



Five Things I Learned Writing for a Newspaper

By Leslie Panfil

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Instituting a company-wide style guide helps to achieve uniformity.



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Before joining the A/E/C industries, I was a journalist for a local newspaper. The slow death of print news saddens me, particularly when considering everything being a newspaper writer taught me.

If you've never had the privilege of this experience but rely on the written word in your job, I share five takeaways related to my current position as a marketing manager in the construction industry. For those who cut their teeth in the newspaper business, this article stands as a reminder that what you learned on the job is still relevant.

1. Put first things first. The inverted pyramid style of writing is a staple of the newspaper industry. All articles consist of the lead (the most important information), the body (supporting details), and the tail (interesting but not necessary content).

While some believe this is an unnatural way to engage in storytelling, it serves one primary purpose—distilling a story down to its most essential information. Newspaper editors use this form of editing for the same reason marketers do in a proposal—space constraints. The dreaded page count and minimum font size have sent many of us back to the proverbial drawing board. Once you identify the crucial information in the piece, you can confidently and efficiently cut extraneous content.

2. Craft short, concise sentences. Variety is the spice of life, which means you should vary your sentence structure. But never write in one sentence what should be written in two. If you get to the end of a sentence and have no idea what it was about, it's too long. Eliminate unnecessary phrases and redundancies. Banish adverbs and reduce the use of adjectives. Keep your sentences to not more than 25–30 words and paragraphs to 100–200 words maximum.

3. Write fast/edit slow. Everyone's first draft stinks. This is why marketing managers get upset when content providers miss their deadlines. We know the gold is in the editing. Writing and editing utilize different skillsets, and potentially separate parts of the brain. Attempting to edit while you write slows the writing process down and crushes creativity.

4. Hit your deadlines. Newspaper writing is one of the most hard-nosed industries when it comes to deadlines. The reason the phrase “stop the presses” is so dramatic is because it's rarely done. The news industry's intrinsic culture values these deadlines. Meeting them is a matter of professional integrity and ingrained into newspaper writers.

5. Accept good enough. Occasionally, all the stars align, and you craft the perfect piece of content. But more often, the deadline is looming, and at some point, your article or proposal needs to be good enough. Not all of my articles have been award winners, but I learned that there's always next week. Constant improvement is the key to professional growth—and your sanity.

While everyone wants to create flawless content, the truth is that even professional writers can't agree on the Oxford comma, the number of spaces after a period, and whether it's acceptable to split an infinitive. And, as much as I disagree with the person who put “irregardless” in the dictionary, it's in there now. Rules, styles, and words evolve. Most writers agree that consistency is what matters. Instituting a company-wide style guide helps to achieve uniformity. *The Associated Press (AP) Stylebook* is an excellent place to start.

Writing every day, under stringent deadlines, with ample time to edit, will improve your writing. Being a journalist didn't make me a perfect writer, but it did make me a better one. ■