

# On writing: Brad Phillips knows training is key

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



Brad Phillips,  
president,  
Phillips Media  
Relations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# **Does your audience get you?**

## **An exponential mistake?**

Several years ago, when I was just starting out, I was hired by a new client to write a sales pitch letter. The letter would promote a hotel reservations software that the client was selling to small (non-chain, independent) hotels.

The client hated the letter I wrote. He didn't even want to pay me for it! His main complaint was that I used language the hotel owners wouldn't understand. Specifically, I had used the term "exponential growth," and the client thought most people would not understand the word "exponential." I was completely taken aback. To me, "exponential growth" sounded good. You'd want your business to experience it by simply buying a new software, right?

Whether this client was right or not about "exponential," the takeaway is that you have to use the language that your audience will get. If your audience talks at a sixth-grade level, you can't use university-level language and hope they understand what you are saying.

## **Trump gets it (or maybe doesn't know better)**

According to the article "Donald Trump Speaks Like a Sixth Grader. All Politicians Should," by Allison Jane Smith and published this past Sunday in the *Washington Post*, part of Trump's success in the presidential primaries can be attributed to his ability to communicate with the swath of

Americans who have low literacy skills. As you probably have heard, Trump always uses simple words, and repeats them constantly.

Smith writes:

*When speaking to or writing for a broad audience, it's a best practice to speak at an eighth-grade reading level. More than 40 percent of Americans have only basic literary skills, according to a 2003 assessment. And even highly educated people prefer to read below their formal education level.*

## **Adjust your language**

In other words, speakers (and writers) who want to communicate more widely would do better to simplify. Using big words when most people don't get them will only hurt your cause, perhaps exponentially.

Of course, if you are trying to communicate more narrowly, or to a very sophisticated audience, you will have to adjust your language accordingly.

Your job as a communicator is to make sure your audience gets you.

**Have you ever read marketing material that you didn't understand? Do you think it was a language choice issue? Let me know in the comments.**

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# On writing: For Jay Morris, writing is a journey

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



Jay Morris, CEO, Jay  
Morris  
Communications, LLC

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

**Twitter:** @JayMorCom

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

Writing is by far the most important “deliverable” I provide my clients. My projects often begin with a strategic communications assessment, but I almost always end up writing something for the client. It could be web content, a blog post, a press release or a speech—some type of written communication that meets a need and tells the client’s story.

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

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

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

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

style and voice. Blogging and journaling are two excellent ways of doing that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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## **On writing: Julie Mullen buzzes about PR**

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



Julie Mullen Partner/Co-  
Founder The Buzz Agency

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

**Organization:** The Buzz Agency

**Twitter:** @juliemmullen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# One word plus one word equals new word

"Can someone share what they use to backup their files?"

This was the subject line in an email to a Listserv I'm on. In this case, the person wrote backup (one word), which is an adjective, when he meant to say back up (two words), which is a verb.

There are several things about English that seem to trip up a lot of people. This is one of those things.

It happens when you have two words that are often used as a pair and you put them together in one word. However, the new word is not the same as the pair. In some cases the pair is a verb and the resulting new word is an adjective. In some cases

the resulting word is a noun.

### **Back up is not the same as backup.**

When back up is two words, there's some sort of action taking place, which means it's a verb. You put your car in reverse gear so you can *back up* (verb) out of your driveway. Maybe you *back up* (verb) your files on an external hard drive (I don't but I should). You *back up* (verb) your claims with proven information (although some presidential candidates don't).

When backup is one word, it can be an adjective, meaning the word is modifying or describing something. You may have a *backup* computer in case your usual computer conks out. You may have a *backup plan* in case something goes wrong. Sometimes, a backup is a noun: You may have your *backup* with you on a thumb drive.

### **Shut down is not the same as shutdown.**

At the end of your work day, perhaps you *shut down* (verb) your computer. Now your computer is in *shutdown* (adjective) mode.

