

CHAPTER TWO

ADVANCED TECHNIQUES

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Interviewing

BY TU THANH HA

- ▶ In the middle of my first interview, the tape recorder's batteries died. The interviewee waited with growing impatience while I struggled with the electrical cord. When we finally proceeded, I blurted out my killer question. He shrugged and said, "I don't know." I didn't know what to ask next. Long, long awkward pause.

Eight years later and a bit wiser, I've scrummed ministers, met convicts behind bars, talked to drunken thugs at a riot, and interviewed cancer survivors. I am still nervous every time.

It's never easy. Most of us are not raised to confront strangers and pepper them with questions. It's even harder for student journalists, because your paper may not carry the respect you wish it had on campus or in the community.

DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

Be prepared. Decide who you have to interview and what information you need from each interview subject.

A well-researched question is a better question; a well-prepared interviewer has the power. Do as much background research as possible. Visit the library, and check back issues of your paper. Has anything been written about your interview subjects? Anything controversial about them?

Outline all of the questions that have to be answered on a notepad. Add key facts and figures so you'll have a clear overview of your story.

Make a plan: where will you interview

the person? For spot news, it's best to talk to the person at the place where they're doing the thing; officials should be contacted at work; whistle-blowers are often most comfortable at home.

Decide who to talk to first. When covering a conflict, go to people who have allegations to make first. They'll be more eager to meet reporters. Talk to friendly, experienced observers who can give you some background and steer you towards other sources. Always keep the hardest interviewees for last, when you'll be more informed about the issue.

There are people who are interviewed too often and then there others who aren't approached often enough. Bound by tight deadlines, reporters in the commercial media often deal with press attachés or quote from printed statements. Student journalists have the luxury to look beyond those constraints. Dial-a-quote activists are useful but don't stop there.

Good journalists always look for the "regular folks" whose personal stories give a vivid, human touch to an article. Or the bureaucrats who — as long as you don't name them — can explain the intricacies of the new student loan regulation.

A WARNING

Interviews are tools to get opinions or quotes and can steer you towards other sources. They are fact-gathering tools.

People make mistakes when recalling dates or figures, so always check written records after the interview.

TRACKING DOWN YOUR INTERVIEW SUBJECT

This is the hard part. Most reporters have to make dozens of phone calls daily because important people have receptionists to shield them from troublemakers. Allot yourself enough time; start calling as soon as you're assigned a story.

Secretaries are the key to their bosses. Be persistent but always polite. Break the ice. Remember their names. Make yourself known to them. The next time you call, they may put a little more effort into handing your message to the boss — or even leak you some information themselves.

When you're trying to get interviews, some people are going to take a long time to call back. Be persistent and keep calling them. If it's an interview you really need, try calling back at the same time every day, and follow up with an email — no more than one a day. If all else fails, find out where their offices are and introduce yourself in person. Take note, however, of the fine line between a diligent reporter and a pest. Don't call back every five seconds or storm into someone's office. Being rude or obnoxious can cost you an interview, or even worse, a source. Don't burn bridges when you don't have to.

Try grabbing people early in the morning, before they are swamped with work. Try getting them in person, on their way to lunch. Try to get their home numbers. Don't call after midnight, they'll hang up.

Explain to people the scope of your article so they'll know how much time is needed of them. They're more likely to



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call back when they know you aren't after an in-depth hour-long meeting. Often, five minutes is all it takes.

Whenever possible, try to get a face-to-face interview: proximity and body language means you can get a lot more out of sitting down with someone. Phone interviews, however, are fine. Don't do email interviews unless you're absolutely desperate.

If you need a photo, make arrangements for the photographer to come while setting up the interview. Usually it's best if they're done together.

IN THE INTERVIEW

Unless you're naturally charming, warming yourself up before the interview is always a good idea. Review your notes and psych yourself up into a conversation machine.

For an in-person interview, arrive 15 minutes early — you might overhear or see something important while you're waiting.

For a person-to-person meeting, be professional. Show up early and be polite. You don't have to abide by a strict dress code, but a ripped T-shirt with a rude logo usually isn't a good idea. This may sound shallow but you're trying to get a story, not to make a fashion statement.

Finally, when approaching potential interview subjects, always introduce yourself, by name, as a reporter with your paper. Be open, unafraid, and never lie.

Simple courtesy works best. If time per-

mits, start with some small talk to break the ice and relax people. Explain the purpose and scope of your article. Let them know how long it will take. Start by getting the person's title correct and always ask how they spell their name.

If possible, begin the interview with the easier questions. Don't lob softball questions, but get the facts down. Keep the killer question for the end. Have a list of questions you need answered, but be ready to adjust if something more interesting comes up.

Some people are articulate and colourful. It is best to ask them broad general questions and let them elaborate. Others are less talkative. Try more specific, concrete queries. It is far too easy to answer only one part of a multi-part question. Know what you want to ask, and do it clearly and concisely.

Be a good listener. Don't make speeches. The more you talk, the less they have to. Interject only because the discussion is getting off the topic, not because you don't agree. Don't be afraid to forcefully redirect a half-hour-long rant to get back to what you want to talk about — you're the interviewer, after all. Be a director: the best interviews feel like a conversation, but move relentlessly toward the information you need.

Know and use the jargon or terminology of your interview subjects. That'll put them at ease by showing them you're knowledgeable. The trick is to discard the jargon and explain everything in plain English when you write the article.

Drain them. Imagine your subject is a bucket of information. Empty it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Five W's: yeah. Make sure you nail them early on. They're useful for other questions, too: when someone says something important, make sure you understand it — often accomplished by asking "how" and "why." Especially "why."

Ask for a chronology of events, particularly when it's complex. You want more detail than you could possibly use. Ask for the subject's life story. Ask them to describe how it looked and sounded, especially if you weren't there. When someone reaches an important detail, slow them down and get them to tell it like a story.

Listen for logic. If there's a gap, ask for it to be filled in.

If any of these questions aren't answered adequately, or if you think there's more, ask again. Call back if you need to. You might get a completely different response.

Ask anything bizarre or random that pops into your head. This is where the best, the perfect, the memorable quotes come from.

While you're waiting for an interview to begin, take an inventory of the room. As it's happening, note the non-verbal cues the person is giving you.

At the end of the interview, ask an open-ended question. Sometimes people have more than one story in them. Don't forget to ask if there's anything else your subject would like to add, and who else you should talk to.

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COMMON PROBLEMS

You're nervous. In the beginning, you may want to start with telephone interviews so people won't see you sweating or struggling to keep notes.

Remember that your interview subject is probably nervous, too. Even savvy politicians know that journalists can be trouble because they have the last word about what goes into an article.

Avoid questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no." You won't have anything left to quote and you'll get limited information. Use yes/no questions only for exasperated confrontation ("Okay, enough is enough. Did you steal the money, yes or no?").

Don't settle for vague answers. Always look for examples or anecdotes. Your story will be livelier.

Note-taking: never rely solely on a tape recorder. They're unspeakably unreliable. You may want to have it as a back up but try to take as many notes as possible. Don't forget that cassettes take a long time to transcribe. Learn to take notes quickly enough to have verbatim quotes. Develop your own system of acronyms and abbreviations. Learn to write without looking away from your interview subject. Not only is it handy, it's intimidating as hell.

Make sure you differentiate between quotes and paraphrases in your notes. If your subject lets a controversial comment slip by, lob a few meaningless questions at them to keep them busy. As they answer the second query, make sure you have the previous quote written down correctly while it is still fresh in your memory.

If you know someone is lying, let them talk. Liars will often use extensive detail to make the story seem more real; you can use these details to poke holes in the account.

Keep yourself out of the interview. Be personable but don't inject your own biases into the interview. Ask open-ended questions (unless you're digging).

Don't tell your subject something they don't already know, unless you're in a tight spot (see Mind Games, below). Ask what they saw, not if they saw the red car.

Don't be too sympathetic, either. And, though all of these rules are breakable, don't break them too often, or you'll become a liar yourself.

"No comment" is a fair enough response. There are two types of no-comments: those who are afraid to talk and those who are wielding their power against you. For the former: be nice. Ask easier questions, and steer them, gently, to the topic you want to discuss. Tell them that you need their help (only if you legitimately do).

When a politician or university administrator tells you they have "no comment," you've often hit paydirt. If you need a quote, gently remind them how bad "no comment" will look in print, and that you'll run the story whether or not they comment. Don't grin until you're safely back in the newspaper office.

"OFF THE RECORD."

As a reporter, you'll have to deal with people who do not want to be quoted. Just as you shouldn't blithely accept going off the record, neither should you insist that

everything you hear is fair game.

Ask why it needs to be off the record. Often, bureaucrats — who are actually working on these projects — are not allowed to be quoted. They have the best background information though. You can ask communications flacks for an official quotable after. Don't give up without a fight, though: tell the source how much more credible the information they're giving you will be if you can attach a name to it.

Always be clear with what is on and off the record. Unless you're told otherwise, everything is for attribution.

Ask what is meant by off the record. Is the person's name not to be used, or is the interview "on background," meaning that it can't be printed? Some journalists see this as a waste of time, others use it to develop relationships with sources. Whether it's an unethical waste of time or invaluable is up to you.

Tell them when the record is back on, or ask. Sources will hardly ever say, "Okay, you can start quoting me now." Moreover, treat sources appropriately. A politician who doesn't want to be quoted is different from a regular person who has never been interviewed before. In other words, don't bully a scared freshman into saying they hate their professor. But at the same time, don't be intimidated when the university president suddenly says, "disregard everything I told you."

Off-the-record comments are not retroactive. Don't be intimidated if interview subjects tell you not to use their quotes after the fact. If they want it to be off the record, they have to tell you beforehand. At the end of an off the record, go back



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over what you've learned. Often, what they've given you isn't that contentious. Say that. Ask if bits and pieces of the interview can be attributed. But, if you've agreed to take something off the record, honour it.

MIND GAMES

Fun stuff to try during an interview — at your own risk.

Playing stupid — “I don't get it. Can you explain again?”

Blaming someone else — “I don't want to ask this but what (my editors, the readers, people) really want to know is if . . .”

The silent pause — Just don't say anything and wait for a more elaborate answer. The styleguide editor's trademark.

The bluff — “That's not what I hear. Isn't it true that . . .”

Sympathy for the devil — “Uh-huh. Uh-huh.” “No, really? That's terrible.” “Boy, that's awful — what are you going to do about it?”

Clarification — Repeat what someone said to get them to elaborate or correct you. “Let me get this straight. You're saying that . . .”

Related: for the sake of clarity — “Look, I already know this much. You don't want me to get it wrong, and I sure don't want to get it wrong. What am I missing here?”

Quote-making questions — “What's the message you're trying to send to . . .” “Why should students care about this?”

Related: statements — Read from a document, or divulge what you know. Questions can be responded to passively, but a statement will likely get a comment in return.

Gossip — It's easier for people to talk about other people. Name-drop, discuss what other people have said to you (this works best if it's not secrets, but stuff you were planning to put in the story anyway).

Related: use what you know — Ask the official why he fired the whistleblower rather than asking whether he did.

Stick your toe in the door — If things aren't going well, follow that tangent — just don't talk about the photo of her poodle for an hour and walk out with nothing; find a way to go from the poodle back to your questions. Even better, bait them with something controversial someone else has said.

ENDING THE INTERVIEW

Ask if there is anything else readers should know that you haven't asked.

Ask for a home phone number “in case we have to check something with you before going to press tonight.”

Even when the notepad is closed, continue chatting as you head for the door. The best stuff is often blurted out at the end, when the subject is off-guard. You'll have to write down anything they say outside their office before you forget the quotes.

On your way back, review your notes right away. Spell out the illegible parts

Interviewing: A step-by-step method

Often people think of an interview as a single meeting with someone. Wrong. You should view it as part of a wider process where the focus and scope of your article is constantly reviewed, assessed and refined.

- 1• Define the focus of your article.
- 2• Decide who has to be interviewed next.
- 3• Background research.
- 4• Plan strategy. Where? When?
- 5• Request interview.
- 6• Meeting. Icebreaker.
- 7• Questions.
- 8• Harder questions.
- 9• End of interview.
- 10• Ask who else you could talk to.
- 11• Read notes. Evaluate information gathered.
- 12• Enough to start writing? If yes, proceed to next step. Otherwise go back to step [1].
- 13• Write.
- 14• Review what you have written. Good enough? If the answer is no, go back to step [1].

and fill in the gaps while the interview is still fresh in mind. Is anything missing? Anything unclear? Don't be afraid to call back to complete your notes. After the story has run, call back. Often the subject will react, possibly leading to a follow-up. This is also an excellent way to develop a source. ◀

Tu Thanh Ha is now a reporter with the Globe and Mail. Some tips taken from a guide by Eric Nalder of the San Jose Mercury News. With files from Tessa Vanderhart



Media scrum training

- ▶ Politicians have an idea of what society looks like and where it should go: they want you to buy it. They do this through media, and communicate with the hacks through the flack. The political world differentiates between bought media and earned media. Bought media includes paid advertising and press campaigns. Earned media comes through policy announcements and more traditional coverage of their activity.

When it comes to breaking through it all, though, and getting at the stories that aren't part of any managed media event, it helps to have someone on the inside. Ian Capstick, a press secretary with the federal NDP, shared these tips on breaking through the barriers that face journalists when trying to cover politicians.

