

Storytelling versus writing

I am a huge Scandi-noir fiction fan. Recently, I was reading (yet again) a mystery by an Icelandic author (in translation, of course). I noticed the writing was a bit stilted. Some of the phrases didn't sound right, and I can only imagine this was a translation/translator issue. Translating is hard work. You need to understand the language, obviously. And you also need to understand author's tone and intent so you can choose the best word or phrase when many will do. This is especially true with colloquial expressions that don't translate directly. And I am sure these colloquialisms, and some peculiarities of Icelandic culture didn't quite make it in the translation. And yet there was a blurb on the book jacket by an American crime author, praising the Icelandic author, saying she was a "magnificent writer." I doubt that the American read the work in the original Icelandic, so she had no way to judge the writing. What she was judging, and rightly so, was the *storytelling*.

Storytelling versus writing

Good storytelling is not the same as good writing, and neither is good writing also good storytelling. Writing and storytelling are two different, albeit related, skills.

Good storytelling pulls you in. It makes you want to know more.

Good writing is about knowing how to use language and its mechanics to communicate ideas clearly.

Can you have one without the other? Yes, you can. And I would argue that the best stories are also the best written.



Photo by Yaroslav Shuraev from Pexels

Think about your favorite book

If you've ever read a book with an intriguing plot, but with utilitarian writing, you understand that storytelling is a skill separate from writing. Books written by good storytellers who are mediocre writers are readable because you are interested in the story and you want to know more.

If you've ever read a book that's so well written, where the words sing, but there is no discernible plot or the story being told is boring, chances are you stopped reading or read the book super slowly. Beautiful writing alone does not make a readable book.

And I would bet that your favorite books, the ones you recommend or perhaps even re-read, are the ones that have a great story and are well written.

Here's the bottom line for content writers

For those of us who write any sort of content, focusing on *what* we are trying to say should come first. Then, we should think about *how* to say it. If we get both these elements—storytelling and writing—done right, we'll create content worth reading.

Who needs grammar?

Twitter just reminded me that today is National Grammar Day so I shelved what I was going to write (something about nonprofit communications, which I will post later on in the month) so that I could mark this momentous occasion and pay tribute to

the power of grammar.

Proper grammar (and punctuation, usage and spelling) makes both written and spoken communication better and easier to understand. Without it, we are left wondering what was meant exactly. After all, if you're trying to make your point, you wouldn't want to mess it up by using the wrong possessive or contraction. And it would affect your writing if you didn't know the effect of your word choice.

Now, I am no grammar queen. That would be Grammar Girl. I recommend buying (and reading too) her very useful reference book: Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing.

Another favorite reference is Eats Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation by Lynne Truss.

You really need to have at least one grammar book on your shelves or in your electronic library.

Who needs grammar? We all do! Oh, and by the way, March is National Reading Month. If you want to improve your grammar, reading (the more, the better) is the key.

Come learn to blog with me! My next How to Write Your Blog workshop takes place on April 1 in Washington, DC. Get more details and secure your place here.

Why you need to have a style

When writers talk about style they are rarely talking about fashion. They are talking about editorial style. They discuss whether to use the Associated Press Style or the New York Times Style or Chicago Manual. There are probably four or five major published style guides that people follow. In journalism and by extension, public relations, most people adhere to the AP Style. In government circles, people tend to follow the Government Printing Office (GPO) Style. (Here's a great article on Roll Call about the chairman of the GOP Style Board.)

There is one reason to have an editorial style: consistency.

Consistency helps unify your writing. Let's use a common example. It's Chicago Manual style to write Web site (two words, web is capitalized always). It's AP Style to write website (one word, lowercase). **Either way is correct.** But if you use AP in one press release and then Chicago on a white paper, you are being inconsistent. Worse would be to use both styles in one document.

Choose one style and stick with it.

Organizations should develop style guides editorial and branding/image purposes. These written documents (in this case, the oral tradition just won't do!) will help to make sure everyone in the organization is on the same page, bolstering organizational consistency.

