

The week's best brew: super-caFFEinated articles

As I type this, it is snowing outside (again). Let's hope this is the last time this season! Spring starts this evening, at 6:45 p.m. and we are all ready for warmer temps and NO MORE SNOW! But I digress.

Following, you will find seven of the most interesting and/or useful articles I have read and shared in the past couple of weeks. So pour yourself a nice cup of something brewed, and have fun reading!

On blogs and blogging:

3 Google Analytics Reports to Help You Find Blog Post Ideas Your Readers Will Love

The Anatomy of a Perfect Blog Post

How Well Do You Fact-Check Your Content

On writing and copy editing:

Like Versus As

12 Writing Exercises That Will Transform Your Copy Today

12 Useless Public Relations Terms

20 Embarrassing Phrases Even Smart People Misuse

Happy spring!

Some weekend reading

I share so many articles every day on Twitter, and of those I save my favorites to Pocket (my favorite tool for saving articles). Starting today, I will do a weekly or biweekly round-up of great articles for weekend reading.

Here are three articles on writing and editing:

7 Self-Editing Tips for Reporters Without Copy Editors

Study Shows the Value of Copy Editing

11 easy ways to write more clearly

Here's a couple about websites and social media:

5 Things You Can Learn From a Poorly Designed Website

Is Social Media Actually Helping Your Company's Bottom Line?

Happy reading and have a great weekend!

6 copy editing rules to make you a better writer

Today is National Grammar Day, and if there's one group that lives and breathes grammar, it's copy editors. (Note: you will find some that write copyediting and copyeditor as one word, but I decided to follow *Merriam-Webster*, which spells them as two words.)

By cleaning up your sloppy sentences, a copy editor makes your

writing clearer. But not everyone has access to a copy editor. The next best thing is to learn what copy editors look for and apply it to your own writing.

1. Follow a style guide and stick to it. Whether you have your own organizational style guide or you use a standard guide such as *The Associated Press Stylebook*, be sure to consult it and defer to it. You may want to write “Web site” but your style guide says it’s “website.” Don’t alternate usages. And check stuff that is likely to trip you up such as dates, abbreviations, addresses, and titles.

2. Be consistent. Make sure you are using the same spelling and style throughout your document.

3. Use a dictionary (and choose your standard). There are a couple big dictionary names: *Oxford* and *Merriam-Webster*. Choose one and stick to it and then use it to make sure that you are spelling [that word] correctly. And more so, does [that word] mean what you think it means?

4. Watch out for often-confused words. Commonly confused words sound the same or are very close in spelling, but don’t mean the same thing. Some examples are effect/affect, defer/differ, and compliment/complement. You can find exhaustive lists on the internet. Spell check won’t catch these mistakes but using the wrong word will most certainly alter the meaning of what you are writing.

5. Fact check. Make sure it’s Mary and not Marie and that February 14th, 2015 was a Saturday and not a Friday. Are you sure that’s the correct address? You get the drift.

6. Pay attention to your commas (and apostrophes, colons, etc.). Nothing can derail a sentence faster than missing or improper punctuation. Also, take a stand regarding the Oxford or serial comma. Use it or don’t, but be consistent.

Want more? Check out Grammar Girl’s Editing Checklist for an

overview of the various mistakes that copy editors look for, and you can even print it out as reference!

It's easy to get lost in writing your thoughts and not pay attention to the details. However, the details (grammar, style, punctuation, spelling) are what help to make your thoughts clear to your readers.

How are you celebrating National Grammar Day?

Are you sure you know what that word means?

By now you will have heard about the Cleveland local news anchor Kristi Capel and how she used a racial slur to describe Lady Gaga's performance at the Academy Awards. According to this report in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Capel apologized and said she did not know what the word meant (I am not using the word here because it is racist).

Think about that for a moment: *A news anchor, while broadcasting live, used a word that she did not understand.*

In Capel's case, I don't think there was any racial motivation behind this incident, but there was something much more common: ignorance. She was called out (and rightfully so) because what she said was racist. But every single day, people are guilty of using words they don't understand, mangling their meaning.

If you watch enough TV or read enough stuff online or in print, you will see many instances of misused words. To quote

Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*:

"You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means."

Lifhack says that travesty, ironic and bemused are among the 10 Most Commonly Misused Words. Just look up the phrase "misused words" in your favorite search engine and you will get loads of examples (there are many more than 10).

