

Youth Legislature Model Press Corp



Model Press Corp Resources

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Table of Contents

Page 3 - ON DEVELOPING THE IDEA

Page 5 - THE REPORTING PROCESS

Page 6 - ON WRITING

Page 8 - HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

Page 9 - ON BEING A REVISIONIST

Page 11 - ON BEING AUTHORITATIVE

Page 13 - ON RIGHT WRITING

Page 14 - ONE MINUTE TUTORIALS ...Reporting

Page 21 - ONE-MINUTE TUTORIALS ... on Writing

Page 28 - ONE-MINUTE TUTORIALS ... On Editing

Page 35 - ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography

Page 42 - ONE-MINUTE TUTORIALS ... On Issues

ON DEVELOPING THE IDEA

Stories begin with an idea. That raises the question of where ideas come from.

They can come from someone else, of course, but writers who develop their own ideas tend to execute them better. They are more enthusiastic, more inquisitive and have more of a sense of ownership (it should be quickly stated, however, that the fleshing out of an initial idea can best be achieved in collaboration with others: Two minds are better than one).

You arrive at a good idea by answering the following questions:

What interests you? What creates emotion: makes you mad; makes you happy/sad; makes you inquisitive??

Who interests you?

What do you want to look into more or learn about?

How good is the idea: Will it contain information? Will the information be significant enough to be of interest to others?

If you sit down and try to answer questions like the above, you probably will come up with some possibilities for stories to write. But generally ideas are generated more spontaneously. A brainstorm. You see, hear or read something that triggers another idea. A conversation gives you an idea.

The problem is that ideas tend to go in one ear and out the other. Ever wake up in the middle of the night with a great solution to a problem and then wake up the next morning and forget what it was?

Ideas, for many of us, are like jokes: We tend to forget them.

Most writers carry a little notebook or keep a journal. It is a way of capturing the germ of an idea that can be built on.

Don Murray, the author and writing guru, never goes anywhere without his daily journal, an 8x11 spiral notebook in which at various times during the day he jots down thoughts or descriptions of what he literally sees or things he sees in his mind's eye. Here's how he describes the evolution of an idea:

"My columns usually begin with the ordinary. My eye catches a glint from an insignificant element in my life or the lives of those around me, and I see it suddenly with humor, anger, sadness, amusement, nostalgia, concern--emotion gives it significance."

Here's another little exercise that might be worth trying: Write down three ideas you think may be interesting for your publication...for your eyes only.

Take your best idea. Write an answer in a word or two or three to the basic questions each story should contain, if there is an answer: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

Talk over the idea with someone else before you start working on it.

What are the criteria for a newsy idea?

1. Does it have timeliness?
2. Is it of importance (affects many)?
3. Will it be of general interest to the reader?
4. Is it relevant?
5. Does it involve the public's right to know?
6. Does involve the public's need to know?
7. Will it inform/educate/guide/entertain readers?

Few of us our Einsteins, but that doesn't mean we don't have good ideas. The test is whether we are conveying information that is relevant to the reader. Take it from Susan Trausch, who has been a humor columnist, business writer, Washington correspondent and editorial writer at the Boston Globe:

"Ideas come from just living and doing the daily battle--standing in line at the bank and always being in the wrong one; spending a day trying to get the funny noise out of the car and discovering it's a tube of lipstick under the seat; living in an apartment with cardboard walls; having your credit card rejected in front of your fellow man. I write about the little annoyances that are big pains, and those are everywhere."

THE REPORTING PROCESS

Think of the process of reporting as collecting.

Effective writing is built with specific, accurate information. Collect facts, collect impressions, collect quotations, collect details.

Before going out to do the reporting or interviewing, sit in a quiet corner and figure out what questions need to be answered. Put yourself in the place of the person you picture as the reader of your story. Write down the questions and bring them with you as you do research, as you attend a speech or a meeting or as you do an interview.

You're not an expert, so don't be afraid to ask dumb questions.

You're not perfect, so don't be afraid to double-check spelling or facts, even if it is embarrassing for you to say, "Could you repeat that please?" or "Would you mind spelling that again, a little slower?"

Use all your senses: What does the auditorium or room or house look like? What do you see or hear or even smell?

Reporting complemented by writing skill is what produced the following excerpt from Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*:

"On Broadway it was still bright afternoon and the gassy air was almost motionless under the leaden spokes of sunlight, and sawdust footprints lay about the doorways of butcher shops and fruit stores. And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence--I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want. Faster, much faster than any man could make the tally. The sidewalks were wider than any causeway; the street itself was immense, and it quaked and gleamed and it seemed...to throb at the last limit of endurance."

Details tend to reveal.

ON WRITING

Think of writing as a conversation.

If you read James Nuland's book, *How to Die?*, you would have seen a quote from Laurence Stone, an 18th Century novelist: "Writing is but a different name for conversation."

This concept was driven home to me when I was Editor of the Boston Globe and invited Don Murray to be our writing coach. The first day he walked through the newsroom and arrived at my doorstep, Murray said:

"I can tell you who your best three writers are."

I couldn't resist, asking which ones, and he pointed to two women and a man who indeed were among the very best writers.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Because," said Murray, "their lips move when they write."

Writing is a personal process, so maybe it's appropriate that the three main elements all start with the letter "I". They are:

1. **Information**--words are symbols for what we learn.
2. **Importance**--that is, what is significant (which we often find in the insignificant details).
3. **Interest**--if it affects the reader, it has passed the test.

The Steps:

1. Writing is a process. **Do an outline.** There is a logical order to storytelling.
2. **Write a one-sentence summary.** William Faulkner mounted a 3 x 5 card on his typewriter with just a couple of words that reflected the theme of his novel, so that he would never stray from the point as he wrote. Good writing means throwing away much of what you have collected and synthesizing or hanging onto only what matches the central theme of the story.
3. Writing is the story's voice. **Determine voice.** The tone should match the essence of the story. Is it best told in an inverted pyramid structure? In first person? As an essay, following the standard format? Or in free form? The options are many. But when you are deciding which option best tells the story, you will eliminate a lot of options in order to allow the voice of the story to be heard properly.
4. **Writing is discovery.** You are now ready to start your conversation. How? **Just get it down on paper.** Let yourself go and be surprised about what happens. Walt Whitman once said he never knew how his poems would end: "I just let her come until the fountain is dry." Edward Albee is quoted as having said, "I write to find out what I'm thinking about." Some people find they can write better without using notes, then come back and fill in the details. Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or capitalization or grammar.

Faulkner said, "There are some kinds of writing that you have to do very fast, like riding a bicycle on a tightrope."

5. **Good writing has a beginning, middle and end.** Many writers get stuck on the beginning. My advice? Skip the first paragraph, start with the second and come back to it. Another technique is to write about 15 first paragraphs in different ways as fast as you can, even abbreviating words, virtually scribbling. Soon you will find you are borrowing elements from one paragraph and using it in another. Then you look back and pick the one you like best...or continue on with the second paragraph and go back later. The middle should come easy, if you have an outline.
6. **Finally, the ending.** Well, it may be final, but it also is lingering. The last paragraph sticks in the reader's mind. So you should make a special effort to have a good final paragraph--not a summary, but something that captures the essence of the story. It may be a nugget of information that you have stored up like a squirrel. Many good writers often know what they are going to say in the last paragraph before they write the first paragraph. The possibilities are endless (pun intended). Look at how other good writers end their stories to get some ideas.

HOW TO CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

Interviews have four stages that precede the writing of a story: arrangements, preparation, the actual interview and the reconstruction.

ARRANGEMENTS--Spontaneous interviews, except in connection with breaking news, seldom contribute to thoroughness. Once you have decided to interview someone, **call in advance** to make an appointment. **Identify yourself** by your name and the name of your publication. If you feel the need to do so or are asked to describe what the story is about, be brief and general. The shape of the story might change as you continue your reporting. If you are interviewing several persons in connection with your story, interview the principal person last, because you will be better prepared based on what you learn from the earlier interviews.

PREPARATION—Do as much **research** as possible in advance on the person and/or topic you are working on. Sources might include the library, public records, the internet and people you know who can provide background information. Prepare your **questions** in advance in writing and bring them to the interview. Refer to them but don't show them to the interviewee, because it creates too formal an atmosphere. Ask other questions as they might arise, based on what the interviewee says or something new that might come to you on the spur of the moment. Bring two **pencils** (or pens) **and paper**. A stenographer's notebook is usually easier to handle than a large pad but use whatever is comfortable. Bring a **tape recorder** if you can but be sure to get the permission to use it from the person you are interviewing. You also should take notes, because it will help in the reconstruction phase, and, yes, tape recorders fail occasionally.

THE INTERVIEW—It is inadvisable to launch right into the interview unless you are only being given a few minutes. Some casual conversation to start with will relax both of you. Questions should be as **short** as possible. Give the respondent time to answer. Be a good listener. If he or she prattles on, it is appropriate to move on as politely as you can. You might say something such as: "Fine, but let me ask you this...". Try to draw out **specifics**: How long, how many, when, etc.? Absorb the **atmospherics** of the locale where the interview takes place, with particular attention to what might be a reflection of the interviewee's personality and interests, such as photos of children or bowling trophies or a paper-littered desk or a clean one, etc. Note **characteristics** of the interviewee that might be worth mentioning in your story, such as pacing, looking out the window to think, hand gestures and the like. Invite the person to call you if she/he thinks of anything pertinent after the interview. It often happens, so be sure to provide your name, email address and phone number on a card or piece of paper before you leave. If that person has a secretary, be sure to get that person's name and telephone number, too, in case there is some detail that needs follow-up and, again, leave information as to how you may be contacted. If a photo is needed and is not taken during the interview, be sure to make arrangements then to have one taken at a later time.

RECONSTRUCTION—As soon as it's practical after the interview, find a quiet place to review your handwritten notes. In your haste while taking notes, you may have written abbreviations for words that won't mean anything to you a day or two later. Or some of your scribbling may need deciphering, and, again, it is more likely you'll be better able to understand the scribbles soon after the interview. Underline or put stars alongside quotes that seemed most compelling. One star for a good quote, two stars for a very good one, etc. It will speed the process when you get to the writing stage. One other thing to look for in your notes: the quote you wrote down might not make a lot of sense, unless you remember what specific question it was responding to. In short, fill in whatever gaps exist in your notes that will help you better understand them when writing.