Editorial guides should cover issues like:

- Word usage (website versus Web site; do you say chairman, chairperson or chair?)
- Punctuation (use em dashes or not?)
- Preferred date and time usage (do you say April 24 or April 24th?, 6 PM or 6:00 p.m.?)

Branding/image guides should clarify issues like:

- Logo size and positioning
- Organizational colors
- Acceptable fonts

There are a great many resources on the web, and even templates to follow. Large organizations like the World Bank have style guides that you can download.

If you don't have an organizational style guide, this year-end may be a great time to develop one or make it a goal to develop one in 2014.

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How to write a contact email

If you have received any type of contact email, you know there is a way to do it and a way not to. Just this week I received a contact email that made me realize lots of salespeople don't know how to do it. The email I got was this:

Hi Deborah:

I'm working with the [company name] sales channel, and my client requires the assistance of a company specializing in "Communications Audits".

Kindly drop me a line to discuss (my phone number is provided below). Thanks,

[Email signature]

This email followed a voice message that went like this:

Hi Deborah, My name is X , a consultant working with the sales channel (...) and [my client] is inquiring about a communications audit. And I'd like to talk to you about it, how does it work, relative to their sales channel, it would be very lucrative to your business. ...

The consultant seems to assume I understand what “the sales channel” is supposed to be. He is also looking for “communications audits” relative to the sales channel. And lastly, he is telling me it would be lucrative to my business. There are two things going on in the contact, and they are at odds with each other: looking for a solution for a client and offering something to me. Which is it? Neither is clear.

I asked for clarification as to what exactly he was looking for, and this consultant suggested having a 15-minute conversation. When I said I needed more information to see if there was a fit, he repeated what he had told me. I then wrote back saying I thought there wasn't a fit. To top it off, I got this email back from him:

I'll gladly give you appropriate details if we were to connect.

Surely you're not too busy to grow your business and frankly, if you are – delegate to as a sales rep.

You're not too important to talk to me; I deal with Presidents of companies with revenues exceeding \$100M.

In the end, this person is really trying to sell ME something, which is obvious since he can't tell me what problem his client is having that he thinks I can help with. What he really wants is to have a connection with me. And he thinks that by insulting me and assuming things about me, I will want to talk to him (not to mention that he has grammatical

challenges...)

If you want to have write a successful contact email, do not follow the example above. Here is what you should do instead:

1. Start with being clear on the purpose of your contact. What you are looking for. Are you looking for a quote? A description of services? A location?
2. Tell the contact how you found him/her and/or why you are contacting him/her. For example: I am looking for a general contractor, and I came across your name in the XYZ directory.
3. Provide details that may be relevant. Don't assume that the person understands everything you are saying. Using the example of the general contractor: I am looking to add a powder room to the first level of my two-level house. Currently, I have two bathrooms upstairs. I think there is enough space on the first level to accommodate this change. I am not sure if the plumbing can be worked in.
4. Ask specific questions. Are you able to do this service? What do you charge? What other information do you require?
5. Close nicely and provide contact information: Thanks for your attention and please contact me either by email or by phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx.
6. Before sending, make sure your spelling and grammar are correct. Emails that are full of typos and mistakes make you look unprofessional.

Realize that you may not always get a response. That's OK. And if you do get a request for clarification, clarify! You may have questions, and the contact may have questions. Don't assume that you both know everything.

Finally, don't do what the guy in the contact email to me did: say you want one thing, while meaning something else. People

see through that and it makes you look bad.

Thoughts?

Why you need an editor

Most people can write, but some don't do it very well. That is why most people would also benefit from having an editor.

I often edit other people's work. Most of the time, the writing is done by people whose primary job does not include writing. There are a few things I correct over and over. Here's a list:

Wordiness. Using too many words when fewer will do. In grad school, a professor of mine had us remove ten words from every assignment. It's a good exercise for everyone.

Long, complicated sentences. This is somewhat related to wordiness, but also shows that people are afraid of short, direct sentences.

Using I instead of me. I am not talking about a sentence like this one. People don't seem to want to use the word me in constructions such as "that time works for John and me." I am not sure why.

