Susan B. Weiner
Investment Writing

Investment Writing Top Tips 2015

from Susan Weiner, CFA

Author of **Financial Blogging:** *How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients*

Surefire strategies for igniting your target market's interest

investmentwriting.com

Susan B. Weiner Investment Writing

Your communications with clients and prospects are essential to the success of your investment, wealth management, or financial planning firm. ***Investment Writing Top Tips 2015*** gives you information you can use to boost the effectiveness of your marketing, social media, and writing.

Read these tips from the newsletter and blog of Susan Weiner, CFA.

Tips for….

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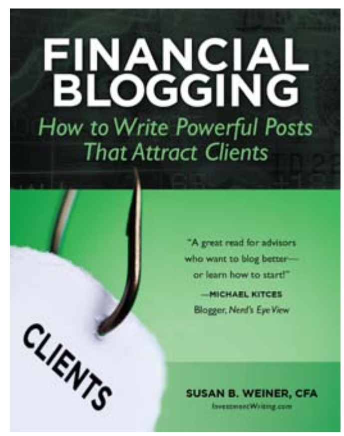
What people say about Susan's book, *Financial Blogging: How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients*



As a financial professional, you may not know where to start when writing for client communications or marketing. Susan Weiner's book shows you where. She also leads you through the entire process of how to write effectively and naturally for your business. I highly recommend her book to anyone interested in using written communication in their business.

—Russ Thornton, Wealthcare for Women

I learned a tremendous amount from this great book about the writing process. Susan has inspired me to mind map a year's worth of blog posts!

—Eleanor Blayney, CFP®, CFP Board Consumer Advocate

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BLOGGING:
20 topics for your financial blog

If you feel frustrated by coming up with topics for your financial blog, the journalist's five Ws and 1 H can help. Below I share a list of 20 topics inspired by the 5 Ws and 1 H.

As you brainstorm topics, think about how you can solve problems for members of your target audience. This will make your posts relevant to them. For help with this, read "WHAT PROBLEM does this blog post solve for them?"

WHY

- Why I blog—remember to focus on your readers as you write about yourself. I aimed for that in "Why I write for you."
- Why I manage money the way I do
- Why I became a financial planner or an investment manager
- Why I changed mymind about a topic important to how I help clients
- Why investors should pay less attention to financial news

WHO

- Who you can trust with your money
- Who should inherit your wealth

WHAT

- What do you want?—ask your readers what they'd like to learn about on your blog. I've written about how to do that in "Ask Questions to Generate Content That Pops," my guest post on the *Wired Advisor* blog.
- What is most important for the success of your investments or financial plan?
- What is the biggest risk to your financial success?

WHEN

- When should you retire or start collecting Social Security?
- When are you ready to buy a house?

WHERE

- Where in the world should you invest?
- Where should you custody your assets?

HOW

- How to go broke—sometimes writing about what *not* to do can be powerful
- How to pick a financial advisor or investment manager
- How to pick a mutual fund or ETF
- How to create a portfolio for the long run
- How to deal with the stock market's ups and downs
- How to protect yourself against inflation

For more ideas about generating blog post topics…
…check out "Photo + Mind Map = Blog Inspiration."

EMAIL:
Email subject lines: How to handle boring disclosures

What subject line should you use when you send clients a disclosure via email? This question came up came up when I spoke to the Financial Planning Association of Massachusetts in 2013.

The problem: Losing your clients' attention
You send some emails because you need to move clients to action. Others, such as disclosures required by regulators, are less compelling. Choose your subject lines carefully, if you don't want these emails to discourage your clients from reading your emails.

Here's a list of disclosures that advisors told me might be sent via email:

- Client agreement
- Fee disclosure
- Form ADV, Part 2
- ERISA-related disclosure, such as a Rule 408(b)(2) disclosure
- Privacy policy

Sure, it's important for clients to understand the legal nature of your relationship. However, most of them won't read boilerplate disclosures. Even worse, when they receive one boring email from you, they become less likely to open your future emails.

Solutions: Label clearly or bundle
The worst thing you can do is to send the disclosure with a vague or misleading subject line—something like "update from XYZ Advisors."

Instead, label the email clearly, making it easy for your clients to decide whether to open it. You could write something like "annual disclosure of _____," dropping the key topic in the blank.

Another possibility is to avoid sending the disclosure as a standalone email, assuming that's okay with your compliance experts. For example, you could include the disclosure with your quarterly client email or monthly client e-newsletter.

INVESTMENT COMMENTARY:
5 steps for rewriting your investment commentary

Investment commentary authors often know the markets well, but lack writing and editing expertise. After all, they're earning big bucks to manage money, not to write. You don't want me to run your portfolio, but I've learned some lessons about how to edit investment commentary. I've edited and written commentary for a diverse group of clients.

My experience has inspired this list of steps for anyone who'd like to edit investment commentary or other articles.

Step 1. Analyze overall structure

Before you dig into the details of your commentary, look at its overall structure. Your analysis may lead you to delete or move entire sections to make the structure more reader-friendly.

