(Instructor's Note: Howard B. Taylor, editorial consultant for Copley Newspapers, wrote the following article to help journalists sharpen their craft. Although the references are dated, the ideas are sound and still very current for communicating on the World Wide Web.)

The purpose of this is to round up a few points of writing and copy reading. It is not intended as a complete catalogue.

Although some consider it elementary, the points emerge from copy and from stories that were in the paper.

Basic tools of the craft

The American Press Institute in a note on writing says this: "The average reporter — not the good one — has little respect for the basic tools of his craft, the words he works with. He is impatient of distinction in meaning. He regards as academic (a somewhat dirty word) any insistence on precision. Although he began his career because He Wanted To Be A Writer, he resists the discipline all writers must follow. As a consequence, much of his writing is full of errors ranging from small imprecisions to outrageous misuses.

Thus we see "imply" when "infer" is meant and "following" when "after" is meant and "over" when "more than" is meant and "aggravate" when "irritate" is meant. We see "claim" when "say" is meant, "refute" when "contradict" is meant and "flaunt" when "flout" is meant.

We see things like "authored" and "chairmaned" and "hosted." We see "strangled to death," "accused with treason" and "had his leg broken."

Minute points? Yet, minute detail determines the whole and spells the difference between the average news writer and the craftsman.

News should be written simply, directly and crisply. It should be written so any reader, regardless of education, can understand it. It should be written straight away, without backing into the phrasing.

Statements of fact should be hung specifically on their sources when qualification is necessary.

Pretentious language should be avoided. Colloquialisms and vernacular should be used only when the tone of a story calls for them.

Keep it simple

Short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs are best.

Kenneth L. Simms, formerly managing editor of The San Diego Evening Tribune, made this point in a memo on news writing:

There are even "little" big words:

"Encounter" when "meet" would have said it.

"Inevitable" when "sure" would have done.

"Accelerated" when "speeded" would do.

"Purchase" when you might say "buy."

"Commence" when you might use "begin."

"Employment" or "position" when "job" would do.

A reader is in trouble when a sentence contains too many ideas.

Here's an example (from the body of a story about a 50-hour revival meeting at a college):

Authorities at the ancient school located about 35 miles west of Chicago which was founded as a church college in 1861 at the start of the war between the states and now opens its doors to youths from all denominations, including some from overseas, said they would let the demonstration run its course.

The discovery that too many ideas in one sentence caused trouble led some newspapers to limit each sentence to one idea. That's not necessarily the answer. It sometimes leads to choppy sentences, and they should be avoided, too.

Hub Keavy of the Los Angeles AP, an able craftsman with words, wrote this advice:

News writers are forever being advised to use simple sentences. They might better be urged to use simplified sentences. A simple sentence has one clause. It can be admirably direct if the subject matter also is simple. But it isn't versatile. It won't always tell as much as we need to tell at once. A sentence can be compound or complex and still be a good sentence if it isn't too long. All the clauses and phrases have to be arranged properly. If they are, the sentence will be clear and will have impact. These are the chief objectives in news writing.

That is itself is an example of lucid writing. His longest sentence is 18 words. Other lengths in it are four words, six, eight, nine, 10, 12 and 13.

The API has made surveys of the relationships between sentence length and reader comprehension. One newspaper with an average of 17 words in its sentences had a reader comprehension of 97 per cent. Another with average wordage of 33 had comprehension of 31 per cent.

Writing effective leads

Excess words get into stories. A news writer must sharpen his perception of verbiage. Here is an example from a wire-service story — the words in caps are excess baggage: "Doctors transferred two of the students to the nearby Fort Hood Army Hospital FOR FURTHER CARE after INITIAL treatment at the Killeen Clinic. Those LISTED BY CLINIC PHYSICIANS AS SUSTAINING WOUNDS SUFFICIENTLY SEVERE TO BE SENT TO THE ARMY HOSPITAL were Bobby Watts and George Chastain." That's 20 wasted words.

Another wire-service lead: "Detroit — Production of smaller automobiles by the auto industry's 'Big Three' of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler appeared today to have moved a bit closer to the realm of certainty." It might have said: "Detroit — Smaller automobiles by General Motors, Ford and Chrysler seemed more likely today." There are 12 words against 29, and has anything been lost?

