

The Basics of Style
to accompany
Public Relations
Writing
The Essentials of Style and Format
Fifth Edition

Thomas H. Bivins
University of Oregon



Published by McGraw-Hill, an imprint of The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.
Copyright © 2005, by The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. All rights reserved. The contents, or parts thereof, may be reproduced in print form solely for classroom use with PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING provided such reproductions bear copyright notice, but may not be reproduced in any other form or for any other purpose without the prior written consent of The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., including, but not limited to, in any network or other electronic storage or transmission, or broadcast for distance learning.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WORKING WITH WORDS	1
Jargon	1
Exactness	2
Wordiness	4
WORKING WITH SENTENCES	7
WORKING WITH PARAGRAPHS	8
Logical Sentence Order	9
Logical Transitions	10
Paragraph Development	10
PLANNING AND WRITING	11
The Outline	12
UNITY AND LOGICAL THINKING	13
Clarity	13
Cause and Effect Relationships	14
FINAL THOUGHTS ON WRITING	16

THE BASICS OF STYLE

Why study style? The problem is, not many of us learned to write the way we do in school—instead, we learned on the job, picking up bad habits as well as good ones and having those habits further ingrained by people who couldn't put it down much better than we could. That's why it's important to pause for a few moments and check our writing style to see if we have acquired any bad habits that we should correct.

That's the purpose of this section—to help you understand some of the accepted methods of “good” style and to apply those methods to your personal writing style. I don't want you to change an already good writing style. What I would like to give you is an increased awareness of how to change those things you would like to change while leaving the good parts intact. I've tried to make this section as painless as possible by providing you with the most appropriate areas of style in the most abbreviated way.

WORKING WITH WORDS

Formal vs. Informal

All of us think we know how to use a dictionary. It's part of every writer's library, right? The problem is that a lot of people don't use their dictionaries to check the meanings and spellings of the words they use. This leads, of course, to misinterpretation of written materials by readers.

One of the biggest problems in using dictionaries is deciding whether or not a word is appropriate in context. For instance, a word that might be entirely appropriate in informal English might not be appropriate in formal English. Dictionaries can be of some help. Most provide guidance in selecting the right word. For instance, a dictionary might label the word *swipe* as a colloquial or informal alternative to *steal* or *plagiarize*. You wouldn't want to use it in a formal, business letter.

This brings us to our first rule: Avoid using informal words in formal writing.

Informal:

It seems that Mr. Jordan swiped the information on the new plastic widget from a brochure he found in his files.

Formal:

It seems that Mr. Jordan plagiarized the information on the new plastic widget from a brochure he found in his files.

It's usually safe to assume that if a word is not labeled as informal in your dictionary, it is considered to be in general usage and therefore formal.

For the public relations writer, contractions (which are usually considered informal usage) can be useful. Frequently, you can take on a familiar tone with your target audience by using contractions. For strictly formal documents, however, it is still a good rule to write out the complete word or phrase instead of its accepted contraction. Words like *can't*, *won't*, and *isn't* should be written out as *cannot*, *will not*, and *is not*.

Jargon

All industries have their jargon, or specialized vocabulary. Banks call Certificates of Deposit “CDs,” journalists call paragraphs “graphs,” police call a record of arrests a “rap sheet,” and highly technical industries develop an entire dictionary of shorthand notations. Jargon should not be used for external information pieces unless they are to be read only by experts in the field. For internal pieces, jargon is usually acceptable. For the lay reader, use jargon only if you are able to explain it in lay terms. It is wise to follow this procedure unless you are sure that your jargon has become accepted general usage.

When jargon becomes cumbersome, it overrides meaning. What we commonly refer to as “legalese” and “bureaucratese” are really an overuse of jargon. The result is ambiguity.

Back

Jargon:

Do not discharge your mechanical device releasing its base-metal projectile until such time as the opposing force has decreased the distance between your two positions to a point allowing visual recognition of the delineation between the ocular components of the aforesaid opponent and recognition of the opaque, globular housing thereof.

General:

Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes.

Words like *impact* and *input* have now become jargon to many industries. They sound “trendy” to many people and give them a false sense of belonging to a select group of “experts.”

Jargon:

I have asked Ms. Pomeroy to input the latest cost figures so that we may have the results by 4:00 this afternoon. (A noun misused as a verb.)

General:

I have asked Ms. Pomeroy to enter the latest cost figures so that we may have the results by 4:00 this afternoon. (A verb used correctly.)

Jargon:

The severe downturn in the economy has negatively impacted our industry. (A noun misused as a verb.)

