



# **Writing Broadcast News**



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*Shorter, Sharper,  
Stronger: A Professional  
Handbook*

THIRD EDITION

**Mervin Block**



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*Dedicated to the memory of my parents*



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# A NOTE ON SCRIPTS AND EXCERPTS

**M**ost scripts in this book were submitted to me over the years by news directors who were preparing for newswriting workshops I held in newsrooms across the country. I had asked the NDs to send me about 200 pages so we could discuss them at the workshop. I'd read the scripts in advance and set aside those with common or unusual mistakes. At the station, I'd project the scripts onto a screen without the name or initials of the writer. Then I'd point out the mistakes to the staff. With no ID on the scripts, no one was put on the spot—except me.



W

riting well isn't merely important—it's imperative. Whether writing for TV, radio, new media, or for print, we all need to write better.

If you're a writer or want to be one, any kind of writer—reporter, producer, anchor, newswriter, blogger, intern—and you absorb the tips and pointers in *Writing Broadcast News*, you're bound to write better.

Over the years, surveys have shown that most news directors say the skill they prize most in job applicants is writing. No matter what kind of work you do in any kind of newsroom (broadcast, digital or print), good writing is a boon.

This new edition is better organized than the previous edition. And this edition does a better job of highlighting important points. It's expanded in key areas, and it has a more comprehensive index, making it easier for readers to find what they're looking for. As a result, this edition is shorter, sharper, stronger.

The suggestions I passed along in the previous edition are still pertinent, helpful, timely—and timeless. And this new edition provides even more suggestions.

Do you want to strengthen your scripts? Streamline them? Know more about attribution? Question leads? Quotation leads? *Quote* and *unquote*? And other quotidian questions? Want to learn more about broadcast news-writing in general? About news judgment and journalism? This professional manual offers clear, simple guidance.

*Writing Broadcast News* is intended for two kinds of writers: broadcast professionals who want to enhance their skills and students who want to acquire those skills. Whichever group you're in, newbie or oldbie, or you don't know where you stand, you've come to a place I trust is worth your while. And even if you want to focus on writing for print or the new digital media rather than for radio or television, this book can help.

*Writing Broadcast News* reviews the basics briskly, then deals with other elements of broadcast newswriting. The book presents scripts and excerpts

that have been broadcast, along with my corrections, objections and suggestions. I've collected the scripts over the years at newswriting workshops I've held in TV and radio newsrooms in about 45 states, 3 Canadian provinces, and elsewhere.

Because mistakes are often our best teachers, I point out flaws in these scripts. After I correct a script, I often provide my rewrite. The scripts are the same as those displayed in the previous edition, and my rewrites offer countless clues on how to revise effectively.

*Writing Broadcast News* starts with the Dozen Deadly Sins, and it follows with a raft of Venial Sins. I don't just list the sins; I elaborate on each one. Then I pivot to what I call the Top Tips of the Trade. I've polished them and added several new ones.

Two new features in this edition are pull quotes and WordWatcher boxes. This book's boxes and pull quotes emphasize and illuminate especially important points. These typographical devices are used to draw you into the text and enable you to add more arrows to your quiver.

For 13 years, I wrote a column, WordWatching, for the Radio-Television Digital News Association (formerly RTNDA). The Word-Watcher boxes in this book, based on my monthly column in RTDNA's *Communicator*, focus on the differences between writing for the eye and writing for the ear.

This book is full of tips—tips about words, about grammar, about writing, about journalism. Sounds like an advertisement, doesn't it? Well, *Writing Broadcast News* speaks for itself, and you can see for yourself.

To write well, we need to read a lot, write a lot and think a lot (but not of Camelot). Write as often as possible. And show your scripts to someone who's a better writer than you. If you're already the best writer in your class or shop, it's probably time to move on to a tougher class or a bigger shop.

The English writer Hilaire Belloc said, "Of all fatiguing, futile, empty trades, the worst, I suppose, is writing about writing." I disagree. Writing about writing is challenging. I get a real kick when readers tell me my book has helped them get the hang of writing news for broadcast—or helped them write better.

But in spite of my disagreement with Belloc's remark, I do agree with something else he wrote: "When I am dead, I hope it may be said, 'His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.'"

