

On writing: Ami Neiberger-Miller sticks to the tried and true

We've arrived to the last On Writing interview of the year, and this month, I've turned to public relations maven (check out her Twitter handle below) Ami Neiberger-Miller. I met Ami at a PRSA conference a few years back where we both were presenting. Ami truly understands how PR works, and how important writing is to communicating effectively.



Ami Neiberger-Miller

Ami Neiberger-Miller is a public relations strategist specializing in nonprofit organizations, associations and small businesses. She is the founder of Steppingstone, LLC, a communications and public relations agency. She has written educational curricula, a book, feature articles, press releases, infographics, training materials, websites, style guides, policy manuals, and much more.

Find her on Twitter at @AmazingPRMaven

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is the lifeblood of my work in public relations and advocacy. I am constantly writing for news releases, feature articles, emails, strategic plans, social media and much more. Writing is an important skill because of the electronic age in which we operate. Even though people are reading content online, they are often reading written text when they view content online. And written text plays a role in shaping visual media now too – in the form of scripts, graphics and video.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

The craft of writing is very much alive and well today. Writing well matters even more in a digital world. Writing the right words has never been more important than it is today – because attention spans are shrinking. We have to share information much faster now and it's even more challenging to get people to pay attention. There is still space for longer form writing, and with the internet, more opportunities to attract attention and be published. Digital options also offer writing opportunities – because scripts have to be created for videos, and copy has to be written for infographics, flipbooks, and all sorts of other materials.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

To me one of the best skills you can develop in writing is

delivering quality copy quickly. I am typically the person who tries to muscle through to finish the job and reach my word count for the day (and then some). But I've found that I do better if I take breaks when I get stuck or reach a point where copy is just not flowing. Taking a break can be as simple as going for a walk, making some tea, or packing up and working in a new environment. Returning with fresh eyes to your work can make a big difference. Just a short break can refresh your spirit.

I also find that I tend to do better with longer writing projects if I focus on them in the morning. By the end of the day, my creative juices are spent. While I can do "sausage-grinding" types of writing fairly late in the day and into the evening, I find I am typically more focused and creative in the morning. One of my favorite time slots for writing is 4-6:00 a.m. (yes, I know that sounds insane) because it's a time of day that's quiet and distraction free. It's also when my mind is freshest. If I wake up on a mission for a particular project – early morning is the time I want to use to write and pour out the words.

I also think it's important to develop the ability to "free write." Just getting what you want to say out is a triumph, even if it's messy. Far too often, I see writers get paralyzed by wanting to be sure that what they write initially is correct or concise. I may be the kind of person who proofreads restaurant menus for typos, but I can't apply that same eagle eye to newborn writing as it's pouring out. Getting the initial "brain dump" done can be cathartic and help you organize. Editing can come later. Respect the process so you don't lose a great thought or element because you got caught up in the details. Being able to just sit down and "free write" without judging yourself is a really helpful practice to develop.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references?

I am old-fashioned in that I still keep on the shelf near my desk a red Webster's New World Dictionary (that I won for an essay I wrote in sixth grade so it is horribly out of date but beloved). Next to it are a thesaurus and a Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. To me, those are the big three. But I readily admit that I don't take them out very often. I keep a lot of writing books nearby too. I have some favorite online resources, such as Purdue University's Online Writing Lab and Grammar Girl. I also like Ann Wylie's writing workshops (which I take as webinars through my PRSA membership). On Twitter, I search for #writing #quote when I need an inspirational pick me up. I also subscribe to Women on Writing.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

I don't really follow a style guide with my own writing. If I am doing a project for a client, I use whatever style guide they prefer. Increasingly, clients are issuing their own style guides and making variations from the major style guides, as style has become tightly linked to branding. I keep on my shelf the following: the Associated Press Stylebook, the Chicago Manual of Style, the Elements of International English Style and the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

My most cringe-worthy writing gaffe is when I double up a sentence, as in "today we are going to announce that XYZ is today." It's an easy mistake that can be caught by proofreading. For some reason though, it's one of my bad habits.

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

Favorite word: partner

Least favorite word: innovate

It's always good practice to keep tried and true resources at

your fingertips. Like Ami, every writer should have a dictionary and thesaurus nearby. The various style guides are invaluable, and AP and Chicago both have very good online versions by subscription.