First, identify the main themes of your commentary. You may decide after a quick reading that your themes are something like the following:

1. This was a volatile quarter, due mainly to disappointing corporate earnings and instability in the Middle East.
2. Corporate earnings are likely to recover for three reasons.
3. Instability in the Middle East will continue and here's how it affects our investing.
4. Here's why these six stocks are the portfolio's biggest winners or losers for the quarter.

If a simple read-through doesn't identify your main themes, you can try mind mapping your commentary's content. I sometimes use mapping when editing complex client documents. Mapping gives me a bird's eye perspective that helps me spot clustering of ideas that form themes. For more on mapping, please see my book, *Financial Blogging: How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients*.

Once you've identified the themes, delete any paragraphs that aren't relevant. Also, move your paragraphs so your argument builds in a logical order.

Step 2. Provide guideposts for your readers

Once you've identified your commentary's themes, you can make it easy for your readers to absorb them. Three key tools are your title, introduction, and headings. Each of these components should manage your readers' expectations.

Titles should communicate your main topic. Simply writing "Third Quarter Review" isn't enough. It doesn't distinguish this quarter's review from all that preceded it. Nor does it distinguish your review from your competitors'. At a minimum, name your main topic in your subject line. For example, "Third Quarter Rocked by Earnings and Middle East Conflict."

As for your introduction, I believe in having it say exactly what you'll cover. This lets your readers quickly assess whether your commentary interests them.

Next, use your headings as milestones for your commentary. Express your opinion or conclusion, if possible. For example, instead of using "corporate earnings" as your heading, consider something like "corporate earnings disappoint, but rebound likely."

Step 3. Work within paragraphs

Once you've completed your "big picture" edits, dig into your individual paragraphs. Strong topic sentences will ensure that today's busy readers can skim what you read, using their quick scan to zero in on the content that most interests them.

A strong topic sentence covers the paragraph's main point. Everything that follows in a specific paragraph should relate to the topic sentence. If not, then cut it. This isn't the only correct way to write, but it's the best way to write for online readers and readers suffering from information overload.

For more on this topic, read my blog post about the first-sentence check.

Step 4. Examine your individual sentences
The next step is to make what professionals call "line edits." This means correcting and improving your sentences for grammar, punctuation, vocabulary choices, and other issues in your writing style.

Working down to small items from "big picture" items is efficient. It means that you don't waste time improving your word choices in a sentence or paragraph that you ultimately cut from your draft.

Step 5. Proofread and check statistics
Once you've completed your editing, it's time to proofread. I've blogged in "5 proofreading tips for quarterly investment reports" about my best proofreading tips. Also, check the accuracy of your statistics, such as index returns. If possible, get someone else to proofread your work. After you've lived with a document for awhile, it becomes hard to spot errors that would smack you in the face on a first reading.

If you follow these five steps, you'll attract more readers. That's your goal, right?

INVESTMENT COMMENTARY: 4 tips for turning investment commentary into blog posts

As the role of blogging in asset management marketing grows, firms struggle to generate effective content. This is why it's great to exploit your investment commentary on your blog. However, some pieces of investment commentary weather the leap to your blog better than others. Make the wrong choices and you'll fail to attract readers. You'll also turn off those who already navigate to your website.

I have four main tips for asset managers who want to get more mileage out of their investment commentary by sharing it on their blogs.

1. Be provocative—or at least express an opinion

You're competing for attention with many fast-breaking news sources, so don't rehash information that's already out there. You'll lose readers quickly if you start with "The S&P 500 rose x.x% and the Barclays Capital Aggregate Bond Index rose fell y.y%." They can get that information in many places. Sure, you must include this data in your quarterly commentary or weekly economic statistics roundups, but don't focus on it in your blog posts.

Instead, interpret the data and make it relevant to your readers. Readers care most about the WIIFM, what's in it for me. Explain how the market's movements affect your outlook and the way that your readers invest. For example, should readers consider a tactical move in their portfolios or can they rest easy, assuming your outlook is on target? Of course, as with your regular investment commentary, check with your compliance and legal experts to make sure you don't promise too much.

2. Focus on one theme—and keep it short

Online readers are looking for solutions to their problems. Compared with readers of printed materials or even clients viewing your emailed commentary, they'll quickly abandon your writing if you don't offer a solution. Being provocative isn't enough. You need to focus on the one area that they care about.

Let's say a reader is assessing whether to increase a portfolio's allocation to emerging-market bonds. You don't have much time to win them over. The typical online reader makes an initial assessment of a page in less than one second, according to the Nielsen Norman Group's *How People Read on the Web: The Eyetracking Evidence*. If emerging-market bonds aren't highlighted in your title and introduction, the reader will move on. Once you draw in readers, you have to keep them engaged. Research by the Poynter Institute found that people averaged only 78.3 seconds on the first story that they chose to read but did not complete when using iPads.

Because readers have such short attention spans, I believe you should keep your blog posts short. When I teach financial advisors who aren't seasoned writers how to blog, I encourage them to write posts that run 250 to 400 words in length. A non-professional writer can't go too far wrong in such a short piece.

If you are a strong writer who maintains focus on a single topic, you can go longer. This is especially true if you follow my next tip.

3. Write posts that are easily skimmed

Many readers skim instead of reading word by word. Make it easy for them by using powerful headings and strong topic sentences. Readers will stick with you longer if they can scan your headings to find the content that's most appealing to them. This means they don't have to slog through every word to find the relevant section.

