Duffy's crash-course on good writing

Self-edit: No writer can sit down and type up an error-free document. Write your piece and then leave it for some period of time. When you come back, you'll see mistakes that you previously overlooked.

Be clear: When you read over what you wrote, does it make sense – or do you stumble over a phrase? If it's not clear, then rewrite it. Above all, writing should make sense – just say what you're trying to say and don't worry about it sounding grandiose.

Don't be fancy: Don't use longer words because you think they sound better.
- Utilize → use
- Resides → live
- Plethora→ many

Omit needless words: Constantly search for passages that can be shortened. Always reread first drafts with an eye on deleting fluff.
- "The fact that the project was behind schedule" → "Because the project was behind schedule."
- "This is a subject that" → "This subject"
- "the reason why is that" → "because"
- "as well as" → "and"

Use active voice, avoid passive writing: The "doer" should always be at the beginning of your sentences.
- "a mistake was made by me" → "I made a mistake"
- "he was arrested by the police" → "police arrested him"

Avoid pronouns: Sentences should rarely start with "it was" or "there are." These constructs can easily be rewritten:
- "There are several key elements in Japanese cinema" → "Japanese cinema consists of several key elements."
- "It was these people that led the industry" → "The people led the industry"

Avoid weak verbs: Try to avoid forms of "to be" (e.g., "is," "was," "are," "were,") as your main verb. Readers find active verbs much more engaging.
- "He was known for being obtuse" → "He gained fame for his obtuse nature."
- "She is often found in the cafeteria alone" → "She often dines by herself in the cafeteria."

Don't be vague: Avoid sentences with words such as "this," "it," or "these" that continue your point from a previous sentence. Don't assume the reader can follow your pronoun usage – they often cannot. Just be specific.
- "Because of this, the government decided to…" → "Because of Thompson's objections, the government decided to…"

Watch your tenses: Pick a tense (e.g., was = past tense, is = present tense) and stick with it. If you're having trouble, just pick past tense and don't waver.

Don't use "etc.": *Et Cetera* comes off looking lazy. If you're thinking of more examples in a string of words, then just go ahead and put them on paper. Often, we rely on "etc" because we don't want to take the time to complete a thought.

Don't be redundant: Say what you're saying once and assume the reader got it. Try not to use the same word twice in a sentence or in consecutive sentences.
- "The author of the *article* said he writes three articles a day" → "The author of the *piece* said he writes three articles a day."

Understand basic grammar: An independent clause is a clause that can stand alone – i.e., contains both a subject and a verb. Writers must understand clauses to avoid comma splices and run-on sentences. Two independent clauses must be separated by a comma and a conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Only independent clauses can be separated with a semicolon.

- "He jumped over the fence, and he ran to the school."
  - → Both clauses could stand alone, so you need the comma and then the conjunction "and"

The following examples show wrong versions of the same sentence:

- "He jumped over the fence, and ran into the school."
  - → No comma needed because second clause can't stand alone.
- "He jumped over the fence, he ran into the school."
  - → Need a conjunction, otherwise that's a comma splice
- "He jumped over the fence and he ran into the school."
  - → Comma needed because the second clause could stand alone.
- "He jumped over the fence; he ran into the school."
  - → An acceptable use of a semicolon, but try to avoid using them.

Avoid short, choppy sentences: Combine them with another sentence; that's what conjunctions are for. If you use them sparingly, when you do use them – the effect will be powerful. I swear.

Understand basic pronoun use: Subjective pronouns "I," "we," "they" are used as subjects. Objective pronouns "me," "us," "them" are used as objects (of sentences and of prepositions.) When in doubt, change the sentence around to see how it sounds.

- "Between you and I, we should…"
  - → "Between I and you, we should" → Doesn't sound right
- ∴ "Who" is subjective, "whom" is objective → Insert different pronouns to figure it out
  - → "He gave the bag to who?" → "He gave the bag to he?" → Doesn't sound right

"Its" and "it's": "Its" shows possession, whereas "it's" is a contraction for "it is."

Avoid getting inside people's head: You're not a psychic.

- "He believes raising the minimum wage will help the poor"
  - → "He said he believes raising the minimum wage will help the poor."
    - → Even better: "He said raising the minimum wage…"
- "He feels helping the poor…"
  - → "He said he feels helping…"
    - Even better → "He said helping the poor…"

Specifically for Journalism Students

Answer your reader's natural questions: If you don't understand a term or a concept, then your reader won't either. Also, don't throw out an intriguing bit of info and then fail to elaborate.

- Ex.: "Smith started his business after he got out of Parchmen State Prison." → Next sentence should offer an explanation. Why was Smith in prison?

Leave yourself out of the story: Nobody wants to hear your thoughts, your ideas, your reaction to the situation or person you're interviewing. Stay objective and speak in the third-person, always. Also, try not to write sentences such as "when asked about…" Just tell us what your interviewee said.

Let your subjects tell the story: Readers like to read quotes. But make sure they're good ones – paraphrase factual information and leave quotes for good juicy bits of dialogue.