospel of Judas)
- Who Is the Holy Spirit? (Cover story, *Charisma*)
- Crunched for Time?

*Use alliteration.*

•The Power of Praise

•Follow the Faculty

•Striving in the Storm

•When Sheep Squabble

*Engage the senses/*

- Most underused: taste, smell
- Most memory-intensive: smell

“With spring training in full swing, the smell of fresh-cut grass and the sounds of cheers in stadiums are enough to motivate anyone to get in shape for sports. But do you know the drills necessary for spiritual conditioning?”

*Convert “ing” forms so you can speak to the reader.*

From: “Going the Distance”

To: “Go the Distance”

No: “Taking Charge of Your Diet”

Yes: “Take Charge of Your Diet”

*Include sidebars.*

Add one for every three pages of double-spaced copy. Ideas:

Book review

Glossary

Chart

Website

Background information

Professional organizations

Quiz

*Break up the copy.*

Follow the dollar-bill rule: No more than a dollar bill’s length of copy without something to break it up—subhead, pull quote, sidebar, white space.

*Save the strongest . . .*

...sentence for the end of the paragraph.

...word for the end of the sentence.

No: We want to bring hope to each person.

Yes: We want to bring each person hope.

*Avoid overuse of couplets.*

- We felt joy and peace.
- He is able to guide and protect us.
- The hotel has simple and basic accommodations.

*When you have items in a series, go for odd numbers.*

Napoleon Dynamite says,

- Gosh!
- Lucky.
- This is pretty much the worst video I've ever seen.

Julius Caesar said,

- I came, I saw, I conquered.

*Remember.*

Dive in. Don't say you remember. Say what you remember.

No: I remember when I was a kid I flew kites with Dad.

Yes: When I was a kid I flew kites with Dad.

*Convert stats.*

- Instead of saying 80% of moms return to work when the youngest enters

school, say four out of five.

- In the two seconds it took you to read this, four women have given birth.

- Also, convert dates to years. Rather than “We have supported them since 1992,” say, “We have supported them for the past twelve years.”

#### *When using humor...*

- Know that many types of humor do not translate well into other cultures.
- Exaggerate enormously (hyperbole)
  - He is older than dirt.
  - They’ve attended that church since before Abram left Ur .
  - “I ask you a simple question and you answer starting with Moses.”
- Avoid using exclamation points. (They say: Look at me. I’m being funny!)
- Do save the surprise for the last word.
- If you can save it for the last syllable, all the better.

#### *Aim for gender-neutral language.*

- Sometimes you can eliminate gender.
- If someone smiles, smile back at him = If someone smiles, smile back.
- OR If someone smiles, return the greeting.
- Avoid using the male singular if the person indicated could be male or female.
- Use of “them” and “they” is okay, but be sure to connect with a plural antecedent.

#### *Get he/she/they right.*

The most common error a person makes while using the English language is when they use a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent.

#### *Know you’re outdated if...*

- You use hyphens - for bullets
- You use hyphens for m- and n-dashes



- You use underlining
- YOU WRITE IN ALL CAPS
- You use straight quotes ' instead of smart quotes "
- You use two spaces after a period. Got it?

*Know the common mistakes editors miss.*

- Subject-verb agreement
  - Each of the projects is done. (Yes)
  - If someone smiles, return their greeting. (No)
- Pronoun agreement
  - Who/whom; unclear antecedents
- Lacking parallelism

*Memorize: Inside out?*

- The period goes inside the quotes, even if it's just one word:
  - Pat it and mark it with a "b."
- That is, unless you are publishing in England. There:
  - Pat it and mark it with a "b".

*Start a Sentence with "And"?*

Dear Mr. Buckley,

Don't start a sentence with "and." In the last paragraph of your column I see this, and apparently the Star-Ledger proofreader did not. (She sleeps a lot.) I am beginning to wonder just how good (or bad) your high school was, and how good (or bad) a student you were. Very truly yours, David Dearborn

Dear Mr. Dearborn,

Verses 2-26 and 28-31, Chapter I, Genesis, all begin with "And." The King

James scholars went to pretty good high schools. Cordially,  
WFB

--Buckley: The Right Word, p. 10

*Nix adverbs.*

“The adverb is the enemy of the verb.” —Mark Twain

Instead, morph adverbs into verbs by using them to make the verb stronger: walked slowly = sauntered

*Lose the Christianese*

- I was at church every time the doors opened.
- We bathed it in prayer.
- . . . blood of the lamb.
- Two hundred “went forward.”
  
- Born again = believe in Jesus Christ
- Christians = Christ-followers
- Winning souls, evangelizing = sharing your faith with others
- Invitation = opportunity to make a commitment to Christ
- Testify = talk about what God has done
- Deacons, elders = church leaders

*Avoid long stretches.*

- Keep paragraphs short, especially for publications with more than one column.
- Average sentence in 1990s North America: 19 words
- Aim for 15

- Hemingway: Averaged 13.5

*Acquaint yourself with the fog index.*

- If you change master's-level writing to the ninth- or tenth-grade level, 111 million adults (nearly five times as many) can read it.
- Do so by keeping a low average number of syllables per word.

*Strengthen there is/are . . .*

- Weak sentence structure, especially at the beginning of the lede.
- “Thing” — weak, too

*End well.*

Overdone endings:

Quoting a hymn (esp. bad for translated works)

Including a poem (esp. bad for translated works)

Citing a verse

Come “full circle.”

Connect the ending back to the beginning.

*Cut articles down to size. (What to do if you article runs long.)*

- Eliminate wordiness.
- Nix the word “the,” when possible.
- Identify modifiers and morph them into stronger noun/verbs.
- Cut a main point.
- Cut a quote.

- Ask yourself: Can you cut the article but add the info you cut by creating a sidebar?

*Keep your creative edge.*

- Take a day of rest and really rest. Read:
  - Read Abraham Heschel's book, *The Sabbath*.
  - Read my interview with Eugene Peterson (on my blog, [Eugene Peterson: That "Good-for-Nothing" Sabbath](#))
- Attend workshops, conferences.
- Read numerous magazines.
- Freelance
- Doing so exposes you to other editors.
- It gives you a life outside of the organization.

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