General:

The severe downturn in the economy has negatively affected our industry. (A verb used correctly.)

Did you recognize any other use of jargon in the above examples? What are they, and how would you change them to a more general style?

In your efforts to write clearly and concisely, remember that the object of written communication is to communicate. In other words, don't “fuzzify.”

Exactness

Exactness is an art. Most of us tend to “write up” when we assume a formal style. But when we “write up,” we lose precision. What we should strive for is clarity, and clarity can be achieved most easily by using exact words. Most of our writing is read by people who know something about us and what we do, but we cannot always assume that to be the case.

Denotative and Connotative Meanings. One way to avoid confusion is always to use words whose denotative meanings most closely match those understood by our audience. The denotative meaning of a word is its “dictionary” meaning and, of course, the best way to determine that is to look the word up. The first example below uses the wrong word.

Wrong:

The employees were visibly effected by the president's speech. (Effect means result.)

Right:

The employees were visibly affected by the president's speech. (Affect, in this case, means emotionally moved.)

Back

Wrong:

As a manager, Marvin was fine; but as a human being, he had some severe problems dealing with sex differences among his department members. (Sex usually refers to biological differences or the act itself)

Right:

As a manager, Marvin was fine; but as a human being, he had some severe problems dealing with gender differences among his department members. (Gender has become the accepted term for the differences in roles related to the total experience of being either male or female.)

Connotative meanings are those meanings your audience may associate with words in addition to or instead of their dictionary meaning. Connotation is the result of automatic associations your audience makes when interpreting some words. For example, you may intend the word dog to mean a four-footed, warm-blooded animal of the canine species. To audience members whose past associations with dogs have been positive, a picture of a particularly friendly dog may pop into mind. For some who may have had negative experiences—such as being bitten by a dog—the association may be entirely the opposite of what you intend. Although there is no way to guard against all such associations, there are certain words or phrases that you should avoid as they are too vague in connotation to be useful to you as a communicator.

Think of the different connotative meanings for words such as liberal, conservative, freedom, democracy, communism, and patriotism. Words with multiple connotations may not be the best words to select if you are striving for exactness.

Some words or phrases may have little or no connotation, such as place of birth. The denotative meaning of this phrase is clear, but there is little connotative meaning. However, if we replace the phrase with the word hometown, not only does the denotative meaning become clear, but the word also gains a definite connotative meaning—usually a positive one.

Specific Words vs. General and Abstract. Exactness requires that you be specific. When we read something that has been written in general, nonspecific terms, we can't help but feel that something is being left out—perhaps on purpose.

General words are indefinite and cover too many possible meanings, both denotatively and connotatively. Specific words are precise and limited in definition.

General	Specific
car	Honda Accord LX
people	Delawareans
animal	cat
precipitation	rain

Abstract words deal with concepts or ideas that are intangible, such as freedom or love. Use these words, but make sure that they are not open to misinterpretation.

“Enjoy the freedom of 7-Eleven!” (Does freedom mean that you pay lower prices, can shop 24 hours a day, have ample parking, preserve the American way each time you shop there, or what exactly?)

One of the parts of speech affected the most by inexactness is the adjective. A number of adjectives are extremely general and impart little or no additional meaning to a noun, thus negating their function.

General:

Marisa, please take this report to word processing and tell them it's a rush job. (Show me something that isn't a rush job!)

Back

Specific:

Marisa, please take this report to word processing, and tell them we need it by 3:00 this afternoon. (Now, word processing has a specific deadline.)

Keep it fresh. At one time, all expressions were original; however, today we're frequently stuck with many trite or overworked expressions or clichés. The problem with these is that they may be entirely overlooked by your reader, who has probably seen them a thousand times.

Trite:

Nine out of ten, times Harcourt is wrong in his instant analysis of a problem.

Better:

Most of the time, Harcourt is wrong in his instant analysis of a problem.

Trite:

Harcourt is claiming his latest plan is a viable option in controlling employee absences.

Better:

Harcourt is claiming his latest plan is a solution to the problem of employee absences.

Public relations, like many other forms of writing, including journalism, has developed certain stock expressions that some might consider to be clichéd. Many of these, however, are acceptable shortcuts that aid understanding.

John Smith, a native of Chicago . . .
or
Chicago native John Smith . . .

Generally, these semantic shortcuts impart the correct meaning without being vague or appearing trite. Other phrases have become clichéd through overuse, and have consequently lost their meaning.

The head of programming says this new product will keep APC on the cutting edge.

