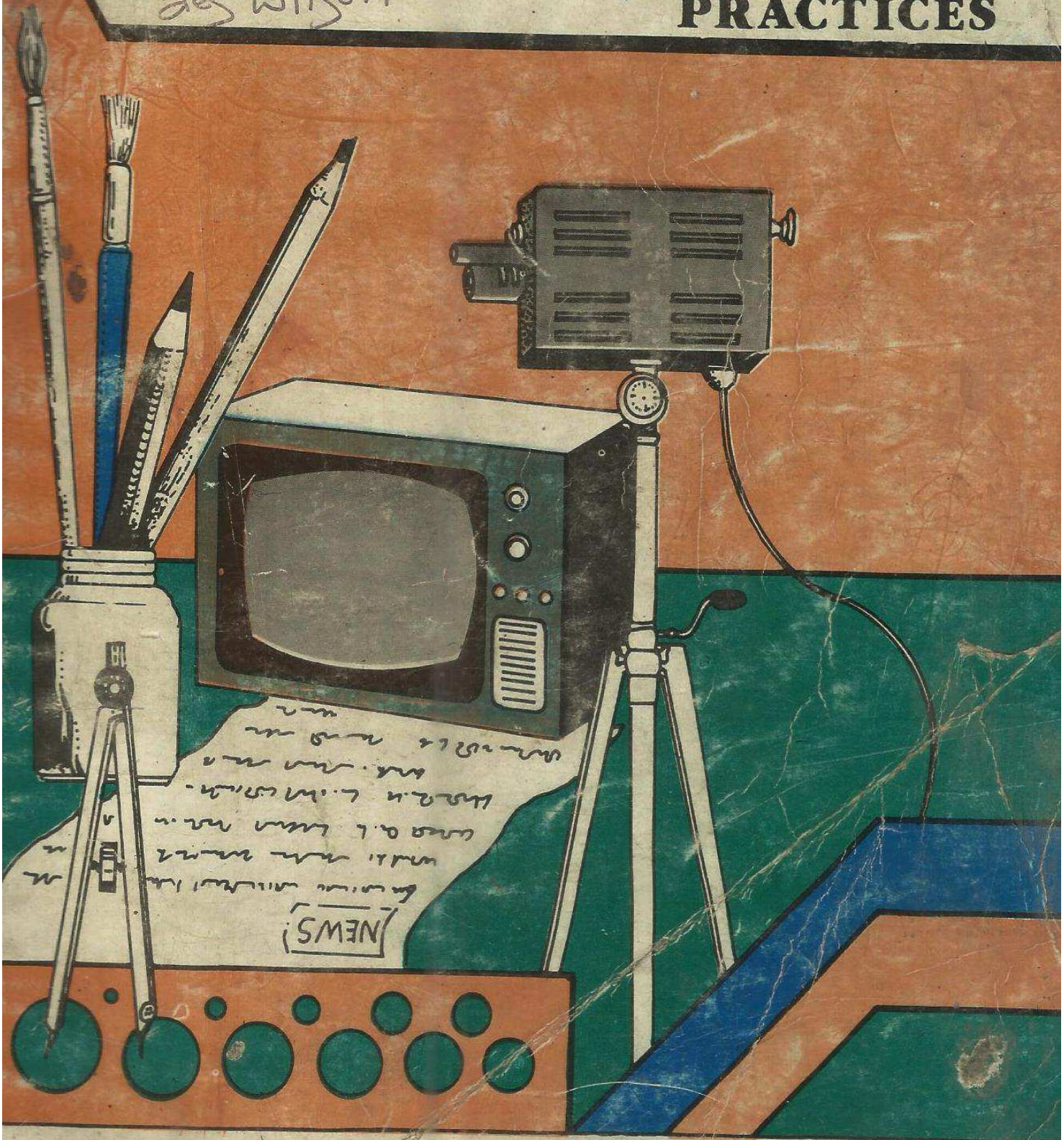


COMMUNICATION ARTS

PRINCIPLES
APPLICATIONS
PRACTICES

Des Wilson



Emmanuel Akpan (ed)

Writing Skills for the Journalist

5

Des Wilson

OBJECTIVES

After reading through this chapter you should be able to:

