

breakfast, packs a lunch for school, heads for her bus. But this morning is different. Danielle doesn't feel like packing a lunch. She wants to buy something; she is thinking about the cheese pizza they sell at the Booker T cafeteria. Last night, she asked her parents if she could have some money. But they said no.

Danielle heads down the hall. She is walking through the family room when she notices some spare change on the end table. She counts the coins: \$1.55.

She picks up the money and puts it in her purse. She gets her backpack and leaves the house, locking the door behind her.

This scene set up the situation and leaves the reader wondering: Will her parents find out? How will they respond? It is a tiny conflict but powerful enough to draw the reader through the story.

Principle #6: Slow down.

After you have built tension in your story, slow down to maintain it. As the world around us moves faster and faster, this technique becomes even more powerful. If you build your scene properly, the reader will hold still and look carefully at anything you wish.

Learning how and when to speed up and to slow down is key. It's something of a paradox: Speed up when explaining boring (but essential) information, and when the action is moving rapidly—your very best material—slow down. You slow down so the reader can enter the scene and process what is happening. You speed up because you have a lot of ground to cover.

How do you slow down? Allow more space on the page. Use more paragraph breaks. Find natural pauses inside the scene. You might be inclined to skip over them, but they can help you slow down the pace. A story that I worked on about a murder included a police chase. The police started shooting out the tires of the escape car. As the car began to spin, the music on the car's CD player stopped. I included that pause in the music to draw out that suspense-filled moment.

Principle #7: Learn to crescendo. CA E 7 CENDO

At the end of your story or the end of every section of a longer story, your narrative must crescendo. It doesn't have to be a loud moment; quiet moments are often more powerful.

Here is another example from David Finkel, a daily story that he wrote while at the *St. Petersburg Times*, on the day that Ted Bundy was executed. The story was about the parents of one of Bundy's victims, Margaret Bowman. Here are the last several paragraphs:

The TV went off. In the quiet, Jack Bowman regained his composure and then headed outside. He wanted the day to go by easily and the night to go easily, too. He wanted to sleep soundly. He wanted to awaken and sense that Ted Bundy was already beginning to be old news. He wanted the vengeful signs of strangers to be thrown in the trash and their firecrackers put away. He wanted to finally get to the point where at last he could think about everything that had happened.

Tuesday, for a short time, he tried.

"Tell me your feelings about the execution," someone said to him.

"I wanted him punished," Jack Bowman said. "This was not hard for me."

"Tell me about Margaret," he was asked.

He began to cry. He shut his eyes. "I don't think I can."

Writing narrative is like rendering a complex piece of music on the page. The writer hears it and then must reproduce it. For the reader to really hear it, too, each note—each component of your story—must be struck in a way that develops the reader's experience of the text.

Many connections to music

Writing Complicated Stories

LOUISE KIERNAN

People sometimes ask me, "Are you an investigative reporter, or a features reporter, or an explanatory reporter?" I never know how to answer. Why ask at all? Categorizing journalism is in part why many investigative stories are dull, feature stories can be superficial, and explanatory stories explain so little. For complicated stories, we need to combine all three. This blending is both my central goal and biggest challenge as a reporter.

In June 2000, I wrote a front-page story for the *Chicago Tribune* about a woman named Ana Flores, who was killed by a piece of glass that fell from a building. The story, a Pulitzer finalist, begins with this image: "The glass falls like a shadow, swift and silent, a dark blur swooping through the wet sky."

The image of the shadow didn't come from observation or creative license, but from a police report, which I also used to track down

and interview witnesses. That document and others enabled me to tell a story that would have been otherwise impossible. Ana Flores, the protagonist, was dead, and several people involved in the story didn't want to talk to me because they were responsible for the accident that killed her. Documents were key to that project.

Narrative reporters sometimes consider public documents dry, statistical, and boring. That couldn't be further from the truth. In 2003, I completed a two-part series about postpartum depression, including profiles of two women who had committed suicide as a result of that illness. The medical examiner's autopsy reports included one of the women's suicide notes: a dozen pages she had written to explain why she was about to jump from a twelfth-story hotel window. One of those notes was to the front-desk clerk:

Dear Tim,

I'm sorry to have used your kindness this way. You knew something wasn't quite right, but your kind heart took pity on me and let me stay in the hotel. I hope this doesn't get you into trouble. You really are a fabulous clerk, very good at what you do. Tell your boss this wasn't your fault.

