Notes, quotes and other journalism stuff

Companion reading for presentation to Steve Bagwell's
Mass Communication 375 class (Reporting)

Linfield College
Renshaw Hall Media Lab
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(But valid in all 50 states and U.S. districts and territories)

Curated by Carl J. Dubois
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You didn't ask, but ...

From the curator, thoughts and lessons learned in more than three decades of sports and news reporting and editing:

Learn the rules before you start trying to break them.

Nobody remembers who was first to report a story, but everybody remembers who got it wrong. Be careful worrying too much about being first and not enough about being right.

Become informed about news and business, even if you want to focus on sports coverage. Sports reporting isn't just about covering games. You must become familiar with reporting on crime, contracts, stadium construction and all kinds of other "real world" issues.

Hang out where people discuss the things you want to report and write about. Listen to what's on their minds. Sports bars. Pubs where political talk is known to happen. Be wary of political and fan forums, as they quickly become toxic. They are worth checking out, but in limited doses. The same with talk radio. If you aren't careful, you will start to let them become your assignment editor in a way. Resist that. Be better than that.

Read. A lot. Read everything. Become well-rounded. Learn to be good at learning on the fly, because in reporting, you will be constantly learning, on an unforgiving deadline, about things you knew nothing about five minutes earlier.

Pet peeve: Go easy on “officially” and all variations of the word. Be specific about what happened. A player signed an offer sheet. A player and team agreed in principle on a contract. A player signed a contract. A college agreed to join a conference. A college signed an agreement to join a conference. A college team played its first game in the new conference. A high school player committed to attend and play for a college. A player signed a scholarship letter of intent. None of these require using “officially.”

Sports teams and organizations of any type are increasingly insulated in a bubble of positivity, PR, marketing and messaging, always hearing or desiring positive-only talk. When you’re in such an environment, anything objective comes across as negative.

All you have in this business is your credibility and integrity. Don’t blow it. You gain trust by the fairness of your reporting over time. Even people who perceive you as being “negative” will see that, eventually, if you are fair.

You may have seen this quote: “Journalism is printing what someone else does not want published; everything else is public relations.” There are many versions of the sentiment, attributed to a lot of different people. One version says: It’s news if they want anything kept out of the paper; it’s advertising if they want it in.” The spirit, if not the letter, of every version is the same: You work in news, not in public relations (which pays a hell of a lot better, by the way). This does not mean you must have an adversarial relationship with those you cover, but maintaining a healthy distance from them and their motivations relative to your coverage is appropriate and necessary.

Tips from the pros

Contributions from current and former sports journalists and others from newsgathering and storytelling fields who were asked to share their favorite advice (including small-town papers, Major League Baseball beat writers and a state capitol bureau chief for a major newspaper):

- "Your job is to REPORT, not to 'write.' " (In other words, if your primary interest is in creative writing, you're probably pursuing the wrong career.)
- Best advice I got is still probably the best advice I could give in today's journalism: Knock on the door. Don't just wait for a story to come to you, go get the story even if it means knocking on the door of an accused criminal. Go get the story.
- Nouns and verbs. (In case, it's not obvious: Go easy on the adjectives.)
- One: "Go outside." Even as a small daily sports editor, I tried to get to somebody's practice or game, no matter the sport, every day. Two: One that always stayed with me, was Chuck Stone telling us college kids about his career, "I was an OK writer. But I was a HELLUVA reporter." Different era, no doubt, but I still hear that one in my head even though I'm several years out of the business.
- Don't assume.
- Timeless advice? Spell out, aloud, every name for the people involved. Every one. John Smith? J-O-H-N S-M-I-T-H? This was always a basic thing that, several times, stood me in good stead because I made it a habit after having it suggested while I was still in college that it would be good to do. It seems obvious, but you'd be surprised how often it is not done. Best example? There was a four-year All-American softball pitcher's name — very phonetic, and really, not hard — that was misspelled, by everyone, including the SID's office, for more than three years of her collegiate career, because no one did this, and she was too nice, shy and polite to correct anybody, until one day, I covered the team, asked her, and did it). She, and my editor, both thanked me profusely — he after rolling his eyes in embarrassment and exasperation.
- This is not advice I received, but, based on experience, I would add this, especially nowadays: Be careful what you post/blog.
- Overwriting is a plague. Write like you talk. If you don't, people will think you're a fraud, and you might be. Write to a story's worth. Don't write long just to write long. If it's worth it, write to your heart's desire. Splurging on stories that aren't worth it is tiresome to the reader.
- Read your stuff aloud. write it, print a copy, take it outside or somewhere you can have a moment's peace, and read it aloud. Much more likely to catch errors, repetition, lapses in logic and construct. And yeah, don't **** up people's names.
- For the editors out there: When news or sports reporters come back from covering something, ask them what happened. They will almost always tell you the most interesting thing. That should be the lede/angle of their story.
- Still valid even in skeleton-crew newsrooms: The paper will still come out without you. Use your comp time/vacation days. You've earned them.
- Everyone, even the best journalists in the business, needs to be edited.
- Don't ever debate whether to make another (phone) call. If you're even asking the question, make the call.
- When it doubt, cut it out. If you're not sure if something belongs in an article, it doesn't.