Mental tanglefoot sometimes ruins a lead. Hub Keavy offered these examples:

"A law designed to force the American Red Cross to label blood plasma shipped into Louisiana according to race goes into effect July 30."

Read it again, if you want to find out what it means. News writing should be so lucid that no one is forced to read it again. Hub rephrased it thus: "After July 29 blood plasma shipped into Louisiana by the Red Cross must be labeled according to race."

Another: "A young couple and their two infant sons were overcome by ammonia fumes last night when a line through which liquid ammonia was being pumped from a tank car into a storage line burst."

Revision: "A young couple and their two infant sons were overcome by fumes last night when an ammonia pipe line burst."

Another: "The chief prosecution witness at the trial of the accused slayer of a prominent druggist hanged himself in the jail cell today."

Revision: "The state's chief witness in a murder trial hanged himself in jail today."

Another: "The biennial general council of Congregational Christian Churches, in session here, today sent a telegram to House Speaker Rayburn and House minority leaders urging full support of the administration's foreign aid program, now before Congress.

Revision: "The biennial general council of Congregational Christian Churches today endorsed the administration's foreign aid program."

A newspaper lead said this: "Municipal Court Marshal Howell last night said that he has asked the county grand jury to investigate a refusal by city and county jailers Sunday night to book a marshal's woman prisoner."

The lead has 32 words. The reader must wade through 17 before he has an idea what's happening. Then he must read 15 more before the facts are wrapped up.

A broadcaster handed the lead this way: "The grand jury has been asked to investigate an incident that occurred Sunday night."

He did it in 14 words.

The Evening Tribune had a lead saying this: "Attention women: Want to drop 130 pounds in nothing flat?"

The Illinois State Journal had a lead that said, "Ever go chasing girls down a railroad track?"

Those are leads that will capture a reader.

It may seem unnecessary to explain what a lead should do. But, to repeat what we all know, a lead should:

- Tell a reader what the story is about.
- Make the reader want to read on.
- Put the story in focus.
- Create the proper mood, if there is a mood.

Using restraint

Stories about violence should be written with restraint. A writer should avoid the breathlessness that tries to impact hectic (and usually exaggerated) emergency to the situation.

For example, on the wires and in local copy we sometimes get approximately the following: "All available ambulances were immediately dispatched to the scene of the tragedy and the victims were rushed to nearby hospitals."

Let's be calm. Let's make it: "Ambulances took the injured to hospitals." It's more effective — and the professional tone of the paper will be enhanced — if you under-write instead of over-write.

Avoiding clutter

Adjectives and superlatives sometimes are used in a mistaken belief they strengthen and lend color to a story. Actually, they weaken a story.

For example, "an explosion" is better than "a violent explosion," because all explosions are violent. It's better to tell precisely what happened: "An explosion today destroyed a 10-story building." It's more effective to tell the facts specifically and without jabbing the reader in the ribs. Then the reader will decide for himself that the explosion indeed was devastating.

By the same token, let's not describe a slaying as "a brutal murder," or say that "the night watchman was viciously beaten by the burglars" or that "the girl was savagely raped."

None of those crimes is committed with gentleness and we are writing immaturely when we doll up the circumstances with such ornamentation.

On that subject, I often wonder why we call all homicides "murder." "Murder" really is a technical term; "slaying" is a better basic word, even when the slaying is premeditated.

Thus, "an investigation" is better than "a thorough investigation" or "a sweeping investigation" or "an all-out investigation." If it's a genuine investigation, it won't be superficial.

The subject of clutter is related to the foregoing. Clutter words are used by everyone in ordinary speech, but we ought to keep them out of the newspaper.

They are a waste of space because they contribute nothing and, worse, they give the paper a juvenile tone. Some random examples:

"He said he had not yet received the report." Why the "yet?" If he hasn't received it, obviously he hasn't received it "yet." So you don't need "yet."

"Construction work already has begun." Why "already?"

"The witness denied any knowledge of the robbery." Why "any?"

“The senator is now serving his third term.” Why “now?”

“The house burned down.” “The factory will close down.” Why “down?”

“The flight set a new record.” If it’s a record (in that context), it’s new.

“He disclosed for the first time.” If it’s a disclosure, it’s for the first time.

