**Basic Writing Skills**

**First things first:**

1. What is the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of your writing?

b. Who is your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?

Knowing your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ helps you to determine the

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ you will use.

**Story Types You May Eventually Use:**

* **Press Release** - a concise announcement of an upcoming event such as a women’s seminar on money management. It should be no more than one page in length, double-spaced and typed unless the event is highly notable.
* **News Story** or newsbreak is a story of current public interest to a broad audience, with or without pictures. It can precede an important upcoming event, especially if the public is clamoring to read about it and someone of note is quoted. However, most news stories cover an event that has happened.
* **Newspaper Feature Story -** always includes pictures and there is more leaway to write with description.
* **Magazine Feature Story** - includes pictures or other graphics and usually gives even more room for creativity.
* **Narrative Writing** - a manner of writing when your viewpoint (or another person’s) is the highlight. Description, exposition and dialogue are included.
* **Devotional** - is written to serve as a motivator, to turn the reader’s attention to God. It is usually written from a personal experience or the writer’s response to the experience of someone else.

All manuscripts should be double-spaced, except for radio and television releases, which are triple-spaced. You can request guidelines from the magazine/devotional editor of your choice.

**Getting in Shape**

Try doing at least one of these exercises on a daily basis to keep your writing muscles flexible.

**Exercises:**

1. Sit in a place where you can watch people passing by. Begin writing without checking yourself along the way. Focus on writing a description of all that you see and all that happens. Take notice of sizes, shapes, and any other visual details.

2. Write continuously as you listen to a musical selection or a non-narrative film (such as a nature/worship video set to music). What are you reminded of? What are your responses?

3. Practice a two-minute writing test. Choose anything to write over and over; it could even be your name. See how many times you can write it in two minutes.

4. Practice what is known as “free writing.” Take pen and paper and allow yourself at least 10-15 minutes. Now, choose a topic, and just begin writing whatever comes to mind about the topic. Don’t worry about how the end product will look just let your mind work and yours hands flow. Discard the tendency to make a judgment about a thought before you write it down.

Make a goal of being able to write for fifteen minutes without any hesitation and then for an hour with two short breaks. If you run out of things to write, write repeatedly, “I can’t think of anything to write” until more ideas pop into your head. This will keep you fit and healthy as a writer.

**Free Writing Exercise**

**Suggestions on how to develop the kind of readable, memorable writing readers will yearn to read and editors clamor to receive.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Know your focus**

First thing you want to do: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

You will want to cover the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**Example: Suggested attention-getter to begin an article for the Adventist Review.**

Seven bright-eyed girls, ages 12-17, laugh a lot these days as they enjoy fun-filled times with their big sisters. Their sisters aren’t related to them. They aren’t kids either. They are thirty-ish women, members of the Birmingham Maryland Adventist Church.

Two years ago, the Women’s Ministries Department of the church met to brainstorm community outreach ideas. One of the members, who was reared in a motherless home, suggested the idea of Adventist Big Sistering. The women snatched up the idea.

2. Write with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!Choose Active Words – Avoid Lazy Words!

**Common Weeds**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

“\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_” \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Turning Lazy Words into Action Words!

“It was a dark and stormy night…”

Tightened:

**What is a cliché?**

It is a much \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ word or phrase.

Observe the following examples. Notice how we use them almost without thinking, in both speech and writing:

Cliché—*Once in a blue moon* Change—It rarely happens

Cliché—He*’*s *the pick of the crop* Change—He’s the best choice

Cliché—Johnny looks *fit as a fiddle* Change—Johnny appears robust

Cliché—He *looks like something the* *cat dragged in*  Change—He looks bedraggled

Multiple Clichés—With *reckless abandon, in no time flat,* the boy made *a complete disaster* of his toys

Change—Swiftly and uncaring, the boy ruined his toys

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is using as few words as necessary to convey the message or information.