- Read your article from the last paragraph up. Without the flow of the narrative, you're more likely to catch a misspelling, missed word or grammatical error.
- We are not the story; we are the storytellers
- Learn to do as many things as you can, from writing columns and gamers and features to keeping stats, taking photos, creating competent videos, recording podcasts. Hopefully you won't have to do it all in one day, but it'll really help you down the road to be able to confidently tell someone you can do so many different things. Especially at smaller shops, outside of the very basics (go to game, produce content), the job is what you make it. Might as well use that opportunity to produce content that will reach audience in new ways and give you some quality, diverse resume clips.
- Don't pretend to understand a sport you don't understand. Didn't wrestle in high school and don't know what the hell just happened? Don't know shit about why cyclists ride in a peloton or what a kayaker is trying to pull off? Ask. Tons of your readers don't know either, and they'll appreciate your story a lot more if you can describe what happened to an expert and to a novice.
- Try. Most people — OK, maybe not most, but many — only barely try, to get that story, get that interview, follow up on that idea, even apply for that job. Things will work out way, way more often than you'd expect.
- Turn questions you ask yourself, little things you notice, into stories. They'll often be unique and more interesting than many standard profiles. Like, for instance, cyclists shave their legs. Can it really make that much of a difference? How much difference does it make? (Maybe there are answers to that one. No idea. But just keep your eyes open and learn to turn your own curiosity into unique stories. There's no better recent example than John Branch making a feature out of "why do basketball sneakers squeak?")
- Look for ways to elevate your profiles into bigger, wider stories, for instance, rather than doing a profile just on a local ultramarathon runner, maybe make his or her personal story the backbone of a feature on the growth of ultra running.
- No one told me this, but I know it too well: Protect your story ideas. Never trust your colleagues.
- I had a former colleague tell me a few years back when I was having trouble with a lede to sit back and ask myself "What's the point?" ... meaning what's the most important or noteworthy thing to take away from the story? That turned out to be a huge help and is something I still do to this day.
- I wrote a feature as an intern that was a pile of hot garbage. The interview was bad, the story was lame and I hated it. Granted, I was still green as hell, but I was just generally bemoaning what a crap show the whole process had been, and a guy who had been in the business for 20 years stopped me and told me that I should try like hell to bust ass and make every story awesome, but that there were always going to be stories here and there that I was going to simply have to grit my teeth and get through. That always stuck with me. I'd like to think we've all had those stories that sucked but simply had to be done. I don't let those bother nearly as much as I used to.
- In other words, not every story is going to be a home run.
- To further emphasize that point: Perfect is the enemy of good. Sometimes you have to just hit "send" and be done with it.
- Mine, on the first day I was in a baseball clubhouse, from a beat veteran: "Don't try to bluff these guys. They know the game better than you. But they're happy to explain it to you. It's what they love. They'll want you to understand. Are you genuinely curious about something, about how something happened or why they

did what they did? Ask them. They'll tell you. But don't ever pretend you know. They'll see through that in a second, and you'll be dead in here. Also, don't get caught looking at anyone's dick."

