

Keep the ‘you’ and today — and tomorrow — in *USA Today*

USAT U
Tues., Sept. 14, 2010, 4-5 p.m.

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Emulate—or **improve**—the excerpts you see here. They’re from articles—many of them deadline-driven—that are generally well written and well edited.

9/7/10. This booklet is a PDF of 11 color pages.

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1. Lead with the future

Whenever possible, focus first on what will or may happen.

Emulate:

'Act of war'

Terrorists strike; death toll 'horrendous'

USA Today, 9/12/01, 1A. <http://newseum.org/exhibits-and-theaters/permanent-exhibits/9-11> .

To guide your readers into any “tell me a story” lead sentence, head with the future if you can.

Emulate:

Verdict expected soon on toxic air aboard jets

Three Alaska Airlines managers conducted an extraordinary experiment on an MD-80 jet in 1996. Frustrated by complaints about noxious mists on MD-80 flights, the managers tried to recreate the problem on a jet parked inside a hangar.

USA Today, 5/9/02, 1A. <http://www.usatoday.com/money/biztravel/2002-05-09-cabin-air.htm> .

Emulate:

Karzai Is Said to Doubt West Can Defeat Taliban
Former Officials Say Afghan Leader **Seeks Deal** With Militants and Pakistan

Two senior Afghan officials were showing President Hamid Karzai the evidence of the spectacular rocket attack on a nationwide peace conference earlier this month when Mr. Karzai told them that he believed the Taliban were not responsible.

*New York Times, 6/12/10, A1. With solely the first headline:
<http://nytimes.com/2010/06/12/world/asia/12karzai.html> .*

2. But prefer **present** tense!

Present tense + a future time usually = future sense.

Improve:

The new hours, he **said**, **were** the first step toward the mandatory reservation system that **will go** into effect in January and that museum officials **said** will allow them to spread out visitors during the day.

New York Times, 2/18/07, § 5 (Travel), 3.

<http://travel.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/travel/18journeys.html> .

Emulate:

A new law, which **goes** into effect in January, **requires** American citizens to carry passports for all Caribbean destinations except Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands . . . “In Puerto Rico, the vibe is open and cool, but there is still a genuine local bohemian tradition,” **says** Edmund Castillo, the designer for Sergio Rossi, who was born and raised on the island.

New York Times Magazine, 12/3/06, 42.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/03/style/tmagazine/03trelax.html> .

Emulate:

Today, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates **comes** to Washington to participate in a panel at the White House and to meet with members of Congress.

Washington Post, 4/5/00, E10. http://articles.sfgate.com/2000-04-05/business/17643889_1_economy-or-waste-microsoft-judge-rules .

Present tense often combines present and future.

Improve:

Thirty states and the District of Columbia **have banned** the practice [texting while driving], but the laws **are** difficult to enforce.

USA Today, 7/21/10, 1A. http://www.usatoday.com/tech/wireless/2010-07-21-1Atexting21_ST_N.htm .

Improve:

Nobody knows much about Santana Moss, and that includes the Jets. They **have been hoping and waiting**, but nobody knows how effective he can be.

New York Times, 1/12/02, D1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/12/sports/sports-of-the-times-moss-is-still-the-x-factor-for-the-jets.html> .

Improve:

After the storms, the Legislature passed a constitutional amendment consolidating many of the New Orleans-area boards into just two regional boards. The law **required** that members, who are appointed by the governor, have expertise in fields like engineering, hydrology, geology and law.

New York Times, 4/18/07, A14. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/18/us/18levee.html> .

Emulate:

Under the 2002 McCain-Feingold campaign finance law, groups wanting to broadcast advertisements that name federal candidates within 60 days before a general election, or 30 days before a primary, **are** required to follow strict rules on how they pay for them. The law **requires** that donors be disclosed and **caps** contributions to prevent secretive groups from advocating for or against candidates in thinly disguised advertisements known as issue ads.

*New York Times, 12/22/06, A24.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/22/washington/22campaign.html> .*

Choose strong verbs: present tense, active voice, avoiding weak nouns.

Improve:

Simplification of the story will be effected by us tomorrow.

Emulate:

We simplify the story tomorrow.

But emulate these uses of passive voice:

Actor nonexistent: Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak has yet to **be equaled**.

Actor irrelevant: The summons **was served**.

"Equal writes": Tell any doctor your symptoms, and you'll **be advised**.

3. Report to ‘you’—your reader

Emulate:

Rescue Plan’s Basic Mystery: What’s All This Stuff Worth?

