Other Important Writing Suggestions

Absolutes: Adjectives that are absolute have no degrees. They either are, or they aren't. For example, a building can't be partly destroyed. Destroyed means there's nothing left of the building. A "partly destroyed" building is really a damaged building or even a severely damaged building. Similarly, something can't be "more unique" or "less unique." Unique means one of a kind.

Addresses: Much depends on whether the address includes a house number. Follow these rules:

- *Abbreviate "Street," "Avenue" and "Boulevard" only when these words appear with a numbered address*. Like this: 119 Oak St., 119 Oak Ave., 119 Oak Blvd. But: "I live on Main Street," or "The accident happened on Thompson Avenue."
- *Lowercase and pluralize designations like "streets," "avenues" etc. when used with two or more street names*. For example: Oak and Madison streets. Broadway and Carlton avenues.
- *Spell out all other street designations*: 119 Oak Court, 119 Oak Lane, 119 Oak Place, etc.
- *Abbreviate compass points in a street name if there's a numbered address*. Otherwise, spell the compass point out. Like this: 119 E. Oak Lane. East Oak Lane.

Alphabet soup: A term for a story heavily laden with acronyms like TVA, NAACP, AARP, FBI, etc. Alphabet soup can result when an author spells out the name of an organization on first reference and then uses the organization's acronym to refer to the organization throughout the rest of the story. It's usually better to adopt one- or two-word "tag" for the organization and use the tag instead of the acronym. For example: "The *National Education Association* has endorsed Sen. John Smith's re-election bid. The *association*, in a statement released Friday, described Smith as a reliable supporter of pro-teacher legislation throughout his first two terms in office."

Antecedent: An antecedent of a pronoun is the word the pronoun stands for. For example, in the sentence "The police officer drew his weapon," the pronoun is "his," and the antecedent of "his" is "officer."

- *Whenever you use a pronoun, you must make absolutely sure that the pronoun has one and only one possible antecedent.* If you don't, the result can get pretty confusing. Consider this sentence: "The police officer wrestled the suspect for control of his gun." There's no way to tell whether the gun belonged to the officer or to the suspect. Why? Because the pronoun "his" has two possible antecedents, "officer" and "suspect." A rewrite -- in this case, one that eliminates the pronoun -- makes the meaning clear: "The police officer and the suspect wrestled for control of the officer's gun" or "The police officer and the suspect wrestled for control of the suspect's gun," depending on which you want to say.
- *Also, make sure a pronoun and its antecedent match in number*. For example, in the sentence, "The team played their best," the pronoun "their" and its antecedent, "team," don't match in number. "Team" is singular (even though it is made up of several

individuals) and "their" is plural. There are two easy ways to correct the sentence: 1. "The team played its best." 2. "The team's members played their best."

Brevity: In general, media writing values brevity: short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, short stories. Why? Media compete for people's time. The more time media take to use, the less likely people are to use media. In short, people get bored or tired when reading long sentences, grafs and stories.

Courtesy titles: AP Style says you generally should avoid using "Mr.," "Mrs." or "Ms." in front of someone's name. On second reference, simply refer to someone by his or her last name only. Use courtesy titles, however, when there's a need to distinguish between a husband and a wife who have the same last name. For example: "John and Jane Doe run a restaurant down on the corner of Main Street. Mrs. Doe works the register and takes orders from customers. Mr. Doe mans the kitchen." See the reason for using the courtesy titles? Without them, you wouldn't know which Doe did what. *Note, by the way, that the New York Times ignores this rule in its news columns*. Everyone in the NY Times is "Mr" "Mrs." or "Ms." this or that on second reference. When you work for the New York Times, you can ignore the rule, too. Until then, though, follow AP Style.

Demonstrative adjectives: Letting demonstrative adjectives -- words like "this" or "that" -- stand alone can reduce a sentence's clarity and lead to confusion. These words need something to refer to. "This *book*," or "that *chair*," for example, not merely "this" or "that."

