Maryland Today
Seminar 4: Refining the Writing

July 25, 2018
Seminar Rules

- We all have something to contribute, so please speak up
- The more you contribute, the better the experience will be for everyone
- We will start and end on time
- Attendance counts
Basic Principles of Good News and Feature Writing
“Why bother geeking out about writing?”

- Aiming for clear, strong writing helps you communicate better, regardless of forum.

- We want people to read Maryland Today.
But seriously
Simplify
Short words usually beat long, polysyllabic ones:

- “use” rather than “utilize”
- “ask” rather than “inquire”
- “buy” rather than “purchase”
- “build” rather than “construct”
- “also” rather than “additionally”
- “said” rather than “stated,” “mused,” “fumed,” “expostulated” and a hundred other distracting words.
Aim for structural simplicity:

- Short sentences with fewer clauses vs. long, complex sentences.
- Short grafps—and three sentences is a long graf.
- Crisp, focused ledes, whether for a straight news story or a feature.

(But don’t be afraid to break the rules for a good reason.)
Sacoby Wilson, associate professor of environmental health at the University of Maryland at College Park, helps Maryland residents become “citizen scientists” to improve environmental conditions in their communities. (Courtland Milloy/The Washington Post)

By Courtland Milloy  April 10  Email the author

As the fight for environmental justice intensifies in the Washington area, a new breed of community activist has emerged: the citizen scientist. They are ordinary residents using a basic understanding of civics and science in service to the health of their communities.

“They do their own research and they are not intimidated by the glossy presentations of industrial polluters at zoning hearings and county council meetings,” said Sacoby Wilson, an associate professor of environmental health at the University of Maryland at College Park.
Because that, in a coconut shell, was the problem. Jimmy Buffett is not really Jimmy Buffett anymore. He hasn’t been for a while. Jimmy Buffett — the nibbling on sponge cake, watching the sun bake, getting drunk and screwing, it’s 5 o’clock somewhere Jimmy Buffett — has been replaced with a well-preserved businessman who is leveraging the Jimmy Buffett of yore in order to keep the Jimmy Buffett of now in the manner to which the old Jimmy Buffett never dreamed he could become accustomed. And therein lies the Margaritaville® Mesquite BBQ Rub: The more successful you become at selling the Jimmy Buffett lifestyle, the less you are seen as believably living the Jimmy Buffett lifestyle.
Kill the Jargon
(Maryland Today stories are for general readers, not specialists)

What did you say?
Avoid Tired Buzzwords

● synergy
● catalyze
● high-impact
● translational
● transformative
● state-of-the-art
● paradigm
Newly discovered armored dinosaur from Utah reveals intriguing family history

Spikey southwestern species evolved from Asian ancestors

Date: July 19, 2018
Source: University of Utah

Fossils of a new genus and species of an ankylosaurid dinosaur -- *Akainacephalus johnsoni* -- have been unearthed in the Kaiparowits Formation of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM), in Kane County, southern Utah, U.S.A., and are revealing new details about the diversity and evolution of this group of armored dinosaurs. Expected to look like other North American Late Cretaceous ankylosaurid dinosaurs with smooth bony armor on the skull, the new research suggests just the opposite and indicates that the defining features of *Akainacephalus*, specifically the spiky bony armor covering the skull and snout, align more closely with Asian ankylosaurids, who also have more pronounced spikes covering their skulls.
A new species of spiky-headed dinosaurs has been discovered in Utah, the oldest of its genus ever found in North America. *Akainacephalus johnsoni* is 75 million years and like its cousin, the *Ankylosaurus*, had an armored body and an imposing club tail.

The dinosaur's scientific journey began 10 years ago in 2008, when a paleontologist with the Bureau of Land Management found what appeared to be a fossil site at the Kaiparowits Formation of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. A hotbed of prehistoric discovery, the Kaiparowits has been called "dinosaur Shangri La." The National Monument was recently shrunk through an order from President
Look at This Incredible New Armored Dinosaur Found in Utah

They’re calling this newly discovered dinosaur “thorny head,” and it’s changing what we know of North American ankylosaurs, the heavily armored herbivores that had the misfortune of living alongside *Tyrannosaurus rex* during the Late Cretaceous.

Behold *Akainacephalus johnsoni*, a new species and genus of ankylosaurid dinosaur. It’s considered the most complete Late Cretaceous ankylosaur ever found in Utah—or in the entire southwestern United States for that matter. Unlike other North American ankylosaurs that lived around the same time, this particular dinosaur featured spikes and cones on its head and snout, hence its name.
Talk Researchers Down From the Ledge

- Help them raise their media savvy and understand a news article is not a journal article.

- With proper care, simplified doesn’t have to mean dumbed-down or incorrect.

- A good, readable article can grab outside media coverage and raise their profile.