ON BEING A REVISIONIST

*"I love revision. Where else can spilled milk be turned into ice cream?"--Author
Katherine Patterson*

What does it mean? "*Seeing again....*"

What does it NOT mean? Editing. Editing is getting a story ready for the reader; revision is luxury of satisfying yourself. You should wallow in it.

Think of revision as an ongoing process that starts when you first think about how you will write a story to the point when you turn it over to an editor. Think of it as being nothing but a fun, positive process.

Revision **is** writing. This is you fashioning a sculpture in writing--molding, shaping, adding, subtracting... Think of yourself as a sculptor. The first draft is when you take a big chunk of clay and sort of mold it into a shape that looks roughly like a bust of a person. You have a *rough* idea that this glob of clay has a chin and a nose...but the eyes and lips are not apparent. You are writing a *rough* draft.

Writing Coach Don Murray, who has written a whole book on the topic of revision, says, "Rewriting begins before you put the first word on paper and continues until you edit the final draft--which may, in turn, inspire revision."

When I was a reporter driving back to the newspaper after an assignment, I would run ideas through my mind of various versions for the "line" or the opening sentence or the closing sentence. Then when I got back to the paper I would pour it out as fast as my mind could recreate it, changing it as I went along, not worrying about spelling or capitalization or punctuation, just getting words on paper.

Then I would walk to the water cooler.

When I returned to the typewriter (I'm dating myself), I would either tear up what I had done and start over with a totally new fast draft, or I would begin the revision process. The revision process. How does that work? First you give it a quick scan for obvious additions or deletions, still not worried about grammar or such fine points.

Then read it aloud to yourself. Now that sounds contradictory, but you should try it, and you will discover that you can actually hear the music of your writing. Sometimes it sounds pretty nice. Other times you choke on a discordant note.

After that, I would go through the piece from top to bottom, asking myself a variety of questions that soon became second nature:

- ***Is it accurate?*** When in doubt, check it out. When I would ask my father how to spell a word, he would always respond the same way: "Look it up." The same is true with facts. Don't guess. Don't rely on someone else. Check it out.

- ***Is it focused?*** By that I mean, is there a single theme throughout. If I have written a "line", is every sentence supportive of it. If not, it would be distracting to the reader and should be eliminated. At this point, try writing a title for the piece. Not a headline, but a title. You'd be surprised how that helps clarify the focus.
- ***Is it too long or too short?*** Once I wrote a piece for an MIT publication based on an interview of more than an hour. I was told to keep it to 300 words. That's not much. Then I was told it would be the cover piece of this issue and therefore could only be 200 words long. My second piece was better than the first.
- ***Is the story clear?*** An editor I once worked for used to say, "The readers you care about live in three deckers, not in the ivory tower at Harvard."
- ***Are things in the right order?*** (Some people actually try writing an outline after they write their story.
- ***Does it flow?*** Kurt Vonnegut, the novelist, says, "Don't put anything in a story that does not reveal the character or advance the action." The same is true for the kinds of stories you write for your publication.
- ***Is there enough significant detail?*** Is there enough or too much description?
- ***Is it the right "voice" for the story?*** You don't right an obituary with a flippant tone.

Is it me? Only you can answer that question, but after a while you will see that you have developed a style of writing, just as you have a style for carrying on conversations, whether you realize it or not.

Then there are two bigger questions?

Where is the tension in the story? The rain fell for 36 hours. So what? The rain fell for 36 hours and forced 300 people out of their homes in Helsinki.

Does the story contain any surprise(s). When you learn from the reporting process--or even the writing process--then what surprised you will most likely surprise the reader--or most of them anyway. "In 1956 Helsinki experienced its worst flooding. The Fire Department had to pump out 50 basements of homes. This week the Fire Department pumped out 250 basements. In '56, 10 roads had to be closed. This week 25 roads were closed to automobiles...etc."

Now that you have answered all these questions, you can go back and fix up your typing and the grammar and take out all the cliches and jargon!

Remember, revision is the fun part of writing. Or as Bernard Malamud used to say, "I love the flowers of afterthought."

Good writers spend lots of time at revision. Don't be fooled by how simple and clear some of their writing seems to be. Harvard economist/author John Kenneth Galbraith once wrote:

"In my own case there are days when the result is so bad that no fewer than five revisions are required. However, when I'm greatly inspired, only four revisions are needed before, as I've often said, I put in that note of spontaneity which even my meanest critics concede."

So...You are now sculptors.

ON BEING AUTHORITATIVE

It's important to write with authority, because written words carry weight. How can you be sure to do so?

The techniques vary slightly based on the type of writing you are doing. Let's confine our attention to *opinion writing* and *news/feature writing*.

On opinion: A person can write with authority if he or she is a bonafide expert on a subject. Otherwise, it is necessary to quote others, in effect borrowing the expertise of others. It also lends authority to include the arguments of those who take the opposite position from yours.

On news/feature: Writing style is one way of instilling authority, but a surefire way is to do extensive reporting. We differentiate for the reader between material that we know through our own accord with what we obtain from other sources. Two basic types fall under the "know-of-own-accord" category: common knowledge and what we see/hear ourselves. It is common knowledge, for instance, that Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, so we don't have to credit the Pentagon for that fact. If we attend a soccer game and see the player score by kicking a high shot with his right foot, we don't have to quote the coach to that effect. Otherwise we employ attribution both to provide verification and to instill authority. The most common form of attribution is linking a person or written source to a direct or indirect quote. However, any proprietary information that is obtained through reporting or research should be attributed--and that includes public information. It is important to weave attribution into the story as elegantly as possible so that the story doesn't read like a bumpy road. In some cases, when information from several sources is intermingled in a story, it is appropriate to carry a line at the end of the story, possibly in italics or in parentheses, giving credit: (Some information from this story came from Associated Press reports and from the Encyclopedia Britannica). This often occurs when historical information is incorporated into the story. The use of confidential or unnamed sources should be avoided altogether. In the professional press there are times it is appropriate. However, even in those cases, strict adherence to certain procedures must be carried out to maintain integrity and even at times withstand legal action.

Several *ethical issues* flow from the desire to write with authority. Three of the most important are: conflict of interest, honesty and plagiarism.

On conflict: A writer must be independent or neutral in connection with the story subject matter. If there is any doubt about such independence, it behooves the writer to state any affiliation, past or present, with any of the persons, organizations or issues covered in the story. Even an appearance of conflict can undermine a story. An example might be a social friendship with a business or governmental person being the focus of a story you are writing.

On honesty: The writer must never invent. Go through the story in the revising process with an eye toward finding any point in the story where a fact might have been guessed at or not double-checked or where there might be a element of slight exaggeration or distortion.

On plagiarism: Passing off the work of someone else as your own, in whole or in part, is a serious violation of trust between the writer and reader.

ON RIGHT WRITING

Writing is more than throwing words onto paper. It is a form of story telling that requires us first to determine in our own mind what the heart of the story is. What is its essence? Until we come to grips with that essential element, we should refrain from putting pen to paper.

Novelist Anne Dillard expresses this paramount premise in the following way:

“There’s no virtue in writing per se. It’s like dribbling. Can you make the shot? Is the question.”

A Veteran’s Vision

We gain further insight from our guru, Don Murray, whose wisdom stretches across a dozen books and hundreds of articles:

“Writing is thinking, and thought begins not with a conclusion, but with an itch, a hint, a clue, a question, a doubt, a wonder, a problem, an answer without a question, an image that refuses to be forgotten.

“Such fragments are caught on the wing, when I think my mind is somewhere else.”

What’s Your Vision?

Few of us have reached the level of a Dillard or a Murray, but we nevertheless have stories within us that need telling. And we should tell them in our own way, drawing word pictures with our signature attached. All that’s needed to begin with is a desire to tell our stories, to share them with others.

Mission, Goal and Objective

Our stories live within us, dying to be told so that they may live outside of us. We can either dribble out the words or write them right.

- Be a Storyteller
- Engage, instruct, entertain
- Provide new perspective

What’s Right?

Specific aspects that enrich stories are:

- Right focus, Right Approach, Right Thinking

- Right tone, Right content, Right words

What's Wrong

Specific aspects that detract from stories are:

- Lack of single focus
- Lack of structure
- Lack of people
- Lack of the unexpected
- Lack of revealing detail
- Lack of that little extra reporting
- Lack of voice
- Lack of revision

Recommendations

What are some tips that might enable inexperienced writers to learn what's right?

- Study the techniques of writers you like/respect
- Write your story in your mind away from the computer:

“I assign the writing problem to my subconscious,” says Murray.

- Decide structure & write fast
- Let the story unfold
- Tell the reader what she/he may not know

ONE MINUTE TUTORIALS

by Jack Driscoll

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Reporting (#1)

A good story starts with a good idea. Where do you get ideas? They come primarily from what interests or excites you and from what you think would interest your reader. Ideas should be fresh and timely or newsy; they should be of general interest, important and relevant to young people. They should result in stories about things the reader has the right to know or a need to know in order to be a good citizen. These stories should inform, educate, guide or entertain.

So, now you have this great idea. You should start interviewing, right? Wrong. The first thing you need to do is research the subject as thoroughly as possible, at the library, on the internet and by talking to some experts.

Collect as many facts and as much detail as possible. Become as much of an instant expert as you can, but bear in mind that this is just the beginning of the process.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Reporting (#2)

You've heard the expression, "Look before you leap"? The same goes for reporting. Think about what you want to find out that's new about your subject. Think about who would be the best persons to interview. Think about what you are going to ask them.

You became an instant expert through your advance research, right? Now I want you to become a dummy! Ask dumb questions. Don't try to impress the interviewee with your expertise. Ask questions that will prompt an answer. Then listen.

It's a good idea to write down your key questions in advance. In listening you'll think of even better questions during the interview, based on what you are told. Take lots of notes but review them as soon after the interview as possible to fill in the blanks and, yes, to make sure you can read what you wrote.

Make notes during or after the interview of what your senses picked up. They are usually visual (pictures on walls, books on shelves, how person dresses, whether they smile a lot, etc.), but there also may be sounds worth noting or even smells. When it comes time to write, details tend to reveal a lot about the subject.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Reporting (#3)

There are two sides to an interview: you and the interviewee. Let's talk about you. Call in advance for an appointment if you plan a face-to-face interview. Whether it's in person, by telephone or by email, you should: identify yourself clearly by name; point out that you are

reporting for a publication, provide the name and give the URL if asked; and briefly explain what your story is about. Be general, because the shape of most stories changes as you do more reporting.

