MediaWriting

MediaWriting is an invaluable resource for students planning to enter the dynamic and changing world of media writing in the twenty-first century. With easy-to-read chapters, a wealth of updated, real-world examples, and helpful "How To" boxes, this textbook explains the various styles of writing for print, broadcast, online, social media, public relations, and multimedia outlets. Some of the features included in the book are:

- A rewritten Chapter 13, Writing and Reporting in the *New* New Media, with updates to how social media is used today
- Expanded chapters on print reporting methods and the *Associated Press Stylebook*
- Updates to Chapters 5 and 6, Legal Considerations in Media Writing, and Ethical Decisions in Writing and Reporting, discuss recent court cases and current ethical issues
- Explanatory "How To" boxes that help readers understand and retain main themes
- Illustrative "It Happened to Me" vignettes from the authors' professional experiences
- Discussion questions and exercises at the end of every chapter

Designed to meet the needs of students of print and broadcast media, public relations, or a wannabe jack-of-all trades in the online media environment, this reader-friendly primer will equip beginners with the skills necessary to succeed in their chosen writing field.

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MediaWriting

Print, Broadcast, and Public Relations

Fifth Edition

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Preface: Introduction to *MediaWriting*

ABOUT *MEDIAWRITING*

The first edition of *MediaWriting* was conceptualized in the mid-1990s in response to industry trends that indicated media were coming together in "convergence," spurred by the increasingly interrelated technologies of computer, telephone, and TV. Future media companies, it was said, would be those that successfully combined the three; specialization was on its way out. Print and broadcast journalists and public relations professionals of the future, it was predicted, would not merely be reporters and writers but would increasingly find themselves in an information processing business requiring overlapping skills. What wasn't anticipated was the rapidity with which these changes would occur and the avalanche of new media technologies that would totally transform our information experience in both positive and negative ways.

Newspapers introduced an online presence that quickly exceeded their print circulation figures, many with real-time streaming audio and video. Radio and television stations and newspapers set up convergent news operations that meshed print, television, and new technology venues, a pattern replicated in many other markets around the country where broadcast and print reporters were now expected to prepare copy for each other's medium. Radio stations, which a few years earlier introduced streaming audio of their programming, began to offer streaming video of their DJs doing their programs. Many corporations and non-profit organizations took advantage of the opportunities presented by computer technology to provide newsworthy information directly to their publics, bypassing traditional journalistic gatekeepers.

While advertising continues to be the economic backbone supporting the media, the dot.com collapse and the Great Recession in the first decade of this century, along with a decline in stock values across media properties because of a precipitous decline in advertising revenues, forced the reshaping of the traditional business model of the communications industry with consolidations, staff cutbacks, and employee benefits

reductions. Then, from seemingly out of nowhere, came the social media. MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and a host of other venues re-revolutionized the dissemination of news and information. Soon, everyone who relied on effective communication had a Facebook page and hundreds, even thousands, of Twitter followers, requiring yet another set of skills piled onto those already deemed necessary.

Newswriters now need to be able to write a piece of newspaper copy designed to be read and then converted to a broadcast script that can be heard or with visuals that can be seen, then get the story onto the web and hand-held mobile devices with graphic elements that will make the story interesting to read. And, by the way, information needs to be constantly updated lest content consumers become bored and look for more interesting sources of information. Public relations practitioners are not only expected to produce news releases in print and broadcast versions for external media, internal organizational media, the website, Facebook page, and Twitter followers, but need to monitor and effectively respond to negative social media postings and unfounded rumors that might adversely affect the organization and its stock price.

The job market has changed dramatically, too. Although traditional daily and weekly newspaper, radio, and television jobs are still available, competition has increased even as salaries remain relatively low. Newspaper readership percentages have been on a downward spiral for years and, although online newspapers are attracting readers, the number of daily newspapers continues to decline. Most local radio stations have abandoned news and television caters to increasingly fragmented audiences. Traditional agency and corporate public relations has expanded to non-profit organizations. An increasing number of media writers work in a variety of print and broadcast venues as job opportunities have expanded dramatically for those with interchangeable writing skills and the ability to effectively use social media. Predictions are that in less than 20 years, media writers will be independent contractors, coming together as part of specialized teams, working on a specific project, then leaving to start another. Today's media freelancer is already working in this way.

MEDIAWRITING FEATURES

MediaWriting is an introductory, hands-on writing textbook for students preparing for all professional areas of communication and is also designed for instructors who want to be writing coaches and mentors as well as teachers. A primer for those who will venture into this new multi-platform media environment, *MediaWriting* offers real-world examples and exercises, presenting students with progressive writing activities and creating an environment to develop research and interviewing skills.

Good writing remains the bedrock of effective communication. We tried to follow our own advice and make the text "read" well using conversational sentences that are easy to follow, with information and tips to become a successful media writer.

Although the subject matter is still divided into print, broadcast, and public relations sections—because each writing form has a distinct style—the textbook pulls these elements together so that at the end of a semester or term you will have a grasp of their basic principles and begin to develop the attitudes and skills required for media professionals.

From a basis in writing news and features for print media, *MediaWriting* moves on to writing for broadcast news and the new media. Finally, it introduces public relations writing for the various media forms. Not only are the "hows" of media writing explained but also the "whys" by discussing the theoretical aspects of communication. This book examines legal and ethical issues, analyzes what makes news and how it is written and reported, looks at the impact of the internet and social media in the dissemination of information, and explores the role of the public relations practitioner in today's media environment.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

The internet and the social media have become essential communication tools for print and broadcast journalists and public relations professionals. This fifth edition reflects these changes, with increased attention to communicating through social media, the preparation of online copy, and updates to computer-assisted reporting techniques. All of the chapters have been reviewed and many have been extensively rewritten to reflect the changes that have taken place in this dynamic, ever-changing profession.

Because the authors feel it is important to inculcate prospective communicators into the highest standards of the professions, we have included current topical issues in the ethics chapter. For instance, the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 congressional races marked a dramatic shift in the way news is reported and how information is acquired and perceived by audiences. There have at times been embarrassing instances where news outlets have had to retract inaccurate stories, or deal with scandals involving reporters who have either plagiarized or made up stories, quotes, or events. This has led to the charge of "fake news," generally by politicians who don't like the coverage they receive. Each of these has served to undermine the credibility of the news media, essential for a robust democracy to flourish. Regretfully, too, we have found it necessary to add a segment on appropriate workplace conduct in light of the revelations of sexual harassment in the media and related industries, giving it the emphasis we believe it deserves.

As before, *MediaWriting* carries a number of features that we hope readers will find helpful:

- Increased attention to computer-based applications, including online copy preparation and effective use of social media tools.

- Explanatory "How To" boxes aid in understanding and retaining main themes.
- Practical exercises that bring to life concepts and writing principles.
- Updated "It Happened to Me" vignettes interspersed throughout the book from the authors' personal experiences and those of media professionals.
- Notes for those who prefer specific citations are included in chapters in which we have drawn directly from other sources.
- Discussion questions and practical exercises at the end of each chapter.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors, associated with the faculty of the Department of Communication at Buffalo State College, bring varied academic and professional talents to this writing project.

W. Richard Whitaker, Emeritus Professor of Journalism and Broadcasting, has broad experience in TV news as a reporter, cameraman, and producer; and in newspaper work as a reporter and desk editor. A Navy Reserve public affairs officer for 20 years, he was also a consultant and associate producer for a family-owned film and video production company. He taught at the college and university level for 39 years, serving as a department chair for 11 of those years. Whitaker has published articles in *Journalism Quarterly*, *Journalism History*, *Middle East Review*, *Oral History Review*, and *Northwest Ohio Quarterly*, and has written Navy-related articles for a variety of publications including *Curator*, for museum directors, and *U.S. Navy Medicine*. He has written bibliographic entries for *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, *History of the Mass Media in the United States*, and the *Biographical Dictionary of American Journalism*. He holds a B.A. in radio-TV news from San Jose State College, an M.S. in journalism from the University of Oregon School of Journalism, and a Ph.D. in mass communication from Ohio University.

Ronald D. Smith, Emeritus Professor of Public Communication and former Chair of the Department of Communication at Buffalo State College, served as Associate Dean for the School of Arts and Humanities. He has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in public relations strategy, writing, case studies, research, and related areas. He has worked as a public relations manager and consultant, newspaper reporter and editor, and as a Navy journalist during the Vietnam War. He has written two other textbooks: *Becoming a Public Relations Writer* and *Strategic Planning for Public Relations*, both entering their fourth editions, and has published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and in *Sage 21st Century Reference Series: Communication*. Smith is also project director for the American Indian Policy and Media Initiative at Buffalo State and co-editor of the Initiative's 2007 book, *Shoot the Indian: Media, Misperception and Native Truth*. An accredited member of the Public Relations Society of America, he has served as chapter president and district chair and has been honored

as Practitioner of the Year. Smith's degrees include a B.S. in English education from Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania and an M.S. in public relations from Syracuse University.

Janet E. Ramsey, a State University of New York (SUNY) Distinguished Service Professor and Dean Emerita, has served as chair of the Department of Communication and Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Education at Buffalo State College. A professor of journalism, she has 35 years of teaching experience in both the secondary school and university levels. She has published a textbook for college students, *Feature and Magazine Article Writing*; written articles in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Magazine Journalists*, and *Journalism Educator*; and has conducted research on Susan Sontag for the *Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*. She has also presented papers on Chaucer, the literary figure of her doctoral studies. Ramsey has been a fellow of the American Press Institute and of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and she served as president of the Buffalo Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. She has done public relations writing for Buffalo State College and served as chair of its College Senate for three years. She holds an undergraduate degree from Ohio State University in secondary English education, an M.A. in English from SUNY College at Fredonia, and a Ph.D. in medieval literature from SUNY Buffalo.

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

Several of our Buffalo State College colleagues reviewed our manuscript and suggested or provided content. Our thanks to Joe Marren, who contributed sections on news and new technology, and to Brian Meyer, a reporter for the *Buffalo News* and WBEN radio in Buffalo, N.Y., for his update on newspaper and broadcast reporting and new technology. Two other colleagues, Janet Kaye and the late Bill Raffel, provided guidance for the law and ethics chapters in earlier editions of *MediaWriting*.

SOME WORDS ON WRITING

Like all writing, media writing requires discipline because it's hard work. It's also fun and rewarding. A newspaper reporter goes out and covers the news, then comes back and writes a story with his or her byline under the headline. With a constant 24-hours-a-day/seven-days-a-week deadline, internet reporters face the same challenge that wire-service reporters did a half-century ago. TV correspondents report from the scene with their name superimposed on the screen, and radio journalists often have the challenge of working on even tighter deadlines. Public relations practitioners interact with their journalist counterparts to help in reporting the news, then similarly do interviews and research news stories for use in either internal publications or external news releases.

The new social media and mobile applications have expanded the demand for talented, creative, and highly motivated people.

Whichever field you choose, it's a great way to make a living. The professions are very competitive, however: For every job for which you'll be applying, at least 15 other equally or more talented people want the same position (and the professionals who have heard this statement say that's unduly optimistic). You have to be good to make it! As a prospective communication professional, you need to develop curiosity about the world around you, a broad knowledge base, creativity, attention to detail, and respect for accuracy, objectivity, and fairness. You also have to acquire solid writing skills and a passion for words: Communicators are "wordsmiths," people who respect language and have learned its usage. Only when you have developed these characteristics of a language and information specialist will you be able to effectively interpret the world to other people. *MediaWriting* is designed to help you build the necessary foundation to do just that and, with concentrated effort on your part, our book will help you develop the skills to go on to more specialized writing courses and succeed in the profession.

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1 Communication Theory and News Values

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Our media reading, viewing, and listening habits are part of a complex dynamic that has been identified by research over the years.