Write informative headings that convey each section's point. For example, I didn't call this section "Skimmability." Instead, I gave you a tip.

Starting each paragraph with a strong sentence that conveys the paragraph's main topic also enhances skimmability. I suggest that you test your blog post with the "first-sentence check," which I've described in my book, *Financial Blogging: How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients*.

4. Write like a human being, not an institution

Blogs are less formal than most communications traditionally issued by investment management firms. They take a more conversational approach. This is especially true if you're targeting individuals instead of institutional investors. Many of the most appealing blogs directly address "you," the reader, and may even refer to the author as "I."

Of course, "I" may be a step too far for investment firms emphasizing team management of portfolios. But even using "we," investment managers can use some of the techniques I discuss in "How to add personality and warmth to your financial writing–Part one" and "Part two."

Bonus tip: Don't share PDFs

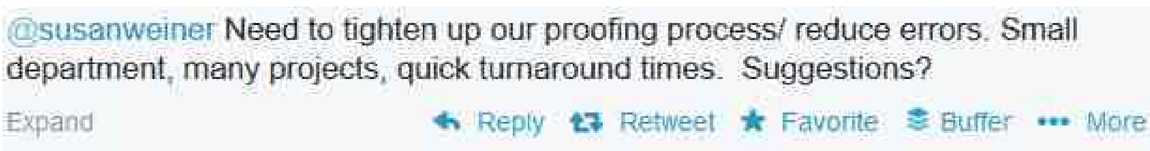
Want to annoy your readers? Ask them to download a PDF file from your blog to read your commentary. Blog readers don't want to take extra steps to access your content.

If you must include a link to PDF, don't make that link the focus of your post. Instead, write an intriguing introduction to that PDF so readers get some value before they click.

INVESTMENT COMMENTARY: 5 proofreading tips for quarterly investment reports

Proofreading quarterly investment communications stresses people. Tight deadlines and client demands add to the pressures on a small department. However, creating checklists and processes will ease the strain. I have some suggestions to help you be accurate and avoid stylistic inconsistencies and typos.

This post started as a response to the tweet you see here.



1. Create checklists for data

There's nothing worse than sending out a third-quarter report that's labeled as a second-quarter report. This almost happened to me early in my days as a director of investment communications. That near miss inspired my love of checklists.

When writing quarterly communications, create a list of data that must be updated. This is especially important if you start writing in a quarterly template document that holds the last quarter's data.

Another way that I manage this when updating documents with previous-quarter data is to turn on Microsoft Word's "Track Changes" feature. I know that most of the document should turn red with changes before I "accept all changes" and start proofreading.

A variation of this data checklist is a list of common errors that you review just before you hit "send" on your document.

2. Create a style guide
Typos, poor punctuation, and stylistic inconsistencies are more likely when you lack a style guide. You can adopt a standard style guide, such as the *Associated Press Stylebook* or *The Chicago Manual of Style*. However, you still benefit from a style guide specific to your company. Your guide will cover issues those guides avoid, such as how to spell the plural of "Treasury" or whether a portfolio is overweight "in" or "to" a sector.

3. Use technology that identifies weaknesses
Your word processing software's grammar and spell checker isn't perfect, but it's still worthwhile. I supplement mine with PerfectIt software, which checks for consistency in your usage. A free version is available as the Consistency Checker.

There's also software that will help you to identify larger issues of style and grammar. Hemingway is a free app that assesses the difficulty level of your sentences and suggests some ways to improve them. I thank Bill Winterberg of FPPad for pointing me to "hOw wE eDiT wRiTTeN cOnTenT," Alyce Currier's article on Wistia that introduced me to Hemingway. Grammarly is another option, but I haven't tried it.

4. Read your work out loud—or get software to read it
When you do heavy editing, it's hard for you to see the typos and other weaknesses in your work. That's why I use Adobe Acrobat Pro to read out loud, as I described in "Why I love Adobe Acrobat Pro for proofreading." I can hear problems that I can't see.

5. Use a fresh pair of eyes
In an ideal world, a professional proofreader will review your work. That happens at some of my larger clients. When my client agreement permits, I often hire an outside proofreader to review

the first complete draft. A pro who knows the industry will do the best job but any set of competent fresh eyes is likely to help.

If you lack the luxury of outside help, see if a colleague can review your work. Or, leave your work overnight—or at least for an hour—before you review it with fresh eyes.

More resources

For more proofreading tips, check out "Six ways to stop sending emails with errors." You can test your proofreading skills weekly with Mistake Monday. Check the Investment Writing Facebook page on Monday mornings.

INVESTMENT COMMENTARY:
Investment commentary–5 ways to outsource

Market and portfolio performance commentary is an important part of communications strategy for most investment and wealth managers. But sometimes writing that commentary becomes a drag on the firm's employees. Or perhaps the firm realizes that its employees are better at strategy and portfolio management then writing. If this describes your firm, it may be time for you to outsource.

I see five main models for commentary outsourcing, depending on the kind of commentary you need. These vary in terms of how much control you give up over the content and the process.