- [a] *show some understanding of the primary reasons why human beings communicate*
- [b] *identify the major writing types and their characteristics*
- [c] *show more than a flitting knowledge of the essentials of good journalistic writing*
- [d] *explain the essential news values*
- [e] *show some understanding of the mechanics of writing namely spellings and punctuation*

INTRODUCTION

A writer for the media should possess certain characteristics which should show in his writing. These characteristics should be reflected in the quality of his writing. The best writers of all time were never those who were hardly understood but those whose writings displayed the qualities of simplicity, clarity, conciseness, correctness, completeness, courteousness, candidness, concreteness, coherence and concord. What do these qualities stand for? What must a writer do to possess them? Like all human communication skills they have to be learned. One of the chief sources of these skills is reading good authors. In addition, on-the-job training and a lot of practice could help too. Through practice the learner can integrate these elements into his work if he writes about what he knows, considers his reader's interest as paramount, gets straight to the point, begins with what he considers familiar to him and his reader, uses concrete examples to illustrate his supposition, and respects his reader's point of view. All of these elements are mutually inclusive and should never be taken for granted if we intend to communicate with others.

ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF GOOD WRITING

[i] **SIMPLICITY**

The purpose of news writing, for example, is to communicate the news to the reader, not to confound and confuse him; to make explicit and clear rather than enigmatic and complex. An impressive reporter is one who

writes plainly and simply even though the situation may call for long technical words. ⁽¹⁾ The good reporter always replaces the difficult word with a simpler one. Even explanations are given for technical words in order to make the meaning clear. This is distinct from the oversimplification of a problem or situation which renders the writing simplistic. At the end of the day the good reporter or the good newspaper is judged by its ability to make its offerings (news, features etc) readily available to and easily understood by its audience (readers). The simple style is beautiful to read and easy to understand.

[ii] CLARITY

Sentences in news reports should be clear and not subject to more than one meaning even though by the nature of words, they are often prone to such ambiguities. The better writer takes the extra pain or goes the extra mile to ensure that he presents only one possible meaning. The politician may, on the other hand, go the extra length to ensure that ambiguities are embedded in his speech because it may serve his best interest. Kasoma has, nevertheless, pointed out that clarity in news writing requires that the reader is left in no doubt as to the meaning of the words or sentences in the story. A word with more than one meaning should be replaced by one with a precise meaning. A news story that is open to more than one meaning is dangerous for the writer, reader and the society at large. These issues have been examined by Wilson (1988) in his discussion of distortions. A foggy writing, of the type we have spoken of, sometimes results from grammatically wrong constructions as well as from long, poorly constructed sentences. It may contain misplaced modifiers, wrong pronoun referents and may violate the rule of concord, that is, agreement between the subject and the verb. In addition, it may contain wrong spellings and punctuation also.

[iii] CONCISENESS

The need to be brief is usually associated with simplicity of style. The laconic writer is one who does not strain after words and phrases which sometimes turn out to be clichés and jargons. But he is however careful in his choice of words or phrases which he uses to effectively reflect his thoughts. He writes what has to be written in as brief or concise a manner as possible, and avoids pointless elaboration, exaggeration, tautology and circumlocution. Perhaps one of the most useful aphorisms to guide writers on the need to be brief is to be found in Alexander Pope's statement in his *An Essay on Criticism* where he says that:

Words are like leaves; and where they most abound,
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.

It should be obvious to any writer that word economy has certain important advantages, namely,

(i) Space is saved, the paper on which writing is done is saved for some

other writing activity.

(2) Time is also saved both in writing and in reading.

The journalist always has to work under deadlines and pressure. He therefore needs time to carry out other tasks. He cannot afford to waste time on excessive writing.

(3) Much effort is spared and effects are achieved with the minimum outlay of material and effort. This advantage is related to the needs of time.

(4) A concise writing achieves vigour and directness. It is found to be effective.

(5) Effective communication is achieved. Long, clumsy and complex sentences task the mind and since the reader has very little time to spare it is refreshing to get meaning immediately

(6) Finally, the writer achieves a reduction in printing costs. It should be pretty obvious that the more you write, the more you spend in terms of the cost of writing materials and printing cost.

