




*Writing and*

*Reporting*



*News*

**A Coaching Method**



Second Edition

**Carole Rich**

**2<sup>ND</sup> EDITION**

# *Writing* and *Reporting* *News*

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**Second Edition**

*Carole Rich*

University of Kansas



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# Preface

Writing news can be fun. Writing news is also a crucial skill. Technology has reduced the world to a global village where people can communicate with as much speed and ease as though they lived next door to each other. But the amount of information available is of galactic proportions. No matter what medium is used to convey the information—computers, television or paper—journalists who know how to gather and write information clearly will be needed more than ever as the world of communication continues to expand. This book is devoted to teaching you how to acquire those skills.

*Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method*, Second Edition, uses the principles of the writing coach movement in newspapers to bring coaching into the classroom. Teachers and good editors have always helped writers improve their stories by offering suggestions during the reporting and writing process. But in many newsrooms editors became too busy to confer with writers before the stories were submitted for editing. The writers often received little or no feedback about how they could improve their work.

Concerns about the quality of writing in newspapers have prompted many editors to hire writing coaches to help journalists improve their skills. The coaching movement was initiated at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, which offers training programs for journalists. Two of the institute's directors, Roy Peter Clark and Don Fry (who is now an independent writing consultant) trained journalists from all over the world in coaching methods.

But what is coaching? Coaching is a way of helping writers help themselves. A coach doesn't stress how you failed to write a good story. A coach stresses how you can succeed. A coach helps you discover your writing problems and suggests how you can find solutions. An editor may concentrate on the end results of your writing; a coach concentrates on the process of your writing. A coach asks you what techniques worked well for you in your story and where you struggled. Then a coach helps you find ways to report and write more effectively by encouraging you to try new approaches and take risks. Like a basketball coach who trains players how to improve their techniques on the court, a writing coach trains writers how to perfect their techniques in the craft.

This book aims to serve as a writing coach by anticipating problems writers have and offering solutions. It describes techniques writing coaches use at newspapers. Many other techniques in this book are an outgrowth of my experiences teaching journalism students at the University of Kansas and of my work as a visiting writing coach at several newspapers.

Each chapter begins with coaching tips so you can learn how to be your own writing coach and gain confidence as a writer. No book can substitute for your instructor. This book attempts to supplement what you learn in the classroom by providing you with hundreds of examples and tips from award-winning writers.

I have chosen the examples carefully to provide stories that not only illustrate the techniques in the chapter but are also fun to read. I have also included examples that reflect our multicultural society in subject matter as well as in the choice of writers. Newspapers and magazines contain some remarkably good writing. I hope you will agree when you read some of the excerpts and full text articles from them. Newspapers also publish some dreadful writing. I hope you will learn what to avoid from the bad examples.

This second edition of *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method* contains many new features, such as:

- a new chapter on beat reporting
- a new chapter on computer-assisted journalism featuring detailed instructions for finding information on the Internet (as well as references throughout the book to on-line journalism sources and skills)
- a revised chapter on the changing concepts of news
- a revised disaster chapter featuring the Oklahoma University student newspaper's coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing
- a revised chapter on storytelling techniques, incorporating features and specialty stories
- a revised chapter covering government and statistical stories
- an expanded chapter on accuracy and libel
- an appendix of on-line sites useful to journalists
- many new exercises

The book also emphasizes current trends in news writing, such as the emphasis on graphics. You will learn how visual and verbal elements work together and how to use graphics as a writing tool.

## *How the Book Is Organized*

The first three parts of this book are devoted to teaching you the techniques of reporting and writing—from generating story ideas to developing a writing process. Writers have many different ways of working. No one way works for everyone. This book offers you many tips so that you can choose the ones that work best for you. It encourages you to take risks and to find your own style. It urges you to consider revision as a crucial part of the writing process. If you learn the techniques of good writing, you can apply them to a variety of stories.

The fourth part of the book provides you with opportunities to apply those skills to many types of stories. It offers tips for solving problems you might encounter covering crime and court stories, government, disasters and a variety of other stories. This part of the book also offers a chapter on how to apply for a job.

Although the book is arranged sequentially to take you through the steps from conceiving the idea to constructing the story, you do not need to study the book in the order it is written. Each chapter is self-contained so that your instructor can design the course to fit the needs of the class and so that you can use chapters of most interest to you.

The greatest frustration I experience as a teacher is that there is too much information to teach in a basic reporting course. With the increasing use of technology and such resource tools as the Internet, the journalistic skills you need to master multiply as well. There is no way you can learn all the skills you need in one semester. But I hope that you find this book helpful in teaching you the techniques you need now and that you will use this book as a reference for information you may need in the future.

## *Basic and Advanced Techniques*

This book is geared to beginning and advanced journalism students. If you are a beginning journalism student, you will find detailed explanations about how you can develop reporting and writing skills. If you are an advanced journalism student, you can study more complex writing techniques, such as those in the chapter on storytelling or the use of data bases in the chapter on computer-assisted reporting. You will also find many models of sophisticated writing styles by journalists who have won numerous awards.

Although the primary focus of this book is newspaper writing, the techniques of reporting and writing presented here will serve you well if you are planning a career in magazines, public relations or broadcasting.

I hope the coaching tips and writing examples in this book entice you to try many techniques so your writing becomes a very rewarding experience for you and your readers. I welcome your suggestions for improvement.