CHANGES IN MEDIA

Mass communication is a powerful force in modern society; it has been since the development of printing by movable type in the sixteenth century. While newspapers, radio, television and cable, magazines, film, and the related fields of public relations and advertising all continue to shape the manner in which we react to the world around us,

they face increasingly aggressive competition from what we call the *New* New Media. Facebook, Twitter, Telegraph, and a host of sophisticated social media applications for hand-held devices draw thousands of followers as they carry news, information, or entertainment features (some with questionable accuracy or objectivity).

Information dissemination is more than a matter of gathering facts and putting words together because writers must work within the opportunities and limits provided by the technology, societal values, the communications process, economic constraints of the media business, and the needs of the audience. This chapter provides a foundation for learning media writing by exploring the context in which print, broadcast, and internet journalists, and public relations professionals write and seek to communicate.

MEDIA WRITING AS MASS COMMUNICATION

Not too long ago, with a limited number of media outlets, there was consensus on what defined "news." Objectivity and a commitment to air all sides of a story were the driving ethical standards. Inevitably, traditional journalism would be shunted aside by new technologies that beat the established media with greater immediacy to targeted audiences and sound and pictures relayed onto cell phones.

Writing and reporting could not help but adapt to this ever-changing information environment as the demands of these new conditions placed yet another burden on already overtaxed reporters. News pieces have become briefer as information is replaced by new information. Brevity, simplicity and a "go with what you've got" ethic drives this informational environment. "Run with it," the new mantra declares, whether it's right or not; it can be corrected later. While public relations practitioners were finding it difficult to market traditional news releases because of a declining "news hole" in print media, they quickly learned to adapt to the opportunities presented by social media in disseminating messages.

Through the years, various communication theories have been developed about the role of the mass media in society. It can be theorized, for instance, that media writing has changed not only because of the immediacy and intensity made possible by today's communication technology, but by the demands of the 24/7 news cycle. Communication theories, validated by empirical evidence, have implications for you as a media writer because they attempt to explain what people pay attention to and why, and how messages become lost or distorted despite communicators' best efforts.

THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATION

One of the early communication researchers, Harold Lasswell, identified three functions of the mass media: (1) surveillance of the environment, (2) correlation of the

parts of society in responding to that environment (explaining to various publics what the news and information being transmitted means to them), and (3) transmission of the cultural heritage from one generation to the next.[1] Another prominent researcher, Wilbur Schramm, said that in order for media messages to be successful, they must be designed and delivered in ways that gain attention, using language commonly understood by communicator and audience.[2]

Although these propositions were first offered years ago, they remain a valid description of the task facing today's media writers. A reporter's job is to look around and see what is happening, and then communicate what he or she deems important to the reading, listening, viewing, or texting public. Clarity in presenting the message is vital: If the audience doesn't understand what is being communicated, it will turn away from or misinterpret the message.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Increasingly, media messages have become part of the babble of background sound and activities. Multitasking has become the norm. It is rare for people to *only* read a newspaper or *only* watch TV or *only* have a conversation. They often do one or more while engaged in other activities without paying attention to the background the various mass media provide.

In many respects, Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan was right when he said, "The medium is the message," meaning that societies have always been more influenced by the form of communication than by its content. Long before CNN and satellite TV, McLuhan envisioned an electronic "global village" of shared experiences and information, a holistic environment shattering the isolated "linear" bonds that print communication fostered. McLuhan said that society had entered a new age in which our world and surroundings were changing rapidly. While he cited television, as responsible for "reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life," McLuhan's observations have been exponentially compounded by the rise of the internet and the social media. This new world of electronic information media, he said, involves all of us all at once. Information pours upon us instantaneously and continuously: as soon as we acquire information, it is rapidly replaced by still newer information.[3] Whether this new information environment will eventually bring us together as imagined or continue to drive us apart as a society remains to be seen.

Ironically, with all of the various information resources available today, people often read superficially or listen with only one ear to a radio or TV report. This inattention contributes to what is known as **perceptual distortion**, the tendency to introduce inaccuracies in perceiving what the writer or announcer said. A cardinal rule of newswriting to remember is that what the communicator sends by way of a message

is less important than what the audience receives and perceives. Often, these two are quite different.

One reason why people of different ages, genders, races, or religions sometimes receive the same information but take from it different meanings is addressed by the theory of **denotative** and **connotative** meanings of words and symbols. People attach denotative labels (standard, descriptive names) to things, concepts, and ideas but they also put their own connotations (interpretations of meaning or value) on those same things, concepts and ideas based on their experiences, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. For instance, the denotative meaning of a "No Smoking" sign outside your classroom building is that no smoking is permitted inside. Even that simple message has connotations. If a student has trouble making it through a 50-minute class without a cigarette, he or she might feel that "they" are abridging personal rights by prohibiting smoking. A nonsmoker, on the other hand, might interpret the sign as protecting the health of students and faculty.

Another source of message distortion is audience reaction to **cognitive dissonance**.[4] The theory of cognitive dissonance says that people can tolerate only so much emotional upset and, when information we receive is different from that which we accept or with which we are comfortable, our mind seeks a balance by rejecting or modifying the dissonant information. An example is when a news report of a disaster is so emotionally jarring that internal psychological defenses are set up in order to cope with the message.

Finally, two types of communication interference, **physical noise** and **semantic noise**,[5] are present in the process of message transmission. Physical noise is anything that distorts the reception of the message—background sounds that drown out a speaker, static, or similar problems. In theory, it can be corrected. Semantic noise is confusion caused by using words or phrases that the audience cannot understand or might misinterpret. Although semantic noise is harder to deal with, effective media writing can eliminate most of its associated problems.

MEDIA RESEARCH AND THEORY

Media research shows audiences are very interactive.[6] Although many people think TV audiences are composed of mindless "couch potatoes," only a small proportion of viewers fall into that category. More typical is the "channel surfer," who zips through cable-system offerings—a type of behavior that also shows up in online media use. Several theories have been developed to explain differences and similarities in media habits. All are directly applicable to media writers because they explain how people receive and distort media messages.

Individual Differences Theory

According to the theory of **individual differences**, people are unique in the way they approach media messages. Individual demographics and experiences shape audience

perceptions of communicators and their transmissions. Therefore, the credibility of sources and the way issues-oriented messages are viewed can change from person to person.

Social Categories Theory

While audiences possess individual traits that determine responses to messages, **social categories** theory maintains that people who share similar demographic characteristics will respond similarly to a message. Research has shown, for instance, that women interpret a television news report differently than men. Women (a social category) tend to remember feature news and pay attention to visual background detail, while men (another social category) tend to remember factual detail at the expense of the other.[7]

Social Influence

Often, social categories can be particularly strong when they involve members of a close-knit group, even though the group may have a diversified membership. The theory of **social influence** states that members of a group can construct an artificial reality for themselves, strong enough even to reject appealing mass-media messages or portrayals.[8] Youthful members of a close-knit religious fellowship who do not drink, for example, will not change their behavior no matter how appealing the beer commercial—with all those suntanned people frolicking on the beach and drinking lots of beer with nary a bathroom in sight—because of the social ostracism that would follow.

Selective Processes

Because so many media voices compete for attention, people's media behaviors are influenced by the so-called **selective processes**: selective attention or exposure, selective perception, selective retention, and even selective recall. The selective processes theory contends that although exposure to some media messages may be accidental, for the most part audience members choose whether to pay attention. Because it is impossible to read, hear, and see everything in our mass media environment, people selectively expose themselves to messages they feel will be of interest or help to them and interpret them according to their biases. Then, because it is impossible to remember everything, only information that seems salient (important) is retained. What is retained, some scholars insist, is subject to the distortion of selective recall. Events or facts are remembered or subconsciously altered in a way that reinforces beliefs and attitudes or staves off cognitive dissonance.[9]

Stereotypes

A filtering process takes place as readers, listeners, and viewers interpret facts, statements, and events. Audiences rely on **stereotypes**, the mental images people use as a simplified representation of reality. According to newspaper columnist Walter

Lippmann, who first wrote about stereotypes in 1921, "Whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself, for the real environment is altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance." Gradually, we develop a mental picture of the world that seems true to us, then respond to this pseudo-environment as though it were true.[10] Although stereotypes can impede information flow, audiences—as well as news organizations—have long used them in stories about race, gender, age, politics, or international relations.

Wants and Needs Gratification

In explaining basic audience behavior, the theory of **wants and needs gratification** maintains that an audience will not pay attention to a media message unless the message or the medium fulfills some perceived want or need. According to the theory, all media behavior is based on the expectation of reward.[11] Even collapsing on the couch at the end of the day "just to watch some TV" is a form of the wants and needs theory in operation. So is watching a "slice-and-dice" horror film with friends in order to be part of the group, even though you may not care for that film genre.

Opinion Leaders

Years ago, researchers identified what became known as the **two-step flow of communication**, in which media messages travel to influential community members known as **opinion leaders**, who then explain the significance of the messages to those who look to them for guidance.[12] For example, labor leaders are opinion leaders for union members; respected business leaders are opinion leaders for residents of a town. Opinion leaders also may be influential people in medicine, education, the clergy, or advocates for social causes. Political partisans or advocates for social causes direct their message to the like-minded. Newspapers, with editorials or political endorsements, remain important opinion leaders. This theory has since been expanded to a multi-step flow of mediated communication, with multiple opinion leaders providing various levels of influence and interpretation in a dynamic process between receiver and sources.[13] Individuals increasingly bypass opinion leaders entirely, creating their own interpretation of events and ideas relayed by social media. Thus, instead of creating messages for a relatively homogeneous audience, today's media writers must consider a diverse audience, with each member having distinct interests and insisting that individual demands be met.

Narcotizing Dysfunction

Members of audiences sometimes remain unmoved by media messages. For example, although the amount of political information and advertisements has increased, political participation continues to decline. Research has identified a phenomenon known

as the **narcotizing dysfunction**, which is often seen among people who pay close attention to news and public affairs issues without acting on that knowledge.[14] These well-informed people choose not to vote or take part in community government because overexposure makes messages seem confusing and contradictory. Thus, these members of the audience do not make decisions, even though they are relatively well informed.

Cultivation

Media research has concluded that many people's values and worldviews are related to their media exposure. For heavy viewers of news, public affairs, and political talk shows that match their political or social biases, those programs become their version of reality and the manner in which topics discussed on the programs becomes salient. Local news broadcasts are particularly effective in cultivating certain perceptions of reality of the community. Likewise, those who view violent TV programs may cultivate that view of the environment as reality—"the city is a dangerous place"—or accept similar stereotypes. **Cultivation** theory, then, postulates that mass media, especially television, "cultivate" a perception of reality. People who extensively consume media share those views more than mild or moderate media users.[15]

Acculturation

News professionals are not immune to being influenced by what they do. The theory of **acculturation** suggests that news reporters adopt the attitudes and behaviors of those they cover. Police reporters, for instance, at times are stronger supporters of law and order than many police officers. Political reporters may take on the views of people about whom they report, which is why the networks periodically shift White House, State Department, and Pentagon correspondents to different beats. In those examples, news people have become socialized into adopting the mindset of their environment—often without their conscious knowledge—and they pass those values on to the audience.

Spiral of Silence

Not everyone buys into the values and world view expressed by the mass media. The **spiral of silence** theory says that fear of isolation or separation from those around them prevents people from expressing their opinions when they perceive themselves to be in the minority.[16] As more people with out-of-the-mainstream views withdraw from public debate, the majority appears even stronger. Because mainstream media present a common view of the world and imply that it is accepted by most people, those who disagree with the media's perception often remain silent for fear of being considered out of step. Instead, those minority views are expressed only when legitimized by the

media. Spiral of silence theory also explains the hostility many people feel toward the news media. People who do not agree with the thrust, bias, or social values of a news report may believe they are in the minority or powerless to effect change. If so, they may internalize their resentment rather than speak out, at least until election day.

