



JESS UNWIN PROVES
HE'S A DIAMOND GIZA WITH TEN
TOP TIPS FOR CURRENT-DAY SCRIBES!

BUILD A GREAT PYRAMID

1. PYRAMID

So what's this all about? A term more familiar to newspaper 'hacks' like me, it describes the right structure for writing and means starting your message with the most interesting stuff first (at the sharp, pointy top of the pyramid), and then spreading out and down through your story with the less important stuff.

2. INTRO

The first paragraph is the apex of your pyramid, containing the essence of your message. Its aim is to hook your reader. It's an oft-used comparison, but it's true to say that when thinking about an intro consider what you would say first to a friend in the pub if you had some juicy gossip. You wouldn't open by talking about the weather if you'd just been sitting next to Brad Pitt on the bus.

An intro should so encapsulate your message it should be possible to cut off the rest of the story and find the first paragraph still makes sense on its own – but obviously missing the detail. However, it must make the reader want to read more. Keep your intro short – under 30 words – and use just one sentence with as little punctuation as possible.

3. PARAGRAPHS

The building blocks of the rest of your pyramid create paragraphs that introduce new ideas and clarify distinct points, but they should also be like links in a chain, with the end of one flowing into the next.

4. SENTENCES

Keep them short – one thought to one sentence whenever possible. This makes the bits of your message more digestible mentally. Get things the right way round in your sentences. For example, do use: George Bush came in to borrow a children's learn-to-read book when I was at the library yesterday. Don't use: Yesterday, when I was at the library, the man who came in to borrow a children's learn-to-read book turned out to be George Bush.

5. QUOTES

Knowing who's speaking is as important as what they're saying. Unattributed quotes lack credibility because who's to say the author isn't making them up? (I know what some of you are thinking). It's obvious, but early naming of the quoted source

Forget walking like an Egyptian – **WRITING** like an Egyptian could be the answer to improving your communications tool and engaging your target audience. I don't mean hieroglyphics: that wouldn't help at all. No, I mean by sticking to some of the tried-and-trusted rules of writing, one the most famous of which is the 'pyramid'. Good writing, which is what the pyramid is about, comes down to the same things – whether it be newspaper or business publishing. Your goal is to get over your message – whatever it is – quickly and effectively to a target audience. How to do that is not rocket science, but it is a skill that writers have to learn. Here are ten helpful tips.

always adds to what's being said. "Maths in not my strong point" has a lot more impact if you explain Gordon Brown said it.

A great quote can sometimes sum up a story and so can be used in your intro but, generally, they are offered to add more detail further down.

6. BE BRIEF

Get over your message in as few words as possible! Why? Because time is precious. It sometimes seems we're bombarded with information 24/7 – you're up against newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, the internet, texts, e-mails etc. Think about how we all deal with this. The truth is we scan what passes before our eyes and very quickly reject the information – unless it's interesting to us. So, as a writer, you need to get your hook in fast.

7. USE PLAIN ENGLISH

It's thought the average adult reader's age in the UK is about that of Homer Simpson (between 10 and 12 years old). Whether that's true or not, short words are simpler to understand so you get the message over quicker. Avoid jargon, acronyms and unfamiliar abbreviations. Just about everyone knows what the BBC is (but some don't know what it stands for – Corporation, not Company). However, only some will recognise OINKY (One Income, No Kids Yet) from the dating industry.

Harry Potter fans might recall SPEW (The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare), but no-one will be able to guess the meaning of FART (Fight Against Ridiculous Taxes – a campaigning farmers' group in New Zealand). Amusing though these examples are, unfamiliar abbreviations are a no-no. If you have to use acronyms or abbreviations, spell out what they stand for at the first mention with the acronym/abbreviation in brackets afterwards. If you use jargon, explain what it means.

8. / 9. SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION

First off, don't dismiss the checks that come with software like Microsoft Word (but watch out for American spellings). I still have a dictionary and encyclopedia within reach when I write but nowadays I also turn to the web for help.

The thing to remember is to be sure of your source's authority. For example, use the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary. Newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Economist* have free online guides to their tried-and-trusted spelling and grammar rules and even Google can be a help – but, again, look at reliable sources and get the same answers from three different sources to be sure.

I wouldn't recommend the best-selling and very smug book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss. Instead, try something like *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation* by RL Trask – it's short on witty attitude and long on practical help. Training courses are also invaluable. Start by contacting CiB or the National Union of Journalists.

10. THE WEB

People lose interest even more quickly when reading from a computer screen, so getting to the point straight away is doubly important. Highlight key words and phrases, use bullet points and meaningful sub-headings. Most of all, write HALF as much as for print then cut it some more. ■

→ Jess Unwin has been a writer and designer (print and online) during 20 years in newspaper and corporate publishing. His experience as a sub-editor includes work for *The Sun*, *News of the World* and the *Daily Express*. In 2004 he was appointed as quality, production and IT manager with CG Business Communications.

