

# GS Insight

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## PR's Most Underrated Skill

How important are top-notch writing and reporting skills in PR? Very important if you listen to editors – who, after all, are deciding every day whether or not to run the material that clients pay their agencies to develop.

But not very important to hear some practitioners tell it. When interviewing candidates recently for an account supervisor position, we heard comments like: “I used to do quite a bit of writing, but then I got promoted.” Or: “We hire freelancers to do most of our writing.”

These same candidates boasted of their skill in strategy and planning, and their creativity in staging events. Writing was relegated to lower-level people, part-timers or freelancers. It seems that in much of PR nowadays, people seek to get promoted out of the writing function. They see writing as necessary to career advancement, rather than fundamental to creative thinking and solid strategic planning abilities.

### Why?

Maybe it's because of the ascendance of strategy in PR. The best writers in the business would be of little use without good strategic planning skills.

Maybe it's because of the increasing influence of broadcast and online media, where visuals and imagery come first, words second.

Maybe it's easier for clients and agency leaders to get excited about a big idea than to appreciate sound, clear writing in everyday communications.

Or maybe it's because writing well is just plain difficult. The learning process – which should never end – can be hard on the ego. A good Journalism 101 professor or PR manager can wield a red pen like a machete. PR writing is especially tough because copy must often satisfy the demands of at least three distinct audiences with widely different viewpoints: the client, the editor and the target audience.

Strategic planning, vivid imagery and big ideas are important in all business communications. However, as PR agencies seek to broaden their outlook and diversify their

skills, many seem to be neglecting the importance of writing in solid strategic planning, making it the most underrated skill in PR.

### Key To Media Relations

The editors' survey comments on the next page make it clear that good writing is important to cultivating the respect of media gatekeepers. Editors expect PR people to think and write like journalists.

One print editor put it simply: “Before I open an envelope or read an email, I usually know from the agency letterhead or individual subject line what to expect. Some news releases will be clear, they'll contain useful information for my readers, and they'll take a minimum amount of time to edit.

“Others will be vague, poorly written, and focused on the client and product rather than the reader.

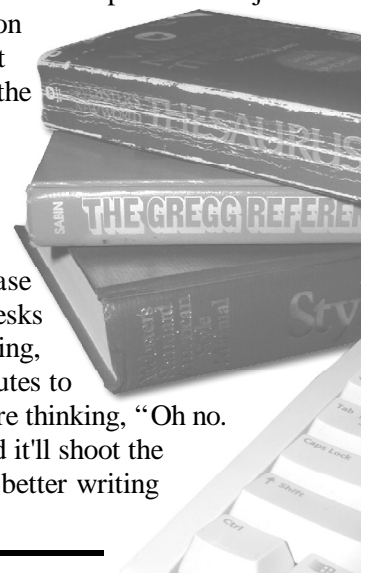
“If I'm on deadline and I need a story, which envelope or e-mail do you think I'm going to open?”

In other words, good writing opens doors with the media -- both short-term and long-term, directly and subtly.

### Time Efficiency

Skilled writers are also time-efficient. It's part of their job to get the information and direction they need, then turn out copy that flows quickly and easily through the client's approval loop.

Think of the marketing, sales, technical and legal people who must approve copy in your organization. When a news release or backgrounder lands on their desks for approval, they should be thinking, “Good -- when can I find 15 minutes to look this over?” If, instead, they're thinking, “Oh no. I'm going to have to rewrite it and it'll shoot the whole afternoon,” then you need better writing from your PR agency.



## Best Of Both Worlds

Are good writing and good strategic counseling mutually exclusive? While it may sometimes seem that way, many PR practitioners are highly skilled at both. Effective writers should also excel in strategic planning because writing well in PR involves much more than just being a wordsmith. It demands a creative, disciplined and analytical way of thinking that is fundamental to strategic planning.

One of the first lessons in Journalism 101 is never to write anything without first knowing the audience.

Who are they?

What do they *already* know?

What do they *want* to know?

What do they *need* to know?

What questions would they ask?

A good PR writer must understand the questions and needs of the client, the editor and the end-

user or final target audience. This ability to examine an issue from three different sides can be invaluable in strategic planning.

Good writers must also be able to think clearly and solve problems. They must ask tough questions, gather pertinent ideas, examine the relationships between ideas, organize and prioritize them, and then put the ideas together in a way that makes sense.

Substitute “Good strategic planners” for “Good writers” in the previous paragraph and you’ll see how parallel these two functions can be.

## Hiring Well

How does a corporate communications manager go about hiring an agency that places a premium on good writing?

One key to the process is to check references. Call editors in your field and ask them which agencies send useful, well-written material. Or ask prospective agencies for editor references.

Look at the agency’s past work – especially collateral materials that haven’t been edited by outsiders. Is it easy to read? Are the messages clear? Does the copy talk to the reader or customer with useful information, rather than simply presenting “puff?”

Ask prospective agencies which staffers would be doing the writing on your account. We believe the answer should be the entire account team. At Gibbs & Soell even senior managers stay active and hands-on with writing and editing work.

What else do the writers do, besides write? We have always believed that writers should be involved in all phases of client service, particularly

research, client contact, strategic planning and media placement.

It’s a total quality approach resulting in well-crafted communications that meet the media’s needs, connect with the target audiences, and advance the client’s strategic interest.

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