Coming up later in December will be a recap of the On Writing advice. Please keep an eye out for it here and/or on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

On writing: Todd Van Hoosear works magic against ambiguity

Even though it's hard to believe we are days away from Halloween (and thus two months away from the end of the year, yikes!), here we are, on the last Thursday of October, which means it's time for the On Writing interview. This month I asked Todd Van Hoosear to share his thoughts. Todd is a professional communicator who focuses on technology and social media. He has spent several semesters teaching students at Boston University all about social media. Read on to learn how Todd uses and hones his writing skills (and you may also learn a new word—I did).



Todd Van Hoosear

Todd Van Hoosear is a public relations professional with 20 years of experience under his belt – most of it agency work, but with stints in IT and product marketing. He recently moved from Boston to Gainesville, Florida, where he is still working remotely for a few EMA Boston clients, but also contemplating his next move.

Twitter: @vanhoosear

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

As a PR pro, I regularly vacillate between stressing the importance of writing and that of selling when it comes to putting the right team together to serve my clients. Public relations is, at its essence, a combination of the art of storytelling and the science of influence. Writing plays into both of these. So do interpersonal skills, organizational skills, and yes, even math!

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji

world?

To quote Blaise Pascal (and Mark Twain and Lord knows how many more authors it's also been attributed to), "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time." Writing is hard. Writing concisely is even harder. Writing good tweets and texts may be the hardest of all. Except maybe for Donald Trump. He's got it down. He makes it look easy when it's not. I'll give him credit: he writes like he speaks, which is a critical skill in today's world. For most people, it takes years to forget all their formal writing training.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

I can't remember where I heard this, but it's stuck with me all these years: good writers are like magicians, and the readers are their audience. The readers want to be tricked. They love the mystery, even when they know it isn't real. Your job as a writer isn't to fill their heads, it's to give them what they need to fill their own heads, and then messing with them just a little. Maybe not quite as much as George RR Martin does, though. That's just cruel. I'm still mourning Ned Stark!

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

I listen to the Grammar Girl podcast religiously. I also read Copyblogger on a regular basis, as it's very relevant to my day-to-day. Finally, I'll go old school and recommend a book: *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert Cialdini. It's my writing bible.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

I am *AP Stylebook* 100%, as are most PR pros I would imagine.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

To quote Faith No More: “What is it?” Ambiguous pronouns drive me absolutely crazy. Who is he? Who are they? People say? Which people, exactly? This was near the top of the list of pet peeves I shared with my students every semester at Boston University.

7. What’s your favorite word and what’s your least favorite?

Thank you for giving me the excuse to use the word epeolatry in a sentence. Poorly, yes; but it’s there. It’s how I feel about words, especially when I find the right ones. I’m not sure I have a least favorite word. They’re all great. But I do have a least favorite non-word: irregardless.

Just so you know, I had to look up epeolatry and it means “a worship of words.” That’s a good one to know! I love Todd’s view that writing concisely is hard. And even more so, that writing well is like magic. Making concise writing look easy is definitely a trick worth learning. On Writing will be back, but not on the last Thursday of November, since that is Thanksgiving Day and I think you’ll have better things to do than read this blog, instead it will publish on Thursday, December 1. Don’t miss it!

On writing: Bonnie Friedman is an advocate

I met Bonnie Friedman at an industry networking event several years ago. We’ve stayed in touch, and a couple of years ago Bonnie told me she was starting to write a book about advocating for someone who is ill and in the hospital. The book was published earlier this year, which prompted me to reach out to Bonnie to ask her about her writing.



Bonnie Friedman

Bonnie Friedman is a seasoned communications and marketing professional with more than 40 years of experience in the Washington, DC, area, with her own consultancy Bonnie Friedman Strategic Communications, LLC. She worked for several federal agencies before starting her own consulting business. Her new book, *Hospital Warrior: How to Get the Best Care for Your Loved One*, combines her passion for health care advocacy with her love of writing.

