

Writing tips

Writing for video is different from writing for print or online platforms. When you write narration for a video story, you are writing for the ear. Your viewers can't go back and reread something that didn't quite make sense. To ensure they understand your message, follow this collection of tips from media consultant Mackie Morris.

The Good Writer's Dazzlin' Dozen

Mackie Morris frequently conducts seminars for TV news stations. At those seminars, Morris relentlessly drives home his active-voice message. Peppered throughout his presentation are other useful writing tips. He calls them "The Good Writer's Dazzlin' Dozen":

- Write factually and accurately: The best technique and the finest form mean nothing if your copy is wrong.
- Write in the active voice: This technique makes your copy tighter, more complete, easier to listen to, and more interesting. Do whatever you must to avoid the passive voice.
- Write in the present tense or present perfect tense: That makes your copy more immediate, and immediacy is more interesting. For news stories in particular, avoid the word "today" because it becomes repetitive. If you use past tense, make sure you give a time reference to avoid confusion.
- Keep your writing simple: Give the audience the best possible chance to understand your story. Choose positive forms over negative forms. Instead of writing "The university board rejected a proposal to close admissions," say "The board kept admissions open." Write one thought to a sentence. Don't search for synonyms; repetition is not a sin. Don't search for complicated, "intellectual" language. Avoid technical jargon. These elements demand extra effort from your listeners, and you might lose them.
- Be complete and clear: In your quest for brevity and conciseness, don't omit necessary information.
- Stick to the rules but develop your own style: Try to say the same old thing in a different, new way. Make use of writing devices that make copy easier to listen to and more interesting, such as using the "rule of threes" (that is, grouping items by threes, such as red, white, and blue; left, right, and center; over, under, and through). Saying things in groups of three always sounds better. Pausing before saying the third item is even more effective.
- Write to be heard: Maintain a sense of rhythm in your writing. All life has rhythm, and rhythmic writing is easier to hear. Mastering this concept is difficult. Start by avoiding long sentences and punctuating your copy with sentence fragments. In addition, avoid potentially confusing homonyms. Always test your copy by reading it aloud.
- Avoid interruptives: Don't force the listener to make difficult mental connections. Put modifiers next to what they modify. Don't split verb phrases (split infinitives).
 - Incorrect: Will eventually decide.
 - Correct: Eventually will decide.
 - Incorrect: Doctors only gave him six months to live.
 - Correct: Doctors gave him only six months to live.
- Use commas sparingly: Because you are writing to be heard, you want to avoid unnecessary breaks in your copy. A comma demands a hitch in reading and the resulting jerkiness frustrates the listener. Reducing the number of commas also eliminates subordinate clauses that kill the impact of copy, especially if they come at the top of a story or sentence.
- Use numbers sparingly: Listeners have trouble remembering numbers. If you need to use numbers, try to round them off or reinforce them by using on-screen supers (text that identifies a location or interview subject, for example).

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- Avoid ambiguous pronoun references: If you use a pronoun, make sure the pronoun agrees with its antecedent and appears close to the antecedent. For example, “John Doe hit Bob Smith on the head and paramedics took him to the hospital.” Instead of “him,” use “Smith.”
 - Let the pictures tell as much of the story as they can: Video that clearly conveys a specific message requires general writing, while generic video needs more detailed writing. Utilize the touch-and-go method, wherein you write directly to the video at the beginning of a sequence and then allow the writing to become more general with background information and other facts as the video continues.

Writing in the active voice

Writing in the active voice dramatically improves the quality of your productions.

For example, consider this passive-voice example:

A bill was passed by the Senate.

Use this active-voice version instead:

The Senate passed a bill.

Putting the receiver of the verb’s action after the verb changes passive-voice writing into active voice. Passive voice is not ungrammatical, but it deadens, complicates, and lengthens writing. You use passive voice sparingly in everyday conversation, and you should use it sparingly in video journalism. You are asking people to listen to your words. Focusing on active voice makes your copy more interesting and easier to understand.