

50 THINGS ABOUT WRITING BASICS

By Paul Vigna, Philadelphia Daily News

1, There's plenty of reference material out there. Here are some suggestions:

The Elements of Style, Strunk and White; On Writing, Stephen King; The Little, Brown Handbook; The Associated Press stylebook.

2. And more: On Writing Well, William Zinsser; How to Take the Fog out of Writing, Gunning and Mueller; Writing for Story, Jon Franklin; The Right to Write, Julia Cameron; <http://www.freep.com/jobspage/academy/index.htm>.

3, You're not working for the post office. Their abbreviations differ from the Associated Press. Pennsylvania should be Pa. Missouri should be Mo. Mississippi should be Miss. Spell out Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas, Utah.

4, Some cities stand alone when you refer to them. Among the cities: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, etc. As well as a list of international cities. Every other city or town is referred to with the state. Refer to the stylebook.

5, Is there something in your CoSIDA handbook that requires listing the attendance?

It's only relevant with a record crowd, either small or large, or a consecutive sellout. Otherwise, put it in the boxscore or not at all.

6, Keep leads simple: ST. LOUIS (AP) -- Once again, Chris Carpenter was almost untouchable. Carpenter carried a five-hitter into the eighth inning and became the major leagues' fourth 12-game winner as the St. Louis Cardinals beat the Colorado Rockies 6-0 Friday night. THE STORY LATER EXPLAINS THE REFERENCE TO UNTOUCHABLE.

7, Easy on the details: University's bid for its first conference title since 1991 came up short Saturday as top-seeded Tech overpowered the Indians en route to an 80-57 win in the Home Depot Corporation Southcentral Conference championship game in front of an energized crowd of 3,266 at Vigna Gymnasium.

8, This is enough: University's bid for its first Southcentral Conference title since 1991 came up short Saturday as top-seeded Tech rolled to an 80-57 win in the championship game at Vigna Gymnasium. SPONSOR CAN GO LOWER. SO CAN ATTENDANCE.

9, Don't forget that you're writing for two schools: Temple's Kelly Samborin scored two goals, including her league-leading 16th, but the Owls never led in a 15-8 loss to Drexel on Friday. The Owls saw their four-game winning streak end, and next visit conference-leading Penn tomorrow afternoon as the season winds down to its final two weeks.

10, Don't exhaust your reader. Keep your sentences around 20 words: In 2000, Owens won the celebrity dunking competition at the NBA All-Star Game played in Oakland. He also has a full-size basketball court at his home in Atlanta that he uses as part of his personal conditioning program. As for Owens' primary occupation, Rosenhaus said the situation remains status quo, but that he did speak with Banner recently.

11, Pace your sentences. Follow a long one with something short: Part of her day also includes bringing boxes over from the Lake Norman property, a 13,000-square-foot house with five bedrooms and seven bathrooms and a garage that houses a 1951 Mercury that Reggie had fixed up. Sara has no idea what to do with it.

12, Limit commas to three a sentence. The more clauses, the more unwieldy your sentences: Temple's Jim Sommers, the league's top scorer, had 24 points, including the game-winner with 6 seconds left, as the Owls rallied to beat Penn, 76-73, last night before 10,616, a record crowd, at the Palestra.

13, No arrests will be issued for using paragraphs. Use them liberally.

14, On features, particularly longer ones, include a nut graph that tells your reader what the story's about. This is from a 120-inch story on Sara White, the widow of Reggie White:

Close to 6 months have passed since Reggie White died, leaving behind Sara, their two teenage children and an equally stunned array of relatives and friends. Only now are they beginning to come to terms with what happened, yet it somehow still seems so unreal that he has slipped away from them. He just loomed so large, in uniform and out. Few knew that better than the crowds who cheered his exploits on NFL Sundays or were within earshot of one of his booming sermons. Spiritually, he stepped away from the pulpit in his later years to focus his

attention on learning Hebrew and disentangling the original Scriptures. What he could not know is that his health was not as sound as it had appeared, that the days he and Sara would have together would be tragically few.

15, **You can wrap up a game story or feature with a quote:** Calvecchia looked out at the field that has been his home since moving to Malvern 33 years ago. "It's going to be hard to call it quits," he said, eyes fixed on the distant goalpost. "I think I'm going to find this last year very, very difficult."

16, **Don't make your reader wade through a collection of quotes to figure out who's talking. Attribution should be higher rather than lower:** Coach Andy Reid said, Or "That Super Bowl win is my most satisfying yet," said coach Andy Reid.

17, **If you're changing speakers, let the reader know about it. Not this way:**
"Whoopee, we're national champs – finally," said Temple coach Bobby Wallace.
"This feeling has been a long time coming," said quarterback Mark Briggs.

18, **But this way:**
"Whoopee, we're national champs – finally," said Temple coach Bobby Wallace.
Quarterback Mark Briggs was equally elated. "This feeling has been a long time coming," he said.