Twitter: @Bonniecomm

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is the heart of what I do, whether working in government, as a consultant or now as an author. Even as a teenager, I loved to write. For me, it is the most effective

way to express thoughts, share information or convey emotion. Of all the things I do professionally, writing is by far the most important skill in my wheelhouse.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

Yes, I believe it does matter. Whether you want to convey thoughts, information or emotion, you want to do so effectively. Sloppy or inexact language detracts from the message and makes the writer appear lazy or facile. For me, it is extremely satisfying to create a strong, well-crafted statement or document that precisely reflects my point of view.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

When I first started my career, I was told to write the first draft, warts and all, off the top of my head, then go back and improve upon it later. When I feel stuck now, I still follow that advice. It helps me express my initial thoughts and move forward with my work. There is a freedom in that type of writing that frequently breathes life and light into my work, even if I later edit or revise it.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

Depending on what I am writing, the top three are the Associated Press Stylebook, William Strunk's The Elements of Style and Roget's Thesaurus. Even though I frequently use online resources for quick references, these three are still my all-time favorites.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

I don't follow a specific style guide as a matter of course. However, if I am writing for the media, I use the AP

Stylebook; if writing for a government client, I may use the Government Printing Office Style Manual. When I wrote my book, I did not use one particular style guide but referred to various resources when I needed guidance, particularly on how best to convey complicated medical information for lay readers.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

I really dislike the use of "impact" as a verb. It grates on me. As far as I'm concerned, the word "impact" should remain a noun. When used as a verb, it strikes me as affected and pretentious. That said, I recognize that language must be fluid and supple. If it weren't, we might still be speaking Elizabethan English today.

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

There are so many great words; it is hard to choose. One that I like a lot is onomatopoeia; it is wonderfully descriptive and rolls around in the mouth quite deliciously. Likewise, there are several words I dislike viscerally, but none are acceptably repeated in a family-friendly interview. All are mean-spirited, hateful references to individuals or groups. Some are four letters; others are longer. You get the idea.



Hospital Warrior Launch

Given that her book launched this year, I asked Bonnie to share her thoughts about the process of writing a book.

Describe your book:

Hospital Warrior: How to Get the Best Care for Your Loved One is a how-to guide on advocating effectively when someone you love is ill. It is filled with advice, tips and ideas based on my own experience as well interviews with a wide range of medical and legal professionals. It is also a story of love, family and thriving. The website is www.hospitalwarrior.com.

What inspired you to write the book and how long did it take you to write it?

Hospital Warrior draws on my 24 years of advocating for my husband through 14 separate hospitalizations—some routine and some life-threatening. He is now doing well, and I felt I had learned so much over the years that I wanted to share with others. Giving back is an important value in my life. In Judaism, we call it *Tikkun Olam*. This is my way of giving back. The book took about two years to write.

What were your main challenges in writing and publishing a book? How did it compare to the previous writing you have done?

There are many challenges in writing and publishing a book. To start, as an author, you must be clear in your own mind about your audience, your message and your market. While you need to remain flexible about options and opportunities, you can't lose sight of your primary goals. Publishing in today's market is very difficult, especially for new authors. I feel fortunate to have a small, indie publisher who invests in his authors' success.

In some ways, writing this book was similar to other forms of non-fiction. It required research, interviews, fact-checking and discipline. But it required all those things in massive doses—more than I had ever done before. Also important were organizational skills, tenacity and belief in what I was

doing. It might have been easy to give up or change course, especially when finding the right publisher proved difficult. But I was determined, and that paid off for me.

What tips do you have for others thinking of writing a book?

Be clear about your purpose. Know your market. Stay open-minded and creative. At the same time, bring discipline to your work and apply it to your writing. If you are a new author, find a mentor for guidance and support. I have a wonderful friend who is the author of seven books; she shared advice generously when I needed it. Also be sure to have at least a few readers—people whose opinions you respect and who will provide solid, constructive feedback on your work. Then be willing to listen to them!

Like Bonnie says, writing a book is just like writing for marketing and PR, except taken to a “massive” degree. It’s a great achievement, and in Bonnie’s case, one that will provide people with needed information to successfully helped loved ones who are ill and in the hospital.

For more writing insight from a communications professional, check back here on Thursday, October 27 for the next On Writing interview.

On writing: Stu Opperman impacts PR

The most effective public relations professionals understand journalism, and what makes something newsworthy. They also

appreciate that writing clearly and concisely is crucial to communicating with news editors and journalists. This is exactly why Stu Opperman is great at PR. I've known Stu for many years, and have often turned to him to review my writing. I know he will help make it clearer and more concise.



