

The word ‘yesterday’ is taboo in broadcasting. Nothing sounds more incongruous than a station with hourly bulletins giving a time reference that harks back 24 hours. If ‘yesterday’ or ‘last night’ have to be used, they should be kept out of the opening sentence and buried further down the story.

Similarly, phrases such as ‘*this morning*’, ‘*this afternoon*’, or ‘*this evening*’ can date copy. So, for inclusion in the 6 o’clock news, the following story would have to be rewritten:

‘The chief prosecutor for the Rwandan genocide tribunal pledged this morning to re-arrest a key suspect if he is released . . .’

The phrase ‘*pledged this morning*’, which would stand out like a sore thumb by the evening, would be replaced with the words ‘*has pledged*’. Some news editors object to prolific use of the word ‘today’ arguing that all broadcasting is about what happened today, so the word is redundant and can be omitted.

Similarly, exact times, such as, ‘*at seven minutes past twelve*’ should be rounded off to, ‘*just after midday*’, and specific times should be used only if they are essential to the story or heighten the immediacy of the coverage:

‘News just in . . . the President of Sri Lanka has been assassinated in a suicide bomb attack. The bomber struck within the past few minutes at the head of the Mayday parade in Colombo . . .’

For those listening in the small hours of the morning, references to events ‘*last night*’ can be confusing, and should be replaced with ‘*overnight*’ or ‘*during the night*’.

Time references have to be handled even more carefully when a station is broadcasting over several time zones. Canada, for example, spans seven such zones. To avoid confusion over their copy, news agencies that file stories over a wide area usually include the day of the week in brackets.

Active

News is about movement, change and action. Yet too often newswriting is reduced to the passive voice – instead of actions that produce change, we hear of changes that have occurred as a result of actions. ‘*The car smashed into the brick wall*’, becomes the limp and soft-centred, ‘*the brick wall was smashed into by the car*’.

Hickory Dickory Dock	Hickory Dickory Dock
The clock was run up by the mouse	The mouse ran up the clock
One o’clock was struck	The clock struck one
Down the mouse ran	The mouse ran down
Hickory Dickory Dock	Hickory Dickory Dock

The passive version on the left could be said to be lacking something of the snap of the original. The active voice is tighter, crisper and more concrete.

Positive

Three ways to write a stronger lead: 1. Don't start with *there is*, a dead phrase; 2. Place the emphatic word(s) of a sentence at the end (thank you, Strunk and White); 3. When you find 'after' in your lead, what comes after 'after' should usually go before 'after'. (We hear stories that start something like this: 'Mayor Filch imposed a 9 p.m. curfew on teens after students burned down Jones High School.' The big news is that the kids burned down a school, so what comes after 'after' should go before 'after': 'Students burned down Jones High School today, and Mayor Filch imposed a 9 p.m. curfew on the city's teens.')

– MERVIN BLOCK, BROADCAST NEWSWRITING COACH,
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News is about what is happening, so even what is *not* happening should be expressed in an active, positive way. '*He did not succeed*', becomes '*he failed*'; '*He was asked to move, but didn't*', becomes '*he refused to move*'; '*Plans for the hospital would not go ahead for the time being*', becomes '*Plans for the hospital have been shelved*'.

Double negatives should be unravelled; '*Doctors say it is improbable that the illness will not prove terminal*,' becomes '*Doctors admit the patient will probably die*'.

Redundancies

Redundancies are words that serve only to clutter up the copy. They should be ruthlessly eliminated:

Check out

End result

Eye witness

Period of a week, etc.

One of the worst offenders is the little word, '*that*', which can straddle the middle of a sentence like a roadblock:

*'Rugby, and New Zealand's All Blacks say **that they are** set to trounce arch-rivals Fiji in the World Sevens Series.'*

Dump '*that*' and contract '*they are*'. It slips off the tongue much more smoothly: '*The All-Blacks say they're set to trounce . . .*'

Like *that*, *the* can also be a pain. To be extreme about them both:

*'When asked about **the** possible strike action, **the** dockers' leaders said **that** they hoped **that** would not be necessary.'*

Now read the sentence again and leave out the words in bold.

Every word should earn its place in the copy. Newswriting is too streamlined to carry any passengers. Modifiers such as *'very'*, *'quite'* and *'almost'* are excess baggage and should invariably be dumped.

Repetition

'The obvious is better than the obvious avoidance of it'

– FOWLER'S MODERN ENGLISH USAGE

Unnecessary repetition of words can jar the ear and should be avoided, but if no alternative can be found, and if it *sounds* right, then don't be afraid to repeat. No one has yet come up with a way of avoiding saying 'fire' in a story about a . . . well, a conflagration, without sounding absurd. Common practice is to alternate the words 'fire' and 'blaze' (if indeed it is big enough to be a 'blaze'!).

Where a *proposal* is involved, alternatives such as *scheme*, *plan*, *project* or *programme* may be used.

Homonyms

Homonyms are words that sound like others with different meanings:

Bare	and	Bear
Blight	and	Plight
Might	and	Might
Ate	and	Eight
Billion	and	Million
Fatal	and	Facial

Mishearing 'facial injuries' for 'fatal injuries' in a story about an accident could cause increased and unnecessary concern for relatives. Usually the context will make the meaning of the word clear, but beware of baffling the listener.

Singular or plural?

Should it be the Government *says* or the Government *say*? Opinions differ and many newsrooms settle the issue by writing whatever sounds right to the ear. The trouble starts when inconsistencies creep into the copy:

'The Conservative party says its policies will defend Britain's position in Europe. The Tories want an end to what they describe as "European meddling" in Britain's affairs.'

'The Conservative party says', and *'Tories say'* may both sound right individually, but they do not sound right together. Journalists must make up their own mind.