

The Washington Post needs copy editors

It seems a daily occurrence at the Washington Post: a headline typo here, and a factual error there. Sometimes, I have had to read a sentence several times to even start understanding it. This is because the Washington Post has few (if any) copy editors. I suspect reporters are being asked to edit their own work, which is never a good idea, especially with quick turnarounds. You can edit your own work, if you can look at it with “fresh eyes” after a day or so. In the fast-paced, 24/7 news cycle, there is little time to look at writing with fresh eyes.

I could not believe the mistake I found in an article in today's Post. It's about the Chesapeake Crab & Beer Festival, which took place on Saturday at National Harbor in Maryland. The story appeared in the Post's Local Living section and had the headline “All smiles on a crab-filled festival day in Inner Harbor.”

The Inner Harbor is in Baltimore and the event took place at National Harbor. Then, in the body of the article, the writer says the event took place in Baltimore, except it didn't. See for yourself here:

Washington Post article

Copy editors don't just catch grammatical mistakes and typos, they check for accuracy too. Clearly, this article was not checked at all. A cursory search (and plain common sense) would have told anyone reading this article that the event took place at National Harbor and not in Baltimore.

Shame on the Washington Post! These mistakes make the newspaper look sloppy and careless, and makes me question the accuracy of all reporting.

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.

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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.

What does that mean?

Yesterday, after Pilates class, I was chatting with another student for a couple minutes as we gathered our stuff. In the background, I heard a bell ringing. I noticed it but didn't

know what it meant. We kept on chatting. The bell rang again. Again, no idea what it was. Then, one of the instructors tapped me on the shoulder and said we were being too loud, to please leave, and that the bell means be quiet. I turned to her, and after apologizing (#sorrynotsorry), told her that I had absolutely no idea what her ringing bell meant. Neither did the other student. We went outside, feeling a bit peeved.

In my experience, a ringing bell indicates something is starting or ending. In yoga classes, teachers often ring a bell to indicate final relaxation is over. I do not associate a ringing bell with the need to be quiet.

I've been going to this Pilates studio for several weeks. Not once has my instructor ever rung a bell, even when there have been other people chatting. There's no sign indicating that you need to be quiet or that a bell will be rung if you're not. There's nothing about it on the studio website. In fact, this is the only instruction regarding behavior:

Protocol

Clients must sign-in at the Front Desk upon arrival. Please remove your shoes and silence your cell phone upon entering the studio. Pets are not allowed. For your safety, clients who arrive more than 10 minutes late to a group class will not be permitted to join the class.

This studio is quite small and there's no separate waiting area. It's one big room. If noise is a problem (and mind you, Pilates, unlike yoga, lacks a meditative/spiritual aspect), you need to remind students to be quiet. You could put up a sign saying something like: please, no talking or cell phone use (or whatever else).

We all understand what this means, right?:



That's because some symbols/signals are universal.

Here's the thing: if you are going to use a symbol or signal that is not universally understood to mean what you intend it to, you will have to define it and educate people about what it means.

If you want to communicate clearly, you cannot make assumptions. You'll have to keep in mind that other people have different experiences and understanding than you.

How to undermine your credibility

An important message for Deborah

That was the exact subject line of an email I got this morning from AT&T.

Since I have my cell phone service through AT&T, and the email clearly was *designed* to sound official, and I thought it was service-related news about my usage or bill. But no, it wasn't about my cell phone service at all. Instead, the email was an advertisement for a "flash sale" on AT&T's home security services.

Let's review: A company with which I have an established (and may I add, quite long) customer relationship sends me an email that claims it's important. The subject line is personalized, but the purpose of the email is to sell me other, *unrelated* services.

A case of misdirection

In other words, the subject line of this email was misleading. The email was neither important nor specifically for me. It was a promotion that required a subject line that would hook me into opening it.

Entering the realm of unintended consequences

Today's misleading email from AT&T had two unintended consequences:

- it eroded my trust in AT&T, undermining the company's credibility
- it caused me to unsubscribe from their promotional emails (all of them)

Raise interest but not at the expense of your credibility

Yes, companies and organizations need to have email subject lines that will raise interest and make people open the email. That's the purpose of email marketing after all. But when the subject lines are misleading—designed specifically as click-bait—the organization's credibility takes a hit. No longer will readers believe emails with words such as important, or urgent. Down the road, this can have negative consequences.

Bottom line

Cultivate your credibility, even at the expense of potential sales. Once you've destroyed your credibility, you will have a very hard time getting it back.

Is sharing part of your content strategy?

I can't believe that in mid-2016 I am still complaining about this, but it happened to me again just this morning. I came across an interesting blog post about—get this—content strategy, and it had NO SHARING BUTTONS. None. Zilch. There was no easy way to share this content out short of me cutting and pasting the URL or using an extension such as Buffer (as Jonathan Rick helpfully pointed out on Twitter).

Think about the user

Here's the thing, content strategy is supposed to keep the "user experience" (or UX) in mind. That means, that you, the content strategist or website/blog owner, need to think about your site's visitors: How do they use your site? What do they need to do on your site? What do they want to learn about you? How can you make the process easy and intuitive *for them*?

