



# DISSEMINATING MENTAL HEALTH SCIENCE TO A WIDER AUDIENCE

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# WHAT I'M GOING TO COVER TODAY

- Review few types of public engagement but focus on op-eds
- Review basic structure of a sound argument
- Talk about ledes and news hooks
- Discuss what to write
- Share tips from famous writers
- Talk about how to pitch



# “PROFESSORS, WE NEED YOU!”



- Nicholas Kristof – wrote this op-ed in *The New York Times* in Feb. 2014:
  - Academics are marginalized by society and they marginalize themselves
  - Academic disciplines are more and more specialized and less relevant and accessible to public
  - Academics reduce their influence by solely publishing in obscure journals and talking only to one another
  - Professors don't cloister yourselves like medieval monks



# “THEY” DON’T COME TO US

- In a survey of 475 state legislators, only 27% reported that, when trying to inform their decisions on mental health policy, they sought research from universities.
- The fact that nearly three-quarters of policymakers do not get their public health information from scholars should be shocking.

Purtle, Dodson, Nelson, Meisel, & Brownson, 2018



# ONE EXEMPLARY PSYCHIATRIST WHO WRITES FOR THE PUBLIC

- Dr. Richard Friedman, a Professor at Cornell
- Regular contributor on behavior to *The New York Times*
- Written and spoken about the role of psychiatrists as experts, commentators or educators to a broad audience



# A CALL TO ARMS

- Dr. Richard Friedman said,  
“The fact is that if we do not take a more active role in presenting and explaining our field to the public, others will do it for us.”



# ANOTHER REASON WHY



- Bring more people into the fold
  - The silver tsunami or golden wave is coming.
  - Static or declining number of trainees going into geriatric psychiatry.
  - There are not enough geriatric psychiatrists now, and there will be even fewer in the future, and we need to do something to attract more trainees into our field.

**AAGP** | American Association  
for Geriatric Psychiatry

# THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO ENGAGE A PUBLIC AUDIENCE

- Op-eds
- Longer narratives
- Media interviews
- Podcasts
- Popular books
  - Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long and How Well You Live by Becca Levy
- Public lectures





# THE OP-ED PROJECT

The **OpEd** Project

- Non-profit based out of New York City
- Mission - increase range of voices and quality of ideas heard in the world
- Starting goal - increase number of women and underrepresented thought leaders in key commentary forums
- Work with top universities, foundations, non-profits, corporations & community organizations
- Connect thought leaders with media mentors

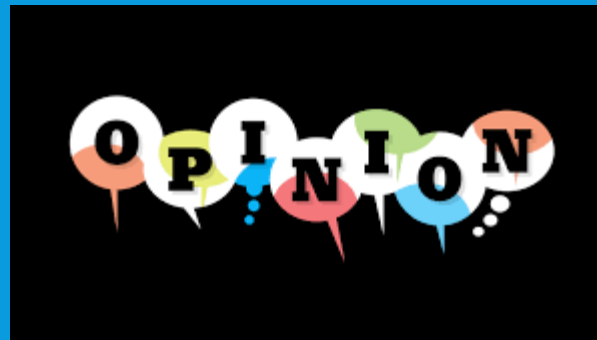


# OP-ED



# BASIC STRUCTURE OF A SOUND ARGUMENT OVERVIEW

- Lede – intro/grab attention
- Thesis – what is your position
- Argument – based on evidence; usually 2-3 points
- To be sure – preempt your critics, address counter arguments
- Conclusion



# LEDES AND NEWS HOOKS

- A “lede” grabs your readers attention.
- A “news hook” ties your ideas into the zeitgeist and makes your piece timely.
- Often a news hook and lede are coupled, but not always.
- Be bold.



# LEDES AND NEWS HOOKS EXAMPLES

- **Use the news**

- This Wednesday evening Frances Newton, 40, will be put to death for the murders of her husband and two children 18 years ago.

- **Tell a dramatic anecdote**

- Last week, I asked my father, a former prisoner of war in Vietnam, what he wanted others to know about ...



# LEDES AND NEWS HOOKS EXAMPLES



- **Reference popular culture**
- The new movie, *80 for Brady*, shows four friends embarking on a wild trip to see their hero, Tom Brady, play in the Super Bowl.
- **Turn conventional wisdom on end**
  - *Sex and the City*'s main characters are witty, glamorous, independent and sexually liberated. In short, who wouldn't want to be them? Me, for one.

