



NEWS WRITING AND REPORTING FOR TODAY'S MEDIA

SECOND EDITION

**BRUCE D. ITULE
DOUGLAS A. ANDERSON**

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News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media

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Douglas A. Anderson is a professor and director of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Telecommunication at Arizona State University. He is author or coauthor of *A "Washington Merry-Go-Round" of Libel Actions*, *Contemporary Sports Reporting*, *Electronic Age News Editing*, *Contemporary News Reporting*, *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media* and *Writing the News*. He has also written articles that have appeared in such academic and professional publications as *Journalism Quarterly*, *Newspaper Research Journal*, *American Journalism*, *APME News* and *Grassroots Editor*. His teaching specialties are reporting, communication law and editing, and he was formerly managing editor of the *Hastings* (Neb.) *Daily Tribune*. Professor Anderson was a graduate fellow at Southern Illinois University, where he received his Ph.D.

Foreword

The authors of this book have asked me to jot down a few thoughts on being a reporter. A few thoughts is just about the appropriate number, since I've never considered news reporting to be a craft or trade or—as some romantics called it when I first began—a racket that requires much explanation.

What a reporter does is get news stories. Simple enough?

A reporter is the basic unit of the news business, just as the infantryman is the basic unit of the war business. Editors and generals are paid more, travel better and wield great power. But without the reporter or grunt, nothing much is going to be done.

So what does it take to be a reporter?

Assuming you are reasonably literate, have no felonious habits and can show up for work sober and clear-headed, here are minimal qualities:

- *You have to be smart.* Many of the people you will be covering, whether they are local politicians, White House aides, business executives or something in between, will be very smart. And since many of them will try to spin you like a top, you have to be bright enough to recognize and resist being conned.
- *It helps to have a sense of humor.* That's because so much news reflects the chronic silliness of human beings, and if you can't occasionally laugh at what you see, you will start developing holes in your stomach lining. If you happen to lack a sense of humor but insist on getting into news work, then you should direct your career toward an executive job, in which a serious, even ponderous, manner can be an asset because people will be deluded into believing you are a deep thinker.
- *You must be resourceful, imaginative and able to think quickly on your feet.* Much news is routine, predictable, easy to gather and write. But much of it must be sniffed out, and there are no set guidelines for how to do it. You have to devise them on the spot or along the way. Try this. If it doesn't work, try that. If the front door doesn't open, there's always the back door. Or bang on a window.
- *You should have a strong streak of skepticism.* People are going to lie to you. Presidents lie, members of Congress lie, campaign managers lie, business executives lie, public relations people lie, crooks lie and even their victims lie. A reporter hears more lies than anybody in our society except maybe a divorce court judge. You need wit and patience as well as the technical skills to sift through the bunk. You need to double-check and triple-check until you have something resembling facts, if not great truths. As Arnold Dornfeld, the legendary night editor of the Chicago

City News Bureau, loved to tell quivering cub reporters: "Laddie, if your mother says she loves you, check it out."

- *You have to have news sense.* If you do not have it, you don't belong in news work. You will be like a tone-deaf musician or a color-blind artist. But what is news sense? I'm really not sure. It's like trying to define what's funny. An editor once told me that it's an instinct for knowing what makes people's jaws drop and eyes pop open when they hear or read about something. A little self-test: When you tell your friends or family about something you saw or heard, do their eyes glaze, do they yawn, do they drift to another part of the room? Chances are, you do not have news sense. But if they listen intently, if they lean forward in anticipation for the punch line, maybe you have it. Look, it's like rhythm. If you got it, you know it.
- *You have to have energy, a second wind, a finishing kick.* Reporting can be hard work. Stories don't always break or develop for the convenience of the 9-to-5 commuter. They can require long hours, tedious legwork. Covering a long political campaign is an almost endless string of 18-hour work days. An investigation into local sewer contracts can mean weeks of poring over specifications, bids and contracts. The best reporters are never clock watchers.
- *A thick hide helps.* Despite the illusion created by a TV press conference, many people do not want to answer a reporter's questions. They will slam the door, hang up the phone, tell you to bug off. Rejection is part of the job, and you can't take it personally or let it wear you down. Nor can you let it make you vindictive or malicious. There's nothing in any lawbook that says somebody has to talk to a guy with a notebook or a microphone in hand. Maybe journalism schools should require every student to spend a few weeks selling door-to-door.
- *Which leads to personality.* You do not have to act like a game show host, but if strangers are going to respond, if sources are going to be trusting, if public figures are going to be open, it doesn't hurt to have a polite, civilized, even amiable personality. There's more to reporting than chasing somebody up the jailhouse steps and shouting, "How does it feel to be charged with slaying your mom with an ax?"
- *You have to be fair.* That means giving people a chance to tell their side of a story and presenting it accurately. It means not baiting, taunting, goading people into an intemperate response. It means not putting words in their mouths. It means checking and rechecking, even if getting all the facts in a story could cause the story to vanish. Those are people, remember, and they have friends, families and reputations. Pencils have erasers, but printing presses and TV screens don't.

