

TELLING TRUE STORIES

INCLUDING ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:

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A NONFICTION WRITERS' GUIDE

FROM THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION AT

HARVARD UNIVERSITY



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Stories Matter

JACQUI BANASZYNSKI

I want you to travel with me to a famine camp in Sudan on the Ethiopian border. You have seen the dreadful television footage of the starving babies, their bellies bloated. Flies crawl in and out of their eyes and mouths, jealous for the last drops of moisture that cling there as long as these babies cling to life. Now you are among them, as a reporter for a midsized daily newspaper in the upper Midwest, charged with writing about a place you have never been before, about an event you can't possibly understand, for readers who will never go there and don't know what it has to do with them—beyond writing a check to charity.

You've been at the camp for several days. You walk its ground each day, stepping around and over 100,000 people who have come because they heard there was water. By the time they arrived—some of them walking three weeks from their Ethiopian villages—the water was no more than a well of mud in a dry riverbed.

You watch the little girls walk to the river and dig in the mud, soaking their rags with moisture that they wring, drop by drop, into their plastic jugs. You sit in the clinic where the waiting line is hundreds long. Desperate fathers thrust their babies at you, thinking that because you are a *khawaja*, a foreigner, you must be a doctor. You must be able to help. But all you have to offer is a poised notebook and some questions—suddenly too little to accommodate this reality.

You wander to the edge of the camp, to the vast defecation zone where those healthy enough to walk go to heed nature's call. It is oblivious to the need for a little human dignity. Women squat inside their skirts, their heads covered in veils, trying to create some sense of cloister.

You stumble to the rocky hillside where clusters of men claw at the hard earth, creating holes just deep enough to cradle the shrouded bodies they gently place there. The holes don't need to be deep, for the bodies are very thin. They bury seventy-five each day, sometimes more. Most are babies.

At night you retreat to the other side of the straw wall that encloses this awful world. You collapse—ashamed of your small and temporary hunger, of your selfish fears—on a cot in a small straw hut. You're grateful that it's dark, that you will not have to look at things for a few hours, but you can still hear. You hear coughing and vomiting and whimpering and keening. You hear shouts, angry bursts of life, and rasps that rattle to silence as seventy-five more people die.

Then you hear something else: *singing*. You hear sweet chants and deep rhythms. Each night, over and over, at about the same time. You think you are hallucinating. You wonder if you have gone quite mad from your fear. How could people sing in the face of this horror? And why? You lie in the dark and you wonder until the mercy of sleep claims you. Daylight comes again, and you open your eyes.

I went to Africa in 1985 to report on the Ethiopian famine for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. I had never been outside of North America.

The singing intrigued me. It took me several days to find out what it was. I had to go through several translators before someone finally told me that it was *storytelling*. When the villages in Ethiopia and what is now Eritrea finally got too parched or too bombed for people to survive there, they got up, en masse, and walked to the famine camps. Then they settled, in whatever little huts they could find, as a village. They continued whatever rituals they could. One of their rituals was their nightly storytelling. The elders gathered the children around, and they sang their songs.

It was their version of school. It was how they carried their history and culture and law with them. It may have been my first conscious awareness of the power, history, and universality of storytelling. We all grew up with stories, but do we ever stop to think about how much they connect us and how powerful they are?

Even, or especially, in the face of death these stories live on, passed from elder to younger, from generation to generation, carried with as much care as those precious jugs of water. Events pass, people live and die, life changes. But stories endure.

Several years after I went to Sudan, I stumbled across what has become one of my favorite books, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. He writes, "Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories

are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story."

I asked Tomas Alex Tizon, who used to work with me at the *Seattle Times*, why human beings need stories, and he replied:

Thank God for stories—for those who have them, for those who tell them, for those who devour them as the soul sustenance that they are. Stories give shape to experience and allow us to go through life unblind. Without them, everything that happens would float around, undifferentiated. None of it would mean anything. Once you have a version of what happened, all the other good stuff about being human comes into play. You can laugh, feel awe, commit a passionate act, get pissed, want to change things.

My friend and fellow writer Katherine Lanpher, who wrote for the *Pioneer Press* and is now with Air America, told me this about stories:

Stories are the connective tissue of the human race, whether you are dissecting a school levy or South Korean politics. At the heart of every issue is a human element that leads to the three most beautiful words in the English language: *What happened next?* If you answer that question, you are a storyteller.

They say language makes us human. That notion is being challenged as we discover that apes have language. Whales have language. I welcome them into our fold. I'm not threatened by them, quite frankly, because I think that stories make us human. Only by telling them do we stay so.

Stories are our prayers. Write and edit them with due reverence, even when the stories themselves are irreverent.

Stories are parables. Write and edit and tell yours with meaning, so each tale stands in for a larger message, each story a guidepost on our collective journey.

Stories are history. Write and edit and tell yours with accuracy and understanding and context and with unwavering devotion to the truth.

Stories are music. Write and edit and tell yours with pace and rhythm and flow. Throw in the dips and twirls that make them excit-

ing, but stay true to the core beat. Readers hear stories with their inner ear.

Stories are our soul. Write and edit and tell yours with your whole selves. Tell them as if they are all that matters. It matters that you do it as if that's all there is.

Delving into Private Lives

GAY TALESE

The fiction writer, playwright, and novelist deal with private life. They deal with ordinary people and elevate these people into our consciousness. The nonfiction writer has traditionally dealt with people in public life, names that are known to us. The private lives that I wanted to delve into as a young writer at the *New York Times* would not often be considered worthy of news coverage. I thought those people had a sense of what was going on. I believed if we could bring them into the larger consciousness, they could help us understand the trends happening around us.