I'm more than happy to see *Writing Broadcast News* back in print. Its absence pained me. After all, I fathered the book. And mothered it. Till fate smothered it. Now CQ Press has rescued it, revived it and renewed it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Charisse Kiino, editorial director of CQ Press, who thought it desirable to reissue all my books.

Thanks, too, to Lorna Notsch, production editor, and Pam Suwinsky, copy editor. I also want to thank three other stalwarts at CQ Press: Erin Snow, Linda Trygar and Chris O'Brien.

I wish to acknowledge another author, Scott Travers, who insisted that I see his agent, Bill Corsa, several years ago, even before I needed an agent. So I saw Bill. And retained him as my agent. I thank Bill for his belief in *Writing Broadcast News* and his unrelenting efforts to find a new publisher. Bill's expertise worked the magic that kept this book from disappearing.

My thanks, too, to my superb editor through the years, Julia B. Hall. She edited the second edition of this book, and it bears her hallmark of quality. Her skills also strengthened this edition.



# PART I

## **RULES**





## Dozen Deadly Don'ts

A

ny writer who knows a lot knows there's a lot to know. And every writer should know that what counts most is what you learn after you know it all.

When I began to write broadcast news, I had already mastered three basic rules: (1) write on only one side of the paper, (2) don't write more than one story on a page and (3) keep the keys clean. With the advent of the computer, rule 1 no longer applies. Even so, over the years, I've digested some other valuable rules while working for old pros in broadcast newsrooms; I've recalled some rules from a class in broadcast newswriting; and I've devised some rules from insights gained through writing day after day after day. Also, I've assimilated rules laid down by various writing experts, especially Strunk and White—and *they* call them rules. I've learned a lot from my mistakes. As you probably know, mistakes are often our best teachers. So the sooner we make our first thousand mistakes, the sooner we can correct them.

Often, the right thing to do is not to do the wrong thing. The Ten Commandments tell us mostly what *not* to do. According to the Talmud, the Old Testament sets forth 365 negative commandments and 248 positive commandments. Not that I want to turn a script into Scripture. But if the Good Book sees the positive purpose of the negative, so should we.

In a burst of creativity, I've labeled the most important no-no's the "Dozen Deadly Don'ts." You may already know some of these how-to techniques. But though we're taught once, we must be reminded many times. These reminders are omnidirectional: They cover radio and television; a.m. and p.m.; AM and FM. And they apply to all kinds of scripts: from 20-second stories to two-hour specials, from anchors' "readers" to reporters' "wraps."

A writer who understands the Don'ts can see why they may be even more important than the Do's. Walter Cronkite was so impressed by the ability of Maine lobstermen to find their way through thick fog he once asked a laconic local, "How do you know where the rocks are?" "Don't," the man replied. "I know where they ain't."

Just as a jazz musician performs his magic by knowing which notes not to play, the careful writer knows what not to write. Here are the Dozen Deadly Don'ts, not necessarily in order of sinfulness. Remember: Our scripts will suffer from—if not die for—our sins, so don't commit any of them.

► **1. Don't scare listeners.**

And don't scare them away. A prime—but not prime-time—example is this first sentence of a broadcast script:

This is a very complicated and confusing financial story.

Why start with a turn-off? No matter how complex or confusing the story, our job is to simplify and clarify, not scarify. We're often faced with stories that seem impenetrable. But we need to get a grip on ourselves—and on our notes or source copy—and plow ahead. And not tell our listeners that we're baffled or buffaloed (even if we are). "The world doesn't want to hear about labor pains," the pitcher Johnny Sain said. "It only wants to see the baby."

That scare was probably not intentional; we certainly don't want one that is:

How does the thought of 10 percent ground bones and other meat remnants in hot dogs, sausage or bologna sound to you?

I'd tell the weenie who wrote that, "Don't try to upset me or my stomach. And please don't question me."

Many scripts are scary for another reason: They've been put on the air apparently untouched by human hand—or mind.

► **2. Don't give orders.**

Don't tell listeners to do this or do that. Don't tell them to listen, or watch, or stay, or fetch. Just give them the news. When a radio anchor says, "Don't touch your dial," I wonder, "Why, is it radioactive?"

