Writing for Digital Media

Tips to Remember

Writing is a skill anyone can learn. It doesn't take any special divine gift endowed to a person at birth. It is a skill that uses a set of tools. Here are some suggestions to help build writing skills:

- Write in active voice whenever possible. Avoid passive voice.

  Example: The car hit the boy. (Active; subject acts upon object)
  The boy was hit by the car. (Passive; object acts upon subject)

- Avoid using the pronoun "that" whenever it makes sense to leave it out.

  Example: The chief said that crime is increasing in the city. (Incorrect)
  The chief said crime is increasing in the city. (Correct)

- Use attribution skillfully. It should serve as a sort of punctuation and should not be obtrusive. Avoid overuse of words such as "according to," "asserted," "explained," "continued" and "added." The word "said" will suffice in most uses, and it is the most unobtrusive.

- Quotations should begin at the start of a paragraph.

  Example: "I could have any one of you murdered for $300," the chief said. "Organized crime has a strong foothold in High Point Valley." (Correct)

  The chief said, "I could have any one of you murdered for $300." (Incorrect)

- Quote only the material that deserves quoting. Sometimes you can reword it in a way that will make the story more clear.

- Call things as they are. Do not use euphemisms in an attempt to keep from making a bad situation look bad. Use words in good taste, but state facts as they are.

- Cut out excess baggage from your writing. Eliminate unneeded words and pare your writing down to clear, concise, legible reading.

- Vary sentence lengths. Some will be short and terse while others may take a line or two. Never write "mile-long" sentences. Think of your reader. He wants to read quickly. Think of the search engines. They need to scan quickly.

- Write in conversational patterns. Put words down in the same way you would tell the story to a friend. Do not look for sophisticated verbiage from a Thesaurus. Look for common words that are understandable to educated and uneducated readers alike.

- Avoid jargon. Use generic terms and stay away from brand names. When a source uses the jargon of his profession, be sure you know what it means then translate it for your reader. The exception is in direct quotations.

- Use plurals when referring to groups of people in general. This will allow you to use the plural pronoun "they" rather than the singular pronoun "he." Since "he" is both masculine and neuter, it must be used when its antecedent is singular and the gender is unknown. Do not use "he or she" or "he/she" or "she" when the gender is unspecified. Use of plural nouns and pronouns is better.

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Example: School officials want to assure that the student has every chance to succeed in their studies. (Incorrect. The pronoun "their" does not agree with its antecedent "student.")

School officials want to assure that the student has every chance to succeed in his studies. (Correct but could be better. The pronoun "his" agrees with "students", but some readers find its use objectionable.)

School officials want to assure that students have every chance to succeed in their studies. (Correct. The pronoun "their" agrees with its antecedent "students" and does not reflect any reference to gender.)