My father was a tailor. He had come from a small village in southern Italy, but he was very fine with a needle and thread. He brought a sense of his own style to his work. He had a great sense of caring about a perfect buttonhole, of measuring perfectly, of making a suit that would fit on the body and would elevate the man's presence. He was an artist of a needle and thread who didn't care whether he made a lot of money.

We were people of the underclass, people who went out and observed but were not ourselves observed. My father was an eavesdropping tailor. He knew a lot about the people who came into his shop. I grew up hearing about the lives of ordinary people, and I thought they were interesting.

My father learned the English language by reading the *New York Times*. During World War II my father's relatives back in Italy were all on the wrong side of the war. His brothers were fighting with Mussolini's army against the invading Allies in 1943. My father read the *New York Times* with a certain sense of concern. I saw in that little house of mine how major events affected us. Each day the *Times* had maps and arrows showing the armies getting closer and closer to my father's village. I saw a great sense of drama.

This is nonfiction; this is my life.

I never had a happier time than when I was a reporter in the *New York Times* newsroom. I left with a tear in my eye when I was thirty-two years old, after working there for a decade. I left not because of any disenchantment with the newspaper, but rather because of the limitations of daily journalism: space and time. The limited time one could devote to the indulgence of one's curiosity made it somewhat frustrating to stay on a daily newspaper. I wanted to spend more time with people who were not necessarily newsworthy. I believed then—and I believe now even more—that the role of the nonfiction writer should be with private people whose lives represent a larger significance.

When I left the *New York Times* in 1965 to work at *Esquire*, the first thing I did was go back and write about some of the journalists there, those wonderful characters in the city room, who weren't news. The first person I wrote about was an obituary writer, Alden Whitman. He would wander around the city room with a little green cap, smoking a pipe, thinking about death, thinking of people who were about to die. He would interview them and tell them that he was going to update their files—a sort of advance obituary. He made his living in this very distinguished way. What was it like to be a man who interviewed people whose time on earth was worthy of space in the *New York Times* when they died?

Now in my seventies, I still have as much of that curiosity as I had at age twenty-two. Curiosity is the beginning. That's not something we are going to get from the Columbia School of Journalism or the University of Missouri. As a nonfiction writer I indulge my curiosity in private lives. I write nonfiction as a creative form. Creative, not falsified: not making up names, not composite characters, not taking liberties with factual information, but getting to know real-life characters through research, trust, and building relationships. You come to know them so well that they are like part of your private life. I respect these people even though I have written about gangsters and pornographers. I saw the world as they see it.

I find a way to write with respect, a way to write truth that is not insulting. I don't make allowances for their dalliances or deviations, but I slide those facts in without being harsh. Precise writing allows that; sloppy writing does not. I get this care for language from reading the great fiction writers: F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, Irwin Shaw.

By 1999 I had spent eight years working on a book but was unable to finish it. I wanted to write about failure. It interests me because it is

a learning experience. When I was a sportswriter, the locker room of a loser was always more interesting than the locker room of a winner.

I wanted to write about John Wayne Bobbitt, the guy who lost his penis. He was a loser in every sense of the word, yet he got no sympathy from anybody. His wife was treated as a virtuous woman, because he got what he deserved. That was interesting. I wanted to know John Bobbitt, and I hung around with him for six months. I drove him around, got to know his doctor, and eventually got to know his wife, Lorena. I traced the knife she had used to Ikea, where she had bought it three years earlier.

On a Saturday in July 1999, I happened to be watching a baseball game on television. On that same day was a highly advertised game between the United States national women's soccer team and the national team of China. I was channel surfing because I was interested in this soccer game, too. Mia Hamm was said to be the greatest soccer player in the United States—not only among women but among men. I started flipping between baseball and soccer, trying to avoid work, so I could get my mind off the miserable life that I was living.

I had never watched soccer in my life. Like most people my age, I don't understand soccer. My father might have understood it, but for all the wonderful things that were imported from the old country, they did not import soccer. Ninety thousand people in the Rose Bowl were watching it. I don't know what they were making all the noise about, but they were clearly excited.

I was interested because of the adversarial relationship between the United States and China. It wound up being a nothing-nothing game. They had a shoot-out of penalty kicks. One Chinese woman ended up missing the penalty kick, and the game was over. If I were a sportswriter, I would have been in that locker room, and I wouldn't have been talking to Mia Hamm but to the woman who missed that kick.

She had to get on an airplane in Los Angeles, spend twenty-some hours in the air, and return home to a China eager to knock off Americans, angry at our meddlesome foreign policy. It struck me that this was the way to write about China. This woman was twenty-five years old and she lost. What was it like for a twenty-five-year-old woman to screw up in this Communist regime emerging as a world power?

I thought, "Oh, the *New York Times* will have that tomorrow." But there was nothing in the paper about the woman who missed the kick. That week both *Newsweek* and *Time* had cover stories about the

Women's World Cup, but nothing about what I wanted to know. It was all about the American victory and how the Chinese team missed the kick, but nothing about that woman—number 13.

I know Norman Pearlstine of Time-Warner, so I called him. "Norman," I said. "In the article today there was nothing about the Chinese woman." So I sent him a fax and told him what I thought would be a good story. I said, "If you write about this woman, she will tell you something about how the Chinese react, what the neighborhood said about her, what her mother had to deal with. The Women's World Cup was televised around the world, and she missed. How do they deal with defeat? These women were part of the great achievement of China's being a world power. She might have had a great-great-grandmother with bound feet. She is using soccer to represent the new China, but she misses the damn ball and now represents disappointment."