- To make the case, you need a good grasp of the subject.
If the topic can’t be boiled down for general readers, it probably isn’t a Maryland Today article.
Get Your Point Across

- Know your subject and your audience.

- Think about what you’re saying with each sentence or graf, and how it leads to the next point.

  Explain hard concepts and provide necessary background

  Smoothly transition between sentences and grafs.

- Ask yourself: Is there any chance that what you wrote could confuse readers?
• Check complex parts with a colleague, including your Maryland Today story contact.

• It might help to outline or map out the story before writing.
“All your clear and pleasing sentences will fall apart if you don’t keep remembering that writing is linear and sequential, that **logic is the glue that holds it together**, that tension must be maintained from one sentence to the next and from one paragraph to the next...”

—Nonfiction writing guru William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*
Be a Grammarly Nerd
aka Style and Grammar Matter
“Deep learning-based translation systems under development at Maryland will take limited amounts of information from the low-resource languages, churn it with other language-related data from better-resourced languages, and come up with powerful new tools that will allow for the manipulation and transformation of content in those languages.”
Learning to Listen

UMD Hosts New Cochlear Implant Intensive Program for Kids

BY ANNIE DANKELSON  | PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE S. CORDLE

A summer symphony floats from a classroom in LeFrak Hall. Children shake maracas, ding triangles and ring bells.

To the side is a less typical scene: Graduate students fiddle with the youngsters’ cochlear implants and hearing aids, making sure they’re working before xylophone chimes beckon everyone to the carpet for circle time.
Avoid the Passive Voice

I'm lovin' it.
IT IS BEING LOVED BY ME.
“Mistakes were made...”
Example

Nope:
“The largest black hole in the universe has been discovered by UMD astronomers.”

Better:
“UMD astronomers have discovered the largest black hole in the universe.”

Best (adding interesting context or facts):
“The largest black hole in the universe has the mass of 100 billion suns and powers star formation in the Optimus Prime galaxy, the UMD astronomers who discovered it said.”
● Write like you talk (without the “like”s and “umm”s). Conversational writing is more natural and appealing.

● Read the story aloud to yourself to identify style or grammar problems or clunkiness likely to throw off readers.
Like What You Write
Aka Follow Freud’s “Pleasure Principle”

A story you care about will ALWAYS turn out better than one you don’t.
• Look beyond the obvious—you might find the story is something other than what you expected (or were told).

• What interests you? What makes you smile? What creates an emotional reaction? Try to write that, even if it’s just a nicely turned phrase in a run-of-the-mill announcement.

• Flee from anything that makes you grit your teeth—or get past it as quickly and cleanly as possible.

• Leave time to go back through the story to tweak, rewrite and make it the best it can be.
“After it’s finally on paper, I start editing out extraneous information and massaging the language so it sounds interesting to read. I have a tendency to write much longer than I should, so when given a specific word count, it’s hard to cut parts of a story that I have some kind of emotional connection to. I keep editing and rewriting until I literally sit up straighter with pride after reading each paragraph.”

—Simone S. Oliver, writer/editor, New York Times and Facebook
Tips and Techniques for Refining Your Writing
Write a Lede That Sings

(...and tells us something we didn’t already know)
Write a Lede That Sings
(...and tells us something we didn’t already know)
● Ledes are the toughest part of the story to write.

● Typically, choose the most interesting or important point.
A feature story lede is often more indirect—it has to both hook the reader and lead to the central point.

Out of their Shells

Researchers’ Turtle Program Helps Shy Kids Connect

BY CHRIS CARROLL | ILLUSTRATION BY JASON KEISLING

Start with a room full of cars, stuffed animals, books, dolls, action figures, robots, building blocks and balloons, and then send in a group of preschoolers.

Everything you might expect—relentless exploration, high-pitched chatter, a chase, maybe a dispute over a coveted electronic dog—is the opposite of what’s happening in a playroom in the Benjamin Building. Like magnets repelling each other, the 4- and 5-year-olds move apart to play solo, periodically glancing warily at the others.
Judgment days

In a small Alabama town, an evangelical congregation reckons with God, President Trump and the meaning of morality

LUVERNE, Ala.

Clay Crum opened his Bible to Exodus Chapter 20 and read verse 14 one more time.

“Thou shalt not commit adultery,” it said.

He prayed about what he was going to do. He was the pastor of First Baptist Church in the town of Luverne, Ala., which meant he was the moral leader of a congregation that overwhelmingly supported a president who was an alleged adulterer. For the past six weeks, Crum had been preaching a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, and now it was time for number seven.
• Find a balance. Don’t jam everything into the lede, but don’t be cryptic or incomplete.

• Remember: This is the start of a story, not an information dump or a press briefing.

