

MAY MEETING

Building Good Relationships with Public Relations Professionals

BY JEFF STEELE

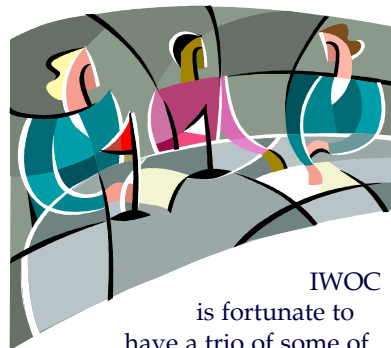
Often considered one of the most solitary of pursuits, writing is actually anything but. In fact, it's no less a "people business" than many other professions. Regardless of your skill hammering away at a keyboard as a professional writer, it's likely your relationships with clients, editors, sources and other writers are among the biggest single factors driving your success.

If you are a writer who produces articles, books and/or promotional materials, some of the most crucial ties you can forge are with public relations professionals. Simply put, PR pros can be among a writer's very best friends.

Whether you're working to develop salable article ideas, searching for insightful sources and information for your stories, trying to keep tabs on what kinds of pieces editors are buying, monitoring editorial changes at coveted editorial markets or foraging for opportunities in public relations writing, developing a rapport with key members of the public relations field can be one of your wisest and most strategic career moves.

To provide a better under-

standing of what public relations professions do – and what they may be able to do for you – IWOC is presenting a Public Relations Panel at the Tuesday, May 12th meeting.



IWOC is fortunate to have a trio of some of the brightest, most skilled and personable representatives of the Chicagoland PR community gracing its dais May 12th.

Kate Koziol, whom many of you know from her occasional appearances at IWOC meetings, parlayed her experience during a career at United Airlines into the founding of her own highly successful public relations firm. Based in the Norwood Park neighborhood on Chicago's northwest side, KSquared Public Relations specializes in both the travel industry and in issues affecting small business development.

Kim Manning, PR director for Chicago's Taylor

Johnson & Olesker, a Loop public relations firm with many builder and developer clients, not only knows the Chicago-area residential real estate market backwards and forwards, but is a walking compendium of information about many of the editors and publications that focus on this key industry.

Kimberly McCullough brings a former journalist's perspective and sensitivity to her role as director of community and media relations for River Forest's Concordia University Chicago. McCullough is as skilled at suggesting excellent sources for education articles as she is knowledgeable about the concerns impacting today's higher education environment.

Like all PR people, the primary responsibilities of our three panelists center on gaining favorable publicity for their clients – in McCullough's case, her own institution. But in handling those responsibilities, they accumulate abundant wisdom about the issues many freelancers write about and the markets to which they sell their stories.

Need names of editors at travel publications? Koziol may be able to provide a

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Stet is published 11 times per year by the **Independent Writers of Chicago**, PMB 119, 1800 Nations Drive, Suite 117, Gurnee, IL 60031, 847/855-6670. Internet address: www.iwoc.org. Copy submissions and advertising materials are due by the 15th of the month preceding publication. All submissions and ideas will be considered. The subscription rate of \$1 per year is included in the annual membership dues. Copyright ©2009 by Independent Writers of Chicago.

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN/ROGER RUEFF

April Showers Bring ... May's Random Thoughts

And more showers, apparently, judging from the weather forecast. I know I'll regret this in a few weeks when Nature opens the blast doors, exposing us all to the white-hot core of a Chicago summer, but I'm more than a little ready for some sunshine—and so is my Harley.

I discovered two mourning doves copulating on my deck this morning. They did not seem the least bit embarrassed. It reminded me of a tale a friend of mine tells... how one afternoon, she spied from her Uptown home-office window a man and woman in the early stages of a non-monetary drug transaction (an oral agreement of sorts) under the back staircase of a neighboring condo. She pounded on her office window and held up her portable phone to let the transacting parties know she was ready to call the police. It was not the act that offended her—merely the choice of venue. Like any good businessman, the dealer consolidated his accounts-receivable department and moved the transaction to friendlier climes.

These are not the kinds of connections you're likely to see made on the Discovery Channel.

It's time to learn a new language—and no, I don't mean the happy, intuitive dialect of peace, love, and positivity that we'll all use in the rosy future when Humanity is united as a common family and war, poverty, hunger, and sickness have been chased from

the globe.

I'm talking about Spanish. I have a play opening in Madrid in September, and the production agreement calls for the producer to fly me over and put me up in exchange for my participation in a number of publicity events. Since I've never been accused of being a shrinking violet (and if I were, the charges wouldn't stick), doing the publicity gigs seems like a



small price to pay for a ticket to Europe. So the answer was a definite, "Si."

