Introduction

There are varied reactions from people when they are asked to write an article for publication. They range from panic to total confidence. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle of the range, because we know the material but are uncertain of how best to communicate it. And there's the critical word: *communicate*.

Webster's New World Dictionary Third College Edition defines communication as "the art of expressing ideas, especially in speech and writing." For the purposes of this guide, however, communication must mean more than the mere expression of an idea. If the reader easily understands the idea, then and only then can we say communication has taken place. For example, "eschew obfuscation" is a wonderful phrase, but does it clearly communicate the idea to "avoid confusion"? Writers are well-advised to equip themselves with a dictionary rather than a thesaurus.

Most Barbershoppers are not professional writers, but many are repeatedly called upon to write articles for chapter and district bulletins, newsletters, newspapers, manuals, *The Harmonizer* and several other publications. It is for those Barbershoppers that this style guide has been prepared. It outlines the essentials of good writing: accuracy, brevity and clarity. It is meant to be used often.

Good luck and good writing!

Develop your basic skills

There is a simple rule that will serve the needs of most Barbershoppers in the majority of their writing. It is called the "Rule of the five W's," which stand for who, what, where, why and when. (A sixth element, how, is sometimes added to the list.) Answer all five in anything you write.

Barbershoppers typically write about an event, a show or performance, in one of two ways. First is the announcement of the performance, so the five W's are extremely important to the reader. The second is after the event in what might be viewed as a synopsis of the activities (this would include the caption for a photo). Here again, the five W's are essential for the reader to understand what took place.

The introduction to this style guide mentioned the key elements of good writing, i.e., accuracy, brevity and clarity. Let's look at each point.

- Accuracy is the most obvious of the three. Items such as the spelling of people's names, dates, times and locations must be accurate. *Reality check:* You will find that it is extremely difficult to correct any error made when such information is published.

- Brevity does not necessarily refer only to the length of an article. An article must contain all the significant information. Humor, well-turned phrases and clever use of language are important in good writing and rarely interfere with brevity. But the writer will want to avoid the over-use of flowery language and adjectives, usually referred to as "fluff." It is shallow, far too wordy, and adds nothing to the article, either in content or its appeal to the reader. It also adds unwanted length to an

article. *Reality check:* Know in advance that such verbiage will be edited out. Don't waste your time putting it in nor that of the editor who will take it out.

- Clarity directly affects the reader's ability to understand the article. An announcement of a performance is fairly straightforward. But other topics, such as an explanation of what barbershop singing is, can pose some problems. One of the biggest problems is jargon -- terms that are unique to the music style. These would include such things as tag, swipe, Chinese 7th, ring a chord, and more. *Reality check:* To the uninitiated, those terms are meaningless, and you will rarely have enough space to fully explain all of them. So keep it in layman's terms. Maintain the clarity.

Finally, let's determine whether the rule of the five W's meets the criteria of accuracy, brevity and clarity. You'll find that it does so very neatly. Proofreaders must verify specific information for accuracy. Answering the five questions -- who, what, where, why and when -- upholds the need for brevity. By staying with basic information, clarity is maintained.

Basic rules and examples

- Ask yourself if your writing meets the criteria of accuracy, brevity and clarity.

- Apply the rule of the five W's: who, what, where, why and when. Be sure all five are answered in your writing.

- Use active rather than passive voice. Correct: The chorus *will sing* in the district contest. Incorrect: The chorus *will be singing* in the district contest. Also, you may write in the second person.

- *Everything* you submit will be edited. Provide sufficient pertinent and significant information to give the editor something with which to work.