I thought she could be a real key to representing the story of China. I would be glad to do that story. They thanked me for my idea, but nothing happened. The summer passed. I was in Frankfurt, celebrating my fortieth anniversary with my wife. And I decided I was not going back to New York at the end of the week. I changed my ticket and went to Hong Kong. I had to find Yu Ling. I went to Beijing—speaking not a word of Chinese, knowing no one. I checked into a good hotel because surely someone would speak English there. I asked the concierge.

This was not like calling the public relations department of the New York Yankees for an interview with Derek Jeter. I wanted to talk to someone who had missed a kick. I stayed in China for five months looking for her. Finally, I got to meet her. I saw her again and again, working through interpreters. I saw her on the field, met her teammates. Soon I had put a year into it.

In 2000, the Chinese mainland team went to Taiwan, and I went with them. This is the type of nonfiction that I indulge in, hanging around people. You don't necessarily interview them, but you become part of the atmosphere.

The girl who missed the kick is featured in the book. Not only has that story come together, but all that other stuff—John Wayne Bobbitt, the storefront that can't ever host a successful restaurant, a red-neck sheriff in the post-Selma South, all that—is now the story of my trying to deal with reality, with all its misadventures, its wrong turns, with an ever-energized quest to know something about people who tend to be ignored.

The Narrative Idea

DAVID HALBERSTAM

As narrative writers we care deeply about sustaining quality journalism in an age that is rather inhospitable to it, for both technological and economic reasons. Television came along in the 1960s and 1970s and replaced print journalism as the quickest, most powerful instrument for news. On the occasion of cataclysmic events—the crashing of a NASA shuttle, John Kennedy’s assassination, the September 11 attacks—people turn to television. It is the prime carrier of news. So we, the print journalists, have had to go where television cameras could not. We must answer the questions that the television’s images pose. We’re lucky, though: Television news raises more questions than it answers.

Print journalists have to be better than they used to be. With network television, cable television, the Internet, and even video games it’s tougher to compete for people’s time. There are more and more sources of information out there, and they demand less and less intellectual energy. People work harder; they have less time. When I started as a journalist, fifty-two years ago, I operated in an age with a single-income middle class. Now it’s a two-income middle class. The writer must get better and better, become a better storyteller.

To write good narrative you must be able to answer the question: *What is the story about?* The *idea*, the concept, is critical to narrative journalism. Moving the idea from genesis to fruition is what it’s all about.

Let’s start with the book idea that became *The Teammates*. In February 2002, I had dinner in Palm Beach with Emily and Dominic DiMaggio. Dominic had been a center fielder for the Boston Red Sox back in the 1940s. In 2002, he was eighty-four. In 1989, I’d written about him in the book *Summer of ’49*. We had kept up a friendship. That night Dominic told me about driving from Boston to Florida with John Pesky, his former teammate. They’d gone to see Ted Williams, another teammate, who was dying. They all knew it would be the last time they would be together. Dominic described how he walked into the room, how desperately frail Ted was, and how he started singing to his old teammate.

I listened to Dominic’s story that night, and then went home and thought, “That’s never going to happen again. Four men, essentially one team, staying friends for sixty years, paying attention to one another, phoning one another, and caring about one another late in their lives.” I thought, “That could be a really nice, small book.” I called Will Schwalbe, my editor, and outlined the book and my idea. He immediately got it. “Perfect!” He said. “*Tuesdays with Morrie* meets *Summer of ’49*.” Bingo!

Writing *The Teammates* was pure pleasure. I liked all the men; I’d worked with them before. There was a richness to them and their lives. They understood themselves and what had worked for them, and yet they had a certain modesty. They’d reached the age of eighty, so they knew the book would be a summing up—not just for Ted Williams but of their own lives. Later, my friend and colleague Frank DeFord, a wonderful writer for *Sports Illustrated*, got hold of the book and said, “Damn! Why didn’t I have the idea?”

That’s precisely the point: The book *is* the idea. Once you have the idea, it just flows out. This is perhaps the best advice I can offer. Taking an idea, a central point, and pursuing it, turning it into a story that tells something about the way we live today, is the essence of narrative journalism.

I’ll give another example. In the fall of 2001, Graydon Carter of *Vanity Fair* called and asked me to go to our neighborhood fire station, about three blocks from my home on Manhattan’s West Side. On September 11, 2001, thirteen men had gone out on two rigs. Twelve had died. Like so many New Yorkers, I wanted to do something in that terrible moment after the tragedy. I was delighted to do it; I jumped at the assignment. I went to the firehouse and talked to the other firemen, all of whom were in considerable emotional pain. They were extraordinarily open and generous toward me. I did about eight or nine days of reporting, and I thought, “This could be a wonderful, small book.”

This is the key to the book: In a city that had been hit by an apocalyptic event, in the midst of it all, was one small institution, a place where relationships were intensely humane, very old-fashioned. Men ate together and slept together and risked their lives for one another. Yet that one institution had paid disproportionately with its suffering. I thought that I could measure some of the pain inflicted on the city by looking at that firehouse. The tone of that book, *Firehouse*, is very understated. It had to be. The book’s language had to suit the occasion. You don’t “hype up” in the wake of tragedy. You underwrite, letting the events speak for themselves. You treat everyone with respect.

The result is a very simple story of a terrible day in a city and who pays the price for it. The book, in fact, is the only one of my books that is not dedicated. The dedication was so self-evidently to the men who died there.