THE “FLACK” V. THE “HACK”

“Flack” refers to a press secretary whose job it is to deal with media for their boss. They juggle requests for interviews, brief their bosses on what is being requested of them, provide necessary information prior to interviews, and help to manage the politician's media presence. Some of these people are more pleasant to deal with than others.

Good flack:

- Build relationships with journalists.
- Provide accurate information in a timely manner.
- Facilitate contact with their boss.
- Tell you what to expect and tell their bosses what to expect.
- Share background info.
- Monitors your coverage, reading the resulting articles.
- Builds trust.

Bad flack

- Rebuff attempts at contact — especially with the student press
- Limits the flow of information
- Provides no documentation

The Ugly

- Are rude and dismissive
- Cut into interviews
- Lie, cheat and steal

There's spin and there's the truth. Know the difference. You should also know what you want and when you want it. Flack and politicians are all busy and if you're taking your time, they'll pass you by.

Plan ahead — make them the first call in your story. How much time do you need? Tell them exactly what you need: Which comments for which story and how much time is needed. If it's really quick, it could be squeezed in. Have most of the answers to most of the questions you plan to ask in hand.

Don't ask politicians for facts! Politicians provide quotes and opinions. They play politics. They don't write the policy themselves, they only provide direction and oversight.

Have your own facts ready. You're asking them about what you already know, not to provide you with new stuff. You can always ask the press secretary for a copy of the document before hand, if you need to.

You're a low priority, so follow protocol

In every instance, following protocol will make you better liked by the press secretary, and as such, more likely to get an interview. But it is necessary to prioritize. The CBC is going to get an

interview before the local broadcast will and the local broadcast is going to be ahead of you. If they run out of time before they get to you, that's just the way the cookie crumbled this time. Know that you might get bumped.

If you aren't sure if you're talking to the right person, know that there are two levels of communications: political and bureaucratic.

For facts, low spin — call the department (they will be pro-government, though, obviously). Opinions, pitches, high spin talk at the political level. Not sure which you're talking to? Ask: who do you work for?

Am I calling the right people?

Local issues are easily defined. Provincial issues are sometimes influenced at the federal level. Know federal/provincial powers, and where they overlap. Sometimes you need to talk to multiple people who should know what you're talking about in order to find the one who does.

Present a good face to be taken seriously. If you're naïve, stupid or lazy you won't get called back. Know what you're going in for and be professional.

Access isn't earned, but it can be fleeting. You have the right to talk to anyone. But they will research you! Politicians communicate what they want, and with who they want to. It's not the truth, it's a message.

There is selective editing going on — you shouldn't expect them to tell you everything. But know what remains to be said. Follow up. Break illusions. If they're not actually answering questions, call them on it.



2 Media scrum training

Learn to read the code of the flack.

- He's away/busy" (No).
- "Are you national press?" (You're not good enough).
- "Call your local MP." (He needs good press).
- "No phone requests." (Too busy. Email him!).
- "Call the department." (Don't understand your request/don't want it).
- "Of course I know what you're talking about" (Googling as we speak).

If it's an arcane or complex question, email first anyway. It gives the flack the time to get background information and brief the politician.

Follow up with emails! Say thank you for the help and that'll go a long way to establishing good press/flack relationships.

As a student, you're not the #1 priority, so don't forget to follow up.

GETTING THE INTERVIEW

Ottawa is unreachable from 1:30-3:45 p.m. for Question Period. Don't call.

If you left a message, follow up your call with an email. If the government is going to fall, use a cell number.

A politician is never as busy as their press secretary would have you believe. Ask if you can reach them during "travel time." Though not good for radio sound-bites. It works well for quick newspaper quotes.

If you want to talk to a minister fast, you'd better have a good story and really need that quote. If necessary, you

can always pull the "I'm going to run it without you . . ." line, but, as above, it better be both good and necessary.

Be persistent, but don't be annoying. Call the same person at the same time, every day. Ask to be put on hold.

Government press secretaries have assistants; don't leave the line. Say "I need to speak to someone now, please." And hold the line — they will pick it up again. If they don't respond, show up, or call CUP's ottawa bureau chief to get more leverage.

SECRETS OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

Ottawa is a very small place once you're in the political circle. Press secretaries talk about student journalists. A lot. To everyone. They ask each other "Should I talk to this person?" Know your own reputation and how what you do will effect it.

When you're on the phone, most press secretaries are recording everything you say. Sometimes they miss deadlines, too.

Don't burn them: they will be an asshole if you do and you'll be hard up for an interview later.

They like to get clippings. It helps prove that they work, builds a relationship, and convinces them to help you again.

Send thank-you cards. It will make them remember you and help with the relationship building. It may also convince them to like you, so they'll look forward to your call.

Many press secretaries (and their politicians) also use (and appreciate the use of) recorders: they act as a physical cue that you're being recorded. They can also be used to mess with reporters. Journalists threaten, harass, and say bad things — having their own version of the recording is recourse against this.

Off-the-record means you can't print what they tell you, but there are degrees of this.

- No names — but you can use quotation marks.
- On background — clarify if this means with or without attribution. This way you can say "a source close to Layton said," "a high-placed government official" or "a government official" in order to clarify the person.
- On deep background — "you didn't get this info from me."

•[See: Ch 2. Interviewing]

If someone says off the record in the latter sense, find it out some other way; now you know that it's out there and you have the ammunition to go ask the questions. Under no circumstances do you reveal where you got it.

Flack remember burns and talk about them on the Hill. Don't do it. Their colleagues will remember you as well.

Watch whenever statistics are used: they are a weakness. Ninety per cent of the time you cite numbers, you get them wrong. They're probably inflated or deflated in favour of the department. Where did it come from? — ask the press secretary: if they don't know, that's a story. Double check all dates,



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names and numbers before you print anything.

Get to the most senior staff member possible. Right below the director of communications, the second-in-command is your best friend.

They want you to talk to the person who can spin. They don't want you to talk to the person who does the job. Find the person who does the job.

There are five spokespeople for the NDP/Layton. The small number minimizes mistakes and, by extension, prevents you from catching mistakes.

Spokespeople will be quoted when there are no elected officials available. Most of the time they will try and get you an official.

A university president doesn't care about being quoted in the student press. Elected officials care more, so know who you want to talk to, and make sure you actually talk to them. This is tough: spokespeople are encouraged, and like to give quotes. They like to be in control. Usurp them. If officials really don't want to talk to you, that means you need to. Get them.

If you give the press secretary a deadline, you will get called back more quickly. Let them know what kind of timeline you're working with. Don't suck up. Be objective and professional. They don't care who you vote for; you're a journalist. They care about the message.

NEW AND NON-FLACK WAYS OF GETTING INFORMATION

Using access to information? Again, be very specific about what you're looking for. Fill out the form and pay \$5, but remember to be very specific.

If what you're asking for is what you think it is, they often don't want you to have it. Anything problematic is delayed, censored, or excised.

Finding it is the biggest challenge.

Build a relationship with the bureaucrats, especially if you need ridiculously specific information. As strange as that may sound if you don't identify as a journalist you'll get your request processed a lot faster.

It's difficult to do FOIs from outside Ottawa, but not impossible. Just don't rely on it for timeliness. If you're looking for something specific, ask. You'll be put in touch with the experts, and you might not even have to go through the FOI channels.

People who are familiar with Access to Information wait about a year. If you really have a story, you have it — whether you've left the student press or not.

Documents lead to other documents. Re-ask for excised portions! Is it missing chapter 2? That's probably what you're looking for. ◀

•[See: Make the most of FOI, ATI Act]

Notes from Ian Capstick, former Managing Editor of the Fulcrum and CUP 64 conference organizer; now press secretary to the NDP



Profile writing

BY LISA WHITTINGTON-HILL

- ▶ Profile writing is everywhere. It's on television, in newspapers and magazines covering everything from politics to business to science. It's not usually labeled as profile writing, but everyone from artists to electoral candidates get written up.

In artistic terms, a profile is a side perspective of somebody's face. The written profile, similarly, takes a look at a human being from a particular angle. The power of words then allows us to rotate, cross-section and fracture that image to produce a stunning 3D portrait. A profile is a mini-biography, a character sketch, a celebration and an exposé of a person or group of people.

Why write profiles? Because people are inherently interesting. Writing about people helps your readers identify

themselves in the story. Similarly, it allows you to humanize social and political issues. If you profile a politician, administrator or community leader, readers get a glimpse of what motivates their actions for good or for ill. If you profile someone living through oppression or fighting for their rights, it provides a human angle (sometimes even an operatic angle) to the impact of the issues. If you place a person in a social context, it provides the reader an insight into what it might be like to experience life in another place or from another perspective.

STOCKING YOUR PALETTE

Before doing anything, you must scout the proper subject for a profile. As far as student newspapers go, you can choose an administrator, an interesting student, or a little-known profes-

sor. Or else, choose someone from the surrounding community who is at the centre of some controversy or some innovative program or group.

Before arranging the interview, find out everything you can about your subject. If no articles have been written about them, consult friends, enemies, colleagues, etc. You won't impress your interview subject if you don't know a hoot about them.

Choose a proper meeting place. Try to get the person in a unique surrounding, perhaps their favourite bar or restaurant. Choose a place that will lend some colour to your story. What your subject orders in a restaurant may find its way into your story.

Whatever the case, don't go for the easy hit. Try to avoid interviewing a high-powered executive in his/her plush-car-

More tips on crafting profiles BY MIKE ORSINI

1• The lede

Begin with an anecdote from the person's life. It should, in your opinion, reflect the essential nature of the subject. It should be concrete, concise and illustrative of the person's character. Provide lots of texture.

2• Justification

Take an idea from the lead. Sum it up in a general statement of theme and then embellish it with three or four very different achievements of the subject. Diversity is important. It sets up a tension in the reader's mind. "How can this one person do all this? Who is he or she?" Do not select just one aspect of the subject's personality. Be as wide in scope as your subject's life.

3• Amplification

This is an account of the person's present day doings and achievements. This section may take up half the article. The tone is conversational. Use lots of quotes. Fill in more anecdotes and expand on the subject's accomplishments.

4• Nosepicker

By now your subject sounds like a saint. If you want to write a credible piece you have to admit the subject has a flaw or series of flaws. Report, in anecdotal form if you can, your subject's negative side.

5• Flashback

This is where you pick up on the subject's deeper background such as early

childhood adventures. This section can vary in length depending on the length of your article.

6• Whither

This is where you report what is coming next in your subject's life, and look to the future. Your subject has all kinds of plans and schemes, so find them out. Where a person thinks they're going can be just as interesting as where they have been.

7• Get Outta Town

This is your conclusion. Like the lead, it should be an interesting anecdote that brings out the essential quality of the subject. The end could be linked to the original lead, like the second bookend.



2 Profile writing

peted office. Go for the plush-carpeted exclusive country club instead.

Your first questions should be open-ended, perhaps a little flattering, the type that allow people to ramble for a couple of minutes. Open-ended doesn't mean long. Then move on to more specifics and explore complexities.

Keep an open mind, but not a scattered mind. Try to stick to your battle plan, especially if you intend to do a confrontational interview. Subjects will try to steer you in another direction (ie., tell you about some of their great accomplishments), but you must stand your ground.

What about those uncomfortable questions? Renowned Italian journalist Orianna Fallaci said that her success as an interviewer may have been the result of asking world leaders the questions few reporters dared ask.

You may not be lining up interviews with political heavyweights, but the same rules apply. Fallaci always reminded her subjects that the public is entitled to answers to her uncomfortable questions. It works. You can be tough without being arrogant or obnoxious.

An important reminder: if you're interviewing someone of note, try not to sound or look too impressed. The Globe's infamous Jan Wong recommends never to profile anyone you're a fan of — not only because it's easy to fall under their spell, but also because if you do a good job in the interview, you'll smash their pedestal to bits.

After your interview, don't hesitate to call the person back to double-check facts or even set up another interview.

They may respect you all the more for being persistent.

- [See: Ch 2. Interviewing]

PAINTING THE PROFILE

So you finished your first interview and you've spoken to some of their friends, associates and enemies. Before sitting down to pen your Pulitzer-Prize winning profile, think about the terrain you've covered.

What stands out about your subject? It could be their candidness, or their reluctance to talk. It could be their perceptiveness, or vagueness. Think of your first impressions of that person. Have those perceptions changed since before the interview? For better or worse? What makes them significant to the readers' lives? Whatever the primary impression is, use it as the centerpiece for your profile.

The end result should be something of a mini-drama, blending description, action and dialogue. The source(s) should do most of the talking, not you. ◀

*Adapted from Magazine Editing by
J.T.W. Hubbard, Prentice Hall
With files from Patti Edgar.*



Narrative writing

BY ADRIAN MA

- ▶ Narrative journalism — or literary journalism — is the reporting of news through the use of literary techniques more commonly associated with fiction writing. Facts unfold through the eyes of a narrator. Story arcs, character dialogue, and lively descriptions of scenes, events, and protagonists/antagonists are the main features of narrative writing.

Narrative journalism is the subject of both scorn and devotion. Some editors hate it out of concern for credibility (see: Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair) and the lengthy amount of time invested into the story by both reader and writer. But more magazines and newspapers are becoming enthusiastic about running narrative articles because they draw people in.