Here's one I see all the time

One word that I have seen misused over and over is "misnomer." Merriam-Webster defines misnomer as:

: the misnaming of a person in a legal instrument

: a use of a wrong or inappropriate name : a wrong name or inappropriate designation

Basically, a misnomer is using the wrong *name* for something. The example used by Merriam-Webster is the *international* airport that only serves domestic flights. Seems straightforward enough. Yet, many times I hear journalists using the word misnomer when what they really mean is misunderstanding. They'll say something like: "It's a misnomer to say that the senator is going to vote for the bill."

You know that word doesn't exist, right?

There are some people who make up words or mispronounce words. Huffington Post lists "11 Commonly Used Made-Up Words That Drive Us Insane" to include: "expresso," "supposably," and the famous "irregardless." (Buzzfeed has a similar list: 17 Misused and Made-Up Words That Make You Rage.)

Using words that don't mean what you think they do only makes you sound ignorant to those who do understand the meaning. In cases like Capel's, not only will you sound ignorant but you may also offend. So here are some warnings:

- If you are not sure of what a word means *precisely*, don't use it.
- If you think a word is right, but you aren't absolutely sure, don't use it.
- If you think you will sound like you know what you are talking about because you are using a long word, definitely don't use it.
- And finally, use a dictionary. Look that pesky word up.

What words do you often notice as being misused?

The 5 essential skills for great web writing

Web design keeps changing

The wonderful Leslie O'Flahavan gave a great presentation/workshop last week about new web design trends and how they affect web writing. You can download it [here](#). Some of these trends include infinite scrolling (like on the Time Magazine website, where you can just keep scrolling down through endless articles) and the large-type front page (like this, on this page with A to X Writing Advice). There's also a trend to include pre-made shareable content (usually pre-written tweets).

How people access a website has to be considered

Then there is the need (this is *not* a trend) to have everything visible and rendering appropriately on any device people happen to be using to access your website—desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphome. Type has to be readable. Although these issues are solvable by good design and web

architecture, web writers have to consider these when deciding how to present which information.

Web writing is not quite the same as writing for print

Since most every business, nonprofit and news organization is on the web, web/content writing is probably the largest type of writing being done today. Yet, it is not as if you can just take your print materials, digitize them and call it a day. Clearly, there is a lot to consider when you are writing for the web.

What makes for a good web writer?

Can just anybody write for the web? Not really. I think people can be taught how to write for the web, but not everybody has the ability to be like Leslie and be able to see what is going on in web design, spot trends and realize how these new changes affect web content.

The five essential skills of a great web writer:

1. The ability to spot the trends. This also means keeping on top of UX (user experience) and other issues that affect how websites are designed.

2. Understanding how the new design trends affect what you write. It's not enough to spot the trends. You need to be able to see how those trends impact what content should be included and how it should be written.

3. Ability to write in short and long formats. As Leslie describes in her presentation, there's the snack and then there's the meal. You have to be able to write short, snappy headlines but also be able to write longer, more "meaty" content.

4. Ability to synthesize information. You are called on to write short descriptions, whether it be for pre-made tweets or web page headings. In order to do this, you must be able to

take a lot of information and condense it. It's helpful if you can explain things simply too.

5. Visual and design sensibility. Being able to understand the role that visual and design play in how a website is read and viewed is key, as the ability to work with graphic/web designers to make your content look appealing.

Have you noticed website writing has changed? Have you seen websites that look great but read poorly? What is your experience with web writing?

Is hurry killing reading comprehension?

In his Sunday *Washington Post* article "What writing 30,000 posts taught this financial planner," Barry Ritholtz, author of the On Investing column, says that not only are many readers choosing to believe what they want to believe, but that their reading comprehension is abysmal. He writes:

Reading comprehension is terrible. I am astonished how many people lack the basic reading comprehension skills to understand a 500-word essay. I give every piece a second edit to figure out how lazy and biased readers are going misinterpret, misunderstand and just plain old miss the point of the post.

(Note: This is part of the last paragraph of his article that appeared in the printed edition of the *Washington Post*, but which is mysteriously missing from the online version of the

article.)

This is sad and disturbing. Those of us who make our living from writing, depend on readers to understand what we say. If readers can't understand our ideas, then how are we going to make sure to get our point across? What is the point of writing? It doesn't matter how talented we are, if the readers don't get it, then it is not worth anything.

What is behind this lack of reading comprehension? Is it that people are not being taught how to read well in school? Is it that people are stupid? Is it that writing has to be "dumbed down"? There's probably some element of all of these, but one bigger problem is that people are in a hurry. They are not taking the time to read closely.

We hear over and over how people are so busy. People are multi-tasking. People are frazzled. One consequence of this continual rush is that people are not paying attention to what they are reading.

