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Writing Development Stories

By

Juan F Jamias
WRITING DEVELOPMENT STORIES

Discussion paper presented by Dr Juan F Jamias at the Workshop on Editorial Management for Senior Women Journalists held on 21 April 1994 in the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), Singapore.

Five Pillars of Writing Development Stories

Five are the pillars of the house (or hows) of better writing. These are: (1) organisation (2) news processing technique (3) words (4) sentences and (5) paragraphing. For greater clarity, number 2 will be the last discussed in the series.

1. Organisation

The basic news structure -- the inverted pyramid style -- has been around since the mid-1980s. It was born in the throes of the American Civil War when information had to be rushed over often unreliable telegraph lines. One way of overcoming the problem was putting facts in descending order of importance. This style still dominates newswriting today.

However, the inverted pyramid style is more and more being challenged. Creativity and experimentation have given rise to many other forms. Many journalists now also construct their stories using the upright pyramid format, the narrative format (i.e. telling a story), explanatory format, or any combination of styles.

In an experiment, results showed that the inverted pyramid was the least popular among the four modes tested with readers. The researchers concluded that the traditional inverted pyramid style does not work very well with readers, especially among readers with less than a high school education.

(Study Question: What style other than the inverted pyramid form have you used in your newswriting? Why did you use such style?)

When writing, consider the alternatives open to you. This is true also for word usage.

The Right Words

The words on the right are to be preferred to those on the left.

1. Multi-syllable words or short words. (Give examples.)
2. Abstract or specific words. (Give examples.)
3. Latin-based words or Anglo-Saxon (American) words (e.g. termination)
4. Jargon or plain words. (See "Shoot on Sight Words" Visual)

Prefer the specific to abstract words. Cow is more specific than livestock. Higher up the ladder of abstraction is "asset" which may mean a cow, livestock, or the land or the ranch.
Be precise and specific. Avoid weak nouns and verbs. Cause, effect and influence are weak nouns while cause, affect and tend are weak verbs.

Avoid using nominals. These are nouns that hide the action. Shift nominals to their verb forms.

Rewrite: The intention of the examples is the demonstration of the application of the principles of good writing.

Jargon obstructs understanding and therefore defeats the purpose of writing for development. Writing which is filled with unfamiliar or roundabout words or phrases confuses readers. Do most people know, for example, the difference between strategy and tactics, between budget and logistics? So, let's shun such gobbledy-gook, officialese and technocratise, and even journalese.

Write clear sentences

Don't crowd ideas in a sentence.

Write fewer words per sentence. But a succession of short sentences may breed monotony. So try sentences with varying lengths. To remedy a long sentence, have the main idea easy to find.

If you have to write long, complex sentences, here is what you can do:

1. Use short main clauses, with the actor and the action close or adjacent.
2. Attach the modifying material to the main clause with commas, in separate clauses and phrases.

Examples:

Typing briskly for four hours, the author wrote the first draft of the chapter on clear writing, and then went to bed.

The author wrote the first draft of the chapter on clear writing, typing briskly for four hours, and then went to bed.

(Study Question: The two sentences differ in emphasis. How do they differ?)

Paragraphing

A sentence constitutes a complete thought, while a paragraph is a cluster of related thoughts. The paragraph presents a new idea, different from the one in the paragraph or paragraphs before it.

Paragraphs serve to break up masses of body text. Thus, paragraphing facilitates reading and prevents eye fatigue.

Transition devices point out the logic and smoothen the shift from one paragraph to another. There are at least nine common ways of providing transition:

a. repeating keywords or their synonyms from one sentence to another
b. using a summary or topic sentence
c. repeating a phrase or group of words used in previous sentence
d. using transition words and phrases like "on the other hand"
e. question and answer
f. listing or enumerating like points serially
g. dialogue
h. placing subheads and paragraph lead-ins, and
i. improved punctuation.

Techniques of Development Writing

1. Translation - Translating horrible technical jargon into language which is more like ordinary speech is only one of the functions of translation. To translate requires knowing the "cultural" level of the readers: their educational attainment, their knowledge, (like specialist or non-specialist knowledge) their personal interests and information needs.

   Specifically, it means defining technical or difficult terms or concepts. The technical term may be defined in a sentence, or by a like word, or presenting it in a context that is self-defining. A common way to enhance understanding of a technical idea is to give an example. Photoperiodism, for example, has been defined as follows:

   "..... it has long been observed that many plants respond to light or the length of day. This response to light periods, called photoperiodism, shows up in most cases in the
flowering of plants. In order to flower, photoperiodic or photosensitive plants require the right number of light hours per day, some flowering when the days are short, some when the days are long.”

2. Popularisation - Popularisation begins from a scientific and technical information base. From this point, the populariser writes or "translates" the technical material into written or pictorial forms (graphics) so as to move writing from specialist to non-specialist knowledge, from scientific and technical language to popular language, from hard to easy reading (readability) and from limited to general (interest) appeal.

3. Humanizing - Humanizing requires putting a story in terms of people. It is even better if the writer can put it in terms of "psychologically near" or familiar places and situations. Operationally, humanizing employs more "personal words" and "personal sentences" according to Rudolf Flesch. "Personal words" are all first, second, and third-person pronouns except the neuter pronouns that refer to things rather than people; all words that have masculine or feminine natural gender, like father and daughter, Bob and Mary. "Personal sentences" include spoken sentences, quotes, and other statements, set off with expressions like "he said". They also include questions, commands, requests and other sentences directly addressed to the reader.

Graphics and Now Comes Infographics

Graphics help to make translations and popularisations clearer and more interesting. Graphics include pictures, graphs, charts, diagrams, cartoons and comics.

With computerisation, information graphics or infographics in short, has become the darling of newspapers and magazines. Essential to the modern newspaper, information graphics exploit any combination of drawings, words, photograph and other images to create a visual means to extend news and feature coverage and help the newspaper reader get a fuller understanding of the text on the newspaper page.

(Project transparency "Visions of an Info Skyway")

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