Don't plunge into your interview unless the interviewee is really in a hurry. A minute or two of chat creates a less tense interview. Usually your least important questions come first.

A good carpenter goes to the job site with a full tool box. Make sure you have pencils (or pens), a notebook or pad of paper, and, if necessary, a tape recorder.

About your tools: Pens are more reliable than pencils. They don't break. A stenographer's notebook is usually easy to handle, but an 8 1/2 x 11-inch pad is sometimes preferred. Make sure your tape recorder has batteries and carry an extra tape.

Get the interviewee's permission before taping. In some places it is against the law to tape record what someone else says without explicit permission, whether it's on the telephone or in person. Some laws are national, others are by region or, as is the case in the U.S., by state. By answering email questions--assuming you made it clear they were in connection with a story for publication--the interviewee is in fact giving permission. Tape recording enables you to get perfectly-accurate quotes, but the process is often cumbersome and time-consuming. And guess what? Machines don't always work! Thus, it's best to take notes, even when taping.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Reporting (#4)

An explosion on the waterfront...United Press sends its rookie (me) to the scene by cab...It's 1953, and the Korean Conflict is going on...Espionage is the first thought that comes to mind...Two soldiers with rifles and long bayonets guard the entrance to the docks...Fire and smoke can be seen billowing from an aircraft carrier, the USS Leyte. "Your identification," says the soldier...I don't hesitate...Out comes my wallet...I show him a card..."Go ahead!" he says, with a sweeping wave...I was first on the scene at an explosion that killed 37 sailors and injured 28...My credentials? A dog-eared union membership card with 12 blocks where stamps were stuck on each month when I paid my dues.

Who certifies the press? Who grants credentials?

In my reporter days in Boston the State Police gave out press badges annually. Later my newspaper said, "Wait a minute! We should decide who bonafide reporters and photographers are, not a government agency." So we made up our own badges.

In controlled societies reporters don't have that luxury. The government licenses them, and that's it. And even in free societies there are instances when badges have to be given out for crowd control or security reasons: covering a country's king, prime minister or president; covering major sports or political events, etc.

Credentials generally are not needed to make appointments or do interviews. Someone who refuses an interview, because you don't have credentials, would probably turn you down anyway.

You could make up fancy, laminated press cards for your publication if you wished, but they would be a lot of work, expensive to make (and mail) and impossible to control over time.

So I recommend you rely on your charm...and your creativity.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Reporting (#5)

You can pile information as high as the eyebrows of The Sphinx, but that doesn't produce a worthy story.

The key to good journalism is context or perspective. Let's examine the difference between a story that results from "emptying your notebook" and "synthesizing" the material you have amassed.

As an example, take a subject: child literacy. If you did a story on a girl from your country who was illiterate at age 12, it certainly would make a readable story. However, it would also be vital to include other elements, such as: what is the rate of illiteracy in your country? How does it compare with worldwide statistics or with countries of similar size or of neighboring countries?

Good enough? No, because those statistics wouldn't have much meaning, unless you could give a snapshot of progress or lack of progress. What was illiteracy like ten years ago? Twenty years ago?

Still, statistics don't tell the whole story. Some say there is a tie-in between government funding of education and literacy. Some say there is a close connection between infant mortality and illiteracy.

And so on. You need to examine the causes or influences that create a certain effect or outcome. Cause and effect...

When you report a story, keep moving your telescope in and out: get the closeup story, the close-in detail, but also draw back and get the big picture.

In the end, the biggest question you need to answer in your reporting is: Why?

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Reporting (#6)

Smart reporters are like squirrels: They save nuggets.

Computers give you a decided advantage. It's easy to store material. The trick is to keep your eye out for snippets of information. Or telling quotations. The "reporting" you do today might come in handy years later.

For example, here are some quotes I have kept through the years, and--since you can write till you die--I never know when they might come in handy to help with a story I'm working on:

``Live simply so that others might simply live." Mahatma Gandhi.

``We are not disobeying the laws of God; we are obeying the laws of justice," by using civil disobedience. ``They (government officials) are getting away with murder, literally and figuratively." Bishop Tutu of South Africa.

``We live in an insane world where we spend one million dollars on arms each minute, while during that same period forty people throughout the world die of malnutrition." Dr. Roger Walsh, U of California.

About writing: ``The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning." Mark Twain.

``We are left with this final image of the United States, a democracy inside but an empire outside: Dr. Jekyll at home; Mr. Hyde in Latin America." Carlos Fuentes, in 1986.

"The kind of work we do does not make us holy, but we may make it holy." Meister Eckhart

``Those who desire to see the living God face to face should not seek him in the empty firmament of the mind but in human love." Dostoevsky.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Reporting (#7)

A wise editor I once worked with often lectured the staff about the need for "overreporting". You never can dig enough on a story you are working on. Indeed, most of the best stories are thoroughly researched, even though--as stated in earlier tutorials--you only use the salient material when you write.

I can hear the loud chorus from you: "Give me a break...I have other things to do in my life...I don't have time..and, and..." OK, so I'll give you a break, because the reader also needs a break. A good publication isn't loaded from end to end with tomes. Variety is the spice of life. Some stories are not that difficult to do and are fun at the same time.

So here are ideas for Five Easy Pieces:

1. Read a book, go to a movie or a play or a concert and write a review. Or go to religious services for two different denominations and write about the comparisons and contrasts.
2. Go to public meeting having to do with education or civic matters that you think would be similar in other countries and write your general impressions. This would be more of a mood piece than a news story.
3. Stand at the busiest intersection in your hometown for an hour and do a piece on whatever strikes you (clothes styles of old vs. young, number of cars that run the yellow light--or the red light). Did anyone stop to talk to you whom you didn't know? What was conversation about? It's a way of conveying the flavor of the place where you live to others.

4. Mail or hand-deliver a six-question written interview to a well-known writer or leading professor or member of the clergy on whatever subject interests you. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

5. Pick out someone in your community who has a really interesting or colorful job and interview her or him. What tweaked their interest in the job in the first place? Why do they like it? What's their normal day like? What's the best thing that ever happened to them? The worst? The funniest?

If you think hard enough, you can come up with five of your own ideas for easy pieces. Two warnings: 1. Don't avoid doing the difficult, in-depth stories, because readers like and want them, too; 2. Don't forget photos!

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Reporting (#8)

In free societies public records are a reporter's best friends. In closed societies reporters have to be creative to gain access to governmental records.

A reporter should always remember that records are indeed for the public and not just the journalist. Therefore, in asking to see a particular record, a reporter should bear in mind that he or she is doing so on behalf of the reading public. A veteran reporter I worked with always used his name only, without appending the name of his prominent newspaper, because he felt he was reinforcing the average person's rights every time he did so.

Public records contain a wealth of valuable information, whether they relate to the schools, the courts or the governing bodies. They are an especially good starting point for a story, providing a foundation to build on. Often they are the basis for questions asked during interviews, which generally should follow rather than precede a records' search.

When there is a need to scour records from multiple agencies, a public library may provide some one-stop shopping. But for up-to-date, complete civic records, nothing substitutes for knocking on the counter of the responsible agency or department.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Reporting (#9)

"Couch potatoes"--those who sit and thoughtlessly absorb what's on television--don't make good reporters. Even when covering a speech, or a press conference or a debate, a reporter needs to do more than absorb what is being pitched.

Preparation before covering this type of story is one step. Learn as much as you can about the person(s) and the past positions that have been taken on the issues expected to be discussed. Whether the opportunity arises during the event or after, ask short, well-crafted questions that you think will prompt a thoughtful response.

After the event try to get reaction to what was said from as broad a spectrum of people as possible: the audience, supporters and competitors, young and old, etc.

Use a tape recorder if possible to record the event and your interviews. Review your notes, think, then write.

"Couch potatoes" tend to swallow what they see and hear; reporters chew things over.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Reporting (#10)

The last thing you want to do if you are writing a story about a person is to interview that person. Literally.

Whether you are writing a profile (that is, a concise biographical sketch) or a story about the exploits of an individual, you should envision your reporting as being like a dart board. At the center is the person you are writing about. The outer circle represents all the written material you can gather about him or her.

The other circles can be thought of as the people who know something about the person. Interview those who know the least first, working your way closer to those who are associates, friends or relatives. Finally you reach your target.

The objective is not to sneak up on the targeted person; rather it is to gather all the information you can, so that you are fully prepared to conduct an informed final interview.

There's another advantage: time. You don't want to waste time during your interview with mundane questions: How old are you? What jobs have you held? How many brothers and sisters do you have? These questions not only take up valuable interviewing minutes, but they also put the interviewee to sleep. Keep that person awake with sharp, well-thought-out questions and you are more likely to get sharp, well-thought-out answers in return.

Follow this reporting formula, and your story will hit the bull's-eye.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Reporting (#11)

Sometimes a reporter's notebook looks like a fence covered with graffiti. Notes are written in the margins and between lines of other notes. Scratch-outs appear here and there. Sometimes words are underlined, or sentences have asterisks beside them. It looks as though the notes were written by someone from outer space or, at the very least, in a foreign language.

How does this come about?

Like most of us, reporters generally don't have photographic memories. They've learned an axiom: elapsed time equals lapsed memory.

After covering a fast-moving event or doing an interview, a reporter frequently finds a place of solitude: a corner of a room, a park bench, an automobile. There the reporter reviews notes

taken a few minutes earlier and fills in gaps. Frequently when first writing quotations in a notebook, a reporter leaves out some words due to haste. While fresh, recollections of visual reporting are jotted down later on: What did the scene look like? What was the person or persons wearing? Did they have any noteworthy mannerisms?

I used to put three asterisks beside my best quotes, two beside good ones and one beside those that were worth considering. When it came time to write the story, this process made the reconstruction easier, particularly if you amassed several pages of notes over the course of the day, as usually was the case.

Two other reasons why I reconstructed my notes as soon as possible after covering a news event or conducting an interview: (1) I used shorthand symbols for certain common words; (2) my handwriting is so atrocious that even I can't read it two hours after hasty note taking.