Melanie

That note, scribbled on a piece of Days Inn stationery, told me a great deal about Melanie Stokes. And I found it in a public file.

When I begin to work on a story, I list all the public and private documents that might exist. Public documents are the more familiar ones: court records, police reports, government studies, and so forth. All reporters should know how to file Freedom of Information Act requests and search court records. (See www.ire.org and www.poynter.org for helpful advice.) Practice finding records at your local courthouse—go down there and look yourself up. Private documents are the ones that people make and keep for themselves: journals, a child's baby book, high school yearbook inscriptions, letters home from summer camp. All these documents can help tell a story, even in short, daily pieces. When you write the classic "teacher of the year" story, ask to see lesson plans and graded papers, or watch a woman working her way off welfare fill out a job application.

Often, what people write is more compelling than what they tell you. Ana Flores, the woman killed by the falling piece of glass, was walking to a job fair when the accident happened. She had practiced filling out an application on a piece of paper her best friend kept as a

memento, painstakingly writing out in English, "Cleaning, cooking, take care of old lady, I am willing to perform." Those phrases served as shorthand for her struggle to make a life for herself in Chicago, after emigrating from Mexico.

Complicated stories demand careful use of detail, but some narrative stories include too many details, describing how every last thing looks and smells and sounds. Every detail you select should help communicate your story's theme.

Within the framework of your story, use your characters' expertise to explain broader concepts. Do the same thing with numbers—use only those that are key to the story and characters. In a story about the experiences of an elderly man who had come to Chicago as part of the Great Migration, the only migration statistic I used was the percentage of African Americans who had left his Arkansas county at the same time he did. That statistic was the one closest to his expertise. Imagery helps explain complicated concepts. In the falling-glass story, I had to explain thermal stress, the physics of the window cracking and breaking loose. One expert compared what happened with plunging a hot glass into a sink of cold water, so that's how I described it in the story. Experts can help you tell the technical aspects of your story. People with passions, whether for comic books or nuclear fission, tend to be good teachers. The imagery they have developed for explaining things to their students can be useful to the writer.

Writing about complex topics requires absolute mastery of the material. By the end of your reporting, you should feel that you know as much about the subject as the people you interview. That mastery allows you to write clear, strong, readable sentences. It's the iceberg effect: one-eighth of your work is above the surface, in the story. The seven-eighths that the reader can't see form your story's foundation. Trust your reporting. Embed it in your story.

In Ana Flores's story, I wrote: "No one knows exactly how much time the glass took to fall—twenty-five seconds at most, perhaps as few as five. It may have floated flat as a table for a time or tumbled like a leaf, but gravity eventually pulled it into an angled or vertical position so it cut down like a knife."

To write that paragraph, I talked with two physics professors and two glass experts. There are calculations about gravity in that paragraph. While I was tempted to point out how hard I worked to get that information, I knew those sentences should stand on their own.

By the time I wrote those sentences, I *knew* the glass had fallen like a knife, that it had fallen like a shadow.

So, perhaps I *do* know how to answer that question about whether I am a features, investigative, or explanatory reporter: "Yes."

How I Get to the Point

WALT HARRINGTON

To report and write good narrative it is important to develop a clear process that takes you from beginning to end: exhaustive researching, choosing a strong main character, thinking the story through, and reporting the story, scene, and theme. I have found that if I stick to that process and don't take shortcuts, I always end up with what I need for the story. It might not be the story that I started out looking for, but it will be a story.

Back when I wrote for the *Washington Post Sunday Magazine*, I put myself on a schedule. I would finish reporting on Wednesday and then schedule a week to turn out the piece. I started by placing two large notepads in front of me. Then I reread all the material I had collected: every document, letter, and note. On one pad I listed possible themes, jotting them down as I read the material. I would list as many as ten possibilities and then use just two or three. On the other pad I listed all the facts, details, quotes, and scenes I was likely to include in the story.

I usually completed that process late on Thursday and then filed away all the boxes of notes. On Friday morning I sat down, closed my eyes, and waited for something to come to mind. It can be scary at first, but you come to trust that it will happen. About 80 percent of the time the strongest scene or image from all my reporting appeared. That scene usually ended up as my lede. If nothing came to mind, I tried again, and again. If no single scene came to mind, I knew that my lede wouldn't be a scene, and I began to think of strong declarative sentences that captured the essence of a subject.

