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An Introduction to Media Style

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This is a short overview of the type of writing I call 'media style'. I use the term to cover any writing intended for mass media, online and off. That means material written for:

- Newspapers and magazines
- Marketing material and advertisements, both online and off
- Professional, mass-appeal websites

At first glance there might seem to be a huge difference between a news story in *The Guardian* and the copy in a sales brochure, or between an in-depth feature in *The New Yorker* and an editorial in the *The Sun* or *The National Enquirer*.

But, although there are clearly wide variations between these media, they all have elements of structure, style and tone in common. If you're solely interested in writing copy, then some of the methods below might seem more journalistic than marketing-based. The distinction is pretty much irrelevant, however – especially if you're writing public relations or advertorial material.

Structure

In the worlds of advertising and journalism, various structural models for copy are bandied about. In advertising, probably the most popular is AIDA, especially if you're writing classical, short-copy ads:

- Grab the reader's **A**ttention,
- Provoke his **I**nterest,
- Activate his **D**esire (or give him **D**etail in longer copy/PR copy)
- Hit him with a call to **A**ction.

AIDA also works very well for many forms of journalism, and is especially handy if you're writing press releases or advertorials.

In general journalism, the structure of a story is usually defined more loosely, in terms of including the vital elements:

- What
- Why
- When
- How
- Where
- Who

The order, obviously, varies.

Another general structure that can work in both a marketing and journalistic context is the **inverted pyramid**. Readers like inverted pyramid structures – that is, writing that starts with a conclusion and then provides information to back it up, rather than the classic essay style which builds towards a conclusion. Inverted pyramids allow readers to decide whether they want to read a chunk of copy in seconds rather than have to wade through the whole thing.

Let's look at a piece of PR copy that uses both an inverted pyramid and an AIDA structure simultaneously:

Size still doesn't matter – Nokia paves the way for an explosion of apps

Nokia today announced that it was releasing an Open C plugin to complement its software development kit (SDK) for S60-based Smartphones.

From now on, it's going to be much, much easier for developers to produce Smartphone applications - and Nokia is particularly expecting that a number of Linux-based open source programs will be ported to the S60 platform and Symbian OS. For Smartphone users, the application marketplace is going to get bigger and more competitive, which should mean more and better apps at lower prices.

Nokia is particularly keen to point out the potential for growth in the business software market, with open source desktop applications growing in diversity and usability.

The problem is, the desktop is still only an inch or two wide. Exactly how far the business community will embrace phone applications that go beyond simple communications remains to be seen: to most users, the term "desktop" suggests wordprocessing and spreadsheet power.

It seems the ceiling for mobile desktop computing hasn't been reached yet - but it can't be far away.

Now let's examine the structure of this copy, and some elements of its style, in terms of the inverted pyramid/AIDA model

Headline (attention): There's a lot going on here. I've used a slightly risqué hook in "size still doesn't matter" – in fact, it's something of a cliché, but it summarizes nicely the concept I'm trying to get across and starts the copy on a lively note.

The next part of the title, after the colon, gives a hint of what is to come.

A couple of things to notice:

- I've used the shortened form ('apps') of the word 'applications'. This saves some space, and indicates that I'm expecting the post to be read by an audience with a reasonable degree of tech savvy.
- I've included a direct, dynamic, visual word – 'explosion'. I could have talked about a 'rush' of apps or a 'dramatic increase', but it wouldn't have been arresting enough. I'm not suggesting that the single word 'explosion' immediately makes the readers sit up in their seats, but at the start of your posts its worth using the kind of language that plants a firm, strong, concrete image in your readers' minds. I'll discuss the important of concrete imagery some more in Part 3.

When you're looking for inspiration for your headline writing, look at newspapers. I don't just mean the Wall Street Journal or the Guardian – go down to the lower end of the market and see how tabloid sub-editors of publications like the Sun and the New York Post handle headlines.

I'm not suggesting that you write the kind of tacky, sensationalist headlines these guys deal in every day (though it might not hurt once in a while). But you should look at the kind of language they use. They're never vague. Everything is concrete and visual. When you're writing a headline, you should be putting an image in your readers' minds that captures their imaginations and makes them want to read on. As we'll see in Part 3, concrete always hooks better than abstract.

