
THE PORRO PASSAROUND TIPS FOR COMMUNICATORS

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STARTING THE YEAR OFF RIGHT

Ah, the New Year. A time for looking forward, a time of endless possibility, a time to lose the weight we all gained. This issue won't help you shed the lbs., but we can offer a few things to help communicators get off to a great start in 2005.

- [1] How to Fight Writer's Block
- [2] On the Web: A GREAT resource
- [3] OpEds: What one editor is looking for

1. How to Fight Writer's Block

You know it's going to happen sometime this year. You'll get an assignment, the clock will be ticking down to the deadline, and you just won't be able to make yourself write. How do you get going?

Every writer has his or her own cure for blockage (check out "First Aid For Writer's Block," by Marcia Yudkin, <http://www.yudkin.com/unblock.htm>). I rely on advice I got from an experienced writer, who told me that when you focus on what you don't have (that blank page) you scare yourself out of writing. So focus instead on stuff you do have.

Start by writing down those random thoughts in your head, fragments of dialogue you heard on the subway, or even that "bad" version of the OpEd or press release that you know you'd never show to a client. One way or other, get words on the computer screen. Chances are good that the process of writing SOMETHING will unfreeze your writing muscles and lead eventually to a good product.

Another tip, surf the Web for articles on the topic you're struggling with. Don't steal prose of course, but looking at other takes on the subject might inspire you to try a new approach, or reassure you that you can do a lot better job than those other scribblers.

*Porro Associates LLC helps corporations and nonprofits improve the written and spoken materials they use to reach key audiences.
<http://www.porrollc.com/results.html>*

2. On the Web: A GREAT resource

In an earlier issue, we stressed the importance of "doing the research" when you're pitching an OpEd. That is, find out all you can about your target newspaper's OpEd policies: how many words the piece should be, the address to which it should be sent, etc.

Well, it turns out there is a wonderful Web site that does a lot of that for you. Check out:

<http://www.ccmc.org/oped.htm>

It lists most of the details you'll need (length, e-mail address, snail mail address, etc.) to pitch an OpEd (or letter to the editor) to the top 100 newspapers in the United States -- Truly a great tool.

And the organization that runs the site, Communications Consortium Media Center, is a super resource, especially for communicators working for nonprofits. The group describes itself as "a public interest media center dedicated to helping nonprofit organizations use media and new telecommunications technologies for public education and policy change." And it delivers.

3. OpEds: What one editor is looking for

You've heard what we've had to say about how to write and pitch an OpEd, now get the straight dope from somebody whose job is to decide which ones actually get into print.

Here's a sample of what John Timpane, editor PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER's commentary page, tells would-be OpEd authors.

I don't like reading policy statements. They're

- * abstract
- * boring
- * predictable
- * written in grey, official bathwater prose

Academic prose is also inappropriate. What we look for is vigorous, clear argumentation within the confines of the short essay -- the voices, not of scholars, but of well-informed and opinionated citizens speaking to others in the widest possible forum.

I do like reading lively, humane discussions of the issues. It's best if these discussions are concrete (arising from specific experiences and circumstances). It's best if these concrete discussions surprise or challenge us.