  Don’t tell us who in your department conducted a study. Don’t lead off with where something was published. Do relate your most fascinating info or research findings.
Read your lede and ask yourself:

- If it’s a news article, does it clearly state what the story is about?

- If it’s a feature story lede, is it creative, maybe even fun, and is it consistent with the larger story?

- Do the style and language work to increase interest?

- Do you see any fat? If so, cut it.
Crack the Nut(Graf)

The nutgraf in theory:

● Functions as the lede in a straight-news/inverted-pyramid lede.

● Right after a feature lede, tells readers what the story is about, and the relevance.
The nutgraf in practice:

- After two grafs throwing out fun facts about Dutch parties 300 years ago, it smoothly centers the story at UMD.

- In this case, it’s just one sentence, and it delivers the news about an ARHU project.
• Usually, one or two straightforward sentences does it.
• But a long, complex feature story might have a longer, more complex nutgraf—and it might be more than one graf.
“This was a special day,” he said after guiding Minnie V. to the dock, his Eastern Shore accent flattening vowels. “It feels so much better in the water.”

Half a world away, scientists watched a different launch with alarm. A 1-trillion-ton iceberg, nearly the size of Delaware and containing twice the water volume of Lake Erie, had broken off from Antarctica. Though scientists aren’t sure if climate change was the cause, the rupture raised fears that a continent with 90 percent of the world’s ice—enough to determine whether Chance will survive the next century—would be further destabilized.

Whitelock knows his position is uncertain. Over the last 15 years, flooding on the lone road to his house increased from a few times a year to dozens.

“I got tired of battling it,” he says. “You had to pick your days to get home.”

Not too tired, however, to leave entirely: He moved just one road down.

“If it’s your home,” Whitelock says, “you’re always partial to it.”

Since 2012, researchers from the University of Maryland have tried to connect local needs with global environmental challenges through the Deal Island Peninsula Project. As climate change leads to erosion and flooding that strands school buses and submerges roads even on sunny days, UMD has brought together people like Stoney Whitelock with environmental and government officials for workshops, community conversations and collaborative research to forge consensus and find ways to take action.
Choose Sharp Quotes
• Think of quotes as spice, adding flavor to the article.
● Don’t convey basic facts and information in quotes.

● Use quotes that could only have come from that person, that convey emotion or opinion. Otherwise, paraphrase.

● Avoid the trap of setting up quotes with a sentence that has the same information as the quote.

● You don’t have to quote—or even include—everyone you interview.

● From the Poynter Institute: “Put your bloated quotes on a diet. Quotations should occupy a place of honor in a story.”
A "Capitol Step" in the Right Direction

How a UMD Alum Co-founded Political Comedy Troupe

BY SALA LEVIN ’10 | PHOTO COURTESY OF VIOLET CROWN PHOTO WORKS

If there's one lesson to be learned from Elaina Newport's professional trajectory, it's this: Making fun of your boss could be a great career move.

A founding member of the Washington, D.C.-based musical comedy troupe the Capitol Steps, Newport '79

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Backyard Battle
JULY 17, 2018
Peter Rosenberg ’02: Sorry, Not Sorry

How an NYC DJ Became Rap’s Biggest Fan—and Sharpest Critic

BY SALA LEVIN ’10 | ARTWORK BY KOREY RICHARDSON ’16
PETER ROSENBERG ’02 DOESN’T MEAN TO BE A POT STIRRER (THOUGH HE USES A LESS-PRINTABLE TERM THAN “POT”).

As co-host of the morning show on famed New York City rap station Hot 97, then on the afternoon talkfest at 98.7 ESPN, he typically interviews rising rap stars, cracks jokes about hip-hop rumors and grumbles about the Knicks.

But occasionally, he can’t help himself. He’s suggested that Jay Z is “hanging on to his little brother’s coattails”—the little brother being Kanye West. He’s accused hip-hop elder Chuck D of doing nothing to support current rap culture. He’s tweeted that mega-rapper Drake “wouldn’t have been the toughest kid in my Hebrew school.”

He might apologize later, like when he said on air that he was “truly sorry” for his comments about Chuck D. “But,” he says now, “I can’t guarantee I wouldn’t do it again.”

Rosenberg’s outspokenness has made him one of the most-high-profile hip-hop deejays of his generation. Not only does he banter about rap’s biggest news and newsmakers, he’s quick to defend what he considers authentic hip-hop and black culture against diluting forces. He’s also earned a reputation as a champion of a classic style of rap, one that prizes complicated lyrical technique and stripped-down beats.

The rapper Busta Rhymes once described Rosenberg as the only DJ “that’s still trying to implement that filthy-under-the-nail, holy, sacred and pure, unmixed, undiluted, un-tampered-with, real hip-hop s—.”
Arrive at the End

Close with a dynamite quote that sums up the story.

