(U) The Humble Footnote: Every Dog Has His Day

FROM: ██████████
the SIDtoday Editor
Run Date: 07/30/2008

(U) Here's another in an intermittent series of articles with general tips on writing...

(U) Many people do not have warm feelings towards footnotes. They remind them of some disagreeable things, for example:

- Memories of writing term papers in school and having to create lots of tedious footnotes containing strange Latin terms like "ibid." and "Op. cit." to explain where they got the text they are citing; or
- Offers from businesses (for example, a bank wants to extend a line of credit, or someone wants the recipients to claim their "free" new sports car), with all of the fine print contained in hard-to-decipher footnotes laced with large amounts of legal jargon.

...No wonder people are turned off by footnotes!

(U) Footnotes don't always deserve their bad reputation, however. In fact, if you are a writer, there are times when the lowly footnote can prove itself your best friend. How so? ***You can use footnotes to provide explanatory details, without interrupting the flow of the text.***

(U) Here's an example: let's say you are writing about a conference you attended, and you want to list all of the many organizations that were represented. If you tried to include that in the main text, it might look like this:

- "This September, I had the pleasure of attending an intelligence conference in sunny Hawaii. I was joined by dozens of colleagues from the SID Customer Relationships Directorate, the SID Analysis & Production (A&P) Directorate, the NSA/CSS Texas A&P Directorate, the Alaska Mission Operations Center, the Misawa Security Operations Center, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency..."

Not exactly a riveting read! Any kind of forward momentum you may have built up with the first sentence has come screeching to a halt with the second.

(U) So what to do about it? If you are tempted to just name the organizations by their abbreviations in order to shorten the list and get the pain over with faster, resist the urge! Unless you know for sure that all of your readers are familiar with the abbreviations in question ("CIA" and "FBI" are well known to anyone who's ever watched a Hollywood movie, but most other abbreviations are questionable), you really ***ought*** to expand all of the abbreviations for clarity's sake.

(U) The better approach is to make a general "catch-all" statement in the main text, and spell out all of the nitty-gritty details in a footnote. The result might look like this:

- This September, I had the pleasure of attending an intelligence conference in sunny Hawaii. I was joined by dozens of colleagues from NSA and several other US intelligence agencies* for some very interesting discussions.

...and down in the footnote, you would spell out exactly who was there. Since the footnote doesn't affect the flow of the narrative, you can "go to town" and name as many long organizational names as necessary without paying any price for it.

(U) Besides long "laundry lists" of facts, here's another thing best stashed in footnotes: definitions of uncommon terms. For example, let's say you use a certain term and you think that *most* readers will know what you are talking about, but some will not. If you stop and explain what the term means, again, you are interrupting the flow of the text and, to make matters worse, you are annoying the majority who are already familiar with the term! What to do? Again, the trusty footnote can trot to the rescue. Simply footnote the term and explain briefly what it means at the bottom of the page.

(U) The question might arise: "If my document is on NSANet and I need to define an esoteric term, can't I just provide a hyperlink to some webpage (e.g., a homepage or a wiki) where readers can find out what they need to know?" This is a judgment call, but what I would recommend is this:

- If understanding the term is essential to understanding the text, you really ought to provide at least the basic details in a footnote, rather than making the readers do the work of looking it up. (After you've given the basics, however, you could hyperlink in the footnote to more detailed info, for those who are really interested.)
- If understanding the term is NOT essential, but only nice-to-know, I think a bare hyperlink is acceptable.

(U) So, the next time you find your text bogging down in places, think about offloading the explanatory details into footnotes... that will keep the main narrative cruising at full speed in the literary fast lane!

(U//FOUO) Comment: This series applies to general writing skills -- not necessarily SIGINT reporting, which has its own set of requirements... Feedback is always welcome. Also, if you would like to suggest a topic for a future article on writing, send it to ▮▮▮▮▮ nsa . Thanks.

"(U//FOUO) SIDtoday articles may not be republished or reposted outside NSANet without the consent of S0121 (DL sid_comms)."