

# 7 SECRETS TO GREAT WRITING

**A**ny decent writer is 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.

▶ **THESE SEVEN TIPS WILL 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 document or creative brief that includes your reasons for producing the piece, your goals, its frequency, the target audience, how you'll measure success and, of course, a content 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 business 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 website traffic? Improve public perception? Let this mission guide your writing.

## 2

### HAVE A PLAN

There are two types of essential plans. The first is a plan for time — a **schedule** — a series of internal deadlines to meet your final deadline. This includes

deadlines for research, interviews and writing — making sure you set aside enough time for each.

The second plan is a **content plan or outline** — an overview of the major points you plan to cover, how long each section should be and whom you need to talk to for each section.

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 and allows you to 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?** White papers 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 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.

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 white papers, make sure your reader can scan the copy for main points. Break up copy with sections, subheads, sidebars, charts, callouts and images.

Great writing gets through to the intended audience, so make sure you consider your readers while you're writing.



# 4

## FIND YOUR VOICE — AND DON'T LOSE IT

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 or casual and colloquial, the words you choose and the sentence structure you employ should reflect that.

Great writing is consistent. When the voice changes mid-stream, readers pick up on it. We don't want readers to get distracted or to begin to question the integrity of a piece.

Honestly, many readers won't necessarily identify a change in tone. They'll simply feel as though there was a change. Great writing doesn't let that happen.

# 5

## GET YOUR POINT ACROSS

This secret should be obvious, but it bears repeating: 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

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, online content, white papers — take a break during the writing process.

Take time away so that you can revisit a piece with fresh eyes. You'll probably be amazed at the number of things that made sense yesterday, but make surprisingly little sense today.

Of course, deadlines and rushed projects don't always allow that. So, make sure you have an editor on standby who can help.

## IS YOUR WRITING SCHEDULE COMPLETE?

In your schedule for your project, consider including the following key tasks:

- ▶ Get signoff on concept and budget
- ▶ Gather statistics and additional research
- ▶ Prepare for interviews
- ▶ Schedule and conduct interviews
- ▶ Complete outline (and get approval if necessary)
- ▶ Complete first draft
- ▶ Send out for editing
- ▶ Finalize review draft
- ▶ Send to internal stakeholders for review
- ▶ Brainstorm photos and additional visuals
- ▶ Submit to designer/programmers
- ▶ Work with other team members to plan for additional content, such as videos or interactive content

## LESS IS MORE

Writers and editors have their own editorial philosophies, but most 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, people read headlines instead of articles. They rely on Twitter feeds, Facebook status updates and text messages for “conversations.” Even if a reader has invited your article, 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!).

I mean, did you read every single word of this document?

That's what I thought.

OK, for a lot of writers, these aren't secrets. But it's easy to forget them when you're caught up in the day-to-day. So, to get started on the right foot, check out the worksheet on the next page.

## HAPPY WRITING!



# GET FOCUSED

**You're ready to start that next piece of great — and strategic — content.  
Let this worksheet help get you started.**

Who is my audience? (Gender mix, age ranges, geographic details, etc.)

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Are there any essential statistics that must be included?

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What is my goal for this story/white paper/report/etc.? What do I want people to think, feel or do? Is there a clear call to action?

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Who are the subject matter experts both inside and outside my company who should be involved?

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What five questions must be answered through this piece?

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Who must approve the content?

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What is the final deadline? What are my key target deadlines? (Have I allowed myself enough time to do great work?)

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