While examples of this style are most commonly seen in lifestyle/entertainment publications like *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*. News magazines like *The New Yorker*, *Salon* and *Slate* also run with this style of reporting. An increasing number of newspapers are also devoting space to investigative features constructed in this form.

Utilizing the narrative form does not work for every hard news story, but it definitely adds colour, excitement, and intrigue when done well. The follow-

ing tips have been culled from articles, from journalism teachers, reporters and editors.

1• Get the facts

“Good writing and good reporting reinforce each other — period,” said Roy Peter Clark, a teacher of writing at the Poynter Institute in Florida.

Narrative journalism may rely on literary techniques, but it is still news journalism, and thorough reporting remains the foundation of your writing. Get the facts: every relevant name, date, event — the Who, What, Where, When, Why and How. Answer the old hypothetical editor’s question, “Was it a pistol or revolver?” Get the facts. As Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Katherine Boo once said, “Stories aren’t lifted up by verbs and structure but by fact — the stuff you didn’t know before — facts earned through engaging with the subject, that nail the complexities. Don’t write around them. Think about what real reporting is and isn’t.”

2• Report with the five senses

Report with all of your senses — what do you smell, what do you hear in the background? Every single detail, no matter how arbitrary it may seem, plays an important function in narrative journalism. Descriptive words help set the scene of the event, the tone of dialogue, and the appearance of characters.

David Finkle of the *Washington Post* talks about “reporting cinematically,” as if you’re holding a camera to film a documentary. Think about where the camera will be pointed. If you’re

reporting a local building fire, maybe you’re directing the lens at the orange flames licking the sky. Or the faces of the racing paramedics, stern with concentration. Or perhaps the crowd of evacuees huddled together under blankets. Narrative reporting requires you to make those kind of decisions in order to deliver news to readers. Write as you report to keep the immediacy of the experience. Keep good notes. Use a tape-recorder if available.

3• Immerse yourself in the story

If you are writing in the narrative form, immerse yourself in the story. Participate and try to understand everything. Katherine Boo stayed overnight at a Memphis bus station while researching her investigative reports about poverty. The *Toronto Star*’s Catherine Porter spent two weeks in a social-housing complex that featured an estimated 12 crack-house units while she was working on a series about squalid living conditions in the city.

By living the experience of their respective subjects, both Boo and Porter found more compelling stories than they were originally aware even existed. As Jan Pollack of the *Baltimore Sun* once said, “News is what you don’t know, not necessarily what just happened.” Dig further by immersing yourself, and will always find new angles and fresh perspectives.

4• Develop a Focus

Narrative writing often runs the risk of being too lengthy and convoluted. It often becomes distracted by story-telling and fails to follow its original pur-

Narrative Journalism

- 1• Get the facts
- 2• Report with the five senses
- 3• Immerse yourself in the story
- 4• Develop a focus
- 5• Write clean narrative
- 6• Write with depth



2 Narrative writing

pose: informing the reader. Before you start writing, Tom Hallman from *the Oregonian* suggests for you try and define what the story is about in two or three sentences. “What does it mean? You have to have some kind of theme. If not, there’s no story.”

Use your summation to guide you through writing, and to help you stay on track. Lisa Pollak, feature writer for the *Baltimore Sun*, also suggests debriefing with an editor or a colleague. Talk about the story and not just what’s in the notebook. Explore different angles, ask yourself what surprised you, moved you or concerned you. Move from content to meaning.

“Report for meaning,” said two-time Pulitzer winner Jon Franklin. Catherine Porter also recommends not getting attached to your original premise or hypothesis. Be open to a completely new approach if your reporting discovers something unexpected.

5• Write clean narrative

You’ve made a pile of notes, done all the fact checking, and developed a focus for your piece. The next important step is to keep your article taut, concise, and chock-full of truth. One way to keep your story on track is to follow the structural guideline established by Roy Peter Clark.

“To create vicarious experiences for readers or viewers, writers transform the famous five W’s and the H: ‘Who’ becomes character, ‘What’ becomes plot, ‘Where’ becomes setting, ‘When’ becomes chronology, ‘Why’ becomes motive and ‘How’ becomes narrative.”

While you’re writing, take the time to examine it word for word. Cut back on details you don’t need. If your story’s main character is an advertising executive working in an office, you don’t have to mention what the weather is like outside. Remove sensational “soap opera details” if they fail to add anything to the story. Finally, a narrative story works through a beginning (scene setting), a middle (the action/events), and an end (the outcome of characters, truth revealed). Take care to write your story so that it unfolds in a well-paced, well-organized manner.

6• Write with depth

Be wary of oversimplifying the characters and situation. Complexity is something to be embraced. Don’t seek out heroes and villains. Most people fall in that grey middle ground.

As Katherine Boo said, “an imperfect character is real. Give subjects complexity and flaws, and readers will trust you.” Although narrative writing is storytelling, don’t sacrifice credibility to create a more compelling piece. Give all the characters frequent and early chances to tell their side of the story.

There remains debate in the newsroom about using the first person singular form “I” as the narrator. The argument against it claims that using the first person singular will attach bias to the piece, with the reporter’s personal views and values co-opting the nature of the facts.

Non-fiction writer Ted Conover, however, believes that using “I” can still work as a third person story, with “I” substituting for “this reporter.”

“Always, I want to be a witness (and keep myself in the background,” he said. According to Conover, as long as the story remains focused on the original subjects, then the credibility of the piece remains untainted.

Finally, fill your writing with strong active verbs to create suspenseful writing. Show, don’t tell. Just like Mark Twain said, “Don’t say the old lady screamed — bring her on and let her scream.”

At its best, a narrative story “is the process of taking the reader for a trip that feels both foreign and familiar. It relays an unfamiliar plot and characters with details that are recognizable and immediately identifiable.” (Rick Press, Features Editor, *For Worth Star-Telegram*). At its worst, “a narrative is a grandiose and outdated appellation that makes those who write them look like prima donnas . . .” (Patrick Beach, *Austin American-Statesman*).

Avoid the pitfalls of narrative writing by doing some keen reporting and keeping your piece focused and honest. While flashy metaphors and compelling characters will captivate readers, the truth will always be more powerful and effective than sentimentality. ◀

Adrian Ma was CUP 68 Ontario board rep, and CUP 69 Ontario bureau chief.

For one of the very best examples of narrative journalism, check out the “Black Hawk Down” features by The Philadelphia Inquirer
<http://inquirer.philly.com/packages/somalia/nov16/default16.asp>



International coverage

BY CARL WILSON

- ▶ If I gave in to my worst instincts, this resource paper would consist of one sentence: Don't do it.

The typical international story run by a student newspaper is a centre-spread feature and a badly-drawn map running up the side, with a sidebar of population statistics or maybe special dates in the history of the occupation.

The text of the article itself is stolen from Noam Chomsky, the Economist, the BBC or le Monde Diplomatique. The quotes are embellished with bleeding-heart sentimentality in one paragraph and pseudo-Marxist rhetoric in the next. The subject is a national liberation struggle someplace in the southern hemisphere and there are no quotes.

Student papers work best as community journalism. They cannot afford to send correspondents to foreign hotspots. They seldom have the background or the research skills needed for solid international analysis.

That being said, there are issues that need to be addressed regarding the international investments of our institutions.

Clearly, what we do locally has a global impact, and vice-versa. To omit the international perspective from our coverage altogether would be to distort our understanding, and to short-change our readers, especially international students and others who might have serious personal concerns beyond our borders.

Furthermore, university is traditionally a time of "expanding horizons." If the

paper's horizon stops at each coast and at the 49th parallel, that's not particularly informative.

So how should we handle international issues, without romanticism, racism, know-nothingism or bad-writerism?

The best focus for your stories will almost always be the relationship between the local and the global. Using the example of an international conflict, you might ask if any local businesses have interests in the region, if your school or city have any links to this country. What about local immigrant communities' reaction to events in their homelands? Do international students have particular insights that you might have overlooked?

Asking these questions can help you steer around the reader's "so what" button.

Write about the biases with which an international issue is treated in classes at your school, or in other media.

After the local-global axis, comparing and contrasting is probably the best way to show how international information is relevant to your readers.

Write about people whose concerns mirror your readers' own: student movements in other countries, environmental activism abroad, counter-cultural movements, housing issues, anti-racist organizing, and so on. Do it in an original way with original interviews.

Get some of your international stories directly from student newspapers in other countries. A lot of other countries have strong student and alternative media, and people in the Canadian stu-

Top 5 ways to make your international news relevant:

- 1• Localize world stories.
- 2• Do more research than the mainstream has time to.
- 3• Take full advantage of your vacations and trips.
- 4• Tap local talent (international students).
- 5• Focus on a few issues.

dent press should be striving to make contact and exchange material with them.

Don't be afraid to do long-distance interviews, even e-mail interviews if costs are prohibitive.

Staff and volunteers can also take full advantage of trips and vacations — use the experience to get something more substantial than a travel guide, if they get up the courage to do interviews.

Or: hit up exchange students to be foreign correspondents!

Encourage people on campus and in your community who are immigrants or visitors from foreign regions to write about their experiences or crucial issues in their homelands.

When these first two options fail, make sure that interviews and opinions from people from the region or culture in question are included prominently. Even if the writer is a graduate student and an expert on the region in question, their analyses will be dry and dehumanizing without first-hand accounts.

Exploit the resources of your school.



2 International coverage

There are professors and students on campus who know more than you do about the subject. There might also be campus advocacy groups interested in the area.

Your school or city library probably carries some foreign newspapers. Scour their pages regularly for leads on international stories. Before you interview people, do thorough background research with newspapers, books and magazines. Examine a wide variety of viewpoints and formulate serious questions.

Make sure you understand what place your sources have in their own cultures. A lot of international students and some immigrants are wealthy children of elites, whose interests might not be served by reform or revolution. Also, a lot of the newspapers you'll be able to see are actually party-line broadsheets.

Apply the same ethical standards as you would if the story were about a local issue.

Be aware that you can sometimes put your subjects at risk if they are speaking out about a totalitarian state, or are involved in a resistance movement. This has become increasingly true with the advent of the Internet. Respect anonymity when necessary.

Follow up on stories. If you think it's a big enough issue, do in-depth analyses, news stories, and opinion pieces, over several issues.

Although an "introductory" feature on another country can be worthwhile to launch a series, the best bet is to make your stories narrow and specific enough that they will be vivid.

Never underestimate the power of a well-placed graphic. Use maps, statistics, bar-graphs, whatever you can to make the locale and the issue clearer. But make sure the information is well-presented and relevant, or you'll just swamp the reader. ◀

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Peace journalism

► Professor John Galtung, a founder of Peace Studies and Peace Research, initiated the discussion on peace journalism in 1997.

In brief, peace journalism is when editors and reporters choose to print or write stories that create opportunities for society at large to “consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict.”

Peace Journalism is a form of writing which uses conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting. It provides a way for journalists to connect sources and the stories they cover with the consequences of their reporting. That is, it allows them to frame stories in such a way that peace-

ful options are prominent. It is a way of writing that aspires to influence society in such a way that the peaceful option becomes the chosen action.

This form of journalism is already being practiced in countries like South Africa, Colombia and Indonesia. In these countries, journalists are more likely to ask themselves what contribution they can make to bringing peace to their society. In many western countries, especially English-speaking ones, this is not the case.

PEACE JOURNALISM AND BALANCE

The principles of Peace Journalism correspond roughly to the four checklist points put forward

in the book “Reporting the World.”

Some journalists use them with the conscious aim of making a contribution to peace, but they are also useful pointers to any journalist who just wants to offer better-balanced reporting. To achieve balance, peace journalism advocates coverage that:

- Illuminates issues of structural and cultural violence, as they bear upon the lives of people in a conflict arena, as part of the explanation for violence.
- Frames conflicts as consisting of many parties, pursuing many goals — ‘cat’s cradle’ rather than ‘tug of war’.
- Makes peace initiatives and images of solutions more visible, whoever

PEACE/CONFLICT JOURNALISM	WAR/VIOLENCE JOURNALISM
<p>1• Peace/Conflict oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore conflict formation, x parties, y goals, z issues general ‘win, win’ orientation. • Open space, open time; causes and outcomes anywhere, also in history/culture. • Making conflicts transparent. • Giving voice to all parties; empathy, understanding. • See conflict/war as problem, focus on conflict creativity. • Humanization of all sides; more so the worse the weapon. • Proactive: prevention before any violence/war occurs. • Focus on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture). 	<p>2• War/Violence oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on conflict arena, 2 parties, 1 goal (win), war general zero-sum orientation. • Closed space, closed time; causes and exits in arena, who threw the first stone. • Making wars opaque/secret. • ‘Us-them’ journalism, propaganda, voice, for ‘us’. • See ‘them’ as the problem, focus on who prevails in war. • Dehumanization of ‘them’; more so the worse the weapon. • Reactive: waiting for violence before reporting. • Focus only on visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage).
<p>2• Truth-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expose untruths on all sides / uncover all cover-ups. 	<p>2• Propaganda-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expose ‘their’ untruths / help ‘our’ cover-ups/lies.
<p>3• People-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on suffering all over; on women, aged, children, giving voice to voiceless • Give name to all evil-doers • Focus on people peace-makers 	<p>3• Elite oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on ‘our’ suffering; on able-bodied elite males, being their mouth piece • Give name of their evil-doers • Focus on elite peace-makers
<p>4• Solution-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace = non-violence + creativity. • Highlight peace initiatives, also to prevent more war. • Focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society. • Aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation. 	<p>4• Victory-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace = victory + ceasefire • Conceal peace initiatives, before victory is at hand • Focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society • Leaving for another war, return if the old flares up again

Galtung’s Characteristics of War Journalism and Peace Journalism. (Lynch & McGoldrich, Peace Journalism, page 6)



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suggests them.

