

Basic News Writing



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us bid to save a li
st, Bolduc said, he
the burning Cadillac
a tow rope so the car c
from a truck th
coughing so far
"convulsions," Bolduc
rescuers sprayed foam from
extinguishers into the car, conce
trating on Kaye and his burnin
seat.
fire extinguisher
As Bolduc approach
pickup truck, he saw Kay
bobbing inside the Cadillac
club, other passing motorists
ed a golf club to everybody stand
ing there."
The rescuers kept pounding
the windshield and a window on the
passenger's side. "Nobody knew if
was going to blow up," ueh-
meier said.
out a dozen motorists
Friday's crowded
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Melvin Mencher

Third Edition

Basic News Writing

Melvin Mencher

Columbia University

Rescue, Celebration, Public Service

The photographs on the front and back covers illustrate some of the work of the media writers in *Basic News Writing*. The photo on the front by Ricardo Ferro of the *St. Petersburg Times* shows the dramatic rescue of a motorist trapped in his car after it had been struck by a truck.

In 1886, the last rivet was driven into the Statue of Liberty, and this symbol of freedom was dedicated in New York harbor. On July 4, 1986, the nation celebrated the centennial of the Statue, and journalists from around the world covered the event. Frazier Hale of the *St. Petersburg Times* caught the excitement in the large photo on the back cover.

Those who work in the media are committed to public service, and the panel from a television story board on the back cover illustrates some of the work of advertising agencies that volunteer personnel. The material here is from Young & Rubicam.

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Preface

This is a how-to book. It was written to help the newcomer to journalism learn how to put on paper words that accurately and clearly describe and explain ideas and events.

Basic News Writing is designed to show the beginner how to gather information, how to analyze its importance and how to put the results of this reporting and thinking into clear and accurate news stories.

The techniques recommended here are those of successful news writers, men and women who make words do their bidding. The writers who have contributed to *Basic News Writing* know that writing does not come easily. They understand how hard it is to whip words into submission so that they dance lightly or march somberly across the page. They have learned to write through patience, confidence and effort.

Patience is necessary because words have a tendency to go their own way, resisting our efforts to lock them into sentences and paragraphs. It takes time to learn to write well. Few people are born writers.

Confidence is important because sometimes it seems that the right words will never come, that the story will not blend smoothly but insists on zigzagging its way from paragraph to paragraph—no matter how patient the writer is. The newcomer should not give up.

All of us possess the creative instinct. We all want to make something of our experiences, to tell others what we have seen and heard. With confidence in ourselves, we can do that.

But it does require work. The aspiring artist who seeks to transfer a sunset to canvas does not instinctively dip his brush into the precise colors on the palette. Through study and trial and error the artist learns just how much white to mix with red for the clouds. The singer cannot turn words and musical notes into a song of lost love the first time she sees the score. It takes hours, sometimes days, before everything comes together and the performance is worth recording. The journalist is no different. Beginner or experienced news writer, effort and hard work lead to well-written stories.

Unguided effort is wasted work, however. The purpose of *Basic News Writing* is to serve as compass and sextant. It provides the directions in which the student should point his or her efforts. The techniques, principles and concepts that are suggested here come from the field, from the everyday experience of journalists on the job. Every concept and principle is illustrated with a practical example from the experience of a professional.

For the student considering a career in journalism, these illustrations serve another purpose. By watching the journalist at work, the student is able to see the many faces and facets of journalism: The young woman just out of journalism school, alone in the AP newsroom, who is called on to handle a rooming house fire that kills more than 20 people. The television network news writer who has minutes to write the story of U.S. Navy planes downing two Libyan jets. The newspaper reporter who climbs the stairs of a nearly deserted tenement to interview a family living without heat or running water.

For this third edition I have included suggestions from users of *Basic News Writing*, most of whom asked that the chapters on writing be moved forward. Also, I have combined some chapters to eliminate duplication.

In response to requests from a number of instructors, I have added chapters on advertising and public relations. This material is intended for the many students whose first news writing course surveys the communications field. I have taken the same approach to advertising and public relations as I have to news writing and reporting. Practitioners help to guide the student.

The emphasis of the textbook remains on news writing and reporting, which my colleagues inform me constitute the preparation for allied fields. The disciplined approach to material, the ability that news writing demands to distill information and to communicate it accurately, honestly and succinctly are useful in all journalistic areas.

Saul Pett of the AP said: "Behind good writing is a basic logic, a basic common sense." *Basic News Writing* takes the approach that you can't write if you can't think.

For this edition, useful contributions were made by Mark Hickson, University of Alabama, Birmingham; Carole Marshall, University of Rhode Island; Alston Morgan, Oral Roberts University, and John Rippey, The Pennsylvania State University. Kay Ellen Krane made many valuable suggestions for the content. Copyediting and proofreading for this edition were done by Merrill Perlman. Patricia Conboy prepared the index.

I also have had assistance from Maria Braden, University of Kentucky; J. Laurence Day, University of Kansas; Dick Haws, Iowa State University; Beverley Pitts, Ball State University; Howard L. Seeman, Humboldt State University; Luke Staudacker, Marquette University, and Terry Vander Hayden, Western Kentucky University.

Many of my research tasks were eased by the enthusiastic assistance of Wade Doares and Steve Toth of the Columbia University Journalism Library.

The philosophy of *Basic News Writing* is best summed up by Samuel Johnson's remark, "The end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it."

For all its practicality, this textbook recognizes that journalism is more calling than trade. Kin to teaching, cousin to preaching, journalism is much more than the sum of its techniques and the advice of its practitioners. Through its many examples, *Basic News Writing* seeks to demonstrate the moral underpinnings of journalism.

