



Randy Hines

editing tips

Provide Writing Tips for Freelancers

By Randy Hines

With fewer hands on deck at many SNPA papers, you might be relying on freelancers, bloggers and even public relations writers to help supply a little bit of the copy you need. That may sound heretical to many veteran journalists, but it is part of the media landscape.

Since these writers will be clogging your e-mail with various contributions, one thing that will make your job (and theirs) that much easier will be to provide needed training on the basics of writing for a print publication. Much of their writing now is probably driving you crazy, as it does many other editors. The national rejection rate for news releases has averaged 90 percent. With shrinking newsholes, that number will go higher – and waste more of your time – unless you provide guidance.

A magazine editor I'm quoting in my next writing text is really down about the quality of releases he regularly receives. "Some of the prose is so bad, it makes the average employee publication editor look like Will Shakespeare."

William Baer, Philadelphia Daily News political columnist, was just as blunt about the garbage he's received. "As a 30-year practitioner who's thrown away (unread) a forest or two worth of press releases (just call me Forest Dump), I'd say PR folks need to keep the following in mind:

- "Mostly, we don't care.
- "When we do care, we want facts – not whatever drivel your CEO or executive director wants put in quotes.
- "These facts are best presented on one page, with clear, non-lingo language and contacts able to discuss them further."

Since many of these outside writers have never had Journalism 101, you may wish to start with the basics. Magazines have provided writer's guidelines for contributors for decades. Now they're conveniently packaged on their Web sites. Does your paper have a similar collection of tips for contributors? What to include for such training will be discussed next month.

Former journalist and Southerner Randy Hines is a professor at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania. His latest book is "Print Matters: How to Write Great Advertising" (www.racombooks.com) with Bob Lauterborn, James L. Knight Chair of Advertising at UNC-Chapel Hill. He can be reached at randyhinesapr@yahoo.com

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