- Vocabulary is important in good writing. 1) *Irregardless* is not a valid word -- it is a double negative. The correct word in all instances is *regardless*. 2) *Titled/entitled* are not synonyms. *Titled* means "named." The show is *titled* "Radio Days." Entitled means "to have a right to." The pass *entitled* him to free admission to the show. 3) Do not say *over* when you mean *more than*. Correct: The chapter paid *more than* $2,000 to lease the auditorium. Incorrect: The chapter paid *over* $2,000 to lease the auditorium. 5) Times: *3 a.m.*, or *3 o'clock in the morning*, but not *3 a.m. in the morning*. Note also that it is *3 a.m.*, not *3:00 a.m*.

- Spell Check will catch only incorrectly spelled words. It will miss words such as *fee* instead of *feet*, where the word *fee* is spelled correctly but is the wrong word in the context of the sentence.

- Know the difference between common homonyms (words spelled differently but pronounced the same) such as: *principle/principal*, *capital/capitol*, *its/it's*, *there/their/they're* (Spell Check won't catch these errors).

- The words *either* and *neither* define a choice between two things only. Correct: It is *either* right or wrong. Incorrect: It is *either* good, bad or ugly.

- Comparatives (-er) and superlatives (-est) are specific in terms of numbers. Comparatives deal with only two. He is the *older* of their two boys. Superlatives deal with three or more. He is the *oldest* of their four children.

- Numbers from zero to nine (except ages) are spelled out. Use figures for 10 and above. (Exception: any number that starts a sentence -- other than a year -- must be spelled out.) A *9-year-old* boy was one of *four* people to join the chapter. *Sixteen* choruses will compete. There are *16* choruses in the contest. *1998* was a good year for us.

- Percentages are expressed with figures and the word percent spelled out. (Note that percent is one word.) This error occurs in *85 percent* of informal writing.

- Capitalization is generally over-used. If you question whether a word should be capitalized, leaving it in lower case will be correct more often than not. Here are some basic guidelines.

    1. Capitalize a title when it precedes a person's name without any punctuation. *Society President Jack Sprat* welcomed the students to Harmony College. But it is: *Jack Spratt, director of music*, welcomed the students to Harmony College.

    2. Capitalize the name of a formal committee. He is a member of the *Marketing & Public Relations Committee*.

    3. In referring to ourselves and our organization, capitalize *Society* and *, Barbershopper* (but not barbershop.)

    4. We now are doing business as the **Barbershop Harmony Society** in all external contacts. For purposes of executing legal documents, the official name of the corporation remains the more formal Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of *Barber Shop* Quartet Singing in America Inc. Note that in this instance only, Barber Shop is styled as two words; In all other cases, barbershop is one word. Note also that in the discontinued Society emblem there is a period after each letter: *S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A.* In all other writings the initials *SPEBSQSA* are written without periods.

- Names of states must be treated in two ways. When listing an address, use the two-letter postal abbreviation, e.g., *WI* (Wisconsin), *CA* (California), etc. For anything other than addresses, the standard state abbreviations are to be used, e.g., He comes from Kenosha, *Wis.*, or The 1999 international convention will be held in Anaheim, *Calif*.

- The *comma* is the most commonly misused punctuation mark. Its purpose is to clarify meaning by setting phrases apart from the rest of the sentence, or to divide long sentences into sections that are easily read and understood. The over-use of commas interrupts the reader. Reading a sentence aloud is an easy way to determine if it is over-punctuated. If there are too many interruptions in the flow of the sentence, it is advisable to rewrite it or to make two sentences.

- The *apostrophe* is used to denote possession, *Bob's* music is on the table; or contractions, *isn't* it true *it's* on the table? (Note that *it's* means *it is* and is not a possessive.) An apostrophe is not used to create a plural. This error frequently

occurs with proper names and years. Correct: The *Smiths*, means all the members of the Smith family. Correct: Barbershop harmony became popular in the late *1800s*. (Exception to the rule: Single letters take an apostrophe to create a plural, e.g., the five *W's*, Mind your *p's* and *q's*.)