Therefore, the effective writer does not write:

He was utterly and completely exhausted after the press briefing
but would write:

He was completely exhausted after the press briefing.

Utterly and *Completely* are synonymous in the context. The effective writer should not write:

It is a rare sight to see horse-drawn carts today.

but

Horse-drawn carts are rare sights today

or

It is rare to see horse-drawn carts today.

Vague words of intensification are often employed without ensuring that they really add emphasis or an additional meaning to the words they modify or qualify. Such words as 'practically', 'definitely', 'terribly', 'awfully', 'quite', 'really quite', 'relatively', 'comparatively' are often employed as intensifiers where they are redundant; even though they are capable of providing precise meanings when carefully employed. Thus it is not right to write:

American Championship Wrestling is *really quite* enjoyable

but

American Championship Wrestling is really enjoyable.

And do not write:

Nigerians are comparatively speaking more comfortable

but

Nigerians are comparatively more comfortable than other Africans.

The above examples should be seen as some of the verbose and imprecise ways in which writers express themselves.

[iv] *CORRECTNESS*

A news report, or any good piece of writing, should be correct in all respects. This should include accuracy or correctness of figures, spellings, punctuation, truthfulness and credibility of the report. A report can be truthful but not accurate. Some journalism teachers see the need for accuracy as the first commandment of the newswriter. Checking and cross-checking of facts and news sources are therefore inevitable if accurate and reliable reports are to be presented to the readers. A ward attendant is not a reliable source of information on the causes of death in a locality neither is a mortuary attendant. The news writer should never guess at facts nor use sources which lack credibility. But somehow related to the problem of correctness is the difference that exists between British and American spellings and usages. When in doubt the writer should always consult a good dictionary.

For local names of persons or places there should at least be a reference book on them dutifully compiled by each media house. Or there may be a dictionary of some common Nigerian names. Indigenous speakers of the language may also be reliable sources for confirmation. For example, newswriters have no option but to learn local place names as well as personal names. Most persons take exceptions to having their names misspelt. Even maps must be correctly drawn as closely as possible if proper maps are not available.

[v] *COURTEOUSNESS*

Any writing that fails to take into account the sensibilities of its readers in terms of showing politeness, or enlightened restraint in the use of language, displays a lack of polish or civility. Short of decreeing a code of language etiquette, which idea is both archaic and impracticable, this section calls for the use of language which will reflect the norms for each society. (A writing which will reflect the norms for each society.) A writing which gives offence belongs to the category of low brow journalism. The news writer should therefore be selective in his use of words. He should avoid taboo words. There are a number of words in each language that are not acceptable in polite conversations. Many of them are expressions depicting sexual desires or racial slurs. Such words are generally to be avoided.

Even in some instances, the use of pidgin may offend against linguistic propriety. So also is the use of swear words, slang, jargon and what is often referred to as journalese to be carefully watched to avoid giving wrong signals or cues to the reader. Albeit, the beautiful and polite language as well as the filthy one is determined by the society. Sometimes the beauty and the dirt lie in the eyes of the reader. Therefore, the reporter must empathise with his society and present only those aspects of the language which his culture does not frown at. There are

well known euphemisms which clearly replace the restricted words or expressions. Most sensitive readers detest slanguage because it is sometimes fuzzy, imprecise and lacks courtesy. Some readers look down on any writing that is riddled with 'slangy' expression. Some taboo words and expletives include the following: Hell, damn, shit, fuck, bloody, bullshit, goddamn, cunt etc. Others are profanities that may be uttered against religious personages or even secular figures. In Nigerian journalism, the differences between say, the language and content of the *Daily Times* and *Lagos Weekened*, *The Guardian* and *Lagos Life*, *National Concord* and *Weekend Concord*, or between *Prime People* and *Ikebe Super* are pretty obvious. While those given first mention here may be said to show courtesy in language use, the others are a little less courteous.

Courtesy as a quality should not be equated with its rather nebulous use in the court of royalty, the powerful or the rich. It does not refer to the Nigerian pastime of title-chase which may lead to such incongruous references as "Chief (Dr) Engineer Ikoiwak Oropo, the chief job creator of Ikot Nsenam, chairman and managing director of Blaxploitation Unlimited, Lagos, with branches all over the Universe". The journalist who does not pay these 'courtesies' is sometimes seen by the king, politician and tycoon as lacking in respect. The reference we make here is to any report that is filled with expletives, profanities, vituperations, sauciness, and has vulgarisms written all over it.