It's almost always helpful to step back from your reporting and organize your notebook, along with your thoughts. Putting details into your notebook also puts the story into perspective in your mind.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIALS ... on Writing

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Writing (#1)

The only way to learn how to write is to write. Another way of putting it: the more you write, the more you learn to write. That's what's makes it challenging: even old geezers like me are always learning how to do it better.

Good writing is good thinking. Indeed, a lot of good journalists and authors move their lips when they are writing. They are silently expressing themselves while their pen is putting the words on paper or their fingers are typing. Think of writing as conversation with another person. You do it all the time orally. So it should be easy.

One difference is that what you write needs to be based on something. That something is reporting. You need information to write well. Even opinion writing is more compelling if it has facts behind it rather than being random thoughts spouted by the writer.

Just as reporters should refrain from plunging into interviews, writers must refrain from writing until they take some preliminary steps that will be discussed in the next writing tutorial.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Writing (#2)

Before you dive into a pool of water, I would hope you look before you leap. The same is true with writing. Before you start scribbling or banging the keyboard, think about where you want to go with this story. Can you state the point of the story in one sentence? That should be the first thing you do. In fact, try writing that sentence about 20 times using different words and see which sentence really clicks--like a dive that creates hardly a splash. Frequently you will wind up using that sentence somewhere in the story.

They say William Faulkner never started a novel without writing down a phrase or sentence on a card reflecting the essence of his book. Then he propped the card on top of his typewriter so it was speaking to him throughout his writing.

A story needs facts which you gather in the reporting phase. I believe in over-reporting--squirreling away as many details, quotes, impressions, etc., as possible. After you gather them, you throw most of them away! That's what good writers do. They synthesize.

Every story has a beginning, middle and end. So after gathering, you organize. What material is going to go where in the story and in what order? Consider sketching out an outline. If the facts don't emphasize your core point, throw them away. Keep what's important, what's of interest. The reader expects you to provide the essence of the story, not to show off how much reporting you did.

And be sure to squirrel away a tasty morsel for the ending of the story. Readers seldom remember beginnings; they often remember endings.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing (#3)

Your mind works much faster than you can write. And part of the mystery of the writing process is that you discover things in your brain that you don't realize are there.

So, the faster you write the more you will surprise yourself with what you know and with your ability to express yourself well. Someone once compared it to riding a bicycle across a high wire in a circus. Walt Whitman said this: "I just let her come until the fountain is dry."

Once you've organized your reporting, just start writing. Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or even capitalization. Don't even write out (or type) the full quote you want to use at a certain point. In journalism, writers often type "TK" at the point where the quote is to go. It stands for: To Come. Why a "K"? I don't know. Maybe it's a throwback to Morse Code?

Don't be afraid about writing too long. You can take care of that later. A reporter once turned in a story to me that was 36 typewritten pages long. It was loaded with facts, but I had no idea what the the point of the story was. I asked him for his notes. I put them in my bottom drawer. Then I said, "OK, go back to your desk and write without notes." The new version was 12 pages long, captured the essence and didn't get tangled in all the notes he had made. He had been guilty in his first draft of what is called in the trade: "emptying your notebook". Not good.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing #4

Jimmy was a bright reporter. Even had a law degree. Writing was anguish for him. One day he came to me in exasperation. He had completed several days of reporting an important story and said, "I've been working for 3 hours on writing this story, and I just don't know how to start it." I told him to leave off the first paragraph, write the story from the second paragraph to the end, then come see me so we could discuss what the first paragraph might say.

He did as I suggested, but the appropriate first paragraph popped into his mind halfway through writing the story, and we never had to have the conversation.

That's one way to start when you don't know how to start.

Another way is to just write something--the first thing that comes into your mind. Then go back and redo it when inspiration strikes you. The less you think about it the more likely you'll have a brainstorm. One of the best writers I ever worked with said she got her "ledes" when she was cooking. "Ledes" is lingo for "leads", meaning the beginning of a story.

Sportswriters are experts at "ledes", because they write under deadline so often. Most sports events are at night, so sportswriters have to write under deadline. Many will write what is called "running" as a game is in progress. In other words, they will be actually typing the high points of what's going on while the game is in progress. As soon as it's over, they write a first paragraph on top of the "running", and a story is immediately ready for the first edition. Since most newspapers have more than one edition, sportswriters write an improved story--often with quotes from the participants and coaches--for the subsequent edition.

This tutorial starts with what is called an anecdotal "lede". It's a simple example that illustrates a point: That you shouldn't allow yourself to get bogged down with the first paragraph or two. Eventually it will come clear to you.

In the next tutorial I will suggest several other kinds of "ledes" as well as a little-used technique for starting with a bang!

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Writing #5

Jack Driscoll can't type.

In my last tutorial, on Writing #4, I made several typographical errors. Sorry.

Seizing opportunity from the jaws of disaster, I began this tutorial with a subject (Jack Driscoll) and a verb (can't type). Some stories lend themselves to starting with a bang like that and proceeding from there.

How you begin a story sets a tone that should reflect the theme of the story. You don't put a fun-poking first paragraph on an obituary.

The easiest way to begin is with someone's quote, but frankly that can become a lazy device.

The Wall St. Journal often uses the case-study approach:

"Jeff is going to Singapore next week.

"Nusrah is going to Alaska.

"Hilary is going to Japan.

"It's vacation time, and many high school students are traveling around the world."

Usually, of course, the first three examples have more substance, but this illustrates a way to set up a story about a trend. The fourth paragraph is a summary of what that trend is.

Profile stories--which we could use more of in the most publications--often begin with a description of the person in a characteristic setting. Narratives use a storyteller's approach, unveiling the elements of the story a little at a time.

Old-fashioned journalism taught the 5 W's and an H approach: who, what, when, why, where and how. "The UN voted today to send a peacekeeping force to Cambridge, because a group of MIT students refused to get on the bus." It's still a good approach for certain basic stories.

Don't worry about which type of opening you use. Let the story dictate that. Novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez summed up the importance of a first paragraph when he said, "The theme is defined, the style, the tone."

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing (#6)

It's a good idea to study the works of accomplished writers; it's a bad idea to copy their way of writing.

Two elements should dictate how you approach your stories: you and the subject matter.

You should write in a way that is most comfortable to you, reaching down inside yourself to express what you are trying to convey. Imagine yourself writing just for one other person. You are not making a speech to a crowd or being a radio announcer with an audience of thousands. Write for an audience of one, because your stories are being read by one person at a time.

Immerse yourself in the subject matter. Digest it. And then tell what you know about the story in your own way. Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes puts it this way: "When I sit and write, I am master of the world. For one brief moment, I am God. I create reality. In literature, imagination and language are reality."

The subject matter should dictate the "voice" of your story. If you are writing about a funny thing that happened to you on the way to the forum, you use a different voice than what you would use writing about war in the Balkans.

Writer Donald Murray, a mentor of mine, once explained it to me as follows: "I like the word 'voice' rather than 'style'", he said, "because style sounds like something you buy off a rack...When we say voice, we should mean the voice of the text, not the voice of the writer...Voice is flavor, voice is the music of writing, matching the meaning of the story."

The fun of writing--which stays with you the rest of your life--is that there is no one way to write. You choose the words. You are in the driver's seat, blending your voice with the voice of the story.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing (#7)

Ever fall asleep during a speech? Was it because you were tired or the speaker was boring?

If the answer was the latter, my guess is that the speech--in 90% of the cases--was too long.

When writing a story, how long is too long? Let's begin by saying that the effectiveness of a story is not measured by the number of words. It's determined by whether you make your point.

Short stories are good!

As stated previously, stories should have a single point or one dominant theme, and the art of good writing is often determined by how much you leave out and how well you condense.

A story of more than 200 words on the web has to have a lot going for it to maintain the reader's attention. Like what? Like: How well you write, how much timely, new and/or lively information it contains, how interesting and relevant the topic is and how much it educates, guides or entertains the reader.

Sounds like quite a challenge, eh? And yet writing short stories frequently is more difficult. They need to be fine-tuned. Sentences must be crisp. Verbs should convey action. Every word must count.

You should go to great lengths to keep your stories short.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing (#8)

Think of writing as feasting.

It is an enjoyable experience. It is satisfying. It feels a need. It....(fill in the blank).

Remember, however, that all good meals require one common ingredient: preparation. The same is true for writing. There's a lot of scouring cupboards, mixing and blending, slicing and dicing that comes first. We call that process reporting. A basic element—one you don't see in movie and television depictions of reporters—is plain old, plain old research.

A top-notch reporter I once worked with started his assignment by talking through the story concept with his editor, then heading for the library. He would emerge carrying a basket of small file folders containing previously written articles related to his topic. He was going to school on the subject.

What does this have to do with writing? We have established that good writing is good thinking. It also should be informed thinking. Writing, for the most part, should be based on information. Therefore it is necessary to gather all available data, synthesize it at the time of writing, and sprinkle the story with just enough of it to add the right texture and the right flavor. Pop it in the oven for 35 minutes at 350 degrees... Well, you get the picture.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing (#9)

Journalistic writing is the act of drawing pictures with words. Call journalism art, call it a craft, it is intended to inform and enrich the reader.

We should convey words and phrases with the care that an artist uses with brush strokes on a canvas. The right tone here, a splash of color there... The reader will stay with a story that is well portrayed—and will come back for more.

All the effort put into reporting can be lost if the writing is approached haphazardly. Stories need to have depth on the one hand, but they also need to be engaging on the other.

Texas columnist Molly Ivins once gave a magazine interview and made the following observations that can be applied to websites as well as print publications:

``We should be reading the daily newspapers to get some understanding of history and causation and structure--all the stuff that pictures cannot show you...I think newspapers also have to become more readable. The reason more people don't read newspapers is because they're boring. You can find more exciting prose on the back of a bottle of castor oil than you can in most newspapers."`

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing (#10)

A word can be like a firecracker: It either flares and goes bang or it fizzles and flops. Among the words that are duds in the English language are “interesting”, “very”, “different” and “unique”.

When you use these words in your stories, you often send out a signal that you are writing for yourself not for the reader.

“I went to Rome on my vacation. It is an interesting place.” The word “interesting” in this case means a lot to the writer and nothing to the reader. Choose a more descriptive word or phrase.

What if you wrote, “It is a *very* historic place.”? Could someone define the word “very” for me? If you said it was “very hot”, does that mean hotter than hot?

