



Make Every Word Count

By [Steve Buttry](#)

writing coach, Omaha World-Herald

February 2003

With space at a premium in newspapers today, you need to make every word count in every story. Work with reporters to hone your ability and theirs to organize information and write tight stories that make every word count.

Plan to Write Tight

Coordinate with the reporter. Discuss story ideas in some detail before the reporter starts gathering information. This is too early to settle on an exact length, but you should make sure you agree on the probable scope of the story. This can save time wasted gathering information you don't need. As the reporter gathers information and writes the story, you will need at some point to agree on a probable length. If you delay this discussion too long, the reporter may waste time and effort and become frustrated.

Consider the reader. A failing of some long stories is that they are written for sources, rather than for readers. Encourage the reporter to consider why she is including information in a story. To impress sources with her knowledge? To keep a source happy? Or to inform the reader? A tougher challenge is to decide whether to write for the reader with strong interest in the issue or for the reader with average interest. For most stories, encourage the reporter to write primarily for the average reader who would read the story.

Make the story useful. When you're discussing with the reporter what information is important enough to include, favor information the reader can use. What will help the reader decide how to vote, what to buy, whether to see a show, what route to take to work, etc.?

Consider follow-ups, sidebars and graphics. You don't have to cram all the important information the reporter gathered into a single story. Can a process or some numbers be explained better in a graphic? Could a secondary issue make a sidebar or fact box? Might

some issues get better treatment in follow-up stories, rather than cramming them all into this story?

Encourage the reporter to write as he reports. As the reporter conducts interviews and researches, encourage him to start writing the story. This will help the reporter develop and sharpen your focus earlier, and a sharply focused story is generally a tighter story. Writing earlier in the process also will help the reporter identify and fill the holes in the story. It will help avoid redundant reporting (which often leads to redundant writing).

Set the Pace

The lede sets the pace for each story. A brief, breezy lede invites the reader into a story with the promise of a quick and lively pace. A ponderous lede invites the reader to turn to the next story, in which case it doesn't matter how long or how good the rest of the story is.

Entice the reader. Don't let the reporter treat the lede as a suitcase into which she will cram as much as she can fit. Regard it more like a g-string, brief and enticing. If your lede captures the essence of the story in a few words, the reader will read on to learn the facts. You don't need them all in the lede. A long lede shows a lack of confidence, like the reporter doesn't believe the reader will read the whole story so you tell as much as you can as fast as you can.

Challenge long ledes. We've all read excellent ledes that were long: 30 words, maybe even 40. But those are rare. Most long ledes are too heavy and slow. Check how long the lede is, even counting the words occasionally. If it's more than 20 words, challenge each piece of the lede and ask whether that actually has to be in the very first paragraph. Challenge the reporter to write a shorter lede.

Stamp out punctuation. Many of the best ledes have one piece of punctuation, a period. Regard multiple commas or dashes as red flags. Encourage the reporter to try writing a smoother sentence with just one comma or none. If you have lots of punctuation in the lede, read it aloud so you can hear whether it's choppy or whether it flows smoothly.

Minimize attribution. Attribution lengthens a lede, as well as weakening it. Can the reporter state something as a fact, rather than hedging it with attribution?

Subtract numbers. If the lede uses any numbers, their impact must be strong and their meaning and relationship must be immediately evident to an average reader. If the reader has to stop and ponder the numbers, they don't belong in the lede. (They may not even belong in the story, but in a graphic). Rarely could you justify using more than two numbers in a lede.

Write an alternative lede. If the lede is longer than 20 words, tell the reporter to write a shorter alternative lede and evaluate the two side by side. Don't accept a long lede without testing it

against a shorter lede.

Keep a Sharp Focus

Ask what the story is about. A tight story is not simply a short story. A tight story of any length is a story with a clear, sharp focus. Ask the reporter frequently as he gathers information and as he writes what the story is about, why a reader would want to read it. Bruce DeSilva of the Associated Press suggests asking these questions as you help the reporter try to find the story's focus: Why do you care about this? Why did you want to write this story? What touches you emotionally? Who is benefiting/being harmed, making money/losing money? How are readers being affected by what you have found? What is new here?

Write a headline. Encourage the reporter to write a headline for the story to help her find the focus. Or a logo, if it's a series. Or a budget line. Whichever of these devices the reporter uses, insist that she writes a good one. As DeSilva says, "no 'Unit Mulls Probe' garbage."

Tell your story in three words. Bill Luening of the Kansas City Star recommends identifying the focus by boiling the story down to a three-word sentence, a noun, an active verb, and an object: "These generally emerge as themes, rather than a story focus, but they can lead to a theme statement. Maybe, if the story is a narrative, you can get them to outline the complication, development and resolution this way. The story of the Pied Piper then would be, Rats Overrun City. City Hires Ratman. Ratman Kills Rats. City Stiffs Ratman. Ratman Steals Children. Moral: Keep Your Word. Or...Flutists Kick Butt."

