



# Nuts & Bolts

Edited by [Bob Baker](#)

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## **Sweat the small stuff \***

While you were making your New Year's resolutions, did you pledge to improve at your job? Was it a big, fuzzy promise? ("I will be in the paper more often with more dailies..." "I will be in the paper less often and do more A-1 stories..." "I will try harder to help my reporters...") The world gets in the way of those kinds of resolutions most days. So, instead, how about promising to do something practical--something you could actually do every day? How about promising yourself to steal a small amount of time every day—let's say 15 minutes—to do one thing that will make you better? For example, you can vow to apply one additional minor refinement to every story you do, if you tend to do a lot of them. Or, you can create a daily habit (such as more one phone call a day to build a potential new source) that doesn't depend on whether you're writing.

Last year, in a variety of seminars throughout California, I asked each participant to pledge 15 minutes a day to a particular personal cause that would make him or her better. Here, for your consideration, are some of the ideas I heard:

1. One more read of my copy to cut fat.
2. One more read to hone the perspective graf
3. One more read to try to make a "report" sound a little more like a "story."
4. Think more about story structure before writing, rather than heading for the keyboard and "discovering" the story while writing it.
5. Polishing the language that connects the anecdote to the nut graf
6. More one more call to a source who will allow me to write with more authority/confidence.
7. Writing a theme statement that guides my writing.

## **\*and it's all small stuff**

8. (From an editor) Read stories earlier in the day so I have time to ask for a rewrite rather than trying to fix them myself.
9. One more read to eliminate mediocre quotes
10. Spend more time preparing interview questions.
11. Read my story aloud before filing it.
12. Interview a person affected by the government story I'm writing.
13. Read one great newspaper story a day.

14. Translate jargon
15. (From an editor) Do a better job of explaining the changes I want to make.
16. Write better transitions to explain why a new theme is being introduced in the story
17. When I self-edit, envision an audience that has Attention Deficit Disorder.
18. One more read to reconcile detail with the larger question of what is essential.
19. Try harder to humanize crime stories
20. Make sure I know beginning and end of story before I start typing.
21. Probe the senses
22. One more read for sentence length.
23. Use my own voice instead of an anecdote
24. Improve endings by injecting a sense of anticipation.
25. (From an editor) Encourage my writers to take chances
26. Examine whether each graf plays a specific and unique role
27. Make sure the ending resonates back to the beginning
28. Start over when my first draft requires it
29. If the lead won't come, try writing the body.
30. (From an editor) Read the whole story before forming a judgment
31. Write subheads in longer stories as a way of reminding yourself to write in chunks/scenes
32. (From an editor) Make sure in prewriting consultation to reach a consensus on the theme of the story
33. Stop worrying what "they"--bosses--will think of it. Use your instincts
34. Ask yourself repeatedly: "What happened?"
35. When interviewing, ask enough questions so subjects are forced to put themselves into a scene, giving you more opportunities to present them in action
36. Do a post-mortem on your story once it's in print

Some of these considerations can eat up more than 15 minutes, but many the can be accomplished quickly. They're presented as a reminder of the endless number of calculations we make—or should make—every day. Getting better may start with a general promise, but inevitably you're going to have to sweat the small stuff.

Pick one, or perhaps two, qualities and devote yourself to them for a month, or until they become part of your hierarchy of habits. Then add another, and another, and another.

Let's take an example: Number 6—I promise to spend an extra 15 minutes a day doing one more interview to help me write with more confidence and authority. Let's combine it with Number 13—I promise to read one great newspaper story a day. The reading can help you discover specific qualities of authority, studying how the writer accomplished it. Let's take our recent Page 1 examination of the sloppiness of America's vote-counting process, and see what we find:

Because ballots can be bought, stolen, miscounted, lost, thrown out or sent to Denmark, nobody knows with any precision how many votes go uncounted in American elections. (Hmmm, the punchiness of that dependent clause is interesting—bang, bang, bang, bang, bang,

five verbs in a row. I could steal that trick...)