Implications for Media Writers

What does all this theory mean in practice for the media writer? It is a reminder that communication is not simple and carries no guarantee of success. What the media most commonly do is reinforce opinions, attitudes and beliefs, and maintain the status quo.[17] For the most part, audiences will reject or ignore messages that run counter to already-held opinions, attitudes and beliefs, even those are carried by the powerful traditional or social media. Some attitude modification is possible through the mass media, however, an effect often seen when public opinion polls record a decline in "undecided" respondents in favor of one position or another. The mass media also can serve as powerful educational mechanisms in the diffusion of new ideas or the creation of new attitudes in novel or changing circumstances.[18] The challenge to the media writer, then, is to write and report stories in a way that avoids creating cognitive dissonance and slips through the selective process filters to be retained because the stories appeal to some want or need felt by members of the audience. Such writing is not always easy.

THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Like many other businesses—and journalism, broadcast news and public relations are businesses, make no mistake about that—the field has its maxims and sayings. One of them is attributed to Wilbur Storey, editor of the *Chicago Times* during the late nineteenth century, who said the role of the newspaper was "to print the news and raise hell." His contemporary, Charles Dana of the *New York Sun*, said newspapering consisted of buying newsprint at two cents a pound and selling it for 10 cents a pound. About 80 years after Storey and Dana broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow told his colleagues that television was a mixture of information, entertainment, and sales, and that when the three were gathered together under one tent, the dust never settled.[19]

Public relations began with communication efforts of organizations to generate positive public opinion. Edward Bernays, one of the original thinkers in the field, broke new ground in the early 1920s when he helped create what was to become the public relations profession. He defined public relations as the process of "crystallizing public opinion," which involved the "engineering of consent" based on Thomas Jefferson's principle that in a democratic society, everything depends on the consent of the public.[20]

All these quotes reflect a tension that remains in the communication business. The organizational structure, management, and newsroom operations reflect the at times

conflicting dynamics of serving the public and making money. Although all three media formats share news values and the need for solid writing skills, they differ in their treatment of the news message. Print can go in depth on non-visual stories that broadcasting would never cover. Broadcasters are interested in sound bites and visuals that may not lend themselves to print treatment. Public relations writers face the challenge of getting their advocacy messages carried through the media. Unavoidably, editorial decisions are dictated by the nature of the medium and the economic necessity of drawing and keeping an audience.

Roles Within the Media

As a beginning journalist, broadcaster, or public relations practitioner, you will find realities far different from the idealistic concepts lectured about in colleges and universities. To print or broadcast the news, the businesses that run newspapers, radio, and television have to make a profit; public relations practitioners also must be sensitive to the well-being of their businesses or organizations when they deal with reporters.

Gatekeeping

Communication theory recognizes people called **gatekeepers**, those who open and shut the gates of communication, thereby determining what an audience sees, hears, and reads. Individual newspaper beat reporters, and editors are examples of gatekeepers; they decide which stories will be covered, whether the coverage appears in print, and, if so, how it is reported. Radio and television news directors, assignment editors, program producers, and field reporters perform a similar gatekeeping function, as do those who determine a radio station's playlist for the week or a TV station's late-movie offerings. Newsletter gatekeepers include the editor and contributors. Public relations practitioners are also gatekeepers, monitoring and controlling the flow of information from their organizations as well as access to their sources.[21]

As the information environment has become more complex, the number of gatekeepers has soared. Their decisions are generally based upon news values, as well as what will be effective in the competition for readers, listeners, and viewers and how the information will impact those audiences.

Agenda Setting

An important element of the news professional's job is **agenda setting**. Agenda-setting theory holds that the mass media determine what is important by starting newscasts with a particular story or printing it on page one. When news gatekeepers no longer consider an item to be of importance, it is allowed to slip off the public agenda. Although agenda-setting theory concedes the primacy of the media's role in determining

which events are important, it concludes that media outlets only tell audiences what to think about, not what to think.[22] It could be argued that, with the increasing advocacy by politically biased networks, cable channels, and social media platforms, this theory may need to undergo reevaluation because people increasingly pay attention only to news outlets consistent with one's beliefs.

Public relations practitioners have learned to be attentive to the topics being covered in the media, because they present an opportunity for their organization to address a topic that is on the media agenda. A high-profile celebrity who goes public with an admission of depression, for instance, may provide the news peg for a mental health clinic to give media interviews on how to identify and deal with the condition.

Framing

While agenda setting deals with the perceived newsworthiness of an issue, **framing** focuses on the manner of presentation of the story. Seen often in coverage of political news or social issues, the theory attempts to explain how the news media frame a story. Is a political candidate "ahead," "surging," or "falling behind"? Is there an inherent "good guy" or "bad guy" in the story? Whose version of events gets top billing? Which version becomes the standard against which other points of view are measured? Framing provides for a rhetorical context for the text, involving the use of metaphor, story-telling, myths, legends, jargon, word choice, and other narrative elements, including "spin."

For example, a report on repeat driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol might be framed in several ways: criminal recidivism, police incompetence, lenient judges, or the power of addiction. Agenda setting tells audiences what to think about; framing theory suggests the media influence how the audience thinks about an issue.[23]

Issue Attention Cycle

A related theory, the **issue attention cycle**, says that the news media and public ignore a serious problem for years, then for some reason they suddenly notice it. The national debate about global warming is a good example. Policy makers declare it a crisis and concoct a solution. The other half of the theory says that when it is realized the problem will be costly and not easily fixed the first reaction is for everyone to become angry, then bored, then finally to resume ignoring the problem.[24]

Status Conferral

This theory says that, because of their influential nature, the mass media confer status and legitimacy on people, organizations, and ideas.[25] Thus, if a person appears on TV as an expert on an issue, that appearance enhances his or her reputation. After all, if people were not important, according to the theory, they wouldn't appear on

television, because TV and cable doesn't have time for unimportant issues, ideas, or people. The status conferral theory implies that reporters need to be careful in covering news about groups. When choosing sources to quote, it is important to ensure that the source or organization is indeed legitimate and representative.

CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF NEWS

Traditionally, the mass media have provided a sense of broader community, reflecting who and what Americans are as people, while also influencing social trends and traditions. In recent years, however, newspapers and news reports have become as fragmented as the audiences they serve. Faced with a proliferation of alternative media outlets, newspapers have felt it necessary to become more reader-oriented in order to retain their share of a fragmenting audience. Broadcast reporters find the competition even more intense. Increasingly, news is becoming more featurized and user-oriented—more of what people appear to want, rather than what the newspaper editor or stories broadcast news director thinks they need.

Fewer network news stories are straight news accounts, and even those tend to have a more mediated or thematic approach with an emphasis on people, human interest, scandal, and "news you can use." There has been a substantial decline in straight news stories, in-depth analyses, and international stories on the major network newscasts. Instead, the move has been toward consumer and health news. Prime time network news magazines, which have replaced documentaries on network television, have all but abandoned traditional topics such as government, social welfare, education, and economics in favor of celebrities, sensational crime, lifestyles, and other feature fare.

Fewer resources are being put into newsgathering because revenues are down sharply in the traditional media. As a result, more newspaper reporters are being turned from specialists back into generalists; most local radio stations have virtually no reporters in the field and fewer local TV news stories feature correspondents. On television, the range of topics is narrowing even more to crime and accidents, plus weather, traffic, and sports. Any internet sites that have tried to produce original news content have struggled financially; those that are thriving rely almost entirely on the work of others. Among blogs, only five percent of their content is what journalists would call reporting.

"FAKE NEWS"

Fake news has been around since antiquity. In the thirteenth century B.C. Pharaoh Ramses II spread propaganda regarding his military prowess. Egypt today has scores of scenes of his victories carved on ancient temples and monuments; some reflect true events, many do not. Octavian, later to become the Emperor Augustus, ran a disinformation campaign

against rivals Antony and Cleopatra about the outcome of the naval battle of Actium in 31 B.C., which ultimately led to their deaths. During the Roman second and third centuries A.D. pagans and Christians traded invented, exaggerated stories about each other's immorality and cruelty. In the Middle Ages there were periodic rumors that Jews killed Christian children and used their blood for religious or ritual purposes. This "blood libel" permeated much of the European mindset for centuries, leading to discrimination, periodic pogroms and, ultimately, the Holocaust.

In America, Benjamin Franklin wrote fake news accounts about murderous Indians on the frontier working in league with British soldiers in order to sway public opinion in favor of revolution against the crown. False stories about potential slave revolts kept the South on edge during the early to mid-nineteenth century, inflaming passions that ultimately led to civil war.

Mass-produced newspapers found that fake news stories were good for circulation. The *New York Sun* in 1835 published a story reporting the purported discovery by astronomers of life on the moon, with winged creatures floating above the cratered landscape. During the Civil War correspondents "wrote up" commanding officers from lower ranks to general, either to curry favor or to have access to the regimental whiskey supply. In the 1890s, the Yellow Press rivalry in New York between Joseph Pulitzer's *World* and William R. Hearst's *Journal*, who blamed Spain for the destruction of the battleship Maine in Havana harbor, helped precipitate the Spanish-American War.[26] Exaggerated reports of German cruelty during World War I helped sway U.S. public opinion to support intervention on the Allied side. After the war, when many of the most sensational stories were debunked, it led to a mindset that refused to accept stories of Nazi atrocities, even when the death camps were finally liberated late in World War II.

A more recent example: One of the national tabloid newspapers had a front-page story that said President George H. W. Bush was conferring with aliens on strategy during the 1991 Gulf War. It featured a picture of a Roswell-type creature with the president in the White House Oval Office!

The preceding examples really were fake news, but what makes what is termed "fake news" so insidious in today's social media environment is that it undermines trust in the credibility of the mainstream media. It leaves people not knowing what to believe, or else they cling to preconceived notions that match their own version of reality. Politicians use the term to deride factual news reports that run counter to their public or private positions and instead offer "alternate" versions of reality. This resulting undermining of democratic norms is spreading to other countries, too, as would-be strongmen use the "fake news" term to denounce or demonize their political opponents. The belief by a considerable segment of the U.S. population that much news is "fake news" won't end soon, even if reporters are unerringly accurate. Social media spread messages faster than traditional media, unintended mistakes are still going to occur, and people will continue to ignore information that's contrary to their beliefs. It's a reality that poses a difficult challenge for both novice and seasoned reporters.

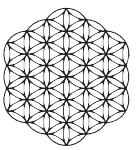
THEORIES OF THE PRESS

The way in which news is covered in American society reflects two important press theories: **libertarianism** and **social responsibility**.[27] Historically, when printing by movable type developed in the latter half of fifteenth-century Europe, authoritarian governments sought to control this new and expanding form of communication. Printers were licensed and expected to support and advance the ruler's policies, and criticism of the political system or those in power was not tolerated. The press was regulated by government guidelines, restrictive press laws, censorship, and by the granting of printing licenses only to those deemed politically reliable.

Libertarianism

Although the authoritarian system still exists under some repressive governments, authoritarian press theory gave way in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States and parts of Western Europe to a libertarian concept, based on the philosophy of rationalism and natural rights. **Libertarianism** relies on a "marketplace of ideas," in which anyone with a viewpoint has the right to publish it without prior government approval. Although the purpose of the press is to inform, entertain, and sell goods, its primary responsibilities are to help discover truth, be a "watchdog" for society, and provide a check on government. Crucial to the American media system is the First Amendment to the Constitution, a logical extension of libertarian theory, which says, "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." Because of the First Amendment, which basically affirms an individual's right to speak his or her mind, the mass media are permitted wide latitude in what they can report, and relatively narrow constraints are placed on what is actionable in court after publication.

BOX 1.1 Notable Quotes on Freedom of Speech and the Press



Hugo Black: *The Press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of the government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people.*

James Madison: *Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the*

BOX 1.1 *(continued)*

power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both.

Benjamin Franklin: Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government; when this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins. Republics . . . derive their strength and vigor from a popular examination into the action of the magistrates.