- Equips us to distinguish between stated positions, and real goals, when judging whether particular forms of intervention are necessary or desirable.

Writing with these points in mind will offer more balanced coverage, helping readers and audiences to form their own views about the conflicts besetting our world and the best way to respond to them.

GOING BEYOND THE ZERO-SUM GAME

The ‘Zero-Sum Game’ describes coverage in which the active parties are describe as two parties, one goal. The two parties in the story are too often depicted as having only one goal — to win (the authors use the example of Bush v. Hussein). In this style of coverage, there can only be one winner.

You can see how new developments in conflict coverage are depicted in this manner. If one side is ‘winning’, it means the other side must be ‘losing’. Ultimately, each faces either victory or defeat. Defeat being unthinkable, each steps up its efforts for victory. In other words, thinking of, or framing, a conflict as consisting of only two parties serves to escalate the conflict (Lynch and McGoldrick, 42).

Try the following tools used by conflict analysts to unravel what a situation is really about:

Tool 1: mapping the stakeholders

Expand your picture beyond the two parties to a multi-party pattern simply by asking who has a stake in the out-

come. Do not be limited by space and time or by who is being violent. Think globally. Go as far back or forward in time as you like or feel is necessary.

Tool 2: needs and fears mapping

List the different parties to the conflict. Include all who have a stake or involvement in it. In social or political conflicts, parties are often not united. Instead, they have factions, leaders and followers, core members and supporters, etc.

- Establish current positions. Write down the current positions of all these parties, including the demands they are making or their stated goals.

- Define the issue. You often find that defining the issue is difficult because to do so is to identify what the conflict is all about. In these circumstances, it is necessary to write down a number of definitions. When this is the case, the exercise has the merit of reminding us of the complexities of a conflict. This is especially useful for journalists, since it

means they have to find creative ways to convey the complexity, or risk siding with one party over the other(s).

- What are the needs and fears of each party? Needs could include the right to fish or grow crops, maintain earnings from mineral deposits, the right to speak and be educated in the language of an ethnic group or a guaranteed secure supply of water or oil. This is a useful opportunity to list hidden agendas as ‘needs’ and ‘concerns’ on the map.

As for fears, this is an exercise not in deciding what we think is reasonable, but in listening to what people in a particular group are afraid of. It is useful to air fears that usually go unstated but still influence people’s behaviour.

Do not get bogged down in solutions. They may sometimes look like needs (‘we need independence’), but go behind that and keep asking the question ‘why?’ Why do you need independence, what will it give you?

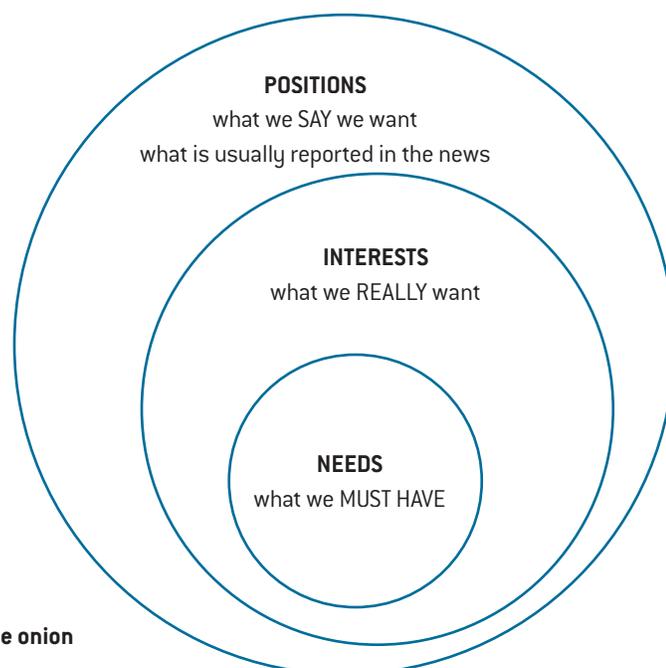


figure 1: the onion



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Try and put yourself in someone else's shoes. Beware of accounts of conflict which do not show the needs of all the parties.

Tool 3: the onion

Sometimes a conflict can be so well entrenched as to seem dominated by familiar slogans and demands. The slogans and demands on each side make up platforms or positions. The trouble with positions is that they are inherently divisive. They are too often the end-product of a process of polarization.

Demands are really goals formulated by each side in such a way as to divide and distinguish it from the other(s).

Slogans to express these demands are most enthusiastically taken up by extremists, who often get the most attention from media.

A more creative approach for journalists would be to 'peel the onion' — find ways to uncover the original goals from underneath the mass of hardened, conflict-oriented, discourse. Goals can, according to this approach, take the form of interests and needs.

[See figure 1 on previous page] ◀

Sourced from "Peace Journalism" by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick. www.peacejournalism.org



New directions in covering culture

BY CARL WILSON

"I want to write my plays not only for the class of people who acknowledge plays to be a legitimate form of expression, but for those to whom the phrase 'form of expression' may mean nothing whatsoever."

— Arnold Wesker

- ▶ The paradoxes of arts and culture sections sometimes seem a strange reversal of what troubles other parts of the student press.

Most news and features reporters are trying to cover vital social issues, but make little impact because of poor writing and research skills. Culture departments, on the other hand, frequently attract talented writers, but allow them to indulge themselves with subject matter that is unconscionably narrow and irrelevant.

As the above Arnold Wesker quotation suggests, the usual 'aesthetic' approach mostly provokes bafflement, apathy or outright hostility in people whose assumptions aren't the same as the critic's. Even the arts writer who tries to cover more 'rockin', 'hip' or 'alternative' art usually comes across as some variety of snob.

To the reader, a snob is anybody who values style over substance.

Indeed, style is integral to conveying any feeling or thought. But what's usually missing is a discussion of where all this 'style' and 'content' comes from and what it might mean.

This whole syndrome is fed by the habit of seeing culture reporting as little more than 'reviewing'. That misperception

isolates events and trends in singular moments and works. In fact, culture is a beat, a subject area the paper should cover the way it would cover the environment, health, education or labour.

"Culture" involves images and identities, the media which represent and communicate them, and the forces which affect those media. It encompasses not only 'arts and entertainment' but more subtle phenomena which seldom find their way into our pages. It's one of the most important subjects any newspaper can cover.

How, then, can we write about culture in a way that will really matter to our readers, no matter what their backgrounds, and serve as a genuine alternative to what's offered in the commercial mainstream arts media?

Take a look at the kind of arts and culture writing available in the commercial media. The Globe and Mail touts elitist culture and analysis. CanWest/TorStar papers promote squishy-white family entertainment and Hollywood stars.

'Hip' weeklies and magazines profile fashionable music and movies. Small community papers write about local socials and flower-painters. Academic and arts-trade journals write about technique, subtexts, politics and industry news, but in jargon nobody but their fellow scholars or artists can understand.

We have to ask ourselves what's missing from this picture and try to fill in the empty space.

We cannot do it with reviews alone. Reviews can be effective, but culture

reporters do their craft a disservice by neglecting other journalistic forms.

Cultural issues can be examined through as many forms of writing as any other issue. Culture can be expressed through news stories and investigative features, satires, or opinion and analysis pieces. Even how-to and survey articles have their place in culture writing. Interviews and profiles, if not obsequious or gossip-mongering, can bring out far more interesting perspectives on an artist than a review ever could.

Be selective about what you cover. Grant well-crafted reviews their place, but place more in-depth stories in the prominence they deserve. That is, treat your work as journalism. This should reflect not just high technical standards of research and communication, but social commitment as well.

But what exactly are these stories going to be about?

Here are a few suggestions, few of them original but all of them vital to making culture coverage more responsible and relevant to our readers. This list is by no means exhaustive.

CONTENT-ORIENTED CRITICISM AND INTERVIEWS

Except when a message jumps out and bites them, like with Thelma & Louise, mainstream critics seldom discuss the cultural location of works they review. This opens up a huge opportunity.

Look at the underlying themes. Examine representations of women, queers, people of colour, and people with disabilities. Look at metaphors and sub-

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texts; at ideologies of conformity or opposition; at relationships with other works and genres in the artist's history or the community's; at narrative structures or narrative clichés; at topical references and allusions; and at all the devices of plot, writing, image, movement, and materials — they all relate to the content.

Point out mainstream critics' misreadings or biases and what they might signify. Then argue them down.

Analyze the meanings of pop culture trends and novelty phenomena. Rock critic Greil Marcus published a book called *Dead Elvis*, in which he examined the deeper anxieties and aspirations behind Elvis sightings and Elvis impersonations in American popular culture. Along these lines, examine new trends in Saturday morning television programming or critique the latest ads for Volvo cars or political candidates — who's being manipulated, and how?

These developments in mass culture are recognizable to your readers. If you frame them well, these articles can be remarkably effective ways of talking about what's happening to our culture as a whole.

In interviews and profiles, discuss the artist's social milieu and political agenda, conscious or unconscious. How do they use their art to intervene in social life? What strategies do they have? How does their technique relate to their ideas? These discussions don't have to be held in the language of the semiotician or the musicologist. Address complex questions in plain language.

SUBCULTURES AND MULTICULTURES

As a Varsity arts writer once put it during a CUP seminar, one of the most palatable problems with the average culture section is that it's so "tight, white and Western." But why?

From your campus to your community, to Vancouver to Hollywood, the cultural world is jam-packed with subcultures, ethnic cultures, queer cultures and anti-cultures.

For some readers, these will reflect their own communities. For others, these will be new windows on new realities.

Part of the secret to dealing with a broader multicultural range is recruitment (and vice-versa). Ideally, cultures should be written about from within. Even if that isn't yet possible at your paper, there's no excuse for ignoring diversity.

Another of the big obstacles to this expansion in coverage is a fixation on 'professional', commercial products. Yes, there are a lot of interesting divergences within the mainstream — it would be a crime not to cover hip-hop, new Black cinema, gay literature, feminist theatre, and so on.

But a lot of this activity is happening on the margins, because it's either too edgy (like queercore zines, dub poetry) or more amateur and traditional in orientation (like Indian or African dance, country blues, community cabaret, cultural fashion or folk art). 'Amateurism' is a relative term, though, which usually betrays your class bias. Treat 'amateur' artists with as much respect as you'd give to commercial stars.

Deal directly with the cultural roots of your material. Actively seek out artists who aren't white, straight, Western men — call community centres, women's groups, artists' unions, all-grrrl bands, colour-blind theatre groups, etc. Profile them and write stories about their achievements or troubles.

Talk to people who are into different scenes. Ask about the events and artists they know. Keep contacts and resource lists. Print previews of upcoming events relevant to people from different communities, even if they don't seem like 'college'-oriented happenings.

Run investigative features on these subjects — particularly if you're in a small town where there's not a lot of activity.

Write a feature on the difficulties Asian-Canadian artists have getting recognized, or how gays and lesbians are misrepresented in mainstream movies. Phone the media moguls and put these questions to them. Interview artists, writers and activists concerned about cultural representation, whom you can discover by reading far-flung fringe publications (see list at end of article).

Address the problem of white Western artists appropriating the images and stories of other cultures, commodifying them, putting them in subsidiary roles, or ignoring them altogether. How do people from marginalized groups depict or interpret the dominant culture in their work? Cultural clashes are one fruitful source of material, though they are never the whole story.

But papa, don't preach, especially not from the outside. And don't talk only about 'difference' — deal with cultures

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in context, but treat their art as art, with the same critical standards you'd bring to other work.

Novelty, token representation and exoticization aren't the point. Get the views of non-dominant cultures into the paper through invitation, investigation, inclusion, documentation and exchange.

STATUS OF THE ARTIST

This is an important angle for investigative stories and cultural news. Talk to artists about their education and development. Look into training and apprenticeship programs and profile them, with an eye to process and access. Ask what artists do to further develop skills and ideas while working.

Cover the grit, not just the glory. Cover artists' unions in labour stories. Deal with health and safety hazards faced by painters and technicians. Look into income tax, copyright, border hassles, working two jobs, touring headaches and other problems faced by working artists. Profile some counter-examples to the artist-entrepreneur model, like co-operatives, collectives and workshop groups.

CULTURAL ACCESS

Mainstream media often treat art as though it were produced by some alien species of genius that we can only stand back and admire. Break down that ethos. Examine instances of art that gets out of the galleries such as audience-participation theatre, busking, public sculpture, community-based media and pirate radio.

Discuss the problems of expense, isolation, racism, sexism, classism and lack of leisure time that stymie many people's efforts to become artists, participate in cultural activity or even just go to a show. Provide how-to information that can help readers get past these barriers, and profiles of artists who've succeeded despite daunting circumstances.