- Journalism has changed, but it is still primarily about stories. And people.
- An editor at my first paper told me: Want to know the cure for writer's block? Lower your standards. And of course, meet the deadline.
- We write for our readers, not for our sources. I think that it's easy to fall into the trap of enjoying praise from sources - or avoiding confrontations with them. So this is a vital one to keep in mind.
- Become a great reporter first, and the rest will follow. I think too often college students just want to start spewing their opinions.
- Here's a good one from a superstar in the business, George Esper, who was an AP war correspondent famous for staying during the fall of Saigon. He thought too many reporters tried to appear too much of an authority on subject matters during interviews in certain instances and would be better served acting a little naive and asking for further explanation.
- Read and write. Read the best journalism and other written works out there, understand what makes them so good and try and learn something. Write every day. Practice may not make perfect, but it'll certainly make you better.
- Listen. Sure, you want to have some ideas in mind on what you want to ask that person. But don't be afraid to scrap that line of thinking if the interview goes in a different direction. Follow up on what is said. Turn the interview into a conversation. You'll make the subject more comfortable and get some nuggets/stories you otherwise wouldn't. You'll also find other sources to talk to about said person just from listening closely to what is said.
- "Get it right -- the first time." It's the first order our grizzled old wire service editor-turned college newspaper faculty adviser barked out in his cigarette-scarred voice almost 40 years ago, and it should apply just as much today (especially in the era of rushing stories onto the internet).
- Short, declarative sentences. Short, declarative paragraphs.
- Whatever that large gaggle of reporters is doing in the clubhouse - do the opposite.
- When everyone is looking left, look to the right.
- Don't feign expertise, even if you have it. Let people explain themselves.
- Always ask one more question. Always do one more interview.
- Never interrupt an answer. Instead, be quiet. The subject will keep speaking.
- Don't always start a story from the beginning. Begin in the middle. Start at the end.
- Master every rule before you try breaking them.
- Read everything.
- Be skeptical, not cynical.
- Honor the work.
- It's more about the reporting than the writing, and that's true for even the best writers. But once you do the good reporting, write the damn thing. Use quotes wisely.
- The interview is everything in the space. The person's words, their facial expressions, their gestures, the dog that jumps into their lap. All of that is on the record and may help the story.
- Not every story is an A+; that doesn't mean it shouldn't be written. Not every ending contains wonder or healing or a Big Lesson. When you start dismissing worthy stories in front of you to search for only the very best ones, think twice.

- Learn to get tired of the "rough background" feature. It's an easy cliche. Lots of people have them, and not just poor kids. It may or may not be what makes them tick. Don't presume you know their context.
- There's a difference in degree, if not kind, between clever and funny. Most writers are occasionally clever. Few are funny. Even fewer are funny on Twitter.
- One of my favorite things I learned here is to keep your quotes tight. Don't lead into the quote with a paraphrasing of the quote.
- If you write for a college paper: Get out and cover something. Cover a game. Do a feature. You're right there on campus and the opportunities are there to do good, original work. No one gives a shit about your NBA preview or your take on the pennant race or your fantasy football team. Do the work. Get some experience. Get some clips.
- Remember, it's better to look stupid in person/over the phone than in print, online, TV spot, etc. In other words, if you realize you need to clarify an answer or didn't ask something you really should have, call that source, even if it's late, and make sure what you have is correct.
- Write short sentences. I say that in opposition, or in addition, to the typical writing tip about eliminating unnecessary words, because it's more specific. Of course writers don't want words they don't need, but the idea behind cutting unneeded words is to make writing more clear. A good way to do that is to write shorter sentences. Then, if you wanna get fancy, go back and maybe add a few together.
- Write for the college paper, TV or radio station, or more than one if possible.
- Get an internship at a news organization if you can.
- Consider writing a blog.
- Be sure to use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and watch out what you say and do on them.
- Learn the basics of Excel and, if you like data, learn how to use Microsoft Access or mysql.
- Consider learning how to fly a drone, shoot and produce audio or video.
- Learn basic web coding, ie, HTML.
- Consider learning advanced coding, ie, javascript, PHP, python.
- Don’t burn any bridges in this business. It’s a small world.
- Have a backup plan.