I got the idea for my first—and still best-known—book, *The Best and the Brightest*, in 1969 after I returned from my second tour as a reporter in Vietnam. I knew that U.S. policy in Vietnam wasn't going to work out. I thought, "When the Kennedy administration swept into office, they were called brilliant, the best, most able group to serve in a generation. And yet, clearly, Vietnam was turning out to be a tragic miscalculation, as painful as anything this country had experienced since the Civil War. How could it have happened? How could men so allegedly brilliant be the architects of so great a tragedy?" I envisioned a mystery novel, a detective novel, with a great cast of characters.

I figured it was a four-year book. I got a rather small advance that came out to about \$10,000 a year. I thought the book would take two and a half years of legwork if I went out and did two long interviews a day. That's almost exactly the way the equation came out. To my surprise, the book became a huge best seller. It spent thirty-six weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Doing the book changed my life. I didn't get rich, but because of its success, I received generous book advances, giving me the time to do future books the way I wanted to do them. *Time* is the crucial ingredient for a nonfiction writer. The more time, the more interviews you can do, and the greater the density of your work.

I'd like to give one critical bit of advice to those who are drawn to this work and want to succeed: *The idea is vital*. Telling a good story demands a great conception, a great idea for why the story works—for what it is and how it connects to the human condition. It is about ideas, about narration, about telling a story. You must be able to point to something larger.

The legwork of reporting is critical and most of the fun. It turns an idea into an entertaining and substantive story. The more reporting—the more anecdotes, perceptions, and windows on a subject—the better. Writing is secondary. Sometimes when I lecture to journalism classes at colleges, I tell them I'm about to divulge the best question a reporter can ask a source. For the first time (in some cases) their interest perks up and out come the notebooks. And I say, "At the end of the interview always ask, 'Who else should I see?'"

It's very simple: The more views of any subject that you get, the better. The more reporting you do, the more authority your voice

has. I can always tell when a journalist is cheating. I can tell when it's a two-phone-call story. If you were an executive producer of a football game on television, would you have a better product if you had twenty cameras on the field or just two? The more people you talk with, the more perspectives you gather, and the more interviews you do, the better. Your writing will flow from the material you've gathered. Chances are, you've come into this work because you genuinely like talking to people. If not, you should probably find other work. The legwork must be fun. Think of it as part of a continuing education; we're paid to learn. It isn't just getting a byline that drives you; it isn't just where the story lands in the paper. Fifty-two years later, I still like what I do.

Here's my last bit of advice, garnered from those fifty-two years: *Read*. Read good nonfiction books. Read very good newspapers: the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*. When you find a reporter whose work you admire, break his or her code. Examine the story and figure out what the reporter did, where he or she went, how that reporter constructed the story, and why it worked.

Read good detective fiction. I don't think anybody does narrative structure better than good detective writers. Read the work of Gay Talese, one of the journalists who broke through the barriers to narrative writing in the 1960s. You'll find density in all of his work. He took the time to observe, to be a fly on the wall. His work is great cinematic journalism. When you read his work, you can almost hear a little camera whirring away. I belong to a generation of people like Talese and others who struggled against more limited forms of journalism. Our editors just wanted the who, what, where, when, and why. Often, the work we thought was our best got cut away.

Things are changing. Narrative nonfiction is on the rise, and I feel lucky to have spent more than fifty years doing it. I've been paid to learn, to ask questions, to think. What could be more enjoyable and more rewarding than that?

Difficult Journalism That's Slap-Up Fun

KATHERINE BOO

The greatest potential—still largely unrealized, I believe—of narrative reporting is communicating the very hardest news. Narrative can convey vividly and potently the greater failings of government and industry, inequities of class, and fractures in the infrastructure of opportunities in this country. It can engage the public, almost against its will, in crucial questions of meritocracy and social justice.

Over the years my editors and I have wrestled a lot with the tension between narrative and news. After I turned in a story draft for a series about neglect in Washington, D.C., group homes for disabled adults, one of my editors, a very smart, experienced, and tough woman, said, "You have uncovered serious crimes here. You are burying them under a bunch of distracting writing." A literary approach to the story, she argued, sabotaged the prospect that those crimes would be taken seriously, that justice would be done.

In the face of these risks, why do we choose narrative?

For some subjects, *not* choosing narrative means not being read at all. When your subjects are grim and your characters destitute, disabled, or extremely unintelligent, and the wrongs against them are complicated, how many people are going to relish tucking into your story with their bagels and cream cheese on Sunday morning? I choose narrative, sometimes with ambivalence, to further the goal of our profession: readers finishing the story and maybe giving half a damn.

Go to a place in your community that you don't know very well, ride a few buses, get off them, explore, and ask yourself questions about what you see. I guarantee you will find something that the public doesn't know about because too few journalists bother to make these trips anymore. It's considered inefficient. When editors ask what you have been doing, they don't want to hear, "I've been riding buses and thinking all day."

Doing this work might involve some subversion of your editors, of the process, and of the marketplace. Serious subjects don't sell newspapers anyway. Narrative about serious subjects might not be a popu-

lar craft, but it's essential. Without the telling, well-reported detail, the narrative form is an empty seduction. It's us listening to ourselves talk, falling in love with the sound of our own voices.

How do you find those telling details, the earned facts, and then convey them? It involves two opposite sets of skills. While reporting, you must lose control so you can accumulate the facts. While writing, you must exert maniacal control over those facts. You begin by being laid-back and hanging out. Take the great inhale so that when you exhale, you will have among your notebooks that detail that conveys so much, so economically. Weave that detail into the warp and weft of your hard facts.

