

tenth edition



Melvin Mencher's

**News
Reporting
and Writing**



Melvin Mencher's News Reporting and Writing

Tenth Edition

Melvin Mencher
Columbia University



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NEWS REPORTING AND WRITING

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Preface

The tenth edition of *News Reporting and Writing* marks its third decade in journalism classrooms. Though much has changed in the classroom and in the media since the first edition, the fundamentals remain, as does the purpose of *NRW*:

1. To teach the skills necessary for a variety of media work.
2. To provide the background knowledge essential to accurate and informed reporting and writing.
3. To suggest the values that direct and underline the practice of journalism.

Learning to report accurately and to write precisely and vigorously is no simple task. Digging through the clusters of events and the torrent of verbiage to find useful, relevant information and then capturing these nuggets in purposeful language require mastery of a demanding discipline.

This may seem a daunting task. Don't worry. The guides in *NRW* provide ample help. They have shown the way for several generations of successful news writers. Here are some of the journalists who will help you on your way:

Guides We will accompany a young reporter as she conducts her first interview, and we will watch an experienced reporter dig through court records to expose a shameful part of our past.

We will look over the shoulder of a reporter as she makes her way through Internet sources for the background essential to her story. We will venture into newsrooms where multimedia news workers write for online, broadcast and print media.

We will sit in the press box with reporters covering high school football and major league baseball games. We will join a police reporter as she races to cover a triple murder.

We will watch a reporter labor over his story until "little beads of blood form on his forehead," as Red Smith described the agony of the journalist's search for the words that accurately portray the event. And we will share in the reporter's joy when the story is finished and is given a byline and placed on the front page or makes the evening network newscast.

We will stand at the side of newsletter and magazine writers, alternative (see p. xxi) and special-interest journalists, and we will watch how a news release is prepared.

In other words, we will be concerned with the processes of reporting and writing—how reporters gather information from sources and from their observations, how they verify the material, and how they put it together in news stories and features.

The journalists we will be watching work for small newspapers in Iowa, South Dakota and Oregon, and they are on the staffs of metropolitan dailies in Chicago and Los Angeles. They serve online news services and online newspapers. One reporter writes for a network television station in New York; another covers local events for a television station in San Francisco. We will see how general assignment reporters and the men and women assigned to cover politics, sports, business, the police, city hall, education and other beats do their jobs.

The Basics

Whether covering a college basketball game, writing an obituary or reporting the president's State of the Union address, the journalist follows the same basic process. The sports reporter, the entertainment writer, the general assignment reporter in a town of 25,000 and the Associated Press's White House correspondent all share a way of thinking and a similar set of techniques that have guided journalists through the years, whatever the changes in technology.

In their reporting, journalists seek out the new, the significant, the material they decide will inform their readers, viewers and listeners. And they find a suitable form for this information in a story that satisfies the public's need to know.

The journalists we will be following not only show a mastery of the basics. We will see that they share an ethic that directs and gives meaning to their work.

Power of Knowing

"Knowledge will govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both."

—James Madison

The Morality of Journalism

The literary critic Northrop Frye could have been describing journalistic morality: "The persistence of keeping the mind in a state of disciplined sanity, the courage of facing results that may deny or contradict everything that one had hoped to achieve—these are obviously moral qualities, if the phrase means anything at all."

James O. Freedman, former president of Dartmouth, might have been speaking of the practice of journalism when he described his experience as a law clerk to Thurgood Marshall: "In that year, I learned from a great advocate that law must be practiced not only with craft and passion but also with a tenacious commitment to ideals."

Mary McGrory, the Washington columnist, described an aspect of how journalists approach their work in comments she made after interviewing 45 journalists who had applied for Nieman Fellowships at Harvard. She said she found these journalists to have a "great deal of commitment and compassion." Most had a trait in common, she said: "They knew a great deal about what they were doing. They did not think it enough."

McGrory was a role model for generations of journalists. At a time when too many reporters seem umbilically attached to their computers and columnists

rarely venture from their office chairs, McGrory prided herself on being a shoe-leather journalist.

"I have to see," she said. "I have to hear. I don't want anyone doing my listening or watching for me."

McGrory understood the morality of journalism. "No great men call me," she said. "You know who calls me? Losers. I am their mark. If you want to abolish lead mines. If you want to save children from abuse or stupid laws or thick-headed judges, you have my telephone number."

McGrory's spirit animates this edition, as does the work of the reporters whose work I have borrowed to provide instructional material . . . reporters like Clifford Levy, whose series on the abuse of the mentally ill won a Pulitzer Prize. "Of all the praise I got for the series, the most meaningful was from other reporters at the paper (*The New York Times*) who said it made them proud to work there because it was a classic case of looking out for those who can't look out for themselves."

