

ROSS'S DURABLE DOZEN

12 classic principles for professional writers in mass media

Can anyone learn to be a competent writer for mass media? Probably yes. Can anyone learn to be a creative, even brilliant writer? Well...probably not. Professional skill is not the same thing as talent. But if you thoroughly understand and remember the 12 principles below, certainly you'll have gone a long way toward becoming a skillful professional able to produce competent copy for most mass media. Brilliance and creativity you'll have to discover within yourself.



1. The story is not about you. Unless you have the privilege of writing a personal column, keep your opinions to yourself, and do not write in the first person (“I,” “me.”).

2. Leads must be specific, usually in active voice, and pertain directly to the subject of the story. Do not write a general statement you may use for a term paper or research paper. Find a specific theme or unusual element to hook your readers in and encourage them to continue.

3. Substitute strong verbs for weak strings of adjectives. Avoid reaching for the overused verbs “to be” or “to have.” Seldom use the adjective “very” or “unique.”

4. Seldom use these phrases: “There is/are/was/were”; “due to”; “because of”; “What he did was...”. They are common, but weak constructions. Yes, they

sometimes can be used effectively. Learn the rule first, then learn when you can break the rule.

5. You must use quotes in nearly every story of any length. Quoting sources gives a story authenticity and readability. Most mass media stories rely on interviews or meetings. Seldom will you write a story without interviewing someone, and usually you will interview two or more people. Learn to record interviews as well as take notes so that you can accurately report what people say.

6. Quotes must be attributed to sources, with complete identification (first name, last name, specific title), and usually the source can't be you, the writer. Your interviews must be of those who have the knowledge or authority to be credible experts.

7. Do not write a mass media story in chronological order, particularly a meeting or panel. Emphasize the key point, the most interesting or important aspect of the story, and support that with quotes and explanation. Less important aspects can be brought in later, if necessary. (Exception: you are writing in narrative style. If you know how to write narrative, you also know when not to.)

8. Do not rely on clichés or stereotypes. They mark amateur work.

9. Do not submit any story without proofreading it. Review it as many times as you can, preferably leaving it a few days and then returning to it.

10. Study use of transitions to create a smooth and readable story. Ideas should be logically placed, with one idea flowing to the next facilitated by a word or phrase of transition.

11. Memorize the AP style you need for common expressions, and keep a stylebook next to you for less common ones. We do not use APA style in mass media. We do not use Chicago style. We do not use a works-cited page. AP style is universal in American mass media, and if you do not know it you will not appear professional.

12. And lastly.... In the United States punctuation is *always* inside the quote mark, except semicolons and colons.