

Tips for Writing Online

Prepared for the Social Media Institute, 2012 Ryan White Grantee Meeting, November 2012

1. Assess Value

Ask yourself: Can my audience use the information I am providing? Can they act upon it to: participate; understand a challenge and solution; implement a best practice; know where to go for more information.

2. Be Brief

In general, use short sentences and paragraphs. Keep in mind: people tend to scan online.

You can count the number words in MS Word by going to: File > Properties > Statistics.

3. Headlines

Use 3-8 words that grab attention/crystallize your key point—an action, a purpose, an outcome.

4. Your Lead

An artful sentence (10-25 words) that presents essential facts and tries to answer who, what, when, where, why, and how as quickly as possible. Put most important information up front (e.g., conclusions, data point, quote, action to take), with additional facts later on. Journalism refers to this as the “inverted pyramid.”

The sentence should have some dynamic character to motivate the readers, using such techniques as an outcome, a location, a personality, a finding. The lead can be longer if artfully crafted and can even be two sentences. In shorter pieces (e.g., newsletter articles), the lead should generally be “hard” (covering the essentials). However, it’s fine to provide some “soft” sell to engage the reader. In longer pieces (especially features), the lead can be “hard” or “soft” (the latter being creative, whimsical, perhaps a story-telling approach).

5. Main Text (for Longer Articles)

Essentials in your body narrative will vary based upon the length and type of article being written. Notable approaches include:

After the lead, provide a nutshell paragraph that summarizes why the article is important.

Consider the 5 W’s (and 1 H) of news writing (ideally but not crucial in most cases): Who, What, When, Where, Why, How. These have an investigative tone and can be helpful in focusing text but also doing background research (e.g., phone interview with a grantee to prepare a case study).

Use bulleted lists when presenting a series of items.

Provide a closing (e.g., a place to go for more information (e.g., Web site, person to contact, an upcoming related event, a tie-in to an activity, related item).

6. Get Permission To Quote/Attribute/Use Photos

Permission is always required for photos you take and quotation of people you interview. For written attribution, get permission over the phone or via email. For photo permission, get signed

permission (via a signed form or email acknowledgement). When repurposing quotes, permission is not required, but cite your original source.

- Sample photo release language: I grant YOUR ENTITY permission to use my photo(s) in any of its materials (web, print, video, or other) and understand that such materials will be available to the general public.
- Source of photos: Many photos are available online for free or at low cost. For example, Creative Commons is a photo sharing service that houses photos with pre-negotiated use agreements.
- Note: See Wikipedia to learn more about Fair Use, which is defined by that site as “[A] doctrine that permits limited use of copyrighted material without acquiring permission from the rights holders.”

7. Repurpose Don’t Plagiarize

Don’t be afraid to copy/paste from existing items but tweak and change. In other words, don’t plagiarize. Repurpose.

If compiling a general announcement (e.g., upcoming event, funding announcement), go online and search for what others may have already written and modify accordingly. You may find that others have done much of your work for you in terms of capturing key points, catchy headlines. Again, don’t plagiarize.

8. Be a Trusted Source of Information (e.g., 2 Source Rule)

Make sure your information is accurate by using trusted sources, original sources, and/or by going to at least two sources. When repurposing content from a trusted source (e.g., government agency), the 2-source rule is less of a concern.

9. Mechanics Of Posting Content

When you copy/paste, remove the formatting. Paste into Notepad (PC) or TextEdit (Apple) to strip away the coding.

Stripping out coding is not necessary when using Facebook, Twitter, and Hootsuite.

10. Visuals/Graphics

Use visuals—photos, graphs, etc. When using photos, crop them to focus on the subjects.

Reformat photos so they download FAST (PC: use Microsoft Photo Editor; Apple: use Preview).

Things to Avoid—In General

Presenting names and dates up front (e.g., the name of an agency, program, meeting, event).

Laundry lists of services and activities.

Endorsement and enthusiasm. Neutrality is crucial in providing an objective voice.