

Communication 4312 – A Check List

Let's stop and review what we've been doing.

First, ask yourself, why am I doing this story? What is the context?
Have I answered all the questions I should have?

Were you properly prepared? That is, did you have everything you could have collected in advance. With experience you are going to discover that preparation is one of the most important aspects of writing.

Sometimes you might want to write a statement about the story before you begin writing. Just a sentence or a paragraph. Answer the question: what is this story about?

However, you should not delay from the time you gather the information until you begin writing. Don't worry about having the story completely thought out in advance. Sit down and write. You can write facts, quotes, etc. You may want to put the story aside and come back to it later.

You don't have to write the lead first. You can write it at any time. Sometimes the lead will come after you have begun writing. And, before you turn the story in, go back and ask yourself if you have written the best lead that you could.

Have you set the story in time and place? When and where did this happen? Don't let the story just float around. The way you do that varies with the story. Put the time and place where they best fit.

You should have a definite organization. You should be able to chart that. Have distinct paragraphs. Don't put things that don't belong in those paragraphs – for instances, background, description, etc.

Keep the attribution simple. Write in the past tense. You should have already placed the story in time. The past tense will refer back to that time. Other than simple identification, don't add anything to the attribution. The attribution has to be there, but you don't want to call attention to it.

Find a place for the background. Don't have it too high. You may want to identify a person early. But, let the details of the background wait. Remember, the reason it is called the background. Unless you are writing about a person who has taken a new position or something like that, don't make the story about the background.

The story should be about the person in the situation she or he finds herself or himself in. If you are writing about a teacher, the story is not where the teacher grew up or where they went to school. The story is about the teacher and teaching and whatever relates to that. The same goes for anyone else you are writing about.

Be careful not to be distracted by interesting but incidental information. That can throw you off the story. If the teacher rides a motorcycle, you've got to figure how that fits the story. Otherwise, it may not belong. On the other hand, if the teacher rides a motorcycle to school, you can't avoid that. In fact, that might be something to consider when deciding what the story is about.

A big problem in this regard is the seemingly important question of where a person was born. Stay away from "a native of." If a person was born in Pensacola or New York but only lived there a few months that doesn't mean they are a native of those places.

Always be on guard against nonessential information. "A native of" is one example. Another example is age. If age is important, find a place for it. Don't just throw it in, as "the 49-year-old" or "the 49-year-old teacher."

Stay away from elegant variation. On second reference, use the person's last name or her or him. Don't make it "the teacher," or whatever. Don't say, "the teacher said." If a detail about a person is worth mentioning, find a place to use that detail. Don't just throw it in.

Avoid clichés. Don't start sentences with it and there. Be careful with when and while. Especially be careful with when and while in the lead. Avoid fads and cuteness. Write simply and clearly. Read your story aloud and see where you stumble or where the language isn't clear.

■ David McHam