Once I had my lede, I moved on to the foreshadowing in the piece—a sort of nutgraf that clarifies the story for the reader. After writing the first three hundred or so words of an eight-thousand-word piece, I stopped writing, and at that late stage, with the project clearly centered, I finally jotted down an outline of the entire piece.

As I did that outline, I asked myself: *What are my strongest scenes? What ideas will I work with? What would make a good ending? What threads should I pull through the entire story?*

I put my trust in the process, and it always allowed me to turn in a solid draft by the following Wednesday.

The Emotional Core of the Story

TOM WOLFE

Philip Roth was the hottest young novelist in America in 1970—he had won the National Book Award with his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, in 1960 and had just lit up the sky with *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969—when he uttered what I call Roth's Lament: *We now live in an age in which the imagination of the novelist lies helpless before what he knows he's going to read in tomorrow morning's newspaper.*

I imagine anyone, writer or otherwise, can sympathize with that. Just think of the story of Paris Hilton. I'm sure some novelist could have dreamed up a plot in which a beautiful young blond heiress with a lower lip like a slice of mango is caught on a pornographic videotape. But the rest of the novel would no doubt be about . . . the extortionists, who are demanding five million dollars for the tape, and so she enlists a couple of young computer hackers to invade her father's investment accounts and extract the five million dollars, but then the hackers demand a 20 percent cut as their commission, which would be a cool million, and she panics, and then—

And I suppose some novelist could have dreamed up a plot in which a beautiful young blond heiress with a sly fructose smile and no immediately detectable acting or show business ability gets a ten-million-dollar contract to star on a television show and goes on to turn herself into a national franchise with a line of clothes, perfumes, and handbags?

But I don't think there is a novelist living who could have dreamed up the actual story line, which is that Paris Hilton got her millions . . . *because* she made the pornographic tape. Otherwise she would have remained just another ripely labial random boldface name in the gossip columns.

I wrote only nonfiction for the first fifty-four years of my life, then wrote a few novels, and I can tell you that the problem with fiction today is that fiction has to be plausible. And plausible is not the first word that comes to mind to describe an age like this. . . . The newspaper will soon be extinct. . . . High school students in New York stage cell-phone rights demonstrations protesting a new regulation that would ban cell phones in the schools, thereby making it impossible for them to watch movies during classes or text-message each other during tests. . . . In 1992, a man named Francis Fukuyama published a book entitled *The End of History* about how all the world agreed that Western liberal democracy had created a utopia and was hailed as a seer and prophet. Nine years later a bunch of terrorists nobody ever heard of cranked history back up again and made him look like a fool. In an age like this, to update Philip Roth, the "serious literary novel" is now headed for—I started to say "extinction," but that is not exactly what is happening. Instead, that precious lap dog with all its ineffable wafts of sensibility is heading up to a snow-capped peak where poetry, a genre that reigned supreme until the mid-nineteenth century, now lives. It's cold up there. Everyone praises them because that's a lot more pleasant than visiting them.

The upshot is that two varieties of the species *Nonfiction narrative* now reign in American literature. One is the autobiography, whose popularity has never waned in the 444 years since Benvenuto Cellini's *Confessions*. Orwell once characterized autobiography as the most outrageous form of fiction, because autobiographers seemed perfectly comfortable retailing their sins and crimes, their swindles, drug abuses, betrayals, debauches, their pelvic saddle convulsions and loin spasms, even rape, murder, looting and pillaging, since all give off whiffs of excitement and bravado—whereas, said Orwell, they never mention "the humiliations that make up seventy-five percent of life." Yet some of Orwell's own most powerful books, notably *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Homage to Catalonia*, as well as many of his great essays, such as "Shooting an Elephant" and "Why I Write," are autobiographical. Not even the occasional exposure of fiction masquerading as autobiography, starting with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, is likely to diminish the genre for long.

