

Ranly on Writing

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Some Reminders

* It's time you stop being a writer and start becoming a communicator. A communicator strives for four goals: Attention, Comprehension, Retention and Action. Being creative aids all those goals. Being creative takes effort; being boring does not.

What the Internet has done to writing

* The Internet has changed EVERYTHING. If you are still writing, editing and putting out publications the same way you did five or 10 years ago, you're in trouble. People on the Internet can click and get the information they want, and only that, and when they want it.

* Apply the rules of writing for the Internet to writing for print: Write for surfers, make information quick and easy to get, think verbally and visually, cut copy in half, use lots of lists and bullets, write in chunks, provide hyperlinks, let readers talk back.

Credibility is everything

* Being creative accomplishes nothing if you have no credibility. Credibility is destroyed by incorrect and inconsistent copy. Being clear, concise and coherent also aid credibility.

* And for credibility, the story must be complete. It must answer all of the questions in the mind of the reader.

Beginning the story: The lead

* After the title or headline, the lead will often determine whether your story will be read. The lead should **lead** -- it should pull readers in. The story should unravel from the lead.

* In the past, newspaper leads were written to give readers all of the important facts up-front. But this was not for the benefit of the reader! It was so that the story, set in lead, could be cut from the bottom to make it fit on deadline. There are more compelling ways to get readers into stories.

* The who, what, when, where and why are still important. In the past, news writers have been trained to decide **what** in the story **they** most want readers to know. Now you must decide **what** is most likely to interest the **readers**.

* The lead, the top of your story, must tune readers into WIIFM -- What's in it for me? The who, what, when, where and why are important, yes, but only to get to the most important question, the **so what?**

* The best way to direct your story to the reader is to see if you can get the word "you" into the lead. You is the most used word in advertising. The lead used to be: "Last night by a 5-4 vote, City Council raised the price of garbage pick-ups \$1.50 per month beginning May 1." Now the lead is: "You're going to pay \$1.50 more for your garbage pick-up beginning May 1."

* You might want to save the WIIFM or the so-what for the second paragraph. Rudolf Flesch wrote about the classic writing formula: Find a problem (issue, product, idea), but don't write about the problem. Find a person who is dealing with the problem, and tell us how he or she is doing. Tell a story.

* Similarly, you may begin by briefly setting a scene, much the way a TV camera would. Or start your story with a story; use an anecdote that nails the issue you are dealing with. It's The Wall Street Journal approach to writing. It's what we used to call a feature -- only it's telling the news in a more compelling, interesting and memorable way.

* But don't forget the important paragraph, the nut graph, high in the story, that sets the focus, the so-what, the WIIFM, the ROI, the RA. This paragraph says (without saying it in so many words), "This story is important to you because...."

* Some readers like a first-person story. "How I did something" is often more real, less cumbersome than a third-person approach sprinkled with direct quotations. "As told to" stories are a welcome break in a publication.

* Sometimes the best way to tell a story is the way it happened -- chronologically. Narrative writing is not just for

fiction or entertainment. An hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute approach can add interest and structure to an account.

* Research proves that stories written in these ways get more readers. Secondly, research proves that readers remember information given in this story structure over stories written in the strict inverted-pyramid style. It's time you get beyond the inverted pyramid.

Non-fiction writing can use literary devices

* Creative non-fiction writing uses similes, metaphors, analogies and allusion. Use examples. Use comparisons; nothing means anything except as compared to something else. Appeal to the senses. Be specific and concrete rather than general. Don't tell me - show me.

Interesting articles begin with interesting titles.

* Selling the copy with attractive heads, blurbs and captions is the most important job of the writer -- and of the entire staff. Readers read heads five times more than they read the body copy.

* Headlines are allowed to be creative and fun. Brightness communicates; boring doesn't. Heads must be compatible, yes, but they may be clever or catchy at the same time. Of course they must accurately reflect the piece by being correct, and they should be clear if they stand alone without a benefit blurb.

Capture readers with summary/benefit/contents blurbs

* Writers must write summary/benefit/contents blurbs with everything they write. David Ogilvy says no one will read the small type unless they know the benefit up front.

Don't neglect captions

* Captions are often the most neglected element of publications. Every picture must have a caption, even the most obvious one. Captions must complement the photo and connect it to the story.

Do some teasing with internal blurbs, pullquotes, breakouts

* Internal blurbs or pullquotes tease readers on to the pages. The writers of the articles should present these teasers. Tips work well as internal blurbs.