Stu Opperman, APR

An accredited public relations professional, Stu Opperman, APR, owns Impact Players, well-connected firm that positively impacts the business agenda of its clients and contacts. Prior to that, he worked for South Florida-based public relations firms and also had a career as an executive and on-air talent in radio.

Twitter: @stuoopperman

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is the backbone of all that I do, whether it's media relations, crisis communications, content production, relationship, or audience building. Effectively communicating through the written word, in whatever format it takes, is how I most often accomplish internal and external objectives.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

It matters more than ever, since there will be diminishing numbers of people willing or able to write effectively as communication evolves. Those who have embraced or been enabled by the shortcuts will find they need individuals who possess actual writing skills, especially in situations where it is critical to be clear, persuasive, or motivating.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

Pay attention to effective writing and take note of how it's being done, and that's not just in books. There is plenty to be learned in short-form communications – articles, email, blog posts, Twitter, and even billboards.

4. What are your top writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

I'm a big fan of Stephen King's "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft" (where he famously wrote that "the road to Hell is paved with adverbs"). Strunk and White's "Elements of Style" is a classic I continue to turn to on a regular basis.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

For the media work I do, there is only one – the Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

The use of extraneous language that could be replaced by one

word (“due to the fact that” should be “because”).

7. What’s your favorite word and what’s your least favorite?

My favorite word may be “repugnant,” not only because it’s so descriptive but also because the speaker shows his or her distaste in the pronunciation of it. My least favorite are all the ones poor writers litter their copy with, especially in public relations, such as “unique,” “cutting edge,” and “state-of-the-art.” If everything is unique, then nothing is.

I agree with Stu that getting rid of extraneous words (and cliches) would go a long way in giving public relations writing more impact. For more writing insights, check back here on September 29.

On writing: Leslie O’Flahavan gets the point

I definitely wanted to interview Leslie O’Flahavan for this series, and I am so glad she agreed to be featured this month. She’s been teaching writing for years and offers an academic perspective that’s a bit different from marketing/communications folks.



Leslie O'Flahavan,
E-Write

Leslie O'Flahavan is a get-to-the point writer and an experienced, versatile writing instructor. As E-WRITE owner since 1996, Leslie has been writing content and teaching customized writing courses for Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. Leslie can help the most stubborn, inexperienced, or word-phobic employees at your organization improve their writing skills, so they can do their jobs better.

Twitter: @Leslie0

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing IS my work. Because I am a writer myself and a life-long writing teacher, writing plays the largest role possible in my work. Of course, I may be a bit biased, but I think writing is an essential skill. At work, writing is perhaps THE essential communication skill.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

Yes, writing well matters even more in our digital/emoji world. Some people have the idea that “no one really writes or reads anymore.” I don’t agree with this at all. If you text, you are writing. If you Instagram a picture of your brunch, and you add some words to the picture, you are writing. It’s elitist to think that only academic tracts or annual reports are “real” writing. Writing happens every time someone keyboards or scrawls some words. Because we’re writing so much now, doing it well matters a lot.

3. What’s the best advice you’ve received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

How you improve your writing skills depends on what you need to write, the skills you’re struggling with as a writer, and which stage in your career you find yourself. In most cases, the best advice I could give is to find a good example or model of what you’re trying to write before you begin. So, if you have to write a proposal, find an example of a proposal that won the funding. Read it analytically to see how the writer constructed it. If you have to write the “About Us” page for your website, find three or four models of excellent About Us pages and one that’s not very good. Before you begin writing, contrast the bad one to the good ones. Analytical reading will help prepare you to repeat the successful writing strategies you’ve observed.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

I like wiktionary.org, *Letting Go of the Words* by Ginny Redish, and Grammar Girl’s QuickandDirtyTips.com

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

In my work, I often am asked to follow my client’s style

guide, which will sometimes be an in-house guide or a published guide such as Chicago Manual of Style, with some company-specific adaptations. I'm always glad to follow a style guide.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

As a writing teacher, I try not to be peevish or to cringe very much. After all, I'm supposed to be helping people whose writing is cringe-worthy or whose grammar blunders tweak my peeve nerve. I'm not put off by a genuine writing error. These things happen. In fact, I recently misspelled my own name in an email. What puts me off is when people act like fixing the error isn't important. Or when they treat the plain language movement as a fad. That makes me cranky.

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

In 2016, my favorite word is *rapport*. And *pimples* has been my least favorite word for decades, since I had them, back in the late 70s.