“He strangled to death.” “He suffocated to death.” That’s the same as saying, “He drowned to death.”

“He served as toastmaster; he was vice president.” Make it, “He was….”

“The President has a bad cold.” “Police said he was badly injured.” That implies some colds and injuries are good. What’s meant is that the President has a severe cold and that the injuries were severe.

The man who has been injured sometimes “remains critical in a hospital.” He’s not “critical”; it’s his condition that’s critical.

Let’s not call children “little children” or “young children.” The word “children” (usually) explains that they are relatively little and are young. Let’s not say that women give birth to “baby boys” or “baby girls.”

Let’s not describe girls and women as “beautiful” or “lovely.” “Lovely Joan Doe” came up “Lousy Joan Doe” on us once through a typo, and it served us right.

Let’s not say that “fire broke out.” Sounds like it had been confined in a cage. Why not “fire started?”

We should use precise words. We sometimes get “tipped” for “informed,” “spotted” for “saw,” “combed” for “searched” and so on.

We sometimes use “stakeout” to describe police surveillance and a host of words that some apparently believe are synonyms for “narcotics.”

Those bits of jargon are fine in pulp magazines, but we ought to keep them out of the newspaper.

Specific words over clichés

Some additional examples where specific words would be better than manufactured clichés:

“Names will not be released until next of kin are notified.” “Testimony released today showed….” This sounds as if the names and the testimony had been held captive and finally set free. Let’s use “made public” or “announced” or some other specific word.

“The convicts staged a three-hour riot.” Let’s save “staged” for events that take place on a stage. We can say the convicts “rioted three hours.”

“The Navy today unveiled a new plane.” Let’s save “unveiled” for activities in which a veil literally is removed from an object — “Mayor Daly unveiled the statue.” We might say that the Navy “exhibited” the new plane.

“The Community Chest launched its funds campaign.” Let’s save “launched” for vessels and use “started” or “opened” or “began” or some other precise word.

We shouldn’t use inept synonyms in an effort to avoid repetition of key words in stories.

For example, let’s not use such words as “hike” or “boost” or “jump” for “pay raise.” Let’s not use “slash” or “cutback” for “reduce.”

If you’re writing about cats and dogs, it’s better to repeat those words than to call them “felines and canines.” And let’s never refer to a banana as “an elongated yellow fruit.”

We should avoid calling groups of persons “a pair,” “the trio,” “the quartet,” and so on. (A caption referred to five women as “the quintet.”) Those words are fine to describe vaudeville teams or musicians, but let’s make it “the two” or “the three persons” or “the five women.”

Including background

The job a weaving background into a story sometimes causes trouble. Background must be introduced deftly. It’s better to wrap it up in one paragraph than to drop it in dabs.

Here’s what results when background is strung out (in a story about a bank employee who made off with $55,000):

A bank examiner said he had obtained a confession from the one-time football star.

Bank officials said they found it difficult to believe that the serious-minded Sunday school teacher had taken the money.

The GI trainee told investigators he took the job to earn money to go into business for himself.

The former YMCA boy’s counselor admitted he had lost in stock speculation.

The son of a former clergyman denied women played a part in his theft.

The former paratrooper said he would ask none of his friends to post his bail.

The omnibus paragraph sometimes used in an attempt to wrap up names, ages and other explanatory material makes hard reading. Here's an example, the second paragraph of a story: "Taken to Mercy Hospital for treatment of cuts and bruises and then released were John Doe, 27, of 919 Front St., and Richard Roe, 20, of 111 Broadway."

It's easier to read if it says: "Two were taken to Mercy Hospital for treatment of cuts and bruises and were released. They are John Doe…."

Another (Almost inconceivable, but it did get into the paper!): "Transferring to a vacant three-bedroom home they own in another part of the city were Mr. and Mrs. John J. Grindstone…."

Cause and effect

Watch out for the unintentional cause-and-effect relationship that the New Yorker magazine delights in reprinting. Examples:

- A sophomore at Chapman College last year, Carol was coated with a mixture of petroleum jelly, lamp black and shark repellent before diving into the water from the island.
- A student at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Smith believes the money fell from the truck.

