

Writing with Style and Substance:

STYLE MATTERS

Good magazine writing, like all good writing, incorporates the three “Cs” of good composition: clarity, conciseness and correctness.

CLARITY

To be understood by your reader, your message must be clear and your words should communicate one idea at a time.

Tip: To achieve clarity, choose simple, familiar words when trying to express a complex thought or situation.

Example: According to Armstrong, a computer network involves two or more locations and serves to transport and store information. It functions much like the pneumatic tube that carries your bank deposit from the drive-through line to the teller inside the bank, where your money will be held for safekeeping. When you save a file from the terminal at your desk, it is sent in the form of electronic signals, in much the same way your voice goes through the telephone wire, to a network server (the safe) for storage.

Tip: Write with an active voice whenever possible. Active sentence construction is direct, while passive construction often utilizes unnecessary helping verbs and prepositional phrases.

Examples:

(Active voice) The dog snatched the Frisbee®.

(Passive voice) The Frisbee® was snatched by the dog.

Tip: State the facts or describe the situation in positive form, then move on to your next point. When troubled with how to word a specific passage or start a paragraph, say the words out loud first. If it makes sense when you hear it, it will probably make sense when you write it.

CONCISENESS

Avoid fancy language and don't over explain. Clear sentences are usually shorter sentences, employing the most efficient words to communicate meaning. Therefore, the second “C” deals with omitting unnecessary words. In written communication, most of us are in the habit of announcing we are about to announce something, which is unnecessary.

Examples:

(Wordy) Due to the fact that our campuses are growing ever more diverse, most programming organizations are actively building more representative boards.

(Improved) Because our campuses are growing ever more diverse, most programming organizations are actively building more representative boards.

Tip: Avoid beginning sentences with overused expressions such as “the truth is,” “in conclusion,” “to begin with,” “in

other words,” and, most importantly, “the fact that.” In their place, use definite, concrete language. Give the essential details in an active voice and your writing will have vigor.

Example: Lola Bridgett is arguably the most successful political journalist working in the Washington, DC-area, yet she has stayed true to her Indiana roots. Her reporting is gritty, award winning and pulls no punches. She likes her food home cooked, her coffee black and her desserts sweet.

CORRECTNESS

Good grammar is a must. Remember that grammatical rules exist to facilitate the clear communication of ideas. Magazine writing, though, uses a much more informal style than that used for writing academic papers or answering exam questions, so some rules—like those prohibiting the use of the second person—may not apply.

By its nature, good grammar ensures clear, concise and vigorous writing that your reader will be sure to understand. It is not stuffy, bloated or academic. In the past, it was customary to avoid using contractions, with the exception of quotes from individuals. Contractions are now generally acceptable because they maintain the authentic rhythm of the spoken word and blend well with the conversational tone of most magazines. On occasion, an idea or expression is so succinct and descriptive that it will be set apart as a very short sentence.

Example: “Individuals have got to realize they can't just run-drive around these railroad crossing guards,” said Sheriff Williamson, adding, “That's why my deputies and I will be riding with several G&T conductors for the next several weeks. We'll be in radio contact with patrolmen at each major crossing, and we'll be issuing tickets. No warnings given.”

Endnote

For additional information, refer to *The Elements of Style, fourth edition*, by William Strunk Jr., E.B. White and Roger Angell. This thin volume has long offered more advice to improve writing than books four times its size. In addition, you might want to read William Zinsser's *On Writing Well, 25th Anniversary: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*.

“In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.”

OSCAR WILDE