First person: Avoid making a "guest appearance" in your own story through unattributed first-person pronouns like "I," "me," "we," or "our." For example:

City officials broke ground Monday on a redevelopment of First Avenue between 12th and 15th streets.

I was there watching as ***our*** mayor proudly plunged a shovel into the soft dirt and told ***me*** that beauty and functionality were about to return to that blighted section of town. ***We*** all applauded the mayor's comments.

Hopefully: Use "hopefully" as an adverb, not as an adjective. "The hungry dog gazed hopefully at the boy's sandwich." The adjective form is "hopeful," as in "The hopeful dog gazed at the boy's sandwich." The most common misuse of "hopefully" is in sentences such as "Hopefully, we will finish up on Monday" when the intended meaning is "We hope to finish Monday," not "We will finish Monday with hope in our hearts."

Lead: A lead is the first sentence of a news story. It should be a *single* paragraph consisting of a *single* sentence of 30 or fewer words. It also should sum up the most important "what" of the story as well as the "when" and "where" of the story. It should include the "who" of the story if there is one and should sum up the "why and how" of the story if there's room. The lead's first verb is critical. It should be active voice, should appear within the lead's first seven words, and should take readers straight to the main "what" of the story. Any attribution ("said," "according to," etc.) should appear at the end of the lead, as in "..., John Smith said Monday." or "..., according to the report."

Only: Be careful where you place this powerful modifier. It will tend to modify the word that comes immediately after it, so be sure the word that comes after it is the one you want it to modify. For example, the sentence "She only skimmed the thicker reports" means "She only skimmed the thicker reports; she didn't read them thoroughly." It does *not* mean "She skimmed only the thicker reports instead of skimming all of the reports."

Paraphrase: Paraphrasing is simply saying what someone else said, but in your own words instead of in their words. Suppose, for example, the police chief says, "This city's officers are some of the most well-prepared officers in the country. They're trained better than most officers. We also equip them better than most officers." It's not that great of a quote. You could write a paraphrase that said what he said, only better: The police chief called the city's officers some of the best-trained, best-equipped officers in the country.

Partial quote: Avoid using a partial quote. A partial quote is a quote that picks up in mid-sentence. Like this:

The detective said the two suspects "make Bonnie and Clyde look like a traveling circus. These guys are elusive, calculating and, above all, deadly."

It's far more elegent to set up a quote by preceding it with a graf that indicates who is about to speak and generally what he or she is about to say, then present the quote as a complete sentence in a separate graf.

Quotes: Be selective about what you choose to present as a direct quote. Nine times out of 10, you can use a paraphrase to do a better job than the source did of saying what the source said.

- *When you use a direct quote, it's important to use a quote that forms a complete sentence.* In other words, don't use a partial quote.
- *Always set up a quote by preceding it with a paragraph that:*
    - Indicates who is about to talk
    - Gives a general paraphrase of what he or she is about to say
- *Then present the quote in its own paragraph.* Here's an example (also note the punctuation):

Detective Jason Smith said the suspects, both wanted in five states on charges of murder, kidnapping and robbery, should be considered armed and dangerous.

"These two guys make Bonnie and Clyde look like a traveling circus," Smith said. "These guys are elusive, calculating and, above all, deadly."

Police described the pair as traveling in a stolen, dark blue Ford Explorer with Maryland license plates. A reward of $50,000 has been offered for information leading to their arrests.

- Note how the first graf indicates who's about to speak (Detective Jason Smith) and gives an idea of what he's about to say (the suspects should be considered armed and dangerous). The second graf presents the quote. The "Smith said" is optional. It's pretty clear that Smith is talking. This format helps the reader keep track of who is saying what in a story. One of the most confusing things you can do in mass media writing is present two quotes, back to back, from two separate sources without indicating that the speaker has changed.

- The story then continues with a new paragraph.
- Also note the correct punctuation for quotes:
  - Smith said, "The festival is for everyone."
  - "The festival is for everyone," Smith said.
  - "The festival," Smith said, "is for everyone."
  - "The festival is for everyone," Smith said. "Children are especially welcome."