Para 1 (interest): OK – you might not find a sentence about phone operating systems very interesting, but remember the target audience we’re talking to – telecoms geeks. In this particular snippet of copy, I’ve gone down the route of using the ‘interest’ paragraph to offer some key information that’s vital for understanding the rest of the post. The reader reads it, assimilates it, and – if he’s the kind of techie guy I’m targeting – asks himself a number of questions:

- * What benefits will this development bring?
- * How will it work?
- * Does this mean I can develop my own applications for S60 phones?
- * What are the downsides?

He’s interested, and wants needs answers to these questions. Where’s the best place to find them? He reads on to find out.

Here we see the dual function of the interest paragraph. In some ways it can be considered an extension of the headline. The job of the headline is to hook readers. The interest paragraph reels them in. It is, in other words, the top of the inverted pyramid: the most direct and useful information comes here and the who story is summarised and encapsulated. The actual information that follows will just be building on these keys points. This first paragraph needs to be nice and short.

Paras 2, 3, 4 (detail): This is the meat of the story. We're moving down the inverted pyramid, filling in secondary facts. Strictly speaking, it doesn't need to be divided into three paragraphs – the most commonly-accepted rule of paragraph use is that you only have to start a new one if there is a change of idea, theme, time, speaker or place.

According to that way of thinking, there doesn't need to be a change of paragraph between paras 2 and 3. However, I can get away with putting one there because there's a slight change in direction of the meaning. The main benefit is, of course, that the post as a whole is broken into smaller chunks. We'll discuss paragraphing in a bit more detail in the next section.

Notice, by the way, that this because this post is aimed at a relatively technical, savvy readership, I don't waste words explaining the various bits of jargon and the brand names. Most of the readers of the post, which is aimed at phone geeks and developers, will know what S60 and Symbian OS are. The minority that don't can look it up on Wikipedia.

So I haven't bothered padding out the detail paragraphs with background material that's irrelevant to my target readers. I'm keeping it as short as possible.

Para 5 (action): This is the key part of my post that, I hope, will provoke readers to respond. In this case, because I'm making a statement that invites agreement or disagreement ('it can't be far away'). If this

were a piece of more straightforward sales copy, I would be using a call to action here.

The nuts and bolts of a good media style

I don't know the rules of grammar... If you're trying to persuade people to do something, or buy something, it seems to me you should use their language, the language they use every day, the language in which they think.

David Ogilvy, Confessions of an Advertising Man

What Ogilvy says about ads goes for blogs, too. The key word here is idiom. The idiom you use is simply the way you speak – the level of formality in your language, the words you choose to use, the way you express them and a host of other criteria. If you write your blog in a corporate idiom, you'll only attract corporate readers – everyone else will be turned off. If you use a technical idiom, you'll only attract techies.

Of course, that might be exactly what you want. If you're writing a blog about advanced programming skills, you may not want your email inbox and comments deluged with dumb questions from newbies. The use of idiom locks them out.

But if you're trying to reach a wide audience, and particularly an audience you're hoping to get traffic or earnings out of, it's important that you use their idiom – the everyday language of people everywhere.

So the first thing you need to do is ditch the formality. Sure, you should be respectful, but showing respect isn't the same as being formal. Write to your reader as if you're talking to a friend. That means it's OK to:

- * Use contractions. Your English teacher may have told you it's wrong to turn cannot into can't and I have into I've, but when you're writing a blog – or more or less anything, really, outside of formal letters and legal documents – you should use them just as much as you want to. Trust your instincts on this. When it feels right to contract, do it.

- * Be ungrammatical – but not too ungrammatical. If you write in a relaxed, everyday style, it won't be long before the grammar checker in your word processor starts jumping up and down. Some 'errors' you can safely ignore, but others you need to watch out for. A common, and quite acceptable, error is the sentence fragment – a section of text that's set out as a sentence with a capital letter and a full stop/period, but which isn't a proper sentence in the grammatical sense because it doesn't contain a subject main verb:

The rain messed up my hair. Messed it right up.

