



Melvin Mencher

Basic Media Writing

Fifth
Edition

Fifth Edition

Basic Media Writing

Melvin Mencher
Columbia University

Brown & Benchmark
PUBLISHERS

Madison Dubuque, IA Guilford, CT Chicago Toronto London
Caracas Mexico City Buenos Aires Madrid Bogota Sydney

Book Team

Executive Publisher *Edgar J. Laube*
Acquisitions Editor *Eric Ziegler*
Developmental Editor *Mary Rossa*
Publishing Services Coordinator *Peggy Selle*
Proofreading Coordinator *Carrie Barker*
Production Manager *Beth Kundert*
Production/Costing Manager *Sherry Padden*
Visuals/Design Freelance Specialist *Mary L. Christianson*
Marketing Manager *Katie Rose*
Copywriter *M. J. Kelly*

Basal Text *10/12 Times Roman*
Display Type *Insignia*
Typesetting System *Mac/Quark XPress*
Paper Stock *50# Restorecote*
Production Services *Edwards Brothers*



President and Chief Executive Officer *Thomas E. Doran*
Vice President of Production and Business Development *Vickie Putman*
Vice President of Sales and Marketing *Bob McLaughlin*
Director of Marketing *John Finn*



A Times Mirror Company

The credits section for this book begins on page 465 and is considered an extension of the copyright page.

Cover design by Lesiak/Crampton Design, Inc.

Photo research by Shirley Lanners

Copyedited by Sarah Lane; Proofread by Patsy A. Adams

Copyright © 1996 Times Mirror Higher Education Group, Inc.
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 94-73666

ISBN 0-697-27001-7

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America by Times Mirror Higher Education Group, Inc.,
2460 Kerper Boulevard, Dubuque, IA 52001

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Basic Media Writing

On the Cover: Journalists at Work

The front and back covers illustrate some of the work of media journalists. The photograph on the front by Charlie Neuman of *The San Diego Union-Tribune* led off the newspaper's articles and photographs describing a 24-hour period at the busiest land crossing in the world, the border between Mexico and the United States at San Ysidro. The woman stands between lines of cars in Mexico, hoping for a handout.

On the back cover, Cathie Lynn Rowand of *The Journal-Gazette* took this photo just as the steeple on one of Fort Wayne's oldest churches collapsed after a fire caused by lightning.

The Mud Couple Hug, which is how AP photographer Stephan Savola describes this photo, was taken at the 25th anniversary celebration of Woodstock. "I went to the first Woodstock as a 16-year-old participant," says Savola. "Having that experience to draw upon, I was looking for contrast and comparison all weekend. I found very little to rekindle the sense of community I experienced 25 years earlier until I stumbled across this couple covered in mud." More than a thousand journalists slogged through muddy fields to cover the event.

The Super Bowl is the most widely viewed event on television, and it draws hundreds of reporters and photographers. Here, Bob Galbraith of the AP uses the NC 2000 to record the action.

Bob Thayer snapped this photo of a student practicing a facial massage at a beauty school for his photo-essay for the *Providence Journal Sunday Magazine*.

Preface

Basic Media Writing is designed to help students survey the various fields in journalism and to show them how the practitioners in these fields do their work. Whether the practitioner is a reporter for a television station, a public relations specialist, a movie reviewer, an editorial writer or a courthouse reporter for the local newspaper, the work he or she does has a common core.

Media workers gather information, analyze it and shape the material into lean, accurate and clear writing. The gate to success in these fields admits those who can observe sharply, listen carefully and write pungently.

The everyday experiences of media practitioners provide the foundation on which *Basic* is built. Every technique, principle and concept is illustrated with an example from the work of a professional. For students considering careers in journalism, the work of these media professionals brings the faces and facets of journalism to life:

The young woman just out of journalism school who is called on to cover a fire that kills 20 people; the television reporter who hears that human beings are being used as guinea pigs to test an insecticide; the movie reviewer who has just had to sit through two very bad films; the news photographer assigned to cover a volatile speaker on a college campus; the editorial writer who hopes to persuade his readers to support a school bond issue; the advertising copywriter working on a public service television spot for the United Negro College Fund; the public relations practitioner trying to persuade a community to adopt a project for the recycling of home waste; the photographer covering the defilement of a U.S. serviceman's body in Somalia.

