



Plain Language: Staying on topic

October 15, 2014

By [admin](#)

[This week's tip comes from Jim Worsham.]

One of the challenges in writing is staying on topic, or not straying from the main thesis of whatever you're writing about. The result of losing your way: You don't make your main points effectively.

It's easy, as well as tempting and interesting, to let your narrative stray, like taking an off-ramp on the Interstate to places unknown and getting lost.

That's why it's so important to write an outline or read your writing out loud to yourself (or, better yet, have someone else read it for you) so the problems will speak for themselves loud and clear.

Your outline doesn't have to follow the classic numbering/lettering framework with roman numerals and capital letters, etc. It can just be a word sketch that lists the main points you want to make.

Here are some things you can do as you write to make sure you stay on topic:

1. Finish all your research and know well what facts you have, and don't have, on the subject at hand.
2. Make a strong thesis statement of what you're writing about. For example, if you were writing about the benefits of the Enigma automobile, your thesis statement—a single sentence or a full paragraph—should be an argument for buying an Enigma.
3. Decide what you want to say, as mentioned before, and organize those points into paragraphs, each with its own topic sentence. For example, you want to talk about the Enigma's fuel economy, handling on the highway vs. city streets, safety rating, and cost.
4. Everything in each paragraph should back up the topic sentence. If it doesn't, it should go elsewhere else or be deleted. If one of your topic sentences, for example, talks about the great way the Enigma handles on the highway, everything in that paragraph should back up that assertion.

Now that you're rolling along, be careful not to stray from your main point.

You might go off topic to note how the style of this year's Enigma looks like another automobile model from a few years ago. Or how the new Enigma's wheels have a sporty look to them. Or how most cars don't do what the new Enigma can do because of changes made in the manufacturing process.

Getting into these off-topic areas undercuts your main argument—the points you should have put in your thesis paragraph and were backing up one by one in each paragraph.