This past Wednesday here in the Washington area, the Metro was *shut down* (verb) for more than 24 hours to conduct emergency inspections and repairs. Metro's general manager said the *shutdown* (noun) was necessary.

### **Every day is not the same as everyday.**

*Every day* (noun) that passes I think about some *everyday* (adjective) tasks that can get done quickly.

Just some everyday information to pass on to you. Happy Friday!

P.S. If you get tripped up with this type of thing in your documents, I can help fix it. Contact me about copy editing.

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# On writing: Chuck Tanowitz thinks like a journalist

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



Chuck Tanowitz

**Name:** Chuck Tanowitz

**Twitter:** @ctanowitz

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good writing is good editing.

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

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

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

Being a former journalist, I tend to follow AP Style. An old employer of mine hated the Oxford comma, and now I continue to struggle with it.

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

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

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

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

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

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# **One invaluable writing lesson**

Back in October I pledged to myself to complete National Novel Writing Month or NaNoWriMo. If you haven't heard of it, it's an annual event where the goal is to write 50,000 words during November. People self-monitor and track their word count on the NaNoWriMo website. Once the "novel" is done, you upload



the document for “validation.” And if you indeed wrote the 50K words, then you are labeled a “winner.” Although you can order a winner t-shirt (and pay for it), there are no prizes. The only reward you get is self-satisfaction.

### **Try, try again?**

I had tried to complete NaNoWriMo once before, and only got to about 9,000 words. This time, I made it all the way to 20,000. I wasn't even half-way through and I only had about 10 days left. The website helpfully reminded me that to complete the “novel,” I would have to write at least 3,000 words a day or, if I stayed at the pace I was going, I would finish sometime at the end of December or early January. It was then that I realized that I simply didn't have it in me.

The “novel” I was writing was not compelling. I did not have a sense of how to keep the plot (such as it was) moving forward. And here's the thing: Novels are not a bunch of words strung together to beat the clock.

### **What's a novel, really?**

In fact, the word novel has two meanings. As an adjective, novel means new and fresh. As a noun, Merriam-Webster defines novel as “an invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events.” If we put both definitions together, a novel should be a new, fresh, and long narrative or story.

### **Writing is a discipline**

Here's the good thing about NaNoWriMo: If you develop the discipline to write every day, and if you work toward a clearly defined goal, you will get somewhere with your writing. In other words, you become a writer if you write consistently.

## **But is writing is more than that**

On the other hand: A successful writer has to communicate something specific and has to do it clearly. Just hitting a word count does not make you a writer (certainly not a good writer). It makes you someone who has placed a certain number of words on paper (screen).

## **You have to tell a story**

For me, the big lesson of NaNoWriMo is that writing is not enough. You have to have a story to tell. There's got to be more than words on a page.

I have always been an avid fiction reader. And doing the NaNoWriMo experiment gave me much more appreciation and respect for published writers. Writing 50,000 words is hard. Writing 50,000 words (or more) that actually are interesting, make sense, and share a story is immeasurably harder.

Have you tried NaNoWriMo? If so, what are your lessons learned? Did you write something that was published?

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## **It's a 2for1 blog post**

There's been two blog post ideas floating around in my head, so I thought I would combine them since they are both short.

## **Details please!**

A few weeks ago, I saw a query from a woman to a group we're both in. She was asking about "affordable" meeting space that

would allow her to charge for admission. Predictably, the questions started rolling in: How many people would she be hosting? Would she be serving food? And from me, what did she consider affordable?

Her question was fundamentally flawed because she did not provide enough detail.

Imagine if before asking a vague question, this woman had taken a few minutes to think about what is necessary in booking a meeting space (you know, those pesky details):

- Number of attendees/space needs
- Location
- Budget
- Amount of time needed
- Schedule (date and time)
- Ability to charge attendance
- Catering (needed or not)

She would have saved time (hers and ours): getting better suggestions and fielding fewer questions.

