

The Write Stuff

by Kathy Kern

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Volume 1

Issue 1

June 3, 2002

Editor's note: As I promised (or threatened, depending on how you took it), I will be putting out an e-newsletter once a month to discuss issues of style, grammar and punctuation that come up as I edit releases that come in from the field. You will probably notice that at times I commit in these newsletters the same stylistic sins that I bring to your attention from the releases and updates. You are welcome to point out these mistakes.

When I am on assignment, I submit my writing to the team for editing just like everyone else does. Editing another's work is always easier than editing one's own. However, the fact that I goof up occasionally does not mean that the writing principle at issue is invalid. It just means that we are all human and we all make mistakes. I also want to clarify that the natural way you write to friends and family and the natural way you speak is not wrong just because it does not conform to Standard Edited American English (or the "white male supremacist dialect" as one of my old professors called it.) Sometimes the use of your native dialect is more appropriate than using SEAE. However, releases for CPTnet should generally be "transparent," i.e., should communicate information so easily that your writing becomes invisible. Anytime that your writing makes more of or as much of an impression on the reader than the information in the release, the information becomes less reliable to the reader. Using Standard Edited American English will help the information in your releases stand out instead of your writing.

In this premier issue of "The Write Stuff," we will discuss use of passive voice and use of the semicolon.

PASSIVE VOICE: WHY IT IS BAD, BAD, BAD

"Mistakes were made." "Thousands of Afghan civilians were killed in the bombing."

If for no other reason, writers should avoid using passive voice because it is the preferred mode of communication by The Man, or The Domination System (or whatever you choose to call it.) By using passive voice, the Powers that Be avoid taking responsibility for their actions." The U.S. and British militaries killed thousands of civilians when they

bombed Afghanistan" gives a more accurate and more powerful account of what happened.

When writing releases and updates, you should use passive voice only when you really do not know who or what caused something to happen. For example, "People in the village found the body of a woman who had been shot in the head floating in the river" is appropriate if you really do not know who shot the woman. If you assume, in the case of those working in Colombia, that paramilitaries killed the woman, you can add, "The people in the village told CPTers that they assumed paramilitaries killed the woman because. . ."

If you know that soldiers, guerillas, settlers, paramilitaries etc. attacked someone, say so. Do not say that the victims "were attacked." Doing so lets the attackers off the hook. I always change passive voice to active unless the active voice would sound awkward when I edit your releases. I also sometimes let a single usage of the passive voice slide if it sounds natural in the context of the piece. You should allow yourself no more than two sentences in the passive voice in any given release. More passive voice than that will make your writing seem stilted and awkward.

USING SEMICOLONS WITHOUT A LICENSE

You should use semicolons only when you have two clauses that are "grammatically complete," as Strunk and White say.* That is, the two joined clauses would stand on their own as sentences. For example: "She can't walk through that mob by herself; the settlers will kill her." I would estimate that about 75% of the semicolons that appear in the releases I change to periods, i.e., I make the two clauses into two separate sentences. I know this sounds elitist, but you should avoid using semicolons if you haven't done a whole lot of writing for a good many years. Knowing when to use them requires a degree of subtlety that most beginning writers do not have. It is always correct to write two complete sentences, even when the thoughts are closely related, so I would suggest that you do so if you find yourself wondering whether a semicolon would be appropriate.

*William Strunk and E.B. White *The Elements of Style* Third ed. (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1979) pp. 5-7. If you can put your hands on one these books do so.

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Volume 1
Issue 2
July ', 2002

Greetings and salutations from Webster, New York! I just returned from a speaking tour of Ohio, and since I know you have been waiting breathlessly for the next issue of The Write Stuff, I have selflessly put aside my unpacking to get issue #2 out. In this issue, I will cover shifts in tone as well as providing some exercises in changing passive voice to active.

We will begin with the latter item. Blame Kryss Chupp, because she suggested giving samples of sentences in passive voice and asking you to transform them into active. It's called experiential learning, and moreover, it's good, clean fun! Below are some sentences from Hebron and Colombia updates written in passive voice. You have three minutes to change them into active. Ready? Begin.

- 1) "When the group returned, they were detained by two Israeli soldiers at the Ibrahimi Mosque/ Cave of Machpela, refusing to let them walk the additional 50 meters to their house because it was curfew.
- 2) "At 5:00 am, curfew was declared."
- 3) "Civilians who do not wish to support armed groups may be threatened at armed groups' checkpoints for any number reasons . . ."
- 4) "Villagers reported that high school end-of-the- year examinations were interrupted by the Israeli army, who claimed they were seeking a militant student."
- 5) The following sentence is a tricky one. You will notice that I left it in passive voice when I edited the Colombia Update: June 22-30 , because the rest of the update was almost entirely in active voice, and a little passive voice, especially when it does not obscure the perpetrator, is not bad. However, there is an active voice option. (Hint: use "whom.")

"Due to lack of personnel, CPT turned down a request from a long-time contact of the team who wanted accompaniment to the funeral of a friend who was recently assassinated by paramilitaries."

Put down your pencils and turn your papers over. Remain in your seats until the proctor collects your tests.

SHIFTS IN TONE

The different types of releases that appear on CPTnet fall into, roughly, three categories: updates, press releases and reflection pieces. All three types can be effective communicators of the realities that CPTers witness on the ground. Updates are always written in third person (he, she, him, her, they, them, etc.) and past tense. Cole Arendt and I created the updates in 1996 to accommodate pieces of news and conversations that did not merit full releases. Since that time, they have become the most effective way to communicate the daily activities of the teams and their co-workers. Releases generally follow the standard journalistic pattern: Who, what, when, where and how should appear in the lead sentence. They should be free of opinionated statements (e.g., "The workers said they do not feel leaving the country is an appropriate action to solve these problems," instead of "Understandably, they do not feel this is the appropriate action to solve these problems.") Reflection pieces often (but not always) appear in first person and allow the writer to explain how he or she feels about events. Some CPTers, notably Dianne Roe and Bob Holmes, excel at this type of writing and manage to communicate the facts of an event, express opinions and draw the reader in to reflect on the events and opinions described.

As I said above, all three of these forms are legitimate. The problem comes when people mix genres, which causes shifts in tone. The most typical example involves people making reflective comments in what starts out as a press release. Bob Holmes has generously given permission for me to use one of his June releases as an example. Can you spot the shift in tone? (Hints are at the end.)

One Day It Will Be Better

by Bob Holmes

6 June 2002

On Sunday 2 June 2002, a CPT Delegation took part in a public witness, drawing attention to and denouncing the collective punishment suffered by the people of the Palestinian village Deir Izbzia just east of Ramallah. The 11 delegation members, from the US, Canada and Scotland, were led by CPTer Pieter Niemeyer (Toronto) and accompanied by CPT Hebron team members Greg Rollins (Vancouver) and Bob Holmes (Toronto)

As the taxi-van approached Deir Izbzia it was stopped by locals warning of Israeli soldiers ahead on the road. The delegation walked the last 2

For all of you who are thinking, "Gee, I'm glad I'm not Tracy," let me tell you this: I would LOVE to receive more pieces like this one from Tracy or any other CPTer, errors and all.

Why? Tracy's piece has a reasonably clear thesis: how the dog days of summer in her childhood compare to the dog days of the summer in the Opón.

She uses vivid descriptions (screaming for ice cream, the "pa pa pa" of the guns, playing horse with the children, seeing the dog's body in the log Jam) that stick with the reader. She humanizes the people she writes about, especially the young boys she played with, rather than turning them into stick figure victims. She does a great job of tying a small event, the murder of the dog, to a bigger reality, the murder of people in Barranca, as well as to the larger political picture in Colombia. I would far rather receive a piece like Tracy's than a grammatically flawless one that runs along the lines of "The team did this. Then they did that. Someone told them this. Later someone else told them that. This is an unjust and violent situation."

I can always correct flaws of grammar and style. I cannot make dull descriptions of events interesting. Some of the best releases that have appeared on CPTnet were written by people who hate to write releases. They sent me their letters that had an energy and detail far surpassing "official" releases. See some of the letters that Scott Kerr and Pierre Shantz wrote, for example, in the early days of the Colombia project.

Of course I would rather have vivid and energetic releases with a clear thesis, lots of good quotations clocking in at under 500 words. But I don't want to seem greedy.

FOR THE NEXT _WRITE STUFF_

Do you have other editing or writing questions you would like to see addressed in _THE WRITE STUFF_? Let me know. If I get a lot of questions, the next issue may appear in 2005 rather than in 2006.

SINCE 135 IS WRITTEN AS A NUMERAL, BUT MY GRAMMAR CHECKER DIDN'T LIKE IT. I THINK IT COULD HAVE BEEN CORRECT, THOUGH, WHEN WRITING A SERIES OF NUMBERS, SOME OVER 100 AND SOME UNDER, IT'S OKAY TO USE NUMERALS] who were assassinated in June.

A friend recently asked me if this time in Colombia is preparing me for something else in my future journey. In my mind's eye [CLICHE], I see the dead body of the dog floating in the river and I wonder if I am being prepared for the day when I see my first dead human body floating on the Opón. [THIS IS THE SENTENCE THAT REALLY GRABBED ME WHEN I FIRST SKIMMED TRACY'S RELEASE. IT DESERVES THE POSITION OF HONOR AS THE LAST LINE OF THE RELEASE (OR CULMINATION, AS IT WERE.)

[The dog's death symbolically reminds me that Colombia is recorded as the most violent country in the Western Hemisphere and the third worst humanitarian crisis by the United Nations.] THIS PARAGRAPH WEAKENS THE PREVIOUS SENTENCE. THE REFERENCE TO COLOMBIA AS A WHOLE SHOULD BE ABOVE, WHEN TRACY CONNECTS THE SUFFERING OF THE PEOPLE IN THE OPON WITH THE SUFFERING OF OTHER COLOMBIANS. ALSO, NOTE ABOVE THAT I SWITCHED THE PASSIVE "IS RECORDED BY THE U.N." to THE ACTIVE "THE UNITED NATIONS REGARDS."

[The dog days of summer in Colombia are hot, humid, sticky and oppressively heavy; filled with fear, violence and death.] TRACY HAS ALREADY ESTABLISHED THESE FACTS, SHE DOESN'T NEED TO REPEAT THEM. ONE HAZARD OF DOING A LOT OF ACADEMIC WRITING OR HAVING A BAD COMPOSITION INSTRUCTOR IS LEARNING THAT YOU HAVE TO "SUM UP" WHAT YOUR PIECE IS ABOUT WITH A TIDY LITTLE ENDING. IN A CPTNET-SIZED RELEASE OF 500 WORDS OR UNDER, DOING SO IS UNNECESSARY AND SAPS THE VIVIDNESS OUT OF WHAT YOU'VE DESCRIBED EARLIER. SAVE SUMMARIES FOR BOOKS OR ARTICLES THAT ARE 3,000 WORDS OR LONGER (I'M ACTUALLY JUST PULLING THAT NUMBER OUT OF A HAT. MOST OF WHAT I WRITE IS UNDER 2000 WORDS AND MOST OF IT DOESN'T REQUIRE A SUMMING UP STATEMENT. I ONLY SEE SUMMARIES IN ACADEMIC ARTICLES OR LONGISH BOOK CHAPTERS.]

HERE COMES THE SURPRISE TWIST

km, approaching with some trepidation, a huge blockade guarded by an armoured personnel carrier (APC) and 6 Israeli soldiers. Following a 10-minute questioning of who they were (a Christian tour group), why they were there (to visit a family), which family (Mohammad's), they were allowed through. The townspeople were amazed -- Palestinians are never allowed across this checkpoint. The alternate route to Ramallah includes a mountain hike and always the danger of being shot if seen by soldiers. Fifteen internationals were already there from France, US, Germany, UK, etc. They had come by the mountain route.