[vi] CANDIDNESS

Being candid means that the report must be fair, sincere, frank, honest truthful, impartial, straightforward, objective and lacking in any guile. This quality is often equated with what the Americans call the fairness doctrine. Although the doctrine or regulation essentially applies to the braodcast media, it has since 1949 made it mandatory that a fair opportunity is given to opposing parties in any public discussion of a controversial issue. Although it is sometimes seen as a threat to press freedom, it has nevertheless endowed the practice of journalism with a certain level of responsibility and seriousness. This doctrine can be seen as an aspect of the social responsibility view of mass media practice.

Candidness means that publishing one side of the story without a reasonable effort to get to know and present the other is dishonest and wicked. It is not enough for the reporter to say: 'When I called in Mr X's office to get his side of the story I was told he had travelled out of town'. It is sometimes easier to get the first side of the story especially if the presenter is anxious to receive publicity for it in order to have an advantage over the other side. If the reporter made some efforts to get the first side, there is certainly no exigency to publish it as it stands especially if it will damage the reputation of the other party. Perhaps it would be excusable if the reporter says that the other party refused to talk when contacted; and the reason for going to press would be to force

him to make a reply. However, one view may be published first with the promise to present the other view later. Nevertheless, the better approach is to present the two together because readers are usually sympathetic to the first view and a refutation often meets with public scepticism. The crusader, or the practitioner of avuncular journalism soon gets himself and his medium into trouble if he does not exercise restraint in his jaundiced or one-sided view of the word.

Both sides can be presented thus: An intro highlighting the first side balanced on the other by a rejoinder view. Subsequent paragraphs should then be used to present the arguments on both sides. The reporter should not take sides in the debate. He should leave judgements and positions to be made and taken by his readers. By so doing he can avoid the charge of reporter bias.

[vii] *CONCRETNESS*

This is writing about actualities or particular events or persons rather than on vague generalities or abstractions. The generality of human beings across the world share similar information needs which are more pressing than other needs. The failure by the reporter or other gatekeepers to recognise and write about these needs has led often to controversies surrounding what constitutes news in the Third World. For the reporter working in the Third World the following constitute his immediate information needs and actualities: Health; Land, Agriculture and Food; Employment; Family Matters; Education; Self and Community Services; Financial and Economic Matters; Transportation; Religious and Spiritual Matters; Recreation and Cultural Matters; Law, Politics and Government; Crime and Security; Ethnic Relations; Housing; Science and Technology; Weather Reports; Mysteries; Novelties; Famous Personalities; and Tragedies. All these are concrete issues which the reporter should concern himself with. The reporter, of course, works within a policy and oftentimes such policies do not address the issues of the reporter's environment. Sometimes the reporter resorts to Afghanistanism, an escapist tendency which embraces vagueness in pursuit of temporary bliss in his environment. This practice is common where press freedom is greatly threatened as was the case in Nigeria during the period of the infamous Decree 4 which sought in a curious way to protect public officers from false accusation. This decree was strongly resisted even though its first victims, Mr. Tunde Thompson and Mr. Nduka Irabor of the *Guardian* newspapers, were jailed for one year by the regime of General Buhari. Although the journalist can employ events in other lands as metaphors for explaining his own situational problem, this should not be done in such a way that the explanation is lost to his readers.

[viii] *COMPLETENESS*

The reporter should present a total picture of the event, that is, the whole story complete with all the essential parts. This is an adjunct to

candidness. The reader should be given as much as possible of the whole story except when it is necessary to serialise. Even so, each serial should form a mini-whole. A recap is often necessary under such circumstances. Necessary details should be included to add flesh to the report. This has the additional advantage of making a story clearly understood and thus leaving no room for all forms of speculations which of course, could lead to misunderstanding. Whose fault can it be if a news story be misinterpreted? If it is not a problem of perception then obviously it is the writer's. The complete picture is more useful than the individual parts stuck here and there and sometimes in different editions.