There's more to it, I suppose, but that's what the rest of this book is for.

Mike Royko
Chicago, Illinois

Preface

We wrote *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media*, Second Edition, to show students what it is like to be a news reporter and writer. Our aim was to write an all-encompassing text and make it lively. We wanted to make the drama of news reporting come alive, to kindle excitement while painting a realistic picture.

Our book teaches students to write a story in the newsroom while sitting at a computer terminal. It also takes them out on the beat and into the press box, the council chamber, the courthouse, the wire-service bureau and the press conference. It introduces them to current issues and to reporters and editors who provide down-to-earth advice. We want students to learn the basics while examining the work of professionals.

Students will be with the *Topeka* (Kan.) *Capital-Journal* reporter Roger Aeschliman as he covers a major fire, *Chicago Tribune* reporters Gary Washburn and Ann Marie Lipinski on the scene of an air crash in Texas, *Mesa* (Ariz.) *Tribune* reporter Mike Padgett at a murder trial, *Chicago Sun-Times* feature writer Mary Gillespie as she interviews Miss Illinois, *Omaha* (Neb.) *World-Herald* sportswriter Lee Barfknecht at a University of Nebraska football game, consumer reporter David Horowitz on the air in Los Angeles, investigative reporter Charlie Zdravesky as he prepares a radio piece in Albuquerque, N.M., and *New York Times* theater reporter Sam Freedman on assignment. And these are only a few of the reporters who have been gracious enough to participate in making this book possible.

Our focus is on real reporters in real situations, but this storytelling does not cloud the lessons of the text. We have woven the experiences of journalists into the pedagogical fabric of our book. The reporters provide anecdotes; they also serve as instructional models. In this second edition we have, whenever needed, updated our examples or introduced new reporters and stories.

One thing we learned as this book went through the review process is that virtually every school has a unique approach to teaching news writing and reporting. Some schools, for example, require a text and workbook for an entire semester before turning their students loose for in-the-field reporting. Other schools do not use workbooks; they send students into the field at the beginning of the first writing course while concurrently exposing them to news writing basics. Some schools teach writing for the print media only; others also introduce students to broadcast writing. Because the approaches are so diverse, we wrote a textbook that is flexible enough to meet the needs of most institutions and instructors.

We have also learned, through experience, that students will not trudge through a densely written text. At the same time, however, instructors will not use superficial texts. Therefore, we wanted to write a text that would be both as readable and as complete as we could make it.

KEY FEATURES

News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media has several important features:

- *First-person accounts from reporters and editors.* We enhance the practical aspects of the text by bringing students into actual reporting situations. We show how concepts and principles work in real situations, and we explore the problems, philosophical questions and issues that journalists face on the job.
- *Integrated sections on broadcast writing.* The text is primarily about writing and reporting for newspapers, but throughout it we provide examples of how broadcasters cover the news and write their stories. We point out differences between print and broadcast reporting and writing but also examine the many similarities.
- *Numerous current examples of stories from a wide range of newspapers and broadcast stations.* We use examples of stories from large metros, medium-circulation dailies, small-circulation dailies and student newspapers along with broadcast examples from geographically diverse markets of all sizes.
- *Detailed, comprehensive discussions of the rudiments of news writing and reporting.* We provide chapters on leads, story organization, interviewing, quotations and attribution, qualities of good writing and gathering information.
- *Comprehensive discussions of special kinds of reporting.* After we set forth the rudiments of writing, reporting and gathering information, we provide chapters on coverage of disasters and developing stories, police and fire departments, local government, courts, sports and business and consumer news.
- *Thorough instruction in areas that often receive only cursory treatment in other texts.* We discuss use of survey methods to gather information for news stories, wire-service reporting, and legal and ethical issues.