The APC followed the CPTers into town to check out what was afoot. The soldiers observed the milling crowd in front of the mosque for a few minutes and then left. The whole group began the march to the blockade. Internationals first, with the CPT women in the front line, followed by about 200 Palestinian townsfolk. An Israeli army jeep appeared suddenly on the road behind. A Palestinian leader asked Holmes to speak to the officer in the jeep. Holmes advised the officer that this was a nonviolent march to the checkpoint and was surprised that his only response was that no photos were to be taken of the soldiers.

A line of armed soldiers stopped the marchers in front of the blockade. The townspeople sat and held a press conference. Speaking with great passion, Palestinian leaders told the story of months of blockade -- farmers unable to move their produce for sale in Ramallah, workers travelling with great difficulty and danger to Ramallah, medicine scarce and food expensive -- collective punishment because 6 months ago Israeli soldiers died at this checkpoint. One French woman spoke to the soldiers, questioning their cruelty in punishing the people of Deir Izbzia for an action of Palestinian gunmen that even the Israeli army admitted came from elsewhere.

The walk back to town was peaceful, largely because the leaders were able to control the youth, always ready to throw stones at soldiers. The CPTers returned to the checkpoint for a prayer action of their own. Prayer is always disarming to men with guns - they're unsure how to react. The delegates won't soon forget Sunday Eucharist, in the midst of barb-wire, trenches, mounds of earth, stone barricades and nervous armed Israeli teenagers. An activist from the UK travelling with the delegation said, "I'm impressed with the way you work. This action had a peaceful, positive and thoughtful effect on the villagers, ourselves and the army."

As the delegation departed the captain of soldiers guarding the checkpoint said, "I believe in what you are doing. One day it will be better."

HINTS

#1 The major shift occurs in the second to last paragraph.

#2 The shift moves from a description of the events to a general statement about prayer.

That's all for now. Feel free to send me issues that come up in your writing or the writing of other CPTers that you would like to see covered in this newsletter. Thank you for all your good work.

AGES 3 and 6 NUMBERS UNDER 100 NORMALLY ARE SPELLED OUT (SOME EXCEPTIONS TO THIS RULE EXIST.) At first I was the horse and they the cowboys. After the horse needed one too many rests [META-EDITING NOTE: SHOULD HAVE PUT A COMMA HERE] they lassoed each other and ran all over the yard.

These THESE WHAT? TRACY HASN'T WRITTEN ABOUT TELLING STORIES WITH THE BOYS. I SUBSTITUTED "GOOD ACTIVITIES." SHE COULD ALSO HAVE WRITTEN THAT THESE WERE THE SORTS OF MEMORIES THE FAMILY'S CHILDREN SHOULD HAVE, IN THE FUTURE, ABOUT THE SUMMERS OF THEIR CHILDHOOD; THAT WOULD HAVE MADE THE PARALLELS WITH HER OWN CHILDHOOD MEMORIES STRONGER. DANG! WISH I HAD THOUGHT OF THAT WHEN I WAS EDITING be the stories of the dog days of summer. [However for this Colombian family and so many like them being caught in the middle of civil war where most of the violence is played out in civilian communities the dog days of summer are of fear of guns, fear of paramilitary and guerrilla violence, fear of disappearances and assassinations, and fear of death.] AS LONG AS THIS IS, IT'S NOT A COMPLETE SENTENCE. THE BASIC ROOT SENTENCE IS "BEING CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CIVIL WAR IS _____. TRACY DOESN'T FINISH THAT SENTENCE. YOU CAN'T END A SENTENCE, UNLESS YOU'RE QUOTING DIALOGUE, WITH A LINKING VERB LIKE "IS." "BEING CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A CIVIL WAR IS PLAYED OUTŠ" DOESN'T MAKE SENSE. MAYBE SHE MEANT THE ROOT SENTENCE TO BE "THE DOG DAYS OF SUMMER ARE [FULL OF] THE FEAR OF GUNSŠ" IN ANY CASE, IT'S TOO MANY THOUGHTS FOR ONE SENTENCE. SEE ABOVE FOR THE CHANGES I MADE. SINCE SHE WAS USING THE PLIGHT OF THE DIEGO FAMILY TO ILLUSTRATE WHAT MANY OTHER COLOMBIANS SUFFER, I MOVED HER COMMENT ABOUT THE SITUATION IN COLOMBIA FROM HER LAST PARAGRAPH TO HERE.

For me the murder of the family dog culminated "CULMINATE" MEANS "TO REACH A CLIMACTIC STAGE" I UNDERSTOOD WHAT TRACY WAS SAYING, BUT IT WAS MORE THE STORY OF THE MURDER THAT CULMINATED. I DON'T THINK HER USAGE IS INCORRECT, BUT IT'S A LITTLE AWKWARD when I saw its dead body floating down the Opón River caught in a log jam. Its death and the sighting of its dead body so near the canoe WHICH CANOE? has become a symbol for me of the 135 people assassinated in Barranca from January to August 2005, particularly the 60 [I WAS GOING TO LET THIS NUMERAL STAND,

Dog Days of Summer By Tracy Hughes

I remember being a kid playing outside with friends during the dog days of summer. [During those hottest days]TRACY ESTABLISHES LATER THAT THE DOG DAYS ARE HOT, SO I CUT TO AVOID REDUNDANCY] we would run and play [META EDITING NOTE: I WISH I HAD COME UP WITH A SYNONYM FOR "PLAY" TO AVOID REDUNDANCY. BUT I DIDN'T] under the big old pine tree in our neighbor's yard, at the playground or [simply] UNNECESSARY WORD [META-EDITING NOTE: UPON RE-READING I WISH I HAD REWORDED THE SENTENCE "IN OUR NEIGHBOR'S YARD UNDER THE BIG OLD PINE TREE, BECAUSE AS IS, ONE COULD INFER THAT THE PLAYGROUND AND TRACY'S BACKYARD ALSO HAD A BIG OLD PINE TREE our back yard [always] UNNECESSARY WORD with our closest friends. [Above all] I FOUND THIS PHRASE CONFUSING. DID SHE MEAN "I REMEMBER MOST VIVIDLY?" OR "THE HIGHLIGHT OF THOSE SUMMER DAYS WASŠ?" SINCE I WAS LOOKING TO CUT, I TOOK IT OUT. I THINK JUST TALKING ABOUT THE SCREAMING IS MORE VIVID. would run to our mothers screaming when we heard the bells of the ice cream truck coming down the street. After buying our treats we would sit under a shade tree and devour our ice cream, [mine having a gumball at the bottom.] I FOUND THIS PHRASE A LITTLE AWKWARD, SO I MADE AN INDEPENDANT CLAUSE ABOUT THE ICE CREAM AND CONNECTED IT TO THE PREVIOUS SENTENCE WITH A SEMI-COLON. dog days of summer were hot, humid and sticky but we never missed playing with friends and cooling off with ice cream.

On August 12, paramilitaries entered La Florida while the children of the community were in school. The school children and adults visiting down river heard the 'pa, pa, pa' of gun fire when the paramilitaries killed the Diego* family dog. A community member reported that the children at the school witnessed the dog's murder. No one knows why [the dog was killed] PASSIVE VOICE. I SWITCHED IT TO ACTIVE; whether for enjoyment, because the dog was barking or to intimidate the community members [with the fear of death.] I THINK THE INTIMIDATION IMPLIES FEAR OF DEATH, SO I CUT THAT PHRASE OUT. [Either way] SINCE TRACY GAVE THREE POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE PARAMILITARIES TO KILL THE DOG, "EITHER" IS NOT APPROPRIATE; IT IMPLIES TWO THINGS. SO I SUBSTITUTED "WHATEVER THE REASON" four young children of the Diego family lost a beloved pet.

The day before, I shared breakfast with this family. I really enjoyed playing make-believe animals and cowboy and horse with the boys age

Volume 1 Issue 3 August 30, 2002

Dear Compadres, I have intended to get out the third issue of Write Stuff for more than a month now, but little things like the Colombian team receiving death threats and deportation orders and the crisis on the Oneida Reserve kept bumping this newsletter to the end of the line. Before I pack to leave for the retreat in Indiana, however, I thought I'd finally pull this hangnail off.

THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

I am pleased to announce the arrival of The Chicago Manual of Style to my little family of grammar and style manuals. When I was staying at my father's house in June and July, my father, brother and I began discussing the appropriate place for periods when a sentence ends with quotation marks, parentheses and brackets. (Yes, these really are the sorts of things my family talks about when we're together.) For the last couple hundred years or so, people would have punctuated the following sentence as written: [The paramilitaries call the bribes they force campesinos to pay "taxes."] Lately the mavericks at the National Council of Teachers of English and the Modern Language Association have argued that putting the period after the quotation marks [The paramilitaries call the bribes they force campesinos to pay "taxes."] makes more linguistic sense and it is now acceptable and even preferable for those toiling over dissertation and research papers to do so. Now, I agree that the new mode of punctuation makes more sense linguistically, but I have spent my writing career punctuating counter-intuitively and wanted another, preferably non-academic source to consult.

Accordingly, I ordered a used copy of The Chicago Manual of Style: the Essential Guide for Writers, Editors and Publishers from Amazon.com. In it I learned that the "period inside" school follows a century and a half of American punctuation tradition. The British are more inclined to put the period outside the quotation marks, parentheses and brackets. You all know I would hate to be un-American, so for the foreseeable future, periods go inside.

TRANSPARENT STYLE AND THE USE OF "AS"

Just as transparency in politics leads to better government, so does transparency in writing style lead to better CPTnet releases. Ideally the

reader of a CPTnet release should come away with a vivid understanding of an event described therein and no recollection of the style in which the release was written. If the reader finds him or herself struck by the academic style, or the monotonous repetition of simple sentences or by a snide tone, it detracts from his or her understanding of the release. Even in beautifully written reflection pieces, where readers might remember particularly exquisite turns of phrase, they remember these phrases because the piece has succeeded in connecting them with the writer's emotions.

AS LONG AS WE'RE TALKING ABOUT TRANSPARENCY...

I have noticed in some releases that writers routinely use the word "as" as a substitute for "because." I have two problems with this usage. The first has to do with its violation of the transparency principle. "As" used in this way is reminiscent of British upper-class dialect, e.g., "As the hour was late, the gentlemen left their fair companions in the drawing room and proceeded to Nigel's study for brandy and cigars."

³As" as a substitute for "because" in a CPTnet release screams, "Look at me! I'm sophisticated!" (There are exceptions to this rule a writer has already used the "because" several times in a row and wants some variety.)

The second, more important reason not to use "as" as a substitute for "because" is that it can lead to confusion. For example, the sentence, "As the soldiers were approaching, the settlers put down their guns" could mean both, "While the soldiers were approaching, the settler put down their guns" and "Because the soldiers were approaching, the settlers put down their guns."

As we wish to write transparently and concisely, we shall not use "as" in this manner in future releases.

QUESTIONS FOR CPTNET EDITOR

Do you find this institution we call CPTnet perplexing? Intriguing? Enigmatic? Are there questions about how releases get edited and why certain releases get posted and when that you have been burning to ask? Well, friends, burn no longer. Send your questions to Kathleen Kern at kk@cpt.org and she will attempt to alleviate your confusion. The best questions will appear in what I hope becomes a regular part of this newsletter.

P.S. As I have written this missive rather quickly, there is a higher likelihood of just the sorts of mistakes for which I take you to task. I will not take it amiss, therefore, should you wish to berate me for my carelessness.

under a shade tree and devour our ice cream; mine always had a gumball at the bottom. The dog days of summer were hot, humid and sticky but we never missed playing with friends and cooling off with ice cream.

On 12 August 2005, paramilitaries entered La Florida while the children of the community were in school. The school children and adults visiting down river heard the "pa, pa, pa" of gun fire when the paramilitaries killed the Diego* family dog. A community member reported that the children at the school witnessed the dog's murder. No one knows why the paramilitaries killed the dog--perhaps for enjoyment, or because the dog was barking or to intimidate the community members. Whatever the reason, the four young children of the Diego family lost a beloved pet.