A friend once told me that I find my stories because I never learned to drive. It's true. I take the bus. I walk around. By being out there—not the driver of my story but the literal and figurative rider—I have the opportunity to see things that I would never otherwise see.

I found the group home story because I missed a bus in a housing project. Someone gave me a ride home. He had to stop at a group home because he was having some disagreement with the staff there. I entered the group home at eight in the evening. What I saw there led to my story.

When I do interviews, I never take my subjects to a restaurant for lunch. It's one of the worst things a journalist can do. Stay on their turf. Interview them in *their* world. If they say, "Now I've got to go and pick up my kids from day care and go to the grocery store," you say, "Great. I can write while we're on the bus." I'm not just hearing their stories, I'm watching them live. I find my truth in the dialectic between what they say and how they live.

You prepare for that kind of reporting by *not* preparing, by *not* scheduling three interviews a day. Carol Guzy, a photographer at the *Washington Post*, likes to say, "When you go for coffee, bring a tent." I carry a big purse because if I need to get on a bus and go to Georgia, I can. It's very difficult to do this work halfway. It's very difficult to say, "At five o'clock every day I'm going to be home." For a lot of us that creates practical problems, problems with our families.

Reporting gets easier over time. A friend of mine at the *Chicago Tribune* says, "Curiosity is a muscle. The more you use it, the more it can do." The more you force yourself out into the world, taking chances, and the more times you call the public official to get that document he doesn't want to give you, the easier it becomes and the more pleasure you get in doing it. That pleasure and passion will show when you get down to the business of writing.

I'm not sure that writing gets easier over time. It still seems very hard. The hardest thing is figuring out how to keep the reader from throwing it down and getting a beer instead. You must choose, and choose aggressively. One of the most painful things about writing is all you *can't* say in your stories. I think about the people who died in Washington, D.C.'s neglectful group home system, the terrible stories that I chose not to include. By watching readers' reactions to narrative stories, I've come to believe that three well-articulated, nuanced examples—backed by sharply documented evidence of a broader problem—are far better than twenty examples that raise more questions than they answer. Stories that run in one, two, or three parts, not sixteen, are more effective.

We often talk about story-making as a two-part process: reporting and writing. This leaves out the third part: thinking. I spend a great deal of time holding my themes and scenes up to the light and asking myself: *Which facets are intuitive? Which facets say something meaningful?*

As I do this thinking, this distilling, I talk a lot to my friends—not journalists but painters, poets, and stockbrokers. I listen carefully to what interests them and what irritates them. Listen to the questions people ask after you give them a two-sentence synopsis of your reporting day. In those questions and reactions you get closer to the most important ideas and arguments that you need to show in your scenes. Once you understand the heart of the matter, you will have a much better sense of how to refine and arrange the parts.

This is difficult journalism. It's lonely journalism. Not long ago I was on a Greyhound bus trip across the South, reporting. I was using the Memphis bus station as my Hyatt Regency. My back ached and my butt hurt. I hadn't had a proper night's sleep in four days. But intellectually and emotionally, I was as far as I could possibly be from bored. It's lonely and stressful work, but when you read Adam Hochschild, H. G. Bissinger, Darcy Frey, Joan Didion, Jessica Mitford, A. J. Liebling, or any of the other writers who have done this work so well for so long, you can't help but know that this work is also mind-stretching, life-enhancing, slap-up fun. Go out and find some of it.

PART II



FINDING, RESEARCHING, AND REPORTING TOPICS

Introduction

MARK KRAMER AND WENDY CALL

Before you can construct a factual narrative or develop a strong main character or identify a theme—or even know that you have a useful story—you must *report*. The process always begins with empirical data collection.

This section of the anthology might be the most important. It covers a complicated range of skills and practices: intuiting what might be an apt topic, finding the right place in the vast world to pursue it, developing working relationships with the people you find there, and interpreting the mixed-up, ongoing clutter of activity that constitutes the real world. The writer must transform observation and data into comprehension and then develop tactics for transmitting that understanding to readers.

This section doesn't recite general principles of reporting; many other books have done that work. We've gathered and culled observations, experiences, and musings of fine reporters. They tell you how they thought up topics, identified the right locations for reporting and research, settled in for the long haul, recorded what was happening, decoded it, added background research and their own intelligence, and finally began to write.

The practitioners included here have written for or edited the country's top newspapers and magazines, authored award-winning books, and taught in several fine journalism schools. Their work takes different forms, presents different worlds, and addresses diverse audiences, and yet it all rests on the same foundation: reporting.

A narrative writer with a good story idea is a solo entrepreneur doing a start-up. Until the piece is published, the risk is mostly on the

writer's shoulders. Even a staff reporter at a magazine or newspaper is in large part an independent practitioner while working on a story—especially one done at the writer's own initiative. Nonfiction narrative writing may be artful, human, and even poetic, but it's also a business proposition—a very personal one. The writers here all report with their heads, their hearts, and their deep practicality.



Finding Good Topics: A Writer's Questions

LANE DEGREGORY

How does a writer decide whether a news story is worthy of narrative?

First, there must be some sort of unfolding action. Something has to *happen* so the story can progress from one point to another. To follow current, unfolding action, the writer has to be there. You can almost never write narrative over the phone. You need to be at the scene—to smell it, taste it, hear the dialogue, see the body language, look the people you will write about in the eye.

Second, the writer must gain access. If you talk to people, will they open up to you? Will they let you come back to their house, look through their closets, see what's in the refrigerator? If you don't have that kind of access, you must find someone else close who can provide the insights. Otherwise, you end up utterly frustrated.