The other is nonfiction using the technical devices of the novel and the short story, the specific devices that give fiction its absorbing or gripping quality, that make the reader feel present in the scene described and even inside the skin of a particular character. They are exactly four in number: (1) scene-by-scene construction, i.e., pre-

Acenet

senting the narrative in a series of scenes and resorting to ordinary historical narration as little as possible; (2) the use of copious dialogue—the (experimentally demonstrated) easiest form of prose to read and the quickest to reveal character; (3) the careful notation of status details, the details that reveal one's social rank or aspirations, everything from dress and furniture to the infinite status clues of speech, how one talks to superiors or inferiors, to the strong, to the weak, to the sophisticated, to the naïve—and with what sort of accent and vocabulary; (4) point of view, in the Henry Jamesian sense of putting the reader inside the mind of someone other than the writer. Those were the devices used by writers in the so-called New Journalism movement that began in the 1960s. In 1973 I took the equivalent of a Trappist vow of silence so far as the subject of New Journalism was concerned. I was tired of arguing. I said it was a technical thing, the use of those four devices in an objective, accurate, i.e., properly journalistic fashion. But others claimed it meant "impressionistic" journalism, "subjective" journalism, New Left Journalism, "participatory" journalism—there was no end to it. But now that thirty-three years have elapsed, I suppose it's okay to offer a brief footnote. Besides, in those thirty-three years there has been the best possible outcome. Journalists no longer argue about New Journalism—I mean, how many decades can you keep arguing about something that calls itself "new"? Instead, a new generation of journalists, writing books and magazine articles, have simply appropriated the techniques however they please and are turning out brilliant work—in fact, the best of contemporary American literature, taken as a whole. I could mention many more names, but consider just these two and you will know what I mean immediately: Michael Lewis and Mark Bowden.

To this day newspaper editors resist the idea, but they desperately need to encourage their reporters to adopt the Lewis and Bowden approach. It is not that it produces pretty writing—although indeed it does. They need such reporters and writers to provide the emotional reality of the news, for it is the emotions, not the facts, that most engage and excite readers and in the end are the heart of most stories. Take the subject of crime, for a start. I have just learned, thanks to the Boston newspapers, that the mayor is upset because there are "gangbangers" on the streets wearing T-shirts that say STOP SNITCHING, conveying the message, "Talk to the police, and you're rat meat." The shirts are sold all over the place. The mayor wishes to confiscate them, and he seems to feel that selling them should be a crime, like selling cigarettes to a minor. In itself, that's a story—but

what a great story awaits the reporter who gets to know these teenagers who wear the T-shirts and finds out what that means to them—and what it means in their neighborhoods at whom the warning is presumably aimed. We report crime in our newspapers but not its emotional heart.

On Long Island, there's an epidemic of break-ins while people are in their homes. The robbers want the owners there, so they can be forced to reveal where jewelry and money are hidden. Invariably the news reports tell you how much was stolen, and perhaps what sorts of arms the assailants carried. But that's not the story. The story is fear, on the part of the victims and sometimes the assailants—or their static yodels after successfully dominating and humiliating their victims. Such are the vital facts of crime. The underlying emotions reveal so much about life, and they should be developed in journalism and not just in novels.

~~You need to provide~~ readers two things in this sort of journalism: a detailed picture of the social setting and at least some insight into the psychology of the principals. I think of the setting as a horizontal plane and the individual as a vertical plane. The line created by their intersection—there lies the story. In 1808, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel coined the term *Zeitgeist*—in English, “the spirit of the age.” His theory was that every historical epoch has a “moral tone”—his phrase—that presses down on the life of everyone, and no one can avoid it. I think it's true, and why, in fiction or non-fiction about big cities, for example, the city should be treated as a character because cities are positively feverish with moral tone.

About life beyond the great cities even our best reporters are often clueless. Last August, in Tennessee, I saw the Bristol 500, a NASCAR race. There's a little half-mile track, and grandstands going up almost vertically, seating 165,000, and it's all shaped like a megaphone. The seats are on the megaphone's inner surface and you feel that if you lean too far forward, you'll land on the track. Before the race, a number of people greeted the crowd, including the head of the National Rifle Association—no longer Charlton Heston, not a celebrity. He spoke all of forty-five seconds. The stands rose up as one person and cheered him. Obviously ownership of weapons bears a lot more civic virtue in NASCAR country than it does in Boston. Just before the race, a Protestant minister invoked the Lord's blessing on these loyal fans. He asked the Lord to look out for these brave drivers, and Son, Christ Jesus.” Anyone who introduced an event that way in San Francisco or New York City would risk arrest for a hate crime. New

York writers really must cross the Hudson River, and writers in Los Angeles really must go as far as the San Joaquin Valley. Most of the meaning of America lies in between the coasts, I'm afraid.

Recently I undertook what turned out to be a very happy task, writing an afterword for a new edition of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, by Stephen Crane. Crane is best known as the author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, regarded even in Europe as the greatest portrayal in all of literature of the emotions of a soldier in combat. Crane was the twelfth of fourteen children, with six older brothers. His father was a preacher and his mother a White Ribboner. She wore a white ribbon indicating the passion of her opposition to the sale and consumption of alcohol. She could be hell on wheels, but she was always a terrific writer.

