

# 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!

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## 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](http://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 help 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.

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## 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](http://wiktionary.org), *Letting Go of the Words* by Ginny Redish, and Grammar Girl's [QuickandDirtyTips.com](http://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!

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## On writing: Carrie Morgan rocks the status quo

Welcome to the first "On Writing" interview, a monthly series in which a marketing communications pro will answer seven questions about writing. This month, public relations consultant and author Carrie Morgan of Rock the Status Quo agreed to be the first ~~victim~~ pro to participate. Find her thoughts below.



Carrie Morgan

## **Carrie Morgan**

Author of *Above The Noise: Creating Trust, Value & Reputation Online Using Digital PR*. Senior digital PR consultant – public relations, content marketing, social media & SEO. Author. Feisty word nerd. #PRprochat founder.

**Organization:** Rock The Status Quo

**Twitter:** @morgancarrie

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

As a PR professional who focuses on digital PR, I'd consider writing to be my most important skill, and something that quickly sets me apart from competitors. It drives over 90 percent of my revenue, since I specialize in content marketing, messaging and search engine optimization, allowing me to achieve amazing results for my clients. I constantly work to improve my storytelling skills, too, which is a

fascinating trend to watch right now. My love of writing and helping others led to publication of my first book, *Above The Noise*. It launched just this week, and can be found at Amazon, Barnes & Noble and many bookstores.

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

Writing absolutely matters! From a great headline driving social shares and viral activity to a 140-character tweet, our ability to wordsmith drives conversion and success, or feeds client failure. A picture might say a thousand words, but a few words strung together creatively have REMARKABLE power. As an industry, communications professionals don't put nearly enough emphasis on the importance of writing skills. It's an essential skill. In my opinion, every minute you invest in improving your writing skills (and reading – which improves writing skills almost by osmosis!) delivers a huge dividend. As far as self-education goes, the benefits far outweigh the energy and time it requires to improve. LinkedIn long-form posts or Medium are great places to practice if you don't want to create your own branded blog. LinkedIn particularly works well, since it also helps you build a personal brand – always a solid career move.

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

Read as much as possible, since it boost your vocabulary and grammar skills through exposure, write as much as possible to practice your skills, and invest at least a few hours each month learning something new. Michael Margolis provides a wonderful free eBook on business storytelling skills at [GetStoried.com](http://GetStoried.com). I'm excited to say he'll be a guest on #PRprochat in April, if you'd like to join us!

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

I don't use very many tools, actually, I just write as often as possible. My blog is my #1 tool, since it is the primary place that I practice my writing skills. Twitter is fabulous for teaching brevity while remaining compelling. I also curate marketing and PR content every day, which keeps me on top of new trends and tips throughout the day.

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

I follow the AP Stylebook for public relations content that will be exposed to journalists or formal media platforms – such as press releases, byline articles for a media publication and media pitches. For other kinds of content however, such as blogging or infographics, I fit the style to the outlet. Many non-journalistic media use the Chicago Manual of Style or Strunk & White. A blog post for a business journal might use AP style, but a blog post for a client should be consistent with the style already used on their site. Blogging especially can often use a less formal style of writing. I match the style to the platform as much as possible.

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

My biggest pet peeve? That's a tough one... I really hate it when people retweet something with an error in it. If you liked it enough to share it, take a second to fix the error before you pass it on. Otherwise their error becomes YOUR error. Another pet peeve are press release quotes that sound like every other quote. Be bold, take a stand and write something with a bit of thought leadership to it.

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

My favorite word is "heinous"—I think because it's a word my teenage son really hates, so the look on his face and his reaction when I use it encourage me to repeat it as much as possible. My least favorite word is any misspelled word.

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Instead of waiting for media to share our message, we have the ability to **instantly** do it ourselves.

Not only do we share news at our own pace and control, we can share it in a way that creates dialogue.

Carrie Morgan



Available on Amazon or B&N now!

Carrie has just released her book, *Above the Noise*. Writing a book has its own special challenges, so I asked Carrie to elaborate.

**How long did it take you to write this book?**

This book is several years in the making, because I started out with a different book than the one actually published this week. It took FAR more time to write than I expected, though – about six months of weekends and nights. Building the platform before I approached publishers with my book proposal was about eighteen months of solid effort, on top of time invested to actually write the book.

**Did you face any obstacles and how did you overcome them?**

It was an interesting journey! For my first book idea, *Digital Haystack*, I spent over a year and a half building my platform, then reached out to New York book agents until I landed one, thinking that would help me land a book deal. It wasn't a good experience. Basically, all the agent did was take a book proposal I'd already created, and email it out to a small database of contacts. I had to push her and babysit the process every step of the way. When we finally landed a deal,



I ended up firing the publisher (who wanted to change the name of the book, a decision from its board of directors who knew nothing about marketing as an industry and wanted to use a term that's been outdated for a decade on a book of modern best practices). After I'd cancelled that contract, with no help from the agent, I ended up also firing the agent because she made no effort to sell the book. So that I wouldn't have to pay her a commission, I restructured the book and sold it within twenty minutes of sending out my new book proposal. It was an interesting process, for sure, and I learned some valuable lessons. I'm already working on my second book.

### **Any tips for people thinking of writing a book?**

Build an audience before you write the book, and begin marketing LONG before the book is published, otherwise you'll never rise above the noise to be heard. You also won't be able to draw the interest of publishers, if that's your goal. They want pre-existing audience for the book. There's also a common misconception that publishers will do the book marketing for you. False! They are printers with lackluster marketing skills who only invest budget marketing authors who are already proven to be successful. They do next to nothing for new authors. You must be prepared to do it yourself AND have a budget for that marketing. Also, be very careful of self-publishing. I'd estimate that 90% or more of self-published books were written for vanity reasons and missing the kind of quality a publisher would require, but it's a huge market where everyone makes money except for the author. Also know that self-publishing carries a different kind of clout than something put out by a publishing house. Know the difference, and make sure the road you choose fits your goals for the book. One last thought: before I began the journey to being an author, I had no clue that over 95% of authors make next to NO MONEY on their book. Write it for other reasons. I wrote my book to build up my reputation as a consultant, not to sell books.

Stay tuned to this space for upcoming On Writing interviews. And remember, if you need to create or recreate marketing materials, I am here to help!