This last one is not so much advice but an observation from a sports/news veteran about how good working at a newspaper can be compared to jobs in other professions:

- We tend to do a lot of stories that cycle around. But every day when I go to work, I just might have an opportunity to create something that has never existed before.

Recommended reading

Books

“The Rise and Fall of the Press Box” by Leonard Koppett
“Morning Miracle” by Dave Kindred
“In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle” by Madeleine Blais

“Unbelievable: My Front-Row Seat to the Craziest Campaign in American History” by Katy Tur, NBC News
“Word by Word: The Secret Life of Dictionaries” by Kory Stamper, Merriam-Webster
“Writing Down the Bones” by Natalie Goldberg
“The Elements of Style” by William J. Strunk Jr.
“The Art and Craft of Feature Writing: Writing Based on the Wall Street Journal Guide” by William E. Blundell
“The Great Shark Hunt” by Hunter S. Thompson

Stories

"Phat Chants" by Bill Plaschke, Los Angeles Times
"Death of a Racehorse" by W.C. Heinz, The Sun (many pieces have been written on it)
“Let Us Now Raze Famous Men” by Jeff MacGregor, Sports Illustrated, Feb. 13, 2006
“The Secret History of Tiger Woods” by Wright Thompson, ESPN.com, April 21, 2016

Two stories, same topic, different approaches

In 2012, two stories popped up simultaneously in Esquire and GQ about the same subject -- a private zoo in Janesville, Ohio, where the owner turned his animals loose. The writers -- Chris Jones and Chris Heath -- told the story very differently, and they're both terrific. Heath won a major magazine writing award for his version. There's also a Q&A with Jones about reporting the story on brandonsneed.com. Those three files should be of interest to any aspiring journalist. They are:

"Animals: The Horrific True Story of the Zanesville Zoo Massacre" by Chris Jones, Esquire, February 6, 2012

"18 Tigers, 17 Lions, 8 Bears, 3 Cougars, 2 Wolves, 1 Baboon, 1 Macaque, and 1 Man Dead in Ohio" by Chris Heath, GQ, February 6, 2012

"Chris Jones of Esquire on His Zanesville Zoo Massacre Story ‘Animals,’ ‘The Most Dramatic Story Of The Year’ " on brandonsneed.com, February 6, 2012

Notable writers from different eras

They are worth checking out for different reasons.

Ring Lardner. Grantland Rice. A.J. Liebling. W.C. Heinz. John Updike. Gay Talese. Frank Deford. Dan Jenkins. Gary Smith. Jane Leavy. Johnette Howard. Richard Ford. Gregg Doyel. Rembert Browne. Brian Phillips. Lisa Olson. Juliette Macur. Jane McManus. Wright Thompson.

Recommended Twitter accounts to follow

For entertainment purposes, but you’ll learn some things, too.

Don Van Natta Jr. @DVNJr
Richard Deitsch @ richarddeitsch

Kevin Van Valkenburg @KVanValkenburg
Charles P. Pierce @CharlesPPierce
MacGregorSmithsonian @Jeff__MacGregor
Susan Slusser @susanslusser
Jacob Pomrenke @buckweaver
Kory Stamper @KoryStamper
Merriam-Webster @MerriamWebster
Kathryn Schulz @kathrynschulz
Linda Holmes @nprmonkeysee
Emily Nussbaum @emilynussbaum
Melissa Jacobs @thefootballgirl
Matt Pearce @mattdpearce
Jacqueline Keeler @jfkeeler
Female SID Problems @FemaleSIDProbs
Marty Baron @PostBaron
@ConsciousStyles
Britni de la Cretaz @britnidlc
StuffJournalistsLike @JournalistsLike
Journalism & Tech @jrnlsm