[ix] **COHERENCE**

A report may have unity but lack coherence. Coherence is achieved when ideas are logically arranged and sentences are made to stick together logically and consistently in order to express the central idea of the general report. Callihan (1979:178) stresses the need for the different parts of the sentence to be linked naturally and logically. Logical consistency both in syntactic and semantic usages should be the watchword of the journalist, reporter, or newswriter. Examine the following example:

The minister was alarmed by the report, soon new local government councils will be created.

The minister's expression of concern or alarm is not linked to the idea of creating new local councils. If the two are not related then they should be separated accordingly; but if they are related, then a proper linkage should be established. The idea of creating local councils may be the cause of the minister's alarm. The general guide should be that any part of a statement that stands apart both in terms of violating a sequence and lacking in logical and pragmatic consistency should be quickly revised to achieve the desired effect.

[x] **CONCORD**

The harmony of the individual parts of a report is not really a helpful requirement for a good and acceptable report. The unity of the whole as distinct from the coherence of the parts should be seen as going hand-in-hand. Though such coherence of the parts may be desirable, it is most important to think of the report in its totality as showing a general congruence.

A report can be presented in paragraphs and each paragraph is linked to the other through a careful, logical and thematic arrangement. The topic sentence expresses the main idea of the paragraph and each subsequent paragraph develops one aspect of the general theme until the concluding paragraph. At the end, the reader should be able to see a beginning marked by a strong opening statement, well-developed middle

paragraphs and an equally strong concluding paragraph.

Concord or unity enables the reader to follow through a report more easily than he would have done if the report lacked order and was jerky.

JOURNALISTIC WRITING

Journalism has been described variously as 'history on wheels', 'literature in a hurry', 'information dissemination', 'the events of the day distilled into a few words, sounds or pictures', 'entertainment and reassurance', 'the town crier presenting his news in the marketplace', 'the daily press', 'the Newswatch team on Monday', or simply, communication or news. The journalistic style stresses the need for short, precise sentence, simple words, clear, correct, candid, coherent, courteous, concrete and complete statements or reports all woven into one unified whole. It demands of the journalist a perceptive attention to his duties and responsibilities.

Since every news medium in modern times operating under a social responsibility philosophy, is in competition with hundreds of others, the journalist must of necessity write with a style that has an arresting quality, that which is capable of hooking the reader to the story during the short time that he is willing to spare on the medium. Thus each report must attempt to answer quickly each of the traditional journalism questions: What happened? Where did it happen? When did it happen? Who was/were involved? How did it happen?

A popular name for this is "the five W's." Sometimes it is known as "the five W's and the H".

1. W — What happened?
2. W — Who was involved?
3. W — When did it hapen?
- 4 W — Where did it happen?
- 5 W — Why did it happen?
- 6 H — How did it happen?

In journalistic writing, the demands of the print media are slightly different from those of the electronic media, mainly in terms of the style of presentation of information. The script of the electronic media is meant to be read aloud while that for the print media is meant to be read silently. Whereas literary writing demands the application of the principles of good writing, mass media writing calls for a little more tact. The writer for the mass media writes about cold realities in topical circumstances and his chief concern is with what constitutes news and with its dissemination. The literary writer writes about the facts of life as seen through the lenses of fiction and he is also concerned about its

dissemination but not in its topicality.

Thus for the mass media writer, his chief concern is with issues often described as news. For what constitutes news, there are almost as many views as there are editors and news media. Perhaps the best view about what news is offered by John Hohenberg who warns that there is no formula for deciding what is news nor is there a book of news tables that one can consult. He says:

The things that are and are not news, vary from one day to the next, from one country to another from one city to another, and without doubt from one paper to another.

In his view, news 'is what happened *yesterday, today, and last week or a moment ago*'. Such views explain why news means so many things to many people. Yet in spite of its eclecticism certain key qualities can be defined as constituting news values.

[i] **HARDNESS**

This refers to the factual quality, correctness, validity, accuracy and truthfulness of news.

eg The President announced a new cabinet today. (in an afternoon paper)

[ii] **TIMELINESS**

This refers to its recency, immediacy or currency. The quality also embodies 'hotness' which carries with it a sense of freshness and excitement.

eg The Governor has today named Mr. Grumbling Pitfall as his new secretary. (in an evening paper or radio-television news)

[iii] **SIGNIFICANCE**

This refers to the worthiness for consideration and the prominence of a person or event reported. News should not be about pseudo-events. The size of an event (threshold) is crucial in a decision to report that event.