► **3. Don't bury a strong verb in a noun.**

Instead of writing a lead about a "bomb *explosion*" write, "A bomb *exploded*." Nouns are the bones that give a sentence body. But verbs are the muscles

that make it go. If your first sentence lacks a vigorous verb, your script will lack go-power.

► **4. Don't characterize news as *good, bad, interesting or shocking*.**

Just report the news. Let the listener decide whether it's good, bad, interesting, amazing, surprising, disturbing or shocking. What's good news for some is bad for others. What seems, at first glance, to be good can turn out to be bad. What's good for a city dweller may be bad for a farmer. What's good for Luke Skywalker may be bad for Lucy Streetwalker. A steep fall in oil prices seems like good news. But in many places in this country, it turns out to be bad news. The best course: Just tell the news.

Also undesirable for newswriters is the good news-bad news combo: "Governor Gibson had good news and bad news today. He said he's going to push for a tax cut—but not this year." What's objectionable is that the phrase "good news and bad news" is worn out—like old news.

In fact, the "good news-bad news" coupling has been traced back to biblical times. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Commandments, he reportedly told his people, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I got them down from 40 to 10. The bad news is, adultery is still in."

I said "reportedly" because a news director who reads that may muse, "If a camera wasn't there to shoot it, did it really happen?"

But it's not wrong to use the "good news" approach when the news is indisputably good for a *specific* group or person: "The IRS had good news today for taxpayers." Or "Governor Booodle received good news and bad news today. His good news: He was put on probation. His bad news: He has to make restitution." Otherwise, the time-consuming, subjective "good news" label is bad news. And please don't call a story "unusual." We don't report the usual, do we? Not usually.

► **5. Don't start a story with *as expected*.**

When I hear an anchor say "As expected" at the top, it's usually a story I had *not* expected. Hadn't even *suspected*. Most listeners tune in to hear the unexpected. Even seers have no idea of what to expect. *As expected?* By whom? Not by your average listener. When listeners hear a story begin with *as expected* and the story turns out to be something they did not expect, they probably feel they don't know what's going on.

Often, when newswriters start with *as expected*, they do so because *they* have been expecting a development. Or their producer has told them to keep an eye peeled for the story a news agency says will be moving shortly.

So they've been scanning the wires. After hours of expectation, the story finally arrives. Without thinking, without considering their listeners—listeners who aren't newshawks, listeners whose reading is limited to the program listings—the writers rush to type the words that have been on *their* minds. So they start with that deflating phrase *as expected*, which takes the edge off any story.

Even more of a turn-off than *as expected* is a negative version that I've heard with my own ears. It went something like this: "*Not unexpectedly*, Senator Blather said today he's going to run for reelection." Another variation: "The *long-awaited* appointment of Judge Michael Mutton to the State Supreme Court was made today by Governor Grosvenor." It certainly wasn't *long-awaited* by listeners. Probably only by Mutton. (And his Li'l Lamb Chop.)

That's not the only phrase considered a nonstarter. Here are more than a dozen more ways not to start a story:

**Don't start a story with: *In a surprise move. . . .***

A network broadcast this lead:

In a surprise move, the Interstate Commerce Commission rejected the proposal to merge the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railroads.

I had long forgotten about the proposal. The ICC had been considering it for two and a half years, so how could I be surprised about the decision when I wasn't aware it was pending? For whom was the rejection a surprise? People in the transportation industry, perhaps. But for the rest of us, news is full of surprises.

**Don't start a story with: *A new development tonight in the. . . .***

Every item in a newscast is supposed to be fairly new, based on something newly developed. Some writers try to go beyond that wasteful opening with "A *major* new development tonight. . . ." What's to be gained by telling people, "I've got news for you"? Friends may say that on the phone, but professionals don't proclaim it in a newscast.

And don't start a newscast by saying, "We begin with. . . ." As soon as you open your mouth, listeners know you've begun. Equally useless: "Our top story tonight is. . . ." If it's the first story, it should be the top story. Top stories run at the top. Skip that needless opener and go straight to the news. And don't write, "Topping our news tonight. . . ." Makes me think of Reddi-wip.