19, **The best quote, contained to a paragraph, beats a succession of three or four straight paragraphs of quotes.** Summarize some things. Edit out others. That quote needs to be something special, a comment that helps capture the personality or feelings of the person being interviewed.

20, **Said vs. says.** We generally use said, except in a feature. Writing the attribution in present tense makes it sound more like a feature: "One thing you love is pressure," Calvecchia says. "In my case, the team doesn't look at you as if a goal is all your fault . . ."

Oh, and use said, not related or laughed. Not this way: "I've done everything but stand on my head," Reid laughed.

But this way: Reid laughs at the notion that he hasn't worked hard enough this season. "I've done everything but stand on my head," he says.

21, **When pertinent, such as a new hire, include the age. Always make it a numeral.**
Need not be a modifier, such as

The 46-year-old Reid once coached at ... *instead* Reid, 46, once coached at ...
Age need not be in the lead unless there's something newsworthy about the age.

Andy Reid today became the youngest coach in the history of Brevity University. Reid, 19, was named football coach at a press conference

22, **A few style points on dates:** It's Jan. 16, *not* January 16
It's Jan. 16, *not* Jan. 16th, unless they play on the 16th of every month. It's January 2005, *not* Jan. 2005. Abbreviate January, February, August, September, October, November, December ONLY when it's with a day of the month.

23, **And years:** It's 1998 to 2003, *not* 1998-03. It's the 2004-05 season. It can be 2001-03 or 2001 to '03, depending on your style. It's the 1990s, *not* the 1990's.
It's the '90s, *not* the 90's. A year can start a sentence: 1992 brought changes to the Big Five.

24, **And time:** 12 noon. NAHHH! 12 a.m. or 12 p.m.
4:05 p.m. kickoff, *not* 4:05 p.m. kickoff this afternoon. They'll practice at 6 tomorrow morning, *not* 6 a.m. in the morning (unless it's Temple basketball, then it's 6 every morning.)

25, **And capitals:** It's master's, *not* Master's. It's bachelor's, *not* Bachelor's. It's freshmen, *not* Freshmen . . . And sophomores and juniors, etc. It's cross country coach . . . *not* Cross Country Coach. It's coach Chaney *not* Coach Chaney. ERR ON SIDE OF LOWERCASE.

26, **And hyphens:** Semifinal, *not* semi-final. Quarterfinal, *not* quarter-final. Full-time job, but will work full time. Postseason and preseason, but off-season. It's a game-winning basket and a game-winner, but a basket that won the game.

27, **All-America or?** It's an All-America team An All-America selection. An All-America football player. But All-American Paul Vigna when you're writing about the individual.

28, **No such thing as first annual.** An event doesn't become an annual until it takes place for a second time. From there, it's third annual and fourth annual, up to 10, where you begin using numerals. No reason to use upper case. Just second annual ...

29, **Eagles' or Eagles?** Eagles defender Brian Dawkins. Eagles' Brian Dawkins. The Eagles' Lincoln Financial Field. Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie. Eagles' four-game winning streak
GENERAL RULE IS TO SUB IN THE NAME OF THE CITY OR SCHOOL

30, **Don't mix and match school names with team names in the same sentence.** School names with school names. Nicknames with nicknames.

NO. Temple took a 3-0 lead, but the Quakers rallied for two goals in an eight-minute span to get within 3-2.

YES. Temple took a 3-0 lead, but Penn rallied for two goals in an eight-minute span to cut its deficit to a goal.

31, **School is an it:** Any school or city name is singular, and the team name is plural. Temple won its third straight. The Owls won their third straight. Temple's seniors already have won three championships, and are three wins away from winning another.

32, **Keep things consistent.** Not Duke University in one reference and North Carolina in another. Not Harcum College in one and Villa Julie in the other. Kentucky in one reference and then UK in the next. AS MUCH AS YOU CAN, SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

33, **Try to maintain an active voice.**

Passive: Scholarships were received by three students.

Active: Three students received scholarships.

Passive: Three Super Bowls now have been won by the Dallas Cowboys.

Active: Dallas won its third Super Bowl.

Passive: The Eagles went to Washington and were beaten by the Redskins.

Active: The Redskins beat the Eagles in Washington.

Passive: It's written in a way that something *has happened to you or the subject.*

Active: You or the subject are doing the action.

34, **Transitions help you to achieve these goals by establishing logical connections between sentences, paragraphs, and sections of your papers.** In other words, transitions tell readers what to do with the information you present them. Whether single words, quick phrases or full sentences, they function as signs for readers that tell them how to think about, organize, and react to old and new ideas as they read through what you have written. But they need to make sense.

35, YES. Although both goalies came from such different places to end up at Tech Michaels is from Chicago), their soccer journeys look much the same.

TWEAK, FROM THIS: In addition to stopping opposing teams on the field, the two goalies have both excelled in the classroom.

TO THIS: . . . selected to the all-conference team this season as well.