'Messed it right up' is a fragment. MS Word will suggest changing it, but you don't need to, and you shouldn't if you feel it adds to the overall effect of what you're trying to say.

* Use widely-recognised slang. Popular slang and idioms are fine, as long as you can carry them off convincingly and you can be pretty sure your audience will accept them as normal. A student blogger who writes

Dave's, like, way geeky.

...will sound completely normal. A political candidate or respected academic would not. Again, to adapt Ogilvy's maxim a little, use the language in which your audience thinks.

* Talk about 'you', 'I' and 'us'. Copywriters do this all the time. It just makes everything more personal and compelling.

Choices

Writing is a process of making choices – which words, in which order; which sentences, in which order; which paragraphs...and so on. For the very best writers, writing their best, pretty much every single word represents a choice.

If you ever try teaching English literature to kids, one of the first objections they come up with as you take Romeo and Juliet to pieces is that you're 'reading too much into it' and that the writer 'couldn't have meant to include all those possible meanings'.

Oh yes he could. For really great writers, not a single word is an accident. As you become more involved and interested in the process of writing really good, readable prose you get more and more bothered about getting the words exactly right – about making the right choices.

Bad writing is almost always the result of ignoring the choices you have in front of you and letting your pen or your fingers do the thinking. Sure, sometimes you may be inspired. But most times, if you don't think carefully about your writing, you won't write in a way that people find easy to read.

Plain words

The first step to becoming a really good writer is to understand the plain, everyday, ordinary words are more powerful than long, difficult words. Copywriters use the plainest, clearest language they can muster when they're writing ads and marketing materials, because they know it's the most effective idiom: the Nike tagline isn't Simply Put It Into Action – it's Just Do It. Simplicity is key.

Problem is, mastering a simple, clear, unadorned style of writing is not at all easy. One of the distinctive characteristics of clear writing is that it looks effortless – until you try to do it for yourself.

If you're from a business background it can be particularly tough – especially if you're used to a Dilbert-like corporate environment where it's cool to say 'utilize' or 'leverage' instead of 'use', and where management-speak and clichés abound. Even if you spend your entire life using the plainest possible language in speech, it can be hard to transfer it to the page.

Most of us have been taught from a young age that writing is somehow formal and special, that we need to put on a special style and use language in a particular way, different from the way we use it in everyday speech. When you teach English to teenage students, they often use the thesaurus feature in their word processors to replace ordinary words with fancier ones, because they think that long words make writing 'better'.

Some of the very greatest writers have used the plainest language. A great example is the English political writer George Orwell, who deals with sophisticated ideas using incredibly simple, clear language. In fact, Orwell's writing is really beautiful because his language is so simple. To get a taste of it, I strongly recommend you read his famous essay *Politics and the English Language* – which, as well as being a fantastic example of

clear writing, also gives some useful guidelines on how to keep your English clutter-free.

OK, enough literature. I think I've made the point that when it comes to writing, plain is best. Copywriters know that principle, and make good livings by putting it into action every day. And 'plain' doesn't mean 'dull', either: clear writing is usually more engaging and readable than complex writing.

Let's take a look at twelve strategies for writing good, clear English that your readers will love.

Strategy #1 – Edit, simplify, top and tail

Getting to the end of your first draft of a post is only the end of the beginning. Writing is rewriting – or so the saying goes – and you'll find that almost anything you write can be improved by going over and tightening up.

That's not to say you should agonise over editing for hours – after all, you're writing a blog post, not a sonnet. However, it's a characteristic of good writers that they tend to write and rewrite.

You may do a fair amount of rewriting already, and you'll find that as your writing improves you want to do more and more. In this sense, writing is just about the only skill that gets harder the better at it you

become. Just as important as knowing the value of tinkering with a piece of writing is knowing when to stop tinkering and leave it alone.

The primary aim of editing a blog post should be to make it as short and as clear as possible without sacrificing readability or interest. 'Don't waste words' is about the best advice you can apply to any sort of writing, but it's especially important when you're writing blog posts.