The day before, I shared breakfast with this family. I really enjoyed playing make-believe animals and cowboy and horse with the boys, ages three and six. At first I was the horse and they the cowboys. After the horse needed one too many rests they lassoed each other and ran all over the yard.

These are good activities for the dog days of summer. However for this Colombian family and so many like them the dog days of summer contain fear of guns, fear of paramilitary and guerrilla violence, fear of disappearances and assassinations, and fear of death. The United Nations regards Colombia as the most violent country in the Western Hemisphere and the third worst humanitarian crisis.

For me, the murder of the family dog became real when I saw its dead body floating down the Opón River caught in a log jam. Its death and the sighting of its dead body so near our canoe has become a symbol for me of the 135 people assassinated in Barrancabermeja from January to August 2005, particularly the sixty assassinated in June.

A friend recently asked me if this time in Colombia is preparing me for something else in my future journey. In my mind, I see the dead body of the dog floating in the river and I wonder if I am being prepared for the day when I see my first dead human body floating on the Opón.

*Name changed

Tracy's original:

FIRST OF ALL, THE RELEASE WAS OVER 500 WORDS, SO I READ IT WITH AN EYE TOWARD CUTTING:

electricity in the city and U.S. forces say no one can return for at least another week or two.]

I got three responses. The winner (drum roll, please) is Duane Ediger, who submitted the following rewrite:

"A representative of the Iraqi Red Crescent Society, which provides relief for Falluja's displaced, told Nash and Pritchard that most of them spend freezing nights in tents outside the city, which still lacks water and electricity. U.S. forces say no one can return for at least another week or two."

In addition to shortening the paragraph, Duane also combines a longish, complex sentence with a simple declarative sentence, which adds variety and flow.

Now if I were editing Duane, I might substitute "the refugees" for "them" because "displaced" could be singular and "them" is plural. Or I might substitute "displaced Fallujans" for "displaced."

Thanks to all who responded. Duane gets a warm fuzzy and the runners-up get a room-temperature fuzzy.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING NEW AND DIFFERENT

This week, I edited a reflection by Tracy Hughes who is currently serving on the Colombia team. When I first skimmed it, its power immediately struck me. A few days later, when I edited it, I found some stylistic flaws in the piece that sucked away some of that power. Tracy graciously gave me permission to use her piece for the benefit of other CPT writers. I am going to show how it appeared on CPTnet, followed by her original piece. In the latter I will insert my reasons, in capital letters, for why I edited it the way I did.

CPTnet
17 August 2005

COLOMBIA REFLECTION: Dog days of summer
by Tracy Hughes

I remember being a kid playing outside with friends during the dog days of summer. We would run and play under the big old pine tree in our neighbor's yard, at the playground or our backyard with our closest friends. We would run to our mothers screaming when we heard the bells of the ice cream truck coming down the street. After buying our treats we would sit

Volume 1 Issue 4 October 21, 2002

Dear Compadres, Once again, I am getting this issue out at the last minute before I leave to go somewhere else. This time, I am leaving for the Middle East where I will become a member of the Rapid Response Team currently trying to get to places is the West Bank, Gaza and Israel where violence has occurred or is likely to occur. I am taking my portable computer, and hope to post from my kk@cpt.org address, but I may have to post from my CPTausten@yahoo.com address at internet cafes, so please be sure that all releases and communications with me go to both places.

If I have not gotten back to some of you re: a writing tutorial, or if you're wondering why something has not posted yet, please feel free to nag me. I've been trying to get through more than 500 e-mails that have accumulated over the summer and fall while I was away on speaking trips or working like a maniac on Bible curriculum, and it is more than a possibility that I've missed something from you or accidentally deleted it. I will be leaving tonight (Monday, October 21) to stay inside Rochester so that the person taking me to the airport tomorrow morning on his lunch hour won't have to drive all the way out to Webster, where I reside in suburban splendor.

I weighed both my Strunk and White style manual and my Chicago Manual of Style. The former is three ounces, and the latter is heavier than two pounds--the outermost limit of my postal scale--so for the next three months, Strunk and White will be the arbiter of all punctuation, style and grammar rules. At this point I don't know whether I will be able to keep posting The Write Stuff or follow through on the writing tutorials. I tend to get busy while on assignment, but if peace breaks out, I will try to keep up. If not, I will be SO full of good ideas come my return on January 22, 2003.

And now, for something completely different . . .

WHAT IS AN UPDATE?

CPT updates trace their beginnings back to winter 1996 in Hebron. Cole Hull, neé Arendt, developed them as a way to keep his folks at home informed of the small things happening on the team that did not appear

in the Hebron releases. We quickly realized they were an excellent way of reporting on events and conversations that did not merit a full release, but which gave our readers a window on to the day-to-day life and work of the Hebron Team.

The Updates were never intended to be a simple recounting of information recorded in team logs. (I used passive voice there because, well, it was 1996 and I'm a little hazy now on who intended what.) We intended them more to be a vehicle for the sort of interesting stories that team members share with each other and their families and friends at home. I know that Cole and I leaned toward the whimsical, surreal and humorous, and others have leaned more toward the pathetic and outrageous, but basically, if the Updates give a vivid account of the team's work and interesting conversations team members have with various actors in a conflict, then those are good Updates.

Updates that give a dry accounting of team movements, e.g., "Florence Forthright joined the team," "The team attended a meeting of local landowners," are not of much interest to our readership unless they have interesting details that reflect on the work of the team: "On her way to join the team in Hebron, Florence Forthright had to change taxis six times, walking over dirt barriers with her luggage. At one of the Bethlehem checkpoints, Forthright assisted a woman who was bringing her son to the hospital in Beit Jala for chemotherapy treatments." "At a meeting of local landowners living near the reservation, one man told the participants, 'I will shoot anyone who tries to make me leave my property.'"

I know that on some of the project sites, a lot of the work has involved just hanging out as an observer or violence-deterring presence, so interesting activities and conversations may be few or far between. In cases such as these, I would recommend skipping days or even weeks, if you have not heard or witnessed anything interesting (although I would think that hanging out would involve having some interesting conversations.) If you do one update for the month when things are slow, so be it.

NOW FOR THE COLLECTIVE GROAN ON THE PART OF ENGLISH AND COMPOSITION MAJORS

"Show; don't tell" is one of the most basic principles of good writing which anyone who has taken a writing class has heard ad nauseum. Be that as it may, when you are trying to write about something you witnessed, it is natural to fall into a "telling" mode--possibly because

ifiers myself.

Take, for example, the following sentence:

"Osaid Rashid, a CSD translator and nurse at a local hospital once watched young men making Molotov cocktails with Rich Meyer and told him they were they were receiving orders from above to make them."

Now Rich is a vigorous and enthusiastic guy, but I think I can honestly say his scruples would prevent him from making Molotov cocktails.

The corrected sentence read:

"Osaid Rashid, a CSD translator and nurse at a local hospital, watched, with Rich Meyer, young men making Molotov cocktails"

I also wrote:

"On June 28, 2001, soldiers beat one of the chicken shop owners and his brothers when they came to feed the chickens with gun butts and hands."

This sentence is confusing on two levels, because it could imply that soldiers were doing the feeding and it could imply the brothers or the soldiers had fed the chickens gun butts and hands (This is how Mad Chicken disease gets spread.)

A less confusing version would read:

"On June 28, 2001, when one of the poultry shop owners and his brothers came to feed their chickens, soldiers beat the men with fists and gun butts."

The moral of this story? Everyone needs editing, even editors. Indeed, since my eye muscles began to go bad, I find myself missing a lot flaws in my own writing. My brain sometimes skims what I read even when I try not to. Even when reading did not cause me pain, I always asked other people to read over important articles I had written. One's brain "knows" what one has written and assumes one has used correct grammar and spelling. When one reads something written by another person, however, s/he does not know what the piece holds and can focus more on details.

THE GREAT CONTEST

In the last Write Stuff I asked readers to make the following paragraph more concise:

[Nash and Pritchard went to visit the Iraqi Red Crescent Society. The Red Crescent has been the main agency providing relief for the displaced population of Falluja. Most Fallujans are now living in tents around the city while temperatures dip to freezing at night. There is no water or

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The Return of Write Stuff

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

How have I neglected to put out regular editions of Write Stuff? Let me count the ways Š

Seriously, I'm blaming almost everything I do not get done these days (from clipping my toenails to not responding to Christmas 2004 mail) on the CPT History. Currently, I am finishing the chapter on Indigenous projects. I will then move on Colombia, Iraq, "Intermittent, short and stillborn projects," and a final analytical chapter. I am more than halfway done, but I started working seriously on the history in 2003, and would really like to finish sometime before I'm eligible for Social Security (or before the neo-cons squander Social Security trust funds in the stock market.)

Another reason I have not kept up with Write Stuff is the fact that many stylistic flaws that pop up in current releases I have already addressed in previous issues. I find myself copying and pasting advice I have already written. I would encourage you read the booklets on style that you receive during training and you will, I hope, feel less disappointed when I cut your pieces to the prescribed word length, change passive voice to active, eliminate "It is, there is, this is," etc. (By the way, one of my old editors told me not to use "etc." so much because it implies laziness. You will note I do not use it in CPTnet releases, but I think a little chattiness doesn't hurt in this venue.)

NOW A FEW THINGS TO TIE UP FROM THE JANUARY 17, 2005 WRITE STUFF

In the last issue of Write Stuff, I included a section called, "Leaving things dangling," which addressed the issue of misplaced (or dangling) modifiers. I used as one example the following sentence:

"While pointing out the settlements to the group from the roof of the CPT apartment, a patrol of soldiers came up on the roof."

Since the soldiers were not doing the pointing, I changed the sentence to

"While Florence Forthright was pointing out the settlements from the roof of the CPT apartment to the group, a patrol of soldiers came to the roof."

Now shortly after I posted that issue of Write Stuff, I received Jane Adas's edits on Chapter 6 of the CPT history, which covers the Intifada in Hebron. Imagine my chagrin when I found that I had misplaced some mod-

"telling" is the normal mode of spoken communication. For example you might tell your teammates or the folks at home, "Man, those paramilitaries at that checkpoint sure were acting nasty." However, "The paramilitaries were acting nasty," when written in a report, tells the reader only that the writer thought the paramilitaries were acting nasty. If the writer says, however, "One paramilitary jammed his rifle butt into the stomach of the motor canoe driver and called all the women on the boat 'guerilla whores,'" then the reader has a much better idea of what actually happened and can draw his or her own conclusions about what the paramilitaries are like.

Often, writers both show AND tell, and then it is easy for me just to edit out the telling part. For example, in a recent Hebron Update, there appeared the following:

"While approaching the boundary between H1 and H2, Anita Fast observed some Palestinian women with a little boy. They asked if she would take the little boy home. He was crying and very afraid because it was curfew and the soldiers had been shooting rubber bullets and tear gas earlier into the market. Fast explained who she was and that she would walk him home. He was crying and frightened most of the way, and held tightly to her hand."

I changed this passage to "While approaching the boundary between H1 and H2, Anita Fast observed some Palestinian women with a little boy. They asked if she would take the little boy home. He was crying and afraid because it was curfew and the soldiers had been shooting rubber bullets and tear gas earlier into the market. Fast explained who she was and that she would walk him home. He was crying most of the way, and held tightly to her hand."

Note that I took out "and frightened" because the fact that the boy held tightly to Anita's hand SHOWS that he was frightened. (Also, "crying" is a verb form and "frightened" is an adjective, so using them together kind of messes with parallel structure.)

SHOWING AND SHORTENING

Now that I've looked at the passage from the Update again, I would probably do further editing: "While approaching the boundary between H1 and H2, Anita Fast observed some Palestinian women with a little boy. They asked if she would take the little boy home. He was crying because the soldiers had declared curfew and they had been shooting

rubber bullets and tear gas earlier into the market. He held tightly to Fast's hand and cried most of the way home." Notice how the shortened version gives all the necessary details from the longer version, and how the economy of language makes the incident more vivid.