James Sutton, president of Associated Products Corporation, announced today (May 25) the release of a new line of plastic widgets.

The key is to recognize trite, overused expressions and clichés, and understand when they can be useful and when they can hurt your message. Remember, good writers avoid worn-out words and opt instead for fresh usage.

Wordiness

Being too “wordy” is a habit that most of us fall into at one time or another. Perhaps, as was mentioned above, we once thought it meant we were writing in a formal style. Actually, the opposite is true. Formal English should be no more wordy than informal English. In fact, it should be even more precise because it is formal. As a writer, you will find that the best way to eliminate wordiness is through editing. You probably already have more editors than you need, but your best editor is still you. You can eliminate a lot of shuffling of papers up and down the channels of communication for approvals if you perform some surgery early on. When you edit, strike out the phrases and words that add no additional information to your work, and clarify with precise words.

Back

First draft:

I would appreciate it if you would set up a meeting for sometime in the late afternoon, mid-week, for our next, important get-together.

Revised draft:

I would appreciate it if you would set up a time sometime late Wednesday afternoon for our next meeting.

Final draft:

Please set up a 3:00 meeting for next Wednesday.

First draft:

We would like to attempt to schedule our very next company picnic to be held in or around the city of Wilmington in order to facilitate transportation by employees to the site.

Revised draft:

We want to schedule our company picnic in Wilmington to make it easier for employees to get to.

Of course, you don't want to be brief to the point of abruptness, but you can see what exactness can do in the editing process. The key is to make sure that all important information is covered in enough detail to be useful to the reader.

Unfortunately, we often over-clarify in an attempt to make our messages understood; however, much of what we write is simply redundant or not needed for clarification.

The in-basket is completely full. (How can it be incompletely full?)

Johnson has come up with a most unique design for dismantling the employee pension fund. (It's either unique or it's not—*most* adds no meaning.)

The meeting date has been set for March 31, the last day of the month. (The final phrase is redundant.)

Emphasis

Organization of words within a sentence, sentences within paragraphs, and paragraphs within a larger work is key to clear writing style. We typically organize based on the importance or weight assigned to these words, paragraphs, or larger elements. By placing them in a prescribed order, we give emphasis to the thoughts they represent.

Following are some of the standard methods for gaining emphasis:

- Place the most important words at the beginning or end of the sentence.

Unemphatic:

There was a terrific explosion in the Xerox room that shook the whole building. (There is an unemphatic word in an emphatic position.)

Emphatic:

A terrific explosion in the Xerox room shook the whole building.

- The end of a sentence is also a strong position for emphasis.

Unemphatic:

I know Tom was the one who stole the stapler.

Emphatic:

I know who stole the stapler—Tom.

- Increase emphasis by arranging ideas in the order of climax. Rank items in a series by order of importance, building from the least important to the most important.

Jill was abrasive, lazy, undedicated, and generally ill-equipped to deal with her co-workers. (In this case, ill-equipped is used to sum up Jill's other attributes.)

Watch out for an illogical ranking of ideas. If done unintentionally, this could cause some unwelcome hilarity, as in the following example.

Because of his brief exploration of the casinos, Jerry became morose, despondent, melancholic, and lost twelve dollars.

- Gain emphasis by using the active rather than the passive voice. The active voice indicates that the “doer” of the action is the most important element in the sentence; the passive indicates the “receiver” is the most important.

Unemphatic:

Not much is being done by the employer to defray health benefit costs.

Emphatic:

The employer is not doing much to defray health benefit costs.

Unemphatic:

The study, accomplished by the Financial Department, showed a sharp decline in quarterly earnings.

Emphatic:

The Financial Department's study showed a sharp decline in quarterly earnings.

- Add emphasis by repeating keywords or phrases. Such repetition not only adds emphasis, but often serves as a memory stimulant.

I am afraid that these negotiations gave rise to false hopes, false indications of changes that may not occur, and false expectations on the part of management as to its ability to fulfill false promises.

Don't mistake repetition for emphasis with redundancy. The difference is in the added strength of the statement.

- Add emphasis by balancing sentence construction. Balanced structure occurs when grammatically equal elements are used to point to differences or similarities. The usual construction is one in which two clauses contain parallel elements.

[Back](#)

Knowing the health hazards and still smoking is freedom of choice; not knowing and smoking is victimization.

Working here is boring: not working here is unemployment.

WORKING WITH SENTENCES

Constant sentence length creates monotony, and monotony creates disinterested readers.