The word “different” frequently is useless as well. What is the difference between the following two sentences:

“The students missed class on two different occasions.”

“The students missed class on two occasions.”

In short, the word “different” often is redundant.

The first editor I worked for banned use of the word “unique”. He argued that nothing in this world is unique. We can argue the merits of his policy, but I think all can agree that we are creating a dud with a description of Rome as a “very unique and interesting place”.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Writing (#11)

Descriptive words are abundant; finding just the right word is often difficult.

When we put words on paper, we are conveying the meaning of what is in our mind to the mind of the reader. Since we are more familiar with the subject of our story, we more easily grasp the meaning of the words.

The writer, therefore, needs to get inside the mind of the reader (figuratively, that is) and figure out what word or combination of words will hit home. Sometimes the easiest approach to finding the right word is to write whatever comes into your head, then go back through your story when you’ve finished your first draft and analyze the effectiveness of your key word choices.

A New York Times story on the 25th anniversary of the death of Elvis Presley contained this well-honed sentence:

“It wasn’t only his hip-swiveling, lip-curling presence, so potent that when he was once legally coerced into standing still, he had to wiggle only one finger to make the girls scream.”

The master of word choice was Mark Twain, who wrote the following on the subject:

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning.”

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIALS ... On Editing

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Editing (#1)

Editing involves more than making sure words are spelled correctly, language is used properly, punctuation is in the right places and spelling is accurate. These, however, are important details that separate a polished publication from a sloppy one.

As with reporting and writing, there are big-picture issues that editors must attend to before plunging ahead.

As gatekeepers of a publication, editors must have a clear idea about what the mission is. For instance, the [Junior Journal](#) has decided to be a voice for children's issues, a chronicler of Junior Summit action and a vehicle for breaking down barriers of distance and prejudice. Without being too rigid, editors should be sure stories fulfill at least part of the mission.

So part of editing involves being mission-aries (pardon the pun). Part also involves being ambassadors of ideas.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Editing (#2)

What does it mean to be an ambassador of ideas? Bearing in mind that an ambassador is one who exercises diplomacy, let us examine the issue of idea formulation.

It is my experience that the best ideas most often come from the bottom up, not from the top down. So editors should be encouraging writers to pursue their own story ideas. This is done with prompting, nudging, cajoling, pushing--whatever works. Diplomatically, of course.

Ask the writer what interests her or him? What issues are writers passionate about? What intrigues them? What are they curious about? What's "hot" where they live (event, trend or issue)?

Editing requires good listening. The writer should be heard first, then the editor responds. This then is the beginning of a conversation, be it online or by telephone or in person.

Stories are enriched by the conversation process, because two heads are better than one. Conversation should be taking place when the idea is first being formulated; it should take place during and after the

reporting phase; it should take place before the story is written and it should take place after the editor has fully processed the story.

At each stage the editor should bear in mind that it is the reporter's story on the one hand, but it also is the reader's story. It is not the editor's story.

Thus the editing should generally take the form of questions readers might ask when they come to the story cold (How was he dressed? When did she say that? Where did it occur?). When editors start dictating

what should go into a story, they tend to stifle the conversation and the story. On the other hand, editors should speak up if there are gaps in the story; that is, elements that make the story incomplete. And they should speak up when a story is too long, unclear, awkward, meandering, etc. It's a bit like pulling a wagon: the job is easier when two people are pulling, rather than one, especially when the two are pulling together.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Editing #3

Story ideas are similar to loaves of bread. All of the elements need to be brought together and kneaded. Then the dough is popped into the oven until it rises and is ready to eat.

Editors and reporters should be collaborators in the development of story ideas. Two minds are better than one. It doesn't matter who has the initial idea. What matters is how the idea is molded and framed into a better idea.

Let's say someone wants to do a story on how to make bread. The editor might suggest providing some historical perspective, pointing out that before the 20th Century B.C. there was evidence Egyptians baked bread as did the Swiss Lake Dwellers in the early days of civilized Europe.

That might prompt the writer to recall religious connotations to bread: manna from heaven to feed the Israelites; Jesus calling himself "the bread of life" and the ritual of bread and wine being served in Christian traditions.

Soon a simple four-paragraph story can become a story with substance. Part of this illustration is based on the evolution of an actual story.

The point is that we shouldn't be satisfied with the first idea that comes to mind. That's only the beginning. We should turn it over in our minds, shape it, pull it apart, push it back together again. You know, like kneading.

Now, if I were the editor, I would say you can't write a story about bread without referring to peanut butter! And you, of course, might be inclined to say that's a half-baked idea.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Editing (#4)

Lingo means jargon or slang language. The journalism trade is full of lingo. Some of it actually makes sense.

We talk of "heads" for headlines (sometimes spelled "heds"). We refer to the story as "body type". So you can think of a story as having a head and a body.

The hed is as important as the body. We need to put more thought into our heds (no pun intended), especially on the web, because readers are browsing fast. So the hed has to say, "Hey, wait a minute: you need to look at my body." (pun intended).

The tone of the headline should reflect the tone of the story. Don't use funny or flippant headlines on serious stories.

Most heds should contain a verb to connote action. The selection of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs should be done with care. Choosing just the right word can illuminate.

A hed in smaller type under the main headline is often called a subhed. Its purpose usually is to expand on the idea in the top headline or to interject a second thought. Generally the main hed expresses a single thought or point.

(Note bene: I use the words "usually" and "generally", because we should not get completely carried away by rules. There always is room for creativity if it's tasteful and well done).

Your goal is twofold: To capture the essence of the story and to entice the reader into reading it.

I believe reporters should submit headlines on their stories. They know what they want to emphasize. However, editors reserve the right to rewrite or polish the wording for the final headline. It's normal for an editor to write a half dozen, dozen or even more versions before being satisfied. You want to put your best hed forward!

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Editing (#5)

When you're in another country, you would have difficulty getting around without signs. More and more signs are minimizing the use of words and using symbols, because not everyone speaks the native language. So when you are driving and you see a sign with an arrow bending to the right, you know there's a curve ahead. Sometimes I have to look twice to distinguish between the signs for the ladies' room and the men's room, but obviously these symbols are useful guides.

The same is true with punctuation. It has an important function in a story. Its function is to help guide the reader through the sentence or paragraph in a way that will make the wording more understandable. Many books have been written about the rules of punctuation, but in less than a minute I would make these points about commas:

- * Commas do not signal a pause, so don't drop them into a sentence without a reason.
- * The girl went to the store and bought milk (no comma, because "went" and "bought" have the same subject: "girl"); the girl went to the store, and the boy went to school (has a comma, because it is as though two sentences are joined by an "and").
- * In the beginning the writer did reporting (no comma after "in the beginning", because it is a phrase not a clause; would you put in a comma if it were at the end of the sentence?). The same goes for an adverb that starts a sentence: no comma in: "Luckily I did my homework."
- * In a series you have a choice as to whether to use two or three commas in the following sentence: She liked vanilla, chocolate, strawberry and chocolate chip. Newspapers generally

don't use a comma after "strawberry", because years ago type was handset, so they tried to avoid punctuation marks whenever possible. It saved time and labor.

Most publications have stylebooks to provide consistency when usage and punctuation rules have variables, such as in the last example. Lacking a stylebook, the best thing you can do is use your common sense and think twice before you type a comma or other punctuation mark into a sentence. When in doubt, leave it out. No need to put a bump in the reader's road if you don't have to.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Editing (#6)

Pause before you insert a comma into a sentence, because a comma does not signal a pause.

Why is punctuation important? Because, just as in the case of the last sentence, it can tell you whether a question is being asked or a statement is being made. A comma can introduce a list. A dash can emphasize an interruption or change in tone. A semicolon may be used to link closely related independent clauses (which otherwise could stand alone as a sentence). Parentheses can set off relevant but not necessarily vital information. Quotation marks...well, you know.

The most used is the comma; the most misused is also the comma.

The following sentence takes a comma: "Jeff went to the store, and Hilary went to the movies." In effect there are two sentences joined by the word "and". The sentence has two subjects, and each subject has a verb.

However, the next sentence takes no comma: "Henry went to the store and bought an ice cream." One subject that has to use two verbs and doesn't want to stumble over a comma. Get it?

Therefore, this sentence has no comma: "Mervin started out for the store but decided to go to the movies instead."

Entire books are written about punctuation. Usually there is a chapter just on commas. Their use is sometimes tricky. For instance, which is correct?

red, white, and green.

red, white and green.

The answer is that both examples are correct. In formal English the first is preferred. In most newspapers the latter is preferred. It's important for publications to be consistent. Usually they have a stylebook to give guidance about such matters. The Associated Press stylebook often is adopted by newspapers and magazines.

Readers see inconsistency as a sign of sloppiness. That alone should be enough to give you pause.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Editing (#7)

So here's how it works: The editor goes through the story, is not sure about a few of the sentences, thinks the reader will be confused and makes changes in the story, right?

Wrong.

An editor always must remember that the story belongs to the writer. Errors in spelling and punctuation should be fixed without hesitation. At times an editor can see that the deletion of a few words here and there will tighten up the story without affecting its meaning. And there are other ways an editor can make a fair story into a good one.

However, when it comes to making any substantive changes, it's important for the editor to contact the writer and work out the changes as a team. No story should be published without going through an editor, ever. But major changes also should not be made without the writer's knowledge and consent, unless time becomes a factor.

That's why the good writers know it's smart to turn in their stories before deadline, rather than right on deadline. They also know that editors can improve the way a story reads or ask appropriate questions they think would be raised in the mind of the reader. There's no such thing as a bad question.

There is such a thing as bad editing. That's what occurs when an editor plunges ahead with changes that cross the border from editing into rewriting. The most effective editing tool is a little conversation or an exchange of email. In the end the editing goal is to make the writer's story good enough to become the reader's story.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Editing (#8)

As stated earlier, journalism is loaded with lingo. The written matter of a story often is referred to as "the body". What goes on a body? You got it on the first try: a head. Now you are fluent in journalese, because a head or "hed" is the coined word for headline.

Headlines differ from titles. They are more like sentences with article adjectives left out to save space and enable quick reading by the browser.

Titles go on books and poems and generally are more like labels. Headlines tend to have active verbs. They have two basic functions: 1. To reflect the essence of the story; 2. To draw the reader into the story.

