

7 SECRETS TO GREAT WRITING

► AS ANY WRITER OR EDITOR SHOULD BE,

I'm a fan of clean writing. But great writing and clean writing are two different things. Clean writing is free of typos and grammatical errors. Periods, commas and semicolons are in their proper places.

But the hallmarks of great writing have little to do with syntax or punctuation. Frankly, great writers who lack this grammatical know-how can (and absolutely should) hire a copy editor or proofreader.

Great writing is about communication. Whether you're writing a feature article for a magazine, a brochure for a new product or a report for a nonprofit, your job is twofold: to hold your audience's attention and to get your point across.

Here are seven strategies to help you do just that.

1 UNDERSTAND YOUR MISSION

Before you tackle any assignment, you should have a game plan. For magazine writers, this often starts with an assignment letter. Your editor should provide you with direction. If not, ask what main points should be included. **What is the focus** of the article? How long should it be?

If you're developing a company newsletter from scratch, begin by writing a strategy memo that includes your reasons for producing the piece, your goals, its frequency, the target audience, how you'll measure success and, of course, an editorial calendar: What topics should be covered this month and throughout the year? Should certain topics be avoided? Do corporate politics dictate that certain executives be featured?

Anything you write for a corporation should fit into a larger strategy, so before you start planning a website, brochure or press release, make sure you understand how it fits into the big picture. Are you trying to drive sales? Increase Web hits? Improve public perception? Let this mission guide your writing.

2 HAVE A PLAN

Every time I tackle a new writing project, I create two plans. The first is a **calendar** — essentially, I set a series of internal deadlines to meet my client's ultimate deadline. This includes deadlines for research, interviews and writing — it's critical to set aside enough time for each.

The second is a **content outline** — an overview of the major points I need to cover, how long each section should be and whom I need to talk to for each section. Before I started writing *7 Secrets to Great Writing*, I prepared an outline. Without one, I could've easily rambled for pages upon pages.

Flesh out your topic by making a list of every question your document needs to answer. Then, consider who your sources will be — do you need to talk to your CFO about key financials for a press announcement? Do you need to interview a patient who benefited from a treatment? Develop questions for each person you'll speak with. Naturally, you need to think on your feet and ask follow-ups during a conversation, but make sure you know which questions absolutely must be answered.

Likewise, make a list of the statistics or facts you need to include. These may require online research unless your sources provide them.

Once you have the information you need, and before you start writing, outline the piece. If it's a brochure, envision the information that will go on each panel so you can estimate word counts. If it's an article, decide what information is vital to the main story and what can be set aside for a sidebar or callout.

Upfront preparation makes your writing better and the piece stronger. Plus, in a lot of cases, it streamlines the process so you can work more efficiently.





3

REMEMBER YOUR READER

It's easy to think you're writing for your editor, your boss or yourself.

Wrong.

Who is ultimately going to see the piece? Whitepapers directed toward C-level executives should have a different

tone than content aimed at the average consumer. Consider your language carefully as well. If you're talking to other marcom professionals, for example, you can use jargon like *collateral*, *premium* and *marcom*.

You probably know how it feels when a company or publication doesn't make you — the reader — a top priority. Have you ever tried to read a brokerage firm's customer newsletter and wondered why certain financial terms weren't explained? Or have you received an industry publication that over-explained common terms?

And while readers' needs vary, we can say this with near certainty: Everyone's busy. And research shows that we're bombarded with hundreds if not thousands of marketing and advertising messages a day — most of which are uninvited.

So, let's respect people's time. In some cases, this means limiting a press release to two pages instead of three or sending a simple calendar announcement instead of a full-blown press release. It means breaking up copy with sections, subheads, sidebars, charts, callouts and images.

Of course, you don't have to write short all of the time. Some pieces warrant more depth. But even in longer pieces like reports or whitepapers, make sure your reader can scan the copy for main points.