Option 1: Completely surrender control of your investment commentary
If investing isn't a core part of your firm's expertise, you may not feel the need to express insights specific to your firm or your portfolios. In this case, you can simply buy ready-to-use commentary or commission a trusted financial writer to create the market recap and outlook that goes to your clients.

Buying commentary from a provider who sells the same text to multiple clients is likely to be easy on your budget. You can find the names of providers on my list at "Ready-to-use content for financial advisors."

Alternatively, there are writers—not me—who specialize in writing marketing commentary based on their own research. Both the content providers and the writers may allow you to customize their content. Before you edit or slap your name on their content, check the terms of your agreement with the provider.

Option 2: Hire someone to write interview-based market commentary

When you have distinctive, well developed views and the evidence to back them up, then this is a good option for you. Firms that struggle to find time to generate commentary also find this helpful, in my experience.

To ease your quarterly crunch, schedule your interview prior to the quarter's end. I usually suggest seven to 10 days prior, so you have a good sense of how the quarter is shaping up.

Involve your key decision-makers in the interview. Sometimes that means only your investment strategist. Other times that may mean your investment policy committee, or one person who's an expert on stocks and another who's an expert on bonds. A good interviewer will give you questions to mull over prior to your call. This will help to find your commentary's focus.

Here are some sample questions for your interviewer:

- What is the most important message you want readers to take away from your commentary?
- How did your clients' portfolios perform relative to the market—and why?
- What factors most influenced the market during the period? Do you expect their influence to continue?
- Are there a few statistics that you'd like to highlight?
- How have you adjusted your portfolios during the period under discussion and do you anticipate more changes?

Above all, it's helpful to focus on how the information in your commentary affects your clients' portfolios. After all, that's their biggest concern.

After the interview, your writer will digest the information to create an outline or draft for your review. She will highlight questions or data gaps that she'd like you to fill. Then it's your turn to provide the missing information and give feedback.

If multiple people give feedback, I suggest that you consolidate it in one document, with Microsoft Word's "Track Changes" turned on. "Track Changes" will help your writer identify text to be proofed for grammar and related issues. If two of the evaluators disagree on a substantive issue, please reconcile your views **before** you forward your document to the writer.

What if significant new data comes in between the time of your interview and when you're giving feedback to your writer? I ran into that with congressional negotiations over the sequester in 2012. One option is to discuss potential scenarios at the time of your interview, so your writer is prepared. Another option is to jot down your take on the news as part of your feedback to the writer, who can smooth out the words to make them more compelling, clear, and concise. Another possibility is to request a brief update call with your writer. Prior to that call, it's helpful if you can send her some bullet points with your take on the news, so she can focus her questions to make the most efficient use of your time.

This interview-driven approach isn't right for everyone. If your commentary typically changes significantly between the first and final drafts—or if it relies heavily on data that comes in late—you're more likely to find option 3 more helpful.

Option 3: Hire an editor for your commentary

For investment professionals at some firms, putting their ideas into writing is a useful exercise. It helps them to discover their opinions and collect the supporting evidence. As the writing expert William Zinsser discusses in his book, this is a form of *Writing to Learn: How to Write – and Think – Clearly About Any Subject at All*.

However, the folks who generate this commentary become so engrossed in the details that they may find it difficult to edit themselves. It's hard to get distance from material when you're immersed in it. Plus, a financial education usually doesn't include intensive training in copyediting or in understanding the reader's perspective.

One of the most valuable things that an editor can do is to reframe and reorganize the flow of your information. For example, she can expand on the WIIFM—"What's in it for me"—of the content. She can also improve logical flow of the piece, and apply my first-sentence-check test.

Other valuable functions that your editor can perform include adding informative headings, streamlining text, and checking grammar and punctuation issues. Headings make it easier for skimmers to absorb your opinions and perhaps even be drawn into the details of your commentary. Sentences that average 14 to 22 words and lack distracting errors also help with reader comprehension and retention.

Option 4: Hire a writer for attribution-driven performance commentary

In contrast with market commentary, attribution-driven performance commentary is specific to your firm's funds or portfolios. Mutual funds' annual and semiannual reports also fall into this category.

The components of this commentary may include:

- Your portfolio's returns versus the benchmarks for the relevant periods

- Attribution analysis—for stock funds, this would include the impact of sector allocations, stock selection, and possibly the cash position
- Discussion of specific holdings that contributed to or detracted from performance relative to the benchmark
- Optional: market commentary, transactions during the relevant period, and investment strategy

Some companies provide all of the necessary data directly to their writer, while others incorporate research or portfolio manager interviews conducted by the writer.

Option 5: Commissioning a critique for the DIY commentary writer

Some firms can boost the quality of their commentary simply by implementing suggestions they receive from a one-time critique of their writing. A writer-editor who's familiar with commentaries can identify your commentary's strengths and weaknesses, and provide guidelines for improvements.

For an assessment of your current commentary or newsletter, you can hire me to critique one example of your work.

MARKETING:
Don’t sabotage your website’s news page

A news page featuring your firm’s mentions in the media can boost your credibility, as long as you avoid one financial advisor’s mistake.

“Wow! This advisor hasn’t gotten any press since 2006.” That was my first thought when I looked at an advisor’s news page earlier this year. I immediately thought, “He should delete his news page.”