Extreme care needs to be taken with the writing of a headline. It speaks to the reader and says: "This is worth reading, because...". Otherwise the reader moves on. It doesn't matter how well reported or how well written a story is if the headline does not perform its functions. It's like a door to a house: It can keep you out or let you in.

That's why good editors will try 20 to 25 headlines on one story before arriving at one that is satisfactory. The ultimate responsibility for a headline resides with the editor. However, I encourage writers to put headlines on their stories before turning them in, because the writers

have the best feel for their stories and have a stake in what should be stressed. Editors, on the other hand, may write a new hed, because they realize that the art of headline writing differs from that of writing a story.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Editing (#9)

The best editing often occurs when an editor finds something that's missing.

It would seem a contradiction of terms: finding what's not there?

An easy example would be something like: "The teacher made three points." And then the story only lists two.

More difficult is the process of realizing that an element necessary to make the story complete is lacking. Usually, if the editor puts herself or himself in the role of the reader, these missing elements become obvious. The question is: Does this story answer all the questions that would pop into a reader's mind? Bear in mind that all readers are not necessarily acquainted with the subject matter of the story.

If a story says a rock band is the second most popular, what is the first? If it says her background makes her qualified for the position, what is her background? If it quotes a liberal on a controversial issue, what is the conservative position? What is the moderate position? Are there other positions on the same issue?

The trick is to keep stories as compact and as complete as possible.

Think of stories as a whole and make sure there are no holes.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Editing (#10)

"Rewrite" reporters for newspapers or wire services seldom leave the office. Their writing is based on the reporting or dispatches of several others, whose material often is combined into a story.

In my early years I was one of four rewrite reporters on the night shift at our newspaper. Each of us would write 15 or 30 stories a night of varying lengths. They'd range in length between 100 and 1000 words. The stories were written on typewriters in that era, and we all kept carbon copies of our stories.

At the end of the night, when the early edition had been published and most normal people were sleeping, it would quiet down. At that point we would trade our carbon copies, and each reporter would review the others' stories to see what words could be cut out without hurting the story. For every word that was cut out, we had to pay our colleague 10 cents.

Soon we all became what is often called "tight writers". We also became pretty good editors. Try trading stories with a friend via email before sending them to your editor and see

who can delete the most unessential words. You may not get rich, but it's a fun way to think more carefully about writing tightly.

Here's another exercise: Go back over the above four paragraphs and see how many words can be deleted without hurting the message. I estimate there are about 15. That's \$1.50 I owe you. I'm getting sloppy in my old age.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Editing (#11)

A myopic editor adopts a narrow view of a story, sometimes doing damage by chipping away essential elements. On the one hand, editing should involve nitpicking; on the other hand, editing should only impose changes that improve a story.

What's the best way to avoid getting so caught up in the details of a story that you fail to see the forest for the trees? I suggest taking an ambling walk through "the woods" when you first set eyes on a story. By that I mean you should first read a story from top to bottom before making any changes. Don't even fix obvious typing errors.

The purpose is to get an overall feel for the story. This technique induces perspective into your subsequent editing.

Finally, after all editing is completed, remove your editing hat again and read the story through once more. This time put on the hat of the reader. If you stumble in that reading or you find something that's unclear, you have more editing to do. If it reads smoothly, hat's off to you.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#1)

My comments on this subject are based on 45 years of hanging around with prize-winning "shooters", plus my experience selecting, cropping and laying out photographs. Then there were my own ventures into the field with a camera. Like the time in Israel when I took 36 shots at historic and religious sites only to realize too late that the film had melted in the camera in the 105-degree heat. Or the time in Japan at a national holiday event where I took breathtaking closeup photos of horsemen dressed in ancient warrior clothes galloping their horses across a field and shooting at a target with bow and arrow. You guessed it: my batteries were dead.

One difference between a reporter and a photographer is that there is this thing called equipment. It's a bit more complicated than paper and pencil. Whether you are working with one of those old box cameras or a digital camera, it's important to understand the equipment before you take it on a news assignment. Read the directions. Test it out. And stay out of the direct sun!

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#2)

The two types of journalistic photographs are news and features. With news photos, you pretty much go with the flow: you cannot tell an angry government official to say "cheese". You are trying to capture something that often is a fast-moving event with unexpected twists and turns. Your photograph is an attempt to convey the essence or part of the essence of a news event. You may not get a picture of the winning goal, but you should get shots that reflect some aspect that contributed to the victory. An early lesson I learned from a sports editor was that you seldom would want to publish a photograph of a great shot by the losing team in a basketball game. So the news photographer tends to try to anticipate, to be in the right place at the right time, whether the photographer is covering a war, a surprise birthday party, a politician campaigning or an awards ceremony. The best photograph or set of photographs tell the story.

A feature photograph often can be influenced by the photographer, coaxing a person to move a little to the left or "smile, you're on candid camera" or whatever coaching might make it a better photograph. However, even feature photographs are better when the action or scene depicted is as natural and spontaneous as possible. The worst photographs are ones that simply look posed--because they are. Many publications have banned what I call the "up-against-the-wall" photograph; you know, the ones that have four people standing together looking important.

News and feature photographs can accompany a story or stand alone. In either case they are part of the storytelling process. Photographers who work for news publications or websites are journalists, because they are looking at the world through a prism just as a reporter is. The difference is that a photojournalists' prism is a lens.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Photography (#3)

Photographs first started being used in newspapers about 120 years ago. The equipment has changed drastically since then, but one thing is the same: the person with one eye squinted behind the camera is still essential to the process. A good photo has a center of interest. It may not be located in the very middle of the photograph, but it is the dominant image. This is called composing. You are a composer, and the lens shutter is your baton. You don't click indiscriminately; you frame the subject matter, then click.

We think of a frame being put on a photo after it's developed and ready to be hanged. But good photographers frame their photos in their mind's eye before shooting. It is hand, eye and mind coordination. It takes long experience to know at what moment to shoot, and good shooters can snap off a half dozen photos while a novice is trying to decide what to do.

Composing a frame is where the artistry comes in. The photographer visualizes what the photo will look like and simultaneously determines whether it captures the essence of a reality. Good photos capture what's real and natural; poor photos look stiff and posed.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Photography (#4)

Why do you want to take photographs in the first place? Because you wish to share what your eye sees with others.

How do you know if it's significant to others? Because generally what's significant to you is also significant to others.

How do you train your eye to see what's significant to others? When you arrive at the place where you are going to do your shooting, whether you are indoors or outdoors, take a general, sweeping view of the scene. You are acclimating yourself. You might even want to try to capture that broad scene on camera, preferably using a wide-angle lense.

Next you want to look for the middle-level photo. That's the one that will tell the story. If there is a crowd, it generally would be where the crowd's attention is focused. Look for clues such as this to determine where to shoot. Make sure that scene fills your camera frame. If there is action or emotion, it will be captured by your shot.

Finally you want to move in as far as you can for a closeup. Facial expressions frequently make the best closeups. Sometimes you have to shoot several photos to get just the right expression. Sometimes the closeup will be an object. What is the best angle to show that object? To make best use of light or shadows or a combination of both?

Remember you are looking for natural reactions if you are photographing people. Back away if you think a person is playing to the camera. Move in again when the time is right. When you are close, you not only capture compelling images, but you also prevent others from getting between your snapping shutter and your prize-winning photo.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Photography (#5)

Just as with writing, good thinking is the key to success. Photographers who get the right shot at just the right moment are sometimes lucky, but more often than not it is their mind that has done the job for them.

THINK: Do you have the right lenses with you when you go to an assignment? Do you have enough film? Is it best for indoors or outdoors? Do you have a flash? Some of these elements are built into cameras but not always.

THINK: If there is a lull in the event you are covering or the scene you are at and you have only one or two shots left on your film, forget about those couple of shots and change film. When things heat up, you don't want to start fumbling with a film change. You want a full roll (assuming you're not using a digital camera). And you want to be able to snap off four or five quick shots when the right opportunity presents itself.

THINK: You also don't want to be fumbling to change a lens. Photographers tell me that a 24mm or 28mm wide-angle lens can work well for medium-range shots...or a regular 50mm lens. But when you're doing closeups, the wide-angle and telephoto lenses tend to distort your image. Often a 200mm lens is used--even if you are only a few strides away from your subject. If you really want to get fancy, you can use what is known as a macro lens. Or you can use an extension device. But those things are too fancy for me. Ask an expert, if interested. The point is--just as with film--you need to anticipate. You should affix the lens that you think is appropriate to the place where you are shooting from so that you can concentrate on taking the shot rather than fiddling or fumbling with your equipment.

THINK: You might need something other than your camera to get the photos you need. I have known photographers who have carried step ladders to sports events, particularly high school football and soccer games that often have people standing on the sidelines. If they're in your way, why not shoot over them? Photographers have various tricks to keep their equipment from freezing or from getting scratched in a desert. But I don't recommend what one photographer pulled. He was covering a basketball game, and in the middle of the action let his dog loose out on the floor. Great pic, but...

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#6)

Ed Fitzgerald was a well-known photographer who in his later years became a wire service and newspaper photo editor. He was considered an expert on which lens to use when. But there was another major factor that enhanced his prize-winning photos: lighting.

Most photographers realize that shooting an image from the correct angle is crucial to the creation of distinctive photographs. Fitzgerald took it one step further, making sure that the light on his subject was just right.

One day he was assigned to cover baseball slugger Ted Williams who was working out at the ballpark after recovering from an injury. Williams tended to be antagonistic toward journalists, but Fitzgerald engaged him in conversation about camera shutter speeds while maneuvering

Williams to a spot on the first-base line where, in mid-conversation, Williams took picturesque practice swings with his back to the field. More importantly the lighting was perfect at that spot.

On the way back to the office, Fitzgerald stopped his car in the middle of the street in front of city hall, having spotted an old man with a white beard sitting on a low wall reading the paper. The noon sun was glancing off the newspaper, illuminating the facial image. Fitzgerald crouched, snapped the photo and jumped back into the car. That profile photo appeared in newspapers around the US and won another major contest.

Fitzgerald was an artist who saw images in the right light.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#7)

"In the olden days"--that's an expression my children use when they are chiding me--there were reporters and there were photographers. Now the two frequently are one in the same person.

Economics and technology are the forces that are putting the two together. Print and electronic publications can seldom afford to send two persons to the same story. Meanwhile, the size and weight of cameras today make them easier to use.