John F. Kennedy: *Our press was protected by the First Amendment—the only business in America specifically protected by the Constitution—not primarily to amuse and entertain, not to emphasize the trivial and the sentimental, not to simply "give the public what it wants," but to inform, to arouse, to reflect, to state our dangers and our opportunities, to indicate our crises and our choices, to lead, mold, educate and sometimes even anger public opinion.*

E. W. Scripps: *Give light and the people will find their own way.*

Albert Einstein: *Laws alone cannot secure freedom of expression; in order that every man present his views without penalty there must be spirit of tolerance in the entire population.*

Thomas Jefferson: *The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed.*

Ronald Reagan: *Since the founding of this nation, freedom of the press has been a fundamental tenet of American life. The economic freedom that has earned us such great bounty and the precious freedoms of speech and assembly would have little meaning or be totally nullified should freedom of the press ever be ended. There is no more essential ingredient than a free, strong, and independent press to our continued success in what the Founding Fathers called our "noble experiment" in self-government.*[28]

Social Responsibility

While libertarianism says that anyone with the economic means to be heard is entitled to a voice in the marketplace of ideas, by the early twentieth century access to the marketplace was being choked off by increased costs and consolidation of ownership. Not everyone who wanted to could afford to start or own a newspaper and

libertarianism thus began to break down. To counter this negative impact caused by market forces, the concept of **social responsibility** developed in the 1940s and 1950s. Social responsibility said that because all voices could no longer be represented in the marketplace of ideas, the media had a responsibility to ensure that all viewpoints were expressed and that conflict was to be elevated to a plane of discussion. If the media did not voluntarily assume this role, the theory said, it might be necessary for some governmental or other agency to see that they did so. The notion of social responsibility reached its high point in the 1960s as an activist Federal Communications Commission (FCC) threatened and cajoled the radio and television industry in an attempt to elevate American broadcast standards and the U.S. Supreme Court began to pay more attention to media issues.

Now, the emphasis is increasingly on economics, not public service, a change in philosophy that will affect media writers in any of the communication professions because, increasingly, what is communicated is that which sells. With the emphasis on media deregulation and minimal governmental intervention, the United States seems to have returned to a libertarian-capitalist system, with the goal of reaching the largest possible audience at a maximum profit (increasingly with a minimum of staffing).

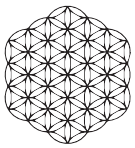
Mitigating this trend, a diffusion of new technologies has put publishing and broadcasting in the hands of the ordinary person, potentially slowing a return to a marketplace driven communication system. Desktop publishing, electronic mail, digital video, fiber optics, camcorders, and cell phones capable of recording pictures and video by amateurs, satellite transmission and, of course, the internet, blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, along with an array of other social media and technological advances, are increasingly turning publishing and network giants into mere voices in the crowd.

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

Your job in the communication business will be difficult because your "balanced perspective" is going to differ from that of the people you write about or who read, watch, and listen to what you write. Thus, being aware of the theories explained in this chapter is important. Cognitive dissonance, the selective processes, and the theory of wants and needs gratification inevitably make the media writer's job more difficult. The individual audience member is in control of how the message will be received, and people may not perceive it in ways the writer intended, or like what they read or hear. That's what the charge of "fake news" really means.

For years, journalists have adhered to the concepts of objectivity and fairness: All sides of an issue must be presented neutrally for the readers, viewers, or listeners to make up their mind. Although media writers continue to strive for fairness and balance, there's no guarantee that our sources or audience will like us in the future any more than they do now.

BOX 1.2 It Happened to Me: Theoretically Speaking



As a general-assignment TV news reporter, I daily encountered applications of communication theory. One expectation by our assignment editor was that the station's reporters would be alert for visual breaking news stories such as fires, accidents, and crime (*the surveillance function of mass media*), although I kept in mind that my video could not be too graphic (*thereby causing cognitive dissonance*). I covered courts and county government, which involved explaining the proceedings and issues to viewers (*the correlation function*), although I knew I had to keep those explanations brief to maintain viewer interest (*wants and needs gratification*).

On occasion, I would have the pleasure of interviewing noted artists, musical performers, and actors for the newscast (*transmission of the social heritage*). In covering election campaigns, I had to be careful about maintaining balance when reporting about a candidate I liked or with whose positions I agreed (*acculturation*). In deciding whether to cover minor-party candidates (*agenda setting*), I had to weigh how viable they seemed, because if they appeared on the newscast, their views would be deemed more credible simply because they appeared on television (*status conferral*).

I routinely interviewed the mayor and other influential people within the community (*opinion leaders*), although I knew that whatever I reported would be filtered through the bias of the viewers (*stereotypes, individual differences*). At times, I would have to "sell" a story to the news producer (*gatekeeper*) because, like other reporters, I had a strong sense that a variety of viewpoints should be heard and that I had an implicit obligation to make that happen (*social responsibility*).

Theory is an abstract? No, not really.—*WRW*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following are class discussion questions drawn from Chapter 1:

1. What has been the impact of what the authors call the *New* New Media on the dissemination of news and information? Why is it important to print and broadcast journalists, as well as to public relations professionals?

2. Is Lasswell's theory of the surveillance, correlation, and transmission function of the press still valid? Explain.
3. Define and explain the importance to media writers of two of the following terms: cognitive dissonance, perceptual distortion, individual differences theory, selective processes, stereotypes, wants and needs gratification theory, cultivation, agenda setting, status conferral, issue attention cycle.
4. Which press theory is "best": libertarian or social responsibility? Why?
5. So, why don't people like the media? What can be done about it?

CHAPTER EXERCISES

1.1—Media Activities Log

Keep a log of your media activities for a week. Which communication theories do you see in operation in your uses of the various media?

1.2—More Regulation?

Should there be increased governmental regulation to enforce the social responsibility theory? Is this even possible? In subgroups of the class, analyze how socially responsibly the media covered a specific news event. Discuss your conclusions in class.

Exercise 1.3—Interview with "Keep 'em Out"

Ace newspaper reporter Kent Clarke receives a call from the media-relations director for "Keep 'em Out," a controversial anti-immigration group. It has vigorously pressured Congress to pass restrictive immigration legislation, strongly supports completion of a physical and electronic separation barrier between the United States and Mexico as a means of keeping out unwanted immigrants and has spearheaded the formation of local armed militias in the Southwest that some have condemned as vigilantes. Because of its strident views with racist overtones, the organization has had difficulty getting its message out, so the media relations director offers Kent the opportunity to conduct an in-depth interview with the group's national president, who is in town for a speech at your college or university.

For Kent, the situation poses an ethical dilemma. He knows that the FBI has been watching the activities of the organization and running checks on allegations of trafficking in weapons and responsibility for attacks on immigrants, although none of its members have been charged with any wrongdoing, let alone been arrested or convicted. Kent does not agree with the group's positions but he knows that many of his readers do. He is fearful that if he does a balanced, in-depth piece, he's going to legitimize

what he feels is a dangerous organization, if not one that tacitly supports hate crimes against legal and undocumented immigrants. On the other hand, he knows that many readers disagree with the group's position and that the paper will probably be deluged with calls and emails protesting *any* story on the organization. Either way the story is covered, some subscriptions may be canceled and a few influential advertisers might even drop their ads or try to induce others to do the same.

Discuss Kent Clarke's responsibility to his newspaper, to his readership and, more broadly, to what he considers the general welfare. If he does the interview, how should he handle it? If he doesn't do the interview, has he missed an opportunity to open debate on a polarizing issue? What should he do?

NOTES

1 Harold D. Lasswell. "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in *The Communication of Ideas*, ed. Lyman Bryson (Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1948), pp. 37–51.
2 Wilbur Schramm. "How Communication Works," in *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (University of Illinois Press, 1954), pp. 13–17.
3 See Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (Bantam Books, 1967); and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964).
4 This concept was first recognized by Leon A. Festinger in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957).
5 The principle of noise was identified by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (University of Illinois Press, 1949).
6 The theory says that media use is motivated by the needs and goals defined by members of the audience. See Mark Levy and Sven Windahi, "The Concept of Audience Activity," in *Media Gratifications Research: Current Perspectives*, ed. K.E. Rosengren et al. (Sage, 1985), p. 110.
7 W. Richard Whitaker, "A Comparison of Viewer Reaction to Color Versus Black and White Television News," unpublished master's thesis (University of Oregon School of Journalism, 1969).
8 These aspects of influence theory research were best summarized by Melvin DeFleur in *Theories of Mass Communication* (McKay, 1970).
9 The selective processes were identified by Joseph Klapper in *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Free Press, 1960).
10 Walter Lippmann. *Public Opinion* (Macmillan, 1921).
11 Uses and gratifications theory began with Wilbur Schramm, who said that people weigh the level of reward (gratification) from a media message against how much effort they must make to receive that reward. See Schramm, *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, p. 19. Several years later, Elihu Katz suggested that communications researchers begin studying what people do with the media instead of what the media do to people. See Elihu Katz, "Mass Communication Research and the Study of Popular Culture," *Studies in Public Communication* 2 (1959):1–6.
12 The pioneer study of the two-step flow of communication and the opinion leader function took place in Erie County, Ohio, during the 1940 presidential election. See Paul Lazarsfeld

et al., *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944); and Elihu Katz, "The Two-Step Flow of Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 61–78.

13 A complex system representation, Westley and MacLean's model, depicted a process in which communicators send out messages, obtain feedback, and adjust their actions. See Bruce Westley and Malcolm MacLean, "A Conceptual Model for Mass Communication Research," *Journalism Quarterly* 34 (1957): 31–38.

14 Paul E. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action," in *Mass Communications*, ed. Wilbur Schramm (University of Illinois Press, 1960), pp. 501–502.

15 Cultivation theory was developed by George Gerbner, who wrote a series of articles over the years critical of the effect of television violence on children and television's impact on the general population. See George Gerbner, "The 'Mainstreaming' of America," *Journal of Communication* 30 (1980): 10–29; and George Gerbner et al. "Charting the Mainstream: Television's Contributions to Political Orientations," *Journal of Communication* 32 (1982): 100–127.

16 See Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion," *Journal of Communication* 24 (1974): 43–51; and Noelle-Neumann's response to critics, "The Spiral of Silence: A Response," in *Political Communication Yearbook*, *1984*, ed. K.R. Sanders et al. (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

17 Joseph Klapper, in *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Free Press, 1960), said that the primary influence of the media is to reinforce behaviors, providing people with reasons to go on doing what they do.

18 Everett Rogers, in *Diffusion of Innovations* (Free Press, 1983), noted that mass media have been particularly effective in promoting change in developing countries.

19 Biographies of these journalists make excellent reading. The best biography of Storey is by Justin E. Walsh, *To Print the News and Raise Hell* (University of North Carolina Press, 1968). Candace Stone, *Dana and the Sun* (Dodd Mead, 1938), is a readable treatment of Dana and his paper. Ann Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times* (Freundlich Books, 1986) has the most thorough treatment of the CBS legend, regarded by many as the best-ever broadcast journalist.

20 See Edward L. Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (Boni & Liveright, 1923), and Bernays' memoirs, *Biography of an Idea* (Simon & Schuster, 1965).

21 The term *gatekeeper* was first used by social scientist Kurt Lewin. See David M. White, "The 'Gatekeeper,' a Case Study in the Selection of News," *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (1950): 383–390.

22 Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (1972): 176–187.

23 See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harper & Row, 1974); D.A. Scheufele "Framing as a Theory of Media Effects," *Journal of Communication* 49 (1) (1999): 103–122; Gail T. Fairhurst and Robert A. Sarr, *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 1996); T.E. Nelson, Z.M. Oxley, and R.A. Clawson, "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects," *Political Behavior*, 19 (3), (1997): 221–246; Z. Pan and G.M. Kosicki, "Framing as a Strategic Action in Public Deliberation," in *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*, eds. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), pp. 35–66.

24 The theory is that of Anthony Downs of the Brookings Institution, from "Up and Down With Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention Cycle'," *The Public Interest* 28 (1972): 38–50.