But then I scanned the rest of the page. I realized that the advisor had listed his media coverage in chronological order. He started in 2006 and continued up to the present day way, way down the page.

Unfortunately, most readers won’t scan the entire page. They’ll stop with the misperception that the advisor is a dud at getting the attention of the press.

The lesson for you? List your news coverage in **reverse** chronological order, putting the most recent items at the top of your page. For an example, see my “In the News” page.

Using the proper order is a small step with a big impact.

SOCIAL MEDIA:
How to live-tweet a financial conference

Live-tweeting a financial conference—tweeting as you attend the sessions—can reward you as well as the conference organizers and speakers. Do it right to maximize your benefits.

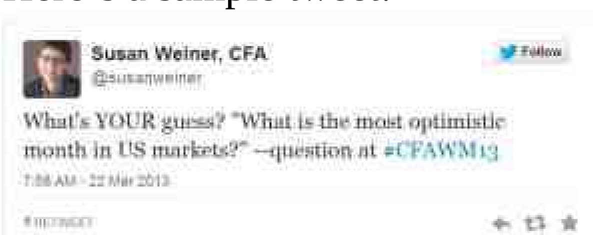
Why live-tweet?
Live-tweeting offers both personal and professional benefits.

Personally, I find that I listen better when I take notes on a presentation. Live-tweeting is a form of note-taking, but other people get to benefit from seeing what you write.

Live-tweeting can also build your social media influence. The week that I live-tweeted the CFA's 2013 wealth management conference, I noticed a jump in my e-newsletter subscribers, in addition to an increase in Twitter followers.

Prepare before you start.
1. Find out the conference hashtag before you start live-tweeting the event. A hashtag is a kind of abbreviation that starts with the # sign. For example, the hashtag for that CFA Institute Wealth Management conference was #CFAWM13.

Here's a sample tweet:



The hashtag is important because it helps conference followers find your tweets.

2. Pick your Twitter tool. I like TweetChat because once I enter the conference hashtag, it automatically creates a list of tweets bearing the hashtag and attaches the hashtag. This is more efficient than working directly in Twitter.

Some live-tweeters prefer to stick to their usual means of filtering and communicating in Twitter. For example, in HootSuite, which I use, or TweetDeck, you can set up a column devoted to a specific hashtag. However, I'm not aware of how you can automatically generate a hashtag when you tweet in HootSuite.

I prefer TweetChat because it saves me time when compared with HootSuite.

3. Have the speakers' names and bios handy. This will help you to tweet these details accurately. I was once very embarrassed by sending a tweet that misnamed the speaker.

Compose your tweets.

1. Name the conference. When your first tweet names the conference along with its hashtag, you put your tweets in context for readers who aren't attending the conference. For example, I might tweet, "CFA Wealth Management conference starting now #CFAWM13"

2. Tweet "sound bites." You can't build a complete argument on Twitter, so it's best to write the Twitter equivalent of "sound bites"—short statements that stand on their own. For example, share an interesting fact or provocative opinion expressed by a speaker. You can also ask a question or express your own opinion about a conference topic. Another popular technique: tweeting a helpful website mentioned at a conference.

3. Identify the speaker. Readers want to know who said what. Sharing the name, title, and company affiliation of your information source provides context and credibility. It's easy to incorporate this in an article or blog post; it's challenging within the 140 characters allowed by Twitter.

One shortcut: use the speaker's Twitter name. For example, if I attribute a statement to @michaelkitces, I save one character over "Michael Kitces" and, more importantly you can click on Michael's Twitter name to read his Twitter bio. You can even explore his credentials further by clicking on the website within his Twitter bio.

If there's no Twitter name available, I try to give the speaker's full name and company affiliation in my first tweet. After that, I may save space by referring to the speaker by last name only.

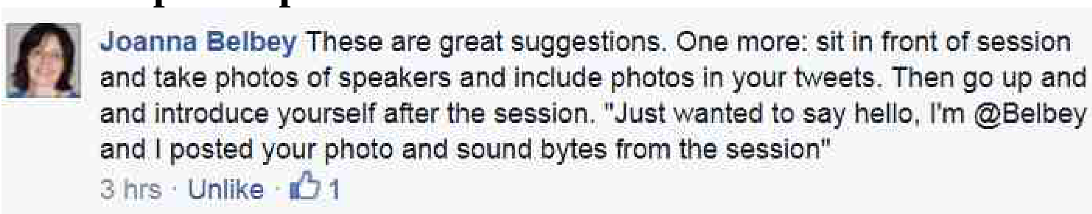
4. Save space with colons and paraphrasing. Instead of tweeting "…, says Patterson," you can tweet "Patterson:…" Sometimes the few spaces you save can keep you under Twitter's 140-character limit. Keep your statement short enough for others to easily retweet, or free up space that's better used explaining an idea.

Similarly, you can shorten your character count by paraphrasing—restating in your own words—what speakers might say in a wordier or more colorful manner.

Tweet selectively.
Don't feel that you must tweet every session and every interesting fact. After all, you're at the conference to learn. Constant typing may distract you from processing information.

Nervous about your typing skills? You can focus on retweeting other people's conference tweets. This shows respect for other people's content and may help you build relationships with them.

