

Nature speaks in signals and signs.

—John Greenleaf Whittier, to Charles Sumner

... truth itself does not have the privilege to be employed at every time and in every way; its use ... has its circumscriptions and limits.

—Michel de Montaigne, *Essays to the Reader*

7 Red Flags and Not-evers

Experienced writers and editors have developed a mental file of words and expressions that might belong in their copy, but usually don't. It's useful to think of these words and expressions as red flags. As soon as they appear, they wave themselves in front of the writer, giving the writer the chance to stop and ask, "Is this word or phrase necessary?" The writer should take advantage of that chance, every time.

Some words and expression simply do not belong in journalistic copy, or most other forms of writing, unless they take the form of a direct quotation.

Red Flag Words

More often than not, the words below are not needed. They often contribute to wordiness and sometimes to redundancy. Take *located*, for instance.

A computer controls the Flexliner from a booth located in the passenger cars at the end of the train.

("Located" plays no role in the sentence. Take it away, and the sentence loses none of its meaning.)

Another red flag word, *extremely*, along with its cousin, *very*, can kill the impact of the word it is modifying.

He delivered an extremely striking portrayal of Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman.

(Better yet, describe the portrayal in detail, and let the reader decide if it was striking or even extremely striking.)

The use of *get* or *got* often does nothing more than give the writer an excuse to be wordy.

The Environmental Protection Agency plans to spend \$22 million to get the hazardous waste out of the sites.

The Environmental Protection Agency plans to spend \$22 million to extract the hazardous waste from the sites.

Some other red flag words:

everyone

everywhere

all

also

both

interesting (when you can't think of anything complimentary to say)

over

held

obtain

overall

The Big Red Flag—"that"

That is most likely the most over-used word in the English language. Sometimes it is needed, but usually it represents nothing more than a form of verbal throat-clearing.

In one special way, *that* should never be used unless in a direct quote. It should never be used as a pronoun for a person. I'm amazed at the number of grammarians who will spend paragraphs writing about the fine art of determining when *who* or *whom* should be used,

but will shrug when someone points out that a *that* is not the proper identification for a human. I don't think *that* should be used for animals, either. But, then, I like animals.

... parents and children that are out walking. ...

(We're talking about people here; should be "who," not "that.")

She recently completed a writing class taught by a teacher that the whole student body adored.

(Also, what was the teacher's name? If a teacher is that good, he or she deserves credit.)

Special Red Flags—"there is" and "there are"

One way to add novacaine to a sentence is to begin it with a "there is" or "there are." Try replacing them with action verbs.

There are schools, hospitals, apartment buildings and high-rises.

Here stand schools, hospitals, apartment buildings and high-rises.

There is the slightest yellow beginning to show on the leaves.

The slightest yellow begins to show on the leaves.

There is concern and perhaps an empathy here, an attitude not self-centered or self-seeking.

They display a concern and perhaps an empathy here, an attitude not self-centered or self-seeking.

There is a mix of people smiling, laughing, frowning and some are non-descript.

A variety of people smile, laugh and frown. Some wear blank expressions.

There are several dead plants in the courtyard.

Several dead plants decorate the courtyard.

There are four or five people jogging along the lake.

Four or five people jog along the lake.

Always a Red Flag—"feel"

Don't use the word *feel* unless you're writing specifically about emotion or sensory information. Otherwise, *think* or *believe* is more accurate. In most cases, *feel* can be replaced with *says* or *said*.

He feels that the overall atmosphere is both physically hard and abusive.

He says the atmosphere is physically hard and abusive. -or-

He says the atmosphere feels hard and abusive.

She feels her writing skills lend themselves toward the demands of journalism.

She says her writing skills can meet the demands of journalism.

She feels that the pursuit of a future in either writing or interior design has equal appeal.

She says she might pursue either writing or interior design.

She feels her youth has been interesting.

She enjoyed growing up.

Red Flag Usages

Beware of the present perfect and past perfect tenses. Both add an auxiliary "being" verb to a verb that already is there doing the work. The perfect tenses create sentences that are weak and wordy.

... when our former enemy is seeming to support the other side.

... when our former enemy seems to support the other side.

She is enjoying a busy life in the Chicago area.

She enjoys a busy life in the Chicago area.

She discontinued her studies because she was traveling across the country.

She discontinued her studies because she traveled across the country.

... designers who are decorating home and offices.

... designers who decorate homes and offices.

He is hoping ...

He hopes ...

... while she is pursuing ...

... while she pursues ...

I am enjoying watching the passing cars.

I enjoy watching the cars pass by.

There are very few smiles, just looks of steely determination.

They display few smiles, just looks of steely determination.

Not-ever Words and Usages

Unlike red flags, which can be used by writers who know why they're using them and have given themselves permission to use them (at least this once), some words and usages simply do not belong in journalistic writing, unless they take the form of a direct quote. Usually, all they add is wordiness. Often, they are redundant.

upon ("On" means the same thing.)

ongoing (Use "continuing" if you must.)

hopefully ("She hopes," "maybe," or "I hope.")

per se

prior to ("Before" works nicely.)

utilize ("use")

in order to ("to")

one (as a pronoun. In American English, it sounds stiff.)

due to

alot (It's either "a lot" or "allot.")

etc. (See Chapter 5.)

held (as a meeting or a track meet. *Held* is accurate if a sink held water or a professor held a degree, but otherwise it is usually redundant.)

Special Not-ers—"currently" and "presently"

Currently and *presently* are always redundant. If you want to make a distinction in time, such as, "She was in high school. *Currently* she

is in college," the word *now* has two fewer syllables and six fewer letters.

Presently is usually misused anyway. It means *soon*, not *now*. It's used as a synonym for *currently*, so it's an artificial replacement for something that is already artificial.

And Another Thing ...

In *The News Business*, Walter Mears and the late John Chancellor took a list of special rules from Harold Evans in his book *Newman's English*. Evans in turn got the list from a bulletin board at the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver. Here it is:

1. Don't use no double negative.
2. Make each pronoun agree with their antecedent.
3. Join clauses good, like a conjunction should.
4. About them sentence fragments.
5. When dangling, watch your participles.
6. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
7. Just between you and I, case is important too.
8. Don't write run-on sentences they are hard to read.
9. Don't use commas, which aren't necessary.
10. Try to not ever split infinitives.
11. It's important to use your apostrophe's correctly.
12. Proofread your writing to see if you any words out.
13. Correct spelling is esential.

Over the years, the list has been expanded by an informal network of donors who send examples to each other on the Internet. Here are some additions I've seen since Chancellor and Mears wrote *The News Business*:

14. Prepositions are not good words to end sentences with.
15. Be sure to use adjectives and adverbs correct.
16. Parenthetical remarks (even when relevant) are distracting.
17. Avoid unnecessary redundancy.
18. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
19. Be more or less specific.

20. Watch out for irregular verbs which have creeped into our language.

21. Who needs rhetorical questions?

22. Above all, writing should be sincere, whether you mean it or not.

23. And the ever-popular, *Avoid clichés like the plague*.