Ask artists about their techniques and methods. Your readers will find it refreshing to learn something new from the newspaper if you explain it in a way that's accessible to people without a background in that field.

CULTURAL HISTORY

Politics, it's been said, is the struggle of memory against forgetting. Knowledge of the past is necessary in order to connect ourselves with the present and the future.

The culture section of your paper is the ideal place to do this. Write about the history of your local gay and lesbian community, discuss when the underground railroad or the slave trade passed through your area, celebrate the anniversary of a major strike, or look back on an underground newspaper or on student activism at your school in another period.

Profile a Canadian who fought in the Spanish Civil War, or an octogenarian housing activist. Dig up the secret roots of a wealthy family in your city that made its mint selling munitions to the Nazis or rum to Al Capone. Write about a bygone theatre, cafe or warehouse that was once the centre of the local avant-garde.

By putting these articles in your culture section, you lessen the pressure to have a "news hook" to hang these stories on, and you provide your readers with a sense of local history, which is a powerful resource. Write about what most people have forgotten.

CORPORATE AND GOVERNMENT CONTROL

Most of the movies, music, theatre, dance, books, TV shows, clothes, food and just about anything else we run into have been produced for the profit of huge conglomerates. While it's important to promote alternatives to this system, we have to confront it directly as well.

Write about corporate concentration of arts and media, trade issues, profiteering, political connections, conflicts of interest and the way corporate pressure can hurt artists. Look at how corporate expectations narrow the cultural possibilities available to us by investigating the business practices, selection processes and marketing methods of major media.

How are new technologies changing our cultural landscape, and what are the corporations' motivations and intentions in deploying them? Can college radio compete with the mainstream? How do record charts and bestseller lists work?

Then there's the flip side to corporate culture: government funding and regulation. How do these systems work? Who sits on regional arts boards? Who gets funded by the Canada Council, who doesn't and why? What legislation governs culture and multiculturalism



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in Canada, how is it changing and what effect is it having on artists, audiences and everyone else?

What's happening in copyright law? Why must broadcasting be regulated through the CRTC, and how do they decide who to license? How does government control affect the CBC, national galleries and other government-run institutions? What's happening in pornography and hate-speech legislation, charter challenges, or censorship by border officials? Does government funding really put a stop to economic censorship?

All these questions cover culture, but they take hard work. The answers aren't easily available. Try setting yourself a quota of investigative culture news to get started.

As you become more comfortable with the style and the research, more ideas will come to you and your section will develop a life of its own.

LIFE, THE MULTIVERSE AND EPHEMERA-THINGS

Finally, keep in mind that there's more to culture than the arts. Mainstream media set up enclaves like 'entertainment', 'lifestyles', 'new cars', 'food' or 'family' in different sections, but you don't have to.

Use your skills as a culture reporter to review local buildings, restaurants, new style trends, festivals, advertising and media. Talk about what toys kids are playing with, the revival of traditional faiths and cultures among First Nations people, computer hacker groups on campus or a new drug. Work with your news department and develop a

series that can run for multiple issues, examining the multiple facets of more complex issues.

In particular, take a look at how media represent different elements of daily life. Write a piece about how abortion issues have cropped up on recent television programs, or the differences between the 'gangsta rap' image and what's going on in your local communities. Write about how daily life can be changed by culture, too — ask if art therapy works, or whether recent films affect community discussions of inter-racial relationships.

Critique the national media, perhaps for downplaying Canada's role in Haiti or Afghanistan, obscuring the big business agenda in free trade agreements, or sensationalizing other sensitive issues. Make it a culture story by focusing on the techniques media outlets use when covering these stories and how they distort the results.

Look at these parts of the culture from the same angles you'd use to examine the arts. They all have economic, political and ideological elements worth writing about. But keep it journalistic — do good research, use sources and quotes, and don't rant.

With all these ideas in the air, it's hard to figure why, in general, we haven't been writing this way.

As I've said, the preponderance of reviews is one reason, but there are a few other bad habits of method and mind that prevent culture reporters from being better journalists. All of us are guilty of a few of them. Don't waste time on self-flagellation, but give yourself a tune-up on the points that apply to you.

Here are some bad habits. Which do you identify with?

- We often don't care enough about the needs of our readers or the credibility of our paper. We believe our own judgment is all that matters, and don't try to communicate with our writing.
- We don't stop to think about what we're doing and why we're doing it. We don't discuss priorities with other staff members. Since we haven't decided what's important, we just write about what we personally like or hate.
- We don't challenge our own bigotries and elitisms. Or our false assumptions about our readers' and subjects' identities, interests and backgrounds. This can result in everything from using too much obscure jargon to churning out racist stereotypes.
- We believe we're above covering campus and local culture. So we don't bother to find out about the learning processes going on, or the unique aspects of local arts and traditions.
- We mimic the mainstream, academic writing or writers we think are cool. So we print "My Date With Mick", "Fear and Loathing in Fredericton" or "The Aleatory Distress of Migrant Signifiers in 84 Charing Cross Road." Yuck.
- We don't speak honestly from our own situations and understandings, instead we try to impress the reader with how smart we are. This usually means we end up talking about nothing at all.
- We don't consider whether we're the best person to write about the subject.

5 New directions in covering culture



If the story's about a misogynist comedian, and you're a man, a woman could be a more sensitive writer. If it's about barn-murals in rural Saskatchewan, and you're from Montreal, maybe there's someone else with more background. This isn't an insult, it's just a fact. Write about what you know as who you are. There will always be another story.

- We don't do much research, don't bother to think about the meaning of what we do find out, resort to clichés or don't attempt to find anything worthwhile to say. Our stories are like hit-and-run accidents with thousands of witnesses.

- We don't read anything but school-books, the mainstream press and other student papers. Or we don't make contact with a wide variety of people as sources, resources and friends. This is like writing with blinders on.

Of course, you and I are not the only ones ever to conceive of this kind of culture coverage. Where can we find some good role models?

PUBLICATIONS TO LOOK AT

- The Village Voice, from New York City, is probably the finest source of culture journalism in North America.

- Fuse, out of Toronto, is overly academic and trendy, but is distinguished by a diverse staff and has some intriguing political ideas.

- Cineaste and Cineaction magazines cover mainstream and independent film with a strong political slant.

- Border Crossings, from Manitoba,

keeps an intelligent eye on the Prairie arts scene.

- Border/Lines, from York University, which does clever stuff on critical theory, travel, literature and avant-art.

- Processed World, from San Francisco, puts a subcultural spin on lifestyle and work issues.

- Spy magazine is good at satirizing and undermining show biz.

- In These Times, The Nation, Zeta and This Magazine are all left-liberal periodicals that give a good amount of space to socially-conscious discussions of arts and culture.

- Adbusters, out of Vancouver, and NYC's Extra! are fine examples of media criticism.

- Ear, Option, Musicworks, The Source, Wire and Maximum Rock'n'Roll all have their snobberies, but they're good places to plug into their respective music scenes. Ditto for theatre magazines like High Performance, TDR, Performing Arts Journal, Canadian Theatre Review and Theatrum.

- Devour publications devoted to women's issues, communities of colour, or gays and lesbians — especially those published close to you — whether it's Fireweed, Rites, Angles, Off Our Backs, Outlook, The Advocate, The Afro-Canadian or Sojourner.

- Read punk-, homo- and fan-zines wherever you can find them, if only to pick up your spirits. Factsheet Five is the magazine that reviews and catalogues this burgeoning do-it-yourself network.

- And although they're easy to disparage, listen to college radio stations, if you can. Often there'll be one or two shows with stimulating, ground-level angles on culture issues. ◀



The art of the review

BY KEN BURKE

- ▶ Arts and culture reporting is as vital to student papers as anything we put between the ads. That is when it's done well. When it's not, it can make the rest of the paper look sick for having the poor taste to associate with it.

The quality of your culture writing depends on how you approach it, and whether you pay attention to a few basics. This is a brief introduction to the art of criticism.

APPROACHING THE REVIEW

Reflection is a healthy habit. In every section of a student paper, a writer must sometimes say “woah,” sit down, and debate whether or not there's any point to what they're doing, and if so, what it is.

The tricky part shouldn't be figuring out whether our society's arts and culture warrant coverage. The culture business makes is an enormous industry, taking in films, books, theatre, music, television, crafts, painting, sculpture, performance and mass media communication.

Covering culture by writing the same stories as mainstream media is like the sports section covering the NHL. Film critic Robin Wood has some advice, though:

“Film reviewing (the giving of personal opinions as to whether films are good or bad) seems to me a thoroughly trivial occupation, and I have never thought of myself as a film reviewer. What I try to do is probe films for possible insights they may offer into our culture, its tensions, conflicts, contradictions and suppositions.”

Student papers should concentrate on placing cultural events in context. A review should not act as a professional gossip and crowd control manager. When reviews are done, they should make readers think for themselves.

Another problem with copycat reviewing is its avowedly apolitical nature. In the market of pre-arranged values, reviewers have designed something called ‘entertainment value’ as the ultimate test of what they write about — all that counts is whether it leaves ‘em smilin’.

We can do a whole lot better. Popular culture is one of the most powerful communicators of ideas regarding sex, race and class in our society. Student culture writers owe it to themselves and their readers to analyze what's really being said in any given work and what that means to society.

More than whistleblowing obvious examples of racism, sexism or homophobia, it also means talking about the positive images and examining the previously dismissed “light entertainment” works in a new, more serious, light. The intent isn't to create scapegoats or to be more politically correct than thou.

As critic Penelope Houston has written, “A cinema of dissent or disengagement makes comments no less revealing than one which wholeheartedly endorses the standards of society.” Those words apply to the whole of arts and culture writing.

A FEW RULES

There are some cardinal rules culture writers should cast in concrete.

Don't play favourites

For many of us, our initial interest in criticism is triggered by personal tastes. No one should limit their writing to what appeals to them the most. If heavy metal, delta blues or Gilbert & Sullivan is all you really want to review, you should question why you're a critic. Having broad interests is a real sign of thinking through culture. Understanding and being able to explain why you like this, dislike that, is even better.

Cover the obscure and local

As an arts writer in non-commercial media, you have the opportunity to cover that which is refused or ignored by mainstream media outlets. In most media, art produced in non-traditional areas is relegated to a small amount of space in the margins and back pages. Sadly, much of the work in our own communities gets little attention from local media outlets. These are also where some of the most interesting stories are to be found.

This doesn't mean that you have to churn out reams of prose fawning over what you feel is mediocre, either. Most artists appreciate balanced criticism. As a result of a balanced review, their next effort might be better, whereas no review at all may mean there is no next effort. Provide conscientious criticism, taking into account the special difficulty many of these artists have in producing their work.

Study your subject

Once you begin covering culture beat, no matter your background, you should learn as much about it as possible. The more knowledge you gain, the more perceptive a reporter you'll be. You can read books on the form, talk to artists or read any clippings and articles you



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can find about the artist and their work. If your writing has the stiff sound of an outsider, it'll be obvious. Greater knowledge means you'll make fewer rookie mistakes.

You should know a little about the history of the art form and which other works this one draws upon or refers to. You should also know what the group of people behind the big names do — what's the difference between a production designer and a scenographer? Galley proofreader and copy editor? Record producer and sound engineer?

WRITING THE REVIEW

Once you're ready to sit down and write, your first concern should be the overall structure.

First, take a look at your notes to decide what you most want to express. As in news reporting, taking notes is essential for culture reporters. Notes remind you of the emotions and impressions that you had at the time, before you had a chance to reflect. They keep your train of thought alive and help to improve your perceptions when it comes to writing. Films may be an exception, but jotting down the first impressions, key words, quotes and ideas help to avoid memory failure. A pad of paper and pen are invaluable to any reporter.

You can often obtain background information through simplest routes. The cinema, gallery, theatre, publisher or promoter likely has press information and visuals on your subject. An administrator or public relations type may also refer you to further information or arrange for an interview. The local library (perhaps at the university)

probably carries the latest editions of journals and magazines with in-depth arts coverage that may be of some assistance, as well.

•[See: Ch 4. Research]

Criticism isn't structured like news writing because the intention is different. News writing concentrates on facts, the statements of people involved, and, at times, an analysis laid over the top like a mesh. In criticism, the piece centers on the writer's analysis. Unlike news writers, who are generally meant to be read and not seen, culture reporters have to be seen expressing an opinion.

•[See: Ch 1. Opinions writing]

As a result, a review needs a form more properly tailored than the inverted pyramid. It needs a style that allows for the clear development of analysis and the drawing of specific conclusions based on presented evidence. So say hello to your old high school buddy, the essay — sort of.

Style considerations, and the reality of having to cut articles to fit space, mean that reviews should not look like the papers you hand in to your professors. Culture reporting, therefore, requires a certain blending of essay and news styles.

In other words, reviews follow standard journalism rules (clear sentences, simple language and short phrases) while incorporating the essay's philosophy of arguing ideas and defending points. A review, like an essay, must have a central thesis. But like news articles, you should arrange your analysis with the most important points on top. This way a reader can get to the good stuff right

away and stick with the piece.

Your impressions of a work may be broad, and many of the ideas may not be linear. If this is the case, it might be best to pick out the most dominant impression you have of the work and use that idea as a loose thesis for the article. Place it first, and discuss the smaller points in relation to that main one.