Bonus tip: Use photos.



Joanna Belbey These are great suggestions. One more: sit in front of session and take photos of speakers and include photos in your tweets. Then go up and and introduce yourself after the session. "Just wanted to say hello, I'm @Belbey and I posted your photo and sound bytes from the session"
3 hrs · Unlike · 1

Thank you, Joanna Belbey, for this excellent suggestion, which I'm sharing with your permission!

SOCIAL MEDIA:
Wonder if people read your LinkedIn status updates?

If you're like me, you sometimes wonder, "Is anyone reading what I post to LinkedIn or other social media?" I believe they are, for reasons I discuss below. I also have some tips to boost your readership.

I'm fortunate that people sometimes "like," comment on, or share my social media updates. (Thank you very much, if you're one of those folks!) However, plenty of my status updates go without any explicit recognition.

However, that doesn't mean that my updates—or yours—go unnoticed. People don't acknowledge your updates for a variety of reasons, even if they read and enjoy your updates. For example, they may:

- Be too busy to take any action beyond reading your update and clicking on your link
- Not realize that clicking "like," commenting, and sharing are a valuable part of social media culture—your connections probably include plenty of social media newbies
- Be scared of getting in trouble with the compliance department—they may be especially wary of appearing to endorse financial advice

Ironically, it takes meeting with people face to face for me to understand the power of social media. At one of the last events that I attended in person, I said "hello" to a woman whom I hadn't seen or corresponded within more than five years. I thought she might not remember me. Instead she responded to my greeting with "I love what you post on LinkedIn!" Wow, that gave me a jolt of positive energy. You may have similarly enthusiastic yet silent readers.

3 ways to discover whether people are reading
If you'd like to know for sure that somebody—anybody—is reading your updates, here are some techniques you can try.

1. Use your updates to pose questions. Ask a simple question in your social media updates to make it easy for people to engage with you. Simple doesn't have to mean a yes/no question. It could be something like "What's the first word that comes to mind when you think about saving for your children's college education?"

2. Ask people if they're reading. You can use a poll on your blog, e-newsletter, or other location to ask your clients, colleagues, and other connections if they're enjoying what you share on social media. You can also ask how you can improve.

3. Use tracking links. Some of the links you share via social media can provide statistics that tell you how people have clicked on them. Check out bit.ly or the link shorteners in HootSuite or Buffer for more information. Also, LinkedIn has a built-in measurement tool that's shown in the image above of "Who's Viewed Your Updates." You can click on the arrows in the upper right-hand corner of your box to see that statistics on other updates that you've posted.

3 reasons no one reads your status updates

If your statistics disappoint you, it may because you're making one of the following common mistakes.

1. Your updates are all about you. Your connections don't want to read a steady flow of self-promotional updates. Focus on content that helps your target audience. You'll earn their interest.

2. You don't post often enough. Most members of your potential readership don't spend all day scouring the Internet for your updates. You must post regularly to catch them online. The ideal frequency varies by social media channel and individual preferences. For example, people expect more frequent status updates on Twitter than on LinkedIn. In an informal poll on LinkedIn, respondents suggested that posting up to four times a day—with breaks between your updates—is ideal.

3. Your status updates are poorly written. Have you seen status updates that consist solely of a website address? That's an extreme example of an unappealing status update. Another example is simply posting "July newsletter" plus a link. When you share links, it's for better to offer an enticement, such as "3 tips to save on taxes."

SOCIAL MEDIA:
Secrets of a speedy sale via Twitter

I sent a tweet asking for new clients. It worked almost like magic. My tweet spurred a tweet from an interested individual, and then a phone call with the person who contracted for my services. This was one of the easiest sales I've ever made.

What can you learn about sales via social media from my experience? I've identified four lessons.

Lesson 1: If you don't ask, you won't receive.
While you shouldn't focus your social media content on promoting yourself, you must ensure that people know how you earn a living. This can involve an occasional explicit request for business, even if it makes you feel squeamish.

In my case, until recently I hadn't done much to publicize via social media my availability as a speaker on effective financial writing. Not surprisingly, I'd never seen a direct connection between a single tweet and my getting booked to speak.

In the speedy sale that's the focus of this post, I tweeted something like:

"Looking for more paid speaking gigs. Here's where I've spoken: http://ht.ly/ujblY."

What a thrill it was when one of my Twitter followers responded, asking for more information. He passed along the details to the person coordinating speakers for his chapter of the Financial Planning Association. The coordinator followed up quickly. Within one week, we reached agreement on a speaking date.

"I wish Twitter always worked this well," I thought after landing this speaking gig. However, it's not that easy. Indeed, what appeared to be a speedy sale rested on a relationship developed over the course of a year.

Lesson 2. You must establish trust.
My seemingly speedy sale wouldn't have happened if I hadn't built trust with my referral source. I achieved that by providing content that he found helpful.

Since my referral source subscribed to my e-newsletter about one year earlier, he had found useful ideas in my newsletters, blog posts, social media status updates, and, most recently, my book, *Financial Blogging: How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients*. We'd even spoken on the phone once. Most of my social media content isn't overtly promotional. Much of it offers practical tips that readers can apply right away. Without this history, my tweet would have yielded nothing.

