

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.

Use email, don't abuse it

If you're like me, you've been bombarded by email for the past several days. First, it was all about Black Friday deals. Then it was the Cyber Monday deals. And today, it's about Giving Tuesday.

Now, I am not against getting deals or giving to good causes. And I think using email marketing is very effective given that people generally opt-in, and are willing to receive your stuff.

But I am against email marketing *abuse*.

Because it's an absolute abuse of your list to send too many emails in too short a time span. It overwhelms people.

@DBMC my inbox is vomiting. It's bad

– Jan-Michael Sacharko (@JanMichaelDC) November 29, 2016

Enough said.

The bottom line with abusing your email marketing privileges is that it will be counterproductive. Too much email (especially from the same sender) makes people hit delete. And some may even unsubscribe.

Use email wisely. Don't abuse it or your list's good faith.

Please, don't tell me more about you

Of books and how people just want to talk about themselves

Last night I attended my first meeting of a book group. Around the table were a dozen women. One lady, who had also never attended the group, decided she would take the reins and introduce herself. And so she did—telling us her story, her children's stories and her grand kid's stories.

As we went around the table, some women shared their name, occupation and where they live, while some women went into great autobiographical detail, even into the TMI (too much information) territory. We heard about what high school they attended, family secrets, divorce, how their ancestors got to America, angst about the kids (there was a lot of emphasis on their children), and very little about their reading or book interests.

But, let's get back to me

When we finally got around to discussing the book, one (self-absorbed) woman kept bringing it back to her experiences, her life, her likes, her dislikes. Everything someone else said

made her want to share something irrelevant to the book and only relevant to herself. At one point, she digressed into discussing whether her second son (who is probably in his early 30s) had attachment issues because he spent a few weeks in the NICU after being born prematurely. (Yes, this really happened.)

I began to think I had mistakenly attended a group therapy session.

Are you being social?

Imagine that instead of a book group, this was Twitter or Facebook. Among the stuff in your feed is a bunch of self-promoting, self-analyzing, self-absorbed stuff. Do you pay attention? I bet you don't. Because when you are in a social setting, like a book group or social media, you are there to share and discuss and *interact*. It is a multi-sided conversation—not a one-sided discourse.

Now, take a look at your marketing materials. How much is about how great you are, and how many awards you've won? How much shows you understand and empathize with your readers (customers, donors, etc.)? If the balance is tipped in your favor instead of your reader, then you are talking way too much about yourself.

Who cares?

To be a more successful communicator (or book group participant), start listening more and talking less. And when you do talk, make sure you aren't being self-absorbed.

Here's the thing: Nobody cares as much about you as you do.

Always start with the reader in mind



Photo by Kaboompics.com

It seems obvious that you should always write your marketing and communications materials with your readers in mind. After all, if you are trying to communicate with them, you have to understand what they need to know.

And yet, how many times have you received a letter that doesn't say anything? Or an email that lacks crucial information? How many times have you had to call up a company because you didn't understand something it sent you? I bet you've had many a moment like this, which left you frustrated.

Missing information

I had such a moment last week. I had signed up for an editing workshop from the American Copy Editors Society (ACES) being given on November 5 in Washington, DC. Here's the email I received a few days before the event (note that I blocked out the names of presenters and a phone number for privacy):

This message is to confirm that you are registered for the American Copy Editors Society (ACES) Boot Camp from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. this Saturday, Nov. 5, at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The workshop will take place in the Fungler Hall auditorium, room 103, located on the Foggy Bottom campus.

Lunch will be provided by the local chapter of ACES.

Presenters XX, XX and XX look forward to welcoming you on Saturday.

If you have any questions or find yourself lost on Nov. 5, please feel free to call 571-xxx-xxxx for assistance.

Notice anything missing from this email? How about the address for the building? Or how about directions and parking information (or links to those)? How about an agenda and/or schedule for the day? Is there any information about what you need to bring with you?

Trying again

The next day, ACES sent another email, regarding parking information. It is basically the same email as before, except for the addition of parking and Metro information, which I bolded for you to see more clearly.

We look forward to seeing you at the American Copy Editors Society (ACES) Boot Camp from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. tomorrow at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The workshop will take place in the Fungler Hall auditorium, room 103, located on the Foggy Bottom campus.

Lunch will be provided by the local chapter of ACES.

Parking

The closest garage to Fungler Hall is the University Parking Garage/G Street Garage, located at 2028 G Street, NW Washington, DC 20052. There is access from both 20th Street and 21st Street between F and G Streets. The self-service garage is open 24/7, accepting MasterCard, Visa and American Express for payments (no cash). The full day rate is \$12.

The closest Metro stop is Foggy Bottom-GWU, with service on the Blue, Orange and Silver lines.

If you find yourself lost on Nov. 5, please feel free to call 571-XXX-XXXX for assistance.

This attempt was a better than the prior email, but still, no address for Fungler Hall. It's as if ACES thinks that everyone is intimately familiar with GW's Foggy Bottom Campus. For those of you who aren't in the DC area, GW's campus is a city campus. Buildings have street addresses—they are not in quads as in traditional colleges.