Once these two conditions seem likely—but before I propose a narrative story to my editor and write a budget line for it—I ask myself seven questions.

Can I go along for a ride or take a walk or be at a meeting, a trial, or a funeral?

Action moves the story along. Can I be a fly on the wall at an already scheduled event? I do my interviews before or after, so I don't interrupt the action. If my subject has a regular routine, I go along. I see the person doing things that I would never have thought to ask about. If there isn't anything going on, I can *make* something happen. I'll flip through photo albums with the person, taking a walk down

the proverbial memory lane. Anything I can do to keep the person moving *and* comfortable provides more material for my notebook.

Is something going to happen?

If I can't be present for some unfolding action, has something significant *already* happened? If so, can I look back and witness its effects on the person or the event I'm writing about? Is there a video of the event, or did someone take pictures?

Is the place important, is the action important, or is the person important?

What am I going to focus on? Is the scene or the movement most important? Is it a "finding the answer to life" sort of piece, or is it a quiet moment about a quiet person?

Will there be interaction between my character and others?

Dialogue is fun to read. It's so much more real and alive than my questions and the subject's answers. I try to find out if the person I'm writing about will be taking their grandma out to lunch. If so, I want to go with them and hear how they talk naturally, not how they phrase their responses to me.

Do I want to tell the story around one scene or five minutes or a whole day, or perhaps follow someone over a period of time?

I wrote a story about a transgendered person after I followed her for ten months. Originally, I planned to follow her as she got electrolysis done, changed her name, picked out a new wardrobe, and changed the oil in her car with her new manicure. I kept following her around, but she was a lonely person and didn't really have friends or acquaintances who accepted her. I saw people reacting with surprise when she walked by on the street, but how could I write about that?

So I waited and waited and waited. Finally, she went to the driver's license office to get a picture with her new look, changing from Andrew to Madalynn. We spent about two hours at the office, including an hour waiting in line. People were forced to interact with her. When I sat down to write the story, it was the only scene I needed. Ten months of work following her around were condensed to two hours at the driver's license office.

Do the characters experience epiphany?

Do the subjects learn something about themselves? Do they become more confused about their place in the world? What kind of realization do they have or lack at the end of the story?

What's the big idea?

I ask myself this because my editor always does. Here's an example: I wrote a story about a man in a bar telling his buddies he had been flashed by two women. Why is that important? What does it say about our culture? Well, it shows a universal truth about the importance of storytelling: The guys at the bar goaded another guy to tell a story. They had stopped in after work for a moment to themselves, their break between driving the garbage truck and going home to feed the dog and make dinner and pay the bills.

If you can find a universal truth in a story, even if it's as silly as "people like to be entertained at a bar," that's important. Thinking about universal truth frames your subject and moves it from one guy at the bar to a symbol that everyone can appreciate.

When I find that meaning, linked with action, I know I have a narrative.

Finding Good Topics: An Editor's Questions

JAN WINBURN

In our newsroom we often read great narrative stories from other newspapers and wonder, "How did they get that idea?" Sometimes we call the writers and ask them. Finally, we realized we could develop a methodology for finding story ideas. We devised a set of questions. As journalist James B. Stewart said, "What are the smart questions?" Here are the seven that we use.

What are the enduring issues of the day? What are the universal subjects?

For narrative writing, this question suggests a follow-up: How can those issues be seen from inside one person's life? To give an example: The death penalty is an enduring subject. It's in the headlines, as it was twenty-five years ago and will be twenty-five years from now. A fresh take on an enduring subject is always timely. When the DNA exonerations of people convicted of murder began, I thought, "These people were nearly put to death. What would they do with the second lives they had been given?"

I wanted to find one of the oldest cases of a person released based on DNA evidence. I asked a reporter to write about what the man

had done with his second life. The story surprised me. I thought he would go as far as possible from where his name was known. He went right back to the eastern shore of Maryland, where his father had been a waterman and he was a waterman.

Is there someone whose life is like that of someone in the headlines? Can this headline story be better understood through the eyes or experience of an ordinary person?

While Monica Lewinsky was in the news, a reporter could have looked at the personal life of other White House interns.

What truism is being presented in the news, and does heading in the opposite direction suggest a story?

We write about all sorts of conventional wisdom. Sometimes, you can take one of those truisms and look in the opposite direction for a story. One of my favorite writers at the *New York Times*, Dirk Johnson, wrote a piece called "When Money Is Everything Except Hers." During the 1990s economic boom, he visited Ronald Reagan's hometown, Dixon, Illinois—a place that was supposedly very prosperous. He wrote about a person there who wasn't prosperous.

Where would it be worth going deeper? Where is the close-up on a story? Where does mystery remain?

When a story has been heavily covered, reposition the camera. Pull in from the wide, news-gathering angle. Look for a close-up angle on the story that hasn't been told.

Where is there ambiguity in a big story?

Look for what author Gary Smith calls "emotional truth." One night in October 1994 a Baltimore man named Nathaniel Hurt went out on his balcony and fired a gun four times into the darkness. Hurt, who was sixty-two, killed a thirteen-year-old boy. He lived in a neighborhood where open-air drug markets operated and kids vandalized cars and homes. Was Hurt a symbol of the beleaguered homeowner in a city under siege or just a vigilante?

Eight months after the incident, as Hurt's sentencing approached, the *Baltimore Sun* features writer Laura Lippman visited Hurt at his home. She saw the pristine carpet protected by plastic runners and the creamy white sofa. Hurt reenacted that night for her. Her story revealed something new: the man himself. "Listening to Hurt," she wrote, "one begins to understand what it means to be honest to a fault."