If you ever despair about giving information away for free, remember that good content will pay off eventually. However, it often takes time to build relationships and establish your expertise. Plus, you must offer something your prospective clients desire.

By the way, you may ask, "Susan, couldn't you have landed this gig without Twitter since you already had a relationship with your referral source?" Maybe, but it would have been hard since I didn't realize that my referral source was in a position to recommend speakers. The beauty of social media is how it makes it easier for the right people to discover you.

Lesson 3. Provide links that enhance credibility.
My gig-seeking tweet included a link to a list of about 30 speaking engagements that I've delivered across North America for

corporate clients and professional societies, including the CFA Institute and the Financial Planning Association. That experience spoke loudly.

If you issue an explicit request for work, you'll probably benefit from including a link to prove your expertise. Your link could go to a bio, case study, blog post, white paper, or something else.

Lesson 4. Social media won't always deliver immediately.
Your timing has to be right. What works one time may not deliver results the next time. Thrilled with the results of my gig-landing tweet, I repeated it. My results? Zip.

That's okay. I don't think my second tweet was wasted. It may have raised awareness of my presentations across a broader audience. When those folks need to hire a speaker in the future, they may be more receptive to me. In fact, I've landed other clients from Twitter by developing relationships with them over time. Another presentation client of mine started following me after I retweeted some of his content, but months passed before he made direct contact and started a conversation about hiring me.

My experience also points to the importance of not taking a "once and done" approach to social media. Your social media tactics differ from your old media tactics, where you sent a newsletter once and then it disappeared into your archives. Today tweets, status updates, and other content can—and should—be repeated, tweaked, and recycled across different social media platforms over time. Remember that some prospective clients and referral sources may find your content—especially blog posts—long after you originally publish it. This helps you to reach the right people at their convenience. Just don't go overboard in repeating the same content, or you'll drive away your audience.

WRITING:
Confessions of a lousy writer—and 6 tips for you

I was a lousy writer. It's true. I wince when I read selections from my Ph.D. thesis, *Bureaucracy and Politics in the 1930s: The Career of Goto Fumio*.

Wordy sentences and examples of the passive tense abound. However, over the many years since I earned my doctorate from Harvard, I've revamped my style, using techniques that you, too, can adopt.

Goto Fumio, the subject of my Ph.D. thesis

1. Get someone to edit you.
It's hard for most people to identify their writing's weaknesses. That's why it's so valuable to have someone edit you. My writing improved the most in the 1990s, when I was a staff reporter for *Dalbar's Mutual Fund Market News* (now *Money Management Executive*). I had the luxury of being edited by professionals. If you work with a professional editor, look for patterns in the changes they make to your text. If certain corrections or changes occur repeatedly, you can create a checklist that you can apply yourself to future drafts. You'll find a sample checklist, the "Blog Post Review Checklist" in my book, *Financial Blogging: How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients*.

If a professional editor isn't in your budget, consider asking colleagues, family members, friends, or even clients for feedback. Members of your target audience can help you assess whether your content appeals to them.

2. Take writing classes.
Take a writing class—any kind of writing class. I've never taken a journalism or financial writing class. However, I've taken many adult education classes on writing essays, memoir, and even poetry in the adult ed programs of Boston, Cambridge, and Newton, Mass. These classes helped me learn how to organize my writing, write more economically, and use words with greater power. You might wonder about my inclusion of poetry on my list, but those classes remind me of how important each word is in my writing.

You may be able to find business writing classes, especially if you look at a local college that offers business administration classes. I have led presentations on investment commentary, email, and other topics.

The rise of online instruction means that you should be able to find a class no matter where you live.

3. Write a lot.
The more you write, the better you'll become, especially if you get your writing critiqued. One benefit of blogging is that it gives you an incentive to write and publish frequently.

4. Read and analyze other people's writing.
When you read and enjoy other people's work, take the time to figure out what you like about it. Is it their catchy titles and headings? The way they hit their readers' hot spots? Their streamlined prose?

You can also learn from analyzing pieces that you dislike. These examples can yield a "don't" list for you. Avoiding terrible mistakes is worthwhile.

Classes, which I mentioned above, are one way to get practice critiquing other people's work constructively. Another way is to join a writing group, where members take turns giving and receiving feedback. My book, *Financial Blogging: How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients,* came from my creative writing group. I don't know how I would have finished my book without group members' encouragement and feedback. Plus, I found my book's project manager in the group.

5. Read about writing.
While learning by doing is most powerful, you can also learn by reading about writing techniques. I recommend books on this blog. I also blog about techniques. While my monthly newsletter usually includes a writing tip, you may also enjoy my "Weekly Tip," which includes just one communications or marketing tip from my archives. You can subscribe or adjust your subscription settings. In addition, you will find step-by-step instructions for writing blog posts in my *Financial Blogging book*.

6. Experiment.
Take risks. Experiment with writing using techniques and formats you've never used before. You're bound to learn something from the results.

WRITING:
How to capitalize financial acronyms

Is it "LIBOR" or "Libor"? I'm startled by seeing the acronym for the London Interbank Offered Rate spelled with only the initial letter capitalized. I believe that every letter of an acronym should be capitalized to communicate that the word is an acronym, a form of abbreviation created from initial letters or syllables of a term such as the London Interbank Offered Rate.