- Use italics for *emphasis* and for *Publication Titles*. Song titles are presented "Wrapped in The Arms Of Quotation Marks (With All Initial Letters Capped)"

Writing the article

Headlines

Headlines are the first thing you read when you pick up a newspaper or magazine. They are intended to draw the reader's attention to the article. Although the headline appears first in any article, it is usually easier to compose a good headline after you've written the article. You then know the focus of the article so you are therefore better able to write a headline that relates specifically to the article.

Headlines are actually very concise *sentences*, not titles. Look at your local newspaper to better grasp how headlines are written. Correct: *Barbershop singers plan annual show*. Incorrect: *Barbershop harmony show*. (Avoid alliteration when writing a headline, e.g., *Bay Barbershoppers buy building*.) Headline styles and formats do vary from publication to publication. However, most capitalize only the first word in a headline.

Headlines normally do not have a punctuation mark (period, exclamation point) at the end. Also, it is preferred that a headline be written as a statement rather than a question. Correct: *Joe Barbershopper is missing*. Incorrect: *Where is Joe Barbershopper?*

Ledes

No, it has nothing to do with the guy who sings the melody in your quartet. The lede is the opening paragraph of an article, usually no more than two sentences long. However, in one or two sentences you must grab the reader and make him want to keep reading. Like headlines, leads are often easier to write after the article is completed. Avoid beginning the lead with the word "the."

Do not put all the facts of the story into the lead. Why would the reader want to continue if he's gotten all the information in the first paragraph of the article? Good lead: *Across North America, another generation has discovered the thrill of barbershop harmony.* Bad lead: *The Barbershop Harmony Society reports that 5,200 North American men below the age of 25 have joined the organization this year.*

Body

This is the heart of the story or article, where you provide pertinent information and details, or paint a word picture. This is where the answers to the five W's will be written. It is where the criteria of accuracy, brevity and clarity should be most rigorously applied.

It is important that ideas are expressed in a logical sequence and those transitions from one thought to the next are seamless. Abrupt changes interrupt the reader's concentration. A shotgun approach to facts or details without thought to their sequence will leave the reader confused or make it necessary for him to re-read the article. If the

confusion is too extreme or the article too disjointed, the reader will not invest the time to sort it out and will abandon it altogether.

Cliches and metaphors are not clever, and certainly are not substitutes for good writing. They are trite, boring and often silly. Consider your typical Barbershopper readers. It is estimated that at least 75 percent of the Society's membership is college-educated. Very few of them will want to read "cutesy" writing. They will, however, appreciate creativity and tasteful humor in your writing.

Each sentence should add some additional detail or be a transition to the next idea. Any sentence that doesn't serve one of those two purposes falls into the category of "fluff" discussed earlier in this guide. Thoughts and ideas should flow to a logical conclusion.

Summary

The summary solidifies and confirms the reader's understanding of the facts. It is a good idea to conclude an article with a summary, particularly if the piece is complicated or if it contains a great amount of detail. However, the summary should not be a restatement of what has gone before. It might better be viewed as a statement of the goals or desired outcome.

For example, if you've written about a vocal development program that involves four five-member teams, a follow-up group, the music team and chorus director, the summary would define the desired outcome for the chorus members and simply acknowledge that a complete internal structure is in place to achieve the goals.

Keep the summary short -- a couple of paragraphs. It is the exit from the article. The summary is also a good place to list the name, phone number and possibly an e-mail address of the person to call for more information.

Word processing mechanics

- *Don't lay out the page!* The editorial and publications staff will do that, and the well-intentioned efforts of numerous contributors can actually make that harder by trying techniques that are application-specific.

- The exception to this is in displaying table data. Use the table function of your word processor and/or consult with a publications specialist for information. *Do not lay out tables using tabs or the space bar!*

- Do not use word processor-based drawing tools. These inevitably fall to pieces when transported across platforms. Save as external files in .EPS or .TIF (300 dpi) format.

- Do not style headlines. In your draft, indicate the end of a section entry with a line of --*--*.

