

Communication 4312 – Don't Write Like This, An Introduction

Along with organization comes the language you use to tell the story.

In the beginning, many of us use the words we grow familiar with – whether they are the best words to use or not. This tendency toward the cliché and the trite is difficult to avoid. But, it must be overcome.

Knowing what not to do in your writing can be as important as knowing what to do. With that in mind, here are some suggestions:

Write simply. For the most part, eliminate the introduction to sentences (like this one). Especially avoid the participle (-ing) beginnings. Unless you have a reason to do so, don't use compound and/or complex sentences. That's not to say that all the sentences should be the same length. Vary them according to what you are saying.

Don't start your stories with *when* or *while*. Be careful of using *while* anywhere.

Don't start sentences with *it* and *there*. Find strong subjects and connect them with strong verbs.

Don't use *in order to*, *prior to* or *following*. Don't use *not only*.....

Use *more than* instead of *over*: more than 40 years.

Don't use *hopefully*. Get that out of your vocabulary. The way you talk with often finds its way into your writing. For that reason, you must be aware of the language you use - even in casual conversation.

Many young writers shortcut the process by using what is called elegant variation. That is, using *the 55-year-old general*, *the native of West Virginia*, *the father of three*, etc. Don't do that. Follow this rule: if you want to use background, description, etc. find a place for it.

Be careful with *a native of*. Also, don't automatically use a person's age. If the age is important, use it. Find a place for it and drop it in. Do not say *the 55-year-old widow*.....

This is especially important with attribution. Use *said*. (Much more on this later.) Don't combine background, description, etc. with attribution. On occasion you may identify a person while presenting attribution. (Again, we'll come back to this at some point).

Stay away from synonyms for *said*. Don't use *according to*, except in reference to such sources as census data.

Avoid *believes*. Say so and so said such and such, not that they believed such and such. The same for *admits*.

Here's an approach I find many of you using, and you shouldn't:

During his time in college, so and so said He obviously didn't say that when he was in college. The writer is trying to say that he did such and such during that time. Turn the sentence around. Say, he said that during his time in college

Do not turn anything in with names misspelled. For instance, Tony Kushner. Ernest Hemingway. Names are not difficult to check. Or, locations.

These are not onerous rules. Gaining control of the way you write is vital to writing well. This is going to be true no matter what you write: plays, short stories, annual reports, profiles, etc.

You can improve your language skills by reading. But, if you are not comfortable with the way you write, find books on grammar, language, etc. and study them. A good place to find such books is at Half-Price Books.

Your writing will improve to the extent you learn new techniques and eschew bad ones. What we are working toward is gaining control of what you write.

■ David McHam