I have a 650 word limit on the monthly column I write for Mennonite Weekly Review and actually prefer for my first draft to clock in at 670-680 words. Making the necessary cuts for length almost always makes the whole piece sharper.

YES, ANOTHER STUPID EXERCISE

Re-reading the passage a third time, I see how I could have shortened and sharpened it even further, but I've got to pack. I challenge you to cut the passage yourself and send me the result. The person who best maintains the vividness of the incident using the least number of words wins.

Until the next time . . .
Kathleen Kern
Dilettante Editor

part of a collaborative effort--that includes you, the staff and steering committee--to spread the good news of the nonviolent kingdom of God, to speak the truth in a world of media spin and to be a voice for the voiceless.

Ways to show respect include the following:

-Respond to messages the CPTnet editor sends. Just a short "duly noted" or "I'll bring this up at the meeting" will let him/her know suggestions are not going down a big, black hole.

-Treat writing about the work of the team as the second most important job after actually getting in the way of violence. Adopting this attitude means that the team will be proactive about deciding what needs to be written--either assigning one team member the job of doing most of the writing or dividing the work up among several people. It means that the team will treat writing about the work as more important than writing personal letters and e-mails. It means that once the releases are written, the rest of the team will read them immediately and then see they get posted in as timely a manner as possible.

-When you do not understand why the editor has changed your work, ask him/her why s/he made the change. S/he will probably be happy to do so, and you will receive educational benefit. If you disagree with the editor's decision, you may want to check and make sure that you can back up what you have written by a reputable style manual such as Strunk and White.

-Assume that your work must fall into the parameters laid out in The Write Stuff for the last several years. That is, do not send in a 1200 word release for CPTnet, when you know the limit is 500 words or less. Accept the fact if you write a weakly-focussed piece, over-use passive voice, or use sentence structures like, "There is, it is, this is" the editors will change your piece to make it tighter and clearer.

My sister once told me that she thought all newborns should be handed over to their parents with the attached note, "It's not about you anymore." I would encourage all of you to adopt this attitude toward writing for CPTnet. The work is more important than our egos.

And of course, I think all the teams are doing some mighty fine work.

Do we really need the prefatory comment? Doesn't the quotation say it all?

UNNECESSARY VERBIAGE AKA DEADWOOD

Many people write they way they talk, and most of us use unnecessary phrases when we talk. One advantage of the 500-word limit on CPTnet releases is that it provides an opportunity for the writer to cut out some of the chattiness.

Consider the following:

[Fox visited with a teenage neighbor. Fox asked a question about the changes since the U.S. invasion.]

Do we really need to describe the visit and the question as two separate events? Simply writing that Fox asked a teenage neighbor about the changes already implies they are visiting.

[He was clear about MPT. "With MPT, we want to live the real Islam - the loving, the helping. [Those who destroy] are not Islam."]

Do we need to read that the person in question was being clear? Isn't his quotation clear enough?

Now you try to cut the following down to the minimal number of words, while preserving all the important information. The winner's version will appear in the next issue of Write Stuff.

[Nash and Pritchard went to visit the Iraqi Red Crescent Society. The Red Crescent has been the main agency providing relief for the displaced population of Falluja. Most Fallujans are now living in tents around the city while temperatures dip to freezing at night. There is no water or electricity in the city and U.S. forces say no one can return for at least another week or two.]

TREAT YOUR EDITORS WELL

As most of you know, I have been working on a history of CPT that is going slo-o-owly. For the month of February, one or more people will be relieving me of my CPTnet responsibilities so that I can focus full-time on the history. (I won't name names yet, until we are certain about who is doing what.) I am asking that you show these people respect and appreciation for their efforts and cut them some slack when things go awry.

Remember, the job of the CPTnet editor is to make CPTnet releases as accessible as possible to the CPTnet constituency. CPTnet editors are not creative writing instructors or therapists or cheerleaders for you. They are

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MEA CULPA, MEA CULPA, MEA MAXIMA CULPA

Time flies when one's country is flouting international law. I just received a message from JoAnne Lingle asking me to send her copies of back issues of Write Stuff. I realized then that I had not put one out since January 15, 2003.

Since I am in a repentant mood, I want to apologize publicly to members of the Hebron Team for accidentally posting a private message about their updates on CPTnet. I had just typed in "menno.org.cpt.news@mennolink.org" twice on their two most recent updates, and I guess my fingers got into a rut.

Additionally, I wish to apologize for using the following sentence in the previous issue: "Adverbs are like sage dressing (or stuffing, if you grew up in Ohio, like I did.)" Muriel Stackley, a member of Steering Committee and former editor of *The Mennonite*, pointed out correctly that the sentence should have ended, ". . . if you grew up in Ohio AS I did."

Briefly, one uses "like" before a noun or pronoun and "as" before a phrase or a clause. I could have correctly said, "If you're like me, you say 'stuffing.'"

Here are some other examples:

'The red hats of the Hebron team are just like the red hats of the Colombia team.'

'She got tired of wearing a red hat just as other CPTers got tired of wearing them.'

"As" modifies "CPTers got tired," while "like" modifies "hats."

Interestingly, my 887-page *Chicago Manual of Style*, in which I can find guidelines for the use of Indonesian names, Greek accents and guillemets (Look it up. I did), has no reference in its index for "like" or "as." My 85-page Strunk and White *The Elements of Style* makes the following comment:

"The use of *like* for as has its defenders; they argue that any usage that achieves currency becomes valid automatically. This, they say, is the way language is formed. It is and it isn't. An expression sometimes

merely enjoys vogue much as an article of apparel does [NOTE: See that "article of apparel does" is a phrase, so the writer uses "as." He could also have said, "Expressions are LIKE articles of apparel. They both can enjoy a vogue." It wouldn't have sounded nearly as good, of course.] 'Like' has long been widely misused by the illiterate; lately it has been taken up by the knowing and well--informed, who find it catchy, or liberating, and who use it as though they were slumming. If every word or device that achieved currency were immediately authenticated, simply on the ground of popularity, the language would be as chaotic as a ball game with no foul lines."

The fact that the Chicago Manual of Style does not list "like" vs. "as" as a topic of concern may mean that Strunk and White are losing ground and that one day the two words will become interchangeable. Languages evolve and change. English used to have a subjunctive mood, just as Spanish and other Romance languages do. Remnants of the subjunctive still exist. For example, "If I were a better CPTer, I would approach public witnesses with more enthusiasm" is in the subjunctive. But if you wrote, "If I was a better CPTer . . ." most editors would not correct you.

Languages also tend to evolve in irregular ways, to the delight of linguists and the despair of those trying to become fluent in another language. For example, in Old English, someone would "wend their way" from one place to another. In the past tense, they "went" their way. When "go" gradually replaced "wend" the past tense of "go" remained "went." Cool, huh?

However, Strunk and White's point remains sound. To write well, one has to follow certain standards. These standards do change over the years, but one needs to master them before one starts doing something different. Picasso mastered the standard forms of art before he branched into cubism.

IT IS, THERE IS

Since we are in the season of Lent and I am feeling repentant, I thought I would focus on a stylistic sin I often commit: the use of "there is." When we speak, we all use "it is," "there is," and "this is" freely, so we don't realize that they are essentially content-free words. When at all possible, try to use active verbs instead. For example, "There were a dozen settlers attacking the Israeli police" is not as striking as "A dozen settlers attacked the Israeli police."

"It is a profound truth that war always kills the innocent" is a clunky way of saying, "War always kills the innocent" or even "The truth is that war always kills the innocent."

soldiers in uniform, their weapons and the vehicles they drive. Writers need to be careful about separating soldiers from their equipment when they write about an action that only a human being can do.

Take the following examples:

[Two army jeeps came to At-Tuwani and accused the villagers of working on the clinic. They said there would be a meeting tomorrow to discuss work on the clinic.]

[The hummer returned, and this time demanded they stop work completely, and hung around to enforce the order for about a half hour.]

I remember also the memorable updates during the outbreak of the current Intifada that referred to tanks conducting house-to-house searches. I actually did conjure up images of heavily militarized Thomas the Tank engines trying to get through the stone archways of homes in Bethlehem.

GETTING ALL DIDACTIC, OKAY, PREACHY

Your writing will be more effective if you let the facts speak for themselves instead of hitting the reader with a "the-moral-of-this-story-is" club.

Consider the following:

[The team heard reports of rifle shots fired during an inter-community conflict related to fishing. The unjust situation of poverty in which the population of the Ciénaga del Opón area lives exacerbates disputes over the limited natural resources available.]

"Unjust situation of poverty" is a little heavy-handed. Simply writing, "Both of the communities involved in the dispute are poor and the fishing tocks are limited" tells the readers what they need to know.

[Los Canelos exemplifies the courageous steps of many Colombian communities as they confront the armed conflict, with great risk to their lives]

Just describing what the people of Los Canelos are doing, i.e., refusing to let guerillas and paramilitaries camp on their lands, tells the reader they are courageous and admirable. Adding didactic comments like the one above cheapens the effect.

[In what seemed an attempt at reconciling the confrontation of life with death apparent when bodies are found in the river, they commented, "Every day another person dies, and every day a baby is born."]

LEAVING THINGS DANGLING

Dangling modifiers are a common grammatical hazard. The term essentially refers to making a phrase meant to describe one noun incorrectly describe another.

For example, take the following sentence:

[While pointing out the settlements to the group from the roof of the CPT apartment, a patrol of soldiers came up on the roof.]

Now, who was pointing out the settlements? The patrol of soldiers? No. Someone else, presumably a Hebron CPTer was showing the group the settlements. You could correct this sentence as follows:

[While Florence Forthright was pointing out the settlements from the roof of the CPT apartment to the group, a patrol of soldiers came up to the roof.]

or

[A patrol of soldiers came up on the roof while Florence Forthright was pointing out the settlements to the group.]

Here's another example:

[Returning to the apartment, the soldiers at the checkpoint near Avraham Avinu settlement detained them and told them they must wait for five minutes because there was a military exercise happening in the old city.]

Who was returning to the apartment? The soldiers? No, again it was the CPTers.

Now you try correcting the next two (I haven't included the context for the sentences. Suffice it to say the soldier did not ask the question and the shopowner wasn't shopping.)

[Wanting to know why, a soldier told Gibb that a hundred Hamas leaflets had been found there two months earlier.]

[During a neighborhood shopping trip a shop owner told Provencher and Fox that her mother had just returned from the Hajj.]

"VEHICLES ARE PEOPLE TOO!"

"NO THEY'RE NOT."

When we we write about "the military," various images come to mind of

There are a lot of exceptions to this rule, oh, excuse me, lots of exceptions to this rule exist . . . Some exceptions to this rule include . . . Anyway, there is a war on. Oh, I mean, the U.S. and U.K. are invading Iraq [Note how much more information the latter usage conveys], so I'm not going to be really picky about "there is" and "it is." AS I said, if you are LIKE me, you find yourself easily slipping into colloquial usage when you write, and "there is" is part of the spoken idiom.

K.O. THE JARGON

CPTers pick up a specialized vocabulary in the course of their work. Some words, like "solidarity" and "grassroots" and "violence-detering presence" we share with a broad variety of peace and justice organizations. Other words come into a team's vocabulary as a result of its work in a special location. For example, in Colombia, paramilitaries are routinely called "paras" and guerrillas are usually referred to in the singular, i.e., "guerrilla."

Now, the great thing about jargon is that it connects us with other people doing similar human rights or violence deterring work. Given that many of us go home after assignments to communities that don't fully understand what we do, we take justifiable pleasure in speaking with people who do not require a definition of a "para" or a "machsoum" ("earthen barrier erected by the Israeli military" for those who haven't served in Hebron.)

Unfortunately the use of jargon in our writing does not cause the average reader to say, "Whoa, I don't know what that word is, but the person who used it must be a really shrewd insider. I want to read more!" More often, when someone comes across an unknown word, the reaction is, "What is she saying? This stuff is beyond me." Thus, jargon becomes something that shuts people out of CPT work instead of inviting them in.