The journalists I know—my former colleagues and students, from whom I have shamelessly taken time and borrowed ideas—would shrink at being described as moralists. Yet they consider their work to have a large moral component. Most of them worry about the abuse of power.

Adversary Journalism Although adversary journalism is often criticized and sometimes ignored, it is as old as the Republic. Today's journalists are descended from a press described by the historian Robert A. Ruthland as "obstreperous newspapers (that) signalled the rise of a new kind of journalism in America that would not truckle long to any officialdom."

The journalist knows that democracy is healthiest when the public is informed about the activities of captains of industry and chieftains in public office. Only with adequate information can people check those in power. Jack Fuller of the *Chicago Tribune* put this simply: "To me, the central purpose of journalism is to tell the truth so that people will have the information to be sovereign."

Walt Whitman, journalist and poet, described the fragility of democracy and its source of strength this way: "There is no week nor day nor hour when tyranny may not enter upon this country, if the people lose their supreme confidence in themselves—and lose their roughness and spirit of defiance."

Confident, rough and defiant. An apt description of the journalist at work—but also characteristics that have aroused anger and animosity. In its role as watchdog for the public, the press has been relentlessly scrutinized and sometimes attacked for its revelations. Journalists understand that the path of the truth teller is not always smooth, that people are sometimes disturbed by what the journalist tells them.

This tenth edition is offered to students with a commitment to and a belief in the traditional role of the press as a means of enabling people to improve their lot and to govern themselves intelligently. *News Reporting and Writing* takes seriously the observation in the Book of Proverbs: "The instruments of both life and death are contained within the power of the tongue."

Public Service Journalism

The kind of journalism that underlies this textbook can be described as public service journalism, a journalism that meets the needs of people by supplying them with the information essential to rational decision making. Public service journalism has a long and glorious history. It has attracted writers like Charles Dickens, whose crusading newspaper *Household Words* carried stories that revealed his indignation at the indecencies visited on the young, the poor and the powerless—themes current today.

Dickens visited orphanages, saw for himself the conditions under which homeless women lived. He walked the streets teeming with the uneducated young. He described what he saw.

Dickens said his ambition as an editor was that his newspaper “be admitted into many homes with confidence and affection,” and it was. His biographer says the result of Dickens’ revelations was a “huge and steadily growing audience ranging in both directions from the middle and upper middle classes.”

Today’s journalists are worthy inheritors of this tradition of public service journalism, and we will be looking at their work. We’ll watch a reporter show how children born in a poor part of town receive an education inferior to the children born into a middle class neighborhood.

Journalism intends to entertain us as well as to inform us, and we will also follow reporters as they show us the zany side of life. We’ll eavesdrop on a truck-diner waitress as she trades quips and barbs with her burly customers.

Journalism’s Tradition

Journalism has always had its down periods, and there has been no shortage of nostrums offered for a quick cure. Its survival, however, has rested on the bedrock of its tradition. Albert Camus, the French journalist and author, was sustained by that sense of his calling during the Nazi occupation of France when he wrote from the underground. Accepting the Nobel Prize for literature, Camus said, “Whatever our personal frailties may be, the nobility of our calling will always be rooted in two commitments difficult to observe: refusal to lie about what we know and resistance to oppression.”

Journalism “is something more than a craft, something other than an industry, something between an art and a ministry,” says Wickham Steed, an editor of *The Times* of London. “Journalists proper are unofficial public servants whose purpose is to serve the community.”

Mentor My model for this amalgam of artist, sentry, public servant and town crier is Ralph M. Blagden, who taught a generation of journalists their duty and introduced them to the power and splendor of their native language. Ralph’s classrooms were the newsrooms of newspapers from New Hampshire to California, where he worked as reporter and editor.

Ralph was my competitor as a state capitol correspondent, and never was there such a mismatch. As a beginning reporter, I reported what people said and did

and stopped there. Ralph generously took the youngster in tow and showed him that a good reporter never settles for the surface of the news, that the compelling commandment of the journalist is to dig out the truth. He refused to make reporting divisible: All good reporting is investigative reporting, he insisted.

Long before investigative reporting became the fashion, Ralph was digging out documents and records to disclose truths. His journalism was in the tradition of Joseph Pulitzer and that publisher's crusading editor, O.K. Bovard. Those of us who were fortunate to work with Ralph feel ourselves to be members of a journalistic family whose roots are embedded in a noble tradition.

Benjamin C. Bradlee, who directed *The Washington Post* Watergate investigation that led to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, recalls the first story he wrote for Blagden when he was a young reporter.

"It had to do with the post-war housing mess," Bradlee said, "and he made me rewrite it 16 times. I've never done that to a reporter, but I suspect I should have. He had a great dollop of righteous indignation, which I learned to admire enormously.

"And of course he wrote with style and punch and clarity."