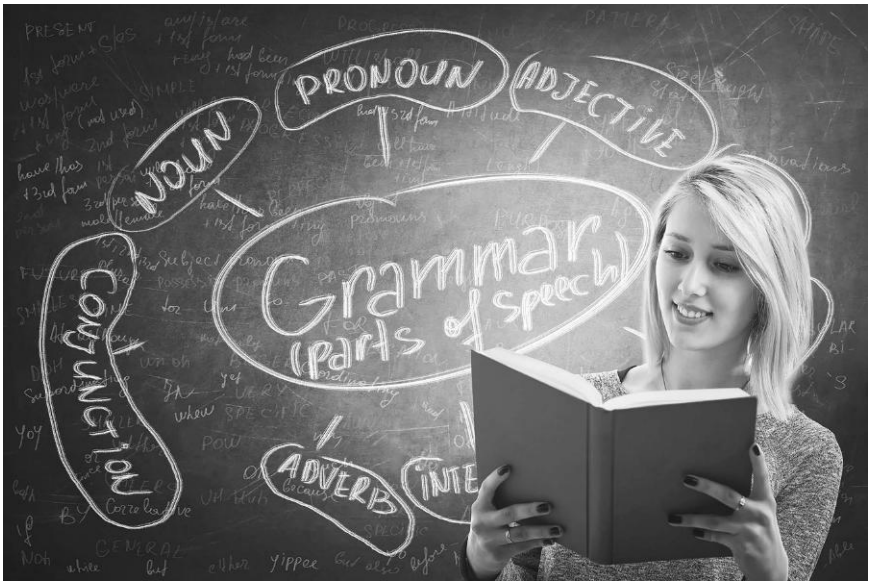
25 Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action," in *The Communication of Ideas*, ed. Lyman Bryston (Harper and Brothers, 1948). James B. Lemert of the University of Oregon published numerous status conferral studies over the years.

26 See https://wikivividly.com/wiki/Fake_News. Search the term "Fake News" for other examples.

27 From Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (University of Illinois Press, 1956). The fourth theory was Soviet communism.

28 Sources: Hugo Black, a staunch defender of freedom of expression, was an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court from 1937–1971 (www.azquotes.com/author/1445-Hugo_Black). James Madison, who wrote most of the Constitution, was America's fourth president (www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/63859.James_Madison). From Franklin's essay "*On Freedom of Speech and the Press*" Pennsylvania Gazette, November 17, 1737 (www.historyguy.com/Benjamin_Franklin_Freedom_of_Speech_Quote.htm). From a 1961 speech by President Kennedy to the American Newspaper Publisher's Assn.; (www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/American-Newspaper-Publishers-Association_19610427.aspx). Scripps was founder of the newspaper chain that bears his name and his quote has been featured on the front page of Scripps newspapers since 1922 (http://scripps.com/company). The brilliant scientist fled Nazi Germany for the U.S. in the 1930s (www.goodreads.com/quotes/21829-laws-alone-can-not-secure-freedom-of-expression-in-order). Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president, to the Marquis de Lafayette, 1823 (https://famguardian.org/Subjects/Politics/ThomasJefferson/jeff1600.htm). President Reagan, in a 1983 statement marking National Newspaper Week (www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/100683c.htm).

2 Fundamentals of Writing and Editing



Media writers are wordsmiths who need to know the essentials of grammar and word usage.

WRITING EFFECTIVELY

Effective writers have an enthusiasm, even a passion, for words. Just as musicians coordinate the sounds of instruments and voices to create captivating music, just as artists let beautiful pictures emerge from many different colors and shapes, so too do writers weave words into exquisite patterns of ideas. Media writers in particular seek

to inform and sometimes to motivate and persuade. To accomplish this goal, they use simple everyday words in original combinations to create rich understandings and new insights for their readers.

As a media writer, your aim should be to use words not to impress but rather to express. That is, don't write to show off. Indeed, writing that draws attention to itself is probably more showy than effective. Rather, try to create expressive writing that gives pleasure to your readers by helping them absorb information, gain insight, and explore ideas. Good media writers use language to present sophisticated information and ideas so that casual readers can understand and appreciate them.

Good writers are sufficiently involved with the conventions of English that they can concentrate not so much on following rules but rather on developing patterns of effective communication with audiences.

This chapter presents principles and guidelines rather than rules. Obeying the basic rules of writing does not guarantee good writing, though it does point the way toward an acceptable standard of writing. By reflecting on these principles and refining your writing through the various exercises presented in this chapter, you can develop your writing beyond mere acceptability. With practice, you can become a highly competent, even skilled writer.

You probably already have achieved a basic competency in the correct use of the English language. Before you read the remainder of this chapter, assess your writing skills by taking the diagnostic test in Exercise 2.1. When you have completed the test, review the answers. If you correctly identified all or most of the errors, congratulations! The test is difficult. Did you do better with word usage or punctuation? If you had some troublesome areas, concentrate on them as you study this chapter.

The basics of effective writing detailed in this chapter fall into four categories of principles: (1) standard usage, which creates a common bond between writer and reader; (2) simple language, which allows readers to understand the writer; (3) meaningful language, through which the writer can communicate a subtlety of ideas; and (4) inclusive language that avoids bias and giving offense. Following are basic principles in each category.

PRINCIPLES OF STANDARD USAGE

Writers communicate clearly with their audience by following the principles of **syntax**, the branch of grammar dealing with the arrangement and relationship of words in sentences.

1. Use Technically Accurate Language

The ultimate rule is to write so the reader can understand your intended meaning. To accomplish this goal, writers need to observe at least the baseline of technical accuracy

by following the canons of grammar, punctuation, and syntax. Use a comprehensive and up-to-date dictionary. The Associated Press recommends *Webster's New World Dictionary* and, as an even more complete source, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. In addition, adopt a good contemporary grammar reference book.

Follow the standard grammatical conventions of the language, but don't follow them blindly. For example, if a sentence that is grammatically accurate sounds stilted or confusing, rewrite the sentence. Writing should not only be correct, it also should read well.

Use correct spelling. Misspelled words signal a careless writer. Journalists and public relations writers cannot afford to have readers conclude that they are careless. When the dictionary or your computer's spellchecker lists two acceptable spellings, check the stylebook; one of the alternatives is likely preferred.

2. Use the Appropriate Level of Formality

Effective media writers use what has been called **operational English** or **standard English**. In the news media, this is sometimes called **network standard** because it is the measure of appropriate language for broadcasting in every part of the country. Some label it "the language of wider communication." Whatever it is called, this English is the version you will use professionally, the one on which this textbook is based.

English has a rich diversity of forms and formalities, and it ranges from the very formal language of legal documents to the informal conversational style and the ultra-relaxed writing associated with texting. Editorial or column writers might use a fairly formal style, including words and phrases such as *it is to be noted that* and *according to one's abilities*. Journalists writing straight news stories would not use such formal phrasing, but they would maintain a neutral stance, such as when they report on a survey of college graduates by referring to those polled as *they* rather than *we*. A feature or editorial writer, on the other hand, might feel free to use *you* and *us* and perhaps even sentence fragments in a lighter, more conversational writing style. On Twitter, you might write of the need to *go str8 2 the source*.

A public relations writer preparing a newsletter story or a service article might use an informal and personal style, and an even more conversational tone for a fundraising letter. Meanwhile, an advertising copywriter might prepare an ad full of sentence fragments and pop jargon. English is a language with such diversity that it can accommodate many different styles and purposes. Here is a comparison of the various aspects of formal and informal language:

Formal Language

- *He*, *she*, *they* in reference to readers
- Complete sentences
- Compound sentences with phrases and clauses

- Complex sentences with frequent use of modifying phrases and clauses
- Passive voice
- No slang and/or colloquialisms
- Straight news articles and news releases, backgrounders, position statements, and editorials

Informal Language

- *You* in reference to readers
- Single words, phrases, and fragments
- Simple sentences in conversational order (subject, verb, object)
- Dashes and ellipses for incomplete or interrupted thoughts
- Active voice
- Contractions, slang and/or colloquialisms
- Feature articles, some columns, newsletter articles, brochures, advertising copy, and broadcast scripts

Try to write in a form appropriate for the audience. English has many cultural dialects, such as those associated with New England, the Ozarks, Louisiana's Cajun region, and the Pennsylvania Dutch country. Some linguists identify as many as 50 different dialects in U.S. English alone. There also are various dialects associated with British English and the versions used in Canada, Australia, and Scotland. Dialects also may be associated with urban hip-hop, down-home country, or ValleySpeak. Some dialects are cultural, such as the Spanglish sometimes heard in Hispanic communities.

Although the general advice is to use standard English in writing news stories, dialects occasionally can be appropriate. For example, a print journalist might capture with quotations the folksy allure of an Appalachian speaker. A broadcaster might make judicious use of street slang when interviewing a community advocate in an inner city. Sometimes a public relations writer or advertising copywriter might use a particular dialect when writing for a specific and narrowly defined audience.

The general guideline when writing in a particular dialect is to write, if not from experience, then at least from research. Write in a way that does not overplay the dialect or demean the people who lay personal claim to the language.

3. Avoid Grammatical Fictions

Accomplished writers understand that some "rules" are not rules at all. For example, the common advice to avoid sentence fragments is good advice, but it is not an absolute. Sentence fragments can enhance readability. Sometimes. Used with care.

Likewise, the supposed ban on splitting infinitives (*to* plus a verb) is a carryover rule from Latin, where it is impossible to split an infinitive because it is a single word.

But English separates the word *to* from its verb. An adverb added between the two carries particular emphasis, as in the phrases *to weakly protest* and *to quietly fume*.

Additionally, some words are becoming obsolete whereas others are being added to the language. *Shall* is one of those words that you probably can do without, especially because few people understand the rule for using *shall* instead of *will*. As for new words and novel usages coming into the language, media writers should take a conservative tack and avoid being on the leading edge of language innovation. OMG—That's not used in text writing for a term paper. LOL.

Experienced writers know that, on occasion, conventional guidelines for English may be bent to achieve special effects. The key is to do the bending carefully, infrequently, and with full knowledge of both the rule and the reason for bending it. Writers cannot claim creative license to justify sloppiness or ignorance. Generally, however, it is better to rewrite the sentence to avoid the need to bend the rule in the first place.

4. Avoid Bulky Sentences

With any type of sentence, writers should strive for simplicity. A good sentence delivers only one thought, and its phrases and clauses work to support the main thought rather than introduce extraneous information. This is especially important when you are writing for the broadcast media, because the audience will not have the opportunity to reread an awkward sentence. Often a sentence is cumbersome because the subject and verb are separated with phrases and/or clauses. It may be appropriate to revise the sentence, perhaps by using the intruding clauses as separate sentences.

5. Make Sure Subjects and Verbs Agree

In its basic form, the principle of subject–verb agreement is simple: A singular noun takes a singular verb and a plural noun takes a plural verb. That's why we write, *The truck is green* and *The trucks are green*.

Beyond the basics, things can get confusing. For example, **collective nouns** are words representing individuals working together as one unit; they may involve more than one person but are used in the singular form. In the sentence, *The management is considering the union offer*, the collective noun *management* is singular; it refers to a group of people who act as a single entity. So, it makes sense to write *The management is considering* when referring to the company leadership in general, but *The managers are considering* when referring to various individual administrators. Other commonly used collective nouns include *jury*, *team*, *couple*, and *audience*.

Be careful with nouns that, although they end in *s*, are singular in their use: *Public relations is a rewarding career* (even though your computer spell check may prompt an *are*). Other examples of singular nouns ending in *s* are *athletics*, *ethics*, *mathematics*, and *politics*. So, you write *Politics is competitive* and *Ethics is important*. Likewise,

take care with Latin-based words, such as *data* and *media*, which already are a plural construction. Write *The media are* rather than *The media is*.