## *Acknowledgments*

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## About the Author



Carole Rich is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Kansas. She began her career in 1970 as a reporter specializing in education and government at the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. She later worked for the *Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) News/Sun-Sentinel* as a reporter, food editor and city editor. She also worked at the *Hartford (Conn.) Courant* as deputy metropolitan editor for two years before she began her teaching career in 1985. Rich has been a visiting writing coach at more than a dozen newspapers and has conducted writing seminars throughout the country.

# *Introduction: Tips From Award-winning Journalists*

Make the reader see. Make the reader care. Follow those two principles, and you will have the makings of an award-winning journalist.

Eugene Roberts, a former editor at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The New York Times*, tells this story about how his editor influenced him to make the reader see. Roberts was a reporter at the *Goldsboro News-Argus* in North Carolina. His editor, Henry Belk, was blind. Many days Belk would call in Roberts to read his stories to him, and Belk would yell: "Make me see. You aren't making me see."

Advice from Roberts: "The best reporters, whatever their backgrounds or their personalities, share that consummate drive to get to the center of a story and then put the reader on the scene."

Roberts should know. During the 18 years he was executive editor of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the newspaper won 17 Pulitzer Prizes.

How do you become one of the best reporters? Observe. Gather details. Ask questions. Be curious. Then write word pictures that make the reader see and experience the action, and plan photos or graphics to accompany your stories.

In the future, as broadcast and print media converge, you may be mixing video images and sound bites with written words. But Roberts' advice will still apply. Make the reader care. Make sure the story has a "so what" element. Write a compelling story that touches the reader's emotions. Use facts, quotes, and visual and

verbal images that make the reader angry, sad, happy, relieved or more informed about an issue.

Ken Fuson, who has won several awards for outstanding writing at *The Des Moines (Iowa) Register*, has this advice: "Don't turn in a story you wouldn't read. If you tell a good story, people will want to read it. If you don't think many people will want to read it, make it short." Fuson is convinced that even stories about government meetings can be made readable with storytelling techniques. "Look for ways to show conflict; try to describe the mood," he says.

He worries that newspaper editors are too concerned about making stories shorter to appeal to impatient readers and to conserve space in the paper. "Some stories are better if they're long," Fuson says. "You could probably make *Moby Dick* a lot shorter, too. But I still think people will read a good tale."

For Fuson, the ending is even more important than the beginning of a story. "When I was a kid, the stories that would make me go back and read again were the ones that had the best endings," he says. "I know most newspaper readers don't read all the way to the endings. But I tell myself if I do it well enough, they'll read mine."

Julie Sullivan is more certain readers will get to the end of her stories. Her prize-winning stories run only 8 inches. Sullivan is a reporter for *The Spokesman-Review* (Wash.). She packs a wealth of descriptive detail into short sentences without resorting to adjectives. Like Fuson, she strives for strong endings, especially in short stories.

"You are trying to make a point with every paragraph," Sullivan says. I think the last one is the one people remember." Her last paragraph in one story is a simple statement that makes a powerful point about the daily dangers an 82-year-old man faces in a deteriorating, low-income apartment complex in Spokane. His watch had been stolen by a drug addict.

"I'll get it back, you watch and see,"  
he fumed later.

He did. The \$50 Seiko was re-  
turned without explanation Thurs-  
day morning.

That night, they stole his food  
stamps.

Sullivan also thinks there is a place for longer stories, but she says the trend now is for brevity. Her advice: "Trust your instincts. Ask yourself what is important and what struck you during the interview. Then write what you remember. Then rewrite. Go back over the story and take out every word that is extraneous."

And some advice from that master storyteller, Edna Buchanan, Pulitzer Prize-winning former police reporter for *The Miami Herald*. Here is what she says in her book *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*:

What a reporter needs is detail, detail, detail.

If a man is shot for playing the same song on the jukebox too many times, I've got to name that tune. Questions unimportant to police add the color and detail that makes a story human. What movie did they see? What color was their car? What did they have in their pockets? What were they doing the precise moment the bomb exploded or the tornado touched down?

Miami Homicide Lieutenant Mike Gonzalez, who has spent some thirty years solving murders, tells me that he now asks those questions and suggests to rookies that they do the same. The answers may not be relevant to an investigation, but he tells them, "Edna Buchanan will ask you, and you'll feel stupid if you don't know."

A question I always ask is: What was everybody wearing? It has little to do with style. It has everything to do with the time I failed to ask. A man was shot and dumped into the street by a killer in a pickup truck. The case seemed somewhat routine—if one can ever call murder routine. But later, I learned that at the time the victim was shot, he was wearing a black taffeta cocktail dress and red high heels. I tracked down the detectives and asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask," they chorused. Now I always ask.

Writers like Edna Buchanan take risks. They try new approaches to make the reader want to read their stories.

This book is about risk-taking writing, the kind of writing that tells stories people want to read. It is about writing to make readers see and care. It is about the kind of reporting and writing that makes reluctant readers read.

Here are some general tips for good writing:

- Show people in action whenever possible. Show and tell.
- Use simple sentences. Favor a subject-verb-object construction. If you write long sentences, follow them with short ones.
- Use strong action verbs.
- Translate jargon into simple English that the reader will understand.
- Use specific details instead of adjectives. Don't write about a large dog; write about a 250-pound St. Bernard named Churchill.
- Take risks. Try new styles. The writer who takes no risks is taking the biggest risk of all—the risk of being mediocre.

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