It's about being social

Sharing buttons have been around for years. There are dozens of plugins that allow this functionality in WordPress, and I am sure in any other blogging platform. Not having sharing buttons means you do not want your content to be shared. Which

means you do not understand the purpose of content or the social aspect of social media (blogs are social media).

It's not difficult: **Your content strategy needs to include an easy way to share content.** And by the way, sharing content also includes being able to email it or print it (don't get me started on how many recipe sites don't have this functionality).

Make sure it works

But it's not enough to stick a sharing plugin on your blog or website and call it a day. You have to check that it actually works. And that it is providing the right information. And that it is easy to find and use. (Just yesterday, I came across another blog post that I wanted to share, and it did have a sharing button, microscopic, but there, and guess what, it didn't work.)

You will find sharing (and printing) buttons at the bottom of this post. Please consider sharing this so that we can get all the non-sharers on board.

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!

It is about feelings

There's a quotation floating out there that has been often attributed to Maya Angelou, but which may have other sources.

It's this:

They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.

If you are working in communications, especially marketing communications, you should take that quote to heart. Perhaps, even print it and post it where you always can see it.

As a communicator, your job is to elicit *positive feelings* from your audience. Perhaps you want them to buy something, donate money, advocate or like your company. If they feel positively toward you or your organization, they are more likely to take the action you want them to. On the other hand, if they feel negatively toward you, they are less likely to want anything to do with you.

Organizations that “get” it are the ones that have the more engaged, loyal supporters. Organizations that don't are the ones that ignore customers or that communicate with them in ways that are not customer-friendly.

So remember to take your customer/supporter/donor's feelings into consideration. Think about how you want your audience to feel the next time you write an email or website copy or anything else. If you focus on that, I can promise you will have better results.

Two common marketing #fails

(and pet peeves)

When you see the same mistake done over and over again, you have to wonder how people manage to keep jobs or their business afloat.

Marketing fail #1: Not sending emails from an organizational address

If you get an email, as I did this morning, from a certain Ellyn Fisher, whom I have never met, would you open it? I bet, like I did, that if you did, you would hesitate to open it if not delete it completely. However, I get so many emails from individuals in organizations, that I decided to open it up and it turned out to be from the Ad Council. So the email was legitimate, but this organization does not seem to understand how email appears in your inbox and why sending it from a staffer's email address is a bad idea.

The best practice would be to send the email from the name of the organization. This is easily done in your email sending options, especially when you are using a email provider such a Constant Contact or MailChimp.

The second-best practice is to use an individual's name followed by the organization's name. For example, I get emails from Janine Wampler, ACES Communications. Those always come from the same individual, and they identify the organization so I know that it's OK to open.

If you don't understand that we are living in an age where each of us gets hundreds of emails a day, we have limited attention spans, and we have a fear of being cyber attacked, you should not be doing any email communication.

Marketing #fail #2: Not having a complete website (or not having one at all)

Last Friday, I was meeting some friends for dinner. There's a new place that I had heard about and I did some searches to see if I could find a menu. The only thing available was a one page website with absolutely no useful information and a Facebook page, with even less useful information. We did end up meeting at this restaurant. We got there and were asked if we had reservations. Since we did not (by the way, it was 6:30 p.m. and the place was not full), the hostess told us our only option was to eat outside on the patio. Normally that would have been fine, but it was abnormally hot and humid and the patio did not even have ceiling fans. We took a look at the menu, which remember, was not available anywhere online, and we were very underwhelmed. The offerings did not make us want to brave the heat and we decided to go elsewhere. A couple showed up right after us and they too were offered the patio, and they also left.

A restaurant website should include all the information that diners need. This includes: hours, reservation policy, menu, special considerations (for example, in this case, the website could indicate diners without a reservation would be seated in the outdoor patio).

These days, there is no excuse for not having a working, attractive website. There are so many providers of build-it-yourself websites, from Wix to Squarespace. And there are providers that specialize in industries, such as restaurants.

What are marketing fails that you see over and over? Share them in the comments.

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.

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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.

Poor grammar is poor communication part 3

Grammar matters

This is a lawn sign that has appeared around my neighborhood:



Lawn sign

I believe what they meant to say was "No Townhouses on Historic Chestnut Lodge." Or maybe they meant to say "Not More Townhouses on Historic Chestnut Lodge," which would still be awkward. I am not sure. Perhaps the people behind this campaign were not sure either. But what I do know is that this sign is wrong.

It's spelled A-L-A-N

U.K's Vision Express had a major typo, transposing the L and A, in a letter to a customer. It was quite insulting. You have to read this Daily Mail article to see what I mean, but suffice it to say, a proofreader would have saved the day. (Thanks to Leslie O'Flahavan for sharing the article on her company's Facebook feed.)

Copy edit your work, or at least, do some proofreading

Having poor grammar, or a typo (or two or three) in your marketing materials is poor communication. Your message will be muddled and any mistakes will distract from what you are trying to say.

Typos and grammatical mistakes are fixable, and if you don't catch them in time, they can be costly. There is a solution and that is to copy edit *and* proofread your written materials.

Watch this space next week for the next On Writing interview, with a pro who certainly knows that grammar and spelling matter.