**Don't start a story with: *someone is news, is in the news, is making news or is dominating the news.***

Without ado or adornment, go ahead and tell the news. That's what a newscast is for. That's why they call it a newscast. Everyone who's mentioned in a newscast is "making" news. When writers say someone "is making news" or "making headlines," they're wasting time, time better spent reporting news.

Another waste of time is the lead that says someone "made history today." Or "entered history books today." Only historians will decide what was historic. And they won't decide today.

Equally pointless is this lead: "They're rewriting the record books today in. . . ." That script is what needs rewriting. Just tell the news. If someone has broken a record worth reporting, say so—simply.

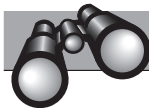
*Without ado or adornment, go ahead and tell the news.*

**Don't write a first sentence that uses *yesterday* or *continues*.**

Both words are bad news. Listeners tune in expecting to hear the latest news, the later the better. They want to hear news that has broken since they last heard or read the news. Imagine tuning in to a newscast and hearing an anchor start talking about something that happened *yesterday*. *Yesterday*? I thought yesterday was gone for good. Who cares about yesterday? I want to hear what happened today. *Yesterday* is still common in newspaper leads, but for broadcasting, it's too old, too dated, too rearview-mirrorish.

But a script mustn't deceive listeners by substituting *today* for *yesterday*, and it mustn't try to pass off yesterday's news as today's. Use ingenuity in figuring out how to write a first sentence without harking back to yesterday. You don't need to be a historian to know that nowadays, yesterday is history.

A worse sin than using *yesterday* in a lead is using yesterday's



## WORDWATCHER

**PRINT** *Mayor Hudson's wife was reported missing yesterday.*

**BROADCAST** *Mayor Hudson's wife has been reported missing.*

If you must lead with a story that broke yesterday, update it so you can use a *today*. Or use a present tense verb with no *yesterday* or *today*. Or if you find out, just before tonight's broadcast, that the mayor's wife was kidnapped last night, you can write around *last night* or *yesterday* by making use of the present perfect, as above. The present perfect tense expresses an action carried out before the present and completed at the present, or an action begun in the past and continuing in the present. In a subsequent sentence, you can slip in that dirty word *yesterday*.

news. Steer clear of *continues* in an opening sentence. In a second or subsequent sentence, *continues* isn't objectionable, but it's meaningless to end a story with "the controversy continues." Or "the investigation continues."

The problem with *continues* is that it doesn't tell a listener anything new. Worse, it tells listeners that nothing's new. *Continues* doesn't drive a sentence or story. It merely says something that has been going on is still going on. It tells the listener this is going to be a story that's not news—just olds.

### *Find a verb with verve.*

News is what's new. When you have to write about a long-running story—a siege, a drought, a hunger strike—search for a new peg. If you can't find a new peg, find a different angle of attack, move in from a different direction. Focus on whatever has occurred today or is going on today, something you can report for the first time, something that you didn't know about yesterday. Find a verb with verve, says Merv.

### **Don't start a story with: *another, more or once again.***

With few exceptions, those words are turn-offs. If we start a story with *another*, it sounds as if whatever the story turns out to be, it's bound to be similar to a story told previously, one that's not much different. Perhaps just more of the same.

A broadcast script:

Another jetliner tragedy in Britain today. A chartered airliner caught fire on takeoff in Birmingham, and 54 passengers were killed.

The crash is newsworthy on its own merits, not because it was the third airline accident within a month. To punch up that fact, I'd give it a sentence of its own: "A British jetliner caught fire on takeoff in Birmingham, England, today, and 54 passengers were killed. It's the third airline disaster in less than a month."

Also, starting a story with *more* signals the listener that what's coming may be more of the same—what some pros call "the same old same old." Usually, it's better to skip *more* and go straight to whatever the new *more* is. One reason many broadcast writers start with *more* is that it's an easy way to go: "More headaches for the president today," "More wrangling in City Hall today," "More arrests in the Acme Power case." Want more?

### **Don't start a story with: a sentence that has a *no or not.***

At least, try not to. Rewrite your negative lead to make it positive. Instead of saying, "The president is not going to take his planned trip to

Tahiti,” you’ll have a stronger opening by saying, “The president has canceled his trip to Tahiti.” A basic rule of writing or speaking is, Put your sentences in a positive form. In *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White say that, generally, it’s better to express even a negative phrase in a positive way: “did not remember” = “forgot”; “did not pay any attention to” = “ignored.” Not for nothing do they stress that.