Thoughts to words

Story ideas

A great way to develop story ideas is to ask yourself what sorts of articles you would enjoy reading. For a beginning writer, topics that interest you are easiest to develop into feature articles. As you brainstorm possible topics, eliminate those that are narrow in scope and keep those that are likely to have broad interest. A survey of a few chapter members might also help in topic selection as you develop the list.

Quick points

- Topics should be informative, lively and meaningful.
- Write from a reader's perspective.
- Let the article be more than a description of something.
- Tell the reader what's in it for him or what the subject means to the Society, his district, chapter, quartet or chorus.
- Explain to the reader how the subject will help him get the most out of barbershopping.

That being said, it then becomes an imperative to know your audience. Are you writing to Barbershoppers in general, members of your district only, quartet singers, or the baritone section in your chorus? Your intended audience will help you determine not only the topic but also the style of writing, i.e., informal, formal, instructional, etc.

First-person articles can be enjoyable to read if they do something more than say the individual went to an event and did what everyone else always does at such a gathering. For example, eating ice cream and staying up late singing tags is *de rigueur* at Harmony College. They're fun to do, but 600 other people did the same things. An article about them will cause the reader to ask, "So what?" They are better mentioned in passing because, although they are part of the Harmony College tradition and experience, they're not among the intended goals of Harmony College. Either one could become an interesting sidebar to the main story. *(Read more about sidebars in the section titled "Other devices.")*

Selecting a topic is really more about common sense than anything. If you are a novice writer, don't select a topic that will require extensive research. Opt for broad appeal and what you know.

On to the word processor

There is no one preferred way to compose an article or story. There are, however, some tips that can make the process easier. As you become more experienced as a writer, your confidence will increase and some earlier techniques can be eliminated.

The type of article you're writing will help determine the process in some instances. If the subject matter has a great deal of detail, it might be wise to do an outline, so that information is provided in a logical sequence. An outline also helps clarify the conclusion

you want your readers to draw from the article. On the other hand, a simple promotional piece probably wouldn't require an outline.

Ultimately, the headline and lead of the story should, in tandem, be compelling enough to make your audience want to read the entire article. For some people, having a suggested headline and lead can help get the creative juices flowing. However, when you've finished the article, go back to the headline and lead to be certain they capture the true essence of what you've written.

Picture a pyramid standing on its point. Good writing employs the "inverted pyramid" principle, in which the main point or premise is made in the lead and opening paragraph, with what follows providing explanation, support or additional information down to the least important or smallest detail.

The body of your article is where you tell the story, present the facts, outline options, or make your argument. Keep ideas in easy-to-read sentences and paragraphs. Remember: *active voice*. Make transitions from one idea to the next as seamless as possible.

The summary is a reaffirmation of the point or premise made in the lead. It is not merely a restatement of what you wrote in the body of the article. The summary solidifies the point or message of the article in the reader's mind.

When you've finished the article, be sure to run spell check, read it carefully yourself, and then have someone else read it. (Proofreading your own writing is not advised -- mistakes are too easily missed.) Remember also that spell check will not pick up words that are spelled correctly but are wrong in context, such as "latter" when you mean "later," or "fee" instead of "feet," and, of course, any errors between singular and plural.

Other devices

Tables are used to organize information into a very readable format. They are especially useful with numbers, which might be very confusing if put into paragraph text. The table puts the information into separate cells where it can be added, subtracted or compared.

Bullet lists add emphasis and provide a way to stress the importance of the items without having to write out a paragraph to include them. For example, you could say that a barbershop chapter meeting should include all of the following as a minimum:

- Greeting
- Warm-up
- Chorus rehearsal
- Introduction of guests
- Business meeting
- Program
- Quartet activities

- Social time

Bullet lists tell the reader that the information is important. They can be very useful in classroom handouts to stress significant points to the students.

