

HEARTSTRONG MEDIA.

The Art of Television Storytelling

A Masterclass on Writing for Meaning and Impact.

By Michael Cogdill, Copyright 2021

Make Moonshine

Moonshine shares two things with great writing: Both are clear as spring water, both come with one helluva kick. Good writing makes the truth come clear. Great writing is original, evocative, distilling what makes us human into the hottest little phrase.

As you write, keep a shot glass handy (yes, an empty one-- no channeling the myths of Faulkner writing drunk). Look at it. A shot glass is small. Almost all powerful sentences are small.

Powerful ideas tend to get distilled to clarity that would fit in a shot glass. E=MC2 is one. Think of the great quotes you know. Memorable quotes by nature keep it small.

Occam's razor applies here. Mixed metaphors, I know, but hang with me. It says the simplest explanation is nearly always the best one. Simplifying big ideas, big stories, makes for clear copy with one helluva a kick.

Mangle Cliches

Journalese flies around so much now that reporting itself is "lucky to be alive."

That one makes me twitch.

But to mangle a cliché takes the familiar in the viewer's mind and makes it original. Sometimes it's horribly familiar. But mangled? It's new.

Consider: THE BILL HIT A ROAD BLOCK. (Of course it did. That "road block" jumps on news copy all over the place).

But now look at this: THE BILL HIT A ROAD BLOCK SCRAWLED WITH THE NAME JOHN MCCAIN.

See how active the voice in that sentence, by the way? More on that in a moment. Write with intolerance of cliches unless you can make it yours, make it original. I'm convinced one reason viewers avoid news grows out of weariness of hearing the same phrases over and over. Dare to write with original voice. It will help you find your voice (More on that coming up, too)

Dance in Threes

The mind magnetizes to things in threes. Science doesn't fully understand why, but knows it's true.

Our minds love to think in patterns, especially this one: Three strikes. Three Stooges. Three little pigs. And see what just happened? The examples I gave came in threes.

Write your copy as if you're writing music. Listen to it. Lyrical copy falls deeply into the ear and the mind. It gets remembered. The rule of threes lives in the heart of lyrical writing.

An example from a spot news story highlights the power of it, even in a sound bite. A woman watching her business burn down rattles off the loss of her equipment. Then she punctuates it, saying, "It's all gone, gone gone." Listen to the rhythmic impact in those words. Each "gone" runs deeper into what the woman feels. Helps the viewer feel it, too.

It's a trinitarian mystery why it works. But it does. Look for ways to write in threes, and LISTEN to your copy turn lyrical, strong, and very listenable.

Keep Your Impact Where It Belongs

We want to believe our important parts belong at the beginning of a sentence, or phrase. Truth is, the big and important parts come at the end. As with so much in life, it's the ending that counts. Witness this.

THE QUEEN DIED, THEN THE KING DIED.

Nothing wrong with that sentence. It's lean, active, carries pathos fairly well. But now watch this.

THE QUEEN DIED, THEN THE KING DIED – OF A BROKEN HEART.

Feel that? The impact grows when the sentence creates a sense of wonder, then a payoff at the end.

Consider this: TITANIC SANK ABOUT 12,500 FEET.

True enough. Now, look for impact.

TITANIC WENT DOWN, MORE THAN TWO MILES DEEP.

Sure, it's a few more words, but here they DEEPEN the impact. Seek simple words that highlight emotion, sense of awe, giving the mundane a coating of wow. Write toward the wow, win the viewer, every time.

It's not hyperbole. It's about finding the pathos. The humanity.

Important illustration here. When it comes to cutting copy, CUT SYLLABLES MORE THAN WORDS. Look at those sentences about Titanic above. Count the syllables just in 12,500. Six syllables in that one number. Now, look at the impact sentence. Count the syllables in the whole thing. It's like magic, the fewer the syllables in a sentence, the greater it's power. Make a point to write no sentence with more than 20 syllables. It's a great act of discipline as a writer. More on that to come.

--more--

A Ruling on Breaking an Important Rule

We never want to flout grammar just because we can. We honor and uphold the language.

But our calling as copy writers and performers goes toward conversation. If it doesn't talk, it's hard to hear. When it's conversational, copy invites the viewer's ear. Pulls at it.

The fundamentals of grammar ALWAYS apply to our work. But one rule can get suspended over and over, for the best of reasons.

Don't sweat incomplete sentences!!

Phrase your copy, don't "sentence it" to death.

Phrasing highlights the essence of how people talk. It's like comic timing, the impact becomes tough to describe, but we know it when we hear it.

Phrasing also tends to generate a sense of wonder.

Consider these two leads:

IN WEST PHILADELPHIA TONIGHT – A DEATH SHOCKING EVEN THE POLICE.