**Sample of tight writing:**

*The squeaking, shaking, three-pound baby cried almost continuously and even when sleeping she twitched all the while. Her constant crying and violent twitching all tore at Maria’s heart.*

*Maria, a neo-natal nurse, specially trained in the care of babies born to drug-addicted mothers, ached for the newborn’s anguish. The baby’s squeak-like cries and twitching subsided some when she was put in a dark corner of the hospital nursery.*

*Maria didn’t know it then, but this abandoned baby would change Maria’s life—and mind forever*.

Tightening the story:

*Darkness and the hum of the hospital nursery provided a measure of calm for three-pound, drug-addicted Baby Sarah. Her pitiful squeaks and violent twitching tore at Maria’s heart.*

*Maria, a neo-natal nurse, didn’t know then how this abandoned newborn would change her life—and mind forever.*

4. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Writing will require \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ your target publication.

6. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

7. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**Here are some questions to ask yourself as you review your work:**

* Is it too long? Where can I eliminate? Is it too short?
* Are there redundant words or phrases? Remove repetitive areas of work—unless there is a substantial reason to retain it.
* Did I slip in any clichés.
* Are there too many of those passive, lazy words? If so, get into action! Start pulling weeds.
* Will my work be more effective if I moved parts around?? Cozy your work.
* Ask yourself, “If I were the editor, would I buy this?”

8. More \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

More questions, as you reread your manuscript:

* Will what I have written here reach out to the reader’s needs and interests?
* Is the context clear in all points?
* If quotes are used, are they correct?
* Is there a reason for everything that is there?
* Check each paragraph for flow and linkage to its neighbor.
* Check each sentence for weakness.
* Check your grammar.
* Make sure you have no spelling or punctuation problems.
* Now look at each individual word. Is each one the precise word you need? Are some too flabby? Unnecessary?
* Be ruthless with your editing pencil! But, make sure each correction improves the copy. Editing purely for the sake of editing accomplishes nothing.

**Sample Press release:**

Your name: Immediate release

Daytime telephone number:

Word count:

**Women’s Stress Seminar At Health Department**

Do you ever feel like a fried piece of meat, pressed between a limp piece of lettuce, a tomato slice and two pieces of half-burned toast?

“The Sandwich Woman” is a no-cost (or if a fee is charged mention it later in the release) seminar to help women cope with the sandwiched feeling. Dr. Eleanor Bussy, a woman’s health specialist, will present the two hour seminar, on Monday, April 10, from 7-9 p.m. at the Moomey Health Department auditorium, 1700 Main Street.

Attendance is limited to 40 so call soon to reserve your space! To register, call 545-9876 by Friday, April 7.

9. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

10. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Types of interview questions to avoid:

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_ questions. 2. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

11. Be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!

**Additional Information**

**Free Writing Exercise**

**News Story**

News stories are commonly written in what is called the inverted pyramid style. This rigid form demands that a story begin with a one-paragraph lead of one or perhaps two sentences summing up the essence of the story. The lead is short, typically less than 35 words. The rest of the story is written in a declining order of importance, with information proceeding from the most important to the least important. This style allows readers to quickly scan the story by reading the lead and perhaps a few additional paragraphs. And, is also helpful to busy editors who can cut lengthy news stories simply by removing less important material from the bottom of the story.

**Newspaper Feature Story**

A feature story is a journalistic article that is typically both original and descriptive. Some feature stories are geared toward entertainment with little information. Other features inform, but entertain little. The best combine both aspects.

A feature story is original in two basic ways. First, it’s original in terms of the way it is written. Unlike the new story’s inverted pyramid style, the feature story’s form is more fluid. They strongly resemble short stories in structure. For example, they have distinct beginnings, middles and ends. Feature stories, unlike news stories, aren’t intended for the scanning reader. They must be read completely to make sense. Secondly, a feature story is original because it can be about virtually any subject that falls within the realm of “human interest,” unlike news stories which presumably are written only because they cover newsworthy events.

Feature stories also tend to be descriptive. Description that evokes imagery is encouraged in a feature story. (A news story, which is supposed to be objective, usually precludes description.)

