

February 2020 Volume 2 Issue 2



Tell Your Story Newsletter (TYSN):

Specializing in Entrepreneurial and Organizational Storytelling

Let me tell your story!

Welcome Mid-February 2020!

As I prepare this issue of "Tell Your Story Newsletter," our roughly three weeks of blissfully mild weather have given way to a new (but brief) deep freeze. But neighbours and colleagues say "We've got this! It's late winter in SK--and we got through January!" The lengthening of the daylight hours helps to boost our energy and moods.

In this month's newsletter, I take a creative refresher, by following a mentor's advice to revisit every non-fiction writer's Bible, *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White.

And in "Storytellers' Corner," I cite Bryan Garner's explanation of "copywriter" and "copyrighter," that some of the Saskatchewanians I meet don't understand!

In "Shop News," I update you on some aspects of "working *on* one's business" (and not only "in it") from bookkeeping to special events.

May the best of winter--the warmth (physical and emotional) that can be cultivated indoors by sharing conversation, ideas and even food--be with you, good readers, as winter gradually recedes.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth

**Principal
Storytelling Communications** www.elizabethshih.com

Article One: On writing better, with Michael Robin

One of the perils of editing academic texts (essays, articles, theses and dissertations) is that the density and length of the texts I edit and their abstract language seep into other, non-academic, writing that I do.

During a lunch-time discussion last week with science writer and mentor, Michael Robin, I was reminded that some “back-to-basics” review would lift my own thinking out of the murky space of dangling modifiers, nouns-as-modifiers, circular reasoning, and so on.

The Elements of Style, written in 1919 and published for mainstream readers in April 16, 1959, remains the Bible of journalists and business writers, world-wide. Although I have owned a copy since high school, I had not read it in years and couldn’t find where I’d stored it. E.B. White wrote decades after it was first published that the book he revised and enhanced from the manuscript by William Strunk Jr. (his friend and former English professor at Cornell) “still seems to maintain its original poise, standing in a drafty time erect, resolute and assured.”

And today’s digitally noisy landscape is an even “draftier” time than the one White observed.

While reviewing some fundamentals of good writing that still transform any non-fiction (be it academic writing, copywriting, journalism or business writing), I offer a few highlights that are refreshing to read. Here they are:

- (1) Use the active voice (even if you are transcribing something from a conference talk or other event that has passed). Why? The active voice is "more direct and vigorous" than the passive. So "I appreciate your hard work" is stronger than "your hard work is appreciated by me."
- (2) Stay in the present tense consistently in the body of your document. Again, the present tense sounds more powerful; and slipping between tenses will only confuse your reader.
- (3) Aim for ABC: Accuracy, Brevity and Clarity. “Omit needless words!” Strunk says. While it sounds easy, the results can be huge.

(4) Be your own ruthless editor, asking yourself, "do these words advance the story? If not, cut!" As Michael reminded me, Strunk and White's "Rule 17" is perhaps the volume's greatest prescription to writers, everywhere:

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the write make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

(Cont'd from Article One):

I would be annoyed to find a vacuum cleaner with unneeded attachments, or a PC with extra hardware! But I know I sometimes leave "extra" words in copy that I've written or edited, myself.

Strunk and White illustrate the point with examples like these:

Before:

After:

the question as to whether

whether (the question whether)

there is no doubt but that

no doubt (doubtless)

used for fuel purposes

used for fuel

he is a man who

he

in a hasty manner

hastily

this is a subject which

this subject

His story is a strange one

His story is strange

owing to the fact that

since (because)

in spite of the fact that

though (although)

call your attention to the fact that

remind you (notify you)

I was unaware of the fact that

I was unaware that (did not know)

the fact that he had not succeeded

his failure

the fact that I had arrived

my arrival

(5) Strunk also warns against splitting one sentence into two, saying “a common violation of concision is the presentation of a single complex idea, step by step, in a series of sentences which might to advantage be combined in one.” Writers often use periods when commas are better. An example of that error is this: "She was an interesting talker. A woman who had travelled all over the world and lived in half a dozen countries."