We will also accompany a news magazine writer on an assignment, observe a foreign correspondent arrange an interview to avoid police spies and listen to a columnist talk about the job of banging out a column regularly. We will take a side excursion as well to look at how the people in design, layout and graphics work, and we'll watch a cartoonist at his work table.

The techniques described in this book are those followed by men and women who make words and images do their bidding. The professionals who have contributed to *Basic* know that their work is demanding. The writers understand how hard it is to whip words into submission so that they dance lightly or march somberly across the page. Those whose work reaches out to thousands, sometimes millions, have demanding taskmasters. But they learn their craft 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 headlines, captions, sentences and paragraphs. Also, the event is fleeting; we have to learn how to grasp it in an instant.

Confidence is important because it seems that the right words will never come, that they refuse to blend smoothly and insist on zigzagging their way down the page—no matter how patient we are. But we all possess the creative instinct, the ability to make something of our experience and to tell and to show others what we have seen and heard. With confidence, we can do that.

Effort makes the patience pay off and the confidence hold true. The aspiring artist who seeks to transfer a sunset to canvas does not instinctively dip her brush into the precise colors on the palette, no matter how patiently she waits for inspiration. Through study and trial and error she 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 he sees the score, no matter how confident he is. It takes hours, sometimes days, before everything comes together and the performance is worth taping. The journalist is no different. Beginner or veteran, the journalist achieves success through hard work.

Unguided effort is wasted work, however. The purpose of *Basic* is to serve as compass and sextant. It provides the directions in which the student should point his or her efforts.

The philosophy of *Basic*, now in its fifth edition, 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."

Johnson's approach to the world around him, wrote the essayist George Gordon, was based on "a habit of truth," which was "in all situations to insist on the facts, and to face them when found." Gordon says Johnson's attitude was "to refuse, at whatever cost, to make life seem better than it is . . . to practice true statement not only in the most important things, but in the least."

Truth telling is the journalist's compulsion and underlying ethic. It is the hallmark of those whose work merits our respect.

Truth is difficult to ferret out. We will watch several journalists try to find some truths in the face of sometimes overwhelming obstacles. Authority often wants us to see its truths, obliging journalists with ample material. The journalist true to his or her calling tries whenever possible to follow Peter Arnett's guideline: "simply to write only what I saw myself."

Unfortunately, truth is often annoying, sometimes ugly, and its unpleasantness reaches into the journalist's work so that the product reflects truth's irritability. "We

have art in order not to die of the truth,” Nietzsche wrote. Indeed, some within the journalistic fold urge on us artistic license to make our work more palatable, more popular.

Yet even the artist understands the necessity of telling untarnished truths, as Robert Lowell wrote in his *Epilogue*:

But sometimes everything I write
With the threadbare art of my eye
Seems a snapshot,
Lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
Heightened from life,
Yet paralyzed by fact.
All’s misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?

If we know what is happening we can cope with the world around us, hold communal conversation on a realistic basis. Serviceable, workable truths—the kind the journalist can provide—enable us to work together to solve our problems.

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* 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.

Sheila Carney prepared the name and subject indexes. Many of my research tasks were aided by the enthusiastic assistance of Ms. Carney, Elizabeth A. Brennan and Steve Toth, both of the Columbia University Journalism Library. Helpful suggestions for this fifth edition were provided by John Mitchell of the Syracuse University journalism faculty and Douglas P. Starr of the journalism faculty at Texas A&M University. Design is by David Decker of Decker Decker & Associates. Wendy Shilton handled the copy editing and the proofreading.

Acknowledgments

The following people have provided help with the book. The affiliations listed applied at the time the individuals supplied material for *Basic Media Writing*:

Mervin Block

Television writer and broadcast workshop director

Harold Burson

Burson-Marsteller

Kirk Citron

Vice president, Hal Riney & Partners, San Francisco

Renee Edelman

Edelman Public Relations Worldwide

Heidi Evans

Daily News (New York)

Bob Gesslein

Sports Information Director, Long Island University

Mary Ann Giordano

Daily News (New York)

Jack Grinold

Sports Information Director, Northeastern University

Stephen Hartgen

The Times-News (Twin Falls, Idaho)

Barbara J. Hipsman

Kent State University

Robert E. Kollar

Chief Photographer, Tennessee Valley Authority

Jeff McAdory

The Commercial Appeal (Memphis, Tenn.)

Mitch Mendelson

The Birmingham Post-Herald

Carol Nation

Dept. Public Works, Arlington County, Va.

