



A Stickler for Details

By Melissa Face



Early in my writing career, I penned a monthly column for the Myrtle Beach Business Journal. Aptly named “Face to Face”—playing off my last name—the column was a creative way for me to highlight our popular South Carolina vacation destination by interviewing members of the community. I loved finding out interesting details about a person’s life and incorporating that information into an eloquent profile. It was often challenging and always rewarding.

I’ll never forget my August 2005 assignment: interview the local postmaster. It was a rather ordinary interview. We met at a coffee shop and chatted over a few cups of steaming brew. He said his last name was “Neat.” I liked it; it sounded catchy.

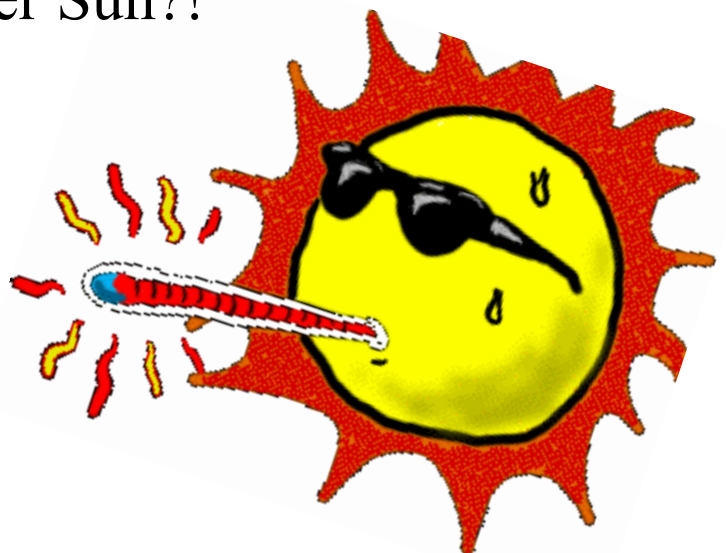
After explaining the slant of my column, Mr. Neat and I talked for more than an hour. He told me that working as a postmaster was a dream of his stemming from his boyhood. “I thought postmen just drove around in their jeeps all day,” he said with a laugh. He then filled me in on his academic background, family life and love of the sun and surf.

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Having Fun in the Summer Sun?!

Summers here in the Sacramento Valley are not all that exciting. From scorching heat to tinder-dry land to bad air days (and hair days), life in the Golden State is a test during the warmest months of the year.

Publishing Syndicate is sizzling, as well! Major changes are happening at our small company and we will unveil our new publishing direction in August’s issue. Until then!



Later in the interview, we talked a bit about his musical tastes, work ethic and personality. Neat described himself as, “A stickler for details who likes things done right the first time.”

I kept his quote in mind when writing the profile. I was extremely cautious about my grammar and punctuation—I didn’t want any errors in my copy. The next morning, I submitted the profile on Postmaster Neat to my editor. I was excited about the story and couldn’t wait for it to go to press.

A week later, the publisher came into my work area with a copy of the new issue. “Melissa, we need to talk,” he said. He pulled a chair over to mine and opened the journal. He pointed to the heading and said to me, “His last name is ‘Leat,’ not ‘Neat.’”

I stared at the boldface heading. I may as well have written profanity. It wouldn’t have been any more humiliating.

“Does he know?” I asked my publisher. “Has he seen it?”

“He’s the one who called me about it. He’s pretty upset.”

“I am so sorry,” I managed to respond. I couldn’t say anything else as I felt a lump rise in the back of my throat. Tears began to leak from the corners of my eyes. Running outside, I cried and cried and cried. It was one of the most embarrassing mistakes I had ever made and I couldn’t make it go away.

How could I have made such an enormous error? The postmaster told me his name over the phone when we first set up the interview. It sounded like “Neat.” I thought that was what he said when I shook his hand. I even said, “Neat name” as we were talking over coffee. It never occurred to me that I was calling him by the wrong name. Then, I thought about him telling me how important details were to him and that he liked things done correctly the first time.

A few minutes later, the route to my error started to become irrelevant. I needed to focus on making things right. So, I fastened my big girl britches and went inside to talk to my publisher.

“What can I do to fix this?” I asked him. “Can we redo the story in next month’s issue? I’ll even rewrite the piece, if you’d like.”

“We won’t be able to do that, Melissa,” he said.

“The best thing to do in this case is apologize and move on.”

So I did. I called Mr. Leat and left a message. I apologized for my novice mistake and offered to buy him a cup of coffee, leaving my number for him to return my call. Then, a few days later, I handwrote an apology letter and mailed it to him.

Luckily, my publisher forgave me and I didn’t lose my column. But I never heard from Mr. Leat again, so I don’t know whether he forgave me or not.



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As humiliating as the experience was, part of me is grateful for the mistake. It made me a better fact checker. Now, when I conduct an interview, I ask for a business card or for the person to write his or her name down for me. I don't rely on my sense of hearing alone. I triple check everything and have become a stickler for details.



And, from now on, I am trying to do things right—the first time.



Melissa, with her son Evan, on the Steel Pier in Atlantic City

Melissa Face lives in Wakefield, Virginia with her husband and two children. This is her second article for the *Wow Principles*. When she is not teaching high school English, Melissa enjoys reading, writing nonfiction and traveling. Email Melissa at writersface@yahoo.com.

Share your writing story and/or writing tips! We need stories that focus on a topic, not those that read like a writing resume or are a tribute to the person who got you started in your writing career.

Roundup-style articles with tips and links for your fellow writers are particularly needed at this time.

Submit your completed article (no more than 800 words) to Dahlynn@PublishingSyndicate.com. Payment is \$25 and PS takes only non-exclusive rights for the newsletter and any promotion of the newsletter.

Five Grammatical Errors That Make You Look Dumb

<http://www.copyblogger.com/5-common-mistakes-that-make-you-look-dumb>

Brian Clark, the founder of Copyblogger Media, has great posts when it comes to writing and grammar. I love reading his site for the latest and greatest.

Above is a link to one of my favorite posts. Be sure to read the postscript at the end of the post...Brian and I are two peas in a pod! Thank goodness grammarians such as Terri Elders and Pat Nelson keep me in check.



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