Compound subjects are two or more nouns acting together as the subject of a plural verb. Even if one of the nouns in a compound subject is singular, treat the compound subject as plural: *Both the teacher and her class regret the delay*, even though both subjects (teacher and class) are singular. Of course, if both subjects of a compound subject are plural, the verb also is plural: *The players and the fans want a victory*. Plural verbs also are needed when one subject element is singular and the other is plural, as in *The coach and the owners are in agreement*.

It can be confusing when the compound subject includes both singular and plural elements joined by *or* or *nor*. In that case, the two subjects are not acting together, so use the verb appropriate to the noun closest to it. For example, write *Neither the editor nor the copyeditors were correct* or *Neither the copyeditors nor the editor was correct*. To sound more natural, use the singular noun before the plural.

Pronouns also can be confusing. Singular verbs go with pronouns that have a singular meaning: *anyone*, *anybody*, *each*, *either*, *everyone*, *everybody*, *neither*, *no one*, *nobody*, *someone*, *somebody*. Plural verbs go with pronouns having a plural meaning: *both*, *few*, *many*, *several*. However, in some situations, the verb is determined by the meaning in context: *all*, *any*, *most*, *none*, *some*. For example, write *Some of the book was destroyed* (a portion of the book), but *Some of the librarians* were *late for work* (several people).

Remember that *who* is the pronoun for people; *that* is for things, animals, and ideas. Despite increasingly sloppy use in tweets and some news crawls, it is not okay to refer to *people that* . . . You are striving to be a professional writer. Try to use the rules of good writing.

6. Make Sure Nouns and Pronouns Agree

The same logic that says singular nouns take singular verbs applies to nouns and pronouns. For example, in *The school lost its mascot*, the singular pronoun *its* agrees with *the school*. In *The players won their game*, the plural pronoun *their* agrees with *the players*.

With collective nouns, the guideline is to use a singular pronoun when the elements of the collective noun are acting as a unit. For example, write *The board will hold its monthly meeting* and *The team honored its coach*. When elements are acting individually, it is usually best to rewrite the sentence to avoid using the collective noun: *Members of the board* (not simply *The board*) *are asking for a special meeting* or *Members of the team were pleased with the new coach*.

7. Place Words Properly

Keep the meaning of a sentence precise by placing words where they belong, particularly by placing modifiers immediately next to the words they are supposed to modify.

Consider the many different meanings that result from the placement of a single word in the following sentences:

The only editor of the magazine recently complained about the photographer. (One editor)
The editor of the only magazine recently complained about the photographer. (One magazine)
The editor of the magazine only recently complained about the photographer. (Not earlier)
The editor of the magazine recently complained only about the photographer. (Not about the writer)
The editor of the magazine recently complained about the only photographer. (One photographer)

Both dangling modifiers with nothing to modify and misplaced modifiers far from what they modify can confuse writers and readers. Good syntax calls for phrases to modify the noun or pronoun that immediately follows them:

Going to the store, Beverly met her friend. (Beverly was going to the store. We don't know where her friend was going.)
The newsletter will include a picture about your award next month. (Is it next month's newsletter or will the award be presented next month?)

Sometimes, violations of this syntax may be confusing:

As a writer, I want your opinion about this piece. (Who is the writer, you or me? The word *I* following the introduction says it's me.)
To pass this course, study is important. (*Study* is not trying to pass this course.)

In other instances, violations of this syntax can be amusing, especially for the discerning reader who understands something about effective sentence structure. Consider this example:

While practicing jump shots, Grandma waited in the bleachers. (Was Grandma practicing jump shots from the bleachers? If so, go Grandma!)

8. Be Moderate with Adjectives and Adverbs

A principle of media writing—whether for print or broadcast journalism or for many elements of public relations—is to be judicious with adjectives and adverbs. Both are useful in explaining and qualifying. Both can be overused by beginning writers, who risk losing the objectivity sought by media writers.

Limiting adjectives qualify meanings, as in *The veteran firefighter ran through the side doorway carrying the 3-year-old child*. The limiting adjectives are *veteran*, *side*, and *3-year-old*; notice that each adjective is a factual word. Objective writers frequently use limiting adjectives because they can add rich detail to the story.

Descriptive adjectives also can enliven the basic information, as in *The exhausted firefighter ran through the blazing doorway carrying the terrified child*. The descriptive adjectives are *exhausted*, *blazing*, and *terrified*; they are more subjective than limiting adjectives. Media writers are careful with descriptive adjectives because they often ask the reader to rely on observations and conclusions of the writer.

Is a *30-story building* (limiting adjective) the same as a *tall building* (descriptive adjective)? The first is a matter of objective fact; the second asks the reader to accept the writer's interpretation of the meaning for the word *tall*. That meaning itself will be influenced by the frame of reference; 30 stories may not be tall for Manhattan, N.Y., but quite tall for Manhattan, Kan.

Adverbs do for verbs what adjectives do for nouns: They provide a degree of nuance or detail, as in, *The writer approached the assignment happily*. Or *fearfully*. Or *half-heartedly*. Adverbs can also modify adjectives, such as *breathtakingly beautiful*. Media writers use adverbs even more sparingly than adjectives. Adverbs often result from what the writer observed. Good media writers don't ask readers to accept the writer's conclusions, but they do provide details to allow readers to draw their own conclusions.

Media writers pay careful attention to adjectives and adverbs that reflect comparisons or degrees of intensity. Comparisons should make sense. Writers need to be accurate in using modifiers that are absolute (that is, those that cannot be modified by comparatives or superlatives). Absolutes include *first*, *last*, *only*, and *unique*. Never use a qualifier such as *very* with such words. Remember also that there is no "first annual" anything unless you are writing historically about something that began in the past.

9. Avoid Empty Phrases

Some words are like weeds. They simply take up space, hide the good stuff, and offer nothing of value. Effective writers avoid empty phrases such as *it is*, *there are*, and other forms of the linking verb *to be*:

Wimpy sentence: *There is a university plan to raise tuition.*
Stronger and more informative: *The university plans to raise tuition.*
Weak: *It will be legal for a 20 year old to buy beer when the new law goes into effect.*
Stronger: *A 20 year old may legally buy beer when the new law goes into effect.*

However, *it is* and *there are* occasionally serve a useful purpose. In some constructions, these phrases emphasize the subject of the sentence. For example, *It was my*

classmate who helped us understand this gives more attention to the subject than *My classmate helped me understand this*.

10. Keep Elements Parallel

Good writers make sure that items presented in a series are used in parallel fashion. Good writers don't mix elements in a series or switch voice. **Parallel structure** calls for repeating grammatical patterns, such as a series of nouns, verb phrases, infinitives, clauses, and so on. For example, it would clearly be unbalanced to write *The dog learned to fetch*, *play dead*, *and rolling over*. The final element is not parallel with the first two. Rather, a parallel construction would be *The dog learned to fetch*, *play dead*, *and roll over*.

Sometimes writers signal that a parallel structure is coming. Common ways to do this are with words like *either*, *neither*, *both*, and *not only*. The reader knows that two things are being introduced by these signals and that the writer will present them in parallel fashion:

We are interested in either going to the movies or attending a play. (Two gerund phrases)
Both when to go and what to see were decisions they left to their dates. (Two noun clauses)
My intention is neither to scold nor to intimidate. (Two infinitive phrases)

Another way writers signal parallel elements is by introducing a sequence: *First, mix in the milk and egg whites; second, knead the dough; third, bake for two hours*. Writers also may clearly signal that a series is coming: *This recipe has three steps: mixing in the milk and egg whites, kneading the dough, and baking for two hours*.

Often, parallel structure is accomplished by writing in threes:

I came, I saw, I conquered.
Government of the people, by the people, for the people . . .
Larry, Moe, and Curly

Such parallelism has a rhythm that can stir the reader. Another structure for parallelism is the **turnaround statement**. An example of this is found in President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address: *And so, my fellow Americans: Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country*.

11. Keep Punctuation Simple

Most writing appropriate for the media has fairly simple and standard punctuation. Broadcasting uses fairly simple punctuation, primarily commas and periods, while

print not only makes use of those and question marks, hyphens, and quotation marks. Go lightly on dashes and parentheses and be wary about using semicolons, colons, and exclamation points. Punctuation should help the reader (and the speaker) break up sentences and give guidance on how the sentence will sound.

Writers should use punctuation according to standard guidelines rather than whimsy. For example, commas create a pause in a sentence, but they are not used only for when a reader or speaker would pause. They also separate items in a series, separate two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction, and conclude long introductory phrases and clauses.

First, consider commas. The use of commas with internal clauses is perhaps the most problematic because the comma's use depends on the meaning of the clause. Do not use commas with essential (restrictive) clauses, which provide information crucial to the meaning of the sentence. Here is an example of an essential clause: *My brother who goes to community college will join me on spring break, but my brother who is in grad school can't be with us*. The *who* clauses are essential to the meaning of the sentence. They tell us which brothers can and can't go on spring break. Because each is an essential clause, no commas separate either from the rest of the sentence.

However, use commas with nonessential (nonrestrictive) clauses, which add nice-to-know information. Consider this sentence with a nonessential clause: *My roommate, who is on my soccer team, will join me on spring break*. Here we learn about one person, a roommate who also is a teammate. The teammate clause is optional and adds some useful information, but the sentence is complete without it. Being nonessential, the clause requires commas at both the beginning and the end.

The same can be said about phrases: Essential phrases take no commas. For example, *The girl standing in the yard is my friend* refers to a specific girl, the one standing, not another girl who is sitting on the lawn or walking down the street. The phrase *standing in the yard* is essential to clear meaning, so no commas are used. *The girl, standing in the yard, was waiting for the barbecue grill to heat up* gives us nice-to-know information about the girl (she was standing in the yard), but the description is not essential to the clear meaning of the sentence. Therefore, commas are used at the beginning and the end of the phrase.

Also use commas if they keep the reader from misreading an otherwise ambiguous sentence, such as after a long introductory clause or when repeating the same word:

Ambiguous sentence: *After meeting the teacher representatives of the PTA executive committee complained to the superintendent*.

Clearer sentence: *After meeting the teacher, representatives of the PTA complained to the superintendent*.

Or perhaps a very different meaning: *After meeting, the teacher representatives of the PTA complained to the superintendent*.

Or consider this sentence: *What I'm asking is, is this the best way to study for the test?* Without the comma, the sentence would be difficult to understand.

Beginning writers sometimes use a comma to connect two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction. This results in a syntax error called a **comma splice** or **comma fault run-on sentence**. For example, *The wallpaper is green, the paint is violet* is wrong because the comma is not strong enough to link the two clauses. Here are three ways to correct a comma splice:

1. Use a coordinating conjunction (such as *and*, *but*, *yet*, *for*, *however*, *or*, *nor*): *The wallpaper is green, but the paint is violet.*
2. Use a semicolon: *The wallpaper is green; the paint is violet.*
3. Divide it into two sentences: *The wallpaper is green. The paint is violet.*

Because they are used so often in news writing, quotation marks deserve special mention. Quotation marks are used to enclose direct quotations, separated by a comma (or, if appropriate, by a question mark) from the attribution that follows. When quoting only a partial sentence, do not use a comma to introduce or conclude the quotation. Quotation marks are almost never used in broadcast copy because the listener and viewer can't see them when the copy is read. Chapter 11 explains how to handle quotes in writing for radio and television.

Journalists also use quotation marks for titles of books, songs, TV shows, and other compositions, but not for titles of magazines or newspapers. Go figure! Better yet, go check out the stylebook.

A few rules apply to using quotation marks with other punctuation. A period or comma always goes before the concluding quotation mark: *"That's a nice story," said Tony, who had just finished reading "Of Mice and Men."* Always.

The position of a question mark depends on what it refers to. If the question mark is part of the quoted material, the question mark precedes the concluding quotation mark: *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is one of my favorite books*. If the entire sentence is a question, the question mark follows the closing quotation mark: *Who wrote "A Tale of Two Cities"?* The same principles apply to exclamation points.