We also have written an accompanying Workbook that gets away from "Springdale, U.S.A."-type exercises. As far as possible, our exercises are based on real news events. In addition to providing writing exercises, each chapter of the Workbook contains review questions for the corresponding chapter in the text.

This second edition continues to emphasize *real reporters and stories*, which serve as instructional models. We have, however, updated the first-person accounts and provided fresh examples of stories throughout.

We have also revised, expanded and reorganized many sections; and we have updated and greatly expanded the Workbook and the Instructor's Manual.

In addition to these changes, the second edition features:

- *A new chapter on the use of electronic data bases.* The second edition places considerable emphasis on computers in journalism. A new chapter—Chapter 11—which complements the material in Chapter 10 on gathering information, shows students how to gather information electronically. There also is a new section in Chapter 2 on computers in the newsroom.
- *An expanded chapter on press releases.* We now show students how to write press releases. Public relations professionals also provide advice to students interested in a career in public relations.
- *Several new sections reflecting changes in journalism in recent years.* For example, a section on photojournalism has been added to Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, we have added a description of the graphics editor as well as a section on the need for cultural sensitivity in journalism.
- *An expanded section on Associated Press style rules.* We have moved the AP rules to the back of the book, as an appendix (Appendix B), where they more logically belong. We also have included more of the important rules that journalism students and professionals follow.

ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media can be used in one-semester courses in news writing, in second-semester courses in reporting or in two-semester courses in news writing and reporting. Because each chapter is self-contained, instructors can use any combination of chapters they wish.

PART ONE: THE FOURTH ESTATE

Part One, The Fourth Estate, introduces students to contemporary news media, provides an overview of jobs in the media and examines how news is viewed by newspaper and broadcast reporters and editors.

- 1 The opening chapter emphasizes that writers can find employment at newspapers, the wire services, television and radio stations, magazines, public relations firms and advertising agencies and in photojournalism. Several reporters and executives discuss opportunities for writers in these areas.
- 2 The second chapter begins with several important issues in today's newsrooms, including journalists' need for cultural sensitivity. It then explores how reporters cover the news and examines the primary jobs

held by print and broadcast reporters. It also discusses the importance of computers in the newsroom. It closes with a look at three reporters on the job: on the police and fire beat for a small Wisconsin daily, on the education beat for an Indianapolis television station and on the theater beat for *The New York Times*.

- 3 Chapter 3 describes the evolution of news treatment. It outlines the traditional criteria of newsworthiness, examines the factors that affect news treatment, presents guidelines for pitching news stories to editors and explores editorial decision making at three newspapers.

PART TWO: THE RUDIMENTS

Part Two, The Rudiments, is the heart of the text. It describes the qualities of good writing and provides instruction on writing summary and special leads, organizing stories, quoting and attributing, interviewing, gathering information traditionally and electronically and—in its final chapter—broadcast writing.