For weeks, Florida has riveted the nation with a mind-numbing array of failures: misleading ballots, contradictory counting standards, discarded votes--19,000 in one county alone. But an examination by The Times in a dozen states from Washington to Texas to New York shows that Florida is not the exception. It is the rule. (Hmmm, each of the three sentences in that graf got progressively shorter, which seemed to have a focusing effect...)

State and local officials give priority to curbing crime, filling potholes and picking up trash. That often leaves elections across the country underfunded, badly managed, ill equipped and poorly staffed. Election workers are temporaries, pay is a pittance, training is brief and voting systems are frequently obsolete. (Hmmm, I love the way specifics fly at me, building a case, and there's no attribution...)

"You know why we never paid attention to this until now?" asks Candy Marendt, co-director of the Indiana Elections Division. "I'll tell you: because we don't really want to know. We don't want to know that our democracy isn't really so sacred. . . . (Hmmm, love the directness of the quote; she's right in your face...)

"It can be very ugly." (Hmmm, quote breaks to a separate graf for impact...seems a little hyped but it's a trick worth thinking about...)

The examination shows: (Hmmm, nice set-up... anticipates that I'm ready for a tour around the nation...good speed...)

\* New York City voters use metal lever-action machines so old they are no longer made, each with 27,000 parts. Similar machines in Louisiana are vulnerable to rigging with pliers, a screwdriver, a cigarette lighter and a Q-Tip. (Hmmm, look how quickly that second sentence moved, just the essentials. I'll bet if I were writing it I would have wasted another sentence on how the rigging was actually performed....)

\* In Texas, "vote whores" do favors for people in return for their absentee ballots. Sometimes the canvassers or consultants, as they prefer to be called, simply buy the ballots. Failing all else, they steal them from mailboxes. (Hmmm, there's that three-sentence trick again: narrower, narrower, narrower....)

\* Alaska has more registered voters than voting-age people. Indiana, which encourages voting with...

Focusing on a primary quality often allows you to stumble into a secondary quality that serves as a building block. Let's say you were cruising the Chicago Tribune's web site on Nov. 19 and happened to begin reading Part I of a four-part series about a day in the life of O'Hare Airport. You might have been looking for tricks to more authoritative writing, only to realize that the top of this story gained its authority by using the power of sensory description (Promise No. 21) in favor of quotes (Promise No. 9):

The air smells like stale hamburgers and unbrushed teeth.

It smells like cold coffee, like sour beer. It smells like exhaustion.

The air smells as if it has been inhaled and exhaled by too many people for far too long and they are breathing it still, snoring and snuffling, sighing and murmuring as they sprawl about

O'Hare International Airport like refugees from some invisible war.

Everywhere you look there are bodies. Stretched along tables and the conveyor belts of X-ray machines. Curled up on baggage carousels, slumped against walls and draped along benches. There are people slung out on the floor, their faces inches away from swinging feet, and people draped around one another like sculpture, trying to find comfort in the curve of a shoulder or bend of a back.

Some feign or force themselves into sleep, shutting out the fluorescent lights, the blare of "Monday Night Football" on television sets they can't turn off, the incessant beep of motorized carts. Others stare, glassy-eyed, at lightning flickering against the dark, rain-spattered windows, thinking about meetings unmet, vacations postponed and children who went to bed unkissed.

There are almost 6,000 people at O'Hare tonight. They are all supposed to be somewhere else. (Yet another promise is about to be fulfilled, No. 5, on better anecdote-to-nut coordination. Watch how the story moves toward it from this graf.)

They are stuck here instead, in an airport that once prided itself on being the world's busiest and now is notorious for making more of its passengers late than any other airport in the country.

In many ways, the transformation of O'Hare from sleek symbol of the jet age to the bus station of the skies parallels the changes in air transportation itself: from fine china and travel suits to foil-packed peanuts and cutoffs, dirty diapers jammed into seat pockets and security guards stationed behind the customer service desk.

Almost 700 million passengers now fly...

Raise your right hand and repeat after me: "I promise to spend 15 minutes a day doing (fill in the blank) to get better at (fill in the blank)." Remember, there are only two kinds of journalists...