12. Stick with the Stylebook

When Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," he obviously didn't have a media stylebook in mind. Stylistic consistency is important in media writing, but one of the nice things about writing for the media is that you don't have to memorize all the rules. Instead, you can turn to the stylebook. The news media have adopted certain language standards to help writers. Become familiar with the most commonly used standard, the *Associated Press Stylebook*. The

broadcast media also have specific stylebooks, and some publications and online public relations venues have their own in-house stylebooks as well. Blogs also should have a consistency in writing style.

PRINCIPLES OF SIMPLE LANGUAGE

"The first and most important thing of all, at least for writers today, is to strip language clean, to lay it bare down to the bone." Writer Ernest Hemingway gave that advice a half-century ago, and it remains true today. The power of language lies not in overpowering readers, but rather in easing them into a new awareness or a better understanding. Good writing is simple writing. Media writers need to remember that their readers are voluntary readers. People read newspapers and magazines, use online materials, follow broadcast scripts, and read public relations materials and advertising copy not because they have to but because they want to. And they will want to read only when they are able to understand the writing.

Here are a dozen principles relating to the writer's need to write clearly and simply.

1. Think Before You Write, Then Write Logically

Writing often becomes cumbersome because the writer has no clear idea of what he or she wants to say. Before starting the writing process, think about what you want to say and organize your thoughts in a logical order. Clear, readable sentences should follow easily when this step is carried out.

Then, write logically. Avoid colloquialisms that are jarringly inaccurate, such as a newspaper article that confusingly reports that *The two boys went missing* or *The boys were found missing after school*.

2. Write Naturally

Here are pieces of advice to help you write naturally:

Be a careful reader. Read what others write, particularly your fellow writers who work in newspapers, magazines, blogs. Read professional reports and organizational brochures.

Be a careful listener. Good media writers don't sound as if they are putting on airs or using words they wouldn't normally use. They write the way they talk. Naturally. Your aim should be to write in a way that isn't artificial or strained, yet in a way that is professional, conversational, and not unduly influenced by either jargon or novelty.

Read it out loud. Learn to trust your ear. Listen to determine whether your writing sounds stiff or awkward. If it does, revise it and read it again.

3. Eliminate Unnecessary Words and Phrases

In a meat market, the butcher trims the fat from the meat. Treat your writing the same way: Trim away the fat words and replace them with lean ones. Don't let empty phrases take up space. When you encounter a wordy phrase, look for a simpler way to express the thought. For example, the sentence, *The librarian said to cease and desist the unnecessary talking* can be simplified to *The librarian said to end unnecessary talking*.

4. Avoid Redundancies

Redundant words add no meaning to a sentence because another word already has provided the meaning. Redundancy takes up space but offers nothing in return. For example, a writer might say *This was a serious tragedy*. Could a tragedy be anything but serious? The adjective *serious* contributes nothing. Here are other examples:

She grew up in a little village. (A big village would be called a town or a city.)
The committee did some advance planning. (Planning can't be done after the fact.)
The committee will refer back to its minutes. (Referring can't be done ahead.)
He is a former graduate. (He may be a former student, but once a graduate, always a graduate.)

As you can see, each underlined word added absolutely nothing to the sentence. (There's another!) Careful writers should challenge every word they write to make sure it adds to the sentence.

5. Use Contractions Carefully

Generally, contractions are appropriate for conversational speech and for informal writing, but not for formal writing. Contractions are rare in straight news stories and news releases for print media other than in quoted material, although they are appropriate for the more conversational style found in broadcast copywriting. Contractions generally are not used in other formal writing such as position statements, proclamations, and editorials. However, writers often use contractions in feature stories, broadcast scripts, and promotional copy, and they are common in blog entries and other social media. Speech writers often use contractions.

In addition to being less formal, contractions sometimes are less forceful in writing. For example, *I won't go with you* does not carry the power of *I will not go with you*.

6. Avoid Creating New Words

Business and academic writers sometimes create new words for their own purposes. That process might be legitimate when the writer is dealing with an emerging field within science, for example. But too often the writer is simply taking a shortcut that can leave the reader confused or alienated.

Two frequent offenders are the suffixes *-ify* and *-ize* used to create a hybrid between a noun and a verb. Sloppy writers take a perfectly good noun, add the suffix, and create a silly verb-like structure. We end up with awkward sentences such as *Joanne will DVD-ify the website* and *Jon will corporatize the family business*. In some situations, parallel construction is not possible. We can *Latinize* a culture, but can we also *Paraguayify* it or *Kenyanize* it? Ever since the political uproar that began at the Watergate Hotel, some columnists and reporters have *-gated* other political scandals, giving rise to Irangate, Travelgate, Zippergate, Katrinagate, Nipplegate, Bridgegate. The Watergate break-in occurred 45 years ago; it's probably time to retire the *-gate* suffix as an outdated reference to a scandal.

Adding *-ation* to the end of verbs also can lead to awkwardness. These words unfortunately have been used in print: *conscienticization*, *Frenchification*, *pornification*, and *teacherization*.

7. Avoid Foreign Constructions

The English language is rather accepting of words from other languages. *Restaurant*, *assassin*, *sushi*, *amen*, and *caucus* all come from other languages (French, Arabic, Japanese, Hebrew, and Algonkian, respectively). Many such words and phrases are commonly used and widely understood and thus are legitimately part of the ever-evolving English language. Avoid foreign-based words and phrases that, even if they are listed in an English dictionary, are not popularly understood, such as *ex post facto* and *a priori*.

When you must use foreign words, use quotation marks around them and provide a translation: *The provost ceremoniously proclaimed that the college had been committed to the education of women "ab initio" (a Latin phrase meaning "from the beginning"), pointing out that the first graduating class included 87 women and 15 men*.

8. Avoid Unwanted Rhyme and Alliteration

After you have written something, read it aloud to yourself or have someone read it aloud to you. Listen for **cadence** (rise and fall of the voice), **meter** (patterned arrangement and emphasis of syllables), and **tempo** (pace) of the words. Listen particularly for

any **alliteration** (repetition of initial sounds of words) or rhyme (repetition of concluding sounds of words or phrases):

Alliteration: *Sixteen snapdragons circle stately sycamores.*
Rhyme: *Mike Hite might wear bright white for his Friday night fight.*

Occasionally these literary devices are effective, but writing can be awkward if they are used unwittingly.

9. Prefer Simple Words

Abjure sesquipedalian, obfuscatory terminology. If you understand this advice, follow it. If you don't know what it means, you're probably better off because you won't be tempted to use unnecessarily fancy words. (Translation: Swear off big, confusing words.)

Just keep it simple. Using simpler and more common words makes it easier for readers to understand a text. Researchers have found that messages averaging 1½ syllables a word are best for average readers. Some states have adopted a requirement that words in consumer-oriented legal documents such as warranties and contracts average no more than 1½ syllables.

Writers need not fear that simple writing means writing simplistically. Important information and profound ideas still can be presented within that syllable limit. For example, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address averages 1⅓ syllables a word. An accomplished writer knows that the meaning can and must be conveyed without writing over the heads of the readers.

At times writers cannot avoid using big technical words, especially in medical or science writing. Even if multisyllabic words are necessary, writers should use a simpler paraphrase to explain the concept. Otherwise, readers will not read very far.

10. Use Short Sentences

Journalists have special reasons to value brevity in their writing. One is a financial incentive. Words cost money in a newspaper or broadcast medium. The words of a news reporter vie for time and space with income-generating advertising. The words of one writer compete for precious news space with those of other writers. Brevity also is needed by public relations writers preparing news releases or blog copy.

Another reason to write short sentences is that readability studies show they are more easily understood. Linguists have developed formulas to measure the level of ease (or difficulty) for readers to understand a piece of writing. One of the most reliable formulas is the Fog Index, also called the Gunning readability formula. Use a search engine to find a Fog Index calculator online.

Research on readability suggests that readers most easily comprehend sentences that average about 16 words. Of course, that is an average. Some sentences will be longer, some shorter. Variety is one of the standards of effective writing. The Fog Index calculates the approximate level of education that a person needs to easily understand a particular piece of writing. The previous three paragraphs in this section, for example, have an average sentence length of 12 words. The passage scores 13 on the Fog Index, indicating that a college freshman (grade 13) should be able to easily understand those paragraphs.

People can understand writing that measures lower than their educational achievement. A college graduate, for example, obviously can read something written for high school juniors. General-interest newspapers are written at approximately the eighth-grade level, yet they count among their readers highly educated professionals, as well as people who did not complete high school. Simple writing does not have to be simplistic or patronizing. Indeed, simple writing assures that complex and sophisticated topics can be accessible to virtually all readers.

11. Vary Sentence Structure

Effective writers seek simplicity while avoiding monotony. One way to accomplish this objective is to vary not only the length of sentences but also their structure, eliminating any unintended patterns. Not every sentence should be written in the subject–verb–object pattern. Introduce phrases or clauses and arrange them in different places. Use compound and/or complex sentences, as well as parenthetical expressions. If appropriate, use an occasional single-word sentence or a sentence fragment. If variety is the spice of life, variety in sentence structure makes for lively reading.

12. Prefer Active Voice

The term ***voice*** describes the relationship between the subject and the verb of a sentence. When we learn a language, we naturally use **active voice**, in which the subject is doing the action, as in *Abdul read the book*. Later, as we learn to vary sentence structure and manipulate our words. Sometimes we revise our writing into **passive voice**, in which the action is being done to the subject, as in *The book was read by Abdul*.

One of the most common guidelines for effective writing is to prefer active voice because it is more powerful and more direct than passive voice. Consider the following examples of active and passive voice:

Set 1

Active: *The principal asked the teachers to meet at 3 p.m.*

Passive: *It was requested by the principal that the teachers meet at 3 p.m.*

Set 2

Active: *The editor will write her editorial.*

Passive: *The editorial will be written by the editor.*

Set 3

Active: *The company reported twice as many absences this year.*

Passive: *Twice as many absences were reported by the company this year.*

Set 4

Active: *Political opponents have criticized Tomasso's benefactors for backing health care reform.*

Passive: *Tomasso's benefactors have been criticized by political opponents for backing health care reform.*

Active voice offers several benefits to the writer: It gets to the point quickly, eliminates unnecessary words, increases readability, provides more specific information, and presents information in a natural order. In the preceding examples, the active voice in Set 2 informs the reader that the editor is a woman, a fact lost in the passive voice.

Despite its usefulness, active voice is not required in every situation. Passive voice exists for a reason, and it offers the following three significant benefits:

1. Passive voice emphasizes the receiver. Sometimes the recipient of an action (the object) is more important than the person or entity that performed it (the subject):
   Passive: *Bakhita Mugamba was hired as the Channel 16 weekend anchor.*
   Active: *Channel 16 has hired Bakhita Mugamba as its weekend anchor.*
2. Passive voice diverts attention from the doer. Occasionally, the writer tactfully wishes to downplay the identity of the person who performed an action:
   Passive: *Spaghetti sauce was spilled on the guest of honor.*
   Active: *Cynthia spilled spaghetti sauce on the guest of honor.*
3. Passive voice provides the writer with a way to handle missing information. When the subject is unknown or no longer important, the writer could use passive voice:
   Passive: *The room was repainted 15 years ago.*
   Active: *Someone repainted the room 15 years ago.*

PRINCIPLES OF MEANINGFUL LANGUAGE

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

(*Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll)

Humpty Dumpty can claim what he likes, but Alice's question is right on the mark. Can writers expect words to mean anything they want them to? Or should writers use words the way readers will best understand them?

A writer's greatest strength is the ability to share meaning and communicate so that readers accurately understand. Shared meaning and accurate understanding require that the writer and the reader apply the same meanings to the words being used.

The following principles are reminders of how to write in ways that are meaningful to readers.

1. Create Word Pictures

Show, don't tell. That is the common advice for news and feature writers, public relations writers, bloggers, and advertising copywriters. Writing is most powerful when it demonstrates a fact and invites the reader to draw a conclusion, rather than when it interprets the situation for the reader. Effective writers provide concrete information so that readers can properly interpret the situation for themselves.