**What do you mean?**

Human Interest – This basically means what “interests people.” A good rule of thumb is that anything that interests the feature writer and the editor is likely also to interest a substantial number of readers. Human interest stories can be about both “people” and things,” but “people” stories typically are more interesting and more read than stories about “things.”

Journalistic – This means following the standards of journalistic accuracy. You must verify information, quote accurately and be fair and precise with description. It is also important to follow journalistic “style.” Style is nothing more than a uniform approach to punctuation, capitalization, abbreviation, titles and, in some cases, spelling. Most American newspapers today have a fairly uniform journalist style that is also quite similar to the style of the major American wire services – the Associated Press and United Press International.

*Feature Writing for Newspapers & Magazines, Edward Jay Friedlander, John Lee; 1988; Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, pp 2-4*

**Magazine Feature Story**

The magazine article is a close relative of the newspaper feature. They are similar in structure. Both begin with eye-catching “showcase” leads. Both have carefully organized bodies with a smooth flow of facts and ideas. Both end strongly. Both are generally based on solid reporting. Both commonly utilize quotations and descriptions. But, the magazine article has its own character. Two of the most apparent differences in the magazine article are the leisurely approach to subject material and the fact that writers frequently take a subjective stand on what they are writing. (Newspapers usually prefer the facts, without opinion in their feature stories.)

While it is a more leisurely approach to writing every word still counts! The copy still must catch and hold the attention of the reader all the way through. And, even though you can share your opinions, there still must be a base of facts.

Another obvious difference in magazine articles is in paragraphing. In general magazine paragraphs are longer and more formal than those in newspaper features.

*Feature Writing for Newspapers & Magazines; Edward Jay Friedlander, John Lee; 1988; Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, pp 65-66*

**Narrative Writing**

Narrate means to tell (as a story) all the details. So, all that we want to accomplish in our article becomes part of a story. We use the story form to explain, inform, clarify, to illustrate our (or someone else’s) views or concerns… We are basically saying: “I know about or have experienced an event. I want to tell you what happened.”

Description: The purpose is to share with readers the impression something has made on us. We want our readers to see, feel, or hear as vividly as we can what we have seen or felt or heard. Basically we are saying: “I know the impression the event has made upon me. I want you to have the same impression.”

Exposition: The purpose is to inform, to explain, to clarify, to make our readers know or understand something about a subject. Basically we are saying: “I’m going to tell you something. I’m not trying to persuade you to believe what I believe or to lead you to value judgments, although there is a possibility that may happen. What I want to do is to make you know or understand something you didn’t know or understand before – at least not so well or clearly.”

*Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers; Glenn Leggett, C.David Mead, William Charvat; Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey1978; pp 154-155*

**Redundancy**

A phrase or sentence is considered redundant when it contains extra, unnecessary, superfluous or repetitive words.

Examples of redundancy in *italics:*

A restaurant once advertised that it offered, “daily luncheon specials *every day*”

A store boasted of values “too numerous *in number* to mention”

A journalist wrote that an issue had been debated “*back and forth*”

One writer described the following: “Smoke rising over the building billowed over a large traffic jam below.” Billowing smoke naturally rises. The non-redundant version of the preceding: Smoke billowed over the large traffic jam.

“A *huge* throng *of people* gathered at twelve noon on Easter *Sunday* to debate the *controversial* issue.” A throng by definition is a huge gathering of people, noon is always at twelve, and Easter is always and only on Sunday.

*“In the event that* our *invited* guests don’t come, we will *bring to an* end our friendship with *all of* them.” If our guests don’t come, we will end our friendship with them.

Some examples of often used redundant phrases:

**Redundancy**  **Solution**

soothing tranquilizer tranquilizer

is in need of needs

could hold practice could practice

other matters recommended also recommended

she went on to say she said

two separate buildings two buildings

make an addition to add

general public public

completely destroyed destroyed

cooperate together cooperate

free gift gift

narrow down narrow

reason why reason

previous experience experience

minor quibble quibble

*Reference from Language Skills for Journalists, R. Thomas Berner, Houughton Mifflin Company, 1984, pp.11-12.*