

Smart Writing!

Presented by

SwanShadow
COMMUNICATIONS

Volume 2, Issue 1

February 2003

Check Your Facts

Before that document — whether it's a letter, a press release, a report, even advertising copy — leaves your desk, follow these simple journalistic principles. You may save yourself some embarrassment.

1. **Make sure you've spelled — and used — words correctly.** Don't rely only on the spelling feature of your word processing program. Spell-check won't catch instances where you've used a *real* word, but the *wrong* word. (Were last year's net sales *really* one billion dollars? Or should that "B" be an "M"?)

2. **Check names, titles, phone numbers, and addresses for accuracy.** Names often have several variant spellings (is it Peterson, Petersen, or Pederson?). It's easy to transpose digits in an address or telephone number. And people in corporate America can be sensitive about titles they've worked hard to earn. Don't get caught referring to someone as a *manager* if she is officially a *vice president*, for example.

3. **Verify facts using two or three independent sources.** (Two citations of the

same article, even in different publications, are *not* independent.) Double-check information you find on the Internet — there's a lot of questionable data floating in cyberspace.

4. **When in doubt, ask.** If you have any reason to wonder, check with someone who knows with certainty.

Incorrect information tarnishes your credibility. I just read a film review in which the writer described an actor as having "the phoniest French accent I've heard in some years." The actor in question is, in fact, French. **Oops!**

— Michael Rankins

Consistency Counts

Often, what we think of as rules of grammar or usage are really matters of style. For example, which of these is the correct way to list a telephone number?

- A. (707) 585-8224
- B. 707-585-8224
- C. 707.585.8224

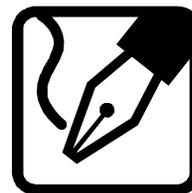
The answer is *all of the above*. None is more "right" than the others. However, within a document, you should pick *one* format and stick with it. Whichever format you choose, be consistent throughout.

For business writers, consistency isn't just an indi-

vidual issue. Style should be consistent in **all** your company's communications. Everyone who writes anything for your business, even an occasional letter, should follow the same guidelines. If you don't already have one, develop a style sheet — **and use it!**

Is That Write?

- *A little light reading?* The Second Edition of the **Oxford English Dictionary** contains 291,500 entries and more than 59 million words.
- **Electric Pencil**, the first word processing program specifically for microcomputers, debuted in 1976.
- The writings of **William Shakespeare** employ a vocabulary of 29,066 words. (The average person? Less than 6,000.)



Suggestions for an upcoming issue?

Share them!

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SwanShadow Communications.

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Writers Say...

"Fine writing is, next to fine doing, the top thing in the world." — John Keats

Three Things to Do BEFORE You Write

Most of us write the same way we speak in everyday conversation. We sit down at the keyboard and just start typing, without much (if any) forethought.

One advantage writing offers over casual speech is the opportunity to present information in an organized manner, choosing exactly the right words and style. To get the best results from your writing, do these three things before you touch a single key.

1. MAKE A LIST.

Get a pen and some scratch paper and list all the main ideas your document should include. Too often, a letter or

memo goes awry because the writer didn't have a clear objective in mind before the writing started. If you don't know what you're trying to say, it's certain your reader won't figure it out either.

2. PRIORITIZE.

Now that you know what thoughts you want to share with your reader, determine the appropriate order. What's the *most important* point on your list? Put that at the top of a new list. Write the *next most important* thing second, and so on until you have the items from your first list in proper sequence.

Sound too basic? I'm sure

you've read more than one letter or article in which the main subject didn't surface until the third or fourth paragraph. (I have!)

3. OUTLINE.

Every key idea on your priority list will need two or three additional points to flesh out the details. Fill in these sub-headings now.

Next, read through the entire outline and see whether it flows well. Does each point lead logically into the next? Is any information missing?

Be sure to address the "tune-out factor." People have notoriously brief attention

spans. If you attempt to include too much information in one document, the reader may "tune out" before the end. If your outline seems lengthy, decide whether some items should be reserved for a separate document.

Now here's a surprise: *the tough part of your writing is done!* All that remains is to turn your completed outline into the finished product. That task should be a breeze, since you've already done all the "heavy lifting."

The better organized your writing, the clearer it will be.

— Michael Rankins