For example, in the sentence *The little boy was happy to see his mother*, the reader must trust that the writer witnessed, understood, correctly interpreted, and accurately reported a happy encounter between a mother and her child. A more concrete telling of the encounter might be *The little boy smiled, ran to his mother, and hugged her*. Now readers can see for themselves the happiness of the situation. They can draw their own conclusion, without having to rely on the writer's interpretation.

2. Use Analogies

Suppose a writer is trying to explain the effect of high cholesterol. He likens it to a busy city street with cars double-parked. He reports on a new medicine that works like a tow truck clearing the streets by removing those double-parked cars and allowing traffic to flow at its normal pace. This writer has used an **analogy**—a comparison that uses imagery or familiar terms to explain unfamiliar concepts. Referring to something readers already know about (traffic) helps them understand a complicated situation with which they may not be familiar (cholesterol).

Using analogies requires systematic reasoning. Students are exposed to this reasoning on standardized tests, as in the following example:

Kitten is to cat as
(a) beagle is to dog.
(b) sparrow is to bird.

(c) flock is to duck.
(d) fawn is to deer.

Think logically about the relationships. You know that a kitten is a young cat. Compare that relationship with the choices. Is a beagle a young dog? Is a sparrow a young bird? Is a flock a young duck? Is a fawn a young deer? From this reasoning, you know that *d* is the correct answer.

Writers approach analogies from the other end. They suggest the relationships, so they use their imagination to identify parallel relationships that can illuminate meaning.

3. Use the Right Word

Words that at first glance seem alike may have significantly different meanings. Good writers understand those differences and they write accordingly.

For example, accomplished media writers know the difference between *imply* and *infer*, and they don't use *disinterested* when they mean *uninterested*. They write *different from* rather than *different than*. They also know why a car cannot *collide* with a tree, why 50 states don't *comprise* the United States, and why *titillate* isn't a nasty word or *niggardly* a racist term. They know not to write about a *voting block* and when to avoid *hopefully*. Accomplished writers know when to say *Jones drowned* and when to say *Jones was drowned*, and they know the difference. They never use *alot* and *irregardless*. And they certainly know the difference between *its* and *it's* and among *there*, *their*, and *they're*.

Accomplished writers also avoid unintentionally using an **oxymoron**, a term that means *sharply dull* in its Greek-language origins. An oxymoron is a combination of self-contradictory words: *thunderous silence*, *alone together*. In general, media writers avoid using an oxymoron. However, in the right circumstance and in the hands of a skilled writer, the deliberate use of an oxymoron can be both powerful and insightful. Shakespeare used such an oxymoron when he called the parting of lovers "sweet sorrow."

4. Use Precise Descriptions

Effective writers provide concrete and specific information. Rather than report, *The company lost a lot of money last year*, a careful writer will say, *The company lost $1.5 million last year*. The reader can interpret whether this is a lot of money from the context of the report.

Likewise, writers avoid words that do not provide specific information to readers. Here's an example of vague words and phrases: *As soon as possible, we should finalize this contract*. When is as soon as possible? And what does finalize mean in this context? To write the contract? To reach agreement on the terms? To sign it?

5. Use Strong Verbs

What a difference a single word can make! Effective writers use words, particularly verbs, that forcefully make the point. Effective writers have learned to be particularly frugal about using forms of *is*, *have*, and *make*. Consider how the following sentences can be made more meaningful by using more precise verbs:

Weak: *She has a new car.*
Stronger and more specific: *She drives a new car*. (Or *leases* or *owns*)
Vague: *He went to the store.*
More meaningful: *He ran to the store*. (Or *walked* or *drove* or *jogged* or *dashed* or *ambled* or *hiked*)
Weak: *"I hate you," she said.*
Stronger: *"I hate you," she sobbed*. (Or *cried* or *screamed* or *muttered* or *wailed* or *announced* or *shouted*)

6. Replace Clichés with Original Words

Familiarity breeds contempt, or at least boredom. A **cliché** is a familiar expression overused to the point that they become weary and stale. When your readers know exactly where you are heading, you've probably used a cliché. Consider these:

Just a drop in the ___.
Few and ___ between.
Right under their ___.
Only time will ___.
Swept under the ___.
Never a dull ___.

If you know where the sentence going, so will your readers, which means you aren't telling them anything they don't already know. Because clichés are predictable, they no longer carry much meaning. When they were original, phrases like *sadder but wiser*, *an apple a day*, and *last but not least* were picturesque turns of phrase—so much so that people used them, and used them, and finally used them up. Today, each phrase has become a cliché, a good thing overdone.

Many clichés today have also lost much of their original meaning, leaving readers both bored and uninformed. Just how long is it before the cows come home? Where is Square One? Perhaps near the mean streets. And what is a bread-and-butter issue? Or is it a nuts-and-bolts issue? Accomplished writers challenge common phrases that carry little meaning, replacing them with their own fresh expressions. In short, avoid clichés like the plague.

7. Avoid Journalese

Newswriters sometimes fall into a sloppy style of generalities, clichés, jargon, and overwriting. This style even has a name: **journalese**. It's especially common in headlines. In the language of journalese, temperatures *soar*. Costs *skyrocket*. Fires *rage* and rivers *rampage*. Projects are *kicked off*. Opponents *weigh in*. Buildings are *slated for demolition*. In journalese, people get a *go-ahead* and projects get a *green light*. Real people don't talk that way, so it's best to avoid such trite writing (headlines and news crawls excepted).

8. Rewrite Jargon

Jargon is specialized or technical language unfamiliar to average readers. It can be appropriate when writing for people in the know, such as readers of a technical blog or a specialized magazine, or Facebook friends of a pharmaceutical lab. Print journalists also can use technical language when writing about specialized subjects such as sports and business. But, more often, writers are addressing people who are not highly informed on a given issue, and they must make "in" words and phrases meaningful to lay audiences.

Faced with jargon, effective writers rewrite it using commonly understood words. Sometimes they use the word and then provide an easy-to-understand definition, or they avoid the technical term and simply use a meaningful paraphrase. What the writer should not do is simply put quotation marks around the jargon; it does no good to highlight jargon without providing a definition or paraphrase.

9. Avoid Loaded Words

Consider this proposition: You are 25 pounds over your ideal weight. Would you rather be called *fat* or *full-figured*? How about *plump*? *Corpulent*? *Husky*? *Chunky*? *Pudgy*? *Stout*? *Rotund*? *Big-boned*? The word makes a difference, doesn't it? Advertisers go to great lengths to describe their products with terms that do not have negative connotations, which is why manufacturers package queen-sized pantyhose or dresses in size XL–Petite.

Consider other scenarios. Is *nagging* the same as *being persistent*? Is calling someone a *colored woman* the same as referring to her as a *woman of color*? What are the differences among an *indulgent*, *permissive*, or *tolerant* parent? Or between a *casual* or an *aloof* smile? English has many words with similar definitions but vastly different, even opposing, meanings. Effective writers take great care in choosing words with the appropriate denotation and connotation. For example, *chat*, *chatter*, *gibberish*, *prattle*, and *babble* all denote the same thing: a loose and ready flow of inconsequential talk. But each word connotes a slightly different meaning: a light and friendly chat, aimless and rapid chatter, rapid and incoherent gibberish, childish prattle, and unintelligible babble.

In journalistic situations, precision is essential. It matters a great deal—to both reporters and public relations practitioners—whether a news source *declined* to return

a phone call, *failed* to, *neglected* to, or *refused* to. There is a mountain of difference among *would not*, *could not*, and simply *did not*. Effective and ethical writers choose the word or phrase that provides the most accurate nuance for the situation.

10. Avoid Pretentious Words and Euphemisms

Pretentious language uses words that are inflated to sound more impressive than the facts warrant. A car dealership advertises *experienced vehicles* or *previously owned vehicles*; bald people are *follically impaired*; midriff bulge is *personal insulation*; and a government report refers to cows, pigs, and chickens as *grain-consuming animal units*. In the pretentiousness of it all, travel agents become *vacation specialists*, junkyard dealers are *auto recyclers*, and belts are made of *genuine synthetic leather*.

There may be no real harm in such language; it can even be humorous. But writers approach this kind of language carefully because it can obscure the real meaning. Pretentious language slows down readers, makes them work harder to understand the meaning, and risks causing them to become cynical. Pretentious writing should be a particular concern for public relations and advertising writers who should attempt to present a positive but honest message.

Note the difference between pretentious language and **euphemisms** (language deliberately made less precise because the more direct words may be offensive or upsetting). Speaking euphemistically, we express our sorrow that a friend's father *passed on* rather than saying that he died. We acknowledge that a pet was *put to sleep* rather than killed. Although there may be a place for euphemisms in journalistic and public relations writing, be careful in their usage.

11. Write Honestly

Seven decades ago, George Orwell coined the term **doublethink** to refer to a system of thought in which the true meaning of reality was distorted to make it more politically and socially acceptable. Writers have drawn from Orwell's idea another word, **doublespeak**, which describes statements that tend to misrepresent reality—especially those made by public officials and organizational spokespersons. Doublespeak takes something negative and tries to make it seem positive. Effective and ethical writers avoid such misleading language.

Many examples of doublespeak are associated with the military activities. The public is deliberately misled when the military reports civilian deaths as *collateral damage* and *soft targets*. Moving prisoners to another country where they could be tortured is called *rendition* and torture is sanitized to *enhanced interrogation*. Terrorists are *freedom fighters*, or not, depending on whether you agree with their aims.

Government has spawned numerous examples of doublespeak. Relaxation of forestry restrictions was called *environmental reforms*, prisoners are mere *detainees*, and

some politicians find it more politically salable to talk about *regime change* than to admit trying to topple the head of a sovereign nation. And it's *welfare* if people are against it; *subsidy* if they're for it.

Businesses also have engaged in doublespeak, calling budget cuts *advanced downward adjustments* and identifying layoffs as *employee repositioning*, *proactive downsizing*, *rightsizing*, or *restructuring staff resources*. Or how about this one: It wasn't a layoff, the company merely offered employees *career alternative enhancement programs*. Fraud becomes merely *fiscal irregularities*. Calling bad loans *nonperforming assets* is more than creative cuteness in language; it deliberately masks the true meaning of the words to minimize the impact of the truth. Such language has another name; it's called a *lie*.

President Donald Trump continuously raised eyebrows with statements unsupported by the facts. PolitiFact, an independent fact-checking organization, labeled 16 percent of his statements or tweets true or mostly true, 18 percent half true, 54 percent false or mostly false, and 15 percent pants-on-fire lies.

The National Council of Teachers of English, through its Committee on Public Doublespeak, has turned the spotlight on individuals and groups committing violence against the integrity of language. President Trump earned the award even while a candidate; his advisor Kellyanne Conway got the 2017 award for insisting that the president wasn't lying, he was just presenting *alternative facts*.

In recent years the NCTE committee has called attention to government reports that, when discussing deforestation projects that strip every tree and bush from hundreds of acres of forest, call the denuded landscapes *temporary meadows*. The committee criticized a Russian report that a driver was not drunk but rather in a *nonsober condition*, and it criticized U.S. government reports that called death *failure to thrive*. The committee highlighted a Canadian military report that called a helicopter crash a *departure from normal flight*.

The use of doublespeak raises serious ethical issues. The Society of Professional Journalists holds its members to standards of "intelligence, objectivity, accuracy, and fairness." Codes of professional standards for public relations practitioners are more specific, calling for honesty, accuracy, truth, and avoidance of false or misleading information. Advertising and marketing codes, reinforced by government requirements to protect consumers, also require standards of honesty. All communication professionals are called on to write with honesty and integrity.

PRINCIPLES OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Media writers are most effective when their writing uses words and phrases that apply to everyone in their audience, with no unnecessary exclusion. Careful writers, therefore, favor terms that encompass many people.