- 4 Chapter 4 features advice on writing from Roy Peter Clark and Donald Fry of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Fla.: Clark takes a look at traits of good writers, and Fry gives practical guidelines for constructing clear, “open” sentences. Then, examples are used to illustrate each of Robert Gunning’s “Ten Principles of Clear Writing.”
- 5 In Chapter 5, students are shown how to write summary leads. In the first section of this chapter, the underlying principles—including the primary elements *who*, *what*, *why*, *when*, *where* and *how*—are explained. In the second section, specific guidelines for lead paragraphs are given.
- 6 Chapter 6 discusses alternatives to the summary lead, explaining and providing examples of narrative, contrast, staccato, direct address, question, quote and “none of the above” leads. It also gives specifics on writing these leads, emphasizing the need for strong, vivid verbs and ending with an illustration of how several different leads could be written for the same story.
- 7 The seventh chapter shows students how to organize news stories. It describes the steps involved in writing inverted-pyramid stories and also takes a look at the hourglass style—in which a writer presents the major news in the first few paragraphs before using a traditional paragraph to introduce a chronology of events. Chapter 7 ends with a look at organizing broadcast stories.
- 8 Students learn from Chapter 8 that strong, vivid quotations can make an ordinary news story special. This chapter describes types of quotations—direct, partial and indirect—and discusses when and how to quote. It also takes up attribution and punctuation of quotations.
- 9 Chapter 9 underscores the importance of interviewing; it covers doing the related research, setting up interviews and conducting interviews for news stories, and features and investigative stories. It shows students

how to structure the interview, ask the right questions at the right times, establish rapport, take notes and so on.

- 10 Chapter 10 surveys standard sources of information in newsrooms and libraries, emphasizing that background information is essential to good reporting and writing. It also takes up government as an information source, discussing the federal Freedom of Information Act and various state laws on open records and open meetings.
- 11 Electronic data bases are the newest tools journalists can use in searching for information. Chapter 11—written by Professor Roy Halverson of Arizona State University—shows students how they can strengthen their stories through electronic retrieval of information, examines the types of electronic sources now available to reporters and provides instruction on how to use them.
- 12 The last chapter in Part Two—Chapter 12—stresses that, although broadcast writing differs in several respects from print writing, the same principles of clarity and conciseness apply to both. This chapter looks at the basics of broadcast style and broadcast writing and illustrates how to write for radio and television. It also features advice from working professionals.

PART THREE: BASIC ASSIGNMENTS

Part Three, Basic Assignments, takes up fundamental stories that reporters often encounter: features, rewrites of press releases, obituaries, weather, disasters and developing stories, press conferences and speeches.

- 13 Chapter 13 begins by distinguishing between hard news and soft news and describing types of features: personality profiles, human interest stories, trend stories, in-depth stories and backgrounders. It points out that the main function of features is to humanize, add color, educate, entertain, illuminate and analyze. It then provides advice on writing features: *finding a theme, developing the story, using effective transitions, etc.*
- 14 Chapter 14 discusses press releases and gives tips on evaluating them—deciding if they are of interest to the audience—and on rewriting them. The chapter also offers tips to students who are interested in a career in public relations.
- 15 Chapter 15 stresses that obituaries are among the best-read items in newspapers and that reporters should strive not only to provide the basic facts but also to humanize obits with anecdotes and quotations. This chapter outlines the information typically given in obits and examines policies of various newspapers regarding names, nicknames, courtesy titles, ages, addresses and causes of death.
- 16 Weather stories are important in many parts of the United States. Chapter 16 provides guidelines for writing about weather and describes types of weather stories: forecasts, travel conditions and closings, record-breaking weather, unusual weather and seasonal and year-end coverage. It also takes a look at AP style for weather stories.

- 17** Chapter 17 stresses that coverage of a disaster must begin quickly and must often be developed for days, weeks or even longer. The chapter illustrates a developing story by examining print and broadcast reporting of the crash of a Delta Air Lines jet in Texas.
- 18** In Chapter 18, the student is given a front-row seat at a press conference and a speech by the lawyer F. Lee Bailey. This chapter explains how to prepare for press conferences and speeches, how to cover them, and how to organize the information into a coherent story.

PART FOUR: BEATS

Part Four, Beats, takes a look at the writing and reporting techniques that are necessary for covering typical beats: police and fire departments, local governments, courts and sports.