Whenever I travel abroad, I try to bone up on the local tongue—at least enough to say hello, goodbye, and order a coffee (or a beer). It seems courteous to do so, and the natives appreciate the effort—maybe because it allays their fears of an expanding American Empire. Besides which, I like language in general... which is good, considering I'm a writer.

I am conversant in French, which I studied in school—so that helps. And I know a smattering of Croatian, Italian, and Chinese (plus just enough Yiddish to invoke the occasional chor-tle). And now I hope to add Spanish to the list.



I haven't started the book-learnin', yet, but I did buy a computer program that includes an interactive DVD and a set of audio CDs to play in the car. The other day, on my way home from the city, I was listening to the CD #2, "Greetings and Introductions," when I did a double-take. The narrator, a pleasant-sounding woman who speaks slowly, enunciates carefully, and has no accent of any kind, was conjugating the verb "estar"—one of two Spanish forms of the verb "to be." When she came to the second-person plural (collective "you"), she translated it as, "Y'all are."

Straight up, no mistake. "Y'all are."

I thought to myself, "Where was this made... in Texas?" But again, she had not the least bit of an accent. Puzzling.

Later on, she got to other verbs. And sure enough, the second-person plural in every case was a hearty "y'all." And the word was absent a Southern drawl; it sounded completely foreign to my ear. Even after I've come to expect it, it continues to cause a jolt. (Also, as a friend of mine pointed out... Does that mean when she teaches English to Spaniards, she tells them to say "y'all"? Oy vay!)

The incident brought to mind an encounter I had years ago when I was teaching business writing at the

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Instructions on How to Write Instructions

BY CYNTHIA MIKAL

Our own George Becht spoke on technical writing for the April meeting. He began by telling us that as a freelance technical/manual writer, he has all of the same issues another freelance writer would have. He has found that there is a need for instructions that range from super simple to very complex. How do you begin to write instructions? A simple example is a cookbook; it has a list of ingredients, tells how to put those ingredients together, and also predicts what the outcome should be. An instruction manual is a “how-to” reference and more. It is a marketing tool, a public relations tool, a place for liability and safety information, an opportunity to show the end user that the company is customer-oriented, and a sales tool for extra parts, at least.

Becht’s writing deals with manufactured products. He does not write computer manuals nor does he write for the Web. He has found some manuals are being exclusively “printed” on the Web, especially those used for computers.

Becht gave us an example of how the process works. For a manual for a paper-folding machine, he had to write a how-to-take-it-out-of-the-box/read-this-first instruction, an operating manual, a service manual, and a parts list. He did not get much information with this project. In fact, he had to take the machine apart, photograph it, and create the entire manual from scratch. For this project he also

worked with a designer. Becht believes that the ideal technical-writer situation is to be involved from the beginning—from the concept of the product not yet fully designed all the way through to manufacture of the product. But sometimes there is an existing product and a need for a manual in three weeks!

Some roles of a manual writer: A traffic controller who coordinates the elements of sales literature, service and user manuals, parts lists, training manuals, engineering drawings and specifications, graphics and marketing. A translator for the engineers and manufacturers to the consumer or operator. A content advisor. A scheduler keeping everything on track. A converter and condenser of information.

To create the manual the writer prepares a first draft, usually in MS Word with text boxes as placeholders for illustrations or comments. The draft then often goes to the designer who puts it into PDF format. It will go back and forth with mark-ups; the edit and final approval may take several rounds. The writer may get a lot of information: for example, a flow diagram, software, and possibly engineering documents that might include photographs, artwork, text descriptions, marketing plans, drawings, and specifications. However, as shown by the example above, sometimes the writer gets much less.

The style of technical writing may be set by the

designer, or the client may have a standard for the company. However, one of the most important things is consistency throughout the manual. The manual may be printed in more than one language and that may affect word count, number of pages, and other items. For example, Spanish uses 30 percent more words than English. Some countries require bilingual manuals. Illustrations and symbols are a big help in overcoming language barriers and are often used for safety descriptions.

Where to look for work? Large companies often have their own in-house writing departments. At times, they get overloaded and hire freelancer writers, usually for these departments: advertising, marketing, product management, or engineering. Most other work comes through design firms. Sometimes design firms have staff writers, but others need freelancers. Design firms often have relationships with companies to develop packaging, advertising, trade show, and other materials. In such cases, the design firm is usually the prime contractor.