Think useful, service

* Busy, in-a-hurry people (are there any others?) will pay attention to you for one of two reasons: One, are you giving them useful information? Two, are you entertaining them? You

are most effective when you present useful information in an entertaining way.

* Readers want service; readers demand respect. Service journalism demands that you present useful information in the most usable way. That means that you must deliver the message in a way that respects readers' lack of time. You must present information in such a way that readers can clip it out and stick in on their refrigerators or bulletin boards.

* Remember, the opposite of useful is useless.

Present information in a usable way; do refrigerator journalism

* Service journalism is useful and usable and its aim is to be used. It succeeds only if readers get off their chairs and do things -- or stop doing things. Service journalism is action journalism.

* Don't write long paragraphs when a simple list will do. In fact, whenever you can make a list, make a list. Don't just list the benefits; quantify the benefits -- five ways to save time. List the advantages and the disadvantages. Make a "do" and a "don't" list.

* Boxes get attention. Sidebars get better comprehension and retention. Learn to place the most important, the most interesting, the most useful information in usable boxes. For example, give them a box telling them where they can get more information -- read, see, call.

* Join the visual revolution; do graphic journalism. Formerly we used graphics to enhance the story. Now we write short, compelling, human-interest stories to enhance the graphic. The journalism, the news, the useful information is in the graphic.

* You show readers respect by engaging them and by being accessible. Readers want to be a part of what they read. Offer incentives to get them into your publication. Ask them for tips, advice, help, recommendations. Tell them again and again how they can reach you by phone, fax and E-Mail.

* Engage readers by using quizzes, games, crossword puzzles. Offer them prizes. Making readers active increases retention.

* Cool off your hot publication by giving readers many entry points onto the page. Solid, running copies are intense, hot and uninviting. Readers don't always begin at the beginning. Use subheads, pullquotes, blurbs, break-outs, boxes, sidebars.

* Study how online communications give readers choices. Do not assume that all readers are the same or that they all want the same amount of information. Learn to layer the news,

presenting the same information in different ways and lengths for different people at different times.

* Stop telling readers everything you know. Give them only what they want or need to know. Then stop.

About Don Ranly: Biography

Don Ranly, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of the Missouri School of Journalism where he taught for 32 years and was head of the magazine program for 28 years. He has an M.A. in journalism and an M.A. in speech from Marquette University, a certificate in film, radio and television from New York University and a doctorate in journalism from the University of Missouri.

Dr. Ranly worked as a newspaper reporter, a magazine editor, a weekly columnist, a radio host and a television producer, director and host. An author of articles and books on writing and editing, he has conducted more than 1,000 seminars for individual newspapers and magazines, corporations, associations and organizations of all kinds.

He is co-author of *News Reporting and Writing* (9th ed.), *Telling the Story: The Convergence of Print, Broadcast and Online Media* (4th ed.) and *Beyond the Inverted Pyramid* (all with Bedford/St. Martin's) and author of *Publication Editing* (Kendall/Hunt). He has compiled a book of readings *The Principles of American Journalism* (Kendall/Hunt).

In addition to teaching writing, editing and publishing courses at the Missouri School of Journalism, his academic areas included the principles and ethics of American journalism and General-Semantics.

In 1995, Dr. Ranly received a University of Missouri-Columbia Faculty-Alumni Award and was named the O.O. McIntyre Distinguished Professor of Journalism for 1995-1996. In 1998 he won a University of Missouri Gold Chalk award in honor of outstanding service in the training and mentoring of the professional students in his charge. In 1994, 1997 and 1998, the journalism faculty nominated Dr. Ranly for the Presidential Award for Outstanding Teaching, in 1996 and 1997, for the Byler Distinguished Professor Award, in 1999, for the Thomas Jefferson Award and in 2001, for the William T. Kemper Fellow for Excellence in Teaching award. In 2002, he was elected a Fellow of the International Association of Business Communicators. In 2003, he became a William T. Kemper Fellow for Excellence in Teaching. In 2005, Ranly received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Business Publications Editors. He is a member of the University of Missouri Jefferson Club.

Dr. Ranly conducts communication seminars on a large variety of topics, from basic grammar and effective writing to his innovative and popular courses in Refrigerator Journalism and Reinventing Print. He has helped plan new publications as well as re-tool and refuel existing ones.

He has prepared critiques for dozens of publications, first by marking the copy and then by discussing the publication on a CD.

Dr. Ranly currently serves as Executive Director Emeritus and Board Member of the Missouri Association of Publications, which he founded in 2004. You can find him at Ranly.com and ranlyd@missouri.edu.