Don Van Natta Jr. puts together a weekly list of good (sports) writing. So does Richard Deitsch. … Kevin Van Valkenburg writes for ESPN.com and ESPN the Magazine and has taught journalism at the University of Montana. Charles P. Pierce is wonderful at (occasional) sports writing and biting political commentary for Esquire. … Jeff MacGregor wrote many splendid magazine pieces (ESPN, others) and now writes for Smithsonian Magazine. … Susan Slusser is the San Francisco Chronicle beat writer for the Oakland Athletics and was the first woman to be president of the Baseball Writers' Association of America. ... Jacob Pomrenke is a great example of finding your niche in sports journalism, merging old-fashioned research with sabermetrics at SABR, the Society for American Baseball Research. … Kory Stamper is a must-follow for anyone using words (and this is a good time to suggest that you explore the difference between "prescriptive" dictionaries and "descriptive" dictionaries, and then to understand that all do some of "both.") … Kathryn Schulz is best known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning piece for The New Yorker on The Big One, the Pacific Northwest earthquake we all know is coming one day. She has written many excellent pieces, including a book about being wrong ("Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error"). … Linda Holmes and Emily Nussbaum are fun TV critics/writers to follow. Melissa Jacobs ("the football girl") does some terrific work. … Matt Pearce covers major national news for the Los Angeles Times. … Jacqueline Keeler is a Portland-based Native American who writes about social justice issues and, notably, the use of Native American mascots in sports. … Female SID Problems is exactly what it sounds like. If you don't know what an SID is, find out now. … Marty Baron may be best known as the former editor of the Boston Globe, whose investigative work on child sexual abuse by Catholic priests in the Boston area was the basis of the movie "Spotlight," one of the most realistic movies ever made about journalism. He is now editor of The Washington Post, the paper whose work after Watergate inspired another movie in that category, "All the President's Men."

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IN STYLE

How Sexist Language Hurts Men

by Karen Yin

Nonsexist language usually involves changing language to include women, such as avoiding the false generic *he*, making occupational titles like *businessman* gender-neutral, avoiding unnecessary gender markers such as *women lawyers*, and not assuming that your readership is male. In the process, we inadvertently ignore the repercussions of sexist language for men, even though stereotyping one gender means simultaneously stereotyping another.

When articles and ads favor mothers, fathers are disrespected as caretakers, which affects custody battles, divorce hearings, and paternity leave options. When occupations are gendered, it reinforces the myth that gender determines capacity, capability, and even disposability, such as when physically dangerous jobs are reserved for men.

Consider these tips for gender-neutral language with men (and boys) in mind:

- *Be a man, man up*: Avoid language that suggests that to "be a man" requires men to hide their feelings or express only masculinized emotions, such as anger.
- *Male nurse, man bun*: Avoid "man words" and male gender markers if they imply that certain occupations, fashions, and behaviors are inherently feminine. However, we want biased words when the bias is relevant, and *mansplaining* and *manspreading* address male privilege in ways that *explaining* and *spreading* cannot.
- Violence: Using male pronouns when talking about abusers makes it harder for male survivors to speak up about female aggressors.
- Friendship: Don't sexualize close friendships between men. This can discourage emotional connections and fuel homophobia and biphobia.
- Orientation: Don't assume that men have or want a female partner.
- Anatomy: Don't assume that women are the only people who can become pregnant. Include others (for example, transgender men with uteruses) by using gender-neutral terminology, like *reproductive health* instead of *women's health*.

An editor's responsibility is to flag biases that don't accurately represent the wider spectrum of human experience. Falling back on stereotypes allows them to flourish. ■

Karen Yin is the founder of AP vs. Chicago and Conscious Style Guide. For another viewpoint on using man-related words, see Word Resource Roundup on p. 6.—Ed.

FORM CD-3267A

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❑ The headline makes immediate sense to the reader and does not distort syntax or usage to make the pun and/or wordplay.

❑ This pun and/or wordplay applies to the story in both its senses.

❑ I have tested the pun and/or wordplay on my podmate, spouse or pet.

❑ The test subject laughed, chuckled or chortled audibly.

❑ I understand that a polite smile does not constitute merriment or delight.

❑ The pun and/or wordplay is not fowl/foul and does not include a proper name.

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