Successful journalists usually can point to someone who early in their careers provided the inspiration and the basics. Joe Galloway, war correspondent and Washington reporter, credits a city government reporter in a small Texas town where Galloway broke into journalism with heading him in the right direction.

Bradlee says this of Blagden:

Ralph taught me to be dissatisfied with answers and to be exhaustive in questions. He taught me to stand up against powers that be. He taught me to spot bullies and resist them. He taught me about patience and round-the-clock work. He taught me about ideas and freedom and rights—all of this with his own mixture of wit and sarcasm and articulate grace. He could also throw a stone farther than I could, which annoys me to this day.

I recall the first story I covered with Ralph. He had heard that patients in a state hospital for the mentally ill were being mistreated. Some had mysteriously died. We interviewed doctors, nurses, attendants and former patients, and we walked through the wards and corridors of the institution. I learned that second-hand accounts are just a starting point, that direct observation and other techniques of verification are essential, and when we wrote the story I learned the power of the simple declarative sentence. I also learned that journalists can be useful members of society, for after the story appeared and both of us had moved on, the state built a modern hospital to replace that aging snake pit.

New to the Tenth

This edition is accompanied by the *Workbook for News Reporting and Writing*, an online interactive series of writing exercises and reporting assignments, skill drills, class discussion topics and home assignments.

A simulation—*News Reporting Simulation: A Fire Scenario*—that puts students at the scene of a fatal fire is also included. Instructions on how to access *A Fire Scenario* are included on the inside of the back cover of the textbook.

Also wrapped with the textbook are the CDs:

NRW Plus—Contains full stories that the textbook summarizes. Many of these stories are accompanied by the comments of the reporters who covered them. *NRW Plus* has an interactive, self-teaching component as well.

Brush Up: A Quick Guide to Writing and Math Skills—Contains instructional material and self-teaching drills and tests.

—Melvin Mencher

Additional Supplements for Students

Workbook for News Reporting and Writing: Used in conjunction with the textbook; contains writing exercises and reporting assignments, home assignments, skill drills and class discussion topics. A city map, directory and cross directory and a source list are provided for the exercises. Available online. (Mencher)
ISBN: 0-07-249195-7

Two CD-ROMs are packaged with the tenth edition textbook:

Brush Up: A Quick Guide to Basic Writing and Math Skills, an interactive, self-teaching CD designed for journalism students. (Mencher and Wendy P. Shilton)

ISBN: 0-07-249197-3

NRW Plus, contains full news and feature stories accompanied by the comments of reporters who handled them and self-teaching exercises, allowing students to check their work. (Mencher)

ISBN: 0-07-246022-3

Also available:

Reporter's Checklist and Notebook, a handy guide to handling beats and covering a variety of stories. Checklists for 15 story types are included, as is "Useful Math for Reporters." Sold independently and can be packaged with the textbook. (Mencher)

ISBN: 0-69-729404-8

The *Instructor's Manual* is available to instructors on the Web at www.mhhe.com/mencher.

Acknowledgments

Many have contributed to *NRW*—my first city editor, George Baldwin, whose patience with a beginner lifted me from days of dark despair; former students whose journalism I have included here; academic colleagues whose suggestions have helped make *NRW* classroom-useful.

I learned from my student who stormed out of the classroom when I said I would not assign her to the story she said she wanted to cover because I was worried about her safety, and I am in debt to my bureau chief at the United Press who had worn down a pencil putting thick, black lines through my copy. “Just show us what the guy did,” he told me. “Let the reader draw the conclusions.”

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A Personal Word

Some of you are probably thinking of the kind of journalism you want to be doing and the best place to launch your career. Fortunately, the field is wide open. Journalism is the gateway to a variety of careers.

You may choose the path to newspaper, magazine or broadcast work. You may have an interest that leads you to one of the several thousand special publications and newsletters. Or you may choose to report and write online or work for an ethnic or alternative publication.

Journalism training opens many doors. But you will find that you have to push hard. “Work harder than anyone else,” Bradlee advises those starting out. Not that it’s all work. Deborah Howell of the Newhouse News Service says, “work hard. But have fun and do good.”

The first job is important. Howard Gardner, a professor of psychology at Harvard who has studied journalists, says of the first job, “It’s like an inoculation . If you don’t have examples of good workers, it’s difficult to know what good work is.”

For tips on how to prepare a job résumé, see Appendix G **The Journalism Job Hunt** in *NRW Plus*.

—Melvin Mencher

Part Opener Photos

Part One

The mayor says he may seek a second term and journalists try to pin him down.

—Photo by Leslie Jean-Bart

Part Two

A feature: A volunteer provides loving care for infants born with AIDS.

—Photo by Steve Krauss, *Dallas Times Herald*

Part Three

A reporter searches her notes for the quotation that will go high in her story.

