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Speaking of Journalism

12 Writers and Editors
Talk About Their Work

WILLIAM ZINSSER

AUTHOR OF ON WRITING WELL AND WRITING TO LEARN

Jennifer Allen	Kevin McKean
Melinda Beck	Lawrie Mifflin
Roger Cohn	John Rosenberg
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of
Journalism

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They Went: The Art and Craft of Travel Writing

INTRODUCTION

During the 1970s I taught a course at Yale in nonfiction writing. My purpose was not to raise a new generation of journalists. I wanted to try to help students in every discipline to harness the world they were living in, and I selected my classes to be a mixture of young men and women from the various arts and sciences, bound for careers in various fields. I was looking for the next Rachel Carson or Lewis Thomas or David McCullough no less than the next White House correspondent.

But one of my students did turn out to be a White House correspondent, for *The Wall Street Journal*, and others went on to become successful writers and editors for newspapers and magazines ranging from *The New York Times* and the *New York Daily News* to *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic*, *New York*, *Newsweek*, *Money*, *Rolling Stone*, *Audubon*, *Discover*, *Life*, *Vermont Magazine*, *Seventeen* and *Vogue*. Meanwhile I returned to New York and got back to my own writing. But I still did some teaching, and in the fall of 1992, when I decided to offer a nonfiction writing course at The New School, I hit on the idea of inviting some of my former Yale students to teach it with me. A different one would come each week and talk about his or her work. I made eleven phone calls, and nobody turned me down.

I wanted to teach at The New School because I've always liked its historic role: to provide information that helps motivated adults to get on with their lives. That's what I hoped my course would do, and I organized it to cover specific journalistic forms and skills that Yale students of mine excel at: feature writing, the personal column, scientific and technical

writing, magazine editing, political and public affairs reporting, profiles, sportswriting, health and social-issues reporting, environmental and nature writing, and local and regional journalism. I taught the first session myself, to establish the principles that are important to me and that my students had taken into their own careers.

My instructions to them were simple. "Come and tell stories," I said. "Tell stories about what you do and how you do it, and how you got started, and what experiences you learned from, including your mistakes. Tell stories that illustrate a point about your kind of writing or editing—stories that aspiring writers will find helpful. If it's a good story, the class will remember the point. If the point isn't implicit, I'll be there, like Larry King, to drag you back to it or to make the point myself." Such prods were seldom necessary—as this book, which grew out of the class, proves. It's a book full of stories that are rich in useful detail. I saw my students turn into good teachers before my eyes.

I had also asked them to talk about values and not just about craft—such matters as fairness and accountability. I knew them all to be men and women of integrity, and the best questions asked by the class were ones that pursued ethical issues that the journalists raised, such as the growing tendency of reporters to color their stories with personal opinion or the tendency of magazine editors to rewrite and distort a writer's article to serve some agenda of their own.

This book is an act of reconstruction. I brought a tape recorder to class, and it provided my raw material, which was then transcribed. But conversational talk emerges on paper lacking much of the syntax and narrative coherence that the eye needs to process it and the mind needs to enjoy it, and I did extensive pruning and transposing and splicing and shaping. I also retained some classroom questions that led to an interesting answer. In several cases I went back to the teacher with my tape recorder and we made a fresh start, developing points I felt had been skimmed or sidetracked or omitted. Throughout, my aim was to preserve the speaking voice of the person who taught the class. Then I sent the chapters to

each of the teachers for their own revisions. The result isn't 100 percent true to what took place, but it's true to what we set out to teach and to what got taught. The class and the book are unidentical twins, each with its own personality.

Following each chapter I've written a postscript: an afterthought that occurred to me, often relating to some incident in my own career as a journalist. My purpose was to give the book a connecting thread, a reminder of its origins. But I also wanted to anchor it in an older journalistic tradition—older than the generation represented by eleven writers and editors just arriving at middle age. At Yale those men and women had been taught out of the values of my generation, and I in turn had been influenced by still earlier generations—as my postscripts, alluding to older mentors of mine at the *New York Herald Tribune* and to earlier models such as H. L. Mencken, gratefully acknowledge.

