

How to Improve Your Writing by Standing on Your Head

by Philip Yaffe

You may not have thought about it, but newspapers provide the best examples of clear, concise, dense (factual) writing you can find anywhere. Otherwise people wouldn't read them.

Journalists not only write superbly well, they do so extremely rapidly. When a news event occurs, they don't have the luxury of spending several days to put together their text. At best, they have a few hours.

Learning how journalists work their "daily miracles" can help you write better at your much more leisurely pace.

Here is an article from an international newspaper.

Britain yesterday has once again called for the United Nations to mount a peacekeeping operation in the violence-torn Darfur region of Sudan in response to increasing complaints from aid agencies on site that international efforts to help Darfur's desperate, displaced population are woefully inadequate.

At the same time, Her Majesty's Government is joining with other European Union countries to threaten sanctions against Sudan unless its government energetically moves to end the "ethnic cleansing" against black villagers in Darfur by the mainly Arab Janjawid militias. UN officials report that the conflict has already claimed from 30,000 – 50,000 lives and about 1.2 million people have been displaced, with about 200,000 taking refuge in neighbouring Chad.

(And the story continues)

In the first paragraph, we learn that:

1. The British Government is concerned about the situation in Darfur.
2. Darfur is a violence-torn region of Sudan.
3. Britain believes a peacekeeping force is urgently needed.
4. It is pressing the United Nations to supply this peacekeeping force.
5. This is not the first time that it has urged the UN to supply peacekeeping force.
6. The population of Darfur has been displaced.
7. Aid agencies in Darfur say that international assistance to these distressed people is inadequate.

In the second paragraph, we learn that:

1. The trouble in Darfur is a race war
2. Arab militias are attacking black villagers.
3. Britain and other EU countries believe the Sudanese Government is not doing enough to stop the war.

4. They threaten sanctions against Sudan if its government does not quickly take action to end the attacks.
5. To date, between 30,000 - 50,000 people have been killed.
6. About 1.2 million have been displaced.
7. About 200,000 have fled across the border into the neighbouring country of Chad.
8. These figures come from the United Nations, which is a reliable source.

Imagine that you had known absolutely nothing about Darfur before reading this text. Within two paragraphs you have learned virtually everything you need to know about this tragic situation.

This is certainly clear, concise, dense writing at its very finest. Unfortunately, it is seldom recognised as such. According to the adage: *Today a newspaper may be the most valuable thing in the world; tomorrow it is good only for wrapping fish.*

Now that you appreciate how remarkable qualities of newspaper writing, the question is: How does it happen? And how can you apply its lessons to your type of writing?

Turning Things on Their Head

Journalists use an ingenious technique called the “inverted pyramid”. Before seeing how it works, it would be useful to see where it came from.

A couple of centuries ago, poor literacy and primitive printing techniques meant that newspapers had few readers, few pages, and were published infrequently (once a week or even once a month). As literacy and printing techniques improved, the number of readers increased, the number of pages increased. And so did frequency. Most newspapers were published at least once a week, some 2 - 3 times a week. Many even became dailies.

This accelerating pace of production created a serious technical problem. In more leisurely days, if a story was too long for the space assigned to it, there was always plenty of time to either rewrite it or redesign the page. However, when newspapers became dailies, this was no longer possible.

What newspapers needed were stories that they could cut off from the bottom. In this way, instead of labouring to revise a story at the last minute, they could simply remove the last few sentences or paragraphs, and the job was done.

In order to do this, stories had to be written in a very special way. It is of no value simply to cut from the bottom if the lost information is crucial for the reader to understand what the story is all about. Consequently, stories had to be written “top down”. All key information had to be concentrated at the beginning and all secondary information presented in declining order of importance. In this way text could be deleted from the bottom and no one would know that it had ever been there.

This story structure became known as the inverted pyramid. It worked extremely well because it not only solved the mechanical problem of overly long texts, it also turned

out to be how people prefer to get their information, particularly when they are in a hurry.

With today's computer technology, the mechanical problem that gave rise to the inverted pyramid is no longer relevant. However, because it constitutes the very basis of good expository writing, the inverted pyramid is still held in high esteem.

Imagine an upside-down pyramid, or rather a triangle, i.e. with its point at the bottom and the wide part at the top.

The top, where all the key information is concentrated, is called the "lead". The second part, which contains the secondary information (details), is called the "body".

- **How to construct the lead**

The beginning of the story ("lead") must be concise. This may be a single sentence or several sentences, whatever is necessary to give the reader a clear overview of what it contains.

Journalists often say that they spend about 50% of their time writing the lead of a story; writing the rest of the story also takes about 50%. Why? Because this is usually how long it requires them to determine the key information to put into the lead, and then to package it in a clear, concise manner. After that, the rest of the story almost writes itself.

Determining this key information is not a matter of intuition. There is a method. Before journalists start to write, they ask themselves a series of questions known as the **5Ws & H**.

1. **Who?** Who are the person or persons involved in the story?
2. **What?** What happened?
3. **When?** When did it happen?
4. **Where?** Where did it happen?
5. **Why?** Why did it happen?
6. **How?** How did it happen?

Not all these questions will be relevant all the time, but they provide a good test. After writing the lead, check to see how many of the questions have been answered. If any answers are missing, there are two possible reasons:

- The question isn't relevant, so do nothing.
- The question is relevant but was neglected, so rewrite.

Another way to evaluate the lead is the ***Stop Reading Test***.