### **When bad adjectives happen to good stories**

Competition to get on Page 1 has historically created a pressure to add superlatives to copy—sometimes from editors, rather than reporters. Too often, these adjectives give the paper a strained feel. The very fact that a story is being placed on Page 1—or in the paper at all—is evidence of its importance. Check these stories and see if they could have survived had a superlative been axed:

1. Did "astonishing" have to be in the second graf? Aren't the circumstances remarkable enough as stated?

Through determination and pluck, a few dozen immigrant production workers have achieved what years of wrangling by labor leaders and anti-globalization activists have not: They stopped a factory from moving to Mexico.

U.S. District Judge Carlos R. Moreno sided with the newly unionized workers Tuesday, handing down an astonishing preliminary injunction that prevents a Gardena jewelry manufacturer from going through with a planned relocation to Tijuana.

Quadrtech Corp., which employs about 120 minimum-wage assemblers, was also ordered to

bring back two truckloads of equipment it had already shipped south.

The injunction, which was sought by the National Labor Relations Board, will remain in effect until...

2. Did “prestigious” have to modify the grant program, especially with “genius” already there? ...In recognition of his imaginative approach, Hayes this year was awarded one of the prestigious "genius" grants given to thinkers, scientists, writers and other innovators by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

At its heart, Hayes' windmill project underscores a brewing debate over ...

This is tricky, relative stuff, and reasonable people can disagree, but let's agree with this much: As often as possible, the facts themselves should communicate the truth. Be tougher on your use of adjectives.

### **Exploiting contrast**

Contrast is one of the strongest devices you can use to explain how the world works: the contrast between what somebody planned on doing and what they did; the contrast between what most people do and what your protagonist did; the contrast between what a government agency was supposed to do and what this one did. What's tough is that this requires a lot of language to explain both sides, and often takes the writer into a quagmire, at least on first draft. You have to put pressure on yourself to distill “process” language to make sure the contrast between “x” and “y” is clear.

“Then and now” is a simple, powerful style of contrast. Check this example by Joe Mathews that compresses a lot of history into a small space:

Five years ago, Michael V. Aloyan caused the Compton City Council no small amount of embarrassment. In federal court, the businessman admitted passing bribes to two council members on behalf of the trash and casino corporations for which he worked.

Now the City Council--minus the two bribe-taking members, who went to prison--is on the verge of awarding Aloyan a no-bid contract to collect Compton's trash, worth about \$25,000 a month. Four of five council members have said they support Aloyan.

With their support as a backdrop, a public hearing tonight promises a bitter look back at Aloyan's past and a messy period that many in Compton would rather forget. Opponents are expected to raise concerns about future rate hikes and criticize the council's traditional willingness to grant second chances.

The resulting debate could create headaches for...

More sophisticated stories require contrast to be heightened, reinforced and simplified throughout the story, like this piece by Marla Dickerson.

First, the story introduces the need for change by showing the stakes:

After years of watching customers chase cheap labor south of the border, garment contractor Esther Chaing had to retool her Harbor City operation to survive.

Then it introduces the dimensions of change:

Her strategy would contradict much of what she had learned in nearly two decades of apparel

making. She would have to cross-train sewing operators in a piecework trade where workers are used to doing a single task at lightning speed. And Le Bouquet Costumes Inc. would have to make garments one at a time, forsaking the batch production that's the backbone of the local industry.

"I was skeptical, but I had no choice," Chaing said. "I was losing \$10,000 a month and about to close my doors."

Then the contrast between resistance and success:

Although the changes seemed counterintuitive to Chaing, her payoff has been soaring quality and productivity--and for the first time in years, prospects for growth.

Now perspective graf that puts the change in context:

Le Bouquet is one of a modest but growing number of small Southland manufacturers embracing Japanese-style "lean" production techniques. Long used by some large U.S. firms, the practices are trickling down to mom-and-pop companies under pressure to slash costs and boost productivity. One of the most potent weapons in the lean arsenal is "cellular manufacturing," which is the antithesis of the traditional U.S. plant structure.

More specific contrast between old and new production methods:

Among other things, going cellular means that goods are produced one at a time, not in large batches. Employees work in teams performing a variety of jobs rather than specializing in a single task. And the shop floor is divided into self-contained work "cells," instead of separate departments for grinding, milling, assembly and the like.