—Photo by Michael DuCille

Part Four

A reporter asks for the names and addresses of the accident victims.

—Photo by Wayne Miller

Part Five

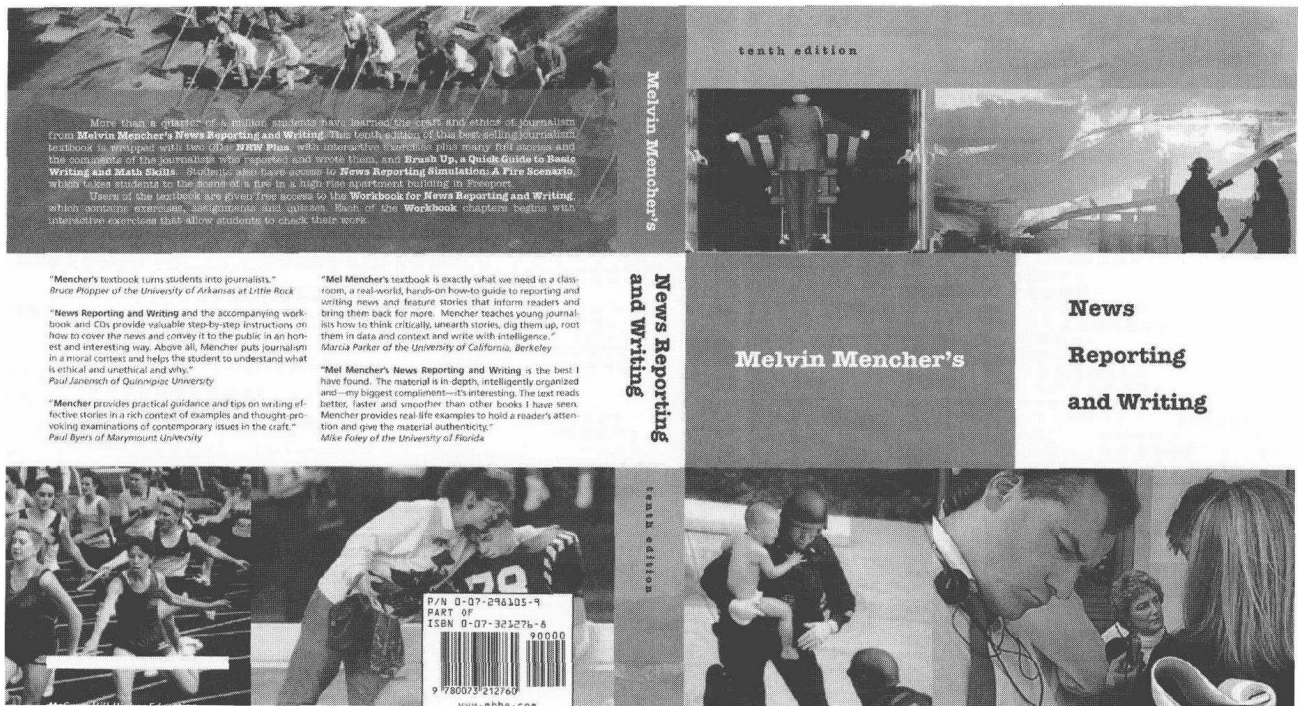
From the first day of school through college, education is covered.

—Photo by Spencer Tulis, *The Leader-Herald*, Gloversville, N.Y.

Part Six

Journalists portray the lives of the young, the old, the poor and the well-to-do.

—Photo by Jeff McAdory, *The Commercial Appeal*



Cover Photos

Grief, Rescue, Promises, Consolation

The photographs on the front and back cover of the tenth edition of *News Reporting and Writing* illustrate the range and variety of journalism.

Front Cover (clockwise from top-left):

- (A) A National Guardsman drapes the Flag over the casket of a soldier killed in combat in Iraq. Spencer Tulis of the *Finger Lakes Times* (N.Y.) took this photograph in a local funeral home.
- (B) David McDermid of *The Eagle* in Bryan-College Station, Texas, photographed this oil refinery fire in Mumford, Texas.
- (C) Lori D. Golias of *The Hartford Courant* photographs reporter Chris Keating taking notes as the new governor lays out her plans.
- (D) A murder suspect takes his child as a hostage as the police close in. He threatens to shoot the child, but surrenders and an emergency squad officer takes out the terrified child. Todd Maisel of the *Daily News* in New York photographed the rescue.

Back Cover (clockwise from top):

- (E) Crew members of an aircraft carrier clean the deck in this U.S. Navy photograph sent to the media.
- (F) The bitter taste of defeat lessened by a comforting mother. David McDermid was on hand at the season's last game to photograph this hug of consolation.
- (G) Bob Zellar of *The Billings Gazette* caught the intensity of these young runners at a statewide track meet.

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