NOW A BANK ROBBERY ... BEYOND WORDS (Robber said nothing, didn't even use a note, just held the gun)

Phrasing tends to produce very lean copy. It works so well in packaging a story, because it headlines images so well.

Consider:

-nat sequence – the worst of the fire-

A LOOK AT WHAT BROUGHT THEM HERE

(FIREFIGHTER SOT)

A LOOK AT WHAT'S LEFT

(QUICK HOMEOWNER SOT)

AND ... WHO GOT EVERYBODY OUT.

(SOT – THE CHILD WHO CALLED 911 AND WOKE THE FAMILY)

Notice how phrasing the opening lets the viewer understand what happened without interference from too much language – from sentencing, if you will. Fires happen fast. Packages have to happen faster than ever. They must communicate in a flash. We talk in phrases because we want to be heard in a hurry. It's second nature. Write that way, and you pull viewers into your copy as if it's their very own. Also, notice the rule of threes in that sequence.

Tease writers, take major notice. Weaponize phrasing in teases, and you'll slay tedium and boredom and the excess that makes people turn off. Teases MUST be lean. Talk of long teases is jive. They do not work. Phrasing what happened into grabbing HEADLINE always works.

Consider:

DRESSED MORE LIKE BONNIE THAN CLYDE

A BANK ROBBER AND *HIS* SENSE OF STYLE.

POLICE WANT YOU TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK ... IN A MOMENT ON NEWS FOUR.

That tease draws from a real case of a very large man going around holding up banks while wearing a dress, earrings, a wig, the whole ironic disguise. The structure – simple enough for a tease in a newscast, a cold open, a pre-open, all the areas that call for headlining and billboarding the news.

Important here to note – a tease, a cold open, a preopen, NONE of these should ever synopsise the story. They should headline it. Just brush strokes to make viewers want to see the whole picture.

Phrasing has a way of highlighting emotions – the poignant, the hilarious, the infuriating. Try it. Practice it. It will make you a better writer.

Break the rule of complete sentences and watch great copy come together.

Surprise Me. And Everyone Else.

In great fiction, we all enjoy a twist. Irony is fun. The unexpected tends to entertain.

My mother had a saying, "You don't have to tell everything you know." Wise discretion. Wise copy writing, too.

Telling the whole story too soon becomes tedious, verbose, dull.

But when we write as if we're dropping coins on a forest floor, getting someone to follow us, the story wins hearts when it suddenly reveals a \$100 bill, lying where no one expected.

Consider a story photographer John Hendon and I titled *The Other Woman*.

We began with images of a man saying goodbye to his wife in the pre-dawn. He has a certain *other* lady of lore, almost always on his mind.

His wife knows it, smiles about it. Her early sound bites flirt with the very idea of this near obsession, occupying her husband's days.

He's building a submarine. In it, he will seek the lady on his mind. You're thinking, maybe he's gone around the bend of believing in mermaids? Maybe he lost a love at sea?

What is it?

The sense of wonder rolls like the ocean in the images.

Here's the payoff, revealed in a standup on the beach near the couple's home.

THE LADY HE'S LOOKING FOR IS NESSIE. YES. THE LOCH NESS MONSTER.

Dan Taylor had already tried once in Loch Ness. He failed. His sub back then, too small. He was building a bigger one. Had a million dollars in it (they were wealthy).

I spare you the rest. See how building suspense, wonder, then reversing course into a SURPRISE makes that story work. It won an Emmy. But more importantly, it won so many hearts and minds with a big reveal (in this story helped by aerials and a good Scotland the Brave on the bagpipes).

Look for ways to surprise the viewer, not telling everything you know right away. Let them wonder what they're about to see and hear when you get a story with irony or anything that can become the BIG REVEAL.

Activate your voice.

Writing in active voice will electrify your writing (and yes that's an active voice sentence).

In active voice, the subject of the sentence acts upon something, instead of being acted upon.

Active voice – SMOKE Poured out the windows

Passive voice – THE windows were filled with smoke

Active voice matches the essence of the reporting of news. News is about action. When we write in the active, we give the story and the viewer the proper sense of something *new, happening*. Writing in the active always refines copy to a lean telling of what happened.

It typically means cutting the words "going to be" out of your vocabulary.

Which brings us to an important reminder about storytelling. We write best when we're news TELLERS. To tell a story is to converse it with the listener. Tell it into your keyboard. Make sure it talks. This means active writing is a great ideal, but one always overtaken by conversation. If you're stuck on a line, can't seem to make it active and conversational at once, default to conversation. Conversational writing wins.

Reporting a story a few years ago, I set out to write it without a solitary passive verb. A noble self-challenge, but I didn't quite make it. There was a moment that simply called for a conversational passive sentence. One passive verb in an entire piece hardly wrecks the commitment to active writing.