For example, an article on a Brian DePalma film might focus on his on/off-again fixation with violence à la Hitchcock, or a Fugazi concert might speculate on whether the band's abstinence from sex'n'drugs diminishes the power of their rock'n'roll. A review of a Spike Lee film might discuss the recurring stereotypes of women in Spike's world.

The articles are by no means limited to these points, though. It's okay to digress to ideas outside your main analysis. The idea is to focus your analysis, resulting in a more thoughtful and imaginative commentary than, "I liked this, this and this. This was okay, and these other things weren't so hot but overall you should see it."

SOME GENERAL TIPS

Back yourself up

When you make a statement, back it up with an example. Don't expect people to believe you just because you said it. They need the truth of your words proven by the examples you provide. If you say the jokes weren't funny, give the reader a sample stinker. If the songs are sexist, quote the pigboy lyrics.

Use the correct tense

This is always tricky, but there is a solution. When reviewing static media



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(which don't change with different performances), use the present tense. The painting/book/record/movie *is* something, because it's the same each time you look at it or listen to it. A play/concert/reading *was* something because it's a completely unique moment in time — the next time the play is performed, for example, the show could be tighter, the crowd's response could be worse and lines may even have been changed or dropped.

Be honest

Don't exaggerate your opinions to be more controversial or readable, but don't shy away from saying what you think, just because it's not fashionable or popular. Don't print a great phrase you just thought up that doesn't fit the subject. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Rebut yourself

When you're finished, reread the piece. Question, ridicule and make fun of everything you wrote. If you've said something that can't stand up to your own criticism, change it so it will or drop it. Read awkward sentences aloud, then revise them. It's better for you to ridicule it now than have readers make fun of it later. But don't be too rough on yourself. The idea is not trash your whole article, it's to smooth out the bumps.

Keep an open mind

Never plan to attack or praise in advance. Of course you'll have some preconceived notions, but those notions should be flexible if they are contradicted or corrected by later experience and information.

WHAT TO AVOID

Self-indulgence

This is the number one enemy of good culture writing. Nobody cares that you rushed to the interview with a hangover from the night before. Your personal anecdotes displaying the similarity of your life to the lives of characters in the book bore readers. Stick to your subject. Remember that you're reviewing the dancers, not your seat or the company you're keeping in the auditorium.

Critical clichés

We've heard and read them all, don't make us read them again. Phrases like the *gripping* plot, the *clean* production and calling every new male folksinger "the new Dylan" are trite. Use words like *stunning*, *classic* and *among the year's best* too often and you look like you've got neon eyeballs. Have a heart, brain and courage, Dorothy. Think up your own clichés (read Orwell's *Politics and the English Language*).

Over-describing the plot

In any form of culture that uses narrative (most books, films, plays, television), you waste your talents and spoil the fun if you spend all your time recounting a plot synopsis. A brief sketch of the situation involved in the story is all that's needed for description. Concentrate on analysis, and don't destroy the potential viewer/reader's experience.

Don't be too technical

Remember that you're writing for a general student audience, not your honours English or Fine Arts class. Avoid technical critical terms, industry lingo and other jargon unless you're going to explain them. Conversely, you should include at least some description of how the technical side of the work con-

tributes to the full effect. Keep two audiences in mind: your average student, and the more savvy viewer. Both should be able to read and appreciate your review.

Don't take too long

There's no need for 75 and 100 word sentences stitched together with every colon, comma and dash known to punctuation. Examine how such sentences can be split.

The same applies for paragraphs. Ten column-inch paragraphs appear far too often in arts sections and they scare away readers like quarantine signs. Check again for any logical breaks and use them.

Finally, don't use a paragraph to say what could be said in a sentence. Many arts articles outstay their welcome. Cut rambling introductions and redundant paragraphs or sentences.

FRESH ANGLES FOR ROTTING COVERAGE

The following are some ideas for writing deeper and more interesting reviews.

Interviews

To get the information you need, you'll have to interview people. Every paper should do interviews with artists and power-brokers in the culture field. This also takes the emphasis away from the opinions of the writers in the section, which is always appreciated.

These interviews could be used to complement a review, as a longer arts feature or profile, or as a culture news story. Q&A interviews are usually dead-ly dull and draw unnecessary attention



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to the “exclusivity” of the interview.

Base your interview questions on research about their work, history, successes and failures. Don’t gush all over them because they’re famous, but don’t treat them poorly if you don’t like their work.

Remember that there’s never a shortage of people to talk to: writers, visual artists, touring musicians, actors, directors, producers, filmmakers, broadcasters, agents, managers, administrators, or rising young whatevers on campus.

• [See: Ch 2. Interviewing]

Comparative reviews

When you have two or more things that are related, prepare an article comparing and contrasting them. Two books by the same author, new books on women’s sexuality, records by ex-members of The Clash, plays about suicide — they all lend themselves well to an article that analyses them, placing them in context with each other and similar works. Such grouped reviews are usually more effective and revealing than several short reviews.

Translation reviews

When a work of art or popular culture has been translated from one form to another, cover what the change has meant. For example, books regularly turn into films, artists mimic or pay homage to other artists and paintings even become musicals. Examining the before-and-after gives you a wedge to get into analyzing the work at both ends. It also provides insight into the intentions of the artists who produced the translation.

Remember that artists freely draw

upon each other’s ideas and works. As G.B. Shaw said, plagiarism is the sport of writers. Don’t waste time and space playing detective games to be clever, but if you can bring out an interesting angle by referring to sources of inspiration, go ahead.

Career retrospective

A new work or a visit to your community by an artist is a good occasion to write a career retrospective. This is especially true when visits lend themselves well to interview opportunities. You could focus on a particular time frame, an entire career, a recurring theme in the artist’s life or work, or even compare new work to past accomplishments. You can then include an examination of how the surrounding cultural scene has changed at the same time. Like most good culture reporting, this requires some research.

Culture news and features

If you can write a review, you can put together a good news story or feature. The politics and behind-the-scenes world of arts communities deserve that exposure. Arts writing is fun, but it should be approached with the same professionalism as any other task at the paper. Reporting in this vein also lends more punch to the arts section, usually considered one of the more lightweight areas in the paper. ◀

• [Want more? See: Ch 1. Arts writing, Ch 2. New directions in covering culture]

This paper has been adapted from Ken Burke’s “Culture Reporting Style”, a CUP resource paper from 1986.



Special issues and supplements

BY TRACEY LINDEMAN

- ▶ In 2006-2007, the Link organized 15 special issues out of 31 issue publishing year. We did it all — the queer issue, media democracy, women against violence, creativity, consumerism and sustainability, housing and poverty, culture and diversity, disabilities, orientation, sexuality, women, and the list goes on.

Publishing supplements and special issues is a fun and useful way to attract new writers who may not be interested in writing traditional news stories. Supplements are also a good way to reach out to other campus groups who address the specific topics you will be discussing in your supplement.

Doing a queer issue? Invite the campus queer rights group to your staff brainstorming session. It fosters a sense of solidarity and these groups may be a lot quicker to help you in the future. Having contributions from people who know what's going on also allows you to draw from a much larger pool of story ideas than your staff alone could create.

SO YOU WANT TO CREATE A SUPPLEMENT . . .

One of the reasons we publish supplements is because something isn't being covered in our normal issues. Some staffers might be adverse to the idea of more "controversial" supplements, but journalism isn't just about reporting the news, it's also about pushing boundaries and writing about communities.

If something is taboo on your campus or in your community, perhaps it's time to write about it — in depth. If any-

thing, it will give your letters section a boost. If you're experiencing some resistance from other editors about the topic you'd like to address, try using a different angle on the pitch. Talk about bringing in new writers, getting topic-specific advertising (i.e. Apple ads for a Science and Technology issue), boosting readership, and increasing participation. Also mention the potential for writers to have their material published in other campus papers via the CUP wire.

Supplements tend to cover social issues, but covering social issues doesn't automatically make you some sort of Marxist-Leninist. This is why it's good to solicit ideas from a wide range of people from all areas of the political spectrum. Invite them to write about these topics in your special issue. A special issue shouldn't just be 12 pages of opinion articles, though. Having solid, well-researched pieces is incredibly redeeming and appreciated by writers and readers alike.

There are a number of different ways to approach a special issue, but it's usually good to know how many pages you're working with: will it be a 4-8 page extra section or a special issue (from a 12 page insert to the Gateway's Herculean 40-page sex issue)? It's often hard to predict how many pages you'll have in advance.

You could discover that you have way more content than you can cram into your pages or that you have far more pages than you have content to fill them with. If your paper has a website, you can throw some extra articles online as "Online Exclusives", which is also useful for directing traffic to your web page. If you have blank pages, it's time to get

creative and do what you do best — it's happened before.

GETTING YOUR IDEAS ON PAPER

Try to schedule brainstorming sessions at least three weeks before the issue is supposed to come out. Advertise the meeting over your paper's email list and put some house ads in the weeks leading up to the brainstorming session. Try writing e-mails to organizations that are relevant to the discussion, inviting them to come to the meeting to share their experiences and educated opinions.

Some dates worth remembering

Oct. 18: International Media Democracy Day
www.uberculture.org/projects/imdd.html

Nov. 25: Buy Nothing Day
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buy_Nothing_Day

Dec. 6: École Polytechnique Massacre anniversary
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/École_Polytechnique_massacre

Feb. 14: Valentine's Day

March 8: International Women's Day
www.internationalwomensday.com

March 21: International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/march-21-mars/index_e.cfm

April 22: Earth Day
www.earthday.ca



2 Special issues and supplements

It's usually a bit slow-going at the beginning of the meeting, so you can always ask your editors to come with some ideas prepared to get the ball rolling. Then you won't be able to get people to shut up — many brainstorming sessions have exceeded their designated hour of discussion. It's a good way to motivate people and get writers enthusiastic about the topic at hand.

When someone suggests a topic, ask if they'd like to write it. At the end of the meeting, ask people to come and put their names beside the stories they'd like to write. Give them their deadlines, word counts and about two weeks to write it up.

the Link (Concordia University), CUP 68 supplements bureau chief, and Quebec Board Representative for CUP 69 and CUP 70.

Other well-loved special issue ideas

- A frosh issue in September
- A convocation issue in April/May
- A travel issue

WHO DOES WHAT NOW?

Who organizes special issues, you ask? The Link schedules its special issues at the beginning of the year and asks editors (and some keen volunteer staff members) to coordinate the issues. Those people act like section editors for the issue, which is useful if your editorial staff doesn't have the time to coordinate a supplement.

Usually, two people is a good way to go, especially when there is a lot of content. Try to assign photos and graphics as story ideas come in. This gives photo and graphics editors more time to do their work in addition to the work for regular issues.

Need help? CUP also maintains a supplements bureau chief, who you can reach at supplements.bureau@cup.ca.



Tracey Lindeman was Editor-in-Chief of



Issues the student press neglects

BY CARL WILSON

- ▶ Is the student press really an alternative to the mainstream?

It's surprising, the extent to which issues once considered radical have emerged into the commercial press in Canada. Violence against women, First Nations' self-government and drug culture are only three good examples. Many of issues that were once the bastion of the student press now grace the front pages and opinion columns of the commercial press.

The range of coverage in student papers has changed very little in the same period. If anything, it's narrowed. In part, this is because many of the same problems still plague many students and still need to be addressed. But there are a lot of serious issues to which we have given little play. Some are new and some are age-old troubles which have had fewer well-placed champions.

The student press can widen the parameters of thought and debate among its readers and be alternative to the mainstream. It can continue to push new ideas and subjects onto the plate.

Many of the other issues covered in this Style Guide also belong on this list, and I'm sure other people could add still more subjects. But I hope these suggestions stimulate some forays into unmapped territory and, especially, more debate about how to arouse a spirit of investigation, innovation, curiosity and risk-taking in student journalism.

ECONOMICS

Economic reporting and analysis are

indispensable to any understanding of political life.

Where there's money, there's power. More directly, where there's money there's food to eat, a place to live, the chance to go to school, books to read, and clothes to wear. So why, aside from tuition fees and student loans, does the student press seem so blasé about economic issues? When was the last time you wrote/read about:

Business

Every major daily has a business section, but what about all the aspects they ignore? As consumers, and as present or potential employees/employers, we should be discussing the realities and ethics of business on campus far more than we do.

What news can you find about small businesses in your community? What about the effects of corporate mergers and restructurings on employees, or on the consumer? What about concentration of ownership and its effects? Can you explain it in better detail than the mainstream black-and-white? What are the implications of corporate control of entertainment, land, government, media and just about anything else? There is a strong corporate presence on almost every post-secondary campus in North America — can that be examined a little closer?

Examine management ethics. Write about companies that are using alternative ownership and management styles like worker-ownership, cooperatives, advisory worker committees or board members from the community. Are "team" models in the same vein or are they a more devious means of squeezing efficiency out of the worker?

Finally, look at how the topography of the business world is changing. In North America, there's been a massive shift away from heavy industry towards the service and high-tech sectors. How are our educations, our jobs, our lifestyles and the development of other countries being affected by this reorganization?

Start by reading the business pages of your choice daily. As you read, imagine that you're interviewing the writer or the subjects. Ask with suspicion what their statements may mean to the rest of us. Then call them up and really ask them.