However, reporting and photo-shooting require different mindsets. It is hard to turn off one mode and turn on the other.

My recommendation is that journalists "think photo" when they first go to an assignment. Taking pictures helps acclimate them to the people and the surroundings. If, in the middle of an interview, you wish to take a couple of photos of the subject, ask for permission. It's a polite way of saying, "I'm not going to be taking notes for a few minutes," and it prepares the interviewee for the sometimes awkward experience of having pictures taken.

Additional photos often should be made at the end of an assignment, after the journalist has a feel for the elements of the story to be published.

The photo-journalist is not a new phenomenon. Small newspapers have had to "double up" before. But it is getting more and more prevalent. And often the photo-journalist is carrying a video camera.

Of course, a photographer-even those whose training is mainly as a reporter, should always be ready to shoot a quick picture when the possibility arises on an assignment. A reporter can reconstruct an unexpected occurrence; a photographer doesn't have that luxury.

Would it be fair to say that the photo-journalist has a split personality that must be ready to act in a split second?

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#8)

Photographers and reporters are alike when it comes to the necessity to carry two important tools: paper and pencil or pen. Electronic writing devices serve the same purpose.

Too often the note the photographer fails to take at the scene prevents a photograph from being published. If you have three people in a photo and can only identify two, it's a little ridiculous to say: from left, Mary Smith, Joe Jones and unidentified person. Getting names spelled correctly and titles/affiliations accurate are as important for the photographer as the reporter.

Group photos present particular problems when it comes to identifications. If there are two clearly defined rows of people, the identification is easy. If someone is standing halfway between one row and another, the ID explanation can be awkward.

We call the written explanation of a photograph a "caption". Sometimes it is referred to as a "cutline", because at one time photos were referred to as "cuts".

Notations made shortly after a photo is taken often come in handy, especially when covering a sports event. At what point of the game did you shoot the picture? What was the score then? Who is the focus of the shot? Frequently the number on a player's shirt does not show up in the photo, so knowing the player's name becomes important.

I once worked with a photographer who bragged about the fact that he covered seven games one Saturday. He recounted where each game was and how he organized his time to cover a part of each. Someone asked how many photos were published from that monumental effort, and he had to admit "none". He was so busy scurrying from game to game he missed the deadline.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#9)

Caption-writing can be an art. The trick is to leave out as much detail as possible.

The best technique is to let the photo speak for itself. The caption should sort of fill in the blanks.

A serene photo of four horses munching on grass in a field should never carry a caption saying, "Horses munch grass in a field." That description is redundant. Clearly the less said in the caption the better, but it wouldn't hurt to say where this scene occurred and maybe what time of day; i.e., "Thoroughbreds enjoy day off from racing on farm outside Dublin." Note that the caption doesn't say "four". The reader can count.

When a photo goes with a story, it is even less important to provide details. Even though research shows that a photo and caption are usually read before the story, the caption does not have to tell the substance of the story. It should only

reflect the substance of the photo.

More important than what's in the photo might be what's behind the photo. How does it relate to the accompanying story?

A couple of fine points: (1) the language of a caption is present tense whereas stories tend to be written in past tense (thoroughbreds enjoy, not enjoyed); 2. The typeface for cutlines should be different from the story typeface. Some use italic or boldface type; some use sans serif for captions and serif for story text. A serif is a stroke or curl at the tip of letters. "Sans" in French means "without", so that typeface has no serifs. It's more blocky.

Stories should show and tell; captions should let the photo show and tell as little as possible.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#10)

Standalone photographs—those that have no stories with them—tell their own story. Photographs used with a story help tell that story.

Does this mean stories are more important than photos? No, they should be seen as part of a storytelling package. Indeed, research has shown that readership of a story is enhanced measurably by the accompaniment of one or more photographs. Photos serve as a magnet. They draw readers into stories. They should not be thought of as window dressing.

If you are taking photographs for a story written by someone else, you should be thinking about how you can complement the writer's central points or themes. The problem is that photographers and reporters seldom work side by side.

Reporters spend more on-site time when covering a story. They usually have to stay from the beginning to the end of an event. Sometimes a photographer can swoop in, spend 10 or 15 minutes at the scene and satisfy the graphical needs. At an athletic event a reporter might be seated high up in a stadium while the photographer is at ground level.

They may be working on the same story but have no opportunity to talk to one another, to match notes.

Discussion before the assignment with the reporter often is a way of sharing story goals and concepts. The focus of the story might change as events unfold, but it's a start. Additionally, the ideal situation is for the photographer and writer to match notes after the event so that the photos selected complement the story.

Communication that takes place between photographer and writer enhances the ultimate communication—with the reader.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Photography (#11)

No offense, but the best photographs are frequently taken with your feet.

We often hear about the photographer who was in the right place at the right time. How come? Sometimes it's luck; mostly it's anticipation.

Photographers try to find just the right vantage point, just the right angle. When several photographers cover the same news story, they frequently are grouped together. Experience tells them what the best position is. Some, of course, are copycats.

However, it still boils down to making the shot at just the right time. I once judged a Pulitzer Prize photo competition in which the winning photo was taken about a second before another entry (which didn't even finish in the top ten).

Nevertheless, you'll never take a prize-winning shot without being in position.

When time, photographers often are seen moving around a lot during their coverage. The right place often changes as the events of the story unfold.

It's even true when taking tight profile photos of a person. The straight-on shot of a person is less compelling than one taken at an angle.

Angle. Vantage point. Position. Perspective. Here's what the French Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cezanne, had to say on the subject: "I could keep myself busy for months without moving from one spot, just by leaning now to the right, now to the left." (As quoted by Alexander Liberman, in *The Artist in His Studio*, p.25)

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIALS ... On Issues

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Issues (#1)

You own whatever you submit to a publication. Whether a story, photo or artwork, it's automatically copyrighted to you. Think of it as your bicycle (if you own one). It's a piece of property that belongs to you. If someone wants to use it, they have to have your permission.

Conversely--and this is important--if the publication wants to use copyrighted material, it must have written permission from the "owner". Let's say you see a photo that you want to use. In the corner of the photo it says, "Copyright, 1998, Time Magazine". So, you say, I'll just use it and put a credit line under it to show it comes from Time. Sorry. Would you take someone's bike for a day without them knowing? No, you have to ask permission and receive it in writing (email is adequate).

On a related issue that recently came up: Once you submit your story to editors, they have the right to edit it, cut it in half or even not use it. However, courtesy in publishing is important. A good editor will be aware of the sensitivities of the writer and discuss any changes that are more than routine. Dialogue between writers and editors is a key ingredient in the recipe for story excellence.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Issues (#2)

A favorite expression of children is "Who says?" Big sister tells you that you have to go to bed: "Who says?"

Now, as an old editor, I find myself using that expression over and over when reviewing stories with writers.

Certain facts are widely agreed upon (a cloudless sky is blue). Some facts are indisputable if writers have seen something with their own eyes (the goal was scored with the left foot) or heard with their own ears ("I am going to resign as Chief Bottle Washer tomorrow").

Otherwise we need to use something called "attribution" when we are passing along information that we don't know about first hand or if it is not common knowledge.

Somewhere in our sentence--often at the end--we need to tell where the material came from: according to the publicity person...it was stated in a communique...according to a report by the Physicians Against Nuclear War...the World Fact Book reports in its 1996 edition...

Attribution is especially vital in political stories. The left wing seldom will agree that the sky is blue if the right wing says it is, and vice versa.

The point is that writers cannot make it seem as though they are God and know all things. If they learned something or read about it somewhere, they need to let the reader in on the source.

Attribution isn't necessarily needed in every sentence, otherwise the story will read like a bumpy road. All that is required is a little red flag when necessary to distinguish what the writer knows from what she or he has found out from somewhere or from someone else.

One last point: Attribution is also needed for historic references as well as current information. When you reel off a three-paragraph summary of the exploits of Alexander the Great, you need to cite a

source at least once. Unless you were there!

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Issues (#3)

When I was growing up, I would occasionally ask my father what a word meant or how it was spelled. His answer always was the same: "Look it up." The easy way for both of us would have been for him to just tell me. The easy way isn't always the best way.

The issue this relates to is accuracy. Why do we make errors in spelling, in people's names, in numbers, in titles or historical references? Usually the cause is laziness, haste, carelessness or guesswork on our part.

An editor once suggested to me that, after I re-read a story I write or edit, I should go back through the story and just look at each fact to satisfy myself that it is correct. The burden should be on the writer, but the last stop for a story is the editor, so both parties have a stake in accuracy.

Sometimes we are given wrong information. How do we know? All we can do is be skeptical and push the sources of information: "Are you sure of that?" "How do you know that?" We even have to be questioning of what we read. Just because it's written doesn't mean it's true.

The best sources for doublechecking are the dictionary and reference books. Also, there's nothing wrong with a reporter calling back someone who previously was interviewed and checking a fact.

To err is human. By the same token nothing turns off a reader more than frequent, unnecessary errors. So, when in doubt, look it up!

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Issues (#4)

Ranking only slightly behind accuracy in importance is fairness. A story that is written in a biased way is sure to turn off most readers--even those who agree with the slant.

It would be simple to suggest that a story with two sides should have an equal amount of words or quotations devoted to each. That's often referred to as balance. However, most stories have more than two sides. And so rather than counting words, the best way is to give all sides their due as fairly as possible while telling the full story.

This requires discipline on the part of the writer. It means pushing aside your own viewpoints and reflecting the views of the key persons or constituencies in your story.

A column or opinion piece is somewhat different, because its role is to reflect the views of the writer. But even in that case fairness dictates that a summary of what the opposing opinion or opinions are should be included. Disagreeing with the opinions of another doesn't mean you can't respect their opinions or their right to think differently than you.

A writer should try to put herself or himself in other peoples' position; try to understand their perspective without adopting it. Writing stories with that approach is an important discipline. Putting yourself in their shoes prevents you from putting your foot in your mouth.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Issues (#5)

When you peel away all the layers, you'll find that the chief characteristic of a good journalist is fire in the belly. In short: passion.

They are passionate about issues that affect people. They care about their audience. They feel deeply about the need to present the truth as well as they can determine it. They want to provide timely, relevant information that people need to know or have the right to know. In some situations they see themselves as educators. That means at times they must entertain, guide and provoke.

