HOW WRITERS STOP READERS: THEY DON'T INTEND TO BUT OLD HABITS LINGER

FEBRUARY 18, 2013

By Mike Feinsilber

Here are some writing practices that drive readers crazy:

1. Long clumsy titles, or multiple titles, preceding a person's name: "Retired Marine Corps lieutenant general and former chairman of the board of Harper & Row Jack Busybuddy said" vs. "Jack Busybuddy, a retired Marine Corps lieutenant general and later the chairman of the board of the large publishing house Harper & Row, said..."

Name first, title second lets the reader know at once that he's reading about a person. Seems elementary, but the clumsy long title still makes frequent appearances, especially in news stories.

2. A pileup of nouns which think they are adjectives: "The winter convertible sales decline..." "A Kalamazoo real estate development's skyscraper home office..."

Better: The customary wintertime decline in sales of convertibles....The home office in a Kalamazoo skyscraper of a real estate development...

These nouns chasing nouns do no one a favor. The writer may think he's saving space. What he's actually doing is shedding readers.

And here's an old news lead that I've been staring at for years:

"Outrage over passport application delays is fueling a drive by Congress to postpone new rules requiring Americans to have the documents to re-enter the U.S. from Canada, the Caribbean and Bermuda."

The reader, trying to figure out what the story is about, looks, at least subconsciously, for the nouns. Oh, she thinks, it is about passports. No, it is about applications. Whoops—it is about delays. At which point she turns the page.

A better way: Rules that would require U.S. citizens to have passports in hand when they return from visits to Canada, the Caribbean or Bermuda haven't taken effect yet, but they are generating a lot of complaints. They also are slowing down the government's handling of applications for passports. So there's a move under way in Congress to postpone putting them into effect.

Longer? Yes. Clearer? Yes. Worth the tradeoff? You bet.

One final word: The writer used "documents" in that troubled original lead because he didn't want to repeat "passports." That's a case of Old Think. It forces the reader to wonder: Are these documents the same thing as passports? Not good.

Nothing is wrong in using a word more than once in a sentence if it is the right word. We do it in conversation. We writers could learn a lot about writing by listening.

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3. Overpacked sentences.

The Wisconsin Democrat, who had long championed the environment, made the teach-in call during a speech in Seattle, which he wrote on napkins on the flight there, said Nelson's daughter, Tia Nelson.

Remember high school English? Remember diagramming? Try doing it to that sentence—an actual sentence from a news story. The story was about Earth Day and its champion, the late Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, who came up with the idea of conducting teach-ins on the environment.

Consider how many facts the reader has to carry in his head before he stumbles on the period: 1. Nelson was a Democrat from Wisconsin. 2. He long championed the environment. 3. In a speech, he proposed a teach-in. 4. He delivered it in Seattle. 5. He wrote it on napkins during a flight there. 6. So said his daughter. 7. Her name is Tia.

Now try using a few periods, the writer's best friend, and try abandoning the old journalistic sacred cow that says attributions (Tia) must come at the end of sentences. People normally put attributions in front. People don't say: "My dog was on fire, a neighbor told me." They say: "A neighbor told me that my dog was on fire."

My version of that troubled sentence: Nelson, a Wisconsin Democrat, has long championed the environment. He laid out the idea of a teach-in in a speech in Seattle. His daughter, Tia, says he wrote the speech on napkins while flying there.

Mine is two words and two periods longer. Clearer, too.

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Anti-Spam Quiz: What is Jack's last name?