
THE PORRO PASSAROUND-TIPS FOR COMMUNICATORS

May 2006

www.porroLLC.com

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT

As writers, we are of course mainly concerned with BIG IDEAS. But sometimes it's the little things that drive us crazy and make the difference between success and failure. This month we offer some advice on a couple very important little things, plus some words to the wise for new freelancers.

- [1] Speeches: Who Really Said That?
- [2] OpEds: Sentences the Editor Sees First
- [3] Going Freelance: Beware the 6-month Slump

1. Speeches: Who Really Said That?

We speech writers love to sprinkle our work with good quotations. Our clients or bosses gain credibility when their spoken words are linked to those of somebody famous. Quotations can be funny, moving, inspirational . . . or trouble. If you get that quotation wrong or attribute it to the wrong person, you make your speaker look very foolish. Reporters love to point out mistakes like that, and too often there is a wonky type in the audience who is only too glad to deflate the speaker by pointing out a mistake.

So you have research every quotation thoroughly, right? Yes, if you have the time. The problem is it can take hours to be absolutely sure you've got it right. Different sources attribute quotes differently or list different versions of the same quote. Did Woody Allen say 75% of life is showing up, or did he put it at 80%? Depends on where you look.

So if you're in a crunch, what to do besides using the quote and praying nobody notices. You can insert the quote and have the speaker say it is "commonly attributed to" or "usually attributed to" someone. That way you get the benefit of the words, and don't get skewered.

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. OpEds: Sentences the Editor Sees First

What part of an OpEd does an Opinion Page editor see first?

Okay, it's a trick question. The first part of an OpEd submission an editor sees is the cover note you put on it. So pay some attention to that note. Above all, remember that your goal is to get the editor to read more, so keep it short. No more than two or three sentences.

Use those two or three sentences just to briefly tell who the writer is, what the subject is, and why the piece is newsworthy. If you find yourself attempting more, stop, go back and pare it down. DO NOT try to cram the essence of the OpEd into the cover note.

Here's an example:

To the editor

Please consider the piece below. In it, AIDs expert John Smith uses the arrival of National HIV Testing Day (June 27) to ask why more people are not getting tested. He says part of reason is the testing message not been effectively targeted to Hispanics and other high risk groups.

3. Going Freelance: Beware the 6-month Slump

On April 26, I was part of a Washington Speechwriters Roundtable panel on "Going it Alone: Life as an Independent Speechwriter." We had a lively discussion that focused on marketing, dealing with down time, managing clients, etc. One piece of advice that may be useful for any new freelancer: beware the 6-month slump. Many freelancers start off with a major client, because the firm they used to work for often wants to use the former employee as a consultant.

That's a great way to start, but it carries a danger with it. It's easy for new freelancers to get so busy working for their first client, that they forget to start looking for their second, third and fourth ones. While that first client my love you, love doesn't last forever in the business world. Eventually that first contract will run out. If you haven't been out looking for other clients, you could find yourself left high and dry.

So - especially when you're starting out - look for clients even when you have them, especially during your first six months on your own.