Subject-verb agreement. I hear it on the news all the time, and see it, often in long, complicated sentences. If your subject is singular, then your verb should be too. Not like this line from a pop song: "The color of her eyes were." (In this case, the subject is the color, which is singular, therefore the verb should be was.)

Misusing words. Often, people think they know what a word means, but they really don't. (I am working on compiling a list of these...)

Using jargon and/or big words. The more jargon you use, the more I think you don't know what you are talking about. I also don't think using the word utilize makes you seem smarter. Read this excellent article from Content Management on how to get rid of jargon.

I know most people can't afford to get an editor. Heck, I don't have an editor for this blog either. Next time you write something, look it over for the items above. If you are unsure, ask!

How to write your blog workshop

What are you doing on May 17? Why not sign up for my How to write your blog workshop? You will learn how to make your blog more effective, how to come up with blog post ideas and lots of other good stuff. Details and registration [here](#).

Weekly communications #fail: homonyms, and how you say it matters

Homonyms: words that sound and/or are spelled the same but have different things

As I was reading the Washington Post this morning, on the front page was an article about a rapist recently sentenced to three life terms. In the article, the reporter said that the

rapist “**reined** terror on Montgomery three decades ago...” Of course, the correct word in this context is **reigned**. Reined (restrained) and reigned (exercised power over) sound the same—they are homonyms—but have completely unrelated meanings. Yesterday, I was reading a blog post with a headline that said “too much to **bare**.” The author really meant to say “too much to **bear**.”

Granted, these mistakes are easy to make because the words are not spelled incorrectly (so spell check would not help) and they sound the same to your ear (so reading aloud would not catch it). Sadly, misusing homonyms is a common mistake. Here’s a list of the most common:
<http://wsuonline.weber.edu/wrh/words.htm>

These types of mistakes are precisely why we need editors.

How you say it matters

Using the correct words is important. But how you say what you are saying also matters. If you are asking me to do something for you, being pleasant and appreciative makes me want to help you. If on the other hand you write me asking me for something you need (like an email I received a few weeks ago) that says that this thing is needed right away, and you don’t say please, thank you or that you would appreciate my help, then, I am not inclined to help you.

Being polite and considerate of whoever is receiving your business communication will result in better compliance. That’s a fact. Being rude, inconsiderate or demanding, on the other hand, will result in resistance.

More about reading; and thoughts about the Costa Concordia

The last post here was about why writing skills might be in decline, and my assertion that it is because people are not reading enough. Today, Gini Dietrich writes in her Spin Sucks blog that reading fiction is beneficial to your career because, among other benefits, it helps fine-tune your social skills, especially your empathy.

So, in addition to helping you recognize good writing, expose you to new worlds, teach you new vocabulary and ways of seeing, reading can help you build better connections and be better at work.

Yet, reading alone will not result in a fabulous, well rounded writer/emotionally intelligent being. **You have to practice. You have to interact.** Someone whose nose is always in a book, and who never emerges to deal with the real world is probably not going to be very emotionally intelligent. Also, if you never write and get edited, your writing is never going to improve.

The Costa Concordia, in case you haven't seen the news in the past two days, is a luxury Mediterranean cruise ship that ran aground near Italy, and sank, killing at least six people onboard. Last night, on the CBS News, it was reported that the crew did not initially inform the passengers appropriately about the impending disaster. They downplayed the danger, and that led to chaos. Some passengers took matters into their own hands.

It seems that people's first reaction to bad news is disbelief. They act as if nothing is wrong. Perhaps that's what happened to the Costa Concordia's crew. Unfortunately,

this type of disbelief can lead to tragedy. There is a also desire to minimize problems.

This is why crisis communication training is so important. When crisis happens, reliable information is key. Denial and misinformation will make a bad situation worse.

Any thoughts? Please share in the comments.

Why is writing well a disappearing skill?

Sally Falkow writes today in her blog, The Proactive Report, that good writing should be considered a primary public relations skill. I agree (and I wrote about that in my post Qualities of a PR Pro).