Marcia Parker

Contra Costa Times (Walnut Creek, Calif.)

Merrill Perlman

The New York Times

Susan J. Porter

Editor, *Scripps Howard News*

Ron Rapoport

Daily News, Los Angeles

Charlie Riedel

The Hays (Kan.) *Daily News*

Sam Roe

The Blade, (Toledo, Ohio)

Bob Rose

The Blade (Toledo, Ohio)

Michele Ruiz

KTLA-TV, Los Angeles

Andrea Sachs

Time magazine

Joel Sartore

The Wichita Eagle-Beacon

Christopher Scanlan

The Providence Journal; *St. Petersburg Times*

Barbara Shulgasser

San Francisco Examiner

Lena H. Sun

The Washington Post

Janet L. Taylor

The Times-News (Twin Falls, Idaho)

Kevin Tedesco

Young & Rubicam, NW Ayer

Bob Thayer

The Providence Journal-Bulletin

Bob Tur

Los Angeles News Service

Burt Unger

Mercedes-Benz of North America, Inc.

Keith Warren

The Commercial Dispatch (Columbus, Miss.)

Tim Weiner

The New York Times

Jan Wong

The Globe and Mail (Toronto)

Emerald Yeh

KRON-TV, San Francisco

Phoebe Zerwick

Winston-Salem (N.C.) *Journal*

Contents

Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xviii

Part One Journalists in Action

1 The Media's Wide Compass 2

Looking Ahead	2	Approaching Deadline	13
Handling a Big Story—Alone	3	On the Copy Desk	14
Racing the Clock	3	The Cartoonist	15
Writethru	5	Helicopter Newsman	16
The Scope of the Media	6	Looking for O.J.	16
The Need to Know	7	A Street Corner Beating	17
Nothing Is Routine	7	Newsletters, Desktop Publishing	17
A California Daily Newspaper	7	Free-Lancing	18
A Questionable Photograph	8	The Dividing Line	19
Designer at Work	8	Criticism and Reviews	20
Planning Coverage	8	Two Duds	20
Budget Meeting	9	The Dean Speaks Out	21
Bullets, Tanks and Torture	10	The Columnists	21
A 10-Alarm Fire	11	In the Pew	21
Inside a Newsroom	12	On the Playing Field	22
A Fatal Accident	12	At the Police Station	22
At City Hall	12	On the Editorial Page	23
An Obituary	13	Some Other Persuaders	24
A Hurricane and Canned Tuna	13	In the Advertising Department	24

Up in the Air	25	Proving Your Point	27
At a PR Agency	26	Collecting Information	28
The Underpinning	26	The Journalistic Process	28
Reporting	27	Suggested Reading	29

2 The Journalist: Traits and Characteristics 30

Looking Ahead	30	Rape Data: Real or Magnified?	52
The Curious Sophomore	31	Twenty-Eight Years	
A Dog's Tale	31	Behind Walls	53
Independence	32	Dependability, Initiative	56
Skepticism	33	Pinpoint Accuracy	56
Savvy	34	Objectivity, Interpretation	56
Knowledge	34	Involvement	57
Street Smarts	35	Discipline	58
Integrity	35	Courage, Stamina	58
Desecrated Bodies	35	Death in the Afternoon	59
Composure	36	Some Realities	63
Creativity, Ingenuity	38	A Variety of Jobs	63
Perseverance	40	A Job Tryout	64
Arrival in Tunica	41	Satisfaction . . .	66
Commitment	44	. . . and Frustration	66
A Career of Exposés	45	Women in Journalism	67
Piercing the Bamboo Curtain	46	Minorities in Journalism	67
Native-American Concerns	48	Group Ownership	67
The Copy Editor	48	Truth Seekers	68
Completeness	50	Suggested Reading	68
Photo Fallout	51		

Part Two Writing

3 Rudiments of the Story 70

Looking Ahead	70	Background	77
Accuracy	71	Balance and Fairness	77
Attribution	73	Stereotypes and Sexism	79
Placement	74	Brevity	80
Verbs of Attribution	75	Content	80
Anonymous Sources	75	Word Choice	81

Clarity	82	Objectivity	89
Completeness	83	Opinion	90
Human Interest	83	Verification	93
Identification	85	Hoaxes	94
News Point	87	Seeking Truths	94
Novelty	89	Suggested Reading	95

