

This is a slightly edited transcript of an audio presentation made by Evan Thomas, author and former Editor at Large for *Newsweek* Magazine.

EVAN THOMAS:

Here are two things that writers often do wrong: 1) They tend to zigzag. By that I mean [you don't want to be] jerking the reader back and forth through a lot of "buts" and "howevers." If you read the memo that you've just written and you see a lot of "buts" or "however" or those things that make the readers zigzag, you know you've got a problem. You need to comb those out and write in a more linear straightforward fashion. It's a sign of sloppy thinking or confused thinking if you are zigzagging too much. Again, a simple way to tell is just look at all those "buts" and "howevers." It's okay, in fact it's good to begin sentences with "but"; you just can't do it too often or you're going to give the reader an aching neck and an aching brain because they won't really figure out what direction you're going in. They'll think that you're really confused and not sure where you're going.

Another basic mistake that writers make is that they're not careful about their topic sentences. The topic sentence as you know from grade school is the first sentence of the paragraph. It is critically important to have good clear topic sentences that clearly aim where you're going, that tell the reader where you're going. Your topic sentence should clearly signal the direction of the memo, speech, or story that you're writing. A lot of people neglect this. They don't pay attention to their topic sentences. Often writers will get cute. They worry more about the transition, going from one paragraph to the next and they think they've written some clever connective tissue, some clever transitions. Transitions aren't nearly as important as topic sentences. What's really important is that first sentence of the paragraph clearly signals [what direction the reader will be going]. And often, writers will begin a topic sentence with some kind of a qualifying clause. It's confusing. Don't do it. Don't say while I was thinking this, I did that. Just begin the paragraph with the subject, verb, and object. Do not begin a paragraph with a qualifier. Don't begin a topic sentence or a paragraph with a qualifying clause. It just throws off and confuses the reader.

I've been talking about writing, but you know the most important part of writing is not the writing; it's the information in there. You can be a great writer, but if you don't have good information, good research, or good reporting it really doesn't matter. The piece, story, or memo, whatever it is you're doing isn't going to be very good unless you have the basic stuff.

I'm a writer at *Newsweek*, but unless I have good reporting, unless the correspondents at *Newsweek* give me good reporting no matter how well written my piece is, it really doesn't matter. So you have to have the basic material and that means you've got to do your research. You have to do your reporting. You have to really have and master the data. You've got to really immerse yourself into it and be able to be so in control of it that you can write about it clearly because you've really mastered the detail.

Now here's a very important point when you're doing research. Do not plagiarize ever, ever. It is absolutely a career ender. If you get caught stealing something, lifting something, pulling something and using it without attribution, pretending that it's your own work and you get caught doing that, you are fired. It is the end of your career. It can be a really serious blow. The business pages are full of chief executives who fake stuff on their resume to make themselves look better. They get fired and it's just a terrible thing to have happen to you. It's morally wrong, but also it's a career ender. So be very careful about attributing material. A lot of you will get stuff off the Internet. You can use the Internet as a research tool, but just as you would with a book, make sure you attribute everything that you're using so the reader knows where the information is coming from. And here's another point...Be honest, more broadly speaking. If you don't know the answer to something don't fudge it. Don't fake it. Don't pretend that you do. Readers can see right through that. Sometimes you can't answer every question when you're writing a memo or a report. Be honest about it, admit it, say that you don't know. Say that the information is incomplete, that you weren't able to get the answer, but be straightforward about it. Don't try to slide and, and fake things by writing around them because believe me readers can smell it out and it will ruin your credibility all together.

It's important when you're making an argument to acknowledge that there's an argument against what you're arguing. We call it a counterargument. It's very important when you write, when you make an argument to include that counterargument. To acknowledge there may be, probably is somebody arguing against you, and to take on what it is they say or whatever the argument is and deal with it. You can't just slide around it or forget about it or pretend it's not there. It will strengthen your argument if you take on the opposing argument and you deal with it. You answer the questions raised by the opposition, so to speak or you deal with the points made in the counterargument. That will actually strengthen the argument that you're making.

One of the pitfalls for researchers is having done all this research, having collected all this material, there is a tendency to drown in it, to be overwhelmed by it, and to want to use all of it. This comes up in journalism all the time where reporters will go out and they'll get a lot of information and they'll want to use all of it. We call it emptying your notebook. Now it feels satisfying to be able to write down everything that you've learned and everything that you've researched, but don't do it. The reader hates it. The reader hates being overwhelmed by a lot of irrelevant information that is maybe exciting to the writer, but really is not all that relevant to what the reader cares about. Remember in writing: less is more. Pare down what you're writing. Only use the essential stuff. Do not drown the reader in information. Cutting is a good thing when you write and simplifying and clarifying. [When you read a long novel in school] that had lots of plots and characters, almost too many plots and characters, too much going on, avoid the [long novel] problem. Have simple, straightforward plots or storylines, or if you will, lines of argument. Don't have too many characters. Don't unnecessarily complicate things. Keep things linear and straight and clear and don't clutter up your writing. Now this applies to word choice. Often writers use too many adjectives and adverbs. They just don't need them. It's better to be clear and definite about what you're saying. Don't say something is pretty good or really good. Just say it's good. You can go through a piece [of writing] and pare out all sorts of adjectives and adverbs, make it much clearer, much simpler, and much direct and you won't be burdening the reader with a whole lot of excess clutter and

verbiage. One of the risks of over-researching a problem is that you will try to make eight points superficially instead of four points well. This is very important not only in journalism but in business writing. When you do raise a point you should deal with it fully and completely, that you don't just skip along from one point to the next. Go back and look at what you've written and ask yourself is the reader, the uninformed reader, going to understand exactly what I'm saying? Have I answered all their questions? And don't think that you can sort of quickly skip from one paragraph to the next thinking that they won't really notice if you don't fully deal with it. This happens all the time in journalism. As an editor I'm often saying don't make eight points superficially. Make four points well.

Let me add a note about writing in your own voice. There is a tendency when people write letters particularly to not write in their own voice, to imagine the way they think somebody else would write and write in a florid or overwritten way. When you write a letter when you're applying for a job, or you're writing a letter to a client, write it simply in your own voice, conversationally. Don't use too many words. Get to the point. Don't overdo it. You need to find a natural voice that is your own voice and stick to it. Generally speaking it's a conversational voice, a simplified version of your conversational voice. Often students will cast about

and they'll try to write like F. Scott Fitzgerald one week or Ernest Hemingway the next. That's all fine for when you're in college or in school. Once you're out in the real world find a voice that's your own voice and stick to it and don't overwrite. Write simply and clearly, but do it as if you were speaking conversationally to somebody.