Ask the reporter to tell you. Especially if the reporter is struggling to find the focus, it may help to tell someone about the story. Ask the reporter to tell you about it. Conversation forces brevity and focus. DeSilva suggests the bus stop test: "Suppose you are at a bus stop and someone leans out the bus window and shouts, 'What is that story you are working on?' The bus engine starts and begins to pull away from the curb. What are you going to shout?"

Find the surprise. Did something surprise the reporter as he researched this story? Maybe that should be the focus.

Identify the emotion. Luening asks writers, "Where does the emotion lurk? Where, as a friend of mine here calls it, is the 'emotional center' of what they've discovered?"

Use story elements. You can help the reporter find the focus by asking what are the story's most important elements. Is this a plot-driven story, or is character the most important element? Or setting? Or conflict?

Help with organization. Encourage the reporter to identify the most important points of the story and the information that most clearly supports those points. This should be the heart of the

story and in many cases the total story. If the reporter identifies more than three or four points, she probably has too many. An outline may help her organize.

Encourage writing without notes. If the reporter has researched well, and if has been thinking about the story, he has most of the story in his head. He knows what the most important points are. He remembers the embarrassing contradictions, the clever quotes, the damning evidence. So tell him to tell the story, without the distractions of that mess of notebooks and faxes and photocopies. Sometimes the process of flipping through notebooks distracts from the focus. Of course, when the reporter is done, he needs to return to the notebooks and other resources to ensure accuracy.

Keep the end in sight. Encourage the reporter to decide early where she wants the story to end. Then the reporter should keep the end in view as she writes, and use the information and anecdotes that lead the reader to that end by the most direct route.

Identify and avoid detours. Detours are a common problem in long stories. A reporter will spend an inordinate amount of time checking out a tip or trying to answer a question. The reporter may need to follow these detours. But the reader doesn't have time for them. Make your story the straightest, smoothest road between the beginning and the end. Don't let the reporter include any turns that aren't part of the route itself. Don't let the reporter empty the notebook. Just because the reporter collected a fact doesn't mean you have to share it with readers. Use the facts that help tell the story, and only those facts. Perhaps the reporter knocked himself out to find a fact that turned out to be unimportant. You need to praise the persistence, but insist that he leave the fact out of the story. Maybe the fact is important, but the effort deceived the reporter into thinking the reader needs to know how she found it. Probably not. Listen attentively to the story. Praise the resourcefulness. But insist on giving the reader just the facts. Sometimes the reporter comes across a funny or intriguing anecdote that doesn't really relate to the main story, but the reporter falls in love with it. Maybe it's worth a sidebar. Or maybe you just have to listen and laugh and make it an inside joke. But tell the reporter it's a detour that takes the reader away from the story's focus. Keep it out of the story.

Be demanding. Tell the reporter to use only her best information, her best illustrations, her best examples, her best quotes. The more demanding the reporter is of the content of the story, the tighter the story, the stronger the focus. Some reporters view long stories as the only good stories. Without question, a tightly written long story has more depth and substance than a tightly written short story. But if the reporter tightens by raising standards and allowing only the best, clearest writing and most important and interesting information, she will write outstanding stories of modest length.

Read aloud. Reading copy aloud will help the reporter identify the awkward phrases, obvious candidates for elimination or condensation. Reading aloud will help identify the long sentences. Encourage the reporter to read the story aloud, to you or to himself.

Allow Time to Rewrite

Much of the best work in tightening and strengthening stories comes in rewriting. Encourage the reporter to use these rewriting techniques to strengthen the story. Then use the same techniques as you edit:

Check each sentence. Tell the reporter to go through a completed draft sentence by sentence. In each sentence, see whether a word or phrase can be eliminated without hurting the meaning.

H&J. If you need to cut a few inches, hyphenate and justify the story. Then look for paragraphs with just one or two words on the last line. See if you can cut a word or two from those grafs.

Stamp out there is usages. Virtually every sentence that uses there with any form of the verb to be will grow stronger (and often shorter) if you rewrite without it. This usage takes the weakest verb in our language and pairs it with one of the vaguest words to create a weak, vague usage that robs sentences of their subjects. Avoid all forms: there is, there's, there are, there was, there were, there will be, there could have been. If you're prone to this, do a quick search for the word there when you've finished writing and fix each sentence where you commit this offense.

Minimize it is usage. Again, this combines a weak verb with a vague word, especially if it has no antecedent. Examples are it is difficult, it is easy, it is important. Say what is easy, difficult or important.

Challenge uses of to be verbs. Is, are, am, was, were, been and being are weak verbs. Sometimes they are the most accurate verbs. You can't and shouldn't eliminate all uses of these verbs. But you should always challenge them. See if you can use a stronger verb. This may not save words, but it strengthens the words you use.

