TO WRITE WELL, FORGET EVERYTHING YOUR HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER TAUGHT YOU

8 MYTHS, 8 RULES

Jonathan Rick
MYTH 1: WRITING IS EASY.
“Writing is easy. I just sit in front of my typewriter and wait for drops of blood to fall from my forehead onto the page.”

—Red Smith
“I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.”

—Flannery O’Connor
MYTH 2: I WAS ALWAYS TAUGHT...
...NEVER TO SPLIT AN INFINITIVE.
THIS?
To Go Boldly

OR THIS?
To Boldly Go
...NEVER TO END A SENTENCE WITH A PREPOSITION.
“This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.”

—Winston Churchill
“Style rules of this sort are, of course, somewhat a matter of individual preference, and even the established rules of grammar are open to challenge. Professor Strunk, although one of the most inflexible and choosy of men, was quick to acknowledge the fallacy of inflexibility and the danger of doctrine.

“‘It is an old observation,’ he wrote, ‘that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules.’

—E.B. White
MYTH 3:  
BY WRITING 
DENSELY, I’LL 
IMPRESS 
EVERYONE.
“With the eurozone in internal and external balance and creditor eurozone seeking internal balance via ever-larger external imbalances in the form of current-account surpluses, debtor eurozone could only attain internal balance with ever-larger external imbalances in the form of current-account deficits.”

—Martin Wolf
MYTH 4: MY READERS ARE TOO AUGUST TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE COMMON TONGUE.
THIS?

I’d like you to roll out a top-down automotive cleansing initiative, which will be incentivized with fiscal remuneration.

OR THIS?

I’ll pay you $5 to wash the car.
MYTH 5: MY SUBJECT IS TOO COMPLEX TO BE SIMPLIFIED.
“If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.”

—Albert Einstein
“Anything that can be said, can be said clearly.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein
THIS?

Our mission is to become the international leader in the space industry through maximum team-centered innovation and strategically targeted aerospace initiatives.

OR THIS?

I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.
“IT’S TOO COMPLEX”
NOMINATED FOR AN OSCAR (BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY)
“IT’S TOO DRY”
9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask

By Max Fisher  August 29, 2013  Follow @Max_Fisher

Get the WorldViews Newsletter
Daily updates delivered just for you.

FREE THE POST'S JASON REZAIAN
Jason’s been in an Iranian prison since 2014.
Join more than 150,000 others and...
9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask

The 11th Most-Popular Piece of Content on Facebook in 2013
“IT’S TOO LONG”
100 MILLION VIEWS

KONY 2012
MYTH 6: IF PEOPLE DON’T UNDERSTAND, IT’S THEIR FAULT.
“If you tasted some food that you didn’t think tasted right, you would assume that the food was wrong. But for some reason, it’s part of the human condition that if we struggle to [read] something, we assume that the problem resides with us.”

—Jony Ive
MYTH 7: MY READERS CARE ONLY ABOUT THE FACTS
“Have you heard me talk about the Paris café?”

—Jonah Peretti
MYTH 8:
A HEADLINE MUST NEVER BE CUTE.
Aberrational Behavior and the Casual Effect of Incentives

Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEADLINE</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 Truths About America’s Entitlement Programs That Will Blow Your Mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Important Tax Facts About Medical and Dental Expenses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 Facts About the 75th Secretary of the Treasury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Putin’s Fiction: 10 False Claims About Ukraine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTENT</td>
<td>HEADLINE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report, Article, Presentation</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo</td>
<td>RE:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>Subject Line</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Everything You Know About Writing Is Wrong: 10 Myths, 10 Rules

2. 10 Myths and 10 Rules of Good Business Writing

3. Everything You Need to Know About Writing

4. You Need Not Be Shakespeare to Write Well. Just Learn These 20 Myths and Rules

5. Most Business Writing Is Lousy. Here’s Why—And How to Fix It

6. To Write Well, Forget Everything Your High-School English Teacher Taught You

7. Writing Isn’t Easy, but It Can Be a Lot Easier With These 15 Easy Rules

8. If Steve Jobs Wrote As Well As He Delivered Presentations, This Would Be His Playbook
1. Everything You Know About Writing Is Wrong: 10 Myths, 10 Rules

2. 10 Myths and 10 Rules of Good Business Writing

3. Everything You Need to Know About Writing

4. You Need Not Be Shakespeare to Write Well. Just Learn These 20 Myths and Rules

5. Most Business Writing Is Lousy. Here’s Why—and How to Fix It

6. To Write Well, Forget Everything Your High-School English Teacher Taught You

7. Writing Isn’t Easy, but It Can Be a Lot Easier With These 15 Easy Rules

8. If Steve Jobs Wrote As Well As He Delivered Presentations, This Would Be His Playbook
LET'S RECAP THE MYTHS

1. Writing is _____.
2. I was always _______.
3. By writing _________, I’ll impress everyone.
4. My readers are too august to be addressed in the ________ _______.