# LEDES AND NEWS HOOKS EXAMPLES

- **Use wit and irony to point out a contradiction**
  - So now we know what “noble cause” Cindy Sheehan’s son died for in Iraq. It’s a good thing W stands for women, or I’d be worried.
- **Use an anniversary**
  - Fifty years after the Supreme Court banned school segregation, but the battle over the racial composition of America’s schools continues in courtrooms across the country.

# LEDES AND NEWS HOOKS EXAMPLES



- **Cite a major new study**
  - A new study shows that cognitive training, like those often found online or in mobile apps, can enhance older adults' brain power.
- **Get personal**
  - When my gay partner and I decided to get married in San Francisco last year, we had no idea our union would be so complicated ...





# THESIS

- What is your position?
- It can either be explicit or implicit.



# ARGUMENT

- Want to build an evidence-based, value-driven argument (as opposed to rhetoric)
- Evidence can come from:
  - Statistics
  - News
  - Reports from credible organizations
  - Expert quotes
  - Research
  - History
  - First-hand lived or clinical experience



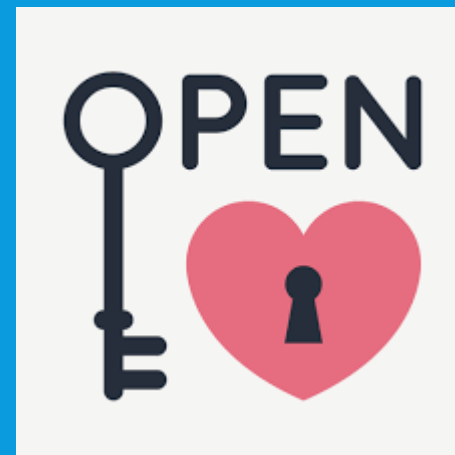
# ARGUMENT (2 OR 3 PER OP-ED)

- 1<sup>st</sup> Point
  - Evidence
  - Evidence
  - Conclusion
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Point
  - Evidence
  - Evidence
  - Conclusion
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Point
  - Evidence
  - Evidence
  - Conclusion



# ARGUMENT

- You don't need three points, just a good idea.
- There is a difference between being "right" and being effective.
- Try to say things in a way that people can hear them.



# TO BE SURE



- Pre-empt your potential critics by acknowledging opposing view
- Acknowledge any flaws in your argument
- Address any obvious counter-arguments and then effectively refute them
  - Acknowledge and dismiss
  - Validate and trump



# CONCLUSION

- Remind us once again of your point/thesis
- Often circle back to your lede



# SHARING SOME OF MY EXPERIENCES IN WRITING OP-EDS



# POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

- Make a difference in people's lives
  - Chester Bennington piece on *CNN*
- Meet interesting people, receive warm "fuzzies"
  - Walter Robinson connection, Project Media email





# POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

## Have fun

- Learn, grow
- Co-wrote pieces with friends – topics I normally wouldn't consider myself expert in
- Co-wrote pieces with friends & laughed, shared the pain of pitching/the “joy” of trolls



# NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES



- People ask me to read their stuff
- Not how I make a living; Need to spend more time writing grants, and struggled for salary support
- Others have gotten perks (e.g., Grand Rounds, secondary appointments), and I haven't
- Negative or ambiguous comments from peers and mentors
  - "Oh, I wish I had time to write!" "You didn't cite this or that," or "How are your blogs coming along?"



# I SOMETIMES WRITE ABOUT “TOUCHY” TOPICS

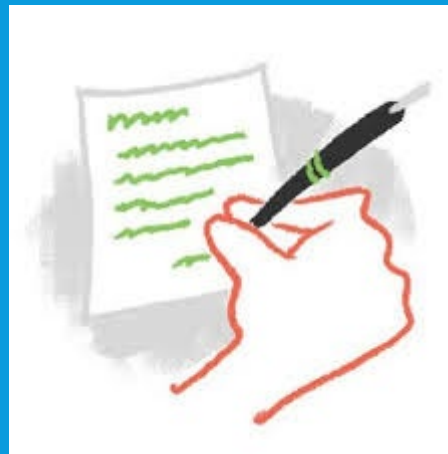


- Borrowed mantra:
  - “If you say things of consequence, there may be consequences. The alternative is to be inconsequential.”
- There have been times, I’ve been asked to write about things, and I really didn’t think I was the best person to do so.
  - The Facebook killer and why we can't always predict gun violence

# “TOUCHY” TOPICS PART TWO

- Stealthing – Is it rape?
  - I don’t know. And, what I learned is it’s okay to say that. So, I interviewed people and shared their perspectives. I’ve said, here are the nuances to the data, and here’s what I’m thinking.
- Dear Donald Trump: I treat combat veterans and they are not weak
  - A number of men and women wrote to say thank you! But, a few took my words out of context.
  - That happens! I didn’t write the piece for them. I wrote it for my veterans and for myself. It stinks that some didn’t understand what I was trying to say.

