Five Steps To High-Impact Writing

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HE RESEARCH SAYS three things make a source credible:
1 Its perceived mastery of the subject.
2 Its perceived similarity to the audience.
3 Its sheer energy — the enthusiasm and vitality it projects.

The same standards apply whether the source is a speaker or a newspaper. Newspapers can enhance their credibility on all three counts.

Thorough and precise reporting convinces readers that we know our stuff.

* Picking subjects that the audience really cares about and writing in conversational English helps readers trust us. And we project the energy that produces high impact with crisp design, graphics and writing.

Fortunately, more energetic writing is the quickest and easiest route to greater credibility. High-impact writing flows from specific techniques. And almost any writer can master five important energizers in relatively short order.

* Keep average sentence length short. Writers who really demand attention seldom average more than 17 words a sentence. Of course, they vary sentence length to add interest. And they sometimes let clean, well-ordered sentences run on for 30 or 35 words. But then they change gears. A good mix contains some sentences of six words or fewer.

Bill Blundell, the former Wall Street Journal reporter and writing coach, mastered the technique long ago. Note this paragraph from one of his ASNE award-winning stories:

“... The 360 Yavapai Indians on this small reservation, the shrunken remnant of thousands who once lived on 10 million Arizona acres, have won their first great victory over the white man. He wanted to stuff some $35 million into their pockets. They told him to get lost.”

* Seek strong verbs. Nothing adds energy like action. And only verbs describe action.

Transitive verbs create the most nickus. They take direct objects, which generate causal flow: “Its claws raked her back.” “He drove two runners home.” “The fire swallowed the first floor.”

Intransitive verbs contain power, too: “The tanker exploded with volcanic force.” “The skier plunged into empty space.” “A line snapped, and the cargo slid toward the rail.”

But linking verbs contain no motion and therefore weaken writing. They merely state that some things are (or are not) in some way the same as others. “The moon is blue.” “The contract talks were tedious.” “The ground felt spongy.”

At their roots, linking verbs are only definitions. They can convey opinion. But they can’t transmit real news.

Another strategy with verbs is to avoid turning perfectly good action words into nouns. Beware suffixes, which often gut the energy contained in a word’s root.

Instead of “gained entrance,” write “entered.” Instead of “since passage of the bond,” write “since the bond passed.” Prefer “depend” to “dependent,” and “deal” to “treatment.” Look for strong verbs root words such as “intrusive” and “graduation.”

* Prefer active to passive: Every writing authority from Orwell to Zinsser agrees that active voice adds power while passive subtracts it. The problem is that hardly anything generates anxiety like writing. And anxiety in turn produces timidity, which often expresses itself in passive voice.

So we write that “the airliner was struck by lightning,” rather than “lightning struck the airliner.” That “more votes were cast for Murphy” instead of “voters elected Murphy.” Or that “Lewiston was flooded by the overflowing river” rather than “the river flooded Lewiston.”

* Be specific. Concrete nouns, verbs and modifiers add energy. Abstractions let it float away. Vibrant writers always ask themselves if they can make each word in the draft more specific without sacrificing essential meaning. So they prefer “audience” to “people who attended.” They say that a shopper “ambled” through the mall, rather than “walked slowly.”

They fill their writing with concrete images that readers can visualize. The detail adds weight, and the weight adds impact.

* Cut the flab. Paula LaRocque, writing coach at the Dallas Morning News, says anything that doesn’t add to a piece of writing, takes away. Unnecessary words deflate impact by padding or replacing the active, precise vocabulary that carries core meaning.

Some flab inevitably creeps into first drafts. So rewriting should focus on cutting anything superfluous. The simplest technique is still the best: Go through the draft word by word, eliminating each one mentally as a test. If the substance remains after removing a word in your imagination, remove it from the screen.

Another tactic is to tighten prepositional phrases by making the object of the preposition modify its antecedent directly. In other words, write “the museum’s object,” rather than “object of the museum.” Replace “the wall of the museum” with “the museum’s wall.”

And, if compressing a prepositional phrase downplays an idea you consider important, go back to Technique No. 1. Break the idea out into a separate sentence.

And build it around a strong verb.

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