OTPS.

One.

Thought.

Per.

Sentence.

This carries our commitment to conversational writing to the level of mantra. We tend to speak in one thought per sentence. Rarely does someone put a parenthetical phrase into a conversation. Borrowing from a lesson above, one thought per PHRASE works very well, too. Again, shoot for 22 syllables, and watch the lines of your copy come alive. Listen to copy written this way. Try it on your stories. It's magnetic.

Write UNDER the Video/Images

Write to video is a cliché born of tweed. Well-meaning professors in college courses at about the 200 level teach this. They don't understand that it's jive. Their tweed keeps them out of the field, where we have been.

Write to video is specious -- a word not for copy, but for expanding minds. Specious means something seems good, but isn't.

Writing TO the video promises to insult the viewer and the photographer.

An example from an endearing moment in the film, *Forest Gump*.

Forest: YOU DON'T HAVE LEGS, LIEUTENANT DAN.

Lt. Dan: YES. I KNOW THAT.

The scene works for grins because EVERYBODY knows that. We can see it. We've been shown. It's obvious. It works in the movie scene because of the obvious. Such a thing rarely works in copy.

Let photographers have their say. Write only what a photographer can't show with a camera.

Here's a great example from what I consider the greatest spot news story ever told. This copy comes straight from a reporter at KPNX, Phoenix.

Nat: Firefighters/First Responders/Sequence

IT WAS A RECYCLING PLANT.

A WAREHOUSE FULL OF TONS OF PLASTIC.

Sot: (Owner, in tears and her housecoat, watching it burn)

"See it's my whole life going up here"

THE PLANT GONE ... THE BUSINESS CLOSED ... JUST TWO MONTHS AFTER THE INSURANCE
CARRIER PULLED OUT.

On this story goes, and notice what the reporter does not say.

Fire!

He never writes the words fire, blaze, conflagration, or any other of the groan-worthy synonyms.

The reason is simple. This story had one reporter and THREE photographers. Those photojournalists captured a woman's business burning like hell. They captured the firefighters, the evac, the unguarded moment of a bystander saying, "This is gonna get real HOT."

The reporter tells us why the fire matters. He writes what the photojournalists cannot tell. He writes the heart of what seems a heartless occurrence in a woman's life. Otherwise he stays out of the way of what television does so well.

Television SHOWS the news

Let the great photographers show it. You, writer, tell the understory. You are the great can't-be-seen.

The bigger the images, the smaller the need for copy. Make it count. Make every word fight for its life.

Write UNDER the video.

Stay out of the way of what gets shown.

E.F. / I.F.

The great Tom Wolfe kept these letters all over his writing study in Manhattan. Floor, ceiling, walls – full of the letters E.F.

They stand for ENTERTAIN FIRST.

Wolfe wrote legendary fiction, of course, and those letters kept him true to the reasons people read fiction. They want to be entertained.

People watch the news for some of that same reason. But they primarily watch for reasons that embody the letters I.F.

INFORM FIRST.

We broker information. Our deal with the viewer goes like this – you watch at a given time, with advertisers attached, and we will inform you of the news of the day.

Intros to packages should begin to inform, even as they set up the broader story. Ideally we should place information – news – in every sentence. Some nuance of the story, phrase by phrase.

But don't forget we perform and well as inform.

Some purists don't like this idea, but it's true.

Anchors bring energy, nuance. They inflect copy to highlight the importance. They communicate urgency by speaking urgently, wasting no time. They know how to slow down and let a story rest. We'll talk about the power of silence in a moment. Reporters, you look for the irony of a situation, for the unguarded moment, for that twist that turns on the magnet that pulls the viewer into the news because something about the news interests them, even entertains them.

Viewers turn to us for both commitments – I.F. / E.F.

When a funny line occurs to you, write it down. Don't fear it. It may be appropriate, it may not, but try it on the copy.

Keith Morrison at Dateline is a master of I.F. / E.F. Here's a fragment from one of his standups in the private lake neighborhood of a man who tried to fake his own death to escape a life of scandal and hedonism. The standup was done in the dead of winter. Keith is writing about the neighborhood itself.

SHE'S WEARING HER WINTER GRAY NOW. BUT IN SUMMER? SHAKEN ... AND STIRRED.

Proof sometimes the news can wear downright naughty grin. Whenever it can, it should.

Silence!!

Sometimes the most powerful thing you can write is – nothing. Letting silence have a say can create seismic power in a story. Just a brief pause can give the viewer a chance to feel something. Or hear something otherwise drowned out. Or simply experience a moment that calls for reverence.