Work

Somewhere behind the spectacles of business and organized labour lurks the daily drudgery of work. It's a hard subject to get into print. It's hard to find stories that document that day-to-day grind, the hostility and alienation caused by minimum wage, and the strategies people use to survive or subvert them.

The economy

The student press seldom devotes space to challenging the dominant media model of the Canadian economy.

What do inflation, deficit, dollar, DOW Jones, and stock market statistics really mean? Whose definitions of economic health are being used? How are economic policies supposed to work and how do they really? Is education a drain or a positive influence on the economy, and does government support reflect those facts? What causes unemployment? Why is there a recession or a boom? Are there any ways of exerting more democratic control over the economy?



2 Issues the student press neglects

Perhaps the most important facet of the economy for the student press to examine would be community economic development. In many areas projects have been undertaken to redirect economic activity towards the grassroots under some form of community control. In other areas, provinces and municipalities still strive to attract as much big business as possible with tax incentives and other perks. How do these different approaches compliment and contradict each other?

If you have professors on campus who teach economics, start with them. Read magazines like the *New Internationalist* which attack economics head-on. Or just read this week's economic news and ask yourself and others what it's all about.

Urban Development/Decay

While housing issues are considered important to the student press for obvious reasons, the story behind housing is the story of developers, architects, planners, city politicians and social services.

These agents interact to plan the future of cities. Individual cases and patterns of development and decay should be followed with a view to who benefits or suffers politically, economically and socially. Whose voices are the loudest and which are missing? The student press can play a role in bringing those voices together.

International trade

GATT. World Bank. IMF. Free trade agreements. It's not difficult to make a case that these are actually the governing powers in the modern world. As trade competitiveness becomes a more and more important factor in

corporate and government decisions, we still haven't looked too closely at the way international trade is changing work, agriculture, education and diplomatic relations. What's the relationship between international trade and the decline of unionism? Human rights abuses? The arrays of enemies and allies in the world? Economic downturns in most regions? What about private education facilities or the impact on university research priorities?

The welfare state

A very large proportion of Canada's people are dependent on welfare and other social services such as EI, medicare, and child benefits. Another portion of the population believe the myths about social assistance recipients which describe them as lazy, shiftless, and drunk. What's the reality?

Talk to anti-poverty groups and welfare rights associations about the problems with the system, why people go on assistance and how they get off it.

Taxation

Is excess taxation an issue? All those social programs cost money, after all, but corporations dive and swim through tax loopholes with glee and much of the tax we pay goes to bureaucracy. Do taxation rates disproportionately affect middle-income workers? Is there a connection between free trade and the GST? What would be a progressive tax system?

Does a cutting of taxes by governments effect our social network negatively (e.g. the childcare crisis)? Does the mainstream media frame taxation as though it is 'bad', despite the possibilities of better health care, childcare, and public transit (to name a few) that could result

from maintaining (or increasing) current tax rates.

Talk to tax-campaigners on all sides, and you'll see how complex some of the problems really are. Some people are refusing to pay tax. Others are devising intricate avoidance schemes. Some studies say that people actually get satisfaction from paying their taxes. Write about them, and see where it leads.

Consumerism

Product safety, prices, status, boycotts and environmental responsibility can all be discussions about consumption. Some push for self-sufficiency, but how do we get there? Others embrace endless consumerism as the new reality. How are their lives different? Is there a middle ground?

Advertising

Ads are often the primary means by which economic and political power-holders manipulate spending, values and language. Yet neither the news nor the culture departments of the Canadian student press seem to care about it.

Your paper itself is full of advertising, of course, and sometimes it seems people read our ads more attentively than our copy. Don't give up without a fight. Write commentaries to balance the ads in your own pages. Research Canadian ad agencies. Cover advertising practices and reception as news. Review new ads as if they were submitted artwork, looking for their social meanings, or publish satires of them. The ways ads work and what they are saying can be brought out of the shadows.

<continued...>



3 Issues the student press neglects

Sustainability

Environmental issues aren't necessarily neglected by the student press, but covering it from more angles can never hurt. Environmental sustainability is a part of almost all decisions we make these days. Use it as a basis for your questions when looking at other issues. For example, if your university's administration is building a new building, what are they doing to ensure it has a low impact on the environment?

Does your school have a compost? Why not? How hard would it be to start a compost program? When your school hosts events are they wreckless towards the environment? Do they use styrophone plates or coffee cups when alternatives are available?

Don't be afraid to question the wasteful habits of event planners and developers. Keep them to task.

LIFESTYLE ISSUES AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Privacy

A certain level of privacy is essential to creating the social space and freedom we need to build healthy communities, or simply to operate with autonomy in a highly regulated society.

Privacy is an increasingly important topic of public discussion in the internet age. Have you ever read the Facebook, Youtube, or Blogger privacy statements? How much of the information that we think is personal is now out of our hands? What about copyright protection on sites like Flickr? Examine the relatively recent phenomena of identity theft, online bullying, or the e-stalker.

Freedom of information is also a big one in the 21st century, especially as it implicates individuals. Where is the line between the need to know and public accountability? Implications of no-fly lists, security certificates and public closed-circuit surveillance are all public issues which relate to individuals. The right to protect personal information against the government's right to protect the public is an ongoing debate.

Police, prisoners and the law

Penal institutions receive little coverage in the student press partly because they have a habit of being removed both socially, economically, and financially from universities and students' lives. This does not mean, however, that there are no good stories to be told from these institutions. The disproportionate numbers of First Nations people in prisons in Canada is not just a statistic to be quoted in stories about Native sovereignty and racism.

Living conditions in prisons are seldomly, if ever, written about; including the problems ex-convicts often have trying to find housing and work; the relationship between crime and economic deprivation or social disadvantage; the effect of high incarceration rates on some communities (aboriginal, for example); alternatives to prisons; police and guard brutality; education (formal and informal) in prisons; voting rights; political prisoners in North America; extradition treaties; the Young Offenders and Youth Criminal Justice Acts; sex and drugs and HIV-transmission in prisons.

Some local police forces also have agreements with universities for security or monitoring student activity

off-campus. Some of these stories can also tie in with privacy issues discussed earlier.

Mental illness/psychiatry

Look at your school's psychology departments. How many counselors are there per student? What kind of wait lists or procedures are in place that present barriers to students in need? What qualifications to counselors have? Do students have to pay for these services? There is often a big divide between services offered on campus and those offered off campus.

Talk to people who volunteer in hospitals, half-way houses and with the homeless. Document abuses and therapeutic alternatives. Not all conventional wisdom is correct. Is there some interesting research happening on your campus that is looking in that direction? Mental illness still carries a poorly understood stigma in our society and the student press has an opportunity to break down some of those barriers in the minds of our readers.

Homelessness

Homelessness and inner-city life are treated in both the mainstream and many alternative presses with a macabre mixture of fear, disdain and pity. People whose lives are spent on the streets are not treated as a part of the normal population and worthy of regular coverage in the news.

Dealing with the question of homelessness without exoticizing or sentimentalizing the subjects is a tough problem for journalists. Look at the new genre of papers produced and sold by homeless people in several North American cities, including Vancouver and Toronto, for hints of what may work. They are



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people who have are living under a very distinct set of circumstances and therefore have a different set of concerns and priorities than many other subjects you will have written about in the past. Try to get into their headspace and understand them before you start to write.

Sex Trade

Workers in prostitution, strip clubs and other parts of the sex trade have been striving to gain recognition of their rights to work in freedom and safety. The “oldest profession” still combats the problems of pimping, street safety and oppression. Advocacy groups for prostitutes exist in many Canadian cities and you should talk to them about their different points of view with other feminist organizations, neighbourhood advocacy groups, and law enforcement organizations compare their own definitions of sexual power, freedom and commerce.

Drugs

Aside from consumer-guide information once a year or so, student papers do not usually reflect the level of interest in, and use of, drugs among their writers, readers, or the general population. The questions of supply, addiction, legalization, enforcement, treatment and recreational use is an opportunity for fresh news, features, and analysis.

Food

There’s more to eating than Kraft Dinner, even for students. It’s a subject that matters (obviously) to everyone. We should write more about food marketing, food additives, agriculture and farming, gardening, student eating habits, the economics of food, the roots of world hunger, campus food quality and sources, vegetarianism and other options in eating, cooking. There is also an increasing trend in dumpster diving

and student food banks which tie in to the cost of education. Locally produced food is also increasing in popularity but growth is slow — examine the reasons for that.

Food security

With many people believing that an oil shortage or crisis is looming on the horizon, and with increasing concern over the quality of farming soil (soil degradation has happened due to bad industrial farming practices), we need to seriously consider where our food is coming from. Much of what we eat is shipped in from exotic locations, sometimes even a tomato travels thousands of miles just to get to your plate, despite the fact that it could have been grown at a farm near you.

Take a look at how agriculture in your region is being affected by the global market. What impact would an oil crisis have on your town or city? What do you really know about where your food comes from? Would you know how to get food if it weren’t pre-packaged for you? Is eating locally a trend in your area?

Literacy

As mavens of print media, we have a vested interest in fighting illiteracy. Most communities have literacy action groups and councils helping people who need tutoring or other assistance in overcoming illiteracy.

Literacy connects with other educational issues and social empowerment among groups for whom illiteracy is unusually high. In the same line of coverage, problems of numeracy, technological literacy, visual literacy, media literacy and others are of concern.

Religion

The social custom of not speaking publicly about religion expresses itself in the student press in the assumption of universal atheism. Religion and culture are so closely linked that they are far from absent from social life. Some of the most interesting stories I’ve read have been about the conflict between changing social mores and religious tradition, or how religious worldviews cause social conflict or affect political life.

Many people of any number of faiths are struggling to reconcile their beliefs with ideas of social justice in a rapidly changing political and techno-oriented world. This ideological struggle is enormously difficult for both older and younger generations but in enormously different ways. What gulfs are being opened up or closed? How is this affecting the way religion is treated on post-secondary campuses? In politics and war? Social norms and friendships? Love and marriage? Death and dying?

Parenting

It’s not much easier to be a parent than to be a child. As university demographics change, there are more and more mothers and fathers attending classes and hopefully reading our papers. Speak to them about the challenges of raising children while being a student. The availability of child care, toys, children’s television, single parenting, community support and gender roles are obvious issues that arise.

Senior Citizens

Senior citizens are the reasons that any of us, and our institutions, are here today. But they are disproportionately represented among the poor and subject to fear and misunderstanding from



5 Issues the student press neglects

younger people. Technology is also leaving many older citizens behind. Writing about mandatory retirement, free tuition for senior citizens, what life will be like for us when we're old are all interesting topics of discussion as well as related health care and social issues.

Gender Bending

One of the fronts which emerged in the 1990s was transvestism and transsexuality. Activists, journals and cultural products dealing with gender benders are now commonplace in most cities and larger towns. We should be giving them prominent, respectful play. Does your paper say “queer” or “lgbtttq”?

•[See: Ch 8. Diversity]

Immigration and Refugees

This is a vital and under-reported part of the anti-racist struggle in North America. The travails of cultural adaptation, racism, border-crossing (literally and metaphorically), financial hardship and family dislocation are all a part of the realities of immigration to Canada. Refugees' problems can be even more brutal.

What kind of fresh immigrant voices are represented in your paper? Stories about how their degrees, earned in other countries, are accepted in Canada (everyone knows the cab driver who has an engineering degree), community organizations, adaptation to language, food and culture as well as their ability to work in Canada are all good story angles. ◀

Carl Wilson is a former editor at the McGill Daily. With files from Amanda McCuaig, President, CUP 70.



Freelancing

BY WILLIAM WOLFE-WYLIE

- ▶ The student press is fun, exciting and you get to be your own boss. You get to cover the stories that you feel are important, often photographing them how you see fit, while working at your own pace.

Wouldn't it be nice if you could keep doing that for the rest of your writing days? Welcome to the world of freelancing.

Freelancing is a term which is tossed around a lot, often with very romantic intonations. Freelancers, while not earning the same level of prestige as columnists for major dailies, have much more freedom than most journalists. But it's not all fun and games. Freelancing requires strict financial management, business skills, vision, and hard writing and photographic skill. As a freelancer, you're running your own business but you are also the product being sold. You have to learn how to sell, negotiate, buy, budget and produce.

A successful freelancer can make more than \$100,000 per year. But this is far from the standard. While most successful writers and photographers will engage in some form of freelancing throughout their career, very few will ever venture into the unpredictable world of professional freelancing. This guide is not meant to push you into that world. Rather, this guide will provide the basics of pitching your first piece, provide some answers to typical questions, point out some typical pitfalls, and console you after your first (inevitable) rejection.

A QUICK OVERVIEW

Just as you wouldn't walk into a biker bar trying to sell piña coladas, nor would you try and pitch ("query" — you'll see) your interview with Stephen Harper on globalization to Food and Drink Magazine. You are both the salesman and the product (your words are the product, but you're selling yourself as the right person to produce them) and you have to know your buyer. Research them, learn their writing style, learn what they like to write about, look at their photographs and see what kinds of tones they set. How many writers do they have? Are they organized around beats or features? How big is their editorial staff? Who owns them? Are they ad-driven? Corporate PR? Subscription-driven?

These are all questions that you'll need to answer for yourself before you can produce a decent pitch.