Let's take a look at some tips to make the language of your posts lean and muscular:

* Waffle tends to gather at the beginning and end of a post, because many writers, when they do a first draft, have a tendency to take a few dozen words to warm up and wind down. Try cutting the first two or three and last two or three sentences and see if it makes any difference. At any rate, take the advice given to screenwriters and novelists: get into your story as late as you can and out of it as early as you can.

* Look at every sentence and ask yourself, 'could I make this shorter or simpler without losing meaning or making it sound ugly?'. Look at words longer than a couple of syllables and ask yourself, 'could I use a shorter one?' You probably won't shorten every word or sentence you look at in this way, or even a majority, but it's a good way to pick out areas that can be tightened. There's no need to be too obsessive, either: this kind of micro-editing can be time-consuming. The point is to have an awareness of your own writing style and to learn strategies for tightening it that you can apply automatically. Once in a while it's worth taking an

hour to go over a post in minute detail, just to refine your skills and learn about your writing style. If you approach your writing in this way you'll soon find that the habit of writing clear, readable prose becomes automatic, and only needs occasional practice to keep on form.

* Again, learn from the journalists. You might not wish to write in the style of the Sun or the New York Post, but the guys who do it for a living really know how to condense a lot of information into a very few, hard-working words.

Strategy #2 – Murder your darlings

A little advice from Samuel Johnson (1709-1784):

Read over your compositions, and when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out!

The same advice, in slightly more modern language, is offered by crime writer Elmore Leonard:

If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.

(That quotation is taken from Leonard's Ten Rules of Writing, which is aimed at would-be novelists, but contains a lot of useful advice that can be applied to blog-writing, too.)

Many writers talk about 'murdering their darlings' – in other words, making a habit of cutting the bits of their writing they like best.

That may seem perverse, but it's a sound strategy. The material I'm convinced is brilliant usually turns out to be the material that my readers think is pretentious rubbish. Don't ask me why: all I know is that it seems to be true and some really great writers seem to have had the same experience.

It think this is because when you're forced to grit your teeth and work hard you just write better. When you're enjoying yourself and everything is flowing smoothly, it's easy to get sloppy.

Whatever the reason for this phenomenon, you should take it seriously. If you've written something you think is really cool, go back and consider cutting it. At the very least, give it a careful edit and think hard. Everyone writes badly from time to time, and the difficult part can be deciding what's bad and what's brilliant.

Ernest Hemingway had a saying: 'every writer needs a built-in, shock proof shit detector'. Make sure you develop yours.

Strategy #3 - Stay active

If you ever use Microsoft Word or similar word processing applications you've probably come across the grammar checker function that spots

passive sentences and phrases in your writing. It's usually – but not always – desirable to replace passive with active voicings.

Just in case you're not sure about the difference between the passive and the active voices, take a look at this sentence:

The cat sat on the mat.

That's written in the active voice. This example is passive:

The mat was sat on by the cat.

See the difference? Both describe exactly the same event. There's no difference in meaning at all. But in the first the cat is actively doing something. In the second the mat – the thing on the receiving end of the cat's action – is described as having something done to it. It's the passive receiver of the cat's backside.

Explaining passive sentences in grammatical terms can be confusing, so let's look at a few more examples to give you an easy sense of what I'm talking about here:

Active: Sandy hit Steve.

Passive: Steve was hit by Sandy.

Active: At the time of the accident, Helen was driving the car.

Passive: At the time of the accident, the car was being driven by Helen.

Active: Emma pulled on her shoes – which her dad had polished – and walked out the door.

Passive: Emma pulled on her shoes – which had been polished by her dad – and walked out the door.

Notice that the passive versions are long longer and incorporate some form of the verb 'to be', like 'was' and 'been'. It's pretty easy to let passives slip into your blog posts, especially if you're writing in the past tense. Wherever you can, replace them with active voicings. If it sounds weird, leave well alone – but you'll usually find that doing so makes the sentence shorter, clearer and crisper.

