

The death of copy editing?

Yesterday, Bill Walsh, a copy editor for the *Washington Post* and author of three books on language, died. He was far too young—only 55—and a victim of cancer. He was liked and respected by his colleagues, copy editors everywhere, and by people who appreciate clean, readable copy (myself included). His obituary in the *Post* is a worthwhile read.

A couple of years ago, I had the good fortune to attend a copy editing workshop that Mr. Walsh was leading. He talked about his pet peeves (“armed gunmen” for example) and talked extensively about comma and hyphen use, among other topics. After the session, somebody asked him why there were so many copy errors in the *Washington Post*. He lamented that the sheer quantity of copy (all that digital stuff) made it impossible to keep up. And of course, his department had suffered cuts.

More and more, news outlets have fewer copy editors or even none at all. Writers/reporters are expected to edit their own work, which, as anybody who has written anything, is damn near impossible to do successfully.

Copy editing is not proofreading. Proofreading is about making sure that words are spelled correctly and/or are in the right place. Copy editing is far more than that. Copy editing is about making sure that the work makes sense and that it is accurate. It strives to improve readability and accessibility.

Bill Walsh was a celebrity copy editor (he had a following!). His insight and wit are irreplaceable. I hope that his main skill—copy editing—does not die along with him. He certainly transmitted his knowledge through his books and his workshops. But he couldn't stop the powers that be from making cuts to copy editing staff.

Without copy editors, readers are shortchanged with text that can be mistake-ridden and inaccurate. Copy editors are

valuable and perform necessary work inside news organizations and indeed, any organization that puts out “content.”

Rest in peace, Bill Walsh. You and your skills will be be sorely missed.

P.S. I don't have a copy editor, so any mistakes (and I am sure there are a few) are mine and mine alone.

How to show you really don't care

“Your sport is reserved.”

That was the headline in an email I got from a marketing agency confirming my attendance at an event it was hosting. Obviously, it should have read “your spot is reserved.” Is this an egregious mistake? Not really, but it is careless. It shows nobody bothered to proofread this email. And remember, this is coming from a marketing agency, which presumably creates accurate copy for its clients.

More careless yet was a letter I received from my HOA's management company regarding board elections. The letter stated that the elections would be held on February 7. The accompanying ballot said the elections would take place on February 28. Every homeowner was welcomed to attend (if only we knew which the correct date was).

Mistakes are everywhere

I've been noticing these types of mistakes more and more. Yesterday, a tweet from a leading women's organization talked

about principals instead of principles. Another letter from my HOA referenced the wrong community.

I am sure you've noticed it too because it has become rampant. I am not sure what's causing this but I believe it has to do with the expectations of instant communication and the ongoing rush we are experiencing. We've seen news organizations that rush to be first instead of taking the time to ensure accuracy.

Avoiding mistakes takes a bit of effort

It takes time to proofread documents. It takes time to ensure all information (dates, times, locations) is accurate. It involves an extra step and perhaps another person.

And not making the effort communicates lack of care

Remember, not taking the appropriate steps to make sure your communications are clear and accurate shows that you don't care about your reader.

What do you do to make sure your communications materials are accurate? Do you follow a checklist? Enlist a proofreader? Please let me know in the comments.

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.

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!

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: @stuopperman

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.

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.