Reports about corruption in government are not about significant things or events. These are rather commonplace things in all societies. But if they involve the chief actors in government they may have some significance.

[iv] **ACTUALITIES**

It should be about persons or events connected with persons or things

e.g. The President addressed members of his constituency at Abuja

last night in what political observers believed was a fence-mending exercise.

Human interest stories are important for newspaper success, and these should deal with actual things or events.

[] *NEWNESS*

News should be about unusual events or different happenings which have not become commonplace. This is what Tony Momoh (1983) refers to as the 'displacement of the routine'. It should be about a change from the normal and should also have freshness. News should also provide new knowledge otherwise it may not be worth the while.

[vi] *CORRECTNESS*

This is a quality which is related to hardness but which goes beyond it. It refers to credibility and verifiability. This is also a reference to accuracy in spellings, dates and other facts of the news story. This is also an essential quality of good journalistic writing which we have discussed in a previous section.

[vii] *OBJECTIVITY AND BALANCE*

The reporter should give all the information available to the reader and eschew reporter-bias. This also involves being fair in the treatment of two or more sides to a news event that is equal treatment of views of participants in a news event. This is a rather difficult quality to maintain. Even some reporters claim that there is no objectivity in news writing. Happenstance and reporter-bias sometimes conspire to give certain events the prominence they do not deserve.

[viii] *CONSEQUENCE*

The reporter should ask himself the question: What are the likely effects of the news report on the readership or receivers? The reporter's empathy with and affinity for the receivers are important in determining what stories shall be presented to them. Cultural proximity makes this possible. Thus issues likely to cause social discontent or upheaval should be avoided. That is why an over-concentration on disasters and other conflicts unnecessarily focusses on the wrong aspects of society. For Africans and perhaps all other races there is a growing need to weld society together rather than emphasize differences.

[ix] *AUTHORIZATION*

Certain kinds of news about certain kinds of events require legitimization by the news source. The authority for the news should come from the traditional legitimization processes. Readers in Africa often ask: Under whose authority was the information given? This is an extension of the value attached to traditional communication media and channels.

Usually this is achieved by sourcing the news story. An example would be in announcing the death of a Chief; the release of information in such a case must come from legitimized source in the community. Such news coming from a non-legitimized source often causes problems.

[x] **UTILIZATION**

Of what use is the news story to the society? This is a question often asked too in reaction to the excessive obsession of western media with disaster-reporting. The news story must, in addition to providing information, educate, entertain and generally create an awareness. News reports without values for the society do not contribute to the growth of the society.

[xi] **RELATIVITY OF SPEED**

Even though we have given timeliness as one of the news values, the speed with which the information permeates the society should be relative to each society. Speed as they say in motoring campaigns, thrills but it also kills. Journalists should never confuse speed with effectiveness because the latter should be the chief objective of any news story. The news should reach the receivers as quickly as possible but not at the expense of other competing factors in the society. The fastest may not be the best.

SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION PROBLEMS

SPELLING PROBLEMS

Two of the commonest scourges of writers and journalists everywhere are spelling and punctuation difficulties. If the problem of poor spelling were just an issue of personal taste perhaps not many would even have bothered talking or writing about it. Poor spellings are indeed sources of irritation to many readers even when they are typographical or printing errors. Perhaps not many realize the harm they do to the image or ego of others when they, for example refer to Peter Abrahams as Peter Abraham or when the possessive form of Dickens becomes Dicken's; Edem Esin becomes Edem Essien or Nssien becomes Essien. No satisfactory reason can be given to palliate a man whose name has been either deliberately misspelt or altered, or ignorantly or carelessly written in another form. So while others take their spellings very seriously, others would, like the character in Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* resolve the issue on the side of 'taste' and 'fancy' of the speller.

The spelling problems of Nigerian journalists are not helped any further through a conspiracy of factors ranging from conventions, origins of words, exception rules, and diverse other linguistic and cultural factors. It will be pointless repeating the rules which govern English

spellings here since many other English language texts have treated the topic competently.