Inexpensive and low-tech, cellular manufacturing is producing powerful results for small firms such as Chaing's. By repositioning existing equipment....

David Willman's recent project on the FDA's change in drug approval policy recognized that the contrast could not be handled entirely in the first two grafs. The subject was too complicated, requiring deliberation. So the first two grafs gave you merely the contrast between (a) ancient history and (b) recent history, setting the table...

WASHINGTON -- For most of its history, the United States Food and Drug Administration approved new prescription medicines at a grudging pace, paying daily homage to the physician's creed, "First, do no harm."

Then in the early 1990s, the demand for AIDS drugs changed the political climate. Congress told the FDA to work closely with pharmaceutical firms in getting new medicines to market more swiftly. President Clinton urged FDA leaders to trust industry as "partners, not adversaries."

...so that the third, fourth and fifth grafs could show you the "now"—i.e., the tragic consequences:

The FDA achieved its new goals, but now the human cost is becoming clear.

Seven drugs approved since 1993 have been withdrawn after reports of deaths and other severe side effects. A two-year Los Angeles Times investigation has found that the FDA approved each of those drugs while disregarding danger signs or blunt warnings from its own specialists. Then, after receiving reports of significant harm to patients, the agency was slow to seek withdrawals.

According to "adverse-event" reports filed with the FDA, the seven drugs were cited as

suspects in 1,002 deaths. Because the deaths are reported by doctors, hospitals and others on a voluntary basis, the true number of fatalities could be far higher, according to epidemiologists.

Some staffers thought this lead was sluggish, taking too long to get to the point. What you have to ask yourself is: What's the greater good in a story like this? Is it merely the findings (seven drugs cited as suspects in 1,002 deaths) or the change in regulatory philosophy that caused them? By the time you finish the fifth graf—and the clarity of the writing makes it hard to stop—you've absorbed a terrific amount of context about how this part of the world works, and are intellectually ready to absorb the greater detail that follows.

### **Cliches of the month**

In the wake of our most-cliches-in-a-mythical-graf contest, copy editor Larry Harnisch submitted a manufactured lead with 40 cliches (virtually all of them recognizable as Times cliches) packed into only 123 words. It demands belated publication:

Bringing to a whopping 40 the number of much-needed cliches in a lead, the legislative hurly-burly ratcheted up a notch in the tree-lined hamlet nestled in the unprecedented mountains as shots from a prestigious blue steel revolver rang out and searchers--all 10-day department veterans armed with the coveted jaws of life--braved rain-slick freeways to craft an eleventh-hour across-the-board moniker that was hammered out by a blue-ribbon task force.

Friday, he himself said as he begged the question at a press conference on a well-manicured suburban lawn before nearby residents, that this was, both supporters and opponents grouched and Sherri Bebitch Jaffe lamented, arguably not your father's high-stakes cliché. Then he likely fled on foot southbound in a white Toyota 4Runner.

Back to specifics. Here are a few more to rethink:

Inner-city: Too often we use this geographic phrase as code language for poor, non-white people, exploiting the many images it carries. It's lazy. "Inner-city" is so freighted with symbolism that it has ceased to be specific. If you want to say something about a place's racial makeup, get the details and present them. If you want to deal with geography, then do it. In the same vein, try to stop using catch-alls like "gritty." What do you really see, specifically--broken windows, overgrown bushes, dead trees, old tires, abandoned cars, graffiti layers deep--beyond the fact that people's skin color is different?

Move forward: This phrase is threatening to become the "closure" of the new decade.

Ground zero: Five uses in six days in December.

Hammering out: "I want to spit every time I encounter in the L.A. Times that an agreement is being hammered out," one staffer writes with appropriate indignity. "It's a classic example of a once-vivid image that's become a mass-produced, off-the-shelf trope for word-lazy newspaper journalists. Lately, its awful cousin--crafted--has been working its way into the columns of the paper, too. (Craft doesn't equate to make or devise. It means to make or devise with unusual skill or artistry). Please do something to hammer hammer out out of the heads of those who resort to it."