If in doubt about whether to use a word, think about loved ones or friends who are largely ignorant about the work you do or the political context in which you work. Would they understand that word? If not, choose one more mundane.

Related to the use of jargon is the attempt to make semantic corrections of terms that domination systems (good CPT jargon, that!) use to obscure the evil they do. People who have witnessed or suffered violence at the hands of Israeli soldiers understandably bridle at the title "Israel Defence Force" or "IDF." In Palestinian solidarity circles, many people thus use the title "Israeli Occupation Forces" or "IOF." In regions of Colombia where the government tolerates the activities of paramilitaries, people find it important to refer to them as an "illegal" armed group.

don't really know the date to which you are referring. Always cite the specific date an event occurs in releases, and make other times relative, like "in the previous (or following) weeks."

MORE BLAH BLAH BLAH

Below is the fourth appearance of a regular feature that will summarize rules people consistently violate between issues of The Write Stuff. Since new people are constantly joining CPT and old people sometimes ignore MY VERY IMPORTANT GUIDELINES, I thought a little repetition might be in order.

* Never ever send a release as an attachment only. Always paste it into an e-mail message as text. I now have a donated version of Word for Mac, which CAN open most files, but since many people are working on different sorts of computer systems of various ages, and networks from different countries can make files difficult to open, ALWAYS paste the text of an e-mail into releases. Even though I now have Word, I still do almost all my writing in Wordperfect, which is the official word processing software for the Chicago office.

*Do not describe actions without telling who is doing them (e.g., "the young men were arrested," vs. "the police arrested the young men.")

*With the exception of Updates, do not write releases longer than 500 words; 400 is better.

*Never use an acronym (e.g., MNF) without explaining what the initials stand for (i.e., "Multinational Forces.") Claire Evans has pointed out that sometimes CPT releases get posted in other venues and people there do not know what CPT stands for, so I have been trying to spell it out myself at the beginnings of releases. Often, however, I still forget. Sigh.

aspects of team life become more important than the actual work.

When I edit, I am always happy to see new CPTers writing releases and watch them develop their writing skills as time passes. I like to encourage people to build on these skills. However, my main job is not to be a creative writing instructor or a cheerleader. My main job is to ask the questions, "Will this release make sense to the reader? Does this release accurately reflect the reality of the team's work? Are there aspects of this piece that might get CPT or its co-workers in trouble if I post it on CPTnet?"

When I began editing CPTnet in 1998, the staff at the Chicago office told me that best writers in CPT are often the least sensitive to having their work edited. Their serenity comes partly from the fact that they have done a lot of writing and are used to being edited and partly from their focus on getting the work done. If your feelings are hurt by how I edited your piece, know that this editing is nothing personal. I am focussing on getting CPT work done. More importantly, don't give up. The best way to become a better writer is to write. Some of the stuff I wrote ten years ago makes me cringe, now. I got better because I kept writing, and learned to adapt my writing to fulfill the function of CPTnet. If it helps, know that I sometimes get really annoyed by the ways editors change my work as well, but I've learned that even an editing howler sentence ungrammatical more writing assignments than I can handle.

"USE MORE QUOTATIONS," SHE SAID.

I've noticed that all of the updates lately are a little thin on quotations. Whenever I read sentences along the lines of "so-and-so talked about the situation," I crankily ask myself, "Why didn't s/he use a quotation instead?" Recording what people actually say is ten times as vivid as making a general summary of what they said (See above, under "show, don't tell.")

For examples of effective use of quotations, see the March and April 2004 Iraq updates.

KISS "TODAY" GOOD-BYE (AND "YESTERDAY" AND "TOMORROW")

Most often you don't send out releases on the same days that you write them. Most often, I don't post CPTnet releases on the same day I receive them from you. Therefore, if you use terms like "today," "tomorrow" "two weeks ago," "Wednesday" etc., you can confuse the reader, because they

The problem with using jargon that is more semantically correct than the terms promoted by domination systems is that such usage comes across as shrill. Using terms like "IOF" to refer to the Israeli military or "martyr" to refer to any Palestinian killed by an Israeli violates the principle of writing transparency. That is, the writing calls attention to itself and not the subject one is writing about.

Consider the title "Yankee Imperialist Running Dogs" and "the Great Satan," that the Chinese and Iranians have respectively used to refer to the United States. As it happens, the United States IS an imperialist country. In Arabic and Hebrew the word we translate as "Satan" means "adversary," rather than a guy with horns and a pitchfork. Given that the U.S., via the CIA, had installed the Shah of Iran who turned the country into a torture state, and given that George W. refers to Iran as part of the Axis of Evil, the United States is indeed a great adversary of the Iranians.

However, these epithets, wrongly or rightly, seem ridiculous to the average North American reader, who will write their users off as hysterical. When confronted with a need to correct a term bandied about by those in power, simply state what the subject really is. For example use "the Israeli military" instead of "IDF." Specify what law makes paramilitaries illegal and be sure to use the same term when describing left-wing groups. People will then take your writing more seriously.

IS IT JUST ME

or do you find the term "CPT team" a little off-putting? I can't help thinking that we're essentially referring to ourselves as the "Christian Peacemaker Teams team" when we use the phrase. Normally, I change it to "Hebron Team," "Colombia Team," etc. But sometimes when teams are working with other groups, it's important to specify which are the CPTers, and "CPTer" seems a little casual. Any ideas for official terminology?

"It's the first day of summer," she explained.
"It's cold and it's rainy," he retorted.
"You're such a cynic," she quipped.
"But look out the window. It really is raining," he remonstrated.
"Just shut up," she yelled.
"It's a free country. I have a right to comment on the weather," he asserted.

THE INCREDIBLY VERSATILE "SAID"

Fear of using "said" too much is a hallmark of the beginning writer. The fear stems from the laudable goal of wanting to achieve variety in one's writing, but here's the secret: "Said" is more or less an invisible word. The brain blips right over it, connecting the speaker with the quotation. Trying to use multiple words for "said" in a dialogue shows that . . . well, you're trying not to use "said." Thus, inserting these substitutions calls attention to your writing, which violates the principle of transparency.

Now, replacing "explained," "quipped," "remonstrated," etc. with "said" in the above dialogue, would not improve it a whole lot, but that's because the dialogue is tedious piece of writing. The imaginary speakers make short declarations at each other instead of approximating a normal conversation. One could make the dialogue more interesting by giving some visual cues and insight into the characters' emotional makeup:

"It's the first day of summer," she said, smiling, as she stood by the window watching the raindrops chase each other down to the sill.

He looked at her over his newspaper. He couldn't stand that stupid smile of hers, the smile that swept all the tragedies of this benighted planet under a rug, leaving a lump of festering misery that she alone could not see. "It's cold and it's rainy," he said. "Can't you see that?"

"You're such a cynic." Turning his way, she offered him the the same beatific smile she had offered the rain.

"Adelaide . . ." He felt choked by rage and sorrow, and then by defeat. He had chosen this fate, this relentless cheeriness. How could she know that the sunshine she thought she was bringing into his life only illumi-

drifting down the river," or "This is hard on people trying to maintain an indigenous way of life" to "This restriction (this situation, this logging practice) is hard on people trying to maintain an indigenous way of life." Again, sometimes I will let sleeping "There ares" lie, because they sound better than the more direct sentence, but such instances are rare.

When you "tell" people about what conclusions they should draw from release, I am likely to delete such statements, particularly if you do a good job of "showing" your point. For example, in the paragraph, "More than x Iraqis have died in bombings of government headquarters. Militants have kidnaped dozens of foreigners, and soldiers continue to die from sharpshooters and road side bombs. The situation in Iraq is very violent right now," I would probably cut the last sentence.

Now, I will not insist that you follow Write Stuff guidelines, if you choose to follow another style manual, say Strunk and White's Elements of Style. (The "White" is E.B. White, the guy who wrote Charlotte's Web, so you know any style guide to which he contributed must be trustworthy.) Some people find The Elements of Style a little outdated, but at eighty-five pages, the book still contains the most efficient approach to good writing that I know. The Write Stuff may be a little more contemporary and have more humor involved in its writing, but then again, I've always cherished S&W's reference to "Rather," "very," "little," and "pretty" as "leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words." And then there is its reference to Walt Whitman letting "loose the hordes of uninspired scribblers who would one day confuse spontaneity with genius."

Languages, as I have said before, evolve and change, and some elements of Strunk and White are outdated, such as its disapproval of the interchangeable use of "like" and "as." If you find style manuals that dispute the conventional wisdom of Strunk, White and The Write Stuff, I would be happy to hear about these new standards in the Syntax biz.

However, I will say that the National Council of Teachers of English style innovations scare me a little. I mean, they don't even CARE about split infinitives any more and say it's no more important for pronouns to agree in number than for them to agree in gender! Shocking. Just shocking.

JUST DOING MY JOB

Most of you are told at training that the teams you will serve on will not provide therapy or a community for you. They are on assignment to deter violence. Now, community and therapy sometimes happen as a result of people working together for the sake of peace and human rights. We should all treasure those moments. However, we should not let these positive

Some good thesis statements in recent releases include:

"There is a gap in my memory that feels like it is a year, but is less than a second long. At one end is the thought, 'When will David and Mabel get here' at the other is 'What was that explosion?'"

"CPT members Elizabeth Garcia, Murray Lumley, Rusty Dinkins-Curling and Jane Pritchard recently met with "Minnie" in the Women's Migrant Centre in Agua Prieta, Mexico. She spoke softly, at times through tears, from her chair in the sparsely furnished shelter, evidently in pain from her recently fractured left wrist, and distraught from her ordeal."

"During September members of the U.S. House and Senate Armed Services Committees will meet to decide how many U.S. soldiers and private military contractors to allow on Colombian soil in 2005. "May the armed men go away and not come back" is an often repeated prayer in communities CPT accompanies along the Opon River."

Note that these thesis statements tell what the article is going to be about, without specifically saying, "this article is about . . ."

EDITING HAPPENS

Sara Reschly has told me that people who have participated in recent trainings have received little booklets containing back issues of *The Write Stuff*. I encourage you to read these booklets contain basic tips for good writing, but because they will tell you what to expect when I edit your releases.

After reading these issues of *The Write Stuff* you will know:

When I see you use passive voice, I will try to change it to active unless

- the entity performing an action (e.g., soldier detains man) is truly not apparent
- the team cannot name the person/entity for security reasons (as happens when the Colombia team finds a body)
- creating yet another short declarative sentence would make the paragraph more monotonous
- it just plain sounds better to leave the sentence in passive voice.

When you use phrases like "It is," "there is," "this is" to begin a sentence or phrase, I will try to make the sentence more direct. For example, I am likely to change "There are boats drifting down the river," to "Boats are

nated the certain doom he saw approaching? "Look out the window," he said. "It really is raining."

The change in her expression was as sudden as it was appalling. "Just shut up," she said, and then repeated, in increasing volume, "Shut up, shut up, shut up." Now she was screaming.

"It's a free country," was his first response. "I have a right to comment on the weather." But even as the angry words came out, he felt a surge of hope. Adelaide was as miserable as he was. For the first time in months he felt happy to be in the same room with her.

VARIETY

Note the multiple uses of "said" in the above dialogue. Note also the times I did not have the characters "say" anything at all but simply described the characters' actions or emotions following the quoted part of the dialogue. I achieved variety not by groping for synonyms for "said" but by where I placed the quoted parts in relation to the characters' feelings and actions.

The instructors in the last writing conference I attended in 2001 emphasized the "Rule of Three" in their lectures. Basically, that means after your third short paragraph, make sure the next one is longer. After the third short declarative sentence, make sure the next sentence is more complex. Using even greater variety is better.

Consider the following paragraph:

"The soldiers stopped the taxi. They ordered everyone inside to get out. They asked to see everyone's identification. The CPTers showed the soldiers their passports. They asked them why they were in the West Bank. The soldiers told the CPTers they could not be out during curfew."