Certain words are often confused and repeatedly misspelt in students' essays as well as adult writing. It is necessary to study these words and ensure that personal difficulties are eliminated through the mastery of one's roadblocks.

Homophones and Some Words Commonly confused

The words contained on this list are alphabetically arranged for easy reference. Homophones are combined with words which pose certain semantic as well as spelling problems; and they are arranged in pairs. Each should be separately examined to clear any semantic doubts.

accept/except	recent/resent
access/excess/assess	shear/sheer/share
acronyms/abbreviations	their/they're/there
adapt/adopt	usage/use .
area/aria	vice/vise .
berth/birth	wander/wonder
carat/caret/karat	your/you're
desert/dessert	
x new/knew	
formally/foermerly	
hearse/hers/hears	
ineligible/illegible	
lightening/lighting	
moral/morale	
→ our/hour	
premier/premiere	
quiet/quite/quit	

PUNCTUATION PROBLEMS

On the other hand, much to the dismay of teachers (at school) and readers (at home) too many writers are neglecting the application of the numerous signs which stand for our different breath pauses and prosodic features. These punctuation marks, as they are known, are the road signs of writing which keep reminding the reader how long he is to pause, how fast to move and where stresses and other forms of emphasis are to be placed. These marks represent the bus stops, bends, destinations and other signs in a natural road journey. Without them much of what we write today would be meaningless.

Nevertheless, punctuation marks are decreasing in frequent usage because modern sentences no longer are as long and involved as those of the previous century and even the early part of the present century. The current trend inspired by modern journalism tends to reduce their occurrence to only those occasions when meaning would be impaired if they were absent. Their use in this case, becomes a matter of taste and functionality. It is true that present-day writers, for the purpose of effective communication, prefer the relatively short sentences, thus eliminating the superfluous use of punctuation marks. But the truth also remains that the long sentence is also still with us as well as new conventions and modes of representing specific concepts, illustrations and precepts which modern printing technology has made possible. In scientific papers and linguistic studies many of these are used to represent and make more meaningful those ideas and issues that would lose much by the absence of these marks.

It is therefore necessary that we should see the punctuation of a sentence as the use of signs to communicate the pauses in vocal conversation. These signs communicate meaning and prevent or reduce confusion and distortion (syntactic, semantic or directional). They are an attempt to represent in writing certain vocal circumstances.

There are many other conventions unique to printing which may be used to illustrate the various elements which may be found in the spoken utterance but which are beyond the scope of this chapter. But suffice it to say that the journalist using the most modern computer or word processor or the latest typewriter should bear in mind that the rest of us may be familiar with only some of the most familiar conventions. Thus some of these marks which may act as noise should be avoided.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Discuss some of the reasons why journalists write. For whom do they write?
2. What are the essential qualities of good journalistic writing? Why is it necessary for a writer to adopt them?
3. Rewrite the following statements to make them better i.e. clear, correct, brief and simple among other qualities:
 - (a) Many Nigerians only care for what they can get from the State since we are a selfish people.
 - (b) In these days and times, it is obvious that children commence their pre-primary education in nursery schools.
 - (c) It is a great political miscalculation for an inconsequential nonentity to attempt to catapult himself from the pedestal of crass obscurity to the forefront of national importance.

- (d) Asukwo is a sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity.
- (e) Communication Arts is a new and wider field of communication studies first introduced at the University of Ibagwa in 1967.
4. What would you consider as African news values?
 5. Pick out words which have been incorrectly spelt from the following list: trouper, tort, alright, connexion, leutenant, grammer, diaphragm, yacht, ommitted, manœuvre. Spell them correctly.
 6. Punctuate the following strings of words to give them more than one meaning. Do this in two sentences for each.
 - (a) The prisoner said the judge is a fascist pig.
 - (b) My brother thought I have been dreaming and had just awakened.
 - (c) He soon found a job in a factory because he was clever at his work he soon rose to be a foreman in a year.
 7. In not more than one typed page, double-spacing, write a lucid report on a recent court proceedings you attended. Your audience should be fairly literate members of a small community which also has access to a national weekly magazine.

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