While you're doing this, there's one more thing to remember: most monthlies plan approximately four issues in advance. In other words, don't write a pitch in May which is time sensitive to the following week. If you're writing a pitch in May, realize that your potential clients are already thinking in August.

For example: back-to-school season is a good time to be planning to have your first freelance article published. This is when the market opens up a little bit since advertising dollars are flowing into publications and they have a little more money to spend on freelance articles. It's also a time when a number of publications have student-themed issues which, let's face it, is a good thing for student writers. If you want to get into this market, you should be writing pitches in May and June.

The other thing to remember is not to expect money quickly. There are two kinds of payment systems: payment on acceptance and payment on publication. Both are fairly self-explanatory, but note that neither of them is "payment on acceptance of pitch." Just as most publications that you will pitch to are planning a few months in advance, so too is their bank account. You might wait a month to hear back about a pitch and then another three months before you ever see real money. This is one reason why it's difficult to make it as a professional freelancer. Complacency can set in easily, and while you're busy now, you might forget to keep writing pitches and then, three or four months down the road when things have calmed down, you can't pay the heating bill because you weren't writing pitches for more work.

For example, in August 2006 Via Rail's travel magazine "Destinations" decided to publish a special student-themed issue to promote student travel along the rail lines. On May 9 I sent a query outlining the article that I wish to write and very quickly received an email from the editor asking me to call him to discuss the idea further. On June 1 I sent in my first draft of the article and received a reply with some requests for changes and for a headshot to accompany the article. On July 11 I received a fact-checking email regarding some dates that were included in the article. The article was published in their August/September edition and on August 8 I received a cheque.

Given that the entire process took more than three months and the payoff relatively low, you can see how difficult it can be to produce a personal budget based on the long-term predictions of



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pitching and writing.

But, accepting that, also realize that editors are reading dozens of pitches a day and sorting through them for the ones that contain the promise of a good article that will help them sell more magazines and produce a better product of their own. Realizing this, you must write your pitch very well.

BUT WHO ARE YOU PITCHING TO?

Everyone has different writing styles. Some are wonderful at writing edgy, sexy columns about the downtown club scene and others have an intimate knowledge of anthropology and are able to bring it to life for the reader.

You have to do some self-analysis here. What kind of a writer are you? What are you bad at? What are you good at? What do you write that people like to read? Remember that the answers to those last two questions might not always be the same thing.

If you've come this far, you probably have an idea of what you'd like to write and how it's going to look when it's written. You might even have an idea of what kind of photo you'd like to see with it.

If you don't have a story idea yet, go back to page one and start over. Editors are not interested in telling freelancers what to write when there are already dozens of others who are pushing down their door with their own ideas.

You've got your idea, now go out and find someone who might be interested.

Sourcing publications to sell your work

to can be one of the more difficult parts of freelancing. When you're just getting started it can be hard to figure out which publications are freelance-friendly, which ones pay their accounts on time and which ones are interested in printing the kinds of articles that you're interested in writing.

A good place to start, as always, is with Google. Type in some keywords that are likely to appear in your article: "wine makers in the Maritimes" for instance. The search results will largely be professional wineries and commercial sites, but there will inevitably be a few that turn up newspaper and magazine articles about exactly that. Examine these — are they industry magazines or one-off trend pieces?

You can also sell your article to the competing publications. If Canadian Wine Magazine published the original article, maybe Wine Connoisseur Magazine is looking for an article to rebuttal with. You never know, but it's worth a try.

One more piece of etiquette: don't pitch the same story to more than one publication at a time. Besides being rude, it also tarnishes your name among those publications if they both respond in the affirmative and you have to tell one of them that you were just kidding. They'll remember that and are unlikely to hire you for another article if they don't think it'll come through.

Another option is to just look in the mastheads of the magazines that you like to read. If you read them a lot, you already know the kinds of stories they cover and the writing style they prefer. Often enough, magazines will include a note to contributors below their mastheads or at least provide the email ad-

resses of the appropriate editors.

Directories of trade publications can be useful. Depending on where you're located and how geographically centered your story is, trade publications can be freelance friendly and generally pay well since they have corporate backing. Nobody writing for them is ever going to win any kind of journalism award, but it gets your name out there and provides some much-needed income.

WRITING YOUR QUERY

In the lingo of the freelance world, pitches are never called pitches. They're called queries, and the word "query" should appear in the subject line of your email or snail mail proposal.

This is easily the most important part of any freelancing project and you should take the writing of your query as seriously as you take the writing of the rest of the story. Your query signals to the editor the quality and style of your writing. It signals to the editor the depth of your understanding of their publication and the writing style being demanded. But, most importantly, it signals to the editor how quickly and efficiently you are able to conduct your research.

What?

That's right — how quickly and efficiently you conduct your research. This is one of the most important things to remember about query writing: don't ask questions. Answer them.

Going back to our example of Wine Makers in the Maritimes article that we'd like to pitch to Wine Connoisseur



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Magazine, here is an example of an awful query:

“I propose that I examine the growth and impact of wineries in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, especially since there are rumours circulating that the production of fruit wines is acting as a draw for tourists coming from Upper Canada.”

This tells the editor that you don't know how to write and that you were sitting on your couch one day and had an idea and quickly fired off an email. While this might be appropriate for a professional whom the editor has worked with before, it is completely and utterly dismissed when it comes from you, the unknown. Compare that example with this one:

“The development of wineries specializing in fruit wines outside of Shediac and Moncton, New Brunswick, has proven to be a profitable business venture for recent immigrants living in the Maritimes. The majority of the current fruit wineries were established between five and ten years ago but most have already cleared themselves of their initial debt and are beginning to expand. The provincial governments have also acted accordingly, including the wineries in their annual tourist guides . . .”

The query will go on to cite some of your sources and, in the tone and lan-

guage of the publication, tell them that they are going to get a series of interviews with the proprietors for these wineries and accompanying photos of their operations.

There are no guarantees that a well-written query is a guaranteed job, but it certainly is the most important part for a beginner freelancer. This is, after all, the publication's first impression of you and you'd like it to be a good one.

“The pitch is an audition. It is a sample of your work,” said Paul McLaughlin, a professional freelancer, at a conference of the Canadian Association of Journalists in Halifax in 2006. “Do not submit a badly written pitch promising an awesome article.”

This sounds like a lot of work to go into something that might not even result in an article, and it is. But you need to do as much research as is necessary to make an interesting pitch. If you don't grab the editor's imagination with your pitch, how are you going to grab 30,000 readers?

Most magazines will take three to six weeks to get back to you about a query and this can be frustrating. It means that you have to be constantly thinking up story ideas, doing the preliminary research, and firing them off. If you do a lot of queries and start to get some positive answers back, this might also

mean that you have to go back through your notes and remind yourself which story you had pitched!

WRITING THE PIECE

Once the query comes back and it's accepted, chances are good that an editor from the publication is going to want you to call them so they can speak with you in person (on the phone is about as “in person” as we really get these days in a digital world). This is especially likely if you're a new writer to the publication and they don't know your work — it's just a way to make them feel a little more confident in your abilities and that you actually know what you're writing about. With that in mind, have some extra information ready when that phone call happens. Even one or two more pieces of information than were included in the original query will let them know that the project is progressing and that you're the real deal.

If you've made it this far, we'll assume that you're a real writer and don't need any coaching on that side of things. Rather, let's talk about your relationship with the publication.

Submit ahead of the deadline. Especially with a monthly publication, like most magazines that you're likely to be pitching to, submit early. Especially if you're writing for them for the first time. This allows them some extra time to review your work and, if they want some sections re-written or edits made, you'll have the time to do that.

Try to publish with the same publication more than once. While it looks good to have a variable portfolio across a number of different publications, it



If you make the decision to start freelancing your work, make the decision and make it firm in your mind. Start referring to yourself as a freelancer. When people ask what you do at parties, mention that you're a freelance writer (in conjunction with whatever else it is that you do). In this way your name and talents get out there and more work will come your way. While you will always be pitching more ideas than will ever come to you, it's still remarkably satisfying to receive an email that says something along the lines of “Hey, I heard you're an awesome writer and I have a project that you might be interested in.” In other words, carry a business card that you can give people. It'll prove useful.



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looks better to show that at least one editor thought you were good enough to hire back more than once. It shows that you're reliable, good to work with, and have more than one idea in any one field. This increases the odds that other people will hire you.

As with all articles that you want to look extra special good, do more research than you'll ever actually need. Even if it doesn't wind up in the piece, it'll increase the depth of your understanding of your subject and provide you with greater context when you come to writing. It also increases the base of sources that you can go back to later on. This is often referred to as the iceberg theory of writing. Imagine an iceberg: approximately 70 per cent of its mass is invisible and below water. Similarly, the best part of your writing is your research that holds the rest of the story above water, even if onlookers never actually sees it.

But, with that, comes the final step:

GETTING PAID (HOW MUCH?)

While it would be nice if we could all write for the sheer joy of writing, the reality is we all have bills to pay. For many freelancers, writing is how we make a living. So, inevitably, how much we're paid for our work has to come into the discussion.

This is the hardest part, for some.

Rates are dependent on your skill, the demand for your skill, the length and complexity of the story, any photography involved, whether or not other writers are pitching the same story, the prominence of the publication, the owner of the publication, how many

freelancers they engage, and about a million other things. Figuring out where you fit in the grand scheme of things is hard to do and, for the first few jobs you do, it's likely that you'll be low-balled.

If you're not sure what you should charge for a piece, ask them first. The initial call from the editor mentioned above is a good time to do this so that everyone is on the same page before you get started. A question like "what is the proposed fee?" is a good way to inquire about where they stand but also leaves the door open to negotiation if you're not especially pleased with their answer.

If they get to you first, though, you should have an idea in your head about what you'd accept to do the job. If asked what your rates are, it's a good idea to throw out a number 50-100 per cent higher than the number you would actually accept to do the job. If you get that amount, great, but if it goes down, at least it's not going down from your minimum.

The amount you can expect to be paid varies a lot. But for a well-reputed professional like Paul McLaughlin (cited earlier), a 500-word feature with photos would return no less than \$700-\$800. As a student or beginner freelancer, you're never going to get that much, but you can always try.

In some cases, such as with coverage of certain events or conference services, the final fee is not in negotiation, but rather an hourly rate to be billed later. www.writers.ca/whattopay has a good preliminary guide on pay scales.

In the end there are too many variables

to provide a standard pay scale. But remember this: talking about money is uncomfortable for almost everyone, but as a writer speaking to an editor you must cast off the student-journalist mentality that we're just having a good time with our own papers. As soon as you enter the freelance world, and especially when negotiating your fee, you become a professional. You are one professional speaking to another, one businessperson unto another; you can be sure the editor is treating the situation that way. If you remember this, then the whole process becomes a lot easier since it ceases to be personal and it all becomes business.

Remember to invoice. Just as you were a businessperson when negotiating your fee, so too are you a businessperson when it comes to collecting it. These publications that you're writing for are legitimate businesses who need to file year-end reports to show where their money went and they need to have appropriate invoices to back up their spending. If you don't invoice them, you don't get your money. Any office suite has a number of templates for invoices that you can fill out and use (remember to keep copies for yourself) or you can always design your own based on invoices that you've received from other companies. But you are a now your own small business and it's a good idea to keep records of where your money is coming from and who it's coming from (also useful in case you get audited).

There are two kinds of payments that come out of freelancing: payment on acceptance and payment on publication. Guess which one is better for you.

Payment on acceptance means that as soon as you've submitted the piece



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and they've approved that it's what they were looking for and is up to their standards, you get your cheque in the mail. For some smaller publications, though, they're running on a tighter budget or different editorial policies than will allow them to do this. For them, you only get a cheque once the piece appears in a magazine. If it never runs, you never get a cheque, but that's a risk that you'll just have to take. Sometimes you can get what is referred to as a "kill fee" for submitting an article that's never published, but this is becoming more and more rare. Remember to clarify this when you accept the job, though.

REJECTION SUCKS, BUT IT WILL HAPPEN

In baseball, if you hit one out of every three pitches you're heading for the all-star game. In love, if every man/woman you ask out ends up sleeping with you, you're likely to die of some heretofore unknown disease. In medicine, getting three out of four answers right is enough to allow you to practice brain surgery.

Writing is like baseball. You're going to be rejected far more often than you're going to be accepted. Get used to that idea now and it'll hurt less later.

Rejection letters are often very short and to the point. Copied below is an actual rejection letter that I received, just to give you an idea of what they'll look like:

Dear William,

Thank you for your submission on Atlantica, and we apologize for the tardy reply, which is due to a very high vol-

ume of submissions in recent weeks. Unfortunately we do not see a place in the magazine for your story.

Sincerely,

The Editors

Like I said, they're not pretty. But, since you've been sending away a number of queries, you're like to get a more encouraging letter back. Something along the lines of this one:

Hi William,

Your story is very interesting. Can I call you to discuss it?

Where and when can I reach you?

Luc

Welcome to the world of freelance writing. You never know where you're going to wind up and what you're going to be writing. That's the exciting part. You get to work with more editors than most writers see in a lifetime and sometimes you even get to travel on their bill.

Being a freelancer requires independence, drive, and the ability to write in a wide variety of styles quickly and on deadline. But hey, those are the skills that brought you to where you are now anyway, right? ◀

*William Wolfe-Wylie (Argosy) was CUP
70 national bureau chief.*