

# The Write Stuff



A veteran journalist shares  
6 tips of the trade

**PageOne**   
CONTENT MARKETING

Since her journalism career began more than two decades ago, Page One Founder Randi Druzin has written for major media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Toronto Star*. In 2015, she started helping corporate clients build their brands through written and visual content. She has produced content for them and has shared with them the most important information she has acquired as a journalist – the fundamentals of good written storytelling.

# In her words...

## 1 The Lead

When the Hindenburg burst into flames moments before touching down in Lakehurst, New Jersey in 1937, none of the newspaper reports of the disaster started like this: “An airship failed to land at a naval station in New Jersey last night.” Readers would have been bored by an opening that bland, and would have lost interest after the first sentence.

Instead, most news stories started like this one in *The New York Daily News*: “The fleet, gray Zeppelin Hindenburg, the greatest lighter-than-air craft in the world, was blown asunder and consumed by flames at 7:25 o’clock last night 300 feet above the heads of a thousand horrified spectators at the Lakehurst Naval Air Start.”

I haven’t seen the data but I’m certain that every person who read that sentence read the next one, and the one after that.

The opening, known as the lead, is the most important part of the story. It must grab the reader’s attention and persuade him to continue reading. This rule applies to every piece of written content you produce, from articles and blog posts to case studies and white papers.

“The lead is everything. It’s the finger snap that gets the reader’s attention,” Rob Roberts, editor-in-chief of the *National Post*, told me. “Always assume your reader is about to leave, and tell him something that will make him want to stay.”

## 2 Questions

Every story should answer six basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

Four of them are answered in the first sentence of the Hindenburg story cited above. What happened? A zeppelin crashed. When did this happen? Last night. Where did this happen? Lakehurst. How did it happen? It burst into flames.

The remaining two questions are answered soon after.

**Who was involved?** “At 4 A.M. today, the Associated Press announced that apparently 34 of the 100 persons aboard were dead. One spectator, Allen Hagaman of Lakehurst, also was killed.”

**Why did it happen?** “... accumulated static or sparks from the engines darted a lethal electric charge into the 800,000 cubic feet of inflammable hydrogen that bore the sky liner from Germany.”

In a news story, all six questions must be answered right away – this story structure is called the inverted pyramid – in other forms of content they don’t. But all the basic questions have to be answered somewhere in the document.

For example, if you’re doing a case study of cannabis being used to treat a dog for gastrointestinal issues, you don’t want readers to walk away wondering what breed the dog was (who) or how long the treatment lasted (when).

One of my journalism school professors once compared a story with gaps in information to a WWII fighter plane riddled with holes caused by anti-aircraft fire. It won't fly.

## 3 Simplicity

That same professor once told me that every good story is built around KISS. He must have sensed I was about to beat a hasty retreat from his office because he immediately explained that it was an acronym: Keep it Simple, Stupid.

This principle dates back to the 1960s, when an American aeronautical engineer determined that most systems work best if they are simple. This principle is as relevant to constructing stories as it is to building airplanes.

Embrace the KISS principle and take these two steps:

### Eliminate clutter

Good journalists aim to produce clean copy — written material that includes only essential words and sentences. They delete words and sentences that aren't necessary. They don't use 10 words in a sentence when five will suffice.

For example, a news writer might use this sentence: "Fire crews arrived at the scene of the blaze and were able to put it out within half an hour." However, a good news writer would use this sentence instead: "Fire crews put out the blaze in 30 minutes."

Adverbs are often what copy editors describe as "clutter." For example, the sentence, "A man was brutally murdered," is one word too many. Murder is inherently brutal, so the word "brutally" is not essential and should be removed.

### Avoid jargon

The best journalists use uncomplicated language. To do that, avoid using jargon. If your readers are new to cannabis cuisine, don't advise them to *decarboxylate* dried cannabis before cooking with it. Instead, advise them to activate the psychoactive element of the cannabis. This will convey the same information in a way that is more digestible.

Deborah S. Bosley, a writing consultant and former University of North Carolina English professor,

made that point in a critique of the writing in academia. "It's easy to be complex, it's harder to be simple," Bosley said. "It would make academics better researchers and better writers, though, if they had to translate their thinking into plain language."

To find jargon that will make your eyes roll back in your head, drop by your local police station. An officer will tell you that, "The perpetrator exited the vehicle and fled on foot prior to our arrival," when what he really means is, "The perpetrator got out of the car and ran away before we got there."

## 4 Liveliness

Your writing should be as lively as it is clean. Here's how to start:

### Use the active voice

You should use the active voice, not a passive one. It is better to say, "The Canadian government legalized recreational cannabis," than to say, "Cannabis was legalized by the Canadian government." The active voice is more direct and is often more powerful.

### Choose verbs over adjectives

The verb is the engine of your sentence. The adjective is the bobblehead doll on your dashboard. It doesn't add much value. For example, it would be more impactful to say, "Buyers cleaned the shelves of CBD oil," than to say, "CBD was a popular item."



# “The opening is the finger snap that gets the reader’s attention.”

C.S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, said it best: “In writing, don’t use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing. Instead of telling us a thing was ‘terrible,’ describe it so that we’ll be terrified.” Relying on adjectives, he continued, is like saying to your readers, “Please, will you do my job for me?”

## 5 Quotes

Quotes add value when they are used to record the opinions and emotions of your sources.

They should not be used to state facts that are already known or that you could say yourself. For example, in a story about natural disasters, you wouldn’t need to quote a scientist saying seismic activity along the San Andreas fault line could trigger an earthquake. Your readers already know that, so the quote would not serve any purpose. However, a quote from a seismologist saying he thinks an earthquake is imminent would add a lot to the story.

Quotes should also be used to expand on the information provided beforehand. For example:

If you wrote a sentence stating that the head of Constellation Brands is optimistic about the future, you could follow that up with a quote from the CEO, saying, “We think that we’re by far the best company in the world – or in the best position in the world of any company – to capitalize on what is absolutely without a doubt going to be a huge market over the next 10 years, hundreds of billions of dollars.”

“Quotes add emotion to a story. I don’t like reading a story that doesn’t have them,” said Roberts of the *National Post*. “Reading a story without quotes is like eating a croissant without chocolate inside. It can be good but it’s lacking something.”

## 6 Editing

It’s difficult to edit or proofread a document you have just finished writing because you’re still immersed in it. Step away from the keyboard for a few hours or a few days. When you get around to reading it over, you’re bound to catch errors or spot ways to improve the text. Once you’ve done that, ask someone else to read your work. As the old journalism adage goes, “Every writer needs an editor.”

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