Redundancy: A word is redundant if it adds no meaning to the sentence or phrase it is part of. For example, the word "completely" is redundant in the phrase "completely destroyed." Things can't be "partly destroyed." The word "destroyed" is absolute. Similarly, there's no point in writing "3 p.m. in the afternoon." Use either "3 p.m." or "3 in the afternoon. Other redundancies are more subtle: "joined together," for example, or "collapsed down." Things can't join in any way besides together, and things can't collapse in any way but down.

Said: Use this neutral verb for most attribution jobs. Other words like "stated," "admitted" "asserted," etc. carry connotations that may be inaccurate. "Stated," for instance, suggests that whatever was said was said under some kind of duress. "Admitted" suggests the speaker had been trying to conceal what was said. "Claimed" suggests that what the person is claiming is untrue.

- *Also use "said" to qualify statements made about what someone thinks or believes*. For example, writing that "The convicted rapist is sorry for his crimes" may or may not be accurate. It's more accurate to say "The convicted rapist *said* he is sorry for his crimes."
- *Also remember that the word "that" usually is unnecessary after "said."* Use "that" after "said" only if some other word -- a time element, for example -- comes between "said" and the description of what was said. For example: "The president's aide said *Friday* that the bill is as good as dead."

Second reference: Second reference is any reference to an individual or organization that occurs after the initial reference to that person or organization in a news story.

- Where references to individuals are concerned, media writers typically use the person's complete name the first time the name is mentioned in the story, then use only the person's last name on second reference. For example, a news story about "Joe Smith" will call him "Joe Smith" the first time he is referred to in the story but simply "Smith" in all subsequent references. Note that courtesy titles like "*Mr*. Smith" or "*Miss* Smith" or "*Mrs*. Smith" are not used.
- Where references to organizations are concerned, it's customary to spell out the organization's full name on first reference, then use either an abbreviation or, better, a "tag" on second reference.

Since/because: Use "since" for time relationships, as in "I haven't seen you since last year." Use "because" for cause-and-effect relationships, like "Because my car broke down, I had to catch a bus." *Don't* make the common mistake of using "since" to mean "because," as in "Since my car broke down, I had to catch a bus."

That: The word "that" can cause trouble in at least two ways:

First, generally, omit "that" after any tense of the verb "to say." For example, "The president said he had signed the bill." Keep "that," however, if a time element appears directly after any tense of the verb "to say." For example, "The president said Monday that he had signed the bill." Also keep "that" if it is followed by a subordinate clause beginning with a conjunction like after, although, because, before, in addition to, until, and while. For example: "The president said that until he gets Congress' support for his Social Security package, he will refuse to sign the highway bill."

Second, know when to use "that" and when to use "which." Both words can be used to introduces a clause or phrase. For example:

- Police found two cars in the suspect's garage. They searched the car that *matched the description of the car seen leaving the scene of the crime.*
- Police found two cars in the suspect's garage. They searched the red one, which *matched the description of the car seen leaving the scene of the crime.*

Notice how the italicized phrases, although identical, serve different purposes. Knowing whether to use "that" or "which" depends on figuring out which kind of purpose the phrase or clause is serving.

In the first example, the phrase is specifying which car the police searched. Without it, you would have no way of knowing which of the two cars police had searched. That property makes the phrase "restrictive" or "essential," and such phrases are introduced by "that."

In the second example, the phrase is providing extra information about the car. Without it, you still would know which car the police had searched. They searched the red one. The phrase simply clues you in to the fact that the red car matched the description of a car seen leaving the crime scene. Such "nonessential" or "nonrestrictive" phrases are introduced by "which." Notice also that "which" usually must be preceded by a comma in such usages.

The/A: Putting "the" in front of a noun in a news story usually signals that you have alluded to that noun somewhere earlier in the story, or that readers are already familiar - perhaps from earlier stories - with whatever the "the" is referring to. If neither is the case, readers will be confused. Consider this example of a *poorly written* lead and second graf:

> One person died Friday afternoon in a single-car accident on Main Street.
>
> *The* boy, 6-year-old Brenden Smith, was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. His parents, Jim and Jane Smith, both of Murfreesboro, are listed in critical condition at Middle Tennessee Medical Center.