4 Writing 96

Looking Ahead	96	Errors Galore	111
The Ingredients	97	Muddy Thinking = Mistakes	113
Simple Sentences	97	Redundancies	114
Simple Words	99	Clichés	114
Conviction	100	Journalese	115
Natural Style	106	Synonyms for <i>said</i>	115
Some Guides	108	Summing Up	116
Storytelling	109	Suggested Reading	117

5 Values and Beginnings 118

Looking Ahead	118	Creating the Lead	131
What Is News?	119	Cancer Outrage	133
Three Basic Determinants	120	Direct and Delayed Leads	134
Other Determinants	122	Writing the Lead	135
Other Factors	125	Take 10	136
Gatekeeping	125	Straight News Lead	141
Summing Up	126	Feature Lead	144
Beginning the Story	126	Hard, Soft; Direct or	
Finding the Focus	127	Delayed?	146
Finding the Purpose	130	Suggested Reading	148

6 Structuring the Story 149

Looking Ahead	149	The Three-Element Story	157
Story Building	150	The Feature	161
The Straight News Story	150	Choosing a Style	161
The Single-Element Story	151	Focusing on a Theme	162
The Two-Element Story	152	Accentuating the Ending	164

The News Feature	164	Some Tips for Good Writing	169
Volunteers to the Dying	167	Major Problems	170
Structuring the Feature and		Copy Check	170
News Feature	168	Suggested Reading	170
Summing Up	169		

Part Three Reporting

7 Finding Information and Gathering Facts 172

Looking Ahead	172	Study Press Law and History	189
Foundations of Fact Gathering	173	Gather Specifics	191
Direct Observation	173	Meet the Audience	192
Interviews	177	Research	194
Research	180	Keep on Learning	194
Taking Stock	186	Develop Common Sense	196
What to Look For	186	Taking Notes	198
Building Background	187	Marking Notes	198
Learn the System, Know the		Summing Up	200
Community	188	Suggested Reading	200

8 Purposeful Reporting 201

Looking Ahead	201	Knowing the Beat	212
Developing the Framework	202	Building Relationships	213
Women as Victims	203	Showing Enterprise	216
Profile of a Lawyer	204	Investigative Reporting	218
Missing Mothers	205	Writing Interpretive Stories	218
Being Flexible	206	Negotiating the Obstacles	219
Knowing the Essentials	207	Moral Indignation	219
Developing Confidence	210	Personal Biases	220
Fine-Tuning the Framework	210	Suggested Reading	221

9 Capturing the Spoken Word 222

Looking Ahead	222	Techniques	223
Interviews	223	Spot News Interviews	223

Profiles	227
Guidelines	227
Preparations	228
Devising a Theme	229
Inducing Subjects to Talk	229
Asking Questions	230
Listening and Watching	231
Taking Notes	232
On- and Off-the-Record	232
Master of the Interview	233
Profile Essentials	234

Ending The Profile	238
Public Gatherings	239
Meetings	239
Panel Discussions and	
Symposia	243
News Conferences	247
Speeches	248
Leads	249
Summary	252
Suggested Reading	252

10 Story Essentials 253

Looking Ahead	253
Accident Stories	254
Fire Stories	256
Death of a Smoker	257
Crime Stories	259
Crime Reports	260
Robbery	261
Burglary	261
Investigation	262
Arrests	263
Law-Enforcement Agencies	265
Booking	266
Criminal Court Coverage	266
Pretrial	266
Plea Bargaining	269
Trial	270
Civil Court Coverage	272
Actions at Law	273
Equity Proceedings	273
Federal Court Coverage	274
Obituaries	274
Personal Details	275
Cause of Death	276
The Lead	277
Localizing the Obituary	278
Sports Coverage	278

High School and College	
Sports	279
The Lead	281
Imagination and Emotion	282
Structure	283
Restraint	284
Extra Dimension	284
More Than Only Games	286
Jocks No More	286
Women in the	
Locker Room	287
Covering Religion	288
Other Types of Stories	289
Briefs	289
Precedes	290
Personals	290
Brights	292
Localizing Stories	292
Follow-Up Stories	294
Sidebars	295
Roundups	296
Weather Stories	296
Rewriting Releases	298
The Roving Reporter	299
Summary	300
Suggested Reading	300