I love Leslie's advice on modeling your writing on something that you think is good. Everyone should work on recognizing when something works well and analyzing what makes it so. Check back here on August 25, when I will interview another marketing/communications pro on the importance of writing. And if you need help with your writing, I am happy to lend a pen!

On writing: PR pro Karen

Addis is succinct

This month's On Writing interview (which is being published early because of the upcoming long Fourth of July weekend) is with PR maven Karen Addis. I connected with Karen several years ago through a Restaurant Week "PR ladies' lunch bunch." We share a love of food, and a belief that writing skills are slowly vanishing. Following are her thoughts on writing and its importance.



Karen Addis, APR

Karen Addis, APR, is the senior vice president at Van Eperen, a full-service boutique public relations agency in North Bethesda. Karen leads new business development and manages the agency's national and international health, science and technology accounts.

Twitter: @karenaddis

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

To be an effective communicator, you need to have excellent writing skills. I write every single day for a variety of audiences and formats, ranging from new business proposals and contributed articles to blogs and tweets.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

Absolutely! You need to be able to communicate clearly and succinctly, especially in the digital/text/emoji world where every word and symbol matters.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

Never stop writing and be well read. You also need to have a thorough understanding of the rules of grammar and punctuation and then know when it's okay to break them.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* never goes out of fashion nor does the dictionary or thesaurus.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

Having graduated with a degree in journalism and having spent my entire career working with the media, the *AP Stylebook*, of course!

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

The random use of the comma. No one seems to know how to use commas anymore!

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

Favorite word: It's a toss-up between vacation and chocolate...or Chardonnay! Least favorite word: utilize. I absolutely *loathe* this word! Use is shorter and means the same thing.

Having recently copy edited a document in which I had to add dozens of commas, I agree wholeheartedly with Karen that people don't seem to know how to use the comma. Do you agree or disagree? Share your thoughts in the comments, and be on

the lookout next month for the upcoming On Writing interview.

On writing: Brad Phillips knows training is key

One of the blogs on my must-read list is Mr. Media Training, written by Brad Phillips. I've been reading Brad's insights on media and communications for years. Brad truly is a born blogger, and a great communicator, so naturally, I wanted to him to share this thoughts on writing.



Brad Phillips,
president,
Phillips Media
Relations

Brad Phillips is the president of Phillips Media Relations, a

media and presentation training firm with offices in New York City and Washington, DC. Before founding his firm in 2004, he was a journalist with ABC News and CNN. Phillips is the author of *The Media Training Bible*, an Amazon #1 Public Relations best seller, the new book *101 Ways to Open a Speech*, and the Mr. Media Training blog, the world's most-visited media training website.

Twitter: @MrMediaTraining

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is critical for our firm and touches all parts of our work. Our books help introduce potential clients to our work for a modest cost, and our blog—which posts fresh content at least weekly—does the same for free. Our writing also influences our training sessions; sharply written media interview practice questions often elicit surprising responses, which allow us to discuss better approaches with the client. In terms of its overall importance as a skill, I can't think of many others that are more important. Framing your ideas well—particularly in a business dependent upon the written word—is non-negotiable.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

When I first joined Twitter in 2009, I feared that it would hasten grammar's demise, or at least its relative importance. To my surprise, I found that the challenge of reducing thoughts to a compelling 140 characters tightened my writing in other places, too. Like so many things, writing can both

thrive and suffer in a digital world.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

The best advice may also be the most obvious: the greatest writing lives in the editing. For example, my preference is to frame a blog post in my mind before writing, hammer it out quickly, and then spend the majority of my time cleaning it up, moving pieces around, and tightening the writing.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

I don't have any specific writing resources, but try to pay attention to other bloggers. For some reason, blog posts are the perfect length for me. I've always struggled with longer-form writing, which is why I organized *The Media Training Bible* as 101 two-page lessons rather than, say, eight main chapters containing 25 pages each.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

I've never felt a compelling need to marry myself to a single style guide; even the editor for my books relied on Chicago style but modified it to meet our needs. This is one of those areas in which it's helpful to know the rules in order to know how and when to break them. More important than stringent rules to me is making sure my choices are grammatically defensible.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

My biggest pet peeve is when writers include unnecessary words. A few extraneous phrases in an effort to achieve a friendlier tone is one thing. But when it's pervasive throughout someone's writing, I click away from their post.