5. My subject is too ________ to be simplified.
6. If people don’t understand, it’s ______ fault.
7. My readers care only about ______.
8. A _________ must never be cute.
Rules
RULE 1
Break up noun clusters
THIS?
The National Electric Transmission Congestion Study

OR THIS?
The Study of Congestion in National Electric Transmission
THIS?
User menu global search

OR THIS?
Global search in the user menu
RULE 2

Make every verb count
Angela **went out** to the street, looking for help.
Angela went out to the street, looking for help.

Angela sprinted out to the street, screaming for help.
Angela went out to the street, looking for help.

Angela sprinted out to the street, screaming for help.

Angela **stumbled** out to the street, **whimpering** for help.
Angela went out to the street, looking for help.

Angela sprinted out to the street, screaming for help.

Angela stumbled out to the street, whimpering for help.

Angela strolled out to the street, seeking a neighbor.
THIS?

Was responsible for organizing a gathering of peer professionals to discuss possible steps toward improving relations among diverse department entities

OR THIS?

Initiated and managed a conference of fellow IT specialists to ensure cooperation and communication across division lines
RULE 3

Embrace analogies
Foreman: We inject gadolinium into a vein. It distributes itself throughout your brain and acts as a contrast material for the magnetic resonance imager.

Cameron: Basically, whatever’s in your head lights up like a Christmas tree.
THIS?
State Farm is there.

OR THIS?
A pomelo is the largest citrus fruit. The rind is very thick but soft and easy to peel away. The resulting fruit has a light yellow to coral pink flesh and can vary from juicy to slightly dry and from seductively spicy-sweet to tangy and tart.

OR THIS?

A pomelo is basically a supersized grapefruit with a very thick and soft rind.
RULE 4

Humanize big numbers
The U.S. federal budget is about $4 trillion a year.

The U.S. federal budget is about $127,000 a second.

In one second, the federal government spends what two typical American families earn in an entire year.
A medium-sized bag of movie popcorn contains 37 grams of saturated fat. The USDA recommends that you eat no more than 20 grams of saturated fat per day.

A medium-sized bag of movie popcorn contains more artery-clogging fat than bacon and eggs for breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak with all the trimmings for dinner. Combined.
RULE 5
Surprise your readers
THIS?
Forgive and forget.

OR THIS?
Forgive and remember.
THIS?

Our treatment isn’t making him better. It’s making him worse.

OR THIS?

Our treatment isn’t making him better. It’s killing him.
RULE 6
Write the way you speak
To avert the all-too-common enactment of requirements without regard for their local cost and tax impact, the commission recommends that statewide interest should be clearly identified on any proposed mandates, and that the state should partially reimburse local government for some state imposed mandates and fully for those involving employee compensations, working conditions and pensions.

The state of New York often passes laws telling local government what to do. These laws have a name. They are called “state mandates.” On many occasions, these laws improve life for everyone in the state. But they come with a cost. Too often, the state doesn’t consider the cost to local government, or how much money taxpayers will have to shell out. So we have an idea. The state should pay back local government for some of these so-called mandates.
RULE 7
Favor contractions
THIS?
Do not wait! Our special sale will not last for long!

OR THIS?
Don’t wait! Our special sale won’t last for long!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTEAD OF THIS</th>
<th>TRY THIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>what is up</td>
<td>what’s up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it is</td>
<td>it’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that is</td>
<td>that’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not</td>
<td>don’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she is</td>
<td>she’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there is</td>
<td>there’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have</td>
<td>I’ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would</td>
<td>I’d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you will</td>
<td>you’ll</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RULEs
Avoid walls of text
THIS?

They have an outdated list of reporters/influencers, which we haven’t received yet. Today is start day, so we haven’t put anything together. Would like your suggestions. They don’t have tagline or elevator pitch. They haven’t done any PR for six years. I asked last week about their testimonials, and they said most were old, so I asked them to come up with others. We can explore Moyers. Agree on infographic. You can mention that on call. Am introducing you as a member of our team.

