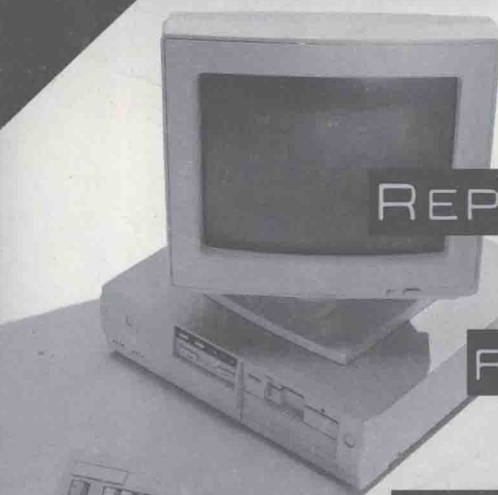


INTRODUCTION

TO

PROFESSIONAL

NEWSWRITING



REPORTING

FOR THE

MODERN

MEDIA

Second Edition

Conrad C. Fink

INTRODUCTION — *To* — PROFESSIONAL NEWSWRITING

Reporting for the Modern Media

Second Edition

Conrad C. Fink

University of Georgia



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*This book is dedicated to
Mr. and Mrs. William J. Holland
whose investment in my students today
is helping create better journalists for tomorrow.*

P R E F A C E

If you want to become an effective newswriter both opportunity and challenge are ahead in this book.

Your opportunity: You'll read how professionals do it. You'll see for yourself how they sweat and labor over the newswriting craft. From their example, you'll learn to look discerningly at the clamorous, ever-shifting world of news, then select those elements most crucial and convey their meaning and importance in simple and direct language that communicates clearly.

Your challenge: No book can teach you how to write; only *you* can teach yourself that.

So, regard this book as merely your starting point. Accept the challenge of fashioning your own newswriting skills, your own news values—and use the writing examples in pages ahead and my writing hints only as guidelines for your own self-directed march toward professionalism.

I made that journey a long time ago but even after more than 40 years as a media professional and teacher, I remember the excitement, the sense of discovery you surely will feel. I feel kinship with you as you start the process, and this guided my writing of *Introduction to Professional Newswriting*. I structured the book to acquaint you first with basic definitions of news, then to lead you with careful pacing toward more sophisticated newswriting techniques in later chapters.

Though you too will find that learning effective newswriting is a fascinating journey of discovery, your journey won't be easy. Even for highly talented professionals, effective newswriting can be an agonizing (if wondrous) process. Red Smith, one of the greatest ever and a Pulitzer Prize winner for *The New York Times*, said near the end of his long career that even for him writing was like sitting down, opening a vein and bleeding.

But, oh, the rewards for those who persist! Imagine a career on the cutting edge of news, being there when it happens, charged not only with watching and understanding what it all means, but also communicating that to those poor souls unfortunate enough not to be there. Wes Gallagher, an Associated Press war correspondent and executive, likened the task (he would call it an honor) to having a ringside seat to the unfolding of history.

And always, beneath the glamor and adventure, there is the central and very serious mission of *communicating*—gathering facts, yes; understanding them, yes; but then going that essential step further and translating into understandable terms, through clear and concise writing, the human condition in all its joy and misery, its positives and negatives, its creative and destructive dimensions.

Newswriting is work that often is fun, frequently creative, sometimes thrilling but *always* important. It is socially responsible work with meaning, work that can shine light in dark corners and change things, work that can make the world just a little bit better place to live.

Don't be intimidated by the challenge of reaching for such distant journalistic horizons. For certain, don't be intimidated by the writing examples in this book. They're drawn from newspapers of all sizes, but because you should set your sights high, I've selected many examples of truly great writing from large papers. Study those examples as goals for yourself,

and remember that those who took this journey before you—and I’ve made the trek—started where you are starting. Even the greatest of the professionals learned, as you will learn, to take it step by step.

At journey’s end, whatever your career interest, you should be a better *communicator*.

If newspapers or magazines attract you, *Introduction to Professional Newswriting* will show you how to sense what is news, where to find it, then how to report it and write it to real-world specifications. This should position you to do well in later and more advanced specialty newswriting in public affairs, business and economics, sports, science or other important topics you see in print every day.

If your goal is television or radio, your basic—and essential—tools must be discerning news judgment and effective newswriting skills, just as in print journalism. *Introduction to Professional Newswriting* should equip you with those tools and prepare you for later concentration in your chosen specialty.

Some of you undoubtedly will be attracted to careers in alternate methods of communication—newsletters, book publishing, electronic delivery of information to homes and offices or other yet unknown techniques that future technology almost certainly will open. For you, this book has real pertinence because whatever the techniques or technologies in years ahead, the core of effective communication will remain your ability to sort through facts, discard the nonessential and present the essential in clear, concise terms.

Those of you inclined toward public relations should note that effective communication—particularly written communication—is the heartbeat of your chosen industry. PR firms repeatedly say, “Send us people who can write.” *Introduction to Professional Newswriting* will help you meet that request. In advertising, a field in which careers stand or fall on ability to communicate, effective writing skills are supremely important. Great ad campaigns that sell products and services—or slogans that push ideas and causes or build fame for personalities and ideologies—all begin in a writer’s mind and find expression on a keyboard.

