Writing tips

Writing for video is different from writing for print. When you write broadcast copy, 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 and Hollywood scriptwriters Stephen Black and Henry Stern.

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 productions. You are asking people to listen to your words. Focusing on active voice makes your copy more interesting and easier to understand.

Using proven scriptwriting techniques

The goal in video production is to tell stories. Scripts can help you plan and tell a coherent story. The following tips provided by two Hollywood scriptwriters, Stephen Black and Henry Stern, will help you construct your scripts:

- Characters are important elements in stories: The best kind of character is one who can surprise you. The audience is not stupid. You need to come up with something unpredictable. You don’t want white hats or black hats. You want people wearing gray hats — people you can’t read. You want to be interested in what happens to them.
- Start your script with a theme: Don’t start your scriptwriting with a plot; start with a theme. Know what you want to say, how you want to say it, and where you want to be at the end. The theme of our current film script is “How does the death of someone affect his three closest friends?
- Create characters: With the theme in hand, next create the characters. What is their arc and how will that change throughout the story? We invent detailed character bios. Where did they go to school? What were their parents like? What was their childhood like? We don’t have to use it all in the script, but knowing it helps craft the story.
- Create story points: Make 30 to 40 story points, such as guy robs bank, hides in mother’s house, falls in love with neighbor, and so on.
- Write an extensive narrative outline: This outline includes texture — the tone and detail — and describes settings and characters. Instead of merely using physical descriptions of characters, such as “Bob is 6 feet, 2 inches tall with the torso of a long-distance runner,” we’re more likely to write, “As John was driving up Canyon Avenue, he looked out his rain-spattered window and caught sight of Bob, one more time, running in the rain.” Narrative makes the script easier to write.
- Structure the story: It’s really crucial that you learn how to structure a piece so your story will make sense. Know where your story is going and how plot elements and character elements will build on one another so they peak at certain points. An excellent film example of structure is Two for the Road, with Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney. Even though they use multiple flashbacks, you know that from beginning to end that this is a story of a marriage on the skids.

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- Tell as much of the story as you can without dialog: Tell it cinematically. Don't give camera directions such as wide, tight, medium. That's the director's job and disrupts the story flow. But it's okay to script camera angles. We wrote a scene where a woman was about to tell her husband their son was killed in combat. The husband ran a steak house and happened to be in the walk-in freezer when his wife arrived. We directed the camera to look through the window and, without any dialog, show the woman tell her husband and watch his reaction.
- Do the research: You can't write if you're not an observer. We're constantly eavesdropping in restaurants. We're acutely aware of dialog going on around us. Our characters have to speak in the vernacular of the time.
- Use dialog: Dialog is more than just writing down what two people say to each other. Good dialog is succinct, crisp, entertaining, and rich. It's a level above conversation.
- Bury the pipe: The pipe is the exposition, the conduit of information, the stuff the audience needs to know to make sense of the story. This applies primarily to feature films and TV dramas. Say the character's been divorced three times, has six kids with six different women, and runs a grocery. You don't come out and say that. You impart it to the audience by revealing it gradually through dialog, action, and settings.
- Make your scriptwriting collaborative: Everyone has a hand in it. A screenplay will go through multiple drafts before shooting begins.

Mackie Morris, media consultant

Mackie Morris is a journalism and communications seminar leader, teacher, coach, and practitioner. Previously, Morris served as chairman of the Broadcast News Department in the University of Missouri School of Journalism. He later worked as a vice president and lead consultant for Frank N. Magid Associates, a major media consulting firm, where he implemented a series of instructional workshops for broadcast professionals.

Stephen Black and Henry Stern, scriptwriters and producers

Stephen Black and Henry Stern have worked as scriptwriters for such episodic TV dramas as *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, *Flamingo Road*, *Matlock*, and *Knot's Landing*. Their work as head writers on *As the World Turns* and consultants for *One Life to Live* stirred things up and added sizzle to both of these long-running daytime staples. They've had a hand in a half-dozen TV movies, including the only TV film starring Audrey Hepburn, *Love Among Thieves*.

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