One of Crane's older brothers, Townsend, was a writer, a correspondent for the *New York Tribune* covering the Jersey Shore resort area. Stephen Crane, a slender, good-looking young man with tousled blond hair, had, as of 1891, been thrown out of four schools in the preceding four years. So he went to work with his brother, for the *Tribune*. In 1892, he covered a lecture by Jacob Riis. Riis was one of the first people to pull the covers back on conditions in American slums, in this case the Lower East Side of New York City. He exposed the conditions but never captured the speech or personalities—never got to the emotional heart. His main emotion was pity.

Stephen Crane read Jacob Riis and formed his own questions: What are they thinking? What is it like to be one of these people? Meanwhile his brother was away, and it became his chore to cover a march through Asbury Park, a New Jersey resort, of construction workers on a patriotic holiday. He described the marchers as slope-shouldered, humpbacked, slovenly drudges. The onlookers, he said, were even worse. He described them as typical Jersey Shore resort visitors, the kind of people who, when a dollar bill is held before their eyes, cease to recognize the rights of anyone else. The story got him fired.

So he went to live on the Lower East Side, rooming with three medical students. He decided he could get to know the Bowery by masquerading as a bum. Here's a slender, young, blond, almost pretty guy—but he got his Bowery bum costume together, letting those wisps of beard and long locks of hair get dirty and fall over his face. He slept in the flophouses, not once but repeatedly. He even brought visitors in to take a look. Nobody ever went back a second time. It was probably in the flophouses that he contracted the tuberculosis he died of at twenty-eight. But out of that experience came his extraordinary *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which is fiction, but closely based on fact.

One of his roommates recalled the day Crane came home highly excited saying, "Have you ever seen a stone fight?" He'd seen some urchins in pitched battle, hurling rocks. The roommates glanced at one another and rolled their eyes as if to say, "Okaaaay . . . a stone fight." Crane's stone fight, however, led to one of the great first lines in American literature: "A very little boy stood on a pile of gravel defending the honor of Rum Alley."

Crane worked as a newspaper writer up until the verge of his death. His accomplishments in what was truly a new journalism 110 years ago should be part of the common knowledge of all newspaper editors, especially now that every newspaper editor in the United States is asking, "How can this newspaper be saved?" They should be asking, how can we get to the emotional heart of our stories? Yet only a few newspaper editors are considering any such thing—not knowing that it is the question of the hour, and that this is the eleventh hour.

Telling the Story, Telling the Truth

ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO

When I began at the *Washington Post* as a reporter in Central America, I found myself working for a very professional organization, but one located inside the world's greatest military power and largest economy, which considered itself to be under threat by a ten-elevator country. I actually counted all the elevators in Nicaragua while I was living there. As a *Post* reporter working in Managua, I was expected to take this threat seriously and report on it.

As the locus of revolution shifted, I moved from Managua to San Salvador. I continued to report what seemed to me hard facts: massacres and mutilated bodies that appeared on San Salvador street corners at dawn. The evidence pointed to the Salvadoran government as the source of this horror. Since the United States supported the Salvadoran government in its fight against the guerrillas, that evidence was questioned in ways that sometimes made me feel as if I was losing my mind. *Post* editors repeatedly asked me to strike a neutral tone. Those editors were brave, intelligent, caring people, but the Reagan administration was setting the agenda.

Eventually, I wrote about a mass killing that turned out to be the

largest massacre of the twentieth century in the Western Hemisphere. Salvadoran soldiers, who had been trained by U.S. advisors, shot, burned alive, or hacked to death eight hundred men, women, and children. The *Post* ran the story I wrote on the front page. The *New York Times* ran a story the same day. And then *nothing*—no follow-up stories, no editorial, no television coverage, no stories in other newspapers. A few ultra-right-wing Reagan administration officials responded by saying that the *Times* reporter and I couldn't be trusted.

For quite a few years liberal media outlets and activists hounded the question of whether the *Times* reporter and I had been hounded out of our respective newspapers because of those articles—as if *that* were what mattered. Twelve years later an Argentine team of forensic anthropologists excavated the site of the El Mozote massacre. They documented the deaths, bone by bone.