# WHAT TO WRITE



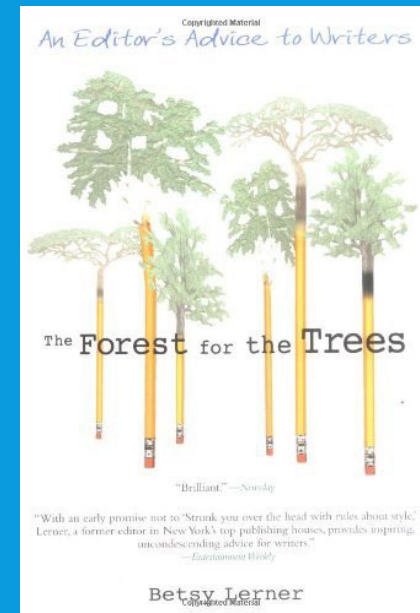
# THE MOST COMMON PIECE OF WRITING ADVICE

WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

# WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

- “Asking for advice about what you should write is a little like asking for help getting dressed. I can tell you what I think looks good, but you have to wear it. And, as every fashion victim knows, very few people look good in everything.”

Lerner, B. (2000). *The forest for the trees: An editor's advice to writers*. New York: Riverhead Books.







# WHAT DO YOU KNOW?



# WHAT YOU KNOW



- A few ways to gain a healthy perspective on your expertise:
  - Inventory your experiences, skills and knowledge
  - Consider your interests
  - Listen to the feedback of others
  - Realize that expertise is relative



# WHAT DO YOU KNOW?



- Own your expertise
  - Know what you're an expert in and why - but don't limit yourself.
- What needs doing that only you can do?



# WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

- To be successful, writers must:
  - say something better,
  - different,
  - or first.



The pieces people like best are usually those that stir debate or arouse strong feeling.

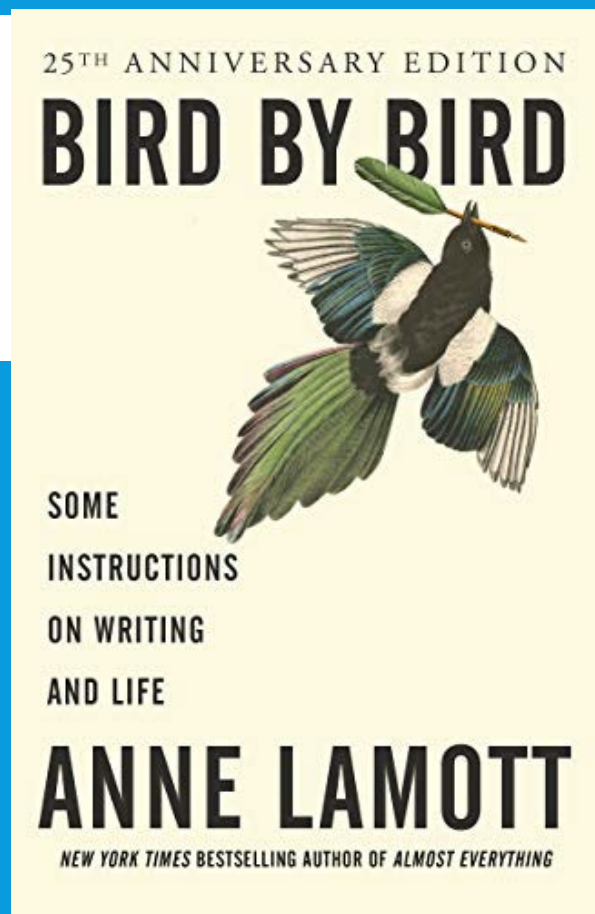


# GET STARTED

- Get one page of anything written, 300 words of memories or dreams or stream of consciousness of *the reason you want to write*.
- Very few writers really know what they're doing until they've done it.
- You don't have to see your destination
- or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see 2-3 feet ahead of you.