The key to good style is to vary sentence length. Don't string together short, choppy sentences if they can be joined to form more interesting compound sentences.

Monotonous:

Harvey walked into the office. He sat down. He began to type on his 1923 Underwood. It was the typewriter with the black, metal carriage. Harvey hated typing this early in the morning. He was never fully awake until at least 10 o'clock.

Varied:

Harvey walked into the office, sat down and began to type on his 1923 Underwood with the black, metal carriage. He hated typing this early in the morning, since he was never fully awake until at least 10 o'clock.

Notice that related ideas are linked as compound sentences. Linking unrelated ideas is an easy mistake, and sounds silly.

Harvey walked into the office, sat down and began to type on his 1923 Underwood. It was the typewriter with the black, metal carriage, and he hated typing this early in the morning. (What does his typewriter having a black, metal carriage have to do with Harvey's dislike for early-morning typing?)

Be careful, however, not to make your sentences too long. Short sentences are easier to read. A guideline for determining proper sentence length is to keep sentences down to about 16 words long. Naturally, you're not going to count each word you write, but you get the idea. Shorter sentences in the context of longer ones can also increase emphasis, as in the following examples:

I have discovered that the content employee is dedicated, remains on the job longer, suffers fewer illnesses, creates fewer problems, and rarely complains. In short, he is productive.

I understand. You have a number of assignments due simultaneously, your secretary is out sick, your copier is broken, and you cannot get an outside line. I still need it now.

Another easy method of preventing monotony is to alter the beginnings of your sentences. In other words, don't always write in the subject-verb-object order. One of the best ways to vary this order is to use a subordinate clause first:

Because of his dislike for early-morning typing, Harvey never showed up at work prior to 10 o'clock.

Starting out early, Harvey walked two blocks at a brisk pace, then collapsed.

Before you start on that report, come into my office for a little chat.

Back

And don't forget—beginning a sentence with a conjunction is perfectly acceptable. Remember, though, that even conjunctions have meanings and usually infer that a thought is being carried over from a previous sentence.

Not only was Harvey later than usual, he was downright tardy. And I wasn't the only one to notice. (Implies that the information is being added to the previous thought.)

Not only was Harvey later than usual, he was downright tardy. But I was probably the only one who noticed. (Implies a contrast with the previous thought.)

With a little reworking, however, even a series of strung-together clauses can be fixed up. Conjunctions can be useful but not if they are overused.

Clauses strung together:

Francine is always on time, and she frequently comes in before regular office hours, and she never leaves before quitting time.

Reworked into a complex sentence:

Francine is always on time, frequently coming in before regular office hours and never leaving before quitting time.

Clauses strung together:

He ran down the street, and then he stopped at the main entrance, and he took a deep breath, and then he went inside.

Reworked into a compound predicate:

He ran down the street, stopped at the main entrance, took a deep breath, and went inside.

WORKING WITH PARAGRAPHS

As the sentence represents a single thought, so the paragraph represents a series of related thoughts. There is no set number of sentences you should include in a paragraph; however, paragraph lengths tend to be shorter today than in the past. Short paragraphs invite readership while long paragraphs “put off” the reader. The key is coherence, which means that ideas must be unified. You can give unity to your paragraphs in several ways: by making each sentence contribute to the central thought, by arranging sentences in a logical order, and by making logical transitions between sentences.

Making Each Sentence Contribute

The first sentence should generally express the theme of the paragraph. Although the thematic statement may actually appear anywhere in the paragraph, the strongest positions are at the beginning or the end; and the end is usually reserved for a transitional lead into the following paragraph.

Our annual operating budget is somewhat higher than expected due to the increase in state allocations to higher education this fiscal year. The result will probably be an increase in departmental allowances, with the bulk of the increase showing up in the applied sciences. Although Arts and Sciences have been “holding up” well, we don't expect that they will be able to maintain this independence for long. As a result, their departmental budgets will also reflect this positive financial shift. Next year's outlook is a different story.

The lead sentence sets the theme for the entire paragraph, which is this year's budget. The final sentence indicates that the next paragraph will probably deal with next year's budget. What you want to avoid are

Back

unrelated sentences. If they are truly unrelated, then they deserve a paragraph of their own. If they are slightly related, then the relationship needs to be pointed out.

Logical Sentence Order

Arrange sentences in a logical order, and provide smooth transitions between them indicating their relationship. There are several ways to group sentences to show ranking: time order, space order, and order of climax.