Like the rest of the book, my postscripts are personal and anecdotal. This is a book of voices. Listen, therefore, as you read. You will hear twelve journalists speaking of journalism—talking about how they work and what they believe.

New York
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JOHN TIERNEY

FEATURE STORIES

For me the biggest challenge in feature writing is to find the angle—or, as it's sometimes called, the “take.” Most stories originate with the idea that there is an interesting person or phenomenon or trend, and the trick is to think of a particular way to tell that story. A rule I try to remember—I've heard it attributed to the editor Byron Dobell—is that “a story should be a verb, not a noun.” It shouldn't just be about a place or an institution; something should be happening there.

Early in my career as a magazine writer I got an assignment from *Esquire* that turned into a debacle. It was to write a story about Phil Knight, the founder of Nike. He was a man who had used a waffle iron in his garage to make the first sole of a running shoe that revolutionized the business. He was worth about \$400 million. It seemed there ought to be something there to write about. But I never figured out what the take was; I never got beyond the nouns “Nike” or “Phil Knight.” I couldn't even manage a simple profile, because when I went to see him I was unable to extract a single interesting quote. That's when I learned that the worst question an interviewer can ask is: “Can you tell me an interesting

anecdote?” The person might have a million of them, but his mind will go absolutely blank. You can silence any raconteur with that question.

During that process my editor sent me a piece that Tom Wolfe had written for *Esquire* about Robert Noyce, who was one of the fathers of Silicon Valley. It began with the fact that Noyce grew up in Iowa and lived in Grinnell, a town that was founded by Protestants fleeing the sinful ways of the East; they went to Grinnell to start a new society. Wolfe’s take was that these software engineers in modern California had the same attitude toward the East—they were puritans appalled by big New York corporations with extravagant hierarchies and lavish perquisites. In Silicon Valley it wasn’t customary for the president of a company to have his reserved space in the parking lot. One day a visiting executive from New York was brought to the company by a chauffeur, who sat outside waiting, and the engineers were shocked that a company would assign one person to waste his time sitting in a car. It went against the religious values of Silicon Valley.

Anyway, that’s how Wolfe saw it, and I remember resenting his story because it didn’t have a quote from any software engineer saying that was how *he* saw Silicon Valley. It was all Tom Wolfe’s idea. But later I came to think Wolfe was right to impose that perspective on the story. Even if the software engineers never talked about religion, Wolfe was justified in arriving at his own take on the subject, just as he had been entitled to say that astronauts had to have “the right stuff.” I doubt if that phrase even occurred to the astronauts until they read Wolfe’s book, and then they probably realized that he had captured the spirit of their program in a way they couldn’t have.

In general, I think, the writer is more interesting than the person he or she is writing about. That sounds arrogant, and I don’t mean that you shouldn’t realistically portray the people you’re covering or that you should intrude yourself into their story. But the reason you’re a writer is that you have an interesting way of looking at situations. At least you have a fresh perspective. Most people who have been doing some-

thing for a long time become completely accustomed to the weirdnesses of their lives. You should always be faithful to representing how people feel, what they think and what they say. But I don't think you have to look at it from their point of view. That took me a long time to realize. I could hear the voices of the people I had interviewed saying, "That's not the way it is." And after a certain point I thought: I don't care; this is how *I* see it—which may be a more valid perspective.

I'll give you a small example. I did an article for my paper, *The New York Times*, about the boat basin at 79th Street on the Hudson River, which has been the subject of countless stories over the years describing the colorful bohemians and old salts who live there. My story compared them to the city's homeless squatters. These people were squatters on public land, which the city spent \$2 million to fix up, and I wondered: Why do they have a right to stay there? The city is kicking the homeless out of the parks; why do these boat people have special rights? Well, my article got taped up on the fence at the boat basin and was annotated with 36 refutations. At one time that would have bothered me, but I knew that my facts were accurate and that my perspective was valid. The boat people had their own perspective: They had a right to be there because they had been there for ten years and it was only proper that the city should pay for them. But I think a more interesting question for the reader is: Why are your tax dollars going to give someone a low-rent place in a public park?