Garner's Modern American Usage agrees that using all capitals is common in American English, but the British tend to capitalize only the first letter. Perhaps the U.K. is the origin of this practice spreading to the U.S. According to Amy Einsohn's *A Copyeditor's Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications*, many newspapers now use "initial cap only for acronyms five letters or longer that are pronounced as words." For example, "Nafta" or "Erisa."

I don't like the trend to mix the upper and lower cases in acronyms, turning LIBOR into Libor. Spelling an acronym using only upper-case letters gently reminds the reader that the term is an acronym. This is helpful, in my opinion.

To define and use parentheses or not?

Acronyms are often spelled out when first used in a document. For example, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA). However, Einsohn says, "In documents addressed to scientists, technical experts, and other professional experts, acronyms that are standard in the field may usually be used without any introduction."

In the case of LIBOR, the spelled-out term doesn't mean much to readers. It's useful to describe how LIBOR is used, for example, as a benchmark for short-term interest rates.

WRITING:
Writing sensitively about tragedy in your investment commentary or blog

Tragedy strikes more often than you'd like. It could be an event like the Malaysian Airlines plane disappearance, the Boston Marathon bombings, or something that happened in your community. Discussing tragedies can bring us closer together. It can make stale topics timely. However, it can also offend and disturb your readers, as discussed in "'Epicurious' Enrages Followers With Boston Bombings Tweets" on the Mashable blog or "This Guy's Replies to 9/11 Brand Tweets Sum Up Everything That's Wrong With 9/11 Brand Tweets." You need to tread carefully. I have some thoughts about how to manage this challenge.

1. Acknowledge the tragedy.
Before you dive into the bottom-line implications of the events, acknowledge that it's a tragedy that affects human lives. You might write something like "We are all hoping for a happy ending in the disturbing case of…" or "We are deeply distressed by the…"

2. Consider your context.
Context matters. Let's consider three scenarios for writing about airline stocks the day after the March 8 disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

Scenario one: Airlines analyst for a buy-side investment management firm
When you're a securities analyst, writing about events that move stock prices is an essential part of your job. You can't avoid it.

Plus, if you're a buy-side analyst, what you write will stay within your firm (unless you speak with the press). This gives you more freedom than writers who communicate with the general public.

Your audience needs to know what effect an airlines disaster will have on the stocks you follow. In fact, it would be irresponsible to ignore the potential impact.

Still, you don't want to be seen as gloating over an investment opportunity created by a tragedy. That's ghoulish.

Scenario two: Wealth manager writing a client newsletter
When you write a newsletter for clients, you'll have a feel for their sensibilities. Also, you'll know what they expect from you—whether it's coldly objective analysis or a warmly personal take on news that affects their finances.

If your clients value objectivity and data above all, I believe you can discuss the bottom-line implications of the tragedy after a quick acknowledgment of the sad event's effect on people's lives. Still, there may be more sensitive folks among your readers. Think about whether you need to discuss the tragedy now. If your newsletter discussion would be just as relevant later, then consider waiting.

Scenario three: Writer of a blog for general consumption
You're at the greatest risk when you publish your thoughts in a medium, anyone can find online, such as a blog or op-ed piece. Tread carefully. Consider how **you** would feel if you or your family experienced the tragedy in question. Acknowledge that this is a serious event that hurts people. Be especially careful if you're publishing where you're likely to be read by people directly affected by the tragedy.

3. Consider the timing.
Writing about a tragedy as it unfolds is different from writing about it six months or even one week later. Feelings are most raw in the early days. You must balance these emotions against the fact that whatever you write—especially if you're an analyst covering securities that are directly affected by the tragedy—may be most valuable in those early days.

4. Get a second opinion.
Not sure how your piece will be perceived? Ask someone you trust and respect for feedback. You'll get the most helpful feedback from someone in your target audience, especially if they're candid.

Depending on your audience, you may decide that an event is too painful for them to read about at this point.

(By the way, I'd like to thank the participant in my presentation to the Baltimore CFA Society who asked the question that sparked this blog post.)

About Susan B. Weiner Investment Writing

Susan Weiner, CFA, helps financial professionals increase the impact of their writing on clients and prospects. She writes and edits white papers, investment commentary, and other communications for leading investment and wealth management firms. Susan has presented to CFA societies across North America on "How to Write Investment Commentary People Will Read" and to FPA Experience and chapters of the Financial Planning Association on "Writing Effective Emails and Letters." She is also the author of *Financial Blogging: How to Write Powerful Posts That Attract Clients*, which describes a step-by-step writing process.

Susan knows how to use language as a financial professional and a journalist. Before becoming a freelancer, she was director of investment communications at Columbia Management Group, a trustee at Batterymarch Financial Management, and a staff reporter for a weekly mutual fund publication.

Investment professionals, financial advisors, and the sales and marketing staff who support them, have praised Susan's workshops on writing investment commentary, emails, and blog posts that help attract and retain clients.

To read more of Susan Weiner's tips, subscribe to her e-newsletter or visit her blog at http://investmentwriting.com/blog.