Journalism's hope and inspiration are its young men and women. This book was written for them and especially in memory of two young men who were killed in Vietnam, Ron Gallagher and Peter Bushey. Ron was editor of the *University Daily Kansan* when I was its adviser at the University of Kansas, and Peter was one of my students at Columbia University. They loved journalism and had faith in what it could accomplish. They wrote, they took pictures and they aspired to make the world a better place for us all through journalism. To them, journalism was a noble calling.

M. M.

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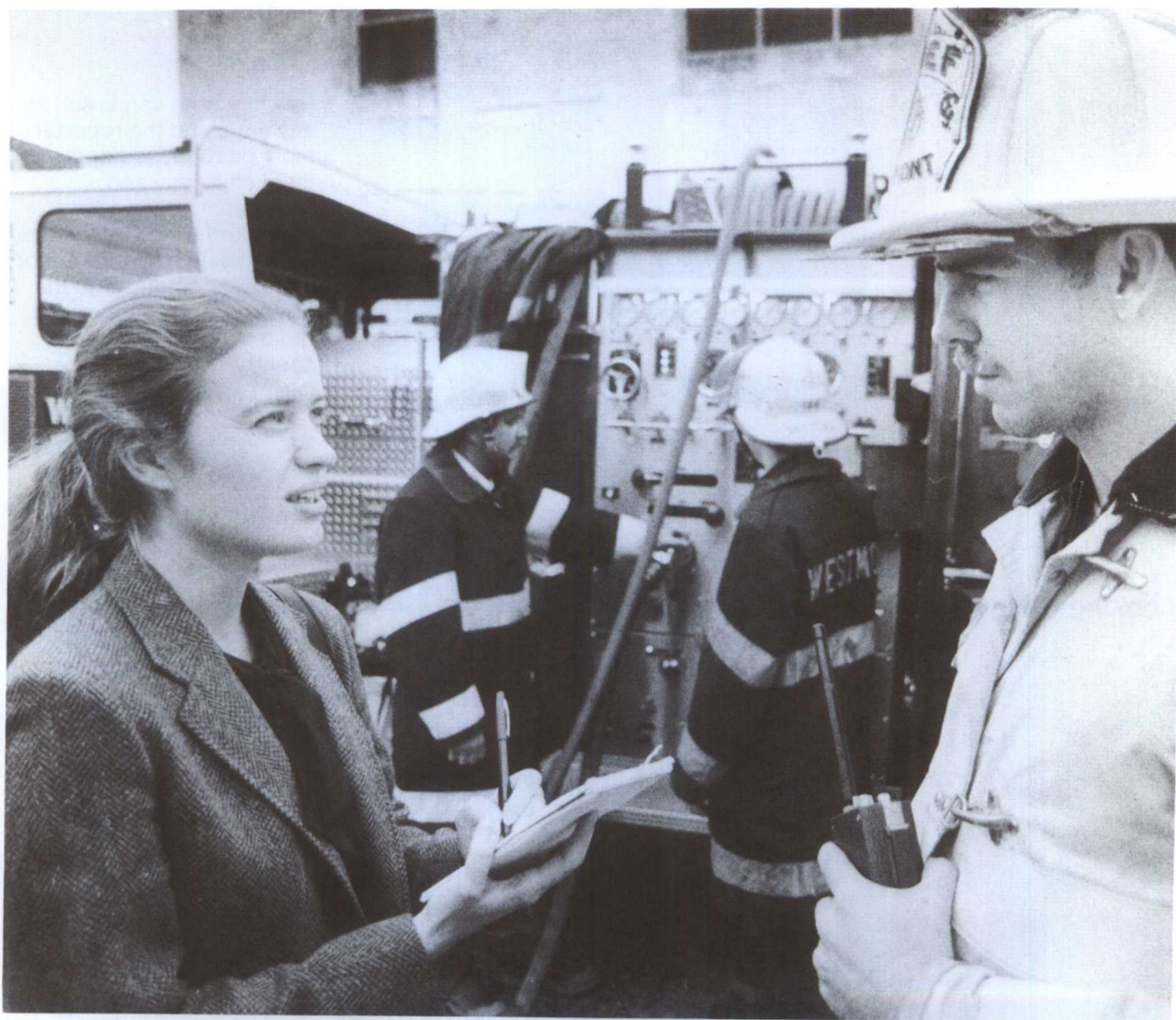
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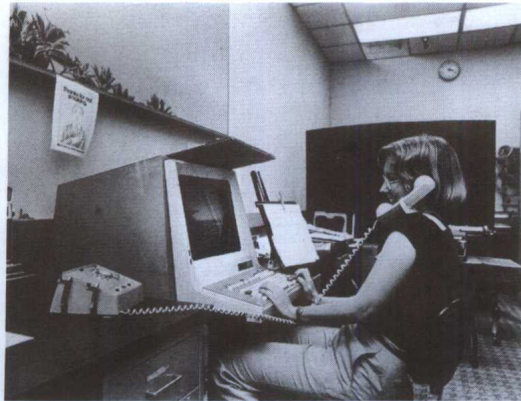
Part One

Journalists in Action



1

On the Job



News stories can break at any time, and the reporter must be ready to handle them efficiently and intelligently. Here, Lindy Washburn of the Associated Press takes notes on a story she will soon place on the wires for newspapers and radio stations over the country.

John Titchen.

Looking Ahead

Writers attempt to give their readers, listeners and viewers an accurate, interesting, thorough account of events. The writer does this by applying his or her skills and knowledge to the tasks of research, reporting, interviewing and writing. The writer's objective is to reach people with information that is easily understood. Sometimes, the writer's purpose is to persuade the reader, listener or viewer to act.