Time order and chronological order are sometimes synonymous, although chronological order often implies a direct mention of time or dates, as in the following example:

The growth of communication in the northernmost regions of America was rapid and coincided roughly with the development of the land itself. In 1867, shortly following the Civil War, the first telegraph line was strung between Dawson Creek and Whitehorse. By the turn of the century, the lines had been extended through to Seattle, on the southeastern coast, and Anchorage, along Prince William Sound. The first World War saw a flurry of development as military involvement increased in the region. With this involvement came a windfall of communication development that lasted until 1959.

Time order is appropriate when explaining the steps involved in an action:

Finding the new cafeteria is easy. First of all, it's on the second floor. This implies that you must go up, if you're on the first floor, or down, if you work on floors three through five. My advice? Take the stairs. With all the selections in the new cafeteria, you'll need the exercise. As you exit the stairs on the second floor, turn to the right. You'll see a sign reading "Cafeteria" and an arrow pointing decidedly down the right-hand corridor. Remember, the second floor is also home to the corporate gym and the solarium. If you get lost, you can always pre-burn those calories. However, if you follow the left-hand corridor to its end, turn right at the double doors, and walk straight ahead, you will either run headlong into the plants grouped picturesquely around the split entrance or stop in time to notice that the cafeteria line begins to the left of this greenery. Simply step up, take a warm plate, and surf the line. Just don't forget where the gym is when you're finished.

Space order implies movement from one location to another: right to left, up to down, east to west, high to low, and so on:

It rained all day yesterday. The weatherman had shown in glaring detail how the jet stream would carry the warm, moist low front from the snow-filled Cascades of the Northwest, over the Rockies, onto the plains, and finally into my backyard on the Atlantic coast. Apparently, it hadn't lost anything in the transition.

Order of climax means that arrangement follows from the least important element to the most important element in the paragraph, in ascending order of importance. Most of the time, the climax is the concluding sentence:

If the clerical staff members are uncomfortable with the workload, their immediate supervisors are the first to know. Middle managers are often reluctant to act on "workload" problems, but if pressured, will pass on complaints to executive officers. If the problem isn't handled to the satisfaction of all the parties involved by the time it reaches the executive level, a vice president may have to intervene; but pity the poor vice president who can't handle the problem. The president's office is a bastion of corporate sanctuary. Woe to him who would invade it.

When arranging sentences in order of climax, consider moving from the general to the specific or vice versa.

Back

Sometimes, moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar will soften the blow of dealing with a new idea:

When we view each member of our office staff as an individual, we sometimes develop tunnel vision. We have to understand the larger picture in order to alleviate this problem. Staff members are all a part of a much larger organism. Together they form departments; departments form divisions. The larger company is composed of these divisions, and the company is part of a much larger conglomerate. To take the analogy further, the conglomerate is only one of the hundreds of such groupings that help make our system of economics one of the most successful in the world.

Logical Transitions

Related ideas are given further unity by the use of logical transitions between sentences. A good transition usually refers to the sentences preceding it. Remember that a transitional word or phrase also has a meaning. Make sure the meaning adds to the understanding of the sentences or phrases preceding the transition:

The floor plan was completely haphazard; furthermore, it appeared to crowd an already crowded office area. (Furthermore indicates an addition to the thought begun in the first clause.)

Don Johnson was the first to try the new water fountain. On the other hand, he was the last to try the potato salad at the last company picnic. (The phrase on the other hand indicates contrast.)

Fourteen employees were found to be in violation of company policies forbidding alcohol on the premises. Consequently, inspection of employee lockers will probably become commonplace. (Consequently indicates that the second sentence is a result of actions in the first.)

The rate of consumption has tripled over the past 18 months. In short, we have a severe problem. (In short indicates a summary or explanation.)

Jeremy covered the news desk. Meanwhile, Judy was busy copying the report before Wally returned and discovered it was missing. (Meanwhile is an indication of time placement.)

One of the major problems with the use of transitional words and phrases is over reliance on a very few common groupings. Many people tend to use words such as however to bridge every transitional creek. After a while, its use becomes monotonous. The answer? Vary transitional phrases. There's always another word you can use. Think about it.

The same applies to transitions between paragraphs. Use words and meanings that tie the thoughts together and form a smooth bridge between subjects. After all, even dissimilar ideas need to be linked. If they were so dissimilar that you couldn't link them logically, they wouldn't belong in the same document.

Paragraph Development

There are a number of ways to develop your paragraphs to show unity and coherence. Notice that all of the examples below supply relevant details in support of a main idea.