Sidebars get their name from their typical position in an article. A sidebar usually appears as a single-column box next to the main article, often is lightly shaded, and adds information related to the subject, but which does not have direct impact on the main theme or point of the article. It contains information that could not stand alone in a separate article.

For example, returning to the earlier subject of eating ice cream at Harmony College, a sidebar could include information about how much ice cream the Barbershoppers actually ate, the fact that low-fat ice cream was available for the health-conscious, and perhaps a humorous item about the guy who sprinkled corn flakes on his ice cream and ate it for breakfast.

Sidebars provide a way to give the reader more information without breaking the flow of the main article. Sidebars also provide another point of entry into the story -- encouraging readers to explore the main story for greater depth.

Other lists. Readers will also appreciate it if you provide a list of additional resources about the subject. They can be placed in a box as a bullet list at the end of the article. The box could have a caption such as "Find out more" or "Additional resources." It is important that the resources be relevant and not merely a list of Society manuals. Include such things as events, people, web sites, books and other publications.

Get it published

The writer's reward comes when his article or story is published, be it in *The Harmonizer* or other magazine, district bulletin, chapter newsletter, or local newspaper. It can be even more exciting for the writer if the story carries his byline.

The savvy Barbershopper can take advantage of some recurring media situations that give him a much better chance to have his article published. Newspapers experience a tremendous lack of information to print around major holidays. They are called "slow news days," and reporters and editors alike welcome a well-written piece. A quality photo to accompany the article will be greatly appreciated. (Broadcast media have the same problem, and a barbershop quartet or chorus singing at a holiday celebration is often unique enough to warrant coverage.)

As previously stated, do not do page layouts. The publication staff will take care of that. (The exception would be for material put in tables.) Always provide a suggested headline but, again, do not format it. Editors usually write their own headlines based on the information in the lead, which underscores the importance of a well-written lead.

Some beginning writers have a difficult time accepting the way their articles are edited. It is a fact that *everything* you submit will be edited. That stresses another previously stated point that fluff and flowery language interfere with good writing and will ultimately be cut. Stick with the basics. Just as in music, mastery of the fundamentals leads to success.

Writing for *The Harmonizer*

The Harmonizer is the official publication of the Barbershop Harmony Society. The magazine is published six times a year in January, March, May, July, September and November.

Editorial mission: We are interested in straightforward, clear writing similar to what you find in any other high-quality magazine or newspaper. The most successful articles provide practical advice and instruction that members can use to enrich their musical experience and to achieve the most satisfaction from their hobby. Published articles and stories offer views and insights into local, district and national events, profile prominent members, quartets and choruses, and present a panorama of the world of barbershop harmony and other *a cappella* singing.

Audience: Readers include the more than 30,000 members of the Barbershop Harmony Society, plus nearly 1,000 additional subscribers composed of music educators, libraries, schools, Sweet Adelines International and Harmony Inc. members, non-member directors, and business executives. Study has shown that at least 75 percent of the members of the Society are college-educated.

Form: Submitted manuscripts should be typed and single-spaced; one copy is sufficient. Do not double-space between sentences and do not use any type of formatting. Put your name, address, chapter name (if applicable), phone number and e-mail address on the first page and cover letter. Manuscripts may also be submitted by e-mail or on floppy disk. We prefer 12-point, Times New Roman in WordPerfect, Microsoft Word or ASCII. *Always keep a copy of your article and any submitted photos*. Manuscripts and floppies will be returned upon request and inclusion of a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Length: Articles are typically 500 to 800 words, but may be longer if necessary to tell the whole story.

Photos: should be included whenever possible. Photos should be high-quality photographic prints, not inkjet prints of digital. If you submit digital photos, please provide the **original image directly from the camera**: no retouching, no resizing, no cropping. **Big files are good.** Historical or family keepsake photos will be returned. We desire to keep other submitted photos in our archives.

Publication: Articles are published on a space-available basis or may be held for special issues of the magazine.

Submission: Mail to:
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