- 19** The first chapter in Part Four—Chapter 19—presents strategies for effective coverage of police and fire departments. It emphasizes the importance of understanding how these organizations are structured, developing sources within them and reading and using departmental records. Advice on writing stories about arrests, burglaries, accidents and rapes is given. A reporter's day on the police and fire beat—a day that includes coverage of a major fire—is described. Chapter 19 ends with suggestions for beat reporters.
- 20** In Chapter 20, coverage of local government is explored. This chapter describes forms of municipal governments (mayor-council, council-manager and commission), emphasizes the importance of getting a feel for the people in power and provides advice on covering city council meetings and the city budget process. It also looks at the county beat: the county commission, the county budget process and other stops on the beat.
- 21** Our next beat is the courts. In Chapter 21, students are introduced to the federal and state judicial systems and to the importance of mastering judicial structures, learning terminology and writing stories in understandable language. The basic criminal process and the basic civil process are described, and a criminal case is traced, step by step, from arrest to verdict. Advice is given on reporting both criminal and civil cases.
- 22** The final beat in Part Four is sports. Chapter 22 explores the evolution of sports writing and contemporary trends in sports coverage and writing styles. It gives practical advice on reporting sports—working with statistics and writing games up for print and broadcast—but it emphasizes that sports writing extends beyond merely reporting games to coverage of contract negotiations, courtroom battles and boardroom decisions.

PART FIVE: ADVANCED ASSIGNMENTS

Part Five, Advanced Assignments, looks at in-depth and investigative reporting, business and consumer news, other specialized reporting, the use of survey methods in reporting and (in its final chapter) the wire services.

- 23** Part Five opens with an examination of in-depth and investigative reporting. Chapter 23 explains that in-depth and investigative articles provide comprehensive accounts that go well beyond a basic news story. Students are shown, first, how to investigate these stories—how to “smell” the story, research it, conduct interviews and if necessary go underground. Then they are shown how to write the story—how to find the best lead, how to use anecdotes and observation and how to tie the story together with a logical thread.
- 24** Chapter 24 explores business and consumer reporting. Students are given instruction on writing both news and feature stories and are also shown how to read annual reports so as to transform a maze of numbers into an understandable story. The chapter lists some important sources for consumer stories and provides practical tips on consumer reporting.
- 25** Today more than ever before, print and electronic news media are hiring specialty reporters. Chapter 25 examines three specialized areas—the arts, religion and legal affairs—and reporters who cover them. It also gives advice for aspiring specialty reporters.
- 26** Chapter 26 takes up the important concept of “precision journalism,” examining the growth of survey research as a way of gathering information for news stories. This chapter addresses basic considerations involved in conducting surveys: formulating and testing questions, developing samples, collecting and analyzing data and writing the story. A college class’s experience with precision journalism—a survey on class attendance—is followed step by step. Chapter 26 also presents rules for reporting polls.
- 27** Part Five ends with Chapter 27, which introduces students to the wire services—primarily The Associated Press and United Press International. The chapter describes how wire services operate and how their reporters rewrite and write stories for morning and afternoon cycles. It also describes how wire services are used: how wire stories are rewritten to emphasize local angles and how wire sources are combined for roundup stories.

PART SIX: BEYOND THE WRITING

Part Six, Beyond the Writing, examines legal and ethical ramifications of reporting.

- 28** Chapter 28 introduces students to several legal issues that are of particular concern to reporters. After a discussion of the First Amendment and the press, it considers libel, newsroom searches, protection of sources,

invasion of privacy, infliction of emotional distress and the question of fair trial versus free press. Landmark cases are discussed, and practical guidelines are provided.

- 29** Our final chapter—Chapter 29—focuses on journalistic ethics; it stresses that, increasingly, society is calling for accountability in journalism. This chapter begins with a discussion of authoritarian and libertarian press systems and “social responsibility” theory, and then takes up public criticism of the press and the response of the press to that criticism. It then examines codes of ethics and some of the most important ethical issues facing journalists today: fairness and objectivity, misrepresentation by reporters, privacy versus the public’s right to know, conflicts of interest and journalistic arrogance.

APPENDICES

We provide several important features as appendixes. *Appendix A* shows the standard copy-editing symbols. *Appendix B* gives many of the style rules of The Associated Press. *Appendix C* gives some excerpts from representative codes of journalistic ethics. And the *Glossary* defines key terms used in the text.

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Bruce D. Itule

Douglas A. Anderson

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