You will often find that developing a definition will add unity to a paragraph:

There are a number of ways of viewing the office water cooler. To a social scientist, it is a communal gathering place at which ideas and information are freely disseminated. It is an informal location, usually outside the territorial boundaries of any one employee and therefore, accessible to all on an equal footing. It is the traditional "oasis," shared by any who are in need of water and at which all are free to share. To imply that this communal ground is the "property" of any one individual or department is to negate its real value. At it, we quench not only our thirsts for liquid, but also for information outside the formal boundaries of protocol.

Frequently, classification will serve to relate like ideas in a paragraph:

There are three categories of clerical aid within the company. At the lowest rung of the pay scale is the clerk. A clerk's job includes light typing, no shorthand, much filing, and a tremendous amount of running around. Next up on the scale is the secretary. More typing is involved (at a much faster speed and with more accuracy), much filing, some shorthand, and a great deal of running around. At the top is the executive secretary. Typing is a must (at great speeds and accuracy), along with good shorthand, much filing, and more running around than a university track team.

The main idea can be made more coherent by comparing or contrasting it with a like idea:

Comparison:

A committee meeting is like a football game. The chair is the quarterback, and as such he is the directing force; however, the members are the players without whom no goal can be obtained. The key to the game plan, then, is to coordinate the players into a single unit with a single goal. The players must be made aware that a unified, or team, effort is integral to the accomplishment of that goal and that the quarterback is the director—he is not the coach. The director recommends; he does not command.

Contrast:

The typical office environment is orderly. Without order, little can be accomplished. Remember the recess periods of your school days? You were able to act freely, without consideration to the restrictive environment of the classroom. You were free to explore your voice, your agility, and your mastery of fast-paced games not suited to the indoors. Once inside, however, you were required to conform to the needs of the classroom—quiet and order. Within these confines, work can be accomplished with a minimum of disturbance; and the accomplishment of that work is as important in an office environment as in a classroom.

One of the best ways to develop a paragraph and its central idea is to show cause and effect. Most things in life are a result of something else. For most of us, though, it takes some thought to trace that development:

The so-called “open office” environment popular in newer buildings today has its roots in several trends. Since the mid-1970s, energy conservation has been a major concern in the United States. The open office requires less heat in the winter and less cooling in the summer, due mainly to the lack of walls. In the place of these walls, we now have “dividers” which, although they serve to mask sound, allow for the free circulation of air throughout an entire floor. In addition to conservation, open offices serve to homogenize workers by removing the traditional boundaries of high walls and closed doors. Employees now have access to each other through a network of openings, yet maintain the margin of privacy needed for individual productivity.

Obviously, a paragraph need not be restricted to any single method of development but can benefit from a combination approach. The key is to be clear, and any method that promotes clarity is a good one.

PLANNING AND WRITING

A sentence usually contains a single idea. A paragraph contains a number of sentences related by a single theme. So too, a complete piece of writing—whether it's a press release, a backgrounder, or an article for the company newsletter—contains a series of paragraphs unified by a single theme and related by logical transitions.

Back

For many of us, the writing is the easy part. Planning is the snag. And the toughest part of planning is deciding exactly what to say and what to leave out. Most of us tend to overwrite. In the words of one observer, “Writing is like summer clothing—it should be long enough to cover the subject, but brief enough to be interesting.”

The first task in writing, then, is to choose your subject and limit yourself to the information needed to cover it. There are several ways to accomplish this. One of the easiest ways is to work from a very general topic to a specific topic:

banking > withdrawing and making deposits > avoiding waiting in lines > using automatic tellers
> using automatic tellers in the lobby

This exercise may seem simple, but it does help clear your thoughts and crystallize your ideas through the act of putting them on paper. Naturally, the theme of any piece is intimately tied to its purpose. If, for instance, your purpose is to encourage patrons to use the automatic tellers in the bank lobby, it may be necessary to come directly to the point in your pitch. However, in doing so, you will probably use one of the traditional writing approaches.

Most of us remember our high school English classes in which we were taught to write various papers for different purposes. Among the most common approaches were:

Exposition—used to inform or explain
Argumentation—used to convince or persuade
Narration—used mostly for entertainment value
Description—used to explain through verbal “pictures”

In public relations writing, narration is the least frequently used except in feature-type stories. The other methods are often used and combined to present information to readers. A lot depends on whether you are trying to be persuasive or are simply presenting information, the two most common goals of public relations writing.