Troublesome pairs

We have trouble with some pairs of words:

Anticipate and expect: Literally, "anticipate" means to take up, use or introduce before the proper or normal time. It's not a synonym for "expect." You might say, "Anticipating rain, he put a roof on his house." You shouldn't say, "The GOP anticipates Democratic support on the tax bill."

Between and among: You can say the marbles are divided "between" two persons, but they are divided "among" more than two persons.

Each other and one another: Use "each other" for two persons and "one another" for more than two.

Argument and quarrel: An argument is a point of view or its presentation. Thus people are injured after "quarrels," not after "arguments."

Compare to and compare with: Similar things are compared with each other, dissimilar things are compared to each other. You compare John Smith with Richard Jones and you compare John Smith to a sturdy oak.

Infer and imply: You imply by what you say and you infer from what you hear and see. "His words implied his readiness. The audience inferred he was ready."

Claim and say: Let's make it "He said he was innocent." Strictly speaking, you can claim an estate but you can't claim that Los Angeles is larger than San Diego.

Unnamed and unidentified: "Police today sought an unnamed man who…." He's not unnamed; he has a name. He's unidentified.

Injured are and dead were: Let's make it "The injured are…." and "The dead were…." This is because the injured are still with us here on earth, while the dead are not.

Parallelism

In that connection, it's preferable to repeat the auxiliaries in such parallel forms as "One man was killed today and one was injured." When the form of the verb "to be" (is are, was were) is not parallel, however, the auxiliary must be repeated: "One man was killed and two were injured." It is wrong to make it, "One man was killed and two injured," because that is saying, "One man was killed and two was injured."

Let's make it, "Ten persons burned to death" or "Five persons drowned" instead of "Ten persons were burned to death" or "Five persons were drowned." The latter implies someone burned them at the stake or held their head under water.

Watch out for those modifiers

We have trouble with "ly" adverbs that precede adjectives. We mistakenly hyphenate such things as "a recently enacted bill" and "a firmly established precedent."

An adverb ending in "ly" should not be hyphenated to the adjective that it precedes in forming and adjective phrase. Thus it should be "a firmly (adverb) established (adjective) precedent (noun)" — no hyphen.

It's an over-simplification, however, to say that adverbs never are hyphenated to the adjective they precede, because we would make it "a well-done steak," "an ill-advised act" and so on.

The reason "ly" adverbs are not hyphenated to adjectives is that the normal grammatical relationship is established without the hyphen. You can see the difference that would exist if you omitted the hyphen in "an ill advised act." Also, "well" and "ill" are not always adverbs, while "firmly" always is.

Mouth-filling strings of compound adjectives force the reader to go back and retrace the meaning of a sentence. "The strikers presented a 20-cent-an-hour wage-increase demand." The compound adjective is too big to swallow. Let's make it, "The strikers asked a wage increase of 20 cents an hour."

A wire story read: "The strikers are seeking a 25-cents-an-hour wage hike, contending that a 10-cents-an-hour jump, which gave them $2.1-hourly pay-scale, is insufficient." That's really making life tough on a reader.

A string of titles preceding a name likewise is difficult to digest. A wire story said: "Signers included former Salt Lake City Mayor Albert Sprague." Let's make it, "Signers included Albert Sprague, former mayor of Salt Lake City."

Articles

We should note the difference between definite and indefinite articles. “John Smith, the organ grinder,” implies that most readers are acquainted with him and that he’s an organ grinder. If he’s not that well known, let’s make it, “John Smith, an organ grinder.” That merely is a reference to a man name Smith who is an organ grinder.

In general, an article should be used in a combination consisting of a name and an occupational identification. “John Smith, an organ grinder,” is preferable to “John Smith, organ grinder.,” because the latter suggests he’s the only one in town.

The absence of articles, indeed, sometimes is so noticeable in our stories that it jars the reader. A recent story ended this way: “Date of the meeting has not been decided.” It would be better to make it “The date of the meeting….”

By the same token, if an “A” or a “The” will start a lead more naturally, don’t hesitate to use it. Arbitrary omission of the articles often makes stories objectionably abrupt. Let the magazine Time be as elliptical as it pleases; we ought to fill out our phrasing.