Every one of the sentences in that paragraph is a simple declarative sentence. That is, they begin with a noun immediately followed by a verb ("Soldiers stopped," "they ordered,") BO-ring. Note how alternating simple declarative sentences with complex sentences and dialogue livens the passage up:

The soldiers stopped the taxi and ordered the people inside to get out. When they asked to see everyone's identification, the CPTers showed them their passports.

"What are you doing here?" one of the soldiers asked. The CPTers told him that they worked with a human rights organization and explained some of CPT's mandate.

"There is a curfew," the soldier told them. "You should not be out."

Note: Sometimes it is entirely appropriate to use, "asked," "responded," "replied," etc., and using them can add variety. Just make sure their use flows naturally from the content of the dialogue, and not because you don't want to use "said."

"That's it for now," the CPTnet editor wrote. "You I know I adore you all, don't you?"

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September 21, 2004

FOCUS!

The 500-words-or-less format of CPT releases accommodates most attention spans, but brings with it certain limitations. The most significant limitation is the capacity of short releases to include only one focus.

Look at some recent releases on CPTnet and try to describe their content in one sentence, e.g., in Greg Rollin's "The Explosion" release, one could come up with the sentence, "In this release, Rollins describes what it was like for him to witness an explosion in Baghdad." Cal Carpenter's "Prisoners are still an issue," is about the Hebron team's visit with the families of Palestinian prisoners on hunger strike. The Arizona/Sonora team's "Tear Down This Wall" is about a joint worship service held on both sides of a wall separating Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Sonora (Mexico.)

When you finish writing a release, try to describe it in one sentence. If you find yourself saying, "This release is about paramilitary control of the Opón River and U.S. aid to Colombia and the effect of pesticides on food crops as well as narcotic crops," your release probably has too many foci. Focusing your piece does not necessarily mean that you cannot make multiple points. You just need to subordinate those points to the main point, or thesis statement. For example, if your main thesis is "Many factors contribute to the current violence in Colombia," then you can indeed discuss army collusion with paramilitaries, U.S. military aid to Colombia and how the drug trade keeps all the armed factions going. However, targeting releases to cover issues that are less general (e.g., Home demolitions in Palestine) more often gets news out that mainstream media sources do not cover.

Your thesis should become obvious to the reader in the initial paragraph. Making the thesis obvious does not mean that you need to state it explicitly as the examples quoted above. In fact, I think a more subtle explanation of the thesis makes for better reading. (I say this remembering the hundreds of five-paragraph essays I coached people through in the remedial writing lab in college. They usually ran along the lines of, "Football is a better sport than baseball for three reasons . . ." The writers then listed the three reasons and wrote three ensuing paragraphs expanding on each of the three reasons and then wrote a concluding paragraph summarizing these three reasons. But the tutoring beat the cafeteria work I did during the summer sessions.)

(whose secret is safe with me) had used the spell checker, I would not have received a release referring to "Cornel" X. I thought Cornel was the guy's first name, until I realized the writer meant "Colonel." Unfortunately, spell checkers won't catch homonym typos. "To," "two" and "too" or "there," "their" and "they're," are often mistakenly substituted for each other, even when the writer knows the difference, but that's what editors are for.

Word Count: You should always use this tool when you finish writing a release. With the exception of Updates and Urgent Action, every release needs to be under 500 words. If you do not want me to choose which parts to cut, you need make the cuts yourself.

Grammar Check: Almost all grammar checkers will identify passive voice most common syntactic flaw of CPTers writing in the field. When the grammar checker highlights a sentence in passive voice, look for ways that you can change the sentence to active. For example, change, "The canoes were tied to the dock by paramilitaries" to "Paramilitaries tied the canoes to the dock." Allow yourself no more than two uses of passive voice in any release.

Grammar checkers also catch doubled words that often occur when a writer is editing and moving words and phrases around. For example, "The high school students stood by the roadblock." Most pieces on which I do a lot of editing contain at least one doubled word.

Now, I also find most grammar checkers mightily annoying, because they assume everyone is ignorant (like Fred!) of various rules: "Are you sure you want to use 'accept' and not 'except? "To accept something means . . ." I read these suggestions and inwardly snarl, "I know the difference between 'except' and 'accept,' damn it!" I also sometimes disagree with the grammar checker over whether my sentences are too long. However, when it tells me that "Long sentences may confuse the reader. . ." I do look at the sentence in question and see if there is a way I can break it into two sentences without damaging the flow of the piece.

Quick Correct: Do you often find yourself typing "solider" instead of "soldier?" "Isreali" instead of "Israeli?" "Hte" instead of "the?" Quick Correct will automatically change these misspellings for you (it just made it really difficult for me to write the intentional misspellings for your benefit.) Insert the typos you most often commit under "replace:" and the correct spellings under "with:" Click on "add:" and you'll find a lot fewer typos in your final releases.

The computer buffs among you may be able to point out other ways the wonderful world of word processing can make you a better, happier, person, but I think I'll just hold up the above features for your consideration.

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THE FIRST EVER _WRITE STUFF_ REVIEW ISSUE

Since I first began writing The Write Stuff in May 2002, CPT has conducted three trainings, which means that many of you have not had the benefit of reading about my pet peeves . . . er . . . insights into the art of good, clear writing. Additionally, I keep seeing certain stylistic problems cropping up in the releases, so I thought a brief refresher course might be in order. So listen up, newbies and you veteran CPTers, let's take a stroll down memory lane.

VERBS THAT HAVE NOBODY DOING THEM (formerly, "Passive voice bad, bad.")

Probably the most common stylistic lapse in the releases is the overuse of passive voice. Reliable sources inform me that the difference between active voice and passive voice is not an easy concept for some people, so I've decided to start referring to the difference between verbs that have somebody doing them and verbs that do not specify that anyone is doing them. For example, in the sentence, "The man was detained," we see that the verb is "detained" or "was detained." Is the man in the sentence doing the detaining? No. Who is? We don't know. The writer has not given us that information.

"Verbs that have nobody doing them" is wordier than "passive voice," I know, but the concept is important for two reasons:

1) Governments and people in power habitually use phrases like, "Mistakes were made," or "Civilians were killed" to avoid assuming blame. If they said, "We made mistakes," or "Our soldiers killed civilians," they would have to (horrors!) take responsibility for their actions.

Part of the CPT mandate is to speak the truth in situations where people are trying to obscure the truth. Part of speaking the truth is naming who is doing what. Related to this point is the importance of making our writing as accurate and detailed as possible within a limited word count. In Hebron, soldiers, the border police and civilian police all arrest and

detain people. And when you throw settlers into the mix, you have four groups of people who attack Palestinians and their homes. Given that the Israeli authorities have arrested border police in Hebron for abusing Palestinians and stealing their property, it's important to note that border police are doing these things. If civilian police arrest and detain people, they usually treat them somewhat differently, so it's important to specify that civilian police are doing these things. As different brigades of soldiers move in and out of Hebron, they respond to and interact with Palestinians in different ways. Specifying that soldiers are hassling or not hassling Palestinians helps identify which brigades tend to be the most abusive. Specifying whether soldiers or settlers shot at or threw stones at a house is important. Several times I have really had no idea who is doing the attacking in releases I have received.

2) Naming who is doing what makes for livelier, stronger writing. Not specifying who is doing what tends to make writing seem mushy and bland. "The report was written and sent to the Chicago office" is a weaker sentence than, "Greg wrote the report and sent it to the Chicago office," or "After Greg finished the report, he sent it to the Chicago office and then went out into the chicken market to watch the sun rise."

Now, using verbs that have nobody doing them is not completely off-limits. Sometimes we really don't know who did what. "The body in the water had been mutilated with an axe," is perfectly appropriate when you don't know who did that to the body, although you could always say, "Someone had hacked at the body with an axe," or, "The body had marks from an axe blade on the torso." Sometimes, using verbs that have nobody doing them adds variety if you have many simple, declarative sentences in a row: "He walked over to the woman in red and asked her to dance. The air was heavy with humidity and cheap perfume. He needed to keep moving. Besides, he was known to be a fabulous practitioner of the tango." We don't know WHO knew that he was good at the tango, but the switch to passive helps break the monotony of the three previous sentences (See "The Rule of Three" in the last issue of the *The Write Stuff*.)

The grammar check on my computer allows me to have eight to ten percent of a manuscript in passive voice. I mean, it allows eight to ten percent of my verbs to have nobody doing them. All the word processing programs in the field should have a grammar check option that will flag these miscreant verbs for you. You should leave them as is ONLY IF

THE END

Fortunately, most people who subscribe to CPTnet are not as ignorant as Fred, but many of them are. Some CPTnet readers may have a certain expertise in Middle Eastern or Latin American affairs but are relatively ignorant about other locations where CPT works. When you write releases, assume that at least one person as ignorant as Fred will be reading them. The Colombia team has an extra challenge before them in that they have to consider what might be confusing for both English and Spanish Spanish-speaking readers.

I suggest that teams set some time aside for discussing ways you can make your releases clearer. In particular, I suggest that you talk about questions you have had to field during speaking engagements or that have arisen from your letters to your supporters. For example, when I first started working in Hebron and referred to "settlers," I kept getting asked at the ends of presentations whether settlers were Israeli or Palestinians. I started asking groups whether they understood what I meant by a "settler" and when some asked for clarification, I gave them a lightning history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the settlement movement. We also started specifying "Israeli" settlers when we wrote releases.

Once you as a team have picked words and phrases related to your project that have confused people, I suggest that you list them on a piece of paper. Across from the confusing word or phrase, write a substitute or explanatory phrase, e.g., "Settler-- specify 'Israeli settler' the first time you use it in a release"; "Sistani-- specify 'Muslim religious leader'" etc.

Fred will thank you.

COOL TOOLS

Periodically, people on teams will become exasperated when I'm harping about their use of passive voice and tell me that no one on the team understands the difference between active voice and passive voice (Or, "verbs that have nobody doing them.") I generally suggest that people use the grammar check in the word processing program they are using, because almost all grammar checkers highlight passive voice and suggest that the writer change a sentence to active.

Becoming familiar with your "Tools" menu will enhance your writing. Below are some of the features in the Wordperfect tools menu that I think are common to most word-processing programs (and I would be interested in hearing which ones have or don't have these tools):

Spell check: This tool is one that everyone writing a release should use before printing a release out for the rest of the team to read. If one writer in the field

IGNORANT FRED

Let me introduce you to Ignorant Fred.

Fred grew up in Delaware, where his parents worked for Dupont Chemical, and had a fairly happy suburban upbringing. He went to college in Virginia and one day noticed a cute girl sitting in a tent on the campus. The sign next to the tent read, "Stop the demolitions of Palestinian homes." Fred stopped to talk to her, and after handing him a flyer, she began talking about the demolitions of homes and neighborhoods in Gaza. Fred rarely read newspapers or watched TV news and his eyes began to glaze over. The girl, Lucille, apologized for inundating him with information. She suggested they go out for coffee sometime.

After the first date, Fred knew he was in love with Lucille (and that he should stop referring to her as a "girl.") She had a great laugh, and more importantly, was really into him. She was also a devout Christian, like he was, and he liked the ease with which they could discuss spiritual matters.

Lucille suggested that he subscribe to CPTnet, so he could become better informed about various issues.

Poor Fred! He did as she suggested, but the more he read, the stupider he felt. He wasn't sure what a settler was and definitely didn't know what gates 4 and 5 were in some place called the Old Market in Hebron. He had no idea what a sistani was or who comprised the Coalition Forces. Fred understood that CPT worked in Ontario, but he wasn't sure whether there were three teams working in Grassy Narrows, Asubpeeschoseewagong and Kenora, or whether one team worked in all three places. He didn't understand why the Colombia releases talked about someone being disappeared, instead of disappearing. He understood that being disappeared was tragic and usually mentioned in conjunction with people getting killed, but he didn't understand precisely how this disappearing happened. He saw the references to "illegal" armed groups and wanted to know the difference between them and legal armed groups. Were guerillas legal? He noted that "illegal" usually referred to paramilitaries meeting popular. He supposed that since positive decisions seemed to come out of the meetings, they must be popular with the local inhabitants.