Q. Ten years ago, or even five years ago, would that approach have been allowed in a paper like the *Times*? You were hired as a reporter, but writers like you are increasingly being encouraged to write feature stories that embody an opinion, which is a groundswell change in American journalism.

I imagine it would have been more difficult to write that story ten years ago. True, I quoted the boat people's lawyer and their point of view, but I didn't give them 50 percent of the article. The gist of the piece was going toward "Why don't they pay any property taxes?"

Q. You mean you constructed the piece in such a way that the facts make your point? Your opinion, as such, never comes through?

Yes, and you can argue, I suppose, that that's disingenuous. But you're right about the trend. Newspapers are realizing that TV now provides much of the news—"Here's what happened today"—and that they have to come up with an approach to make themselves different. One example is the *Times's* coverage this year [1992] of the presidential campaign, which was more daring than it had ever been before. Reporters were encouraged to look for fresh perspectives and to use distinctive voices. During the primaries I was assigned to sit in hotel rooms, watch television, and give my impression of what the campaign and the candidates looked like on the tube. My editors encouraged me to write with as much voice and opinion as I wanted. Eventually, after I wrote that Paul Tsongas came off as a "messianic pedant," they decided to label my stories "Campaign Watch," to alert readers that this was in the nature of a column, not a straight news story. But they told me to keep giving frank impressions. That kind of interpretive writing is much more important now to newspapers.

The most obvious way for a writer to approach any broad subject—any big institution or trend—is to find one person or place or event that stands for the whole story. Of course that's a cliché; there's even a word for it—it's called synecdoche. But in reporting many feature articles, the most important element is the considerable amount of time you spend trying to find the one person who makes a good story.

I was sent to Africa with another reporter to do a series about AIDS, the ultimate "noun" of a story. We had a whole continent and tons of statistics and studies, but we needed something specific—one tale. I went to Zambia, and I noticed that many articles about AIDS referred to a practice that was spreading the disease, called ritual cleansing. But the reference was always just one or two sentences. So I started asking

about the practice. It wasn't an easy trail to follow; I would be in a village, and someone would know someone who had engaged in ritual cleansing, and they'd say, "You go about six miles and you'll see a big tree and then you turn left." Finally, in the capital city of Lusaka, someone put me onto a case. It took a week of badgering people before I got to that person's house, in a shantytown, but it turned into a good story. Here's how it starts:

LUSAKA, ZAMBIA—Sanford Mweupe now looks back wistfully on the uncomplicated days when he had only two wives to worry about. So do the two wives. Domestic life has been strained ever since the events delicately referred to in the household as "the confusion."

Last year, after his brother died, Mr. Mweupe was chosen by the family's elders to perform a ceremony called ritual cleansing. According to the tribal tradition, the brother's two widows had to be purged of their husband's spirit by having sex with a member of his family.

The problem was that Mr. Mweupe's brother had died of AIDS, and the widows quite possibly were infected as well. Mr. Mweupe's wives pleaded with him not to go ahead, but the elders insisted he cleanse the widows and then also take them as wives. He heard warnings from modern doctors, but a traditional healer assured him it would be safe.

So Mr. Mweupe became confused—a not uncommon reaction on a continent where a virus has suddenly intruded into tens of millions of lives. Fatal diseases are never simple anywhere, but it is hard to imagine any quite as complex as AIDS in Africa.

In places like this capital city, where it appears that a fifth of adults are infected, AIDS is a family disease that touches virtually everyone in some way. It confronts Africans not only with death but with challenges to their cultural foundations: their ancestral beliefs, their marital roles and familial obligations, their conceptions of morality and sexuality.

“What could I do?” Mr. Mweupe, a soft-spoken 52-year-old, said one recent afternoon in his living room. “I was bound by tradition.”

Once I found that man, it was fairly straightforward to tell his story and give readers a vivid look at what was happening in Africa. All the effort was in finding him.

At one point I was assigned to do some pieces about the Times Square redevelopment—another noun, and a vague one. I came upon a building, at the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway, where the tenants were being evicted. It was almost empty, and I just went in and wandered around, and there, separately, I came upon two ancient Times Square institutions—the radio host Joe Franklin and a press agent named Dick Falk. On one level those were easy stories, once I found the two men—the idea of these two entrenched Broadway types getting kicked out. The problem was to find a fresh way of looking at them. God really is in the details in this kind of story.