Is there an untold background tale?

In 2002, Joseph Palczynski went on a rampage in Baltimore after his girlfriend had broken off their relationship. He kidnapped her and killed four people who got in his way. He took her family hostage. The events unfolded over two weeks, ending with the police killing Palczynski. Nearly lost in the coverage of this complex story was the fact that it had started as domestic violence. Four writers at the *Baltimore Sun* saw that connection and located six of Palczynski's former girlfriends—all of whom had been abused. Using evidence that spanned thirteen years, the writers wove a chilling narrative exposing Palczynski's long pattern of battering women and threatening their families.

Is an ending really another beginning?

Endings mark the beginnings of new stories about to unfold. A farmer's wife lost her husband in a house fire. That was the end of one story but also the beginning of another: her life on the farm without him. We wrote about her first year alone on the farm.

Reporters and editors should ask themselves all these questions and then *listen*. Listen to what people in your own life say to you. Keep yourself open to all of life; take your head out of the newspaper. Sometimes I have to stop reading newspapers because I have a hard time opening up that other chamber of my mind—the one that invites ideas in from life.

Reporting for Narrative: Ten Tips

MARK KRAMER

When you write, and especially when you write narrative, you create a sequential intellectual and emotional experience for the reader. From your perspective as the writer you are doing other things: describing an event, creating a record, imparting information, explaining that information's source, or doing what my high school teachers called "showing your work"—as in "Solve this problem, show your work." But whatever else you are doing, the fact remains: Your readers will have an intellectual and emotional experience as they read your work. If that experience isn't pleasurable or exciting, they will stop reading.

To keep them reading, you must create a worthwhile experience and also a logical one. In narrative work, characters move through an experience or a set of experiences. That movement crosses the topical categories of any subject outline the author could possibly devise. In narrative writing, characters take action over time, and events unfold. In order to present an organized account of something, however, the author must cover it topic by topic. To make both these things possible, the writer must gather all the topical information *and* all the action. That requires a different reporting style. Here are ten steps to follow.

1. Before selecting a topic, think carefully about what will intrigue readers. Story conception is critical. Is the topic's emotional temperature high or low? A reader brings a lot of emotionality to "high-valence" stories. The most common high emotional valence news story is about an endangered baby: a stolen car with a kid in the back. It takes very little work to energize readers' concern in a story about an endangered baby; as a species we are hardwired to care. Once you have readers engaged and concerned, you have them in the palm of your hand. You can digress to give background information. Your readers will forgive you nearly anything. Stories with high emotional valence require no context, no characterization.

It is more difficult to write narrative about low emotional valence topics. The writer must marshal other tools, including more accomplished writing. Perhaps the slowest topic ever in narrative writing is the flow of rocks; John McPhee wrote four books about it. You can do an exercise to help you figure out McPhee's secrets for keeping the reader with him. In the margin of one of his books—*Basin and Range*, for example—keep a running tab of the questions that come to mind. You will find that the question changes with nearly every paragraph. McPhee inserts them cunningly to mesh with his sharp images, strong characterizations, and anecdotes. These operant questions aren't the big thematic questions of the book but small puzzles to keep the reader going while he deals with the flow of rocks.

2. After selecting a good topic, secure good access. Say you're considering travel to Paris or Buenos Aires or Boise. If you don't know anyone in Paris or Buenos Aires but have met some fascinating people from Boise, go there. Access is everything. The best idea will become a lousy story without deep access to people living their lives. This access takes charm, guts, and aplomb. Potential subjects will take you at the level of

sophistication that you bring to the subject. If you're naive and gawky, you will receive the basic public-relations version of the subject. Do your homework beforehand; the more you know, the more collegially you'll be treated.

For any story you must have access to people at what Henry James called "the felt life level." In his preface to *Portrait of a Lady*, he addresses "the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of *felt life* concerned in producing it." *Felt life* is the level of informal comprehension that you have of your subject at the end of a day spent reporting.

You sit, dog tired, at the edge of your bed, and your significant other says, "How was your day?" You reply, "That road commissioner was a real ass. He's so vulgar and vain. Yet there's something sweet about him." The next day you go to the newsroom and write, "A new road intersection at the corner of Holmes and Fourteenth was announced yesterday by the road commissioner."

Narrative demands felt-life-level access, which is extremely difficult to get. You call a surgeon and say, "I hear you're doing a new kind of neck surgery, and I'd like to find out more about it." He says, "Fine. I have time for a cup of coffee Thursday afternoon at two o'clock." You need to say, "I don't want an interview. I want to watch you living your normal day. What about Wednesday when you're too busy to see me? I won't be a bother. I'll just follow you around."

If you obtain that access because the surgeon is your uncle, don't do it. That's contaminated access. If you learn that your surgeon uncle is an obtuse egotist and that's relevant to the story, you can't include it because it will upset your mother. You need the uncle of a distant friend.

3. Find the unfolding action that will provide the narrative line. Once you secure good access, you must find good examples of unfolding action. Ask your source about her schedule for the coming week and then find something interesting you can experience with her. You won't know the true subject of your piece until you get on site and see things happen. In this case, *subject* doesn't mean topic, location, or main character; it means what the story is about, on a deeper level.

You don't have to follow chronological order, but whatever order you follow must make sense to the reader. For example, following the reporter as she gathers material does not make good narrative. It's the story of how an ignorant person—the reporter—became slightly less ignorant. Your narrative should center on your subject's life. You can't falsify the sequence of events, but you can start at the end if you tell your reader what you are doing.