If Fred had not had Lucille to translate for him, he would have been lost, but he didn't mind. She always got really excited when he asked her questions.

you cannot think of a way to specify who is doing them. Try to have no more than one verb with nobody doing it in any release. Those of you who can easily identify active and passive voice have a responsibility to change passive voice to active when you edit someone else's release. At the very least specify who is doing what. I can always change, "The man was detained by soldiers," to "Soldiers detained the man," but I can't make it right if I don't know who is what.

SEMICOLONS

When I edit releases, I would estimate that I change about 75% of sentences using semicolons into two sentences. Semicolons are used when two complete sentences are very closely related (Yes, Gertrude, that IS in passive voice. Ten points.) For example, "She couldn't climb down to the motor canoe; the river bank was too slippery." Semicolons require a certain amount of subtlety that most beginning writers do not have. It is always correct simply to write two complete sentences, e.g., "She couldn't climb down to the motor canoe. The river bank was too slippery." When in doubt, just write two sentences.

LENGTH

People are more likely to read a short release than a long one. With the exception of updates, most releases for CPTnet should be under 400 words. When a release goes over 500 I get ruthless, so if you care about which of your words get cut, do it yourself before you send it to me. Every word processing program in the field will have a word count feature, usually under "Tools."

NEVER USE ATTACHMENTS

Not all computers use the same word-processing programs, much as Microsoft wishes otherwise. Therefore, always send releases out as text; that is, simply paste them into an e-mail message. I use WordPerfect for Mac. I could buy Word for Mac, but it's a lot cheaper and just as easy for you to send me releases pasted into an e-mail message. Frankly, enriching Bill Gates is something I just don't want to do. For those who don't know, any computer file ending in .doc is a Word document. If Microsoft has its way, Word will one day be the only available word-processing program on the market and that's something we should resist.

Yes Gertrude, everything we discussed today will be on the test. Class dismissed.

**WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? HOW? WHY? HOW MUCH?
WHOSE? WHICH? SAY WHAT? REALLY? IMPORTANT
QUESTIONS TO ANSWER AT THE BEGINNING OF EVERY
RELEASE**

True confession: I have never taken an Introduction to Journalism class. When I was a freshman, Bluffton College offered me the position of editor for The Witmarsum, Bluffton's student newspaper. Then I worked as an apprentice journalist for two semesters on The Bluffton News. These experiences, the hundreds of press releases, articles, essays, units of curriculum I have written since and my winsome charm ultimately got me the job of CPTnet editor.

But I digress . . .

If I had taken an Intro to Journalism class, I would have learned which four or five questions have to be answered in either the first sentence or the first paragraph of any press release or article. I just forget which ones and whether it's okay to have some of them answered in the second sentence. Any journalism majors out there who want to give a definitive answer?

For the purposes of CPTnet, however, I think it's important always to answer "who," "what happened," "when" and "where" at the beginning of every release.

For example, "Israeli soldiers tear-gassed Palestinian students on their way to and from school today in the H2 area of Hebron" answers all of these questions:

Who--Israeli soldiers

What happened--they tear-gassed Palestinian students

When--today Where--in the H2 area of Hebron

I find that the information teams are most likely to leave out relates to "when" Given the rate at which news changes, it is vital to let readers know when a particular event happened, so they can put the event in the context of other news they are hearing. Even though the sample above uses "today," I generally prefer to have a date specified post a release on the same day it appears. "Yesterday" or "last week" usually gets changed to "the previous day" and "the previous week" and

Consider the following:

"The Ontario government refuses to negotiate with the people of Asubpeeschoseewagong on a nation to-nation basis!"

Using an exclamation point at the end of that sentence actually dilutes the impact of the sentence; it makes the writer seem shrill, and not completely stable.

Those are a few thoughts for now. I am open to further questions on usage. You'll all be happy to know that you almost never mess up on question marks.

SPECIAL RECOGNITION FOR OUTSTANDING WRITING goes to the Iraq team for their last few updates. Now admittedly, they had good material to work with, getting evacuated and all, but the updates are not only outstanding because of exciting content. [THERE COULD BE A SEMICOLON HERE BUT I CHOSE TO MAKE TWO SENTENCES BECAUSE THE SECOND ONE IS LONG.] They're great because they capture both the ground-breaking and mundane work of the team in Iraq, record conversations with Iraqi acquaintances that illustrate the situation and in general, are so gripping that the reader doesn't realize how long they are.

BLAH BLAH BLAH

Below is the second appearance of a regular feature that will summarize rules that people consistently break between issues of THE WRITE STUFF. Since new people are constantly joining CPT and old people sometimes ignore MY VERY IMPORTANT GUIDELINES, I thought a little repetition might be in order.

* Never ever send a release as an attachment only. Always paste it into an e-mail message as text.

* Do not describe actions without telling who is doing them (e.g., "the young men were arrested," vs. "the police arrested the young men.") [NOTE PERIOD AND COMMA PLACEMENT THERE]

* With the exception of Updates, do not write releases longer than 500 words<400 is better.

* Never use an acronym (e.g., CF) without explaining what the initials stand for (i.e., "Coalition Forces.")

If I were British, I would conclude this issue with "Thank-you for your kind attention".

approach to period placement, I usually tuck periods inside parentheses and quotation marks at the end of sentences. I'd be interested in hearing from people who regularly read Canadian and American newspapers what rule they see journalists operating under these days.

SEMICOLONS

Semicolons are used to separate two clauses that could stand as two complete sentences, e.g.,

"They should not go out right now. The settlers will kill them" could also be written, "They should not go out right now; the settlers would kill them."

Using the semicolon takes a certain amount of subtlety. You have to decide whether two ideas are so closely related that separating them with a period would introduce too much of a break into the narrative flow. When I edit releases from the field, I change clauses separated by semicolons into two sentences about 75% of the time. When in doubt, write two sentences, which is always correct.

COLONS

Colons should always come after a complete sentence. For example, "CPT's May delegation to Labrador included the following members: Florence Forthright, Jim Stooderblack, Erna Pound . . ." is correct.

"Participants in CPT's June delegation to Cameroon were: Florence Forthright, Jim Stooderblack . . ." is not.

EXCLAMATION POINTS

Exclamation points are the pornography of the punctuation world; that is, they evoke a cheap, visceral reaction and detract from the substance of the writing. Frequent usage of exclamation points makes the following impression: Amateur! Amateur! Amateur!

You should only use exclamation points when you are quoting someone who is in a state of excitement:

"I just saw a group Italians destroy the new fence that Kiryat Arba put up in Wadi Ghoos," a friend told Jim Stooderblack when they met in downtown Hebron. "They are very crazy! But it is good! Very good!"

When you feel you need to emphasize a point in a first-person reflection piece, trust the content of your writing to make the point.

"tomorrow" gets changed to "the next day" if I do not simply substitute the date in question.

AND SPEAKING OF "WHEN"

As some of you know, I have been working on a history of CPT, which has involved going through old reports, releases and letters. A surprising number of these items had no year specified. I am sure at the time people wrote them that they thought the year would be obvious, but now that we have had projects running for ten years, I can tell you that sometimes the year is not obvious. So, even if it seems silly, please put the year on everything that gets printed. Future generations will thank you.

ANOTHER THING THAT GETS LEFT OUT

Sometimes, writers on teams do not sign their names to releases. When something is a straight press release, signing one's name is optional. Updates never have the writer's name, usually because the writer is referencing the log in which many team members may have written.

However, any personal reflection, any release that contains the words "I," "we" or "our" must have the writer's name included after the title. I have sometimes left my name off a personal reflection when I am working in the field and have always gotten a response from some reader asking who had written the piece.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Events of the last couple weeks have taught me that the process by which releases appear on CPTnet is murky for some people. In the interests of de murkifying your lives, here are the basic steps for how writing in the field appears on CPTnet.

1) A writer has an idea for a release, OR an important event happens and the team picks someone to write up a release about it, OR the team realizes it hasn't put out an update for a while and time's a-wasting.

2) Someone writes the piece in question.

3) Team members read the piece and make corrections. Corrections should be applied to content, e.g., whether the writing is factual, whether it is inflammatory, whether it poses a security risk to people mentioned, how it will play in North America's heartland. Corrections should also be applied to structure, e.g., grammar, spelling, use of passive voice (i.e., verbs that have nobody doing them), redundancy and length. Some people are more skilled at editing of this type than others. These people have the obligation to make corrections, just as the person who takes the best photos has the obligation to do photography.

4) The writer or someone else on the team makes the necessary corrections and posts the release on the team's direct list.

5) The CPTnet editor receives the release and notes whether the material is time sensitive, how it speaks to topics on which the North American media is spending a great deal of time, and how long it has been since she last posted something from this team. If she were operating in a vacuum, she would always alternate Iraq, Hebron, Colombia and Grassy Narrows releases so that no team had two releases appearing in a row. However, some releases get jumped to the front of the queue for reasons noted above. CPT staffers sometimes make suggestions about when to post some pieces. The CPTnet editor also values input from the teams about which pieces need to go out fast and why (e.g., if the team is putting out an Urgent Action or companion piece related to a release, they should let the CPTnet editor know about they are doing so.)

6) When the time is right, the CPTnet editor edits the piece for length, grammar and clarity and posts it on CPTnet.

7) [Optional] Readers send notes either praising CPT's work or declaring CPT's moral turpitude by hitting "reply" to CPTnet postings, which causes their messages to bounce to one of several addresses.

KUDOS TO COLOMBIA AND ASUBPEESCHOSEEWAGONG TEAMS

The Update tradition on CPTnet started in 1996, when Hebron team members found they had lots of interesting conversations or encounters that did not merit a full release, but which spoke eloquently to the situation in Hebron. The Colombia and Asubpeeschoseewagong teams found that this format did not work as well for their projects, because life moves more slowly in these locations, and, in the case of the Colombia team, the people in the campo and the people in Barranca sometimes get together to share stories only once a week. They thus began putting out Updates that summarized their work during a period of time and then described notable events or ongoing issues that had taken place during this period of time. Way to adapt, peeps. Thanks to all of you for your hard work, including your writing.

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PUNK! CHEWATION, punkapunkpunka PUNK! CHEWATION (Apologies to those of you who didn't grow up watching "The Electric Company" on PBS)

As I have mentioned in previous columns, languages are always evolving and changing, although language academies try to maintain a static "correct" usage. For example, strict rules about when to use "like" or "as" or making a subject agree in number rather than gender ("Everyone pass his paper to the front of the class") are on their way out of the English language.

The definition of "correct" punctuation has also been changing over the course of my lifetime, which means style manuals are having trouble keeping up with what is a rule and what is a preference. My `_Chicago` Manual of Style has fifty-nine rules governing the uses of a comma, for example. Below are some punctuation issues that often occur in CPT releases. I offer them for those who want to make their writing more professional. However, I would much rather that you concentrate on writing lively descriptions of what is happening on your project locations. As I have said before, it's easy for me to correct flawed grammar and punctuation. I do not have the power make dull content interesting.

WHERE PERIODS GO IN RELATION TO QUOTATION MARKS

Under the British system (or what my housemate calls "the logical system"), if a quoted word or phrase occurs at the end of a sentence, the period is placed outside of the quotation marks.

For example:

Florence Forthright gasped when she saw the amount of farmland confiscated by what the Israeli government calls "the security fence".

Under the American system, the period would go inside the quotation marks.

A similar issue arises with parentheses:

The Colombia team sought another way to refer to illegal armed groups (that is, guerrillas and paramilitaries.)

Under the British system, the period would go outside the parentheses.

Since I spent most of my life solidifying the counter intuitive American

cago and Toronto offices. I try to keep a rotation of releases from the different projects going. Because of the nature of their work, the teams in Colombia and Grassy Narrows tend to put out fewer releases. Therefore, when one from these projects comes in, it usually gets posted fairly soon after I receive it, even if I have five or six Hebron or Iraq releases that came in before it. If Urgent Actions need to be posted, or a team sends in breaking news, those releases will also get moved to the front of the queue.