OR THIS?

They have an outdated list of reporters/influencers, which we haven’t received yet. Today is start day, so we haven’t put anything together. Would like your suggestions.

They don’t have tagline or elevator pitch. They haven’t done any PR for six years. I asked last week, about their testimonials; they said most were old, so I asked them to come up with others.

We can explore Moyers.

Agree on infographic. You can mention that on call.

Am introducing you as a member of our team.
THIS?

Modern product liability legal standards distinguish three categories of product defects: Manufacturing defects occur when the product departs from its intended design, regardless of the level of care exercised by the manufacturer. Design defects occur when the reasonably known risks of harm posed by the product could have been reduced or avoided by the adoption of safer commercial technologies or product alternatives. And inadequate instructions or warnings defects: occur when the reasonably known risks of product-related injuries could have been reduced or avoided by reasonable instructions, labels, or warnings.

OR THIS?

Modern product liability legal standards distinguish three categories of product defects:

1. **Manufacturing defects:** when the product departs from its intended design, regardless of the level of care exercised by the manufacturer.

2. **Design defects:** when the reasonably known risks of harm posed by the product could have been reduced or avoided by the adoption of safer commercial technologies or product alternatives.

3. **Inadequate instructions or warnings defects:** when the reasonably known risks of product-related injuries could have been reduced or avoided by reasonable instructions, labels, or warnings.
THIS?

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, paulo essent et pri, viderer oportere ut sit. Quando disputando nam ex.

Qui graeci molestiae in, cibo lucilius vim ut. Pri noluisse menandri salutandi ei, in nec utroque cotidieque. Veniam veritus detracto duo ea, ancillae moderatius has ad, eum et nihil dolor scaevola.

Ut voluptua moderatius eum, ne copiosae definitionem vis. Eirmod suscipiantur sed eu, fugit posidonium at sed. Sit id mazim impedit salutatus.

OR THIS?

LOREM

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, paulo essent et pri, viderer oportere ut sit. Quando disputando nam ex.

IPSUM

Qui graeci molestiae in, cibo lucilius vim ut. Pri noluisse menandri salutandi ei, in nec utroque cotidieque. Veniam veritus detracto duo ea, ancillae moderatius has ad, eum et nihil dolor scaevola.

DOLOR

Ut voluptua moderatius eum, ne copiosae definitionem vis. Eirmod suscipiantur sed eu, fugit posidonium at sed. Sit id mazim impedit salutatus.
**THIS?**

*Business Insider* raised $12m in March, at a $100m valuation, after *Mashable* raised $13m in January. Vox Media raised $46.5m in November, at a valuation of $380m. Automattic, the owner of WordPress.com, raised $160m in May, valuing the company at $1.16bn. And then, dwarfing all the others, Vice Media raised an eye-popping $500m, in a deal which valued the company at $2.5bn.

**OR THIS?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Capital (Millions)</th>
<th>When</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mashable</td>
<td>$13</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Insider</td>
<td>$12</td>
<td>March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automattic</td>
<td>$160</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice Media</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vox Media</td>
<td>$46.5</td>
<td>November</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AND NOW, THE RULES

1. Break up noun ____________.

2. Make every _____ count.

3. Embrace _____________.

4. ____________ big numbers.
THE RULES, CONTINUED

5. __________ your readers.

6. Write the way you ______.

7. Favor ____________________.

8. Avoid ______ of text.
Your Turn!
Piers Morgan says he’s a big fan of Aaron Sorkin’s writing. So big, in fact, that Sorkin’s latest show inspired him to infuse his own reporting with the zealotry of a convert. And yet, Morgan’s passion runs only so deep.
social/digital media

social/digital media

social / digital media
THIS?
towards

OR THIS?
toward
THIS?

He wasn’t a saint. None of us are.

OR THIS?

He wasn’t a saint. None of us is.
THIS?

This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and God.

OR THIS?

This book is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand, and God.
THIS?

Let’s write a blog in response to that op-ed.

OR THIS?

Let’s write a blog post in response to that op-ed.
THIS?

We should develop a series of strategic partnerships with environmental nonprofits.

OR THIS?

We should develop a series of partnerships with environmental nonprofits.
He earned plaudits for his management of the 2009 fiscal crisis which caused large cuts to the university’s endowment.