

WRITING FOR YOUR READERS

Notes on the Writer's Craft from The Boston Globe

• DONALD MURRAY •



**HANDBOOK OF PRACTICAL ADVICE
ON HOW TO WRITE
WITH VIGOR, CLARITY, AND GRACE**

Writing For Your Readers

Notes on the Writer's Craft from
The Boston Globe

by Donald Murray

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Foreword

Don Murray was the first writing coach at the *Globe*, where he was admired for his Pulitzer Prize, beloved for his affability and solicited for his wisdom. It didn't hurt that he looked a little like Ernest Hemingway, either. While we're on the subject, there was one other thing about Don Murray's talents worth mentioning: He knew more about the art of writing for newspapers than almost anyone else.

The particular debt I owe Don is that he went before me, one of the pioneers in this most unusual and vexing business of teaching writing to professional writers. Imagine the problems: You're a newspaper reporter, 23 years covering City Hall, the mayor tipping his hat to you in the hallway, and some guy from a college in New Hampshire starts telling you how to write. The first words out of your mouth are probably not going to be, "Thank you." If you're a typical reporter, suspicious of the politicians and bureaucrats you cover, fighting all day with your editor, you're not about to welcome some guy who calls himself a writing consultant.

Well, Don succeeded, and I'm trying to carry on his work.

What we promote is a fairly simple concept, the idea that writing is a process, not a mysterious gift from the heavens bestowed upon certain grateful individuals. We encourage writers to report accurately, to think carefully and to write meticulously, but at the same time we want stories to be lively, open-minded and full of surprises. It can be done.

Our great fight is against formula-writing, a strange disease endemic to newspapers. Nobody is born writing that way. Ask a small child to describe a crime and he might say, "Somebody stabbed a man." At newspapers, a writer with 10 minutes until deadline writes like this: "A 23-year Scituate man was stabbed to death. . . ." Or the writer is told by his editor to write a mood piece or a color piece. Unnerved, he reverts to clichés to describe an accident as ". . . a high-speed chase involving two police cruisers and a sedan driven by a 42-year-old Dorchester man that ended in tragedy." The same sort of pressures confront writers everywhere, not just on newspapers, but newspaper writers happen to be read by a few hundred thousand people each day. Inferior writing is quickly noticed.

Newspaper writers probably have a poorer reputation than they deserve. So-called creative writers are always calling newspaper writing hackneyed and repetitive. Maybe it is, but did you ever see the stuff coming out of poetry classes these days? The problem is not that newspaper writing is so much worse than other writing, but that it is not so much better. After all, newspapers pay decent salaries, select staff members from thousands of applicants, and no longer insist that every article begin with a pyramid turned upside down.

It is within the abilities of a writing coach to help people write clearly, thoughtfully and meaningfully. If the writer truly does have a gift, he might also write cleverly and stylishly. It does not matter if the writer is working for a newspaper, preparing a corporate report, or writing a paper in school. The lessons are essentially the same.

Anyone who writes can benefit from this book, because it teaches the fundamentals of good non-fiction writing, the conversion of information from the eyes of the writer to the eyes of the reader. The craft of journalism, done well, teaches the use of observations, descriptions and quotations. It teaches the writer to ask questions and remain ever skeptical.

This is not the first book ever written about writing for newspapers. If you read some of the other good ones, you will find that a lot of the advice is the same. Writing is one of those fields where the body of information isn't as much of a challenge as the application of that material.

The mistake many other books make is that they make it sound easy, just a matter of reading a chapter, warming up the computer, and producing a prize-winner. What I particularly like about this book is that it contains conversations with people who write for a living, many of them good solid newspaper reporters who understand that none of it is easy, that writing well is difficult and writing for editors is nearly impossible.

Another thing I like about this book is that I can hear Don Murray talking, softly and convincingly, and that has always made me want to go out and write a little better than I ever did before.

Alan Richman
Assistant Managing Editor,
and Writing Coach,
The Boston Globe

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The Qualities of a Good Story

Professional writers never learn to write; they continue to learn writing all their professional lives. The good writer is forever a student of writing, extending the writer's voice, on techniques of craft, attempting experiments in meaning.

It is a lonely business, but not a solitary one. Writers need colleagues, test readers, editors, and sometimes a writing coach who, like the opera star's coach, does less teaching than reminding.

The old definitions of hard news — the story

that has to be printed today — and the feature — the story that can wait until tomorrow — do not cover the diversity of stories printed in today's daily newsmagazine. But whatever the form or the subject, any good story has at least seven elements.

Information

Information, not language, is the raw material from which effective writing is built. The writer must collect specific, accurate pieces of information to be able to write effective prose. Too many stories and columns are written instead of reported; they are created by tricks of rhetoric when they should be constructed from a pattern of concrete detail. The revealing details that mark an exceptional story rarely come from competitors' stories, the telephone, or staring thoughtfully across the city room. Information that reveals is collected with the legs.

Significance

Good stories affect the reader. They threaten the reader's life, health, wealth, or sense of values. They give information the reader needs to know. They tell what has happened, what is happening, and what may happen. We should not, however, confuse significance with notoriety, doing stories on the rich, the famous, the powerful, and no one else. It is our duty to show the significance in material that at first appears insignificant.

