



Readable, Riveting, Right

By

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There's an old saying that 'Writers Write.' That's true of authors, but it's also true of journalists and communications specialists. We write. Maybe we write because we're driven to write. Maybe we write because we're paid to write. Whatever the reason — we write.

If you have a 'passion' for writing or earn a living by writing, my hope is that these three simple 'rules of writing' will help you.

Readable

We write so that people can read it. If our writing is not 'readable,' then why write?

If you're a journalist, people read your writing in newspapers, online, or what they hear you report on television or radio. They also hear what you wrote for news anchors to say. It's important that what you write is 'readable.'

If you're a communications specialist, people read your writing through the medium you use in your work (e.g. Public Relations, Marketing, Advertising, Business Development, Mass Media, etc). It's important what you write is 'readable.'

S-V-O

Subject-Verb-Object writing is probably the most basic way of ensuring that your writing is 'readable.' It's what we call 'active' writing. If the subject precedes the verb and object, then readers or hearers will find your writing both readable and 'understandable.' They will understand the direction of the action.

“Johnny reads books.”

That's an example of S-V-O writing. Anyone who can read should have no problem understanding the direction of the action. A boy named Johnny reads books. It's readable and understandable.

However, if you reverse that basic writing 'rule' so that it's O-V-S, it makes the reader work harder to understand the meaning of a sentence. Why? Because you've reversed the direction of action. It's what we call 'passive' writing. The reader doesn't know the identity of the actor of the verb until the end of the sentence. They have to think back to the 'object' (books) to remember what Johnny read.

“Books are read by Johnny.”

The problem with passive writing (O-V-S) becomes worse as sentences get longer. Distance matters in writing. If the reader has to wade through a lot of words to discover the actor (subject) of the verb, they may miss important parts of your news story or other type of communication. If they are ‘reading’ what you’ve written, the reader can go back to the beginning of the sentence to remind themselves about the ‘identity’ of the actor (subject) — if they are interested enough to keep reading. However, if they are ‘listening’ to what you’ve written (e.g. broadcast news, commercial, public service announcement, etc.), they can’t search for the actor of the sentence unless you repeat it in the next sentence or use a lower-third or graphic that includes the actor’s identification. Don’t make your audience work hard to get your message.

One way to recognize whether your writing is 'active' or 'passive' is to look for the action 'direction' or 'performance.' If the subject performs the action (verb), you've written in 'active voice.' If the verb acts upon the subject, you've written in 'passive voice.' Also, look for conjugated forms of 'to be' in your writing. The passive example above includes a form of 'to be' — Books are read 'by' Johnny. The word 'by' is one of those flag words that points to a passive voice sentence. Learning how to use 'to be' forms as flags can speed up the editing process while making your writing more readable.

There are times when 'passive voice' is okay to use in journalism and other types of communications. One example is when the 'actor' (subject) of the verb is unknown. Another example is when your audience will know the actor because of previous sentences or make a proper assumption of the actor's identity because of the context.

The important thing is not to use the 'passive' when you can use the 'active.' If you use too many passive voice sentences in a news story or other type of communication, your audience may lose interest because they can't keep up with the action. They'll move on to someone else's message.

Shorter Sentences

Shorter sentences are usually better than longer ones. The closer you can stay to the S-V-O rule the better. The more words you place between the 'Subject and Verb' and between the 'Verb and Object,' the less 'readable' your story becomes. If you look at a sentence and it is very long, including lots of commas and/or semi-colons, consider 'breaking' the long sentence into two or even three shorter sentences. While you don't want your writing to appear 'choppy,' you do want it to flow well and be understood.

Understood Words

Fiction writers often use words that their readers have to look up in a dictionary. That's fine. It's often part of the fiction 'genre.' However, if you are a non-fiction writer I recommend choosing words that your readers or listeners will understand without having to resort to a dictionary. That includes writing news stories and other forms of non-fiction writing (e.g. PR, Advertising, etc).

I was taught in the 1960's to use words that would be understood by someone in high school. That was based on research that showed the public read and understood writing at between 10th and 12th grade reading levels. According to more recent literacy research, writing at a high school level is now viewed as 'fairly difficult to read.' Keep in mind that's for 'reading' content. If you write for broadcast, experts recommend writing at a middle school level (6th-8th grades). Literacy experts view that as 'fairly easy to read,' which means people who 'listen' to the content will understand your writing better.

I recommend writing 'conversationally.' That means using words that people would easily understand in a conversational setting. If you are writing a publication or communicate for people who have college degrees, you can write at a college level. However, if you're writing a newscast or other communication for the general public, conversational English is better. Know your audience, then write so they understand your message.

Riveting

Writing that is ‘riveting’ is writing that is ‘extremely interesting’ (Cambridge Dictionary) and ‘Wholly absorbing or engrossing one's attention; fascinating’ (*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th Edition).

The content will often determine how ‘riveting’ you can be in your writing. Whatever your subject, look for ways to make your news story or communication ‘interesting.’ I know that sounds like a ‘no-brainer,’ but how much of what you read, see, or hear in mass media is ‘interesting?’ How much is ‘extremely interesting?’

One of the challenges of any news or communications organization is to make their newscasts or communiques ‘stand out.’ How do you stand out in a world ‘filled’ with mass communications? Here are my suggestions for journalists —

- Riveting Story Ideas
- Riveting Story Coverage
- Riveting Story Video
- Riveting Story Writing
- Riveting Presentation

Having spent decades in newsrooms, I understand the story selection process. Reporters need to come to the table with good ideas. Producers, editors, and managers need to help build on reporter ideas to find ways to enhance the coverage. We used to call the process ‘brainstorming’ — lots of ‘brains’ thinking about the best ways to cover the most riveting stories each day.