Lamott, A. (1994).

*Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York: Anchor Books.



# TIPS FOR OP-ED WRITING

- Stay current
  - Follow the news – both general and specific to your areas of specialty.
    - Get the table of contents to scientific journals that cover your research and interests.
  - Receive daily news updates from major news organizations.



# TIPS FOR OP-ED WRITING

- **The perfect is the enemy of the good**
  - Capitalize on the moment. Write fast. Sometimes you only have a few hours to get your piece in before the moment is gone. There will always be more you could do, but you have to remind yourself that perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor.
- **Cultivate a flexible mind**
  - Remember that a good idea may have more than one news hook. Indeed if the idea is important enough it can have many.
  - Keep an eye out for surprising connections and new news hooks – the opportunity may come around again.

# TIPS FOR OP-ED WRITING

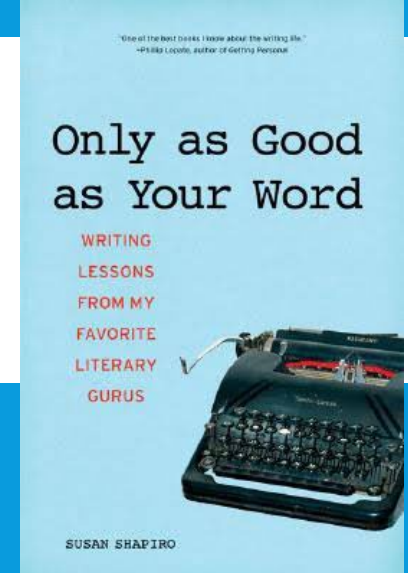


- **Use plain language**
  - Jargon serves a purpose, but not in public debate. Speak to your reader in straight talk. Conversational English.
- **Respect your reader**
  - Never underestimate your reader's intelligence, or overestimate his/her level of information.
  - Recognize that your average reader is not an expert in your topic, and that the onus is on you to capture their attention and make the argument compelling.



# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

- Editors want to find fresh talent.
- In almost all cases, editors will improve your writing.
  - Try not to take comments personally.
- Writing can always get better, especially if a smart critic told you how to refocus or recast your idea in a fresh way.



Shapiro, S. (2007). *Only as good as your word: Writing lessons from my favorite literary gurus*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.

# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

- **No never means no:**
  - It means rewrite, retitle, re-spin, add a more timely lead, and resend it to the hopefully nice editor at the next cubicle.
- Sometimes you need to cut the beginning and start in the middle where the drama/conflict/tension is.



# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

- The degree of one's perseverance is the best predictor of success.
- Some combination of ability and ego, desire and discipline produces good work.
- Rejection is a fact of writing life.
- Very few writers are catapulted into the land of publication without amassing rejection slips.

Lerner, B. (2000). *The forest for the trees: An editor's advice to writers*. New York: Riverhead Books.

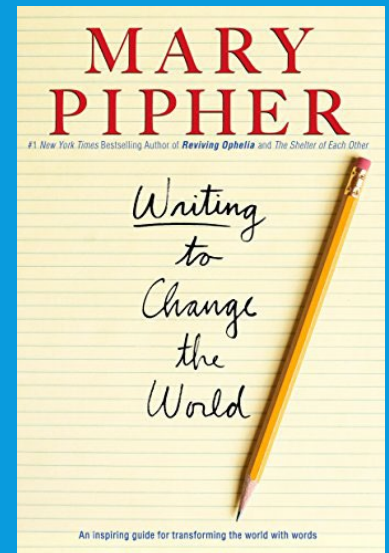
# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

- Submitting your work 50 times or revising it as many times as you have to may be what separate the sung from the unsung.
- For every person who writes a piece, there are thousands who believe they could.
- If you have great writing/communication skills, something new or necessary to say, focus, drive, and a certain amount of self-belief, then you will be heard.

# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

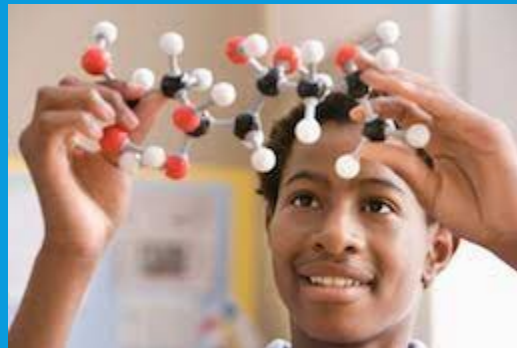
- Writing to connect is “change writing,” which like good psychotherapy, creates the conditions that allow people to be transformed.
- Psychotherapists influence one person at a time, while writers hope to reach as many readers as possible with our words.