The Central Idea

Once you have decided on the purpose of a particular piece, you should write down a central idea in a single sentence or thesis statement. Suppose, for instance, that your goal is to convince employees to come to work on time each day. This will be a persuasive piece. The method you have chosen to use might be argumentation, which will convince your employees. What is your thesis statement? It might be something like this:

Coming to work on time puts you in step with the other employees who work with you, gives you time to adjust to your daily environment, allows you the leisure of some prework interaction with others, and impresses your employer.

So, in a single sentence, you have set down several controlling ideas that can now be elaborated upon. The next step is to develop a working plan or rough outline.

The Outline

Before you begin an outline, it helps to put down some ideas. These can be in the form of a simple list. For instance, to continue the previous example, perhaps you have decided to stress promptness by comparing the benefits of being on time with the disadvantages of coming in late:

Advantages of coming to work on time:
— Allows time to adjust to daily routine

Back

- Allows time for interaction with fellow workers
- Impresses employer
- Allows time to have coffee
- Allows time to read through the paper

Disadvantages of coming in late

- You are rushed into daily routine without adjustment period
- You have no time to interact informally with fellow workers
- You do not impress employer
- You have no time for coffee
- You have no time to read the paper

Now you have a starting point. It might be that you want to address the points one by one, covering the advantages first, and then the disadvantages. Or perhaps you want to compare the advantages with the disadvantages one at a time.

Outlines are extremely useful as a checklist of key points. You may use the outline simply to check your final written piece against to make sure you have covered all points regardless of final order, or you may have each point represent a complete paragraph or section of your finished document in the order presented in the outline.

In either case, make sure that your ideas are related within each paragraph and that each paragraph follows logically from the previous one. The same methods you used to arrange your sentences within the paragraph can be used to arrange your paragraphs within a larger composition: time order, space order, or order of climax.

UNITY AND LOGICAL THINKING

Clarity

We've already learned something of unity by studying the placement of ideas in a logical order within sentences, paragraphs, and whole compositions. Now, let's turn to logic itself. In writing, we should try to present our ideas as logically as possible to enhance understanding.

A major problem hindering understanding is semantics. Semantics involves the meanings of words individually and as they appear in a context. We should be extremely careful to select words that hold the same meaning for the reader as for us. One way to do this is to define terms that are likely to be either misunderstood or not understood at all.

The major cause of antenna malfunction is the lack of foundation stability. The antenna cannot be properly anchored due to permafrost, a permanently frozen layer of ice and soil some three feet below the surface.

All copy to be printed by the in-house print facility should be camera ready (properly sized, clean, and pasted in place).

Often a word can be defined by inserting a synonym.

The altercation, or fight, lasted only three minutes.

Sled dogs are not only used to running over muskeg—boggy terrain—but often relish the softness of the ground.

Some words or concepts, however, require more careful treatment. Abstracts such as freedom, liberty, and democracy have meanings far beyond those found in the dictionary. We must be careful when we write

Back

to give some thought to a word's connotative meaning as well as its denotative, or dictionary, meaning.

Productivity is the major responsibility of the individual employee. Although management is usually associated with and responsible for rises or drops in productivity, individual employees remain the sole determiners of these fluctuations. Do they arrive at work on time and refreshed, ready to work? Do they spend too much time on breaks or at lunch? Do they perform only the required duties, or do they work beyond those requirements? So, then, productivity is more than producing a greater number of "widgets." Productivity is a state of mind carried over into the workplace. Productivity means caring; and caring means taking responsibility.

The determining factor in deciding to go with a simple or expanded definition is knowledge of your target audience, and that is a concern of planning, not style.

Generalizations

A generalization is an assumption based on incomplete evidence. It is a belief that what is true of a few members of a group (regardless of how you categorize that group or what it composes) is true of the entire group:

Teenagers are irresponsible.
The British are very formal.
Football players are all dumb.
Tall people are good basketball players.

Generalizations can be harmless or they can be dangerous. In writing, generalizations such as the examples above should be avoided. If you do make a generalization, you must support it. This means that you must present adequate evidence that what you are saying is true for most of a particular group:

Nearly half of all women in the U.S. believe they are overweight. A recent survey conducted by the National Center for Vital Statistics shows that 39 percent of all males and 49 percent of all females surveyed said they considered themselves overweight. The survey, part of the data collected in the most recent Health and Weight Loss Survey, was conducted on a random sample of men and women between the ages of 18 and 55. According to this survey, at any given time, at least 20 percent of the population are on some kind of weight-loss diet.

In this paragraph, the writer has made a generalization and given information enough to be considered adequate support.