Another argument for avoiding *not*: in some cases, a listener may confuse *not* with *now*. We shouldn’t go overboard worrying about listeners’ hearing problems, but it’s the reason some broadcast newspeople write “one million” instead of “a million”—lest a listener mistake *a* for *eight*.

*Rewrite your negative lead to make it positive.*

A similar concern leads many newsrooms to report that a defendant was found *innocent* rather than *not guilty*; they fear that some listeners might not catch the *not*. Or that the newscaster might inadvertently drop the *not*. But many writers (and I’m one) prefer writing *not guilty*—because it’s clear and correct. Juries don’t find people *innocent*. How could a jury find someone *innocent*, which means without sin?

### **Don’t start a story with: a participial phrase or a dependent clause.**

It’s not the way we talk. It’s not the way anyone talks. And it’s not the way to help listeners latch onto a story. Would you say to a friend:

“*Needing new shoes*, I’m going downtown tomorrow to buy some?”

No. You’d say, “I need new shoes, so tomorrow I’m going downtown to buy some.”

A lead that backs into a story with a participle is weak and murky. And it requires too much of listeners. The participle, or participial phrase as in the example, takes a verb and turns it into an adjective by tacking on *ing*. The participial phrase with secondary information that listeners hear at the start means nothing until they hear the next cluster of words and discover the subject of the sentence. Then they have to rearrange the word clusters to make sense of what they just heard. How many listeners have the time, energy and aptitude to do that while the wordathon rolls on and on?

Try making sense of this lead, written for a local broadcast:

Saying their project could never be compatible with the river which bears its name, the Regional Planning Council denied approval of the massive 1800-acre Wekiva Falls Complex in North Orange and Lake County.

If you were listening to that, could you tell what the subject of the sentence is—or is going to be? After such a clumsy approach, would you care?

Second, if you put a subordinate clause *after* the subject, you separate the subject from the verb. Try to avoid subordinate clauses that separate subject and verb. The greater the distance between subject and verb, the greater the difficulty for the listener. Listeners hear only one word at a time.

*The greater the distance between subject and verb, the greater the difficulty for the listener.*

By the time they hear the verb, they have to rewind mentally and figure out who's doing what. While listeners are puzzling over it, they can lose their train of thought. And if they do lose it, they probably won't be able to get back on board.

To make the subject of the story clear and unmistakable, the best pattern for writing your first sentence is subject-verb-object: Start with the subject, go

directly to the verb, and follow with the object. The closer the verb follows the subject, the easier for the listener to follow. So go with S-V-O.

### **Don't start a story with: a quotation.**

Listeners can't see quotation marks, and they can't examine your script. So when an anchor starts with a quotation, listeners assume the words are the anchor's own. It's especially confusing for listeners when the anchor opens with an assertion that's bold, startling or open to question—and then gets around to telling us who first spoke those words.

*Attribution precedes assertion.*

Likewise, if a story needs attribution,

the way to proceed—the *broadcast way*—is to put the source, or attribution, first. Remember: Attribution precedes assertion.

When we talk to one another, we automatically put attribution first. We don't stop to think about it. Our conversations follow the subject-verb-object pattern naturally and spontaneously: "Jim told me, 'Blah, blah.' And Jane replied, 'Hah, hah.'" Is any other word order preferable? Nah, nah.

In the unlikely event your boss rebukes you, you might complain to a friend, "The boss told me today I have to learn how to park my bike straight." Without thinking twice, you'd put the attribution first. You sure wouldn't blurt out, "You have to learn how to park your bike straight." That's what the boss told me today." Yet, we hear anchors start a story with a quotation—or an indirect quotation or a stunning statement—that sounds as if they're expressing their own views.



**Don't start a story with: a question.**

Why not? Questions tend to sound like quiz shows or commercials. Questions can be hard to deliver, draw an answer you don't want, and trivialize the news. Also, questions delay delivery of the news. And listeners are looking for answers, not questions. No one hurries home to catch a newscast to find out the latest questions.