Next time you are looking to get information about anything, take a few minutes to think about the details that may be relevant. Make it easy for others to provide you with the information you need.

## **It's all about him!**

Saw this on Twitter:



The man stabbed on H Street this afternoon has died from their injuries. [on.wusa9.com/1J0nSLa](https://on.wusa9.com/1J0nSLa)

Although it's become acceptable to use the plural for gender neutrality (I still prefer his/her because plural is plural), if you know the gender (male in this case) it is perfectly OK to use a gendered pronoun (his not their). It's worrisome that people are so intent on being gender neutral (which is good) that they forget that gendered pronouns can be used appropriately.

That's all folks. Catch you soon and let me know if you have any documents that need some copy editing.

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## What you meant to say

"What you meant to say" is a new feature here on the Caffeinated blog. It's meant to be a compilation of the (many) grammatical/spelling/word choice mistakes we see all around us, all the time. It occurred to me that I should start keeping a running list for fun, and then of course, I thought it would make a fun blog post. These are all real examples. Readers are welcomed to add their findings.



By Paulo Paraiso via Flickr

## For the week ending July 10 (questionable word/usage is **bolded**):

**Subject line on a spam email:** This Video Is A Must Watch.  
[Effects Us All}

**What you meant to say:** Affects

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**Tweet:** Come check out our conference room and **setup** a tour!

**What you meant to say:** Set up. As two words, set up is a verb, whereas setup is a noun.

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**Tweet:** CAE stands for Certified Association Executive. **They're** the hallmark of a committed assoc. professional.

**What you meant to say:** It's

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**Tweet to a car rental company:** Great service. Great cars. Will **defiantly** pick [name] again for my next trip

**What you meant to say:** Definitely, showing how you can't ever

rely on autocorrect or spell check.

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# One type of headline will always fail

## *You're invited*

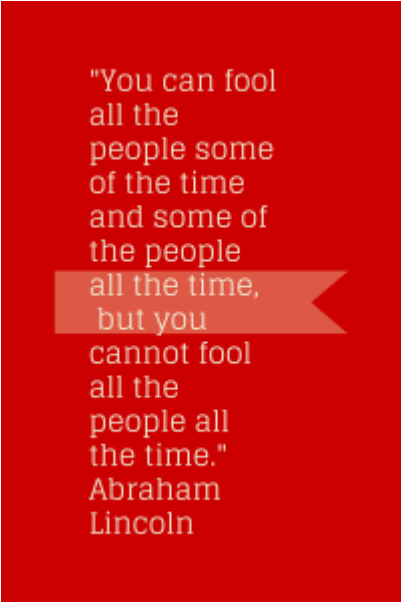
That was the subject line for an email I got recently from Boston University. Naturally, I assumed that I was been invited to attend an event. But no, I was being invited to donate money to the annual pledge drive.

## **This was a classic bait-and-switch.**

The following week I got an email from BU that said something about women (fewer/more women getting degrees, I can't recall). Again, I opened it since I thought it would be an article about gender disparity. It wasn't. It was another bait-and-switch. Again, BU wanted me to be among the women who donate to the university.

## **Bait-and-switch headlines/subject lines are trust-killers.**

I understand there's clutter and that you need to work hard to entice readers. Using a bait-and-switch can guarantee people will open your email or read your article, but at a cost. When you fool people this way (and that is what you are doing), you ensure they will no longer trust your content.



"You can fool  
all the  
people some  
of the time  
and some of  
the people  
all the time,  
but you  
cannot fool  
all the  
people all  
the time."  
Abraham  
Lincoln

What's going to happen when BU really wants to invite me to an event? What type of subject line will they use? I am not going to believe "you're invited" again.

Writing a subject line/headline is not easy. You want to entice readers to open your email or read your article. You are much better off describing what you are offering inside than using a false premise.

What is your experience with bait-and-switch headlines or subject lines? If you use them, how well do they work for you?