

The Space Agent

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Abstract

Nothing has frightened me more through the years than the anticipatory commendation, as in my wife's "Will the rest of the house look as good as the side you painted last spring?" Or as in Dr. Brice Ratchford's July AAACE meeting comment, "Editors tend to be audience conscious."

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RALPH L. REEDER

NOTHING HAS FRIGHTENED me more through the years than the anticipatory commendation, as in my wife's "Will the rest of the house look as good as the side you painted last spring?" Or as in Dr. Brice Ratchford's July AAACE meeting comment, "Editors tend to be audience conscious."

My first reaction was one of hurt. Did he doubt our legendary talent for writing, verbalizing, and visualizing? Would he ask of his other specialists or of his natural-born researchers and teachers that they be conscious of their audiences? Or had we been selected for a special mission? In my anxiety I even went through Dick Lee's thesis again to see if I had missed something that would have led Dr. Ratchford into such a disquieting comment.

What he fails to realize is that we are a professional group, annually getting awards from ourselves for our special talents in preparing news stories, visuals, bulletins, radio, and television. When and if he and his kind pay us, it is not just for what we know, but for our extra-sensory perception. Not everyone can take drab, uninteresting educational material, regurgitated by a committee or department, and turn it into literature that will be stimulating to somebody somewhere out there.

Long Apprenticeship Served

Many of us went through a long apprenticeship of self appreciation before we discovered we had the instinct for choosing just the right words or picture to fit the two-column \times 3½-inch open space. In my own case, this instinct came to me in a flash of light

when Russ Prescott asked me one day at Nebraska if I didn't want to get more salary by editing ag publications. Probably most of us can recall a similar moment of revelation when we first discovered we had this jingle in our genes.

Other Editors' Brains Picked

Of course, after getting on the job, I reproved myself occasionally by checking what editors in other schools were doing. This was just to be sure I had lost none of my delicate originality and manual dexterity. But for most of us, even while in college our greatness had begun to show through. It is not just by chance that today's students refer to a top grade as an ACE. We hardly worked up a sweat in history of American journalism, libel and law of the press, feature writing, editorial writing, and newswriting I and II, preceded of course by English 105 and 106. Some of our courses were even taught by honest-to-God newspapermen, whose tough minds and eagle eyes could tell, without ever talking to us, whether we had what it takes to count out 14½ spaces in three decks. No mickey mouse about this; here is the solid stuff of which journalists are made.

In departments of speech, writing, and art we were at last among our own kind, people very like us who were born with the intuitive knowledge of what others like and understand. We, in this plaster caste, had the originality to improve on what others had written, the spontaneity to rephrase what others had said, the traceability to redraw what others had pictured.

During school and on the job we acquired the extra talent we needed to go along with our native-born audience consciousness. This meant learning to ride the gain on a tape recorder, to count the characters on a page, to make a layout pleasing to the I, to handletter a certificate for the wife of a visiting dean, or to get verbs and nouns in agreement without disturbing either the thought or the author.

Only Few Reach Top

Out of such rigor only a few of us could expect to reach the top, to be media specialists on a university or government staff, fraternize with those at the highest level of authority and morality. Ours was the unalloyed joy of being able to hack away at their

words, chop up their sentences, decode and encode the great truths that constantly boiled to the top in these caldrons of intelligence. Imagine getting paid to re-encrypt for future generations such combinations of words as we get in the exciting routine of a typical editorial week:

Copy case XXX. “As with all static models, assumptions about the fixity of factors and the reversibility of behavioral relations must be applied carefully if adequate realism is to be attained. In addition, the model is somewhat inadequately adapted to analyzing the properties of a dynamic world since dynamic phenomena can be approximated only by the introduction of exogenous assumptions. However, while the model itself does not describe dynamic developments, it is not clear a priori that a dynamic model would be better than a comparative static use of the present one for prediction, provided good projections could be obtained of strategic exogenous variables.”

Copy case XXXI. “The reason for this is that the new shoots which are produced during the summertime produce the fall crop on the tips of these new shoots that first fall. Then when you prune the planting as described above, you will remove the tips the following spring and the spring crop is then produced on the sideshoots of these same canes. Therefore, the pruning immediately after harvest is the removal of the old canes which produced a fall crop on the tips the last fall, then this past spring’s crop. There are now new shoots coming up to give you the new fall crop.”

Copy case XXXII. “When a group has been successful in raising money for a community project, they can rightfully feel that they were influential. If the group failed in their effort to raise the money, one of the reasons could be that they were not influential in the community. If your group takes the action you want them to take, you have been influential; if it does not, then you were not influential.”

When such copy comes, I eagerly go about my task of moving words (whether they need it or not), guided by Flesch, blood, and a 2×4 thumb rule. Then the exhilarating wait for the seance with the scientist himself or herself, the eyeball-to-eyeball exchange over each nuance of the language—why passive was changed to active, was to were, they to it. Tolerantly, patiently,

I explain that I am audience conscious—people with an eighth-grade education want to read 12-word sentences, two-syllable words, and a scattering of personal references. Overwhelmed by this show of strength, the scientist goes his way, exuding new confidence that his (or nearly his) words will reach a vast new audience. No doubt this is why Dr. Ratchford commented as he did about our audience consciousness.

Yet I have a certain uneasiness that he may have been displaying a kind of administrative gamesmanship. Thinking about this possibility has given me a few moments of self-doubt. I wonder if I know all I could about why people do not want to read what I have edited with such expertise, why they don't seem to listen to the mental smorgasbord I have prepared intuitively. Could there be some things I ought to find out about their values, concerns, prejudices, intelligence, ambition, competence, common sense, frustration? If they are old? If they are young? If they are middle-aged?

Maybe, Dr. Ratchford, you were issuing a challenge. It might be a challenge to me, to AAACE media committees, to AAACE contest judges. Maybe we ought to consider, as soon as we get the chores done, getting out of the office and filling in some people spaces on the page of our profession.