**Don't start a story with: the name of an unknown or unfamiliar person.**

Names do make news, but only if they're recognized. An unknown name is a distraction. It can't be the reason you're telling the story; you're telling it because that person figures in something unusual. If the name means nothing to listeners, they're not likely to pay close attention, and they'll miss the point of your story.

The best way to introduce an unknown is with a title, or a label, or a description: "A Milwaukee milkman, Gordon Goldstein, was awarded five-million dollars in damages today for. . ."

Many stories don't need the person's name. Without a name, a story flows better and runs shorter. What does an unknown name in a distant city mean to you? Or your listeners? But, if you're writing about a runaway or a fugitive, the name may be essential.

What's in a name? It depends. Before using a person's name, ask yourself whether the story would be incomplete without it. It is standard, though, to start a story with the names of people who have titles, prominent people who are in the news constantly: President Whoever, Secretary of State Whatever, British Prime Minister Hardly Ever. Omit their first names. The same style applies to mention of your mayor, police chief, governor and maybe a few other public officials when you use their titles.

We can also start a story with the name of someone who has star quality, a person whose name is widely known—in almost every nook and cranny by almost every crook and nanny. But we use that person's first name and precede the name with a label: "The actress Meryl Streep," "the painter Pablo Picasso," "the author John Updike."

We don't use anyone's middle name—unless. Unless we're writing about someone who has long been identified with a middle name, like John Paul Jones. Or Martin Luther King.

Skip initials, too—unless the person you're writing about has long been identified with an initial: Michael J. Fox, J. Edgar Hoover, Edward R. Murrow. Another exception: an initial may be desirable if you are trying to avoid a mix-up with someone widely known who has the same (or a similar) name.

Broadcast newswriters customarily omit “Junior” and “the Second” after someone’s name—unless *not* using them could cause confusion with prominent sound-alikes. But there’s no need to include someone’s first name *and* a nickname. Go with one or the other. But *not* both together. We don’t have time, especially for those silly uses of first names with standard diminutives, like Thomas “Tom” O’Connor. Besides, have you ever heard of a Thomas called Joe?

When you do use names, try to use as few as possible so listeners can keep their eye (or ear) on the ball. Overuse of names—sometimes any use—leads to clutter. Don’t diffuse the focus of a story; keep the listener’s mind out of the clutter.

### **Don’t start a story with a personal pronoun.**

This script started with a personal pronoun, *he*, and kept *he-heing*:

He walked out of a New York prison today looking a little slimmer and slightly grayer. But one thing has not changed. He’s still followed everywhere he goes.

Who *he*? I want to know from the get-go who or what a story is about. So when I hear a script start with *he*, I wonder whether I missed the first sentence, the one that identified the subject. Withholding the identity of the subject stumps listeners. I don’t like newscasters to play games with me. And I won’t waste time with newscasts that don’t present news in a clear, understandable manner. I’m not alone.

A print feature can start with *he* because a reader can spot who *he* is from a headline or a photo or a caption; but we don’t open a conversation with a pronoun. If we rely on the best pattern of all, subject-verb-object, we’ll avoid premature pronouns.

### **Don’t start a story with: *There is, There are or It is.***

They’re dead phrases—wordy and wasteful. The power of a sentence lies largely in a muscular verb. A sentence gets its get-up-and-go from an action verb like *smash* or *shoot* or *kill*—or hundreds of other verbs that express action.

Although *is* and *are* are in the active voice, they aren’t *action* verbs. And they don’t convey action. They—and other forms of *to be*—are *linking* verbs. They link the subject of a sentence with a complement—another noun or adjective, a word that identifies or describes the subject. Other linking verbs include *have*, *seem*, *feel* and *become*. Not one of them has the power to drive a sentence—they only keep it idling. So when you start a

sentence with *there is*, you're just marking time until you introduce the verb that counts.

A network evening newscast:

There is a major power failure in the West affecting perhaps as many as 17 states. Utility company officials say a power grid that delivers electricity from the Pacific Northwest went down today. The cause of the blackout is not yet known, but it happened on a day when power resources were being stretched by record hot temperatures, including 102 degrees in Salt Lake City.