Part Four Specialties

11 Broadcast Writing 302

Looking Ahead	302	“CBS Evening News”	313
On-the-Scene Reporting	303	The Writers	313
Human Guinea Pigs	304	Minutes to Go	313
Writing for Listeners	307	On the Air	314
Clarity	307	Preparing Broadcast Copy	315
Attribution and Leads	308	Style Rules	315
Immediacy	309	Broadcast Career Necessities	317
Summary	309	Suggested Reading	318
Rewriting the Wires	310		
Under Pressure: 30 Minutes to Deadline	311		

12 Visual Reporting 319

Looking Ahead	319	Shutter Speed	333
The Picture Is Universal	320	Lenses	334
The Ingredients of a Good Photo	320	Depth of Field	336
The Tools of the Photojournalist	321	Film	337
Content and Treatment	322	Revolutionary Changes	338
Starting Out	323	The Photojournalist’s Insight	338
Know Everything	323	Crusaders with Camera	339
On the Job	324	Lewis Hine	340
Tension on Campus	325	Contemporary	
Poverty in Appalachia	326	Documentarians	341
Violence at Florence and Normandie	328	Documenting Domestic Violence	343
From Vietnam to a Kansas Prison	329	The Cracked Mirror	344
The Photo Essay	331	The Ethics of Changing Reality	344
Writing Captions	331	Some Problems	346
The Photo Editor	333	What’s Wrong with These Photographs?	346
The Camera	333	What’s Wrong? The Answers	349
Aperture	333	A Home Study Course	350
		Suggested Reading	350

13 Advertising 352

Looking Ahead	352	The Ratings Game	365
The Art of Persuasion	353	Unpredictable Audiences	366
Looking Back	354	The Content	366
Brand Identity	354	The Results	367
Image Ads	355	Helping Dreams Come True	368
Competition	355	Speaking to Runners	370
Newspaper Ad Departments	355	Hype Is Out	371
Advertising Agencies	356	Some Constants	372
Account	356	Regulation	373
Research	357	Careers in Advertising	375
Creative and Media	358	Summing Up	376
From Browning to Barkley	362	The Objective	376
Media Selection	362	The Strategy	376
Creating An Outdoor	364	Content, Media Selection	376
Tots, Teens, Travelers	364	The Results	377
Super Costly Super Bowl	365	Suggested Reading	377

14 Public Relations 378

Looking Ahead	378	Corporate Public Relations	387
The Purpose: Advocacy	379	Selling Cars	387
The Beginnings	379	Selling Tuna	388
Robber Barons and		Public Affairs	390
Reformers	380	In the County	390
A “Physician to Corporate		In the Capital	392
Bodies”	381	Political Public Relations	392
Rubber Whales and Salami		Too Funny	392
Queens	382	Too Bookish	393
The Quest for Legitimacy	383	A Reporter’s View	393
The Scope	384	Ethics	394
The Tasks	385	The Path to a Job	395
Sports Information	386	Suggested Reading	396

Part Five

Laws and Codes

15

Libel, Privacy, Ethics and Taste 398

Looking Ahead	398	Gifts	408
Some Problems	399	Ethical Behavior	408
Libel	399	Personal Guides	408
Libel Defined	400	Poses and Disguises	413
Libel Defenses	401	Taste	414
Avoiding Libel Suits	402	The Double Standard	414
Privacy	404	Frank Language	416
Danger Areas	404	Changing Guidelines	417
Ethics	406	Offensive Subject Matter	418
Plagiarism	406	Questionable Photographs	419
Dishonesty	407	Summary	421
Conflict of Interest	407	Suggested Reading	422
Stylebook	423	Appendix D Code of Ethics	446
Punctuation	429	Appendix E Grammar	449
Appendix A Preparing Copy	435	Agreement	449
On a Typewriter	435	Dangling Modifier	450
On a Video Display Terminal	436	Misplaced Words	450
Appendix B Moving the Story	437	Parallel Construction	451
Newspaper Copy	437	Pronouns	451
Broadcast Copy	440	Sentence Fragments	452
Appendix C How to Use the Freedom of Information Act	442	Sequence of Tenses	452
Who Can Make a Request?	442	Appendix F Copy Editing	453
How Quickly Will an Agency Respond?	442	Drunk Driver	455
Where to Write	443	Stabbing	456
Describe What You Want	443	Boots	457
Plan Your Request Strategy	443	Glossary	459
Identify What You Want Clearly	444	Print Terms	459
		Broadcast Terms	464
		Credits	465
		Name Index	469
		Subject Index	481