I looked up Fungler Hall on Google, but I forgot to note the address, and when I got to the parking garage on Saturday, I didn't know where to go. I looked it up on my phone and the address I got did not correspond to the building. I called the number on the email, but there was no response. I was able to get directions from a student I saw on the street, and I then got to the workshop several minutes late.

How helpful are you being to your reader?

If ACES had started with the reader's needs in mind when writing this email, it would have realized that providing an address and links to maps and directions would have helped recipients of this email.

It's about the 5 Ws

When you write a press release, you should think like a journalist and answer the five Ws: what, why, where, who and when. You should also answer the how. This advice is also

applicable to most any communications material you create.

If you need help creating effective communications materials, contact me!

Why you are failing to communicate on social media

A few weeks ago an acquaintance was coming to town from the West Coast. She posted on Facebook (along with about another five posts the same day) that she was free on a given afternoon and if people wanted to see her, to please message her. Now, I hadn't seen this person in a couple of years, and since I was free on the afternoon she mentioned, I would have liked to get together. But, I hadn't seen her post until it was too late. By the time I messaged her, she had already made other plans since she said that nobody responded to her post.

In my opinion, she failed to communicate effectively. There are several potential reasons why.

Why #1: Not understanding how social media works.

Chances are good that only a few people in your network will see what you post. First, social media is a continual flow of information from many sources. Nowhere is this more obvious than on Twitter, which shows you everything from everybody in real time. If you missed it, you missed it (unless someone re-tweeted it and it gained traction). And to make that more complicated, the different networks use algorithms to show you what the network thinks you want to see. On Facebook, the default algorithm is set to show "top posts," which are the

posts that more people have “liked.” LinkedIn has a similar algorithm, also showing what it deems are “top” posts.

Additionally, social media provides controls for people to “hide” or “mute” certain users. It’s quite possible you’ve been hidden and thus your posts won’t be seen at all.

In order to work around social media’s constraints, you have to provide relevant content that gets liked and shared, and therefore becomes “top” content.

Why# 2: Not using the right channel for your message and audience.

In this case, this woman was trying to communicate with a handful of her Facebook friends (the ones who live in this area). She may have had better luck by using a more targeted approach. For example, she could have used Facebook messenger to talk directly to those people. Or she could have (gasp) emailed or texted the people she wanted to see.

Different channels and media have different audiences. You probably wouldn’t put an announcement that you are giving away your kittens on LinkedIn, but you might post on Facebook. LinkedIn is about business opportunities, and Facebook is more personal. You could also try sharing a picture on Instagram of those cute kitties looking for a home.

You have to choose the right channel to make sure your message reaches the right (more receptive) audience.

Why #3: Forgetting that social media is only one communications channel.

If you were trying to, say, promote a new product, chances are good you would use a mix of channels to reach different target audiences. You would also adjust your messaging accordingly. You might choose to use an email campaign. Or you could do media outreach. Or you could run some advertising, including Google

Ads. Or you could try promotional give-aways. Or sponsorships. You get my drift.

For social media to work, it can't be your only communication channel. It has to be part of a larger communication plan. Social media is just that—a medium that has social aspects that help amplify your message. It is not a substitute for other media.

You want to get your message to the right people at the right time.

For any communication plan to be effective in this way, you have to use a mix of media depending on who you are trying to reach and when. You need to understand each medium, and what type of audience responds best to that channel. And you will need to adjust your messaging (e.g., length, complexity, benefits you highlight, etc.) for each medium.

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: @vanhosear

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!

Why I share political views on Twitter but not on

LinkedIn

Lately, I have seen a couple of opinion pieces written by marketing people that state you should never, ever share your political opinion, at the risk of losing clients and alienating your network.

I don't agree. I think it depends on several factors and there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. You will need to consider at least two issues:

1. Are you an employee or are you representing yourself? Are you sharing a political opinion for a company or for yourself?
2. Where you are sharing your views?

Let's start with the where.

I don't think you should ever share political views on LinkedIn, no matter if you are a company, individual or small business owner. But you should (in certain cases) on Twitter.

LinkedIn is a professional, business-oriented social network. Twitter is not.

People go to LinkedIn specifically to network and to research your professional background. They do not go to LinkedIn to find out about your views on Hillary Clinton.

Twitter is real-time conversation. LinkedIn is more static.

I know that you aren't supposed to talk about politics or religion in polite company. But Twitter is not polite company. It's a rapid-fire issue-of-the-minute national and international conversation. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is not that. It's a staid, share your credentials and network sort of place.

There are millions of tweets every hour. On LinkedIn, your

network probably shares a few updates a day.

People go to Twitter to share their opinion and see what others think.

During the presidential debates it was pretty easy to see who doesn't live in the United States and who uses automated tweets. Those were the folks who didn't weigh in on the Clinton-Trump stand-off and/or tweeted about non-political matters.

But it matters who you are, too.