In the field, reporters and photographers need to use all their skills to make every story as ‘riveting’ as possible. That can include ‘exclusive’ interviews and video. It can also include more insightful and impactful information, including interviews and video that other journalists miss. Remember to tell stories through the lives of ‘real people.’ If your topic is dull, your story will be dull. If the interviews are dull, your story will often

be dull. If the video is dull, your story will often be dull. Don't be dull. Be creative — be innovative.

I highly recommend that writers talk through the story or message with the photographer or videographer as they're driving back to the office. I developed a high respect for the abilities of photographers during my years working in the field. They often gave me great ideas for the best ways to use the video and interviews they shot for 'our' story. Remember, if you're working with a team member your story or message should always be 'team-based.' I often took notes of the ideas as we drove back to the station. You'll find that helpful in the hustle and bustle of a busy news day.

Once you return to the office, production studio, station, etc., use the best materials you have. Don't hurry through your content, unless you're on a particular deadline that pushes you to get things done in a hurry. Even if you are in a hurry, be ready for it.

I remember one story where the photographer and I were more than an hour drive away from the station. The story was about the brutal murder of a young girl in a small community. Police had just arrested a suspect. It was definitely the 'lead story' that day. We knew that we'd have less than 15 minutes to get the story edited and ready for air once we arrived at the station. I had all the 'factual' information I needed, and the photographer told me what video and soundbites he had recorded. I knew there wouldn't be time to write and edit the story in the 'usual' way, so we decided to do the entire 'package' as a 'standup.' The producer asked if we wanted her to schedule our story for the second block, but I said we would make it for 'page one' if we didn't run into any bad traffic on the way back.

Once we got back to the station, the photographer edited the video and soundbites that fit with my standup. I had already called in the anchor script information, so the photographer and I could spend all our time getting the standup edited. The 'standup' helped because we could use less B-roll video since all of the A-roll (except for one interview) was the standup. We made it with a minute to spare. That was a team effort that

gave us an exclusive lead story for the newscast. We did a different version for a later newscast that included more video and soundbites since I had time to write a script and the photographer had more time to search for his best video.

Teamwork — I can't emphasize that enough. Everyone in your group is on the team, so they need to be 'team players.' There are no unimportant members of a team. Everyone needs to do their best every day. Your team's 'A Game' is what will make your story, your newscast, your message 'stand out from the crowd.'

Right

The third 'R' of writing is getting the story or message 'right.' It needs to be right in several ways.

First, it has to conform 'to facts or truth' (*Merriam-Webster*). No matter how well-written or riveting, any news story or communique that doesn't conform to facts or truth is not worth using.

Second, it has to include the 'right' facts. What I mean by that is the right 'choice' of facts. Journalists usually gather more 'facts' than they can use in a story, unless they're going to write several versions for broadcast and/or online. That means they have to select the 'best facts' for their story. By 'best facts' I mean the information of greatest interest and importance to the audience.

Third, it has to include the right 'team facts.' By that I mean writers, producers, editors, and managers work together to determine the 'right' facts the story should include. If you're an independent journalist or communicator and you don't have a team of people working with you, you might want to develop some relationships with other independent journalists where you can bounce ideas off each other. What's the old saying — two heads are better than one?

Fourth, the story or message needs to strike the 'right tone.' That's true whether you're writing for news, promotions, advertising, or any other kind of mass communications. What type of story or message are you writing? Is it a light 'feature?' Is it a heavy 'investigation?' Be sure your words and pictures/video hit the 'right' note.

Fifth, make sure your words ‘match’ the pictures or video for your story or message. If words don’t match what people see, it leads to confusion and people go somewhere else to get their news or information. Too many journalists, including reporters, photographers, and producers, view ‘voice-over’ (VO) copy as having little importance in a newscast. If it has little importance, then why is it part of a newscast or promotion or commercial? Words need to fit the pictures and pictures need to fit the words. I used to tell journalists — ‘see it - say it.’ If the words in the copy are about dogs, the audience should see ‘dogs.’ If the words in the copy are about a train wreck, the audience should see the ‘train wreck.’ See it - say it. Your audience will thank you for it.

Sixth, proof-read your script before you edit and check it again after you edit. Make sure you didn’t leave out information necessary to understanding the importance of your story or message. Make sure you didn’t misspell words, especially those that the audience will see (e.g. lower thirds, graphics, name/location fonts, etc). We’re all human, which means we’re fallible. The best writers make mistakes, misspell words, use incorrect grammar, etc. Proof your

material. If you have someone in your office or studio who has a background in English (of whatever language you use), ask them to take a good look at what you wrote before airing or publishing.

Seventh, ask for a fresh pair of eyes to look at your finished work before putting it on air or online. You may think it's great because you know all about the story, but I recommend asking someone who knows little or nothing about the story taking a look. Why? Because that's how your audience will see, hear, or read it. They know little or nothing about your story, so will it accomplish the goal of being 'right?' Audiences have little time to think about your story or message because newscasts, promotional materials, commercials, etc., keep moving on to the next story or message. If audience members don't understand it, one of at least three things can happen.

1. They will forget about your story or message
2. They will miss out on the next story or message because they're still trying to understand yours
3. They will give up and move on to another media platform

None of those are good alternatives, so ask someone in the office to take a quick look at your work before it hits the air or Internet. Listen to their comments, adjust where necessary, and you'll often end up with a better product.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee