

Writing for Broadcast and Making it Count

by Peter King, CBS Radio



One of my first assignment editors used to say that news writing is nothing more than a bunch of clichés strung together by action verbs. I say we can do better.

Whether you get 30 seconds (radio) or a minute and a half (TV) to tell your story, every second counts.

That means writing tight, bright, and smart.

It means no wasted words, no superfluous phrases, and avoiding the obvious and avoiding clichés at all cost (OK, we've just eliminated about 90 percent of all news writing!).

As journalists, as WRITERS, we need to find a BETTER way to describe situations than the overused "Ron Burgandy" ways.

Reporters spend so much time trying to sound smart or descriptive that the story often gets lost in the stupidity. How many times have you heard the phrase, "We'll bring you the VERY latest," as if bringing you "the latest" just isn't good enough? How many times do we hear the words, "brutal murder," as if someone could kill another human being gently(exception: the 1973 hit, "Killing Me Softly with his Song.")

Watching an Orlando newscast as I write this, a reporter trying to point out a location has just used the phrase, "right here where I'm standing," where "here" or "right here" certainly would have sufficed.

Then there are the clichés and overused adjectives-used mostly used in television news. "You won't believe" is one of my favorites...as in, "you won't believe what this man did when he found out his wife was cheating with his next door neighbor!" Try me. Or, the word "shocking." Shocking to WHOM? Just tell the story.

But wait; there's MORE! Beware the overused sound bite. "Who knows why this terrible tragedy occurred. We'll just have to deal with it and somehow, go on." OK, that's not a reporter's writing-but it IS a waste of time. And choosing better sound bites fits right in with what I'm trying to say here. There's ALWAYS a better way.

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Don't Say That!

God Bless Lake Superior State University. Every year, the school publishes a list of words and phrases which should be banished forever. The 2008 list includes such overused and somewhat nonsensical favorites as "perfect storm," "post 9/11," "give back," "Black Friday," "back in the day," "emotional," "under the bus" and my personal favorite to be forever gone, "it is what it is."

Last April, Mervin Block, the guru of news writing(mervinblock.com), shared a similar list from WLS-TV in the RTNDA's Communicator magazine. It's been awhile since I've looked at that list, but as 2007 ended and 2008 began, I compiled one of my own based on recent radio and TV newscasts(some of these were on the WLS list) They are, in no particular order;

- **Dodged a bullet** - used TOO often for a close call. OK to use if someone just missed being shot.
- **Big chill** - used TOO often since the 1983 film of the same name
- **Winter Wonderland** - should be used only by disc jockeys introducing the song during Christmas season. Or by those SINGING the song. On one Orlando TV station, this phrase was uttered THREE times in one story about Florida's January "Big Chill!" OOPS!
- **White stuff** - it's SNOW!
- **At this hour** - aw, come on, would you ever say this phrase in a conversation with real people?

- **Blaze** - same as above.
- **As you can see from this video** - ok, tell me about what I CAN'T see!
- **We're back here "LIVE"** --or- **as we come back, "LIVE"** - OK, I see your lips moving and hear you talking. I assume you're really there, especially since the graphic says "live."
- **We will have the very latest** - as if having the latest isn't enough?
- **We will keep an eye on it** - or - **we will follow this story for you** - Well, duh! Isn't that your job????
- **The OTHER "big" story or the other "TOP" story** - Sorry. You can't have TWO lead stories. One is clearly number one, the other clearly ISN'T.
- **Murder mystery** - how about leaving it as a murder OR a mystery?
- **Developing story** - NOT something that happened hours ago-and NOT a story in which there haven't been new developments.
- **Breaking news** - see "developing story."
- **Gone/went missing** - they're just MISSING on this one.
- **12 noon/12 midnight** - redundant. See my article in the LAST edition of this newsletter.
- **Passed away** - This is creeping into newscasts more and more often. Remember the phrase, "there is no crying in baseball?" Well, there is no "passing away" in news. At least there shouldn't be. People die. They get killed. They get murdered. But they don't pass away on the news. And if I die, I will come back from the grave and haunt ANYONE who says that I "passed away!"
- **It could have been worse** - only if you've used all the phrases and words in this article!
- **Breathing a sigh of relief** - how about "relieved?"
- **Uphill battle** - like anyone could have a downhill battle?
- **Must win situation** - like there's a "must lose" situation?
- **Something went terribly/horribly wrong** - especially if they used all the phrases used in this article. Oops. I'm being redundant-again!
- **Tension is mounting** - mounting what? A horse? A bull?
- **On a lighter note** - used especially on morning shows, as a transition from a particularly tragic story (making the transition from a murder to pictures of Sparky, the water skiing squirrel). Ugh
- **Brutal Murder** - you may remember this from my last article as well. Have we ever seen a "gentle" killing?

Reporters and writers, Repeat after me: "I will NOT use or abuse any of the above phrases. In 2008." Say it again. Now, do it!

See you in Grand Rapids in March!

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