Strategy #4 – understand clichés

A cliché is a phrase that's been so overused that we don't really think about its meaning anymore:

As cold as ice, as white as snow, you're driving me mad, the crack of dawn, between a rock and a hard place, bite off more than you can chew, fresh as a daisy, keep your head above water, until the cows come home, too little too late, working night and day

Notice that many clichés take the form of similes and metaphors. Clichés are common in business, so if you're writing a business blog watch out for:

Blue skies thinking, think out of the box, push the envelope, cutting edge, core skills, leverage, manage expectations, solutions (as in 'IT solutions'), team player, win-win situation

You'll notice that I've named this strategy 'understand clichés'. Although you should work to reduce the number of clichés in your writing, you'll find that sometimes a cliché can be useful, especially if it communicates a concept quickly and easily.

We're hoping to negotiate win-win

...is much easier to read than:

We're hoping to negotiate a result satisfactory to both parties.

In a situation like that, the cliché works as a kind of shorthand. That's not an excuse to use clichés constantly – writing is always improved by reducing the overall number of clichés – but it is an example of defensible cliché-use. If you're going to use occasional clichés in this way each usage should be the result of a conscious choice.

If you avoid clichés you'll force yourself to think harder as you try to come up with an original, clear way of saying something. As I said when I was discussing Strategy #2, hard thinking usually results in good, readable writing.

Strategy #5 – Reduce adverbs and adjectives

Adverbs and adjectives tend to gum up writing and make it hard to read. Adjectives aren't too bad, but adverbs are the real killers, especially the ones that end -ly.

A quick reminder of what these things actually are. If you know about parts of speech, you can skip the next few paragraphs.

To understand adverbs and adjectives, you need to understand verbs and nouns. A verb is a word that represents a physical, emotional or intellectual action – a 'doing' word, as English teachers love to call them:

Run, take, dig, love, eat, sleep, think, sit, swim, write, feel, consider

A noun is a person, place or a physical or non-physical thing:

Book, phone, New York, clock, love, tree, Annie, piano, dog, road, boat, rain

Adverbs and adjectives add extra description to verbs and nouns, respectively. So in the phrase I ran quickly, the adverb ('quickly') is adding extra description to the verb ('ran') – it's telling us how the speaker ran. In I like the red dress, the adjective ('red') is adding extra description to the noun ('dress') – it's telling us what kind of dress the speaker likes.

Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are the four main parts of speech. Note that one word can take on different roles in different circumstances. In I'll dry the clothes 'dry' is a verb. In my feet are dry it's an adjective.

OK, end of English lesson. As I said, adjectives aren't too much of a problem: as long as you're not using too many of them, they shouldn't affect the readability of your blog posts.

Adverbs are the bad guys. Some of them you can't avoid ('with', for example, can be an adverb), but watch out for are the ones that end '-ly', like 'quickly' in the example above. They're bad because they're often superfluous and they clutter up sentences, making the reader's job harder.

You want to make your reader's job as easy as you can, because if he finds your posts gummed up with unnecessary words he'll lose interest and click out. 'Dave ran quickly' is only a short sentence, but it's flabby, lazy writing. 'Dave sprinted' or 'Dave dashed' would be better. In each

case the verbs (“sprinted” and “dashed”) are stronger and more descriptive, and the sentence, although it was short to begin with, has lost a word it didn’t really need.

Every time you find an “-ly” adverb, ask yourself if you can cut it by making the associated verb stronger.

Strategy #6 – Be concrete, not abstract

Remember what I said in Part 2 about using concrete words and images in your headlines? It goes for everything you write. Your blog posts will be more readable and compelling if they contain plenty of concrete things and actions. When readers read they like to visualise, even if what they ‘see’ isn’t a complete, coherent scene.

So make sure that your posts have plenty concrete words readers can associate with an image:

Chair, fight, lift, wooden, clean, cook, table, rock, climb

Other words can are more abstract and hard to visualise:

Ask, think, idea, being, worry, query, concentrate, legitimate

Abstract language isn’t ‘bad’ language, but you can give a blog post that deals with abstract ideas a bit of extra life by introducing some concrete language or description into it. That’s why newspaper columnists – who

often discuss with pretty abstract political, financial or moral issues – often start their columns with some sort of reportage, story or grounding in everyday life. It gives readers' brains something easy to visualise and process right at the start and gets them 'warmed in' to reading before things get too abstract.