Typical manual sections include: Introduction; Cautions and Warnings (These are often in the front but they should also be next to the text or diagrams that they pertain to because people often skip the front sections. [Seventy percent of product liability suits have to do with some failure to warn.]); Assembly and/or

Installation Instructions; Operating Instructions; Maintenance and Storage; Troubleshooting (Giving users easy fixes to most common problems makes them happy when it is mid-night or on a weekend.); Warranty and License Information; Repair and Service (Included here are repair locations, instructions for shipping the product, what should be included, and a helpful note as to what is wrong.); Accessories (This is a sales/ marketing tool, but it’s also helpful if the user needs extra parts; and a Parts List, which is often a fold-out placed at the front or back to avoid repetitive illustrations.

Some available resources for the would-be manual writer include: *Writing and Designing Manuals*, 4th Edition (due out in June 2009) by Patricia A. Robinson; *Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications* (Microsoft-oriented, but it also has principals that apply across the board, so you should put it next to your Chicago Manual of Style). Also helpful is the American National Standard ANSI Z535.1 through 6, which gives information on safety colors, signs, words, and symbols. These standards are not specifications for safety writing. They are just for liability. In addition, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, College of Engineering, Department of Professional Development

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The Parts of a Sentence Can Be More Interesting than the Whole

This is yet another review in an irregular series devoted to books and Internet sites that are popularly classified as reference source material.

BY RICHARD L. EASTLINE

When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It / Ben Yagoda / 241 pp. (incl. introduction) / Broadway Books, div. of Random House, 2007 / \$12.95 list (paperback) / ISBN: 978-0-7679-2078-0

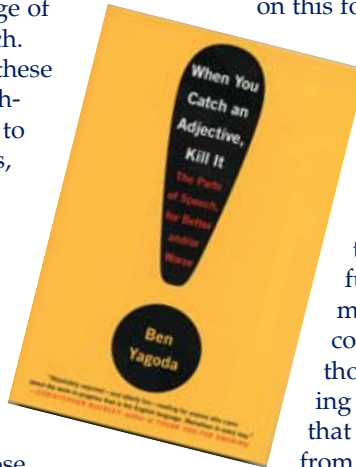
Scarcely a grammar review, what we have here is a light-hearted journey across the expanse of sentences with pauses to study their building blocks, but nevertheless carefully charted and guided by expertise. Author Ben Yagoda is not necessarily emulating the approach of those recent best-selling explorations involving punctuation and word usage, but he does capture their inherent vigor and genuine concern for current trends. The book abounds with a sense of worldly curiosity tinged by his own personal delight. The feeling is infectious.

By and large, his book's sub-title, *The Parts of Speech, for Better and/or Worse*, softens the blunt attack named in the title. Yet, he pulls no punches. He is not advocating the mass murder of all adjectives or adverbs or articles, et al, but taking a stand against those that don't perform well in supporting or even work against the strength of a sentence. Likewise, he is ever conscious of the changing character of words in their shifting from noun to verb, or adjective to adverb. Such changes add spice to a language but also can create potholes for what otherwise might be seamless continuity of structure.

The author covers the nine principal components, beginning with adjectives and ending with verbs, allo-

cating an average of 25 pages for each. Within each of these chapters (the others are devoted to adverbs, articles, conjunctions, interjections, nouns, prepositions, and pronouns), there is a scholarly discourse on the history of the subject in regard to purpose and association with other components of writing. But, after that comes the good stuff—Yagoda's exploration of usage, good and bad, that includes a generous helping of examples as well as his insights regarding trends.

As a sampling, the section on adjectives (seemingly his favorite target) opens with a discussion about the two classifications: "attributive," usually coming before the noun, and "predicative," following "to be" or other related verb forms: "become" and "seem." Whew! Then follows an intriguing argument about adjectives in a series (use of commas) replete with exceptions. Once we're out of the classroom, our author treats us to a collection of examples in which common adjectives are used in unexpected ways. And, as a reward for faithfully paying attention through this chapter, we receive a four-page glossary of unusual adjectives. There are variations



on this format in succeeding sections, but each one is a readable blend of classical information that becomes fused into a melange of contemporary thought, invoking expressions that originate from sources that include David

Mamet, Tom Cruise, and Bruce Springsteen. So, then, what benefit comes to a writer who reads through all (or even some) of Yagoda's explorations? At the least, there should be a deeper understanding of the operating mechanics of these parts of speech and that, in itself, would contribute to creating sentence structure that is more effective. More than that, one should then better discern both the blatant and subtle differences between "good" and "bad" implementation of these word forms while gaining added value in the specific examples offered. If nothing else, his book is a joy to peruse—a hearty dose of imagination employed in the service of understanding more about the workings of the English language.

Yagoda's credentials suit the professionalism of his

April Recap
Continued from page 3.

has classes and conferences on liability issues.