The *weather* was hot, not the temperatures. The script should read “record *high* temperatures.” And let's make that lead read right, or at least better: “A power failure has blacked out a large part of the West.”

Another *there* lead, this on local television, needs corrective surgery:

There's a train rolling through town tonight. But this is one you definitely won't mind missing.

By deleting *there's*, we make the sentence shorter. By making it shorter, we make it stronger. The story is about a train, not about *there*. After we lop off *there's*, let's write it right: “A train is rolling through town tonight. . . .” There are instances, though—as in this sentence—when *there are* may be appropriate.

### **Don't write a first sentence in which the main verb is any form of *to be*, SUCH AS *is, are, was, were* and *will be*.**

It's not necessarily wrong, just weak. Sometimes it's acceptable, even desirable. But it's better to search for an action verb. An exception to avoiding *is* in a first sentence: when *is* serves as an auxiliary or helping verb, as in: “Mayor Glom is *going* to Guam.” But *is*, alone, is usually a nerd word.

A sentence we often hear on the air:

“The president is back in the White House.”

Factually and grammatically, the sentence passes muster, but it doesn't cut the mustard. The *is* lacks movement. It merely expresses a static condition, not action. The next sentence is better because it has an action verb indicating someone has *done* something: “The president has returned to the White House.” Or “The president has arrived back at the White House.”

The use of *is* in a first sentence is all right when the sentence is short and the story big. For example: “The teachers' strike is over.” Or “Mayor Smiley is dead.” The second sentence gets its impact from *dead*. Which leads to another tip: Certain one-syllable words that end with a hard consonant—like *dead*

(or *drunk*)—gain impact when used at the end of a sentence. (No, I’m not suggesting you write *dead drunk*.)

One of the biggest weaknesses in broadcast news stories is the opening sentence. Too many limp—or just lie there. Every lead can’t be a grabber, but what listeners hear first can be crucial as to whether they keep listening. So newswriters should choose action verbs.

This network script shows how *not* to do it:

There was another clash in Britain tonight between police and gangs of youths. The latest incident was in the northern London district of Tottenham, where hundreds of youths overturned cars, threw gasoline bombs and set fires. Several policemen were reported injured. The incident followed the unexplained death of a West Indian woman during a police search of her home.

Let’s see where that lead went wrong. The story had plenty of action that could have been reported with vigorous verbs. Instead, the writer began with the flabby *there was*. And then further weakened the sentence with *another*. When *another* is so high up, it often makes a story less newsy. After all, the main point of the story isn’t that the two groups clashed *again*. The story is that they *clashed*. And if it weren’t a sizeable clash, it probably wouldn’t be worth reporting. The writer sapped the strength of a good verb, *clash*, by using it as a noun. Also, *youth* isn’t a conversational word, not in schoolrooms, not in living rooms, not in newsrooms.

One way to pep up that script: “Hundreds of young people in London *went* on a rampage tonight. They *set* fires, *overturned* cars and *threw* gasoline bombs.”

#### ► 6. Don’t cram too much information into a story.

Too many facts, too many names, too many numbers, too many words are just too much for too many listeners. They can’t process such a steady flow of facts. Brinkley said the ear is “the worst, least effective way to absorb information.” That’s *David* Brinkley, not Christie.

No matter how complex the story, our job is to condense the facts and give the listener not just the essence but rather a highly concentrated essence—the quintessence. The architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, a minimalist, used to say, “Less is more.” When it comes to lead sentences, “More is less.” Moreover, more is a bore.

#### ► 7. Don’t write for broadcast the same way you’d write for print.

Print and broadcast are two far different critters. Because of these differences, you need to set aside habits formed when you wrote an essay or a

term paper. Or when you wrote an article or a book. In writing a broadcast script, you mustn't take a tiresome trudge. Instead, focus on brevity, clarity and simplicity. The rest is electricity.

Newspaper readers can rip an article out of a paper, fold it, put it away and read—and reread it—at their convenience. They can show it to a friend and ask what something means. Your listeners have only one chance to hear your script. One time only. They can't phone you and ask you what you meant. You have to write in a way that enables listeners to understand your script instantly.