Your reaction upon reading the two grafs was probably something like, "Boy? What boy are we talking about, here? There's been no mention of a boy." That's precisely the problem. Consider how adding an allusion to the boy earlier in the story helps things out:

A boy died Friday afternoon in a single-car accident on Main Street.

The boy, 6-year-old Brenden Smith, was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. His parents, Jim and Jane Smith, both of Murfreesboro, are listed in critical condition at Middle Tennessee Medical Center.

Similarly, using "the" in front of a noun or noun phrase in a news story can imply that the noun or noun phrase has been talked about in previous stories and should be well known to the reader. If such is not the case, the reader will be confused. Consider this lead:

The expansion of City Hall has hit an expensive snag, the project's contractor said Monday.

The above lead suggests that the reader already should know about "the expansion." If this is the first-ever story about the expansion, the reader had no way of knowing about it.

Transition: Transition links each paragraph of a news story to the preceding paragraph and provides the momentum necessary to keep the reader reading. Transition also helps link sentences within a paragraph. Some types of transition include:

1. *Time sequence:*

After screeching through the turn from Main Street onto Broad, the speeding car barreled through a red light at the Old Fort Parkway intersection.

Hitting speeds of up to 80 mph, the car *then* careened up Broad Street, finally smashing into a utility pole near Thompson Lane.

2. Repeating a sentence structure:

Johnson said she has tried and tried to call attention to the problem.

She has written 25 letters to various government officials.

She has made countless phone calls.

She has even taken time off work to stake out the mayor’s office.

3. *Using contrast and/or comparison:*

Officials insist the campus has plenty of parking spaces.

However, cars could be seen Monday parked in grassy medians, in front of fire hydrants, on sidewalks and even, in one case, right in the middle of the street.

4. *Using geographic sequence:*

A spacious lobby greets visitors to the new library.

Across the lobby, stairs lead to an airy reading room and computer center on the second floor.

From here, visitors can take any of four elevators to the stacks on the building's six other floors.

5. *Using pronouns and demonstrative adjectives:*

"This ordinance absolutely must pass," the mayor declared.

_He_ threatened to resign in protest if it didn't.

That ultimatum irked the council members, who promptly decided to call his bluff.

6. *Using conjunctive adverbs*:

Developers are applying for a permit to build a landfill on the site.

Meanwhile, environmentalists are organizing opposition to the plan.

(Other conjunctive adverbs: accordingly, consequently, moreover, therefore, however, etc. Be aware that many conjunctive adverbs imply a particular relationship between the thoughs they link. "Therefore," for example, suggests that the second idea is a result or outcome of the first idea. Use these words only when their connotations are accurate.)

7. *Using numbers:*

Getting healthy involves some basic principles, the trainer said.

First, cut the fat out of your diet. Hamburgers, pizza and bacon are OK, but only as occasional treats, he said.

Second, exercise. As little as 30 minutes a day can make a big difference, he said.

8. *Echoing words or grafs from the preceding graf*

The accident left 41-year-old Jane _Smith_ battling for her life in the Middle Tennessee Medical Center's intensive care unit.

Smith, a mother of three, suffered head injuries, a crushed leg and a broken back, a hospital nursing supervisor said.

Very: A word to be avoided. Convey degrees instead by choosing the correct word. Someone who is very angry, for example, is incensed or furious.

Who/That: Use "who" to refer to people, as in "He's the one who wrote the report" or "They're the ones who wrote the report." Also use "who" to refer to animals that have a name: "Lassie was a dog who starred in a 1950s TV show." Use "that" to refer both to objects and to animals that don't have specific names. For example, "Here's the report that I wrote," and "There's the dog that I was telling you about."

Wordiness: Say what you need to say in as few words as possible. For example, don't write, "The man proceeded to leave the building." Instead, write "The man left the building."