Remember, you are generally writing for busy people. *They generally do not want—and often do not need—to read the entire text.* So ask yourself: At what point could someone stop reading and still get a clear, sharp picture of what the text is all about? If they would need most or all of the text, you must do some serious rewriting.

- **How to construct the body**

The inverted pyramid is a pyramid because at each point from the lead downward the information becomes less and less important. This does not mean the information is necessarily less interesting; that is for each individual reader to determine. However, it is no longer vital.

But how do you arrange information in descending order of importance? Remember, it must be possible to delete information from the bottom without anyone knowing that it was ever there.

This is certainly not easy; it requires a lot of skill and practice. But once again, there is a method that offers considerable help. It is called the **Q & A Technique**. It works like this.

After each sentence you write, examine it to see what question it could raise in the mind of your readers.

Then answer it!

If you do this consistently, you will find the answers becoming more and more detailed, so the information will become less and less vital. When you run out of questions, it is probably a good time to stop writing.

A Pertinent Example

Here is the lead of a story in an international newspaper.

Super-sportsman Lance Armstrong, seven-time *Tour de France* winner, filed suit Wednesday in a Paris court to force the publisher *La Martinière* to include his denial of doping charges in a new book about him, scheduled to reach bookstores in September.

(And the story continues)

Here are the 5Ws & H.

- | | | |
|----|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | Who? | Lance Armstrong, seven-time <i>Tour of France</i> winner |
| 2. | What? | filed suit against the publisher <i>La Martinière</i> |
| 3. | When? | Wednesday |
| 4. | Where? | in a Paris court |
| 5. | Why? | to include his denial of doping charges in a new book about him |
| 6. | How? | (not relevant) |

Note that the “Who” is not simply Lance Armstrong but “Lance Armstrong, seven-time *Tour of France* winner”. The name Lance Armstrong may not be immediately

familiar to everyone, but with this description, even people who have never heard of him would now know who he is.

Similarly, the “What” is not simply that he filed a lawsuit but that he filed suit against “the publisher *La Martinière*”. Most readers probably will not know who *La Martinière* is, but they will know that the writer does, which reinforces their confidence in the accuracy of the text. Gaining reader confidence is essential to effective expository writing, and inserting precise detail wherever relevant is an excellent way to do it.

Starting from this lead, the story continues down the inverted pyramid. At each point, the information becomes less vital, giving each individual reader the option to decide at which point they have had enough and can turn their attention to something else.

How to Use the Inverted Pyramid in Your Type of Writing

You may now feel that the inverted pyramid is an excellent idea—for newspapers. But is it relevant for the type of writing that you do?

Emphatically, yes!

Remember, the inverted pyramid provides information in exactly the way people prefer it, particularly when they are in a hurry.

Suppose you are writing some kind of company report—a financial analysis, a new product proposal, changes to the company’s employment policies, etc. It runs to 20 pages. Obviously you can’t organise it into one big inverted pyramid; even the most accomplished professional writer wouldn’t attempt such a daunting task. However, you can organise it into sections and subsections, and write these as inverted pyramids.

You can even go a step further. Most such reports begin with an executive summary. Write this as you would the lead of an inverted pyramid, i.e. be certain that all the key information is located there and that it is presented in a clear, concise, confidence-building manner.

*Contrary to common conventional wisdom, you should write the executive summary **before** you write the body, at least as a rough draft. To emphasise the point, perhaps we should replace the term “executive summary”, which implies writing the body first and then summarising it, for something more appropriate such as “executive briefing”, “executive focus”, etc.*

Treating the executive summary as the lead of an inverted pyramid is not easy, but it confers some extraordinary advantages on both the writer and the readers.

- **Advantages for the writer**

Identifying and writing the executive summary first helps you to:

- Determine what information you really need in the body of the report, i.e. what is of key importance and secondary importance. And what can be eliminated, i.e. what is of no importance.
- Organise the body into the most appropriate sections and subsections.
- Present the information in each section and subsection in descending order of importance.

- **Advantages for the readers**

With an executive summary is written like the lead of an inverted pyramid, readers can:

- Get a clear overview of what the report contains.
- Determine which sections and subsections of the body may be of particular interest.
- Decide whether or not they even need to read the body.

Remember, you are dealing with busy people; they have neither the time nor the desire to read the entire report. What they really want is for the writer to clearly identify what they ***must read*** (executive summary). Any additional material they may wish to read should be left to their own judgement.

The general structure of a well-written report would thus consist of two parts:

1. **Executive Summary**

Written like the lead of an inverted pyramid, i.e. build it on the 5 Ws & H

2. **Body**

Written in sections and subsections, each one in the form of an inverted pyramid

I recently had a discussion about the ideas in this article with a journalist friend of mine, the president of a major US news distribution company. He suddenly realised that over his 40-year career, the inverted pyramid had become so much a part of him that he unconsciously uses it in virtually everything he writes: letters, emails, reports, financial statements, new product proposals, etc.

You will probably never reach the stage of using the inverted pyramid without a second thought. However, if you begin consciously using it as a first thought, I am certain you will be pleased at just how much it will help you write more clearly, concisely—and rapidly.

Editor's Note

Philip Yaffe is a former reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal* and a marketing communication consultant. He currently teaches a course in good writing and good public speaking in Brussels, Belgium.

This article is based on Mr. Yaffe's excellent book ***In the "I" of the Storm: the Simple Secrets of Writing & Speaking (Almost) like a Professional***. It is available directly from the publisher in Belgium (www.Storypublishers.be) or Amazon (www.Amazon.com).

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