

~~I set forth here last~~Last week ~~what~~ I said ~~were~~~~there are~~ Three Simple Rules for Better Broadcast Writing. And yes, they *are* simple. No rule has more than ten words. Each rule is straightforward. Each is easy to understand.

I also said the simplicity was deceptive.

The deception comes not in *learning* the rules, but rather in ~~adhering~~~~sticking~~ to them. Unlike novelists, who ~~have nothing but answer only to~~ the demands of the marketplace ~~to answer to~~, journalists have strict deadlines. Miss a deadline and ~~you'll~~~~you~~ quickly ~~find yourself~~~~become~~ a *former* journalist ~~regardless of whether your chosen platform is print, broadcast, or online. It's. Given the pressure, it's~~ a wonder ~~on~~ many stories ~~that it comes~~~~even come~~ out in prose! So how can you be expected to crank out literature under that kind of time constraint?

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I wrestled with this when I was trying to improve my own writing, and I developed a technique I still revert to ~~even now. When I thought the process through, I came to the conclusion that prose. Prose~~ gets its polish from being reworked. But ~~when~~ in the ~~hot~~ pursuit of a story ~~that couldn't miss its slot,~~ was I ever ~~really~~ going to get the time to rework it? ~~That's a luxury magazine writers get, but daily reporters don't.~~

The broadcast correspondent Charles Jaco, a friend of mine for decades, wrote a few novels in the 1990s. I asked him if he enjoyed ~~the task of~~ writing, and he said, he did, very much. ~~I fell silent in the conversation, and he~~He told me I hadn't asked him the right question. ~~The right question, he said,~~ ~~which~~ was how he liked rewriting, and he hated *that*.

We all hate rewriting, ~~I suspect~~, but it's what puts the meat on the story's bones. It's what makes simple sentences sing. It's what ~~puts the shine on an otherwise murky~~~~makes mundane~~ script ~~shine~~. Still, there was no way in the rough and tumble of a broadcast day that I was going to find the time to go over a story a second or third time. And there just wasn't anyone else who could edit my stuff for me—not that there wasn't anyone *good* enough, just that there was no one who wasn't already working at capacity.

In the spirit of self-improvement, I decided to devise my own system for improving my writing. I started rewriting my own copy, sometimes in the newsroom and sometimes at home. It took me no more than an hour a week, much of it time squeezed ~~out off from~~ other things and some of it shoe-horned into odd lulls in my work day. Some people do the crossword puzzle over coffee. I often did copy-editing with my caffeine.

My process was pretty regimented.

- First, I'd work on stories that were several days old. The reason is that I wanted to get enough distance from them so that I wasn't wrestling with me, just with some mangled words.
- Second, it wasn't enough to re-read a script and mentally work through a rewrite. I forced myself to use a pencil or, even better, a red pen to strike through words, rearrange phrases, and reorder sentences.

- Third, I was ruthless. It was old news, so it really didn't matter what it looked like when I got finished with it.

From my first pass through my past prose, my writing improved. Phrases that were close but not quite there, got there easily. I had a field day substituting the right word for what Mark Twain called "its second-cousin." Structure that seemed like a good bet at first could almost always be improved.

~~So I was getting there—improving my writing and saw myself polishing it.~~ But I really wasn't—~~was merely fixing old news. It's not like I could cut new stories with my improved scripts. In essence, improving it.~~ I was rewriting old news. My marked-up scripts weren't ~~enough~~ even good for wrapping fish!

But I noticed something was starting to change in the way I wrote my deadline stuff. Chronic errors I ~~was had been~~ making started to get less chronic. I was ~~automatically~~ cutting words before I put phrases on paper, ~~selecting better~~ picking more precise nouns and verbs and using fewer modifiers, and getting cleaner, shorter sentences.

It took me awhile to figure out what ~~had happened, but I finally concluded that the~~ was happening. The effort I put into crossing things out, moving them to different places ~~in the story~~, and reworking my words had made me more aware of what was going into my stories before it went in. The time I spent wrestling with past scripts trained me for what to do in future scripts.

Was the hour a week I invested in my writing the most onerous thing I've had to do in 35 years in news? Not by a long shot! (The weekend overnight assignment desk will probably bear that torch for the rest of my life.)

After seeing my writing improve over six months, I figured if I wasn't already ~~teat~~ the Pearly Gates Altar of Prose, I was pretty close. I slacked off the rewriting exercises. Soon, my writing slacked off. So I went back to sporadic rewrite sessions, and I've maintained them ever since. Some years ago, when I was asked to come up with rules for good writing, Solitary Script Rewriting became number four on my list.

It's such an important exercise that I even put this through the rewrite wringer. Have a look here at how it improved.