A YA Book of His Own

Alum Writes the Stories He Didn’t See as a Youth

Reynolds, whose books have been nominated for the National Book Award, often visits schools and talks to young people who are much like he once was. “I try to get them to understand that stories are not reserved for special people or people outside of their communities,” he says. “They have stories. They can own their own stories.”
The right kind of ending quote can make a story stick with you… sometimes permanently.

In your career, you’ve often sung about forgiveness. What do you need to be forgiven for?

“I go to church. I ask for forgiveness. Don’t make a big deal out of R. Kelly saying it in a song. I believe in God. I fear God. I don’t want to go to hell.”

Do you think you might?

“Young fella,” he says, “absolutely.”

—“The R. Kelly Problem,” David Marchese, New York Magazine
A straight news story can end unceremoniously when the writer has nothing else to convey.

Mr. Hayden, in a Twitter post, said the removal of his security clearance would not affect what he said publicly. He also said he does not go to the White House for classified briefings.

—Julian Barnes, The New York Times

*Trump Weighs Stripping Security Clearances From Officials Who Criticized Him*
You can wrap up a feature story with a rhetorical twist instead.

Before starting their commercial farm, the initial idea was to raise their three children in a natural setting while growing their own food, Lori Hill says.

“There’s lessons you learn in everyday life on a farm you can’t learn anywhere else,” she says. “You have the strict responsibility of chores, and you also have freedom to shoot a bow and arrow in your back yard.”

While he hasn’t picked up a bow, the couple’s 3-year-old grandson, who lives nearby, clamors to help tend the animals whenever he can. Just maybe, after a multigenerational interlude, farming might be back in this family’s bloodstream for good.
● The story should end at a natural stopping point, and without loose ends or unanswered questions, unless they’re the point.

● If possible, try to end your story with something that resonates.
The Mysterious Art of Headline Writing
No one’s going to read the story if the headline doesn’t grab them. (Okay, your mom might…)
A Good Hed Is Hard to Write

- Look for inspiration in your best line, or quote.
- Play on an idiom or cliche—don’t use the worn-out phrase itself.
Bee Succinct

Doctoral student wins global award for catchy video on pollinator research

Hunger Gains

Campus Pantry Fills Growing Need Among Terps

BY LAUREN BROWN | ILLUSTRATION BY JASON KEELING

Burning Question

Engineering Professor Leads Global Research for Fire-Safe Building Design

Final Answers

Archivist, at Retirement, Looks Back at Looking Back

Diamonds from Cole

Field House’s Reinvention to Fuse Academics, Sports, Research
• Good heds boil the story down to its essence. Don’t cram too much in.

• Generalize and contextualize:

  Don’t: “Chemical X Did Y to the Z Gene in Protazoa, UMD Researcher Discovered.”

  Do: “UMD Biologists Uncover Genetic Approach to Fighting Cancer.”

• Avoid verbs that drain energy and are inconclusive and boring: discusses, addresses, participates.

• Say something the reader doesn’t already know.
Avoid empty heds: “X School Delivers Pioneering Medical Research.” Instead, what’s new?

Avoid maniacally technical statements and obscure science-y words that will baffle most readers:

- Monopole
- Thermogenesis
- Epigenetic
- Perovskite
- Cellulostic
Exercise 1
Scenario

- DOTS has just announced an exciting new “Employee Parking Cash Out Pilot Program”
- Through some strange twist of fate, your supervisor has asked you to prepare a news article about the program.
- All you have to go on is an email.

Assignment

Write a zippy lede and a snappy hed for a Maryland Today article.
Exercise 2
Scenario

● Your college, school or department has announced the hire of a nationally known faculty member to head up a big new center.

● The center was announced in February and started with a multimillion-dollar grant from the NSF, NEA, NEH, etc.

● The new hire is a top researcher in one of the discipline’s key areas of study (use your imagination).

Assignment

This time, write a snappy hed and zippy lede for Maryland Today.

(Notice: “Major New Center is Announced” will result in disqualification and 20 pushups.)
Discussion
Session 5: Planning the Art

Visuals might be the primary way to convey a story. We’ll discuss photos, illustrations, videos, infographics and other ways to shake up and strengthen your storytelling. Bring one or two story ideas for a talk on what art would best enhance them. Feel free to bring published ones with art that caused you heartburn.
Schedule

Session 1: 11 a.m. Wednesday, June 13, 0215 ESJ

Session 2: 3 p.m. Tuesday, June 26, 2212 ESJ

Session 3: 1 p.m. Thursday, July 12, 2212 ESJ

Session 4: 1 p.m. Wednesday, July 25, 2212 ESJ

Session 5: 1 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 7, 2212 ESJ

Session 6: 1:30 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2212 ESJ