Cause and Effect Relationships

Illogical statements often result when the writer fails to set up adequately a cause-and-effect relationship. We can construct such a relationship based on either inductive or deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning proceeds from the particular to the general. A generalization is based on specific evidence that is deemed sufficient to support it. The results of scientific experimentation, for instance, are based on induction:

A recent study by the Association for Scholastic Testing shows that school children between the ages of 7 and 14 learn quicker and absorb more knowledge when the lesson is interactive. Additional studies by National Employment Associates indicate that high-school students with computer skills attain higher-paying jobs upon graduation. It is clear that computer training is fast becoming a necessary component in the education process.

Deductive reasoning involves working from the general to the specific. Specifics are usually determined

Back

from generalizations. If you know, for instance, that a high fever usually accompanies influenza, and you have a high fever during the flu season, then you might seek a doctor's care. You have deduced a specific need from a generalization. You may not, in fact, have influenza, but you have made a valid decision based on deduction. The basic assumption, however, must be sound for the deduction to be valid:

It is clear that computer training is fast becoming a necessary component in the education process. Through this training, students will become better equipped to deal with a burgeoning technology. Teachers will be eased of the responsibility to be all things to all students, because of the interactive nature of computer learning. And students will ultimately benefit through higher-paying jobs.

As you can see, the deductive process in the preceding example was based on a previous inductive process. Most deductions are, in fact, based on previously collected information from which generalizations have been made.

The inductive and deductive processes are prone to problems in construction. The following guidelines will help you avoid the most common problems:

1. Because one item follows another chronologically, don't assume that the latter is a result of the former:

Helen came in late this morning, and everything has been going downhill since then.

Fred wouldn't be seeing Marge "on the side" if everything was all right at home.

2. Because one thing is true doesn't mean that you can infer another truth from it. This is commonly called a non sequitur:

The recent, sharp upturn in the economy will certainly result in lower unemployment.

Liz is something of an "air head." She'll never make it in the business world.

3. Don't beg the question. In other words, don't draw out an expected response by the way you ask a question. This happens when you assume the truth of a statement you are trying to verify. Sports interviewers frequently do this.

Champ? Was that the greatest match you ever fought or what? (Implies that the match was the greatest, thus biasing the response.)

Janice snuck in at half past eight this morning. What do you suppose she's up to? (Maybe she slept late and isn't up to anything.)

4. Don't set up an either/or situation unless it really is one.

Either you're going with me to the meeting or you're not. (Obviously a reasonable statement.)

Either you're on my side or you're not. (Why can't I see the value in two different arguments without being on anyone's side?)

This is often called the all-or-nothing fallacy because it sets up a false dilemma, ignoring the

fact that other variables or possibilities exist:

Employees either come to work on time or they're simply not dedicated.

School systems are either innovators because they acquire and use computers, or they're traditionalists who choose to ignore the future.

Finally, never argue a point that you can't back up with facts simply because you believe it to be true. Although much of what we believe is based on personal predispositions formed throughout our lifetimes, it is never too late to learn something new or to add facts to our existing knowledge.

If you are to be a good, persuasive writer, you must learn to be objective. For most writers, subjectivity indicates that you have a stake in what is being argued or, at least, a personal opinion. Opinions are best left for newspaper columnists or editors, who are paid to express their opinions. Objective writing is the hallmark of the logical writer. If you present the facts objectively, and they support your argument or point of view (whether that point of view is one that you personally hold or not), your argument will be logically sound.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON WRITING

Now that you have come to the end of this book, you should have mastered the basics of writing and produced most of the documents common to public relations. This will not, however, make you a good writer—it will simply make you a good technician. Good writing takes skill and imagination. Skill can be gained by practice. Imagination can only be gained by your willingness to experiment. Don't settle for the dry phrase or the lackluster sentence—bring creativity to every aspect of your writing.

Naturally, not every piece of public relations writing lends itself to greatness; however, as writers, we should always strive to present our ideas in the best possible light. In this way, even the most mundane may shine. It is not an easy task. As Alexander Pope said, "True ease of writing comes from art, not chance." Never look at writing as simply a job—it is an art and should be practiced with the care of an artist.

And read. Collect the writing of other professionals whose styles strike you. Read everything that you can in your field. Understand what you are writing about and never be afraid to experiment with your style. Of course, you will be edited, and sometimes by those with less skill than you. Don't give up. In the end, good writing pays off—not only monetarily, but in the knowledge that you have the tools to write anything with the clarity and style of a professional and an artist.

All the rest is mere fine writing.

—Paul Verlaine