Both also have excelled in the classroom. Michaels has a GPA of 3.85

36, **You can probably use "impress the judges" in a gymnastics story, but otherwise, put impressive on your list of words to avoid.** LET THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PERFORMANCE, WHETHER IT'S A GAME OR PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT, DETERMINE IF SOMETHING IS IMPRESSIVE. IT'S ALL PART OF REDUCING THE FLUFF IN STORIES.

37, **Use bullets when you can to make it easier for the reader.**

LOUISVILLE, Ky. - University of Louisville men's basketball coach Rick Pitino has added three experienced assistants and made two changes to complete his staff for the 2005-06 season.

* Vince Taylor, an assistant coach at U of L for the past seven years, has been elevated to Administrative Assistant on Pitino's staff.

* Marvin Menzies, an assistant coach at UNLV last season, and Steve Masiello, an assistant coach at Manhattan for the past four years, have joined the Cardinals' staff in a similar role.

* Dan McHale, administrative assistant at Manhattan for the past year and a former U of L staff assistant, has joined the men's basketball staff as Director of Video Operations.

38, **Or to summarize the highlights in game stories.**

Tied at 3-3 in the sixth inning, La Salle used a 10-run fifth to put the game away. Among the highlights:

* Sara Barnes cleared the bases with a double to rightcenter to break the tie.

* Jessica Howard tripled in two more, raising her RBI total to 46.

* Beth Hauer homered with a mate aboard to left.

* Sue Smith followed with her team-leading 12th homer.

39, **Don't bury a name behind a long job title.** Either place the name in front of the title or shorten the title to something like basketball assistant. The name is what's important. Second, no need for the words to be capitalized.

40, **Regarding points:** It's a season average of 16 points or scored 16 points per game But not averaged 16 points per game. And, I guess it's a no-brainer, but type out the rebound per game and assists per game, etc., before you abbreviate. Never assume your reader knows for sure what you're abbreviating.

41, **Put numbers in perspective. Frame them to make them mean something. And if you have a lot of them, put them in a bulleted format.**

42, **You could trim this down to half the number of words.** After a successful clear, the Owl offensive onslaught continued, as Ritchie charged the right side from behind the goal and uncorked one of her patented left-handed lasers past Garonski to put the Quakers ahead for good, 11-10, with 1:13 left. The Quakers controlled the ensuing draw and after spreading the field to run down the clock, Seiss saw a wide-open lane to the net, went for it and clanked an insurance goal off the crossbar with just 45 seconds left on the clock to set the final margin.

43, **Both when and while can be used to talk about actions or situations that take place at the same time.** *Somebody broke into the house when they were playing cards. While they were playing cards, somebody broke into the house.*

YES: The Owls' overall record improved to 18-6, while they improved in the conference to 11-4.

NO: The Phils edged their way over .500 again, while next week the first-place Nationals come into town.

44, **Other distinctions:** Attacker slipped *between* two defenders. Attacker was *among* four players with two goals apiece. The school board, *which* meets regularly on the first Tuesday of every month, ... The school board members, *who* met last Tuesday, ... It's a board *that* meets Tuesdays before Christmas and Wednesdays thereafter until the end of the school year.

45, **And a few others:** *Fewer* refers to a specific number of items you could count; *less* to a collection of items, a period of time or quantity: *Fewer* than 10 graduates took jobs in which they made *less* than \$15,000. ...

And the possessives. *It's* going to take flawless execution for Tech to beat *its* storied rival. *They're* ready to show *their* stuff. *Currently* means now; *presently* means soon; and if you can't figure out which is which, just use *now*.

46, **On can and may and might:** You *can* make it happen. (capable of doing it). You *could* make it happen. (capable of doing it, but hedging). You *may* make it happen. (permission to do it) You *might* make it happen. (or you might not). Primary distinction is between *may* and *might*. This win might turn Tech's season around (not *may*, unless someone's granting permission).

47, **Unique? Doubt it.** It needs to be one of a kind, whether it's a pitching style or jump shot or pregame sequence of gestures. There is no such thing as somewhat unique or kind of unique.

Is Danica Patrick's presence in racing unique? No. There are others. If she wins, then yes, her success becomes unique among the current crop of female drivers. What else is unique? The way Wilt attempted free throws? Yes. Andy Reid's playboard? Probably not. But the way he holds it up to his mouth when he calls plays? Yes, that is.

48, **It's only a game.** So call it that. It need not be referred to as a tilt, affair, bout (unless it's boxing), competition, contest, event, match (tennis is an exception), meet (as is track and swimming), etc. It's just a game. You're all right calling it that in the story.

49, **A request from the desk.** For all releases, put the sport in bold letter atop the game story. It's a failsafe for those times when the sport isn't mentioned in the story.

MEN'S SOCCER

WOMEN'S LACROSSE

MEN'S, WOMEN'S LACROSSE

50. **Some final thoughts:** a, Remember your audience; b, An average 20 to 25 words; c, Best quotes only; d, Who, what, when, where, why; e, Use that stylebook; f, Sweat the details, of course; g, Don't assume anything.