Quality: (Offered, with our endorsement, by the same indignant staffer: "This is a classic

example of semi-literate TV sports-speak contaminating our paper, which, as a last bastion of literacy, is supposed to be more sophisticated and exact. The word quality, thus misused, is meant to convey good quality or high quality. But the word itself is value-neutral. There can also be poor quality and shoddy quality. Thus to say that a baseball pitcher had a quality start is to not in any way characterize that start.”

Sea change: We’re dropping this into syntax, quotes or headlines about every fourth day. It’s time to drown it.

Level playing field: Seven uses in less than four weeks in December.

Poor use of ‘pore’: “This is driving me nuts,” writes another staffer. “I keep seeing in copy I edit and in the paper, pore through, which I am sure should be pore over, and culminating with, which I believe should be culminating in.”

How much irony do you need in life?

Iro-ny: 1 (a): the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning; (b): a usually humorous or sardonic literary style or form characterized by irony; (c): an ironic expression or utterance. 2 (a) (1): incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result; (a) (2): an event or result marked by such incongruity. (3) incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play -- called also dramatic irony, tragic irony.

The words “irony,” “ironic” or “ironically” appeared nine times on Jan. 1 and a total of 42 times during the first nine days of 2001. The three-year average is five times per day. That’s right, 5.5395 doses of irony per day.

Sometimes, we misuse irony as a substitute for odd, or strange. Other times—many times—we hit the reader over the head by it. Consider:

In an ironic final chapter to the most disputed presidential election in modern history, Vice President Al Gore presided over his own defeat Saturday, as a joint session of Congress formally declared George W. Bush the next president of the United States.

The question editors should be asking themselves is: If it’s truly ironic, do we have to point it out?

If you want to see the collective hazard of seeking irony at every turn, watch what the Village Voice’s press columnist, Cynthia Cotts, was able to do to the New York Times recently:

Not so long ago, irony was viewed as a menace on 43rd Street, where the tone was consistently sober and any humor that crept in purely unintentional. But that’s all changed. No one can pinpoint the exact date, but sometime between the arrival of [Sunday magazine editor] Adam Moss and the departure of Abe Rosenthal, irony has received the imprimatur of The New York Times.

Consider the frequency with which the words “irony” and “ironic” appear in the Times. In fact, the Times’ use of the I-words has risen steadily through the 1990s, to a record high of more



than 1,050 in 2000, or an average of three times a day. That's almost double the irony quotient that Times readers were treated to in 1980.

Irony at the Times can be "dark," "sad," "terrible," or "tragic," but there are no small ironies and never enough. Long a staple of the arts coverage, irony has been quietly implemented by other Times sections of late, including the once-staid business and national desks. The trend surfaced on November 13, when Linda Greenhouse landed a spot on the front page to broadcast the "delicious" irony that Republicans, traditional defenders of states' rights, were determined to take the Florida case federal. By the time the case reached the Supremes, Times editorial writers had picked up the cry, writing, "It is ironic indeed to see the very justices who have repeatedly ruled in favor of states' rights . . . do an about-face in this case."

Times writers have apparently been instructed to find role models for the institutional pose of choice. Thus in 2000, readers learned that Lauren Bacall won an award for her "ironic look," that Madonna developed her appetite for irony in England, and that Martha Stewart, Pee-wee Herman, and Chevy Chase are ironic icons. Writer Bruce Jay Friedman is a veteran "irony man," while former Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti can carry off a sinister billboard ad because "there is a string of irony running through his personality." And let's not forget Helen Fielding, whose female characters are "complex ironic jokes."

But the master class should be reserved for magazine reporter Alex Kuczynski, who mines every situation for irony. Kuczynski kicked off the year with a profile of Time writer Joel Stein, whom she placed in the "openly ironic" tradition of Seinfeld, and ended it by taking The Nation's Caribbean cruise, where she found an irony under every bed. Last spring, she discovered the "terrible irony" that George had a better chance of living after John-John died, then blasted another Kennedy for the "glaring" irony of being a lib who takes soft money.

How do we stack up against the New York Times on Ms. Cotts' scale of "irony" and "ironic"? We whacked 'em! The NYT's 2000 daily average was 2.87, far below the LAT's three-year average of 3.58 for those two words. Congrats! he said with some measure of irony.

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