Pipher, M. (2006). *Writing to change the world*. New York: Riverhead Books.



# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

- Writing, like every other complex craft, takes most of us years to master.
- One thing that successful writers share is their ability to tolerate defeat and soldier on.
- Present yourself as a curious student rather than a smug expert. Humility is appealing.



# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

## LAMOTT (1994)

- Writing is so often about making mistakes and feeling lost.
  - Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts.
  - Allow yourself to have “crappy” drafts.
  - Find someone to read your drafts.
- Know that there are so many good stories out there waiting to be told in a fresh new way.
- You don't always have to chop with the sword of truth. You can point with it too.



# HOW TO PITCH





# HOW TO PITCH



- How do you get someone to listen to you in the first place?
- You need to:
  - Establish credibility
  - Capture interest, and
  - Convey the immediate relevance of your point of view – quickly and decisively
- Pitching can happen in lots of ways, but very often it is done by email.

# HOW TO PITCH



- An effective email pitch answers these basic questions:
  - Why now?
  - What's the news hook?
  - Why is this worth reading at this moment?
  - So what? Why should people care?
  - Why me? Why am I the best one to write this piece?

# HOW TO PITCH

- A pitch should also include:
  - Your idea in a few lines
  - Your credentials – only those that are relevant
  - The finished piece pasted below your pitch
  - Your contact information



# HOW TO PITCH

Aspects of a successful pitch:

- Timely
- Well written
- Brief and clear
- Conveys expertise
- Unexpected point of view



# AN OLD PITCH OF MINE

I'm a psychologist and Professor at Yale School of Medicine. For the past 20 years, I've been researching traumatic stress and clinically treating a range of trauma survivors -- combat veterans, men and women who have been physically and sexually assaulted, and people who escaped the former World Trade Center towers on 9/11.

Over the past few years, I've written op-eds for places like *CNN*, *The Hill*, and *USA Today*, and was a regular contributor to *TIME Ideas* and *Newsweek*.

# A PITCH OF MINE

Pasted below please find a submission on how there is better awareness of the effects of traumatic events but some bad information online. I suspect the world is experiencing an uptick in online searches since the increase in school shootings.

Thank you for your consideration,  
Joan

Signature line

# FOLLOW UP TO A PITCH: IF THE EDITOR RESPONDS

- Thank the editor.
  - Even if they said “no.” Remember that “no” can be the beginning of a conversation that can eventually lead to “yes.”
- If they published you, thank them for giving space to the ideas and issues.



# FOLLOW UP: IF YOU DON'T RECEIVE A RESPONSE

- Have a time limit
  - If your idea has a very short shelf life, you might give an editor a day or less to respond.
  - If its evergreen, a week or two is good.
- Send a follow-up email
  - Saying that you'd still like them to run your piece in their publication, but since the piece is timely, if you don't hear from them by the end of the day (week, whatever) you'll assume they've passed, and you'll submit elsewhere.



# FINAL PITCHING NOTE

- Most national newspapers will not consider your piece if you submit to more than one place at the same time.



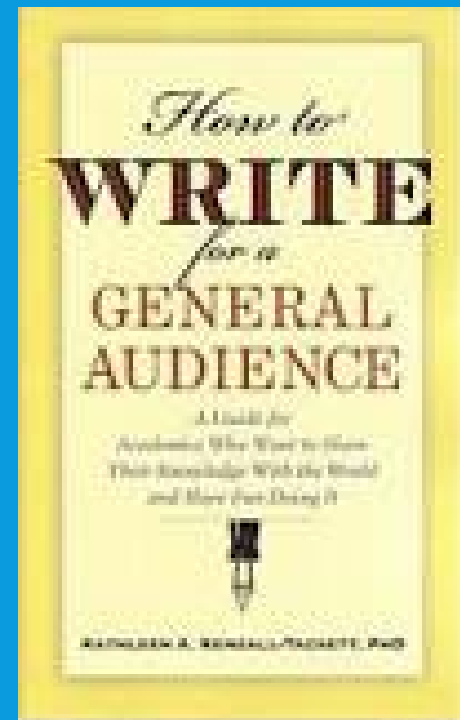
# HOW TO WRITE FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE

- Read and review the journals, books or magazines in which you want to publish.
- Learn what the editor wants and the style their writers use, and follow their lead.

