

LITERARY FORENSICS

A diagnostic tool for writers and editors

READING YOUR OWN WRITING is like looking in the mirror: You can't see yourself as others see you. You are blind to your comeliest curves; you blink past your literary cellulite.

All writers have trademark quirks—things they do with little awareness. They are the writer's version of an athlete's "muscle memory"—patterns that can be great strengths or chronic weaknesses.

A simple diagnostic tool can help identify those writing patterns so you can focus on strengths and start to overcome weaknesses. It can help writers and editors get to the bones or structure or interior of writing, to understand it and to strengthen it.

(The same tool can be used to increase accuracy, use numbers effectively or address other issues of writing clarity.)

WHAT YOU NEED:

Highlighter pens. (Bold, distinct colors are best.)

Hard-copy printouts of a writer's unedited copy. (Preferably in narrow column format.)

A working knowledge of grammar and syntax. (Don't worry; you don't need the lingo.)

An hour to set aside every couple of weeks or month. (This is a marathon, not a sprint.)

HOW IT WORKS:

PRINT OUT three pieces of a writer's unedited copy, preferably in narrow column format similar to a newspaper or magazine column. (We don't ask readers to read full-screen WORD documents; we shouldn't read ourselves that way. People SEE writing. They don't just read it.)

SELECT ONE COMPONENT OF WRITING (ex: verbs, adjectives, attribution. See attached sheet.).

Go through the three stories as fast as you can and highlight the chosen component wherever it shows up. (Do this without judgment. This isn't about good or bad; it's about identifying patterns or habits.)

STUDY THE COLORED HIGHLIGHTS. Does a pattern appear? Consistent use of active verbs?

Tons of passive verbs? Multiple prepositional phrases per sentence? Most graphs start with a dependent clause? Attribution tend to start paragraphs or sentences?

STUDY THE COLORS AGAIN. What affect does a writing pattern have on the effectiveness of the overall piece? Do dependent clauses add needed information—or slow stories down? Do quotes get to the essence of voice or emotion—or run on without adding anything to the story?

NOTE TO WRITERS: Once you see the colored marks on the printed page, your mind will see them when you next write on the computer. Don't overreact or get too self-conscious; it will paralyze you at the keyboard. Write your first draft as you've always done. Then, just before you hit the SEND button (or while an editor has your story but before it goes to press), read through your draft with the highlighter marks flashing in your mind's eye. Rewrite accordingly. Over time you will internalize what the highlighters reveal, and will gain that muscle for early drafts.

NOTE TO EDITORS: Understanding writers' individual patterns helps you know what to focus on when stories come. It gives you editing language that is specific and constructive rather than judgmental. It gives you tools to help stories get better in the moment and writers get better over time.

NOTE TO BOTH: This is an effective accuracy tool. Print your story out, move away from your usual writing desk, and highlight every name, age, fact, address, number, etc. Study the highlights and double-check their accuracy.

~*Jacqui Banaszynski*~

Knight Chair Professor ~ Missouri School of Journalism

Faculty Fellow ~ The Poynter Institute

DIAGNOSTIC WRITING COMPONENTS

You don't need to be a grammarian to have a working knowledge of language. Naming the components of speech—subjunctives, intransitives, conditionals—isn't as important as having a core understanding of how language works or doesn't, and a shared language for communicating that to others.

As you apply the diagnostic tool to copy, here is a starter set of writing components:

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Start with fundamental but specific writing components:

- Verbs (active, passive, linking. Or simply: action and non-action)
- Adjectives
- Adverbs (especially -ly adverbs)
- Prepositional phrases
- Pronouns (especially non-specific pronouns)
- Dependent clauses
- Conjunctions

Add writing components specific to journalism:

- Ledes
- Nut grafs
- Attribution
- Quotes
- Transitions

As you get more sophisticated, move to the components of literary writing:

- Telling detail
- Parallel construction
- Metaphor, simile, analogy
- Description
- Characterization
- Scene
- Foreshadow
- Pacing

Or add components specific to a particular genre of writing:

- Numbers
- Jargon
- Legal language
- Explanatory terms
- Titles

That list is not all-inclusive. It can grow with time, and be fitted to the particular writer or writing genre. But it does require writers and editors to get back in touch with the fundamental components of writing, to understand the impact of individual writing components and to develop shared language.

© *Jacqui Banaszynski*
Professor Emerita ~ Missouri School of Journalism
Faculty Fellow ~ The Poynter Institute
1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing
1986 Pulitzer Prize finalist in international reporting