Joe Franklin has been written about forever. But to me the funny thing—my take on it—was that the city is trying to clean up Times Square, and it has to get Joe Franklin, who has the messiest office in the world, to move. I don’t claim that this take was a revolutionary insight—you might think it was so obvious as to be trite. But at least it gave me a way to write about Joe Franklin and the redevelopment of Times Square. It enabled me to select which details to mention and which quotes to use. When you have a lot of quotes from people who talk at great length, you have to choose the right ones. In Joe’s office everything in the world was there, and trying to convey that was what I loved:

The New York State Urban Development Corporation has achieved a major triumph in its long and troubled campaign to clean up Times Square. This week its lawyers are forcing Joe Franklin to clean out his office.

Mr. Franklin is renowned as Broadway’s greatest nostalgist and television’s most durable host—his 39-year-old

syndicated talk show is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*—but some acquaintances think his most remarkable achievement is the clutter in his one-room office. The debris sits above the northeast corner of Broadway and 42nd Street, in a building whose tenants are being evicted to make room for a new office tower.

The mounds of coffee cups and unanswered letters long ago engulfed the desk and surrounding floor, squeezing Mr. Franklin and his secretary into a clearing by the doorway with one chair. They would take turns sitting. They kept working there this week as movers began carting off, among other things, 12,500 sheets of vaudeville music, 10,000 movie reels, and an undetermined number of unopened press releases from the Eisenhower era.

"I've told them not to throw out anything," said Franklin, who is 62 years old. "The key word to me is 'someday.' It's my solace: someday I'll get to it. This way I also get a thrill that a neat man can never have—the thrill of finding something that was irretrievably lost."

He rummaged through a pile and found a shopping bag where he had filed a 1971 issue of *The New Yorker*, which had a profile of him, called "Broadway Joe." He pointed to the description of his office: "It has that quality that goes beyond mere grime and disorder." Mr. Franklin nodded happily. "I love that description," he said.

Mr. Franklin said he thought of the room as the "prototype of what an office should not be," and his secretary, Sophia Orkoulas, agreed. Ms. Orkoulas, a 21-year-old actress, looked surprised when asked to describe her filing system.

"Well, we don't have drawers where you keep paper inside and stuff like that," she explained. "There really isn't much of a system. We just remember what section of the floor we put something. I thought about organizing things once, but this is the way Joe likes it."

Ms. Orkoulas said there wasn't really any need for a supply cabinet because there were not really any supplies. When they needed a pen or a paper clip they rummaged

on the floor for a used one, and when they needed to write something they could always find an old letter or an announcement with an unused side.

“We used to have some blank sheets of paper,” she said, “but we ran out.”

The secretary said all that with an absolutely straight face. It’s only when you go back and look at your notes that you realize how absurd it is.

Q. But what makes the piece work is all the statistical detail—the 12,500 pieces of sheet music; it’s not “some,” or “a lot of,” or “a couple of hundred.” The numbers are tremendously vivid. So is the detail that they take turns sitting on the one chair. You need an eye for humorous detail to notice that and to use it. Do you remember how it happened to come up?

I was looking for a place to sit, and Joe Franklin said, “You can use the chair.” His secretary just stood up and gave it to me. To them it was perfectly natural that an office would have only one chair, and by then it almost seemed natural to me too—it’s easy to get so acclimated to an environment that you stop noticing its peculiarities. But later, as I was writing the story, away from that den of chaos, I realized that it was a funny detail.

I had a similarly chaotic experience with the other tenant in the building, Dick Falk, whom I later wrote about in another story. He was a man who could talk happily for three hours straight—one disjointed story after another. I walked out of his office exhausted; I didn’t know how I was going to produce anything coherent from the interview. But later something occurred to me as I was telling friends about Falk. By the way, that’s often a good way to figure out the take. As you tell your friends about a story, notice which details interest them and which direction you find yourself following. Anyway, in talking about Falk I found myself focusing on how amazed and delighted he was to have a