The years rolled by. Eventually, the U.S. government decided that maybe a ten-elevator country didn't pose such a threat, and that maybe the Salvadoran guerrillas wouldn't seem such a menace if they were allowed to participate in the political process. A decade after it all began, Central America vanished from the map. Just like that.

The Central Americans weren't any less poor. The victims hadn't come back to life. No justice had been done. Nevertheless, the U.S. public's attention was deemed exhausted on this particular subject. When was the last time you saw an article about El Salvador? And when you saw one, did you want to read it?

When Central America dropped off the U.S. media's map of the world, it was as if I had dropped into that void as well. I felt like the character from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* who survives a massacre of banana plantation workers. He spends the rest of his life saying, "There was this massacre," to which people respond, "You're crazy. That never happened." I never stopped being angry about that.

My driving desire as a writer is to make it impossible for the U.S. reader to ignore Latin America. I do that by telling stories. Stories are the opposite of hard news, the opposite of the easy anecdote.

While I worked for the *Post* in Central America, I was a victim of news addiction. I was always searching for the "big story." What creates news addiction? Why do people want to read newspapers and turn on the television to find out what's going on? I'd like to believe it's some basic, ethical desire to participate as a citizen of the world community. Too often, though, hard news doesn't give us the knowledge or ability to do that. Watching CNN out of the corner of one eye while answering e-mail and learning about an earthquake in Kabul or

of Yasser Arafat's death in a sixty-second spot, while the text at the bottom of the screen reports the collapse of a stock market somewhere, is *not* participating in the world. It is the opposite: feeding the strangely comforting sensation that the world spins too fast to really think about anything.

This sort of news addiction assumes that hard news, as reported in the United States, is fundamentally linked to reality. In spite of my own former news addiction, I disagree. So-called pure news, just the facts, is now considered so pure that newspapers routinely *label* analysis as they label packs of cigarettes: *Warning: this article contains both hard facts and thought.*

In my writing, I purposefully blend information, observation, analysis, and my own reactions to the material. I tell stories, because stories allow us to think wholeheartedly, to truly understand. The greatest Latin American novelists, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, began as journalists. That experience has contributed to a literary school of Latin American journalism that is better written and that contains much more emotional content than U.S. journalism.

To write for a U.S. audience about Latin America I have developed some operating principles. I rarely mention the United States. While reporting, I don't talk to State Department officials, ambassadors, or World Bank staffers. I pretend that Latin America is an independent entity, that we Latin Americans have the authority to talk about ourselves on our own terms. By doing this I present a more complete Latin America, one that doesn't rely on what a third party told me.

I do enormous amounts of reading before I begin reporting. If I can, I spend a month before I begin a trip, as well as my first week in a place, reading prodigiously.

Once I begin to write, I spend days and days working on a lede. I often trade on the reader's fascination with exoticism and the grotesque in my ledes. In the interest of getting people in the United States to read about Latin America, I'm willing to play that for all it's worth. Here is one example, from my book *The Heart That Bleeds*:

Garbage has become an obsession for the inhabitants of Mexico City, spawning any number of fantastic stories, all of them true. There is, for example, the story of the open-air garbage dumps that spontaneously ignited one day in July, spreading fire and toxic fumes over acres of refuse stacked twenty yards high. There

is the story of the *cacique* who controlled more than half of the city's seventeen thousand-odd *pepenadores*, or garbage pickers, demanded sexual favors from the garbage pickers' daughters, and also took all his workers off to Acapulco on vacation once a year. There is the story of a sixty-square-mile garbage dump that the city government decided to turn into a park, complete with picnic tables—tables that have since been sinking gently into the settling layers of trash and loam.

And then there are the rats. One of the most memorable stories dates from the beginning of the decade when an evening paper announced above the fold that a giant mutant rat had been discovered floating dead in the sewage canal. The article said that the rat was the size of a Volkswagen and in the accompanying photo one could verify the caption's claim that the beast had the face of a bear, the hands of a man and the tail of a rat. Two days later, a morning paper explained that the corpse belonged to a lion owned by a three-flea traveling circus.

By being extremely specific in what I report, I don't just bring readers into a world of exotica and the grotesque, but into a world where human beings survive with dignity. Once I have hooked them I trust my reader to care about the same things I care about, the same things that my subjects care about.

Specificity is central to both my writing and my reporting. Focusing on details somehow lashes me to the story, as if it were a mast. I find that as long as I stay focused on detail, detail, *detail* while I'm reporting, I advance the story.

