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Good Writing Makes Good Practice

By Tony Spencer-Smith, Editor Group

Good afternoon. It's great to be here at this fascinating conference, with people who care about the written word.

I work for Editor Group, a Sydney-based editorial consultancy that writes and edits for large organisations and gives writing training.

As Training Director, I have given writing courses to many PR consultants, including regular courses for PRIA in Sydney. This has helped me to understand why good writing is so important to good PR practices, and also some of the writing problems many people share.

To prepare for this speech, I supplemented what I have learnt as a writing trainer by interviewing a number of senior public relations executives.

What I have found is that there are signs of declining writing standards, and that lots need to be done to ensure that everything we write enhances the reputation of our firms and does the best job it can for our clients.

Wonderful and dangerous words

Let's start with a quick look at words. Words are strange and wonderful things. Sometimes they are willing to do our bidding and perform their proper work of engaging and informing and persuading. But sometimes they turn around and give us a sharp nip.

What I'm talking about is those unfortunate errors that can occur when we're not careful enough with putting them together. Here are a few real-life examples.

Donald Rumsfeld, the former American Secretary of Defense, had a convoluted way with words. At one stage in the hunt for Osama bin Laden, he told us: "We do know of certain knowledge that he is either in Afghanistan or in some other country or dead." That came as a great relief!

Metaphors are wonderfully useful literary devices, but they need to be handled with care or disaster can follow, as in these examples from NSW Year 12 English essays.

"She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh like the sound a dog makes just before it throws up."

"Even in his last years, Grandad had a mind like a steel trap, only one that had been left out so long, it had rusted shut."

This next one seems strangely familiar: "Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever."

I'll end this sorry chapter of errors with a gripping newspaper headline: "Utah Poison Control Centre reminds everyone not to take poison." Talk about failing to find a news hook!

Signs of declining standards

What those cautionary tales do is remind us of the importance of getting it right when we write.

As public relations professionals, you are the mouthpieces of your clients, and you are paid to wield words with power and precision. So just how well are you doing at this exciting but sometimes demanding skill?

When I recently asked Chris Savage, chairman of Ogilvy PR Australia, about the writing standards of newly-qualified consultants, he used some surprisingly strong words. He told me: "The basics are broken."

The picture is by no means all gloom and doom. Many young consultants write with flair and initiative. Nicky Dowling, managing director of n2n, sings the praises of the three people currently going through her company's graduate training program.

But there is no doubt that many graduates are emerging from years of university training needing lots of help to hone their writing skills.

For some reason, the craft of writing – the ability to build good sentences and effectively structure documents – is slipping through the cracks of both school and university education.

I have seen this time and time again in writing trainees. And it is a worry in a profession so steeped in words.

Declining writing standards

Chris Savage says he has seen an appalling decline in the standard of writing education. "I'm shocked by the lack of basic spelling, punctuation and grammar, of the sheer ability to write."

He also believes that a real understanding of news angles and hooks, so critical to good media releases, has fallen by the wayside.

Andrea Brady, principal of Porter Novelli in Sydney, agrees new recruits have not been taught some of the basics. She told me: "Sentence structures are becoming more rudimentary. People are struggling to articulate ideas with limited word choices."

Evan Petrelis, a director of Sefiani Communications, says it is difficult to generalise about the writing skills of Gen Ys, but he believes SMSing and other forms of quick electronic communication have badly affected punctuation and led to a tendency to write with excessive economy.

He also believes that the penchant of Gen Ys for multitasking, skipping rapidly from one thing to another, is leading in some cases to an inability to focus intensely on one topic for long periods.

He told me: “You have to keep your wits about you when you write the opinion pieces we often produce for clients. You need a substantial period of uninterrupted concentration to produce a coherent piece. And I am even finding some short media releases which lack a train of thought, a logical flow.”

Good writing has impact

Of course, behind this concern about writing quality is much more than pedantry and nitpicking.

As Andrea Brady put it: “Writing is the core skill of a really solid consultant. And by that I mean the art of communicating ideas and concepts with impact.”

Polished and powerful documents help create and maintain a professional image. Readers often equate messy writing with sloppy firms, and good writing with bright ideas and expert communication. And PRs stand or fall by communication.

A combination of a good news angle and good writing is what gets your clients into the media. Few aspects of PR work are more important than this. Here, it is vital to have a good news sense and be able to write clearly and concisely; to let nothing get in the way of the news.

A bylined opinion piece in a good publication carries the vital message that your client is an expert and might be worth consulting at some point.

