

# The Lost Art Of Writing In Public Relations: Turning To Beer For An Analogy

By Christopher Dobens

My boss once told me that great writing reflects great thinking. As usual, she was right. When you read good writing, you don't even think about it. There are no grammatical errors that distract you and no awkward sentences to slow you down. The structure flows naturally, like the thought process, and you can effortlessly follow the author's train of thought as if it were your own.

But, like good thinking, good writing is often hard to come by. This is especially true in public relations, an industry that attracts far too many job applicants who simply claim that they are "good with people."

However, a general misunderstanding about the nature of our business is only the beginning. The growing shortage of good writers in public relations is a complex problem, which may prove even more damaging to our profession.

## When It Comes To E-Mail...

In our look at PR writing, we haven't yet discussed one of the most commonly used forms of communications today: e-mail. And there's an excellent column on the topic in the March issue of *Harvard Communications Update*.

According to the story, people have forgotten that e-mail is "really a modern form of something your grandparents enjoyed every day: the letter." The article went on to name "The Ten Commandments of E-Mail." Among them:

- Thou Shalt Never Print Thy E-Mail — "Keep the e-mail medium for its best use: a substitute conversation, where the information being exchanged is not controversial.

- Thou Shalt Never Send E-Mail When Furious or Exhausted — Don't send e-mail that you will live to regret. Instead, "write it down, save it, look at it tomorrow."

- Thou Shalt Never Substitute E-Mail for a Necessary Face-to-Face Meeting — Persuasive efforts are most successful face-to-face, and our humanity necessitates that difficult communications, such as reprimands and terminations, be done in person.

- Thou Shalt Send Nothing Over E-Mail That Must Be Error Free — "It is simply impossible to proofread successfully on the computer screen."

As a public relations manager, I have had the misfortune of witnessing the slow decline of writing quality firsthand. Every candidate at our agency must take a comprehensive writing test. I've seen a few really good ones, but most are mediocre at best.

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Perhaps this is because it's far more than just a spelling test. Our test is designed to measure a candidate's ability to write — and think — both clearly and effectively. Basic grammatical competency and an understanding of AP style are merely the fundamentals. We want employees who write clearly and proficiently, and we won't accept anything less.

As painfully dismal as many of the tests are, it is still fascinating to see how a person's thought process is reflected in their writing. From the way they approach the subject matter down to what details they include and omit, the writing reveals much about the way a person thinks.

We give every candidate a writing test, regardless of their level or experience. Some people seem offended when I ask them to take the test, saying they have an extensive portfolio or have been in the business since long before I was born. This, I've learned, is an added benefit of the test. In order to work for me, candidates must also have a sense of humor about such things.

But it still amazes me how many people expect to survive in this business without superior writing skills. Ask any of your clients what matters most to them, and I guarantee that writing will be among the top five skills they list. Salesmanship, charm, and conversational skills are important, but nothing really happens in this business — or any other — until it is written down. The art of writing is fundamental to public relations. Unfortunately, it appears to be a lost art these days.

The information age has dramatically impacted our business in a number of ways. I have been in public relations long enough to remember the arrival of the fax machine. With this new gadget, we were able to significantly reduce our dependence on messengers and overnight couriers to deliver the written word

in a timely fashion. Then came networking and the Internet, enabling us to send documents electronically. These technological developments, along with the many other wonders available through today's personal computer, have given us new tools to disseminate information faster,

farther, and far more easily.

Regardless, even with these technological tools, writing is still the key. I do a lot of my communications via e-mail. This includes media relations, client communications, and day-to-day exchanges with my staff, colleagues, and those at our New York headquarters.

From what I see, it is clear that people — PR professionals, clients, and even journalists — are substituting speed for quality. Take a good look at the next e-mail you receive. How many typos did you find? Would you have sent that out as a memo to someone? Just because we have a faster car doesn't mean we don't have to follow the rules of the road. Good writing still counts.

For example, I know that when I send a reporter some information via e-mail, I'm competing with dozens of other e-mails they receive each day. To ensure that my e-mails get read beyond the first line (or even the subject heading), I make sure they are well written. I keep them brief and succinct, and often use creative flair or humor to differentiate them. The tools may have changed and the speed has definitely increased, but there is no substitute for good writing in public relations.

## A Beer Analogy

So what happened to the art of writing? Personally, I learned to write in school. But it wasn't part of a journalism or public relations program: I didn't study either of those disciplines. I was a psychology major with a minor in English. While journalism and PR courses will teach you the fundamentals of news writing and AP style, there is something lacking. Having interviewed countless journalism and PR majors, I suspect that they are being taught how to write by formula alone, as if a successful news release can be broken down into some sort of recipe.

This is fine if you are writing a

cookbook, but things aren't always that simple in the real world. As I often do, I turn to beer for an analogy.

Writing is a lot like brewing beer. I enjoy homebrewing and have tried a number of different recipes for making beer. But following a good recipe doesn't necessarily produce a good beer. It wasn't until I fully understood the effect of each ingredient and the purpose of each step in the brewing process that I could produce good beer. And, at that point, you don't need a recipe because you have a working knowledge of all the ingredients and steps so you can manipulate them to achieve your desired result — a good beer.

Writing is the same way. You can take the information and plug it into an "inverted pyramid" news release recipe, but that will not necessarily give you a good news release. A working knowledge of grammar and AP style combined with a familiarity with the subject and its news value will enable you to craft a better news release, but a formula will only get you so far. The rest of writing is an art, and the only way to improve an art is to practice it.

To practice my art, I do a lot of creative writing outside the workplace. I encourage my staff to pursue similar activities. In fact, I helped start an internal newsletter to give everyone in the agency a forum to exercise their writing skills.

This is one way PR managers can help revive the lost art of writing in their own organizations. Encouraging their staff to write, whether it is for a newsletter or for a publication, helps employees hone their skills as well as develop individual points of view. Work with your team and make good writing a focus of your organization.

In addition, managers can do some writing of their own. As we progress in this business, it seems like we do less and less writing. But that's not an excuse to be inactive and not keep your skills polished.

For more junior staffers and those just breaking into the business, there is only one option: Get out there and write.



Christopher Dobens is a vice president at Creamer Dickson Basford's Irvine, Calif., office.