Likewise, don’t hesitate to use a name to start a lead, if it will read better that way. We had a lead recently that said, approximately, “Formal announcement was made today by Joe Doakes that he would be a candidate for re-election….” That’s labored. Let’s make it: “Joe Doakes today announced….”

To quote or not to quote

We have trouble with quotes. We should not use orphan quotes. They are used in a mistaken belief that they lend special meaning to the words that are quoted, like this: Many of Washington’s soldiers went “over the hill” during the winter at Valley Forge. The futility of using orphan quotes is that if the reader doesn’t know the special meaning, putting quotes around the words won’t explain it to him. If you have the feeling that you need orphan quotes around words (or italics to emphasize a point), it’s evidence that the sentence ought to be reconstructed.

Partial quotes, however, are another matter. The following is not an orphan quote, and it’s OK: Sen. McCarthy said he is preparing a report “on the aims of the Communist Party to infiltrate every medium of information….” The difference between this and the Valley Forge quote is apparent.

Illegitimate quotes bob up all the time. In a story about a teen-age killer, one wire service wrote: “Her stepfather has urged Starkweather to ‘stay away’ from the Bartlett home.” Any special meaning to “stay away”? Nope. Are the words a flavorsome bit that characterizes the stepfather? Nope. Do they illuminate the local color? Nope. It would make as much sense to quote “stepfather” or “urged” or “home.”

Another wire service wrote: “Authorities said Starkweather had signed a ‘confession.’”

Robert Young, the transportation man, killed himself. A wire service wrote it: “Police said Young had been ‘despondent.’” Another story said: “Haynes pulled a pistol and ordered Russell to ‘walk to the back of the store.’” Another: “Company dealers report a ‘slight upturn’ in the auto market.”

A reporter or a copy reader should take a second — and a third — look at quotes like those. In none of the examples were quotes proper.

Attribution

Quotes and sources should be handled in such a way that the reader knows immediately who is being quoted. Thus the source would be buttoned up at the first natural break in the quote: “Thousands of South Koreans are still held by the Reds,” Gen. Clark said. “They must be returned.”

Sometimes the source is located in an awkward place: “Thousands of South Koreans, “Gen. Clark said, “are still….” Doing it that way makes the quote difficult to read.

It is necessary to introduce the source only once — at the first natural break — in a block of continuous quotes. It is wrong to sprinkle re-introductions through the continuous quotes and, as sometimes happens, to wind up the final paragraph with a “…,” he concluded.

If the running quotes are interrupted in any manner, however, the source should be re-introduced when the quotes pick up again.

It’s almost always better to start with the quote than with the source. Thus, make it “Thousands of South Koreans are still held by the Reds,” Gen. Clark said. Don’t make it: Gen. Clark said, “Thousands of South Koreans….”

In connection with quotes — either direct or indirect — we should button up specifically the circumstances. We should tell whether their remarks were made in an interview, a press conference, a speech, a radio or television appearance, a statement (a handout can be called a statement), in a letter the man wrote to his grandmother. Explaining the circumstances helps to orient the reader.

When it comes to hanging a statement on a source, there’s nothing better than the word “said.” Almost every other speech verb has an editorial implication — asserted, charged, insisted, denied, reiterated, pointed out and so on. Don’t worry about repeating the word “said” in a story. By all means, let’s avoid the word “stated.” It’s stiff-necked.

We should take pains to use restrained language in connection with speech verbs in stories about controversies. The wires have been running wild with “fiery rebuttal,” “blistering accusation,” “ripped out a counter-charge,” “devastating rejoinder.” Let’s be calm. Let’s make it: He said, “…”

We should avoid the editorial “we,” “our,” “us,” and so on in anything except direct quotes. Make it “Sen. Brown said this country’s exports have increased,” not “Sen. Brown said our exports have increased….”

We sometimes neglect to hook up the lead with the second paragraph. This is an example:

A San Diego woman yesterday awaited word from a Cascade Mountains wilderness area where her husband has been missing since Sunday.

Mrs. Charles Dickens, 2659 Fairfield St., said she has given permission for bloodhounds to be used in the search.

As that stands, there's nothing to tell the reader that Mrs. Dickens is the woman referred to in the lead. Such gaps should be bridged, with the second paragraph reading, approximately: "The woman, Mrs. Charles Dickens…."