Challenge all weak verbs. When you find weak verbs such as do, get and have, ask whether you can replace them with stronger verbs. That doesn't simply mean using a longer synonymous verb, such as obtain instead of get or possess instead of have. Ask whether you can convey the meaning of the sentence with a stronger verb. Again, you may not save words, but you strengthen the words you use, making your story feel tighter.

Write with active verbs. Active verbs not only strengthen your sentences, they help shorten them. Passive verbs generally require more words. The subject of the sentence should do the action. Sometimes (especially if you spot a by in the sentence) you can just flip the sentence around: That conviction was overturned by an appeals court becomes An appeals court overturned that conviction. Other times, you have the right subject but need to choose an active verb: Mike Fahey was declared the victor in the race for mayor Tuesday becomes Mike Fahey

won the race for mayor Tuesday.

Replace phrases with words. Look at the phrases in your copy and try to find phrases that can be reduced to a single word: hardly ever becomes rarely.

Eliminate imprecise words. You will very rarely find a sentence that is enhanced by the word very. For instance, the very in the preceding sentence adds nothing. Look for other imprecise words such as many and several that you can cut or replace.

Reduce use of adverbs. Instead of using a verb modified with an adverb, see whether you can use a more precise verb that needs no modification: dash instead of run fast.

Reduce attribution. If the reporter knows something to be true, the story doesn't need to attribute it. Sometimes you can condense attribution with lead-ins and bullets. If the context before a quote, especially an earlier quote, makes the speaker clear, you might be able to eliminate the she said afterward.

Avoid inflated words. Don't write utilize when it says nothing more than use. Don't write approximately when it says nothing more than about. Don't write purchase when it says nothing more than buy.

Paraphrase quotes. Many sources speak in jargon or convoluted sentences that reporters should not quote. Be demanding of quotes. If they don't convey strong opinion or emotion, you probably can say it better (and tighter) than the speaker. If the speaker is using jargon that you wouldn't use in writing or your readers wouldn't use in conversation, paraphrase.

Condense phrases. When you find a sentence that strings together several prepositional phrases or multiple clauses, consider them an invitation to tighten. Try to combine or eliminate phrases. A phrase that modifies a noun might be replaced with an adjective. Maybe you just need to break it into two or three sentences.

Say what is, not what isn't. You can't always do this. Sometimes you have to say what isn't. But often you can strengthen and shorten sentences by stating what is.

No ands or buts. Sometimes writers use and or but unnecessarily as transitions to start sentences. If the sentence doesn't conflict with the one before, but is inappropriate as well as unnecessary. And is frequently an unnecessary transition. By the mere fact that the story continues, the reader knows more is coming. The other overused words that you can cut frequently include that, the and a. Often you do need these words, but sometimes they are extraneous, such as the the and that in the previous sentence.

Catch redundant words. Formerly isn't needed with past tense. Currently or now isn't needed

with present tense.

Catch redundant facts. Watch for quotes or examples that make the same point twice.

Catch redundant setups. Does the writer set up quotes by telling the reader most of what the quote will say? This is an easy place to tighten.

You don't have to quote everyone. Do quotes help make points? Do they advance the story? If the reporter is quoting someone just because she talked to him, cut that quote.

Resources to help write tighter

American Copy Editors Society

<http://www.copydesk.org/words/>

Laurie Hertzell's "Writing tighter while writing well":

<http://www.noTRAIN-nogain.com/Train/Res/Write/tight2.asp>

Jack Hart's "Last-minute strategies for improving your copy":

<http://www.noTRAIN-nogain.com/Train/Res/Write/last.asp>

Kevin McGrath's "Writing is rewriting":

<http://www.noTRAIN-nogain.com/Train/Res/Write/rewrit.asp>

John Hatcher's "The greatest writing tips the world has ever seen":

<http://www.noTRAIN-nogain.com/Train/Res/WriteARC/23tips.asp>

Joe Grimm's "Journalists need to recalibrate their jargon detectors":

<http://www.noTRAIN-nogain.com/Train/Res/WriteARC/jargon.asp>

Joe Grimm's "There is no ease in journalese":

<http://www.noTRAIN-nogain.com/Train/Res/WriteARC/nalese.asp>

Matt Helms' "Questions focus stories":

<http://www.freep.com/jobspage/academy/NWWhelms.htm>

John Christie's "Writer, edit thyself":

<http://www.freep.com/jobspage/academy/selfedit.htm>

Chip Scanlan's "Writing short, writing well in a 50-inch web world"

http://poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=4454

Roy Peter Clark's "Write Good and Short":

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=4907

Chip Scanlan's "Surgery Without Pain: A Tale of Revision":

<http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=11693>

Roy Peter Clark's "Thirty Tools for Writers":

http://poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=707

Used with permission of the author. You may reuse this material as long as the author and ACES are credited.