The question period yielded these tidbits: 1. Manuals are not approved by any outside source or approval companies: there are none out there. 2. The Quick-Start Guide is a part of manual writing. 3. Getting professional insurance is your choice; the company has most of the liability but you can still be sued for errors. This may or may not be an argument for incorporating your company. 4. Technical and manual writing does not require an engineering degree. In fact, looking at the product from the user standpoint is very helpful in constructing a good manual. 5. Becht does not edit but may fix "bad" manuals. He works out of his home office although there usually is one start-up, on-site meeting. He sometimes gets too much information, whether helpful or otherwise. 6. Manual writing pays about the same as regular freelance writing. Becht uses a target hourly rate, estimates how long the project will take, and then quotes a fixed price. (He has found most companies prefer that.) He also gets the first half of his fee with the first draft and the rest upon completion. In revisions, the client is typically looking for specific changes, so revisions involve more editing than writing. A product under development may take 3-5 months to develop so he may be working on 2-3 projects at time for 3-5 months each. 7. Manual writing is no more or less recession proof than any other forms of freelance writing. ♣

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President's Column *Continued from page 2.*

Dallas office of a national accounting firm. As the class reconvened after a break, one of the students—a Dallasite herself—asked me if I knew the plural version of “y’all.”

“I thought it was plural already,” I answered.

“Nope,” she said. “Not quite.”

I thought for a bit, canvassed the class—if the other locals knew, they were not talking—and finally cried uncle.

“Okay, what is it?” I asked.

She showed me a Texas-sized, Cheshire-cat smile and answered happily, “All y’all.”

Of course.

It’s like I always say. “El idioma es interesante.” 🐾

Book Review *Continued from page 4.*

stance. He teaches English at the University of Delaware and has authored several other books, including *The Sound on the Page: Style and Voice in Writing*. In this latest contribution, he adds yet another in a growing series of provocative books on grammar, style, punctuation, and usage that have shaken up the formal establishment. If one accepts the credo that our language must continue to evolve to serve our needs, then Yagoda and his colleagues surely seem to be among the most appropriate spokespersons. 🐾

May Meeting *Continued from page 1.*

few. Want to know what kinds of stories a certain real estate editor favors? Manning usually has a good handle on them. Looking to identify a burgeoning trend in higher education curriculum development? McCullough sparkles at this kind of assignment.

Koziol, McCullough, and Manning will take a number of questions during their panel discussion. They will address what kinds of assistance public relations professionals can provide writers, what writers do right and wrong when working with PR people, how they themselves prefer to work with writers and journalists, what kinds of materials public relations firms and departments purchase from freelance writers, and how writers can best present their credentials for possible consideration for freelance work. Near the end of the program, the panelists will answer questions from members of the audience.

If you’re interested in building your writing opportunities and your income – not to mention your cache of high-profile clips – you won’t dare miss this opportunity to learn more about profiting from strong business relationships with PR professionals.

Held in Room 5008 at National-Louis University, 122 South Michigan Ave., the program will commence with a refreshments-and-networking hour at 5 p.m., followed at 6 p.m. by the moderated panel discussion and questions from the audience. Nonmembers are cordially invited. The

Calendar

May 12

IWOC Monthly Meeting. “Building Good Relationships with PR Professionals.” IWOC’s own Jeff Steele will moderate a panel of PR writers — Kim McCullough, Kim Manning, and Kate Koziol — on Tuesday, May 12 at National-Louis University, Room 5008, 122 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. Program 6 p.m. Networking 5 p.m. Nonmembers, \$15; IWOC members free. Buy-your-own dinner follows. Nonmembers welcome. For more information, call 847/855-6670 or visit www.iwoc.org.

The monthly food and networking get-togethers listed below meet at the same time and place each month unless otherwise noted, but call ahead in case of cancellation. The groups welcome nonmembers. If there’s no group in your area, why not start one? Contact webmaster@iwoc.org.

May 28 (4th Thursday)

IWOOP Monthly Lunch. Join near-west suburbanites for a noon lunch at Poor Phil’s, 139 S. Marion St., Oak Park. For more info, call Barb Dillard at 312/642-3065. Check before you come. This lunch is monthly only if there are enough people who can attend.

June 4 (1st Thursday)

IWORP Monthly Breakfast. Join the Rogers Park IWOC contingent for breakfast at 9 AM at the A&T Grill, 7036 N. Clark St., Chicago. For more info, call Esther Manewith at 773/274-6215.

May Meeting *Continued from left column.*

meeting is free for IWOC members and \$15 for nonmembers. Plan to stay for a buy-your-own dinner at a nearby restaurant after the meeting.

(Jeff Steele has modestly omitted his own name from this write-up. He will moderate the panel. — Editor.) 🐾

It’s Happening on the Web!

Check Out Writers’ Line

Browse Resources

See What’s Doing in IWOC Events

WWW.IWOC.ORG