

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.

Twitter: @MrMediaTraining

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!

3 big reasons to avoid sarcasm in your business blog

A few weeks ago I came across a blog post with a headline that said something like “Why my business is getting off Facebook immediately.” Naturally, I was intrigued. But then I read the article, which told me the many reasons why it would be stupid for him or anybody to leave Facebook, saying things such as: Yes, I want to get off the fastest growing social network that has 800 million readers and counting.

The article, awash in sarcasm, was *designed* to make readers feel stupid for considering leaving Facebook.

I had been drawn in by a headline that I didn’t realize was sarcastic until I read the blog post—a prime example of bait and switch. I felt angry and insulted that the author thought that anybody considering getting off Facebook was stupid.

And then last week, I came across this article on Ragan.com: 31 terms that will complicate your writing. The headline is not sarcastic, but the article is. However, the article is written pretty badly—I was confused as were many other readers as evidenced by the comments. The article, in my opinion, does not work at all.

I asked Brad Phillips, author of the Mr. Media Training blog, what he thought about using sarcasm in professional communication. Here’s what he said:

The challenge is to make sure people don't take a comment you meant sarcastically as a straightforward, more serious one. Therefore, I try to always either preface a sarcastic comment with an obviously absurd rhetorical question or put it in italics to make clear that it stands apart from the rest of the post.

Exactly. **Your reader or audience has to understand you are being sarcastic.** If not, there will be misunderstanding and in essence, a lack of communication.

When you decide to use sarcasm, you run three big risks:

1. You risk irritating or even alienating your reader

According to *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Clear Communication* by Kris Cole, sarcasm inhibits communication: "Sarcasm in fact is in the same league as name-calling, ridiculing and shaming; and it leads to the same results."

In intra-personal relationships, sarcasm can be extremely damaging. According to the post *The Damage of Using Sarcasm in Workplace Communication* by Skip Weisman:

There is no positive upside to using sarcasm. It offers only short-term positive impact for the sarcastic person whose ego may get a boost by putting others down in this manner.

Now, it will be couched in the context of humor and trying to be funny. Yet, that humor comes at the expense of someone else.

In essence, your sarcasm is a put-down to your audience, which can certainly lead to irritation and alienation.

2. You risk being misunderstood

Because sarcasm is a type of passive-aggressive communication – where you say one thing but mean another – there is a very good chance that your meaning will be misconstrued or lost.

It may be challenging for your readers to know that you are being sarcastic and as Brad Phillips said above, they may think you are being serious when in fact you are not.

Because sarcasm is often dependent on tone, and it is hard to express tone in writing, you will be forced to use devices like quotation marks or strike-throughs to make your meaning clear.

3. Your risk seeming ethnocentric and culturally insensitive

Sarcasm does not travel well across cultures. While American culture tends to be very sarcastic, other cultures are not. And even within the U.S., there are regional differences. According to *The Science of Sarcasm? Yeah, Right* in *Smithsonian Magazine*:

Northerners also were more likely to think sarcasm was funny: 56 percent of Northerners found sarcasm humorous while only 35 percent of Southerners did. The New Yorkers and male students from either location were more likely to describe themselves as sarcastic.

Would you ever write a sarcastic white paper or case study? Probably not. Why? Because you think of white papers and case studies as serious documents, intended to share information and/or communicate a finding. Instinctively, we avoid sarcasm in “serious” communications. And many people don’t see blogging on the same level as other, more formal, writing.

The truth is that sarcasm is often used as a distancing

technique, and it can be extremely corrosive to clear communication. You should avoid it in business blogging.

How do you feel about sarcasm in business blogging? Do you use it? Do you avoid it?