I write in the first person a lot. The "I" in my stories is the reader's proxy. My great ambition is to take readers out of their comfort zones and put them in positions of discomfort. I want them to see and smell and taste and touch and hear the things that I did in their place as the reporter.

While out reporting, I stage a little theater in my mind. Before choreographers begin rehearsals, they choose a group of dancers. By the end of the first rehearsal, one dancer will stand out. As a reporter I do the same sort of casting. By the end of the first week I have my leading cast selected. Later on, I figure out how much I can use the other, minor characters. I have been accused, rightly, of having a tendency to favor strong, impoverished, old peasant women who must go down miles to the river for their bucket of water every day and climb back up again—singing! It's true. Once that weakness was

pointed out to me, I tried to work against it. When I write, I try not to indulge my weaknesses, but I also try to avoid playing to my strengths. It forces me to stretch and makes the story bigger.

Writers must give themselves that freedom to fail. As a dancer I learned that unless I jumped as hard and as high as I could until I fell, I hadn't found out how hard or high I could jump. Risk-taking and failure are important. When an editor says to me, "You know, that sentence is awful," I don't say, "Oh, my editor is so terrible." I say, "Oh, that sentence is awful. Let's take it out. It's only words."

On Voice

SUSAN ORLEAN

Developing a writer's voice is almost a process of unlearning, one analogous to children's painting. Young children often create fabulous paintings, only to be told after they start school that real houses don't look that way. At that point, most people lose their ability to be visually creative. Truly great painting retains some element of a child's emotional authenticity. Great writing does, too.

Self-analysis is crucial to developing a strong voice. *Who am I? Why do I write?* Your identity and your self-understanding become subliminal parts of your writer's voice—especially in long-form narrative writing. Imagine yourself telling friends about a story that excites you. Your friends follow the story even though it's not linear but circles back as you tell it. The way you tell a story over dinner is true to who you are, whether that is deeply analytical or extremely witty. At such moments you aren't self-conscious, and you aren't thinking about your editor.

You can't invent a voice. And you can't imitate someone else's voice, though trying to can be a good exercise. It can lead you to begin to understand the *mechanisms* that convey the voice. Read your stories out loud so you can *hear* how you tell stories. As you read, ask yourself: *Does it sound real? Would I have said it that way?* If the answer to either question is no, you have done something wrong. I find that sometimes when I give readings of my published work, I skip parts that seem boring to me. Then I wonder, would it have been better to edit that out in the first place? When you read aloud, extraneous material falls away.

Voice is—as the word itself tells us—the way a writer *talks*. You are ~~speaking to your readers. Sometimes we think we have to come up with something clever, but cleverness for its own sake is rarely powerful.~~

Pace, the sense of timing in a piece, is linked to voice. Pace determines whether attempts at humor will succeed. Change your story's pace to change the mood. Long sentences can slow down the reader. Short sentences race the reader through a scene. As you read your piece aloud, you hear how your readers will make their way through it. Then you can control that movement.

Word choice is another element of voice. When you make an analogy, it's not just to give the reader an image but to advance a larger idea or theme. Once I had a fight with an editor because I wanted to describe a basketball player's feet as "banana-shaped." My editor argued that feet can't really be banana-shaped. And, further, thinking about bananas takes the reader away from the subject: a person playing basketball. "You're giving the reader a ticket to the tropics," he said. I spent hours trying to find the right image to replace *banana*. Suddenly, it came to me: *pontoon*. His feet were pontoon-shaped; he floated over the basketball court. Analogies like these don't usually come as I am reporting. I have to sit at my desk and really work at finding the strongest image possible.

Another aspect of voice is taking on your characters' voices. Sometimes, immersed in my reporting, I find myself thinking in the same rhythm as someone I'm writing about. This is part of my temperament; I tend to become caught up in other worlds. As long as I don't slide into mimicry, it can help a piece of writing. You don't want to hijack someone's voice but draw inspiration from it. It is often a sign that you have submerged yourself deeply in a story, inhabiting it. I wrote half of "The American Man at Age Ten" in the voice of a boy. I stepped in and out of that persona throughout the story.

Soon after I started writing, I realized that I was crafty and could come up with gimmicks to make my work look jazzy. As I matured as a writer and gained more confidence, I began losing what I had mistakenly understood to be my style. I returned to something simpler. One watershed moment was the realization that my writing voice had circled back to something natural, intuitive, and instinctive.