COM356

News-feature story writing tips. 4/25/18

Writing tips to punch up your copy (inspired by categories in Friedlander & Lee, *Feature Writing for Newspapers and Magazines*).

1. Use **specific** terms.

Don’t say: She drove by in her old car.

Say: She drove by in her battered 1999 green Toyota Corolla, paint peeling like layers of an onion to reveal the primer underneath.

2. Use **active** **voice**, not passive, and active **verbs**

Don’t say: She was hit by the ball.

Say: The ball slammed into her side.

3. Use as many good **quotes** as you can. Basic rule: Quote memorable people who say memorable things; paraphrase if the quote doesn’t sing, if it’s hard to follow, or too technical e.g. from your expert. Recall Lane DeGregory says two-thirds of the time she can write it better than people say it.

4. Give readers a **picture** of the people who talk: Professor Beatty is the archetype of a college professor; with unruly and thinning hair; an egg-head eggheads would envy; and glasses that come from the previous millennium.

5. Get and use **anecdotes**. As we said, they can make for a solid lead. Do that in your interviewing—ask the **superlative** question:

What’s the most interesting/unusual/funniest/embarrassing thing you’ve done on your job?

(see “More on Interviewing” handout, Q 10). Try to get people talking (and always take notes even if they are boring and you’re just pretending; but what about when shooting video? DeGregory says then you can make notes about the room, etc.). Also ask their friends or colleagues to tell you a story about the person.

6. Probably should be No. 1 because it’s said the most often: **Show** **don’t tell**.

Don’t say: He was as angry as he could be.

Say: His eyes glared and seemed to pop out of his head as he quivered noticeably with fists clenched.

7. Describe **where** someone is. This is useful for otherwise straightforward interviews, including videos: Walk into Professor Beatty’s office and you’re struck, figuratively one hopes, by the Wall of Stuff. His shelves bulge with an assortment of books, papers, binders and boxes that look as if they are about to collapse at any moment. Indeed, Beatty says that disaster was recently avoided when another professor noticed that the upper shelves had begun to detach themselves from the wall.

8. Use creative, not cliched, **figures of speech** (metaphors, similes).

Don’t say: He was as cool as a cucumber. He ran like a deer.

Say: He was as cool as an aluminum can of Bud at Citizen’s Bank Park in August.

He ran like Oscar Pistorius.

9. Use **analogies**. If you can bake a cake, you can replace a starter motor. Your parts are your ingredients, your tools are your cookware, and your manual is your recipe book.

The problem comes when the analogy distracts the reader because they start to say, “No, they aren’t the same thing.”

10. Try to be **funny**. If you know you can be. But don’t overdo it. Jokes should be quick. I have no examples.

11. Try **second person** (direct address). Often works as a lead (more anon).

You know you’re in Ontario when you see two Tim Horton’s on the same block and a big Esso sign straight out of the 1960s.

12. **Transitions** are one of the most-abused devices. The rule is this: Don’t make the reader stop and say. “What? I thought we were talking about rutabagas.” Try a question as a transition. Then answer it.

But what is it about Twitter that makes it useful for journalists? Clearly, it creates community.

Or try that in the second person: But what do you think makes Twitter popular among journalists?

13. The most basic transitions can be categorized as **bridge** words (In addition, what’s more, and) and **turn** words (On the other hand, however, but). Remind the reader whether we’re still on point A or it’s on to B (or A2).

The laziest transitions identify themselves as transitions:

But enough about food. Let’s talk taxes.

14. Related to bridge words is the use of **synonyms** to tell the reader that we’re still on point A. But don’t repeat the same word; that’s OK but it’s weak and boring.

For hours the huge crowd grew larger and larger outside the stadium.

This was one angry mob.

15. “**Said**” not only works when you are attributing a quote or a statement, it’s often the best option. Your descriptions should convey the mood if that’s the intent.

Don’t say: “That’s funny,” he laughed. (Awkward and also impossible to do.)

Say: “That’s funny,” he said with a laugh.

Also put it in after the first sentence or phrase if the quote is long.

“That was the funniest thing I ever heard,” he said, still grinning broadly at the remembrance. “It was as if I had heard that Monty Python joke that made people die laughing when they heard it, except I managed to survive.”

One more: Always write “she said” rather than “said she” (or “Beatty said” rather than “said Beatty”) unless you are writing or mimicking a bad English novel.

16. Write **clearly**. Put it down, run around the block and read it again. If you can’t make sense of it, no one will. Have five non-journalist friends read it, as DeGregory does. Have one of them read it to you.

17. Try these techniques when looking for the story’s **focus**:

Put it in one or two words—no more. If you can’t do that it might not be about anything fundamental (love, family, health, democracy, death, co-existence, mortality).

Try to tell it to a roommate. Tell it, don’t read it. If you find you can’t, it’s probably not clear in your mind, let alone in what you wrote.

What’s the newspaper/website headline for your story?

18. Be **concise**. Avoid common redundancies such as future plans, several different ideas, boarding process, because of the fact that, at this point in time, join together, true fact. Ask yourself if the opposite exists. Are there “false facts”? No, so it must be redundant.

19. As with No. 14, **don’t reuse** a word nearby. Use a synonym.

Don’t say: I found the concert interesting because of the interesting way she played the cello.

Say: I found the concert interesting because of the unusual way she played the cello.

20. Look for internal **rhythm and rhyme**, but don’t try to force it. The air reeked as fumes leaked …

20. Actually, be really careful about words that are basically **empty**. Avoid empty words.

21. **Every word** counts. Seriously. Even small ones.

Don’t say: I fell off of my chair on Friday.

Say: I fell off my chair Friday.

Final thoughts on **leads** (ledes, to old-school folks). Here is one set of types of feature leads. Note that some of these are leads people say NOT to write (e.g. question leads):

* **anecdotal** lead: John Beatty sat in his office and glared at the computer screen.
* **descriptive** lead. This assumes it leads into a brief profile: First you notice the head—not just large, but oddly shaped, like an outboard motor.
* **second-person** lead: Head north of the Allentown exit and you feel as if you are entering Switzerland. Or at least an imitation of it.
* **expression** lead: If it’s true that one good turn deserves another, then the Cabot Trail is a road you deserve to experience.
* the **freak/list** lead: Big. Bold. Beautiful.   
  That’s Canada to people who don’t live there. To those who do …
* **question** lead. Probably works best with second person: Did you ever wonder what the most popular attraction is in Philly?
* **quotation** lead. Again, this assumes a person is the focus of the lead: “That was when I knew my calling,” said Brother Emery.
* the **surprise** lead. Only OK if you don’t delay it too long: Oscar Pistorius was as fast and as fit as any other elite sprinter who competed at the Olympic level. But he has carbon-fiber legs.