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.

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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.