4. Find hints of character in the action. I wrote a piece about a builder of ship models, an old, meticulous man of great brilliance but not the kindest man, as he would tell you himself. One of his sons, a rather famous writer, expressed resentment, off the record, of his father's self-absorption and insularity. Those personality traits became the story's core.

5. Find the right scene details through careful sensory reporting. Sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste will allow you to set strong scenes, which in turn develop a sense of place in your writing. Beginning narrative writers often set scenes too casually or with too much detail. Give the reader a feeling of volume, space, and dimension, but don't build a diorama.

To reconstruct long-ago events or any scene that you didn't observe, ask your subjects to help you. Don't write "George recalls trudging through the snow." Say to George, "I'm going to do something weird. I'm going to ask you fifty questions about a seemingly innocuous moment in the past. If you can answer them, you can help me build this scene for the reader." If you can't corroborate the person's memories, at least note in your text that they are recollections.

6. Pinpoint your subjects' emotional experience, not your own. The first time I walked into an operating room, while writing a book about surgeons, I thought, "Yuck, blood. This is brutal." None of the people I was writing about said, "Yuck, blood." I had to record my own emotions because they would duplicate the reader's emotions at that point in the story. But it was much more important for me to notice and record what the surgeon and others in the operating room said, thought, and felt. When I wrote that scene, I considered the reader's response, but I had to present the characters' responses.

7. Rigorously research your story's context. Narrative exists inside a social context, an economic context, and many other shells of context. Because of that, research is essential. You must digress from the running narrative to give necessary background information and frame your story. For example, the common story of the surviving family farm is made much more powerful by the author's explanation of the economics of family farms and why they aren't surviving.

If you don't do some research before you start reporting, you risk receiving a public relations snow job. Do just enough research to orient yourself, then do most of your reporting. Save most of the research for late in the reporting process. At that point you only have to find the right information for your story. If you research too early, you have to find out everything.

8. Late in the drafting process, crystallize the point of your story. *Destination* is what my high school English teachers called "the theme." I didn't understand what my English teachers were talking about until I had been a writer for fifteen years. I return to my initial contention: Narrative writing is creating the right sequential, intellectual, and emotional experience for readers. Early on, readers must have (1) an emotional attitude toward the characters and events, and (2) the sense that they are being told all of it for a worthy reason. All the set scenes, characterization, and background must head toward a destination. The ending must bring a payoff.

9. Very late in the writing process, refine the difference between your views and your subject's views. While writing *Three Farms*, I might have felt sad or angry about the loss of family farms, but I still had to write a fair profile of a corporate farm manager. Generally, you needn't mask your views, but make sure your readers can also understand your subjects' perspectives. This refinement will help you navigate the rules of balance for the publication where your story will appear; the rules for *The Nation* are different from those for *Time* magazine.

10. Cherish the structural ideas and metaphors that come to you while you are reporting. While sitting in your subject's barn or operating room or kitchen, you will suddenly think, "Oh, boy, I love this quote because I can use it to introduce that important topic." In the moment, it seems that those realizations will stick to you like notes on a bulletin board, but your mind is not a bulletin board. Peg those ideas in the moment. Write notes to yourself about how to write your piece.

To Tape or Not to Tape

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

I'm deeply grateful for the invention of the pocket tape recorder. Our profession was much harder before it came along. The recorder enables me to be on several channels at once. It takes care of the sound track in a far more accurate way than I can by taking notes. Meanwhile, it frees me to take notes on all the other details: what the person is wearing, what books are on his shelf, what paintings are on her wall, what can be seen out the window, as well as the expressions on the per-

son's face while speaking, her gestures, and his movements. I find that people are hardly ever self-conscious about the recorder, especially if I turn it on without breaking eye contact with them and don't look at it.

When I wrote a book about how Russians are coming to terms with Stalin's heritage, I did all my interviewing in Russian. I'm not a fluent Russian speaker. Sometimes I understood almost everything people said; other times, much less. I came up with a technique that I thought was original, only to discover that every American correspondent in Moscow did the same thing. I tape-recorded my interviews and then found a Russian who spoke English extremely well. I had her transcribe the interviews in English. I received wonderful English transcripts that were full of fascinating material I hadn't quite realized I was gathering.

JACQUI BANASZYNSKI

When I was a reporter, I tended not to tape. A tape recorder can be as intrusive as the reporter's notebook. Tape recorders make me intellectually lazy; my mind drifts because I know I'm getting it all on tape.

When I did use a tape recorder and had to go back to the newsroom and transcribe, it slowed me down enormously. During the course of an interview, my mind filters information, moving toward the core of my story. I found that when I listened to recordings and transcribed them, it was as though I had erased all the filtered, distilled information in my brain. I returned to the wide swath of *all* the information from the interview—not the selective material I had decided was important to my story. It was like having to start over.

If you can steel yourself against using it as a crutch and against the drudgery of transcription, I say go ahead and tape. In this day it's a good defense. Still, tape recorders pose two other dangers, both delicate issues. First, when you tape-record and then compare the recording to your notes, you find out how much material in your notes isn't quite right. Second, if you take quotes directly from tape recordings, you hardly ever get a decent quote. People don't speak in perfect English. They "um" and "ah"; they drop subjects and pronouns. When I take notes, the quotes I record are closer to proper grammar, though the person probably didn't say them exactly that way.

JON FRANKLIN

I use a tape recorder all the time. I often don't listen to the tape, but I have it as a backup if I need it. I don't take that many notes unless the topic is technical, something I don't know well. I may write down some quotes, but I do more paraphrasing. I write down dialogue because I use