On social media, not everyone is treated the same.

If you are tweeting as yourself and you are not claiming a company or organization in your Twitter profile, then you should say what you want.

If you are tweeting in name of the organization, then you need to be very careful what you say.

If you are representing a consumer-oriented organization (like a restaurant or manufacturer), then you should probably keep quiet. People do not generally follow a product or brand to see what political views it has.

If you work for an organization that works in a political or advocacy space, then you must make your views known. People follow political/advocacy accounts precisely because of a specific viewpoint.

If you are like me, an individual who owns her own business, then you should make a decision that best fits you. I choose to share my political views on Twitter, not on LinkedIn. Be aware that not all your current or potential clients will share your views, and may choose not to do business with you because of those views. On the other hand, some people will share your viewpoint and will choose to interact with you precisely because of that view.

We are human

In the end, we must remember that on social media, we are not automatons, we are human beings. Sometimes we respond viscerally and in the moment. For example, when people found out about the horrible massacre at Newtown, they shared their horror and some also shared their views on guns.

Human beings have ideas, likes, dislikes and of course, political opinions. While political opinions can incite strong responses, your likes and dislikes can generate controversy too.

You win some, and you lose some

Ultimately, you will need to accept that sharing your opinions (political and otherwise) may create a backlash, or it could result in support. Your opinions can lose you followers, but they may also gain you a following.

What do you think? Do you share your political views? What is the main reason you do or do not? Let me know in the comments.

P.S. If you care about my political views, follow me on Twitter at @DBMC.

If a tree falls...

You've all heard that famous question: if a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a

sound?

Let's change that question: if you are telling a story, but nobody can hear you, are you still communicating?

I was considering this second question during Rosh Hashana services this week. The synagogue I was attending does not have microphones, and the rabbi there is not good at projecting his voice. As he was giving his sermon, I was having a hard time hearing what he was saying. I am sure the further back in the synagogue that people were sitting, the less they could hear.

If you couldn't hear the rabbi, then you would not know what he said, and therefore, it was like he never gave a sermon at all. So, was this rabbi communicating? In short, he wasn't.

In essence, **communication is the exchange of information**. If you can't hear the information being shared, then you do not know what that information is, therefore information is not being exchanged.

The rabbi may have had some great insights or inspirational messages to share, but if nobody heard them, then he failed to enlighten or inspire his congregation.

Make sure they can hear

The takeaway from my Rosh Hashana experience is simple: It's not enough to have good information to share, you have to make sure your intended audience can receive that information.

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 help 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.

Two big problems muddling your message

When I do any copy editing and/or proofreading, I always come across two problems: wordiness and punctuation mistakes. These problems affect how clear your writing is and muddle your message. That's because when readers have to read overlong, poorly punctuated sentences, filled with unnecessary words, they don't understand what you are trying to say.

Problem #1: Wordiness

Wordiness is using too many words to say what you mean.

How do you fix this problem?

- **Eliminate extra words and phrases**

When I was in grad school, one of my professors (the wonderful Jack Falla), had us write a press release, and then go back and eliminate ten words. The problem with this approach is that wordy people often think they need all the words they have written. They don't.

Today's Nonprofit Marketing Guide has a great post listing wordy phrases and their much more succinct alternatives. Read it [here](#).

- **Ask yourself if you are being redundant**

Phrases such as "basic fundamentals" are redundant.

- **Use active voice**

Active voice uses fewer words than passive voice. It's more direct.

Problem #2: Punctuation mistakes

Punctuation is a tool to make your sentences work better. You use a period to end a sentence and a comma to insert a pause. You use a colon to indicate something is following and a semicolon to separate two big ideas in one sentence. We also use parentheses to add extra information to a sentence and em dashes to set off words or phrases.

How do you fix this problem?

- **Learn how to use the comma properly**

The comma seems to trip lots of people up. Either they use it too much or not enough. And then there's the whole serial or Oxford comma debate. In any case, Grammar Book has some useful rules for comma usage.

- **Learn when to use the em dash**

Em dashes are not to be confused with the shorter en dashes and the even shorter dashes or hyphens. The Punctuation Guide has a good explanation of how to use em dashes.

- **Watch out for improper capitalization and apostrophes**

It's become epidemic lately – people are using capitalization to indicate importance. That's not how it works. Use caps at the beginning of a sentence, and to indicate proper names. The president may be important, but unless you are expressly referring to President Barack Obama, there's no need to capitalize the word alone.

Apostrophes are meant to convey possession. They do not make a word plural. Hamilton University calls the misuse of the apostrophe a deadly sin of writing. Check it out.

To be clear, be concise

Sometimes people are wordy because they don't have anything to say. That's a lack of message. No amount of removing redundancies will fix it. However, if you've written something and you are not sure whether it's communicating what you want it to say, make sure to eliminate wordiness and correct your punctuation. Chances are that being more concise (and precise with your punctuation) will clarify whatever it is you are trying to say.

If you need some help eliminating wordiness, fixing punctuation, and making your writing clearer, contact me!