Which brings me to a professional regret. I wrote something excessive into an important story. If I could go back I would cut it out and simply let silence have a moment. Silence and just a touch of the sound of something.

Hearing that something would have deepened the resonance and the reverence of the story.

It was the story of a soldier funeral, held in my hometown on a freezing January day. The funeral director had gone to Raleigh for a horse drawn hearse. People lined the streets for the procession.

Photographer John Hendon executed the story to perfection.. It moved hearts and minds. But then, in the middle, with the hearse moving through town, I decided to WRITE something EVERYONE could SEE.

AND THE WHOLE TOWN TURNED OUT ... WITH HONOR ... AS A SOLDIER'S BODY WENT BY.

Groan.

The viewer could see the thing I said. The moment called for rectitude. Quiet. If I could do it over, here's how it would go:

AND THE TOWN ... (nat of the horse in the cold -- clop, clop, clop) TURNED OUT (clop, clop, clop)

That story won an Emmy for day-turn, despite my mistake. No matter. I still groan at that mistake of saying too much. Of not letting silence have its say.

Yes, it takes a certain courage to do this. Courage, and collaboration with a photographer, who must know how to time it and how the imagery should sequence.

But silence *can* punctuate the emotions of a story as no set of words ever could.

Caring Journalism

A moment about objectivity.

The great David Brinkley pioneered television news with a calm, strong pith that made people respect and believe him. He once said there is no such thing as true objectivity. No human story should be objectified. But if we're honest and fair in our subjectivity, he said, then we're working as we should as journalists.

I believe this, with passion.

We are to show and tell the truth of human events as human beings. We are called to care for the people caught up in tragedy and misfortune. Empathy does not compromise journalistic integrity, it deepens it.

We check our identity politics at the door. But never our hearts. The heart and the mind dedicated to true and deeply human storytelling defines the best of journalism.

Practice this. Be this. Succeed at the artform that is television storytelling.

55 Words

Imagine writing a novel in 55 words or fewer. It takes imagination, discipline.

In 1995, Steve Moss put out a book of these – the world's shortest stories. He set off a contest – an addictive and very useful one – to see who could write the best ones.

Try it. Try writing a NOVEL in 55 words. Challenge yourself to do it in EXACTLY 55. Writing a few of these will make no story seem too big for packaging on television. You'll find yourself cutting words but not ideas, or events.

You'll learn to write big with small.

3, 2, 1 – The Art of The Toss

A countdown reminds us brevity is the soul of wit, and a tease, and a TOSS. Again, a tease is no synopsis. Let it say just enough to create wonder. Just a few brush strokes in 3 seconds or so, enough to

draw the audience to a must see. Too much, and you promise the story will deliver the same boredom as the tease, only more of it.

Likewise the art of the TOSS. Tosses to reporters and especially to weather anchors create some of the most mind-numbing and insulting time wasting of all.

The heart of a weather toss goes to what the weather means, its active impact, and OUR knowledge of what's to come. Questions make us sound like the anchors are uninformed and don't sit in the same studio with the meteorologists.

Feel the difference:

CHIEF METEOROLOGIST CHRIS JUSTUS JOINS US NOW (of course he does, we can SEE that). AND CHRIS, IS THIS INTENSE HEAT WAVE GOING TO BE LASTING INTO TOMORROW? (Notice the passive voice in that sentence, and the real sense of anchordom ignorance in it all).

Verses:

CHIEF METEOROLOGIST CHRIS JUSTUS – TOMORROW BRINGS DANGEROUS HEAT, YET AGAIN.

Notice how quickly that second toss gets to the forecast and the forecaster, and does it with KNOWLEDGE.

Tossing reminds us to inform as the throw. Try to place news everywhere. No throwaway lines.

Their Story, Your Voice

In 1985, some British creatives put out a character called Max Headroom. He was a fictional man born of early artificial intelligence, a creation mocking TV talking heads as all having the same voice, the same mannerisms, the same style – which was no style at all.

Max Headroom is a calling to be you on television, and no one else. Especially not Max Headroom.

Great reporters and anchors distill truth through their uniqueness. You have a way of talking unlike the way of anyone else. It's fine to take inspiration from heroes we admire in journalism. Perhaps their greatest inspiration to us comes from the calling to find and use your unique voice.

This takes courage.

I once heard a TV agent say he was hearing from many news directors the same phrase, "I want a Brian Williams type." The agent and I laughed at this (before the Williams scandal). It begs the question whether that set of leaders could recognize great talent beyond what is familiar to them. Clearly, they struggled with this.

Please don't fear such devotion to the familiar.

Finding your voice means shedding the others in your head, shedding the comparisons so many love to make, and becoming the writer and performer unlike anyone else – you.

The greats have done this. You will, too.