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

My favorite word is “yes,” not when offered in an unthinking or overly compliant way, but when someone agrees to take on a challenge with determination and enthusiasm. My least favorite is “like” when used as verbal filler.

Do you agree with Brad editing is the most important part in producing top-notch writing? I know I do! Share your thoughts on writing in the comments, and be sure to check this space next month when another communications pro will share his or her thoughts on writing.

Have a meaningful and relaxing Memorial Day weekend: Unofficial summer is finally here!

On writing: For Jay Morris, writing is a journey

We’ve reached the fourth edition of *On Writing*, and this time, I asked Jay Morris to share his insights. Jay, who runs his own PR consultancy, has an extensive writing background as a journalist and editor. He also writes one of my favorite blogs, *The Wayward Journey*.



Jay Morris, CEO, Jay
Morris
Communications, LLC

Jay Morris began his career as a newspaper reporter and editor before moving to the Washington area to practice public relations and marketing at several DC-based trade associations. An award-winning communicator, he now manages his own firm, Jay Morris Communications, LLC, where he helps clients increase their visibility in the marketplace, on Capitol Hill and with members, consumers and stakeholders. He also blogs at The Wayward Journey.

Twitter: @JayMorCom

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Writing is by far the most important “deliverable” I provide my clients. My projects often begin with a strategic communications assessment, but I almost always end up writing

something for the client. It could be web content, a blog post, a press release or a speech—some type of written communication that meets a need and tells the client's story.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

Writing does matter, and I think it matters even more in a world where there is a way too much mediocre content. If you want to distinguish yourself—if you really want to stand out—you need to be able to communicate effectively. Whether it's a tweet or a long-form journal article, put some effort into writing it well. Readers will take notice and reward you for it.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

An English professor once wrote on one of my papers, "You seem to understand the concepts, but your writing is unpracticed." That was a bruise to my ego, but I took what he said to heart and worked hard at improving my writing. I practiced writing clearly and concisely. My advice to anyone who wants to write would be the same: practice, practice, practice! Just as musicians and athletes practice for hours each day, writers need to flex their creative muscles, too. Look for ways to stretch your skills, try new forms and experiment with your style and voice. Blogging and journaling are two excellent ways of doing that.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

Strunk & White's "The Elements of Style," John Warriner's "English Grammar and Composition" and Gerald Levin's "Prose Models" are timeless references worth getting. A good way to perfect your craft is to study authors you admire. Early on, I read nonfiction by John McPhee, Tom Wolfe and Garry Wills, and I read a lot of short story collections. Taking classes or

joining a writers group helps, too.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

I've always followed the AP Stylebook. It goes back to my journalism days when I worked on a newspaper, then later on magazines and newsletters. Regardless of the style guide, I lean towards rules that favor simplicity and eliminating the unnecessary. For example, I'm not a big fan of the Oxford comma. I'm also a stickler for consistency. Once you choose a style rule, you should apply it consistently throughout your work.

6. What's your top-most cringe-worthy-writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

Dangling participles and misplaced modifiers. I often see these in poorly written marketing pitches (and it does make me cringe). The offending sentence usually goes something like this: "As a communications professional who is constantly asked to do more with less, Acme Media understands how important it is for you to spend your PR dollars wisely." Needless to say, Acme Media is not a communications professional!

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

I think the words "intentional," "mindful" and "purposeful" have become overused. It's a shame because I do like the idea of being purposeful in my life and work. Probably my favorite words are the "the other day." I always seem to start my blog posts with, "The other day, I..." It's a good way to begin a story. My advice is to choose words that help your storytelling, which, after all, is what writing is about.

How do you stretch your writing skills? Do you journal and blog like Jay Morris? Let me know your thoughts in the comments and watch this blog next month for more thoughts on writing.

On writing: Julie Mullen buzzes about PR

This month, for the third edition of On Writing, I reached out to Julie Mullen, who has had a long and very effective career in public relations. Julie has not only worked in the trenches of the PR world, but now, as a communications agency owner, directs communications strategy, and hires and manages staff.



Julie Mullen Partner/Co-Founder The Buzz Agency

Julie Mullen is co-founder and partner of one of South Florida's largest communications firms, The Buzz Agency, based in Delray Beach. The firm specializes in public relations, social media, community outreach, and event management. A proud Air Force brat, Julie has lived in 10 states and one foreign country. Her PR career includes director-level positions in broadcast and print media, as well as in agency, not-for-profit and corporate sectors.