What would **you** pay, sight unseen, for a house that nobody wants, on a hard-luck street where no houses are selling? That question is easy compared to the one confronting the Treasury Department as Washington works toward a vast bailout of financial institutions.

New York Times, 9/25/08, A1.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/25/business/25value.html> .

4. Be **consistent**—avoid elegant variation

Improve:

The Environmental Protection Agency said Thursday that BP **has to** choose an alternative dispersant by today and **must** begin using it by Sunday.

USA Today, 5/21-23/10, 1A. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/environment/2010-05-20-oil-spill-chemicals_N.htm .

Improve:

Black federal **employees** are nearly 2½ times more likely to be fired than white **workers** in the government, a study scheduled for release today shows.

Washington Post, 4/19/95, A1. <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-833580.html> .

Improve:

A conflict that has cost more than 2,100 American **lives** and an estimated 30,000 Iraqi **deaths**.

New York Times, 12/19/05, A1.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/politics/19prexy.html> .

Improve:

[T]here appears to be a groundswell of support in the [horseracing] industry to **ban** steroids and **prohibit** race-day medications.

New York Times, 6/9/08, D3.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/09/sports/othersports/09racing.html> .

Watch for ambiguity when you “factor out” repeated words.

Improve—but how?

At 8, the 39th Annual Emmy Awards includes salutes to **the late** Jackie Gleason and Fred Astaire.

Washington Post TV Week, 9/20/87, 3.

Emulate:

In a national campaign that started running over the weekend and relies on computer-altered film clips from the “I Love Lucy” series of the 1950’s, the Mertzes (**the late actors** Vivian Vance and William Frawley) squabble about a Medicare subscription drug plan offered by PacifiCare, a California insurer seeking customers nationwide.

New York Times, 10/3/05, C6.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/03/business/03medicare.html> .

Improve—but how?

The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals . . . Lately it has been graced by gifted and courageous judges such as **the late** Braxton Craven and Clement Haynsworth.

Edwin M. Yoder, op-ed, Washington Post, 2/29/84, A15.

$$ax + ay = a(x + y)$$

Factor out repeated words—but only if they're actually there!

Improve:

Stem Cell Side Shows

. . . An embryo is allowed to grow to eight cells, then **one cell is** plucked out and the remaining **seven** allowed to go on and develop.

Editorial, New York Times, 10/18/05, A26.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/18/opinion/18tue1.html> .

Improve:

Reward Is Offered and Clues Studied in African Blasts

New York Times, 8/11/98, A1. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/11/world/bombings-east-africa-investigation-reward-offered-clues-studied-african-blasts.html> .

$ax + by \neq a(x + y)$

Do vary your words to vary your meaning.

Improve:

U.S. airline traffic **dropped** 10.2 percent in February, with traffic on international routes **plummeting** 26.8 percent. The pattern was repeated on the other side of the Atlantic, where British Airways watched its business **drop** 30 percent.

Washington Post, 3/22/91, B1.

Improve:

As caseloads for the all the programs have **soared**, so have costs. The federal price tag for Medicaid has **jumped** 36% in two years, to \$273 billion. Jobless benefits have **soared** from \$43 billion to \$160 billion. The food stamps program has **risen** 80%, to \$70 billion. Welfare is **up** 24%, to \$22 billion.

USA Today, 8/30/10, 1A. http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-08-30-1Asafetynet30_ST_N.htm .

Program	Word	% increase	From	To	\$ increase
"All"	"soared"				
"Medicaid"	" jumped "	"36"	[\$200B]	"\$273B"	[73B]
"Jobless benefits"	" soared "	[272]	"43B"	"160B"	[117B]
"Food stamps"	" risen "	"80"	[39B]	"70B"	[31B]
"Welfare"	"up"	"24"	[18B]	"22B"	[4B]

Improve:

The **unemployment rate in Wisconsin** is nearly two percentage points below the nation's and **where President Obama won** by 14 percentage points two years ago.

This year, state Democrats are struggling to hang onto the governor's seat that Jim Doyle is **leaving after eight years** and a congressional seat that retiring Rep. Dave Obey has **occupied since 1969**.

USA Today, 9/7/10, 1A. http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/2010-09-07-1Ajobs07_CV_N.htm .

Point out a consistency—but only if it's actually there!

Improve:

The study says poor command decisions helped contribute to a record **160** suicides by active-duty soldiers last year and **an additional 146** deaths resulted from risky behavior such as drug or prescription medication abuse.

USA Today, 7/30-8/1/10, 1A. http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2010-07-29-army-suicides_N.htm .