Strategy #7 – Check readability

There are several tests you can do to assess the readability of your blog posts. Most major readability tests give scores based on what's easy to read for the average individual of average intelligence, or kids of particular ages. You can test the readability of your blog posts using this useful online tester. The site also includes a useful explanation of the three main readability tests: Gunning-Fog, Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade level.

Gunning fog is probably the most useful for bloggers. It generates a score that indicates the rough number of years of education an average person would need to be able to read a particular text and understand it thoroughly. It's not really a meaningful absolute measure, but you can use it to compare your blog against others in the same category.

Below are the Fog scores for the front pages of the top ten most popular blogs in the world (according to www.technorati.com.) Results were calculated during July 2007:

1. www.engadget.com – 10.26
2. www.boingboing.net – 10.31
3. www.gizmodo.com – 8.09
4. www.techcrunch.com – 10.28
5. www.huffingtonpost.com – 9.44
6. www.lifehacker.com – 8.76
7. www.arstechnica.com – 9.88
8. www.dailykos.com – 9.99
9. www.postsecret.com – 10.30
10. www.tmz.com – 8.14

You'll notice that most of the fog scores of these successful blogs land in the range 8 – 10, even when they're typically dealing with relatively technical topics. Interestingly, that's a little below the kind of scores achieved by the print editions of quality newspapers, which – if you include the features sections, usually lie in the 9-12 range. The Juicystudio readability website, linked above, gives a useful table of common readability scores across a range of media.

The lesson: people like writing to be simpler on the web than in print, though not that much simpler. Clearly, the level of readability you aim for should be governed by your audience: a blog written for astrophysicists can probably get away with a lower readability score (because of technical language and the expected age and education of the readers) than a blog aimed at schoolkids.

Strategy #8 – One idea, one sentence

In Part 1 we briefly looked at Jakob Nielsen's suggestion of 'one idea, one paragraph'. Applying Nielsen's rule in practice results in too many paragraphs that are too short, and, consequently, blog posts that are bitty and hard to follow.

I prefer to use the following model:

1 post = 1 topic

1 paragraph = 1 theme or 1 stage of an argument

1 sentence = 1 idea

I think that sticking to this one idea, one sentence rule is a better way of producing clear, readable writing than Nielsen's original model because it doesn't just make your writing easily digestible; it also prevents one of the most common grammatical mistakes – using a comma to join two equal clauses.

What do I mean by that? Well, take a look at this:

I'm going to the beach tonight, the barbecue we had there last week was great.

You come across this kind of construction all the time in writing that's been done in a hurry, and it's an easy mistake to make even if you're a good writer. The comma simply isn't strong enough to stick the two halves of the sentence together. Instead of digging into the grammatical architecture, you can avoid the problem by sticking to the one idea, one sentence rule. The ungrammatical example above seems to contain two ideas:

1. I'm going to the beach tonight.
2. The barbecue we had there last week was great.

If you split it into two sentences, each containing a single idea, the grammar now holds together:

I'm going to the beach tonight. The barbecue we had there last week was great.

However, you can also see the original, ungrammatical, version as implying some kind of causality – the speaker wants to go to the beach because he enjoyed the barbecue so much last time. That's a single idea all by itself, and can be formed into a single sentence by using punctuation that's stronger than the original comma or by using a word like 'because' (known as a conjunction).

I'm going to the beach tonight - the barbecue we had there last week was great.

I'm going to the beach tonight; the barbecue we had there last week was great.

I'm going to the beach tonight, because the barbecue we had there last week was great.

If you're not so sure about the way grammar works you can still get out of plenty of traps just by sticking to the rule: one idea, one sentence.

Strategy #10 – Read aloud

This is the easiest single way to spot mistakes, clumsiness or bits of your writing that could do with tidying it up. It's simple: when you've drafted a blog post, read it aloud to yourself. If it sounds OK, it probably is OK. If you're tripping over certain words or sentences, consider rewriting them.

This strategy is ideal for bloggers, because it forces you to write in an clear, conversational style.