Fall 11-1-2024

Pity the Poor Reader

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Pity The Poor Reader

A pirate's manifesto on writing well

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A

PIRATE'S MANIFESTO

ON WRITING WELL

9th edition

Barking Dogwood Press
50 Decatur Rd, Atlanta, Ga 70706

“No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise.”
The Mock Turtle in