



BY JOHN BURNS, Editor-in-Chief, *Vancouver* magazine

DISPLAY WRITING 101

Does your heart sink when it comes to display writing? Do you feel that after all the hours of assigning and writing and researching and editing and fact-checking, it's come to this: an empty text box in which all your most superficial thoughts are to be published in 36 point bold? I know I feel disheartened each month when the dozens of features, columns, and sidebars roll back around, morphed from friendly Word documents into demanding InDesign pages that all require signage. Lots of signage.

It's a chore, but it doesn't have to call your very essence into question. What I've figured out—and what I hope will help you as well—is that display writing is just writing...on display. And we're all sometimes uncomfortable when we're put on display. As I used to tell my writing students, communication is like a written form of dating, one by which you're trying to make connections, to tell stories and forge a shared history. And if journalism is dating, then display writing is flirting. And we're all good at flirting. It only needs three things.

BE FRIENDLY

Great display writing begins by knowing your audience and making a great first impression. So, are your readers interested in regional doings? Reassure them there's regional content in the way you construct your dek. Do they fancy themselves as worldly? Bust out the 25-cent words. Are they playful or serious, conservative or experimental, needy or self-confident? Tailor your message accordingly. How do you know these things? All good publishing rests on good research. For my magazine I've constructed characters who fit the profiles I've gotten from PMB reports: I know their names, their hobbies, their back stories. If you don't have access to PMB or reader surveys, get creative. Maybe Google Analytics can shed light. Revisit your publication's letters to the editor and social media messages. Even the vibe at your sponsored events or in your ads can help you set the tone.

BE PROVOCATIVE

This is entertainment (no matter how serious the stories), but you can only startle and delight your readers if you start by deeply understanding your stories. That's because you need to manage that optimal distance: enough to provide a sense of a piece's breadth and complexity, but not so much that you lose its focus and specificity. We're all tempted to fall back on favoured heds, and this is one reason we should avoid them (acknowledging there are only so many titles in the world): the story has individuality, so the display should as well.

BE YOURSELF

Really think through the promises you're making to readers. Are you being accurate? Intriguing? Respectful? If you make promises the story can't deliver, it's the writer who'll get blamed, and for what? Because you couldn't pass up that delicious alliteration? Reread the story. Revisit the display. Read it out loud. Read it to colleagues and ask them to guess what the story is about. Sometimes, in my darkest moments, I paste a whole issue's display on one sheet of paper and print it all out, just to despair over my nonsensical word poems. Then I shrug my shoulders, slick back my hair, shoot my cuffs, and begin again.

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5 HEDS/ DECKS AND WHY THEY WORKED...

RAISING THE DEAD

After the terrorist attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall last fall, the grisly job of identifying corpses fell to RCMP Sgt. Diane Cockle, one of Canada's premier forensic archaeologists and a world expert in our worst actions

> Descriptive, accurate, provocative, local, and it ends with a bang.

A WING AND A PRAYER

Antibiotics have saved billions of lives, yet we're increasingly immune to their benefits, in part because of their widespread, unregulated use in the chickens we eat. Consumers, growers, government—who will police our last precious line of defence?

> A complex story that strove to show balance between advocates and industry. How to make that consumer-friendly? With only one (hopefully) subtle avian reference in the hed, and an interrogatory dek.

WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE THE FORESTS FOR THE TEES

One nonprofit intends to stop viscose from killing the ancient boreal

> An FOB piece that let us avoid our greatest weakness (the repetition of two-word heds) and tease a story that might otherwise have seemed do-goodish.

I CAN HAZ INTERNET FAME?

While they await a call from the majors, Vancouver film crews, actors, and writers are creating webisodes that add up to an ad hoc industry

> Self-mocking and lighthearted, even though it's actually a business story (ssssh...nobody noticed).

PAPER CHASTE

Trinity Western will allow gay students into its coming law school—if they promise to abstain from sex. Is that a reasonable exchange?

> The temptations with display about sex are almost overwhelming. Resist. The complexity in these two words was perhaps too much: will readers flipping past stop to remember a 1970 novel and PBS series? Maybe this needed a second thought...

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