One sign that *The Elements of Style* continues to be relevant is that many of the book's readers cite its insights online, including this popular sample that was uploaded on the “Genius” website (www.genius.com):

Before (55 words):

Macbeth was very ambitious. This led him to wish to become king of Scotland. The witches told him that this wish of his would come true. The king of Scotland at this time was Duncan. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth murdered Duncan. He was thus enabled to succeed Duncan as king.

After (26 words):

Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth achieved his ambition and realized the prediction of the witches by murdering Duncan and becoming king of Scotland in his place.

While I'm won't close the drawer on my editor's pencils altogether, listening to Michael's advice and revisiting this classic primer has refreshed my state of mind--for the better. Even thinking about some of the technical parts of writing or other creative activity can clear cobwebs from one's mind.

And I fully expect to revisit Strunk and White when editing documents, too.

And now it's your turn: Do you find reviewing pointers from The Elements of Style or other classic primers helpful? Please share—I'd be delighted to extend this conversation.

STORYTELLER's CORNER

STORYTELLER'S CORNER: Words, Stories and Riddles on Writing and Editing .

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This month:

The case of "copywriter" and "copyrighter," with Bryan Garner

American word specialist Bryan Garner reminds us of the essential difference between the terms "copywriter" and "copyrighter."

A "copywriter," he says, "is a person who writes copy, especially for advertisements and public relations." One could add that copywriters write marketing and communications documents of many kinds, whether in-house for companies or as freelancers.

By contrast, "A *copyrighter* is a person who obtains or owns the copyright to an expressive creation." That person is a copyright owner or copyright holder, which has nothing to do with marketing and communications copy.

Garner cites this example of the confusion from the "Providence Journal" (Feb 28, 2001): "About a dozen people turned out. One of them was Robert Montecalvo, a 63-year-old advertising copyrighter."

SHOP NEWS:

Special thanks this week to Heather Stuart and the team at NSILC, who have provided helpful support as I prepare for another tax season. As in the past, I find that having a shrewd bookkeeper can make a great difference to the administration of freelancing.

Equally special thanks go out to Michael Robin for generously sharing his insights on freelance journalism with me. After years of knowing of Michael's work, it was a great pleasure to meet him and share conversation, in-person. Thank you, Michael!

February 27th is the date of the annual Raj Manek Memorial Banquet, at Prairieland Park. I urge anyone interested in entrepreneurship in the province to join us on that special evening. The program features keynote speaker, [Janet Podleski](#), author of four bestselling cookbooks and host of a Food Network Canada TV show, "Eat, Shrink & Be Merry." Many thanks to Kanchan Manek for organizing and overseeing both these major events and the monthly mentoring seminars

And I'm grateful to mentor Monica Kreuger for her interest in working with me, for another year.

The Raj Manek Mentorship Program Peer-to-Peer group that started in 2019 similarly challenges each of us: Members Megan Kent of "[Little Ox Film Company](#)," Melissa Daschuk of [SaskValley Refrigeration](#) and Giuseppe Almeida of [Safe and Sound Exteriors](#) function as each others' accountability partners. We also appreciated the involvement of our graduating member, Michelle Donald of [Donald Physiotherapy](#) whose success story inspires us all.

And thank you to my inspiring friends at my local gym who make our daily toil there more manageable. Who knew that changing the station from The Sports' Network (TSN)

to CBC Newsworld would improve our motivation, by distracting us from the clock (tick-tock!)

I'm also delighted to reprise my business communication seminars at the [Praxis School of Entrepreneurship](#) next week. I look forward to showing a fresh group of entrepreneurs-in-training on how to write their own marketing and communication materials.

ABOUT US:

Between 2011 and December 2018, "Elizabeth Shih Communications" told the stories of B2B marketing and communications on the Prairies and across the country.

Effective January 1, 2019, I rebranded as "[Storytelling Communications](#)." I help small- and medium-sized businesses close more sales by communicating more effectively; I help Canadian newcomers land better jobs, ethically; and I write the legacy stories of major companies.

Interested in learning more? Please contact me through my CASL-compliant website (www.elizabethshih.com).

After I receive your message, I'll be pleased to discuss projects with you!

Please visit my website for more information (www.storytellingcommunications.ca).

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Thank you for reading! Stay tuned for the March 2020 issue of "Tell Your Story Newsletter," with a shorter format to come!