The question is not whether PR people should know how to write well, but why they don't. April Finnen (@AprilFin) , who writes the blog One Person Shop, said in a Twitter exchange with me:

"I think a big part of it is that good writing comes from good thinking, and that's becoming harder to find."

I answered:

Certainly true, but I do think many people just don't do enough reading either (maybe that's related to lack of thinking...)

To which April responded:

“Agree. If you can find a curious PR pro who reads everything, pretty safe bet they’re a good writer.”

In my opinion, writing well is disappearing because people are reading less. Why is this happening? It may be because they are not curious, not interested, not thinking, working too hard, or any number of other reasons.

If it is lack of curiosity or good thinking, as April says, how are these PR “pros” going to come up with strategies to drive a message?

I can’t tell you how many PR people I have met who don’t ever read books for pleasure or even a daily newspaper. How many PR firms offer grammar and writing courses for their associates? How many PR pros today were English majors in college? Fewer and fewer thanks to the devaluing of liberal arts education and the rise of career-focused majors. If all you studied in college was how to create a PR campaign, but you never read a classic novel, how are you going to appreciate the power of language to convey meaning and emotion?

Do you have thoughts on why good writing is on the decline? Please do share!

How you can shine

Lately, I feel that we live in a very mediocre world as it relates to communications and writing. Open up the newspaper most days and you will find a few articles that seem as if they were written by a teenager. Online, I see typos and spelling mistakes galore. On social media, I see a lot of rude behavior, I suppose reflecting the loss of civility

evident everywhere.

But, as with all problems, there is an opportunity—an opportunity to shine. Because we are surrounded by mediocrity, working to be better will make you stand out.

Here are few ways to shine:

Mind your grammar, spelling and typing: Perhaps you need an editor or just a better review of your writing. And, if you aren't really that good at grammar, perhaps take a class or read a book to improve your skills.

Skip the passive voice: There is nothing like reading long passive sentences. It kills your writing. If you don't know what I am talking about then you never had a teacher who corrected your passive voice and made it active.

Avoid the cliches and jargon: Another dead giveaway that screams laziness and even stupidity is the overuse of jargon and cliches. People hide behind these words. For instance, the following excerpts are from a job description (let me know if you understand what this person does for a living):

- Stakeholder relationship management
- Standardizing processes, roles and responsibilities
- Outreach strategy
- Virtual collaboration

Be polite: If someone writes you an email or leaves you a voice mail, respond. If someone comments on your blog, thank him/her. On Twitter, acknowledge re-tweets. Watch your swearing in a public space (yes, social media is a public space).

Think about your audience: If you think about who your audience is, and what information they need, you will be a huge step ahead. Considering your audience will help determine your language, your timing, etc.

Learn how to network effectively: Perhaps we are spending too

much time with our gadgets, but it seems more people are less able to interact personally with others. If you go to a networking event, try speaking to other people. It is as easy as introducing yourself, and asking a simple question (how did you hear about the event, have you been here before, etc.) You may also want to follow up with the people you meet.

Be a LinkedIn rock star: Not a week goes by that I don't get a LinkedIn invitation that is a) not personalized and b) from someone I don't know. Sometimes, I go to somebody's profile, and it is missing information, does not have photograph, and lists an old position where the person is no longer working. So, you have the opportunity to shine on LinkedIn by:

- Completing your profile (include your photo)
- ALWAYS personalizing invitations
- Not connecting with every Tom, Dick and Jane out there.
- Having an updated job description
- Joining (and participating) in groups

How do you shine? Please share what you do to stand out from the crowd.

Think a headline does not matter?

A headline can either draw the reader in or not.

The Washington Post has different headlines on its website than in the print edition (why this is, I don't know). This morning, for example, I barely glanced at Charles Krauthammer's op-ed piece "Libyan 'Crossfire'." Then, when

perusing WashingtonPost.com I saw the following headline:

Krauthammer: Gaddafi justified his rotten death

Now, that intrigued me. So I clicked and lo and behold, it is the same article.

A good headline is descriptive, yes, and has an element to make you read further. Writing a good headline will get your article (or press release or blog post) seen (if not read fully).