Here a well-structured argument is vital, as are a good squirt of creative juice, accuracy and above all the ability to engage readers. An article that impresses by its coherence and insights is going to do its job of demonstrating thought leadership.

In the words of Chris Savage: “In the cacophony of the modern business world, we need writing with impact and cut-through. Writing must fly.”

Raising writing skills

It would appear that many PR firms are investing a great deal of time and money upgrading skills and trying to avoid misshapen copy getting out into the marketplace.

Many have become more rigorous in selecting recruits, making writing tests a big part of the process.

Wise firms are ensuring that all copy is vetted before going out to face the merciless light of day. Having a fresh pair of eyes focused on any document is a good idea. The problem, as I’m sure you know, is the amount of time senior staff have to spend editing copy when it is really poor.

Many firms, to their credit, have substantial training programs, whether in the form of mentoring or formal writing courses.

Sefiani Communications relies heavily on what they call peer review. Says Evan Petrelis: “It is often good to have someone who is not directly involved in the release bringing a fresh perspective to bear. That can often help to get beyond the detail to strong structure.”

Writing ailments and their cure

What I'd like to do now is to share with you nine writing ailments which appear to be common, with a hint of how they can be cured. You have probably come across many of them yourselves.

1. Trouble with the nuts and bolts of language. Most of the time, without even thinking about it, we get the rules of grammar and punctuation right. But some grammar rules are trickier than others, and some punctuation marks, such as the semi-colon, have subtle strengths we may not know how to use.

The cure: no substitute for a bit of study for this ailment. A good grammar book or teacher will open your eyes.

2. Trapped in a buzzword jungle. There are times when it seems no-one can say anything without throwing in a *going forward*, a *leveraging* and a couple of *stakeholders*.

The cure: become aware of the excessive use of business clichés and try to bypass them by finding fresh, down-to-earth ways to express your ideas.

3. Wasting words. Keeping it simple is paradoxically hard. Most people use far more words than they need to make their point, weighing down their sentences with all sorts of flab.

The cure: start training your mind into becoming an editing laser. Weigh up every word. Is it doing a job, is there a shorter one that would be punchier? Here's an example. In the following, the second *that* is superfluous: "You need a safeguard that ensures **that** nothing material is omitted."

4. Waffling. Even if you have made your sentences lean and mean, if you don't have a structure for what you write you will lose your readers who will say: "What's she on about?" and turn to something else. No sense in writing something if your reader can't see the wood for the trees. The cure: think clearly before you start about the main points you want to make and what you want to achieve, then draw up an outline.

5. Poor news sense. It is easy to get very excited about what we do and think the media and the market are going to listen. If we want to be read, we must have something genuinely new to say.

The cure: always ask yourself what the real news is in what you have to say, what real point of difference your product has. And don't hide it behind praise for your firm and obtrusive brand names.

6. Lack of confidence. This is one of the common colds of writing. Amazing how many people can talk perfectly articulately, yet choke up in front of a computer screen.

The cure: remember, good writing is like good speaking – just a bit more polished. The sentences don't have to come out perfect the first time you write them. The secret of good writing is often in the editing.

7. You're boring. There is often more to grabbing people's attention than writing clearly and concisely. With lots of acrobats out there to watch, they're not going to look at someone plodding along.

The cure: learn the art of the eye-catching first paragraph, the robust quote, the surprising fact.

8. Dumb brands. Many firms spend a good deal of money making sure they have a good-looking, snappy brand and some great mission statements. But such a firm needs to talk the talk: to make sure that its brand is embodied in every document.

The cure: make brand voice an integral part of all your written materials. That means thinking about word choice and tone so the brand shines through.

9. Prosaic words. Poetry is not just something for schoolkids and the lovelorn. Corporate writing can benefit from poetic prose: sentences enriched by literary devices like metaphor and rhythm.

The cure: learn about the different ways to tap into the full power of language, then read good writers and see how they use those devices to increase the emotive power of their sentences.

Conclusion

Writing can be hard, but it also great when you find just the right word; the perfect sentence; the hook that will land a reader even in an overfished sea.

We should never forget that we are fortunate enough to have been born with brains that are, by far, the most complex things found anywhere in the universe.

And one of the most startling achievements of that brilliant hunk of meat is language. Language defines our humanity. Culture is built on it. Everything we do involves words.

Like me, you are lucky enough to work in a world of words. And with a little effort, all of us can learn to use them better – and to have fun doing it!

Thank you for listening to my little line of words today. Now I'd like to hear any questions you have about writing.