For example, even if you don't have time to read every word of *7 Secrets to Great Writing*, I'm confident a simple scan would clue you in to these seven tips. As a reader, you can choose to skip the copy blocks you feel won't be as interesting or pertinent to you as others. (Though I sure hope you didn't skip over this one!)



FIND YOUR VOICE — AND DON'T LOSE IT

4

This one can be tough because it's not always about finding your personal tone — **it's about finding your company's tone.** Either way, it's important to be consistent. Whether your goal is to come across as professional and "corporate sounding" or casual and colloquial, the words you choose and the sentence structure you employ should reflect that. When you're writing on behalf of a company, remember its brand.

IT security company Lumension speaks to C-level execs who understand IT operations and security. Check out this example from the company's website:

With the perpetual onslaught of new vulnerabilities, including zero-day threats, implementing a cost-effective, positive security approach to unified protection and control is a critical component of enterprise security strategy. Organizations must establish and integrate processes to ensure systems are protected from unwanted intrusions.
© Lumension Inc., 2010

It's clear — Lumension's language is smart, professional and clearly directed to IT experts.

A visit to Southwest Airlines' website reveals a different approach. On a day in 2010, the homepage advertised a sale on Boston flights:

Go Wicked Awesome in Boston © Southwest Airlines, 2010

Air travel comes with a slew of regulations — Southwest surely can't be too fun or cute when it writes about TSA rules. But when there's an opportunity to have some fun, the company does. And the voice is consistent with the spunky, laid-back brand.





5

MAKE SENSE

Yep, that's right. This is a big secret: Great writing makes sense.

Remember that feeling you had the first time you watched *2001: A Space Odyssey*? Don't leave your readers with that feeling — you know, like they've been on an acid trip.

Too many inexperienced writers are so concerned with showing off their Ivy League vocabularies — or their deft use of an online thesaurus — that they forget the goal of the piece. Others can't wait to use flowery, verbose language even though doing so often obscures their message. Great writing isn't about showing off. Presumably, **you have a point to get across.** (If you don't, please see Secret No. 1.)

6

TAKE A BREAK

In my experience, most great writing happens in multiple sittings. True, an urgent press release, website update or breaking news story must be written quickly on deadline. But for most pieces — longer feature articles, marketing copy, Web content, whitepapers — take a break during the writing process.

Personally, I prefer to take an entire day away and revisit a piece with fresh eyes. If I can't, I hire an editor to be my fresh eyes. (And depending on the project, sometimes I hire one anyway. Remember, even if you're a good editor, it's harder to edit your own writing.)

In my writing, I'm amazed at the number of things that made sense yesterday, yet make surprisingly little sense today. When editing for clients, I often highlight sections that don't make sense — and are therefore nearly impossible to edit. In most cases, I'm confident that if the writer took a break and re-read the piece with fresh eyes, she would realize how confusing some of her text is. Unfortunately, deadlines and rushed projects don't always allow that. So, make sure you have an editor on standby who can help.

LESS IS MORE

Writers and editors have their own editorial philosophies, but most, I'd say, err on the side of "less is more."

Don't use 100 mediocre words when **10 good ones will do the job.** And when you've gotten your point across, stop. Here's what happens if you don't: You become a *Saturday Night Live* skit. You know the ones — they're funny for the first three minutes, but they last six. By the time the sketch has ended, you can't remember what was funny in the first place.

Plus, most adults I know are afflicted with short attention spans. They read headlines instead of news articles. They rely on Twitter feeds, Facebook status updates and text messages for "conversations." Even if a reader has invited your article, e-newsletter or report into his life through a download or subscription, that doesn't mean he will pore over every word of your document (no matter how precious it is to you!). After all, did you read every single word of this document?

That's what I thought.

For more experienced writers, these seven tips are scarcely secrets. Yet, the moment a project begins, it's easy to forget one or more of them. But if you pause and reflect on these seven secrets every time you write, your product will be stronger in the end.

HAPPY WRITING!