Avoid locking yourself in too early to a set career path. The discovery process of learning basic newswriting could well open to you new and yet unimagined options. American media history is filled with examples of men and women who built successful careers by crossing from one medium to another. Michael Gartner rose from newspaper reporter to important executive jobs with the *Wall Street Journal*, *Des Moines Register* and other newspapers and then became president of NBC News and, later, publisher of a small-town newspaper. A dean of television news anchors, Walter Cronkite, started as a newspaper and news service reporter. Peter Arnett, CNN’s widely acclaimed war correspondent, developed his reporting skills with The Associated Press, writing for newspapers, before turning to television. America’s PR and advertising industries are filled with ex-reporters from newspapers, magazines and broadcast. All began by learning basic newswriting.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Communicating news is what newswriting is all about, and if your writing doesn’t communicate you fail. So, understanding news and how media professionals define it is extremely important. I cover this for you in Part I, Chapter One, “The Professional Context.” Note particularly how the pros express the tip of the news in superbly crafted and beautifully written “leads,” or first paragraphs.

It’s one thing to spot news, another to write it with precision. I turn to this in Part 2, “Your Newswriter Tools.” Chapter Two discusses writing techniques the pros use—including

ing simple sentences, present tense and translating terms readers might not understand. In Chapter Three, we'll start preparing you for a major test of your professionalism: whether you can write in correct style and avoid redundancies and clichés, bloated and abstract language.

Part 3 will help you move toward professionalism. Chapter Four provides hints on organizing news stories. Chapter Five, "The Lure and Hook of Leads," shows you an exciting variety of ways to hook readers. Chapter Six teaches you to pull your readers deeper into your story, once you've hooked them with your lead. Chapter Seven turns to "Constructing the Bridge of Confidence"—creating the authority and credibility in your writing so necessary for today's skeptical readers.

Part 4, "How You Get Published," moves first to the art of reporting—developing sources, succeeding in interviews and how to spot the paper trail that so often leads to significant news. That's in Chapter Eight. In Chapter Nine, I discuss basic stories you can report and get published in newspapers on or off campus. You'll learn how to cover speeches, meetings, news conferences and other basic events so crucial to daily journalism. Chapter Ten explores writing business and economic news, an exciting area of journalism many students ignore—and shouldn't. We'll go into two other news specialties—science news, in Chapter Eleven, and sports writing, in Chapter Twelve. In chapter Thirteen, I'll show you how to use various devices for focusing the news—newsfeatures, sidebars, obituaries, profiles and others.

In Part 5, "Writing for Broadcast and Cyberspace," we'll look first at writing for television. In this medium, story and sentence structures differ from those we use in writing for print. Second, we'll study writing for on-line newspapers. This is in Chapter Fourteen.

In Part 6, I'll acquaint you with two extremely important dimensions of newswriting: press law, in Chapter Fifteen, and personal ethics, in Chapter Sixteen. Ignore press law at your peril! It's a legally dangerous world out there. As for ethics, start now building your personal understanding of what's journalistically right or wrong. Decide now what kind of journalist you will be.

Part 7, Chapter Seventeen covers writing for public relations. For those of you considering PR careers, this is an important chapter.

In Part 8, Chapter Eighteen, I'll give you hints on preparing your resumé and making job contacts. Let's turn this book's lessons on newswriting into *a job in newswriting!*

You'll see many examples of writing—some strong, some weak—in pages ahead. All are drawn from newspapers throughout the country and are reproduced here as written. In some cases, where there are legal or ethical reasons not to identify persons named in examples, I've substituted fictitious names in brackets.

The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual is the standard for style, punctuation and usage in this book, as it is for most American newspapers. However, in some usages newspapers depart from AP style—using "yesterday" or "today," for example, although AP style calls for day of the week—"Monday" or "Tuesday." When such style usages conflict, I've used the individual newspaper's style in reproducing news stories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Few are the days when my wonderful students don't inspire me to strive to be a better teacher, a better writer. From them came the idea for this book. It was their enthusiasm for learning that brought back memories of my days as a reporter and foreign correspondent for The Associated Press throughout the world; those memories, in turn, caused me to attempt

to capture herein lessons I learned the hard way and now hope to pass to the coming generation of journalists.

Professional colleagues have supported all my writing projects, and many stepped forward to help on *Introduction to Professional Newswriting*. Special thanks to Gene Roberts, managing editor of *The New York Times*, for his thoughtful essay on news definition; Lou Boccardi, president of The Associated Press, for providing photos and permission to reproduce portions of *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*, and Ben Bradlee, then executive editor of *The Washington Post*, for permission to reproduce portions of the ethics statement he wrote for his newspaper. The work of many other newspaper colleagues strengthens this book, and to them I've accorded the best salute of all—a byline.

The Jim Cox Jr., Foundation deserves—and gets—a very low bow for its support of my efforts at the University of Georgia's College of Journalism. Without the foundation's support, this and my other books would not have been possible.

In all my endeavors, including this book, I have been supported strongly by the College of Journalism's dean, Tom Russell. He has my thanks—and more.

My thanks, also, to those colleagues in academia who reviewed the manuscript for this book. Their contributions and comments were extremely valuable: Addison Wesley Longman; Michael Berlin, Boston University; R. Thomas Berner, The Pennsylvania State University; William Celis, University of Colorado; Mike Cowling, University of Wisconsin; Tom Dickson, Southwest Missouri State University; Richard Gibbs, Shippensburg University; John Griffiths, University of Florida; Roy Hamrick, University of Texas; Mike Kautsch, University of Kansas; David McBurney, Illinois State University; Todd Simon, Michigan State University; Leroy Smith, State University of New York at Buffalo.

Conrad C. Fink
Athens, Georgia

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