A Buddhist monk was once invited to lunch in the private dining room of an American news magazine. For 45 minutes various business and news executives described the numbers of people they had deployed in each of their areas of responsibility and what they did. Finally it came time for the monk to speak, and he said simply, "Yes, but why do you do it?"

That is the central question in any craft or profession. The answer has to be that you care deeply.

Recently I read a profile of a California editor. In the article he described listening to a speech by Gregory Favre, then president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Here's what the California editor said: "Gregory was in tears, because he was talking about how much he loved newspapers and what we do. I remember watching him that day and having tears well up in my eyes, too, because I thought that's just exactly how I feel about this business. I love it."

These are crusty newspaper veterans. The crust is on the outside; the fire is on the inside.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...On Issues (#6)

Where information comes from is sometimes more important to the reader than the information itself.

Therefore we should always be sure to attribute the source of information in our stories. The reader needs to know where you received your quotations or statements of fact: From a book, from an authoritative person, from a political person who might have a liberal or conservative bias, from an interested party (spokesman for a company or special-interest group), an involved bystander?

Some of what you write may be commonly known and therefore needs no attribution, such as: "The Earth is round" or "King Hussein of Jordan died in 1999." Some may be known to you, because you witnessed it. You don't have to say, "The goal was scored with a low kick, according to the referee."

If you think the reader may wonder about the source of a piece of information, don't hesitate to say from where you learned it. Generally attribution is used when the information appears in the story: "The weather will be sunny and warm for the next five days, according to Finland's Weather Bureau."

Occasionally credits are run at the end of a story, particularly when tidbits are scattered throughout the story or come from multiple sources: "Some of the material in this story came from Reuters and Associated Press dispatches". If a second writer provides some help, it should be acknowledged: "Deepika Pereira contributed to this story."

Providing the source--or what is generally called attribution--lends authority, perspective, insight and credibility for readers--according to what they have told me through the years.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Issues (#7)

General Electric coined the memorable advertising line: "Progress is our most important product". Variations of the theme have been expounded by other businesses ("Service is our most important product") and by educators ("Children are..."). In the publishing field, I would use the word "credibility".

Credibility is our most important product.

Believe me, it's the most important aspect. Why should you believe me? That's the rub. Credibility, or believability, has to be earned. It is earned over time and consists of numerous attributes. Among them are accuracy, being informative, fairness, being caring, consistency, being responsive and dependability.

A publication that concerns itself with humans and the major issues that affect people has a good start. Still, we need to realize the root of the word "publication". It derives from "public". And credibility for a publication derives from being public-oriented.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Issues (#8)

The freedom to publish carries with it a need to be responsible.

- * Certain words that are considered vulgar should be avoided.
- * Descriptions of tragedies don't have to include every gory detail.
- * Personal feelings should be set aside when commenting on people or institutions.
- * A story never should be written that might knowingly put a person or persons in danger.

Responsibility also should be exercised in reporting and photo-taking.

- * Identify yourself and the organization you are representing.
- * Avoid doing stories about organizations or groups you are affiliated with (exceptions would be your country or your religion). If need be, state the affiliation in your story.
- * Never lie, cheat, eavesdrop steal in news gathering. Preposterous? The pressure to "get the story" sometimes can trigger inappropriate behavior.
- * Never accept a gift of any substance from the subject of a story (a cup of tea certainly is permissible).

It's important for journalists to be squeaky clean in the carrying out of their duties, because failure to do so washes off on the credibility of the entire publication.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Issues (#9)

Many books discuss the subject of objectivity, and most of them come to the same conclusion: Objectivity is impossible for a journalist to attain.

Well, we could also say it is impossible to be honest all the time or to be accurate all the time.

They miss the point. Objectivity is what a journalist should be striving for in the coverage of news (I will explore subjectivity in the next tutorial). Objectivity is a discipline. It requires training along with checks and balances that generally are provided by fellow journalists, by editors and by reader input.

A simple personal experience. In my early days of reporting I covered the Boston Celtics basketball team. On my days off my wife and I occasionally would attend a game, partly to keep up with my beat and partly because she enjoyed the sport. At crucial moments, especially in the last minutes, the crowd would be on its feet hollering and screaming. I would be sitting there. Sometimes someone nearby would say, "What's the matter with you?"

There was nothing the matter with me.

I was concentrating on who was covering whom; what strategy was being carried out; whether any of the players was limping or seeming to be overtired; what the time on the clock was; who on the bench was taking off a jacket getting ready to enter the game; etc.

It would be the same for a reporter covering Parliament or a local council meeting: You are concentrating on the business at hand on both sides of the aisle or wherever else something is going on. And you are alert to any unexpected development.

Again, objectivity is a discipline. Reporters are trained or train themselves to become acquainted with all facets of a story.

Think of yourself as having a ringside seat on the unfolding of a small segment of history, no matter what kind of story you cover. Your only objective is to see and hear what's transpiring and convey your observations as fairly as possible.. If it's a highly-charged, two-sided story and you do your job well, both sides probably will be mad at you.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Issues (#10)

The opposite of objectivity is subjectivity.

Generally subjectivity is found in columns, editorials and entertainment or product reviews. It reflects the opinion of the writer or, in the case of an editorial, the position of an organization or group.

What confuses the reader is when opinion is entwined in what might appear to be a news story or when opinion is found in the same place as news stories.

Most good websites will either create a section called opinion or commentary or the like. If not, the articles themselves are labeled clearly.

From the writer viewpoint, it's easy to write opinion. You just write what you think. However, it can become boring. Who cares what you think? Therefore, the best read opinion pieces are well thought out, well written and well researched.

Even the best writers can flop when they fail to do research on their topic. Indeed, their position is strengthened if they at least allude to the opposing points of view. It is a signal that the writer has considered other views before arriving at an opinion.

Thus, tone is important when writing opinion. Those who pontificate--that is, express their views in a pompous way--tend to have fewer readers; those who differ without downgrading are more successful.

Opinions should be made sharply and clearly but not with a knife protruding.

ONE-MINUTE TUTORIAL...on Issues (#11)

Squeezed between objectivity and subjectivity is a concept called "analysis" or "news analysis".

Analysis involves an explanation of an issue. While it avoids opinion or taking sides, analysis interprets an issue--or some part of an issue--based

on facts most everyone would agree on (example: War is repugnant). Its purpose is to take a complicated subject and make it more understandable to the reader.

An analysis is the closest cousin in journalism to an essay. Good ones stay with a central point or theme, have a clear opening statement, followed by explanation and a conclusion. If news stories have 5 W's and an H (who, what, when, where, why and how), then an analysis has one W (why?).

A subject for an analysis, based on a news development, might be the digital divide. When technology companies decided to donate large sums of money to a United Nations project aimed at improving the plight of computer have-nots, a follow-up analysis could have been done on why that step was significant.

The purpose of such an analysis would be to discuss the involvement of the companies but not gloss over the fact that in some circles these contributions may have been met with disapproval. What is generally accepted as fact and not an opinion is that there is a digital divide

It takes some sophistication to write an analysis, because the writer is called on to answer a basic question: What is the meaning of the news issue?

If I were to write an analysis of analyses, I would say: The answer to the question (what is the meaning?) is not arrived at by smoking a pipe or looking out over the ocean. It requires a knowledge base to draw on. You aren't born with that knowledge. To obtain it entails research work, generally known as reporting. That's the truth; it's not an opinion.

Issue Goals

Every issue should be organized and laid out before work begins on the actual printing. Below is a guideline to the issues that should be printed during the conference. This is a guideline, not a rule.

Issue 1-Target Delivery: Wednesday Registration

Welcome Letter from Governor

Supreme Court Article

Officer Training & Committee Chair Training: Report on trainings that took place in preparation for the conference

Officer Interviews: Interviews conducted at officer training.

Candidate Interviews: Interviews conducted at press training.

Pictures- taken at Officer training and registration

College Spotlight- focus on Colleges visiting Youth Legislature

Pizza, T-Shirt, & Conference Picture Adds

Places to eat

Issue 2-Target Delivery: Wednesday Night/Lunch Thursday

Opening Session Report- Report on opening session= Governor's Speech, Oath of Office, Director's Opening remarks, etc...

Officer Interviews- Why they ran for their position, what they hope to get out of it, personal info...

Candidate Interviews- Why they chose that position, what's their campaign focus, what do they hope to accomplish, why should delegates vote for them...

Issue Focus- article about one of the issues facing Mississippi today and that there is a bill covering

Political Rally- Who had particularly effective/entertaining presentations?

Pictures- taken at Opening Session, committees, mezzanine, etc...

Pizza, TShirt, & Conference Picture Adds

Issue 3- Target Delivery: Thursday Night

Interviews- Any Candidate Interviews/Office Interviews leftover.

Pictures- Lots of pictures

Feature Articles

Advisor Interview- get a conference point of view from advisors. Maybe one new and one experienced?

Pizza, T-Shirt, & Conference Picture Adds

Issue 4- Target Delivery: Friday Lunch

Interviews- Any Candidate Interviews/Office Interviews leftover.

Life as a Page- Feature on the hardest working delegates at the conference

Lt. Governor Speeches- Who had particularly effective/entertaining presentations?

Gubernatorial debate- Who had particularly effective/entertaining presentations?

Court Report- Give a report on cases heard by the Supreme Court so far & the decisions

Pictures

Pizza, TShirt, & Conference Picture Adds

Issue 5- Target Delivery: Friday Night

Interviews- Any Candidate Interviews/Office Interviews leftover

Polls open! Vote Advertisement.

Capital Report- talk to the Capital Hostess and get some interesting facts about our State Capital building.

The Real Deal- Find an actual Legislator, Sgt. At Arms, or other official and interview

Pizza, T-Shirt, & Conference Picture Adds

Pictures

Issue 6- Target Delivery: Saturday

Campaign results

Any leftover items that have been left out of earlier issues

Closing comments

A few last tips for the press:

Taking pictures: GET CLOSE! Most interesting pictures are from the waist up. You are a member of the PRESS! Don't be scared to walk to the front of the room to take a picture. Take a few of the same thing so hopefully one of them will turn out.

Include a picture with every article.

Check your grammar and spelling-don't sound like no idiot

Keep your questions and comments professional.

Meet your deadlines.

Take good notes and write legibly so you'll be able to read it later

Make sure if you take a quote, write it down correctly!

Keep your articles short and precise...no one reads the long, boring ones!