How many times have you posted something or written an email including details about an upcoming event and the recipient will ask you for the exact information you have already provided. It happens to me all the time.

Case in point: I wrote a short email to a friend telling her that I had missed seeing her at our book group and that I really didn't like the book. She wrote back telling me that she has had some family issues and hadn't finished reading the book, and she also wanted to know what I thought of the book. Now, my email was five sentences long. One of those sentences was about my opinion the book. She clearly did not absorb what I wrote. Either she was preoccupied or in a hurry or both.

It seems people are no longer able to read closely. They skim through the information. In fact, when I teach my blogging workshop, I tell my participants that content should be scannable, since this is what people do when they read on the

web.

This loss of reading comprehension concerns me. It makes me wonder how anybody is going to learn anything new, let alone anything complex. If we are promoting new products or ideas, this is going to be a huge obstacle to overcome.

What do you think? Have you noticed that you have to oversimplify ideas? Have you noticed that people just don't seem to pay attention?

Summer challenge #4: Be more active

Before you think I am going to challenge you to move more, let me clarify that this is a writing challenge, not a fitness challenge. I am talking about **active voice**. Originally, I wanted to name the post "Be less passive," but that sounded a bit too negative.

Most every writing teacher, and probably even your own English teacher in school, makes a point of telling students to avoid the passive voice. And yet, especially in business writing, we see people using passive voice without any measure. "The company was founded by John Doe," they write. "The management team will achieve its objectives by implementing long-standing traditions," they add. And on and on.

Passive voice is dull. It's boring. You know why? Because it isn't active! Passive voice is the equivalent of the couch potato, who just sits around, staring mindlessly at the

television. The couch potato often feels bored (and boring). The couch potato hasn't done much lately so he doesn't have much to say.

Active voice is more like an athlete than a couch potato, and therefore, has far more energy and zest for life. Active voice is the runner while passive voice is the straggler. Active voice gets to the point much faster, while passive voice is busy drawing out its words.

You see why active voice gives your writing more punch. It makes it lively. It makes it more interesting.

So, challenge yourself to use the active voice as often as possible. Because really, do you want your writing to resemble a couch potato?

Challenge #1: Tick off verbal tics

Starting **every** sentence with words or phrases such as honestly, frankly, truly or in reality.

Describing things using the **same adjective or adverb** every single time. You know, that show was terrific, it was fantastic, it was tremendous.

(Over) relying on **certain expressions** (generally cliches) such as "at the end of the day" or "right back atcha" or "takes two to tango."

I think of these as verbal tics. We are not even aware that we

are using these verbal crutches. And they can creep into our writing, especially in social media posts. They may distract readers and listeners or even make them tune out what you are saying.

The summer's first challenge is to rid yourself of verbal tics (or at least reduce them).

Here are the three steps to take:

1. **Identify** these verbal tics in your writing or speaking. Start paying attention to yourself and your writing. Do you find yourself saying certain things over and over?
2. **Figure** out why you are saying this. Why do you have to preface your statement with "honestly?" Are you generally not honest? Is it just habit? Is there any other way to say this?
3. Now, this is the hard part: **eliminate** the word or phrase completely. Try doing this for a day or two. If you catch yourself about to use one of your verbal tics, find another word or phrase to use instead.

This won't be easy. We get into patterns and it's hard to stop. And that's the point of this challenge: becoming aware of your patterns.

What do you think? What is your verbal tic? Are there verbal tics that your colleagues have that drive you nuts? Tell me!

UPDATE:

Seems that even the New York Times has verbal tics, as the article [The New York Times lists its crutch words](#) points out. Verbal tics are crutches for sure!

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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5 tips for Friday on editing your own writing

I think having themes like **5 tips for Friday** is a great way to keep you blogging, and I suggest that in my blogging workshops. I saw somebody's 5 tips today, and I thought I would try my hand at it.

As a writer, I have to edit my own work. Truth is, it is far easier to edit other people's work. You very rarely see your own mistakes right away—be it typos or more serious errors.

Here are five tips to make sure you present the best piece of writing you can:

1. Take a break between writing and editing. A few hours will do, but a whole day, if possible, is better.
2. Read it out loud. Your ears may "see" mistakes that your

eyes don't.

3. Pay attention to homonyms (words that sound the same like than and then and their and there). Are you using the right word?

4. Go back and cut out ten words per page. Excess words often clutter your meaning.

5. Make sure most (if not all) sentences are in active voice. If they aren't, change them.

What is your best tip for editing your own writing? Please share in the comments.