Organization: The Buzz Agency

Twitter: @juliemmullen

1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

At this point in my career, I spend much more time editing than writing. I do enjoy giving “track changes” a hearty workout. Most of the writing I do currently is geared towards new business development (e.g., proposals, RFP’s). Is it important? Absolutely. Our livelihood depends on it. Who wants to hire a communications firm that can’t craft an interesting message? Or spell?”

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

There are many platforms our industry uses to create compelling messages. Press release writing is obviously much different than creating content for a Tweet. But regardless of *what* you are writing, it’s critical to know *how* tell the story in an effective way. Additionally, I will not even consider an applicant whose writing skills are sub-par. From their initial introductory email, to their resume, to their writing samples, and if we give them a writing project, we look at the compilation of it all before we even begin to take the next steps. I don’t want recent college graduates mistaking their for they’re, for example.

3. What’s the best advice you’ve received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

Read, read, read. If you’re a publicist, read content that is relevant to your client – newspapers, magazines, industry trades, etc. Get to know what kind of information those outlets require and what style of writing they tend to use,

then format your written pitches, releases, presentations accordingly.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

AP Stylebook has always been my go-to source. I also use industry sources like PR Daily or PRWeb.com. But the best source I have is an editor I know, who, I believe, is the best in the business.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

Yes, AP Stylebook is like the Bible of proper grammar and punctuation for journalists, so if it's good enough for them, it certainly is good enough for me!

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

Improper use of homophones, such as their/there/they're; affect/effect; than/then. It drives me NUTS!

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

My least favorite has to be any form of hyperbole, such as AMAZING! SPECTACULAR! MOUTH-WATERING! Wow, it's hard to pick a favorite word, but contenders include serendipity, oxymoron, and love.

Do you agree with Julie that your livelihood in public relations depends on being able to write well? Share your thoughts in the comments. And be sure to check this space on the last Thursday of every month for more thoughts on writing.

On writing: Chuck Tanowitz thinks like a journalist

This month, I asked Chuck Tanowitz to give me his thoughts on writing. He studied journalism, and later worked in radio and television news. From there, he made the transition to public relations. Throughout his communications career, Chuck has relied on having strong writing skills and a sharp mind, as you will read in his answers below.



Chuck Tanowitz

Name: Chuck Tanowitz

Twitter: @ctanowitz

Chuck Tanowitz is a content, marketing and PR professional living in the Boston area. His written pieces have appeared under his name and under that of his clients, in everything from the *New York Times* to the deepest trade technology publications.

1.What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?

Public relations relies on writing. Pitching media requires it, but so does social engagement and the by-lined articles that clients want us to write all the time.

2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?

It matters now more than ever. Writing well is not just about typing in a few words, it's about communicating. Even if you're using a few emojis in your texting, your job as a communicator is to convey a thought, emotion or opinion using the tools at your disposal that are appropriate of the medium of choice. If that medium is text and the emoji helps convey some crucial aspect of that thought, then go ahead and use it. But the words remain necessary and the shortened length mean that the editing skills honed over a lifetime are all that much more important.

3. What's the best advice you've received or would give on how to improve writing skills?

Good writing is good editing.

4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?

It sounds silly, but my top writing resource remains Google. It helps me with spelling, grammar, usage and fact checking. You can't trust everything, but mostly it's a solid resource. My second-favorite is my social network of fellow writers. Third is the AP Stylebook.

5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?

Being a former journalist, I tend to follow AP Style. An old

employer of mine hated the Oxford comma, and now I continue to struggle with it.

6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?

I hate passive writing. Not that I hate it in all circumstances, but I find a lot of young writers fall back on it to hide that they're actually missing information and facts. We used to do that in TV when we would say "a man was shot" when we lacked information about who fired the gun. TV got around some of that by eliminating verbs altogether, with lines such as "gunshots today leave one dead and two injured." But if writers simply looked for the verb "to be" and cut it back, they'd find their writing greatly improved.

7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?

No one word is better or worse than another, the context matters most.

What resonates for you? Let me know in the comments. And be on the lookout the last Thursday of every month for On Writing, where professionals share their thoughts on one of the most important communications skills.