Kendall-Tackett, K. A. (2007).

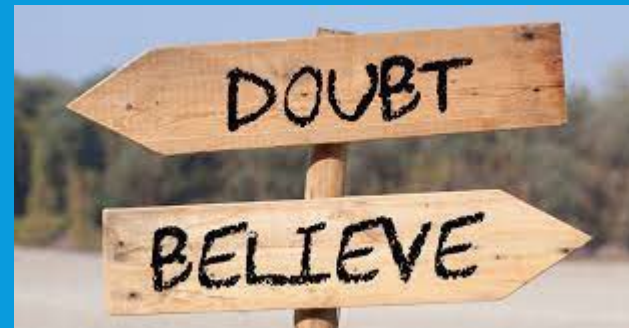
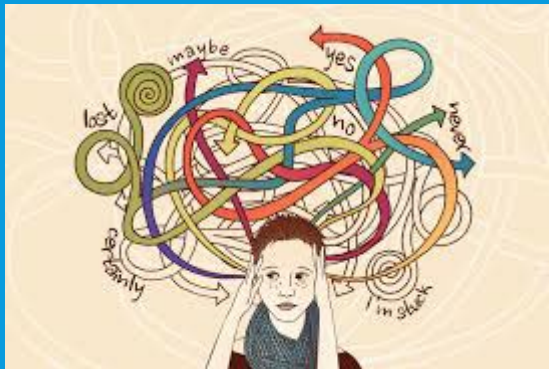
*How to write for a general audience:*

*A guide for academics who want to share their knowledge with the world and have fun doing it.* American Psychological Association.



# WRITING FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE

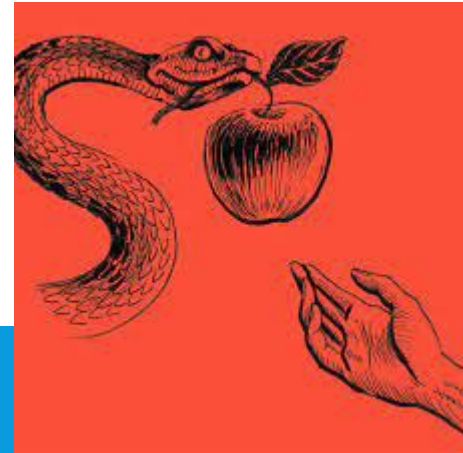
- Try to read widely in fields outside your immediate area of interest. You will be amazed at the number of ideas you generate.
- Most writers are afflicted with doubts about their writing abilities at some point in the process.



# SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF ACADEMIC WRITERS

1. Passive voice
2. Jargon
3. Abstractions
4. Noun pile ups – Cut the number of nouns you use or at least make them concrete
5. Weak voice construction – Turn your nouns into verbs
  - She made a suggestion to she suggested
  - That was his intention all along to he intended that from the beginning.

# SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF ACADEMIC WRITERS



## 6. Too many words

- Professional writers average 15 words per sentence
- Omit needless words – reduce the quantity of words and then try to improve the quality of words that remain.

## 7. Too many syllables

- The higher the mean number of syllables, the higher the reading level; Use simpler words.

# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS

- Tell stories about real events while using techniques like characterization, suspense and surprise.
- Write as you speak.
- Vary sentence and word length –
  - Generally write shorter sentence but throw in a long one now and then.
- People have a natural affinity for stories.

# TIPS FROM FAMOUS WRITERS



- The first thing editors hate is when academic writers go over word or page limits.
- An academic title presents you with two distinct disadvantages:
  - Editors are concerned that you can write in an accessible level for their publication
  - Academics disregard for deadlines.
- If you knock on enough doors, eventually one will open.

A graphic with a yellow and blue background. The text "OUR WORLD NEEDS" is at the top in blue, bold, sans-serif font. Below it, the letters "Y" and "U" are also in blue, bold, sans-serif font, separated by a cluster of colorful bubbles in shades of blue, orange, and white. The background features a gradient from yellow to blue with some faint, larger bubbles.

OUR WORLD NEEDS  
Y U

Please share with a wide audience.

If you have any questions or comments,  
please feel free to contact me:

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