In a perfect world, every team would have at least one person with the basic instinct to say, "That needs to get written up and sent out as soon as possible." We do not, however, live in a perfect world. I did not come into CPT with instincts telling me "that would make a great picture," or "that would be the best way to get down one side of the ravine and up the other." I had to learn these things (well, the picture-taking anyway), and my first efforts were mediocre or poor, but I did learn to do certain activities better after some practice.

Competent writing is something that also takes practice. Having someone on the team willing to take on the responsibility of learning to write up incidents as soon as possible after they happen is crucial for the work of the team. At your next team meeting I would encourage you to designate "the writer" among you and begin making his/her writing part of your team life.

The issue of timeliness does not apply to all of the teams right now, but it will at some point for all the teams, which is why I am addressing this special edition of the Write Stuff to all of you.

Thanks for your good work. My harping on timeliness lies in my desire for EVERYONE to know about your good work.

Kathleen Kern

P.S. If you are writing letters to your friends/family describing important events shortly after they happen, you can send me those instead. However, if you have energy for writing these letters and do not have it for writing releases, you may want to take another look at your priorities.

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THINKING ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE

CPTers on assignment write for different reasons. Some have a detached, prosaic approach. They see information that needs to get out; they write it up and they post it. Others write releases as a way of expressing feelings about what they have experienced.

Whatever their reasons are for writing, CPTers need to keep their audience in mind as they write. As CPT has grown, the audience has expanded to contain people from different backgrounds. Journalists and human rights organizations subscribe to CPTnet in order to collect data. People from peace organizations subscribe to see how the work of CPT fits into the context of wider peace movements. People from CPT's church constituency subscribe in order to target their prayers about different conflict regions and to reflect upon how the teams' work fits into a faith context. Some readers strongly prefer the updates and straight news releases; others prefer reflection pieces.

Writing for all these audiences can be tricky. Realistically, you can't please all the readers all the time. However, you should be mindful of percentages. If your team has been sending out a lot of straight news releases and updates, have someone on the team write a reflection piece. If you are unsure of what to write about, think about aspects of your work that you find meaningful or troubling. How have you talked about these aspects with your teammates during devotions? How have you described these aspects in your letters home? Answering these questions will serve as good starters for a reflection piece.

Members of the Steering Committee have informed me that they would in particular like to see more theological reflection pieces on CPTnet. Remember that the great majority of our support comes from individual Christians and churches. They are interested in how Christians can make a difference in various conflicts by following Jesus. They want to be a part of this Christian witness. Thus, teams should periodically put out releases that illustrate this intersection of Christian faith and Nonviolent Direct Action. Doug Pritchard's "Prayers for Peacemakers" takes on some the burden of theological reflection for CPTnet, but I would

encourage all the teams to "get religion" in their writing periodically as well. Of the fifty-six non- "Prayers for Peacemakers" releases that have appeared in November and December, only four had some theological content. Erin Kindy's release this week, "Worth more than sparrows," is the most recent.

Now that I have noted the importance of satisfying the needs of our readership to read reflection pieces, especially theological reflection pieces, let me assert that straight news releases are also important. Given that the mainstream media often do not cover what CPTers witness in the field, they need to get this information out quickly and professionally. That means reporting what you have witnessed or heard or heard as factually as possible. The recent series of testimonies that the Iraq team has put out are good examples of these reports (although I had to cut them to fit the parameters of CPTnet.)

Straight news reporting means leaving out editorial comments like, "The U.S. military obviously doesn't care about the human rights of Iraqis." Comments like these make it easy for people already suspicious of CPT's work (yet another audience to consider) to dismiss our writing as biased. Just reporting the ways that soldiers abuse the human rights of Iraqis is a more effective way of helping people draw conclusions about what how the U.S. military regards or does not regard human rights. I find reports of U.S. and Israeli soldiers expressing discomfort with their government's policies especially valuable in communicating the realities of military occupations to our readership. Doing so shows that teams are listening to both the dominators and the dominated, which gives us credibility.

SOMEWHAT-RELATED STORY

I was visiting with the head of B'tselem rights organization reports coming from some sources without reading them because of the over-heated rhetoric used in the pieces. The editorial comments made by the writers rendered the data suspect. I bit my lip and said, "Umm, does that include releases from the Hebron Team" and she assured me it didn't. Whew.

HYBRID REFLECTION/NEWS RELEASES

Some people in CPT communicate important news in the form of reflection pieces. Erin Kindy's piece mentioned above is one such example. Killings by paramilitaries have recently increased in the Barrancabermeja area. Erin reflects on how these killings affect her and the people

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Special Supplementary issue on TIMELINESS

As I write, I have fifteen releases in the CPTnet backlog, most of which came in the last couple days. Many of them are written about events that took place in February.

The most important part of your work is reducing violence, whatever form that may take on the various projects. The second most important part of your work should be writing up important incidents the same day they happen, or close to it.

Now I realize that you all are operating under constraints. The Iraq team, in particular, is handicapped by an unreliable e-mail system.

However, if the main reason you are having difficulty getting news out in a timely manner lies in your being too tired or stressed out to write, or just not feeling like writing, you can choose to make changes in the structure of your team that would facilitate getting releases out in time. In particular, you can designate the most able or willing member of your team to be "the writer." That person would make it his/her job to carve out a time in every day for writing. S/he would interview other team members who have witnessed newsworthy events and get releases out as close to the day they happen as possible. The writer would, of course, still make violence-detering work his/her priority, but s/he would probably not participate in all the visits, meetings, patrols, etc.

What are the consequences of waiting for weeks to write something up and then sending me eight releases in the space of a few days? Well, it means that the description of important events may not appear on CPTnet until a month after they happen and the CPTnet editor will receive complaints. It means that certain releases may never appear at all, because I deem them too out-of-date.

Remember that CPTnet is shared by four different teams right now and CPT staff, who write about various events happening through the Chi

overreacting and the team dropped the matter.

More recently some people on teams have said they did not want their names on personal reflections, because they felt doing so was self-promoting. However, I think if these reflections are written in a spirit of humility, one need not worry about claiming authorship. I believe using one's name on one's reflections puts a more human face on the release. Not claiming authorship, on the other hand, might lead the reader to attributing special powers to the Mysterious Unknown Writer.

So to wrap this section up, if you must err in your writing, err on the side of humility. But try not to err at all. And if you manage not to err, try not to get all egotistical about your inerrancy, okay?

MANTRAS

(Say each one three times before writing a release)

- I will never ever send a release as an attachment only. I will always paste it into an e-mail message as text.
- I will not describe actions without telling who is doing them (e.g., the young men were arrested, vs. the police arrested the young men.)
- With the exception of Updates, I will not write releases longer than 500 words. 400 is better.
- I will never use an acronym (e.g. CF) without explaining what the initials stand for (i.e. "Coalition Forces.")

Use incense and Tibetan meditation bells if it helps.

Thank-you for all your good work. More often than not you strike exactly the right balance between humility and promoting the efficacy of Nonviolent Direct Action.

within the communities where the team works.

Sometimes these reflection/news releases work well and sometimes I wish the team had just put out a straight news release. I think Erin's piece fits in the former category releases will be coming soon about the killings in Barrancabermeja.

If you do decide to convey breaking news in a reflection piece AND anything written in first person is basically a reflection piece the subject heading contains the breaking news that needs conveying. Resist the temptation to come up with a poetic title.

I'm going to pick on Bob Holmes about a subject heading he sent last week because he consistently writes good, concise, thought-provoking pieces, because he's given me permission to use his mistakes for educational purposes in the past and because hey, he's a priest; he has to forgive me.

Bob wrote a release last week about a trip to the town of Ramadi and the village of Al Jazeera in which a particularly horrifying event took place on November 22, 2003. Bob titled the piece, "Not far from Ramadi," and I assumed it was another one of his excellent reflection pieces. Reflection pieces are generally not as time sensitive as news releases, so I posted other pieces ahead of it. Then I read through the whole piece, realized it contained news that we are definitely not hearing in the mainstream media, and I changed the title to, "U.S. soldiers kill four of their own and three handcuffed Iraqis in Al Jazeera village."

Again, consider your audience. Those who prefer news releases and see the poetic title, "On the road to Ramadi" might very well delete the message without reading it. Yet these people might be the ones most keenly interested in the fact that U.S. soldiers had killed three handcuffed Iraqis because they were so distraught about having killed fellow members of their squad.

(Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa, Father Bob. Disculpame.)

**So, if it's not too much trouble I'd like to talk you about
HUMILITY IN WRITING FOR CPT
(if you don't think that's too presumptuous)**

Most of CPT work is a balancing act. We balance times of assertive in-your-face activism with periods of reflection and waiting for local people decide what course they want to take in their resistance. We balance time we spend doing the work and time we spend team-building. We balance teams according to gender, age and the ever-popular Gilmore-Fraleigh work styles.

How we present ourselves through our writing is also a balancing act. Part of the CPT mandate involves putting a spotlight on the work of peacemakers to show that nonviolent direct action takes as much courage as military maneuvers. Unfortunately, describing ourselves as heroic in our releases is at best unattractive and at worst will lead our readers to think that CPTers are in the business of ego-fulfillment or grandstanding.

Writing, "I stood in front of the soldiers with my arms out shouting 'Don't shoot' because I was willing to die to prevent them from killing people in the crowd" sounds melodramatic, even if it's true. The relatively innocuous, "We prayed with the people by the river for protection from the armed groups and thus, in a small way, brought them hope" has a presumptuous, 'look how saintly we are' feel to it.

Probably the best way to avoid sounding egotistical about the good things we do in our writing is to write releases in third person and use the quotations of non-CPTers. For example, consider the following description: "The women at the head of the demonstration stopped in front of the soldiers and refused to back away, even when the soldiers pointed their guns at them. Florence Forthright and Jim Stooderblack moved in beside the women, arms outstretched, and called, 'Don't shoot! This is a nonviolent demonstration.' Other CPTers stood in the middle and at the back of the crowd. After about twenty minutes, the organizers of the demonstration decided to turn back.

Once everyone had returned to the University, the organizers provided tea and cookies and expressed satisfaction at the way the day's events had turned out. A member of the faculty told Forthright, 'If you hadn't

been there, someone would have gotten shot.'

Notice how much more palatable the previous description is than the following: "Jim and I stood in front of the soldiers and told them not to shoot. If we hadn't been there, someone would have gotten shot." The first example also gives credit to the courage of the grassroots organizers of this demonstration, who are actually taking more risks than the CPTers are.

Or consider the following personal reflection: "Despite the ongoing CPT patrols up and down the river, the numbers of armed actors in the area appears to be increasing. We felt as though we had little to offer in the way of protection for the people in these small communities. Nevertheless, at their request, we have kneeled and prayed with them at the conclusion of our visits. 'Your prayers bring us hope,' one elderly woman told me as she helped me down the riverbank."

BUT DON'T GET TOO SELF-EFFACING

Now, while it is always better to err on the side of humility. CPTers really can err on this side. I think the error has its roots in people telling us how special we are because of our work. Those of us who have stood in the line of fire or fished dead bodies out a river have all had the experience of someone telling us some variation on, "Oh I could never do what you do. You're so brave." We know that we probably were not putting ourselves at risk as much as people think we were and we also know that the people we work among are at much greater risk and get no affirmation for their bravery. Accordingly, our embarrassment might lead us to play down the "heroic" aspects of our work.

In 1998, when the Hebron team received e-mail death threats from a partisan of the Hebron settler community, saying they had three days to leave before someone killed them, the team at first did not want to publicize the issue. Palestinians received death threats all the time in Hebron and no one wrote press releases about it. The Chicago Office and I had to push the team a little bit to respond to the threats, because it was important for our constituency to know what sort of behavior the Hebron settlers condoned. The resulting publicity prompted solidarity visits from various progressive Israeli groups and in the end the team, as they expected, suffered no ill effects from the threats. A few months later when another e-mail death threat came the Hebron team's way, they called an Israeli friend for advice. She basically told them she thought they were