Focus

The stories that newspaper writers usually take most pride in are long and often come in a series. The newswriter is a territorial animal with a primitive instinct to use up as much newsprint as possible. But the stories that survive are usually short, pre-

cisely limited, and clearly focused. Most good stories say one thing. They tell not of a battle, but of a soldier; they talk not about governance, but a deal; they discuss not a socioeconomic group, but reveal a person and a life.

Context

The effective story is put into perspective so the reader knows where the story has come from or where it is going, how widespread or how typical it is. Sometimes the writer who is not very skillful delivers the context in a big, hard-to-swallow capsule in about, say, the third paragraph. The more skillful writer weaves the context through the story.

Faces

We should never forget that people like to read about people. Journalism presents ideas by introducing the reader to the people who are creating the ideas or by showing the people who are affected by them. For ideas, read laws, trends, scientific discoveries, judicial opinions, economic developments, international crises. News stories work best when the writer has the skill to get out of the way and allow the reader to meet and hear the people in the story.

Form

An effective story has a shape that both contains and expresses the story. A narrative will work if it has all the information the reader needs and if the story can be revealed in a chronological pattern of action and reaction. The writer must find a form that gives the reader a satisfying sense of completion, a feeling that everything in the story flows toward an inevitable conclusion.

Voice

Memorable news stories create the illusion of an individual

writer speaking aloud to an individual listener. A good newspaper is filled with fascinating conversations. But the writer must remember to keep the voice appropriate to the story. We all know writers who use the same voice every time they write. There is always an Uncle Elmer who bellows in the same way at football game, wake, Thanksgiving Dinner, and hospital room. The good writer seeks a voice that is consistent throughout the story, but varies its volume and rhythm to the meaning. And we should never forget that even in an age of mass communication the act of reading is private, one writer speaking to one reader.

*

Even in a time dominated by electronic wonders I am amazed that I can see a basketball game won or a prime minister shot at 11:30 at night and get up at 6:00 in the morning aware of the what, but hungering for the why, and walk down my driveway, and there's the Boston Globe, full of whys.

Each edition of a newspaper is assembled from hundreds of decisions and dozens of reportorial and editorial skills. The reporter collects information, orders it into a meaningful pattern, and then clarifies the meaning so that the reader will understand its importance. The three activities of collecting, ordering, and clarifying are carried on simultaneously and interact, but as the writer moves toward the deadline the emphasis shifts from collecting to ordering to clarifying.

The Writing Process:

Principles and Tricks of the Trade

PRINCIPLES

Collect

Effective writing is built from specific, accurate information. To write well, the writer must find the details that reveal meaning, which the poet, Maxine Kumin, calls the "informing material."

Words are symbols for information. Before writing, the writer must collect an abundant inventory of fact, impressions, quotations, details, much more than the reporter will use during writing. The reporter must be open to surprising information, details not yet understood.

Order

It is the responsibility of the artist — and the news writer — to bring order to chaos. The writer must discover the patterns of information that will inform the reader.

The news is put into context so the present rises from the past and points toward the future.

The writer satisfies the reader's hunger for specifics arranged in a revealing pattern, a temporary order in the daily confusion.

Clarify

The effective writer works to become invisible. The best prose seems not to be written at all.

To achieve this clarity, the writer cuts, adds and reorders; seeks active verbs, proper nouns, and the subject-verb-object sentence.

The writer should remember the flight of the seagull: economy of motion, simplicity, and grace. Most of the time less **is** more.

The Writing Process:

Principles and Tricks of the Trade

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Figure out the questions that the reader will ask. Ask them.• Imagine how the story will affect your readers. Dig for the information to reveal it.• Listen to what is being said — and how it is being said.• You are not an expert. You are a reporter. Don't be afraid to double-check your information. Intelligent ignorance can be a good quality in a reporter.• Use all your senses. Capture the sound, smell, taste, feel, as well as the sight of the story. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get close enough to the story to care about it; keep far enough away so that you won't be involved.• Remember that people want to read about people. Get names, ages, titles, addresses, and more. Record the details that reveal people acting and reacting with each other.• Be skeptical, not cynical. Remember Hemingway's advice: "The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof, shit-detector." | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Know why the reader should read this story. Make sure you know the one most important meaning of the story.• The lead is the key to organization. It orders the material for the writer. Rehearse leads on your way back to the city room; Draft several leads, a half-dozen, a dozen — at three minutes a lead — to make sure you find the lead that works best.• Once you have the lead, write the story fast. Then go back and check each fact, each name, each detail, each statistic, each quote. |
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The Writing Process:

Principles and Tricks of the Trade

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

- Order the story so that you won't have to use transitions. Anticipate and answer the reader's questions as they are being asked.

- Document every major point with information and let the reader know the source of that information.

- Give readers the information that make them turn to someone and say, "Listen to this" The good story makes the reader an authority.

- Write in the active, not the passive voice.

- Make sure you know what the story means. State it in one simple sentence. Then make everything in the story support that meaning.

- Write with verbs and nouns. The adverb signifies failure to find the right verb; the adjective, failure to find the right noun.

- Vary the length of paragraphs and sentences. The more vital or complicated the point, the shorter the sentence or paragraph.

- Remember that brevity results from selection more than compression.

- Use variety of quotations and paraphrase. Use quotes to allow sources to make large, judgmental, or controversial points. Make sure quotes sound like the speaker, not the writer.

- Watch out for too many -ings, -lys, thats, shoulds, woulds, quites, and variations of the verb to be.

- Put significant information at the end and the beginning of the paragraph.

- To test the writing, read it aloud.