Newspaper reporters often construct their stories on the scaffolding of the Five W's—*Who? What? When? Where? Why?* And another question: *How?* They squeeze the most important facts into the top of an article, with succeeding paragraphs presenting facts in descending order of importance. But broadcast newswriters bypass that pattern. They skimp on the Five W's; they might write a script with only a few W's.

For writers with a newspaper background, a reminder: Don't write in inverted pyramid style. Leave that to print people. If you don't know what an inverted pyramid is, don't ask. You'll have one less print habit to kick.

Keep this in mind: Think listeners, not readers. Be sure to write right. And write tight.

*Think listeners,  
not readers.*

#### ► 8. Don't use newspaper constructions.

Here's an example of a common newspaper construction: "The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said today Beijing should stop threatening Washington. Senator John Kerry said. . . ."

Newspaper readers would probably see that Kerry is the committee chairman, the person described in the first sentence. But in broadcasting, the nature of the medium leads many listeners to assume that the Kerry in the second sentence is another person and that Kerry is adding *his* voice to the chairman's. In broadcasting, this is better: "The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, John Kerry, said today. . . ." Or else "The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said today. . . . Chairman John Kerry told. . . ." That makes Kerry's identity unmistakable. (P.S. Don't call anyone a chair. Or a couch.)

Another common construction ends a sentence with "according to . . ." or "she said." But that's not *our* style. We in broadcasting never end a sentence with attribution. Or never should. When attribution is needed, keep this in mind: Attribution precedes assertion.

In journalism school, a class in *broadcast* newswriting taught me not to use *newspaper* terms. When that instruction sank in, it struck me as sensible. Why should we in broadcasting use the language and style developed over centuries for another medium, a medium that broadcasting tries to distance itself from—and distinguish itself from?

A few print phrases and words to avoid:

- ▶ *in the headlines*: What headlines? Why are those newscasters plugging newspapers?
- ▶ *front page, sports page, people page, back page, or cover story*: Cover for TV? Pages? The only pages in broadcasting run errands.
- ▶ *up* as a verb: “The workers want to up their pay.” Reminds me of a *Reader’s Digest* title: “How We Upped Our Income; How You Can Up Yours.”
- ▶ *slay*: *Slay* is a good Anglo-Saxon word, but *slay* is not so strong as *kill* or *murder*. Don’t use *slay* unless you’re talking about dragons. Or Santa.
- ▶ *youth*, when writing about a young person: It’s not uncouth to say *youth*. But *youth* is a print word. Have you ever heard anyone use it in conversation? If so, please report him to the Bureau of Youth Abuse.
- ▶ *former, latter, respectively*: Few listeners remember names or items mentioned even moments earlier; and they certainly can’t look at your script to see what you were referring to.

▶ **9. Don’t reach for big words when small words can do the job.**

“Short words are the best,” said Winston Churchill, “and the old words when short are the best of all.” The author Richard Lederer said, “Small words cast their clear light on big things—night and day, love and hate, war and peace, and life and death.” As they say (not Churchill and Lederer), Save the big words for Scrabble.

▶ **10. Don’t pluck a clever word or phrase from your source copy and use it in your script.**

Listeners who heard a newscast or visited an Internet news site an hour before your newscast and then heard your borrowed words may figure that you got your gems from that earlier newscast or news site. So they’ll regard you or your anchor as copycats. Use your own words; say it your own way. After all, you’re a writer, right?

► **11. Don't lose or fail to reach a listener.**

The best way to keep a listener is by talking *to* the listener, not *at* the listener. And by working at your job, not forcing the listener to do your work. She won't, so you must. Writing is hard work; it's easy only for those who haven't learned to write. Compressing a long, complex story into 20 seconds is a challenge. Telling that story well is even harder. As Confucius should have said, "Easy writing, hard listening. Hard writing, easy listening."

► **12. Don't make a factual error.**

That's the deadliest sin of all. It causes you to lose your credibility. And eventually your listeners. Perhaps even your job.

If you want to win a Peabody and not wind up a nobody, here's another important rule: Don't be intimidated by rules. Newswriting isn't an exact science. To improve your scripts, go ahead: bend a rule or break one—if you must. But only when you can improve a script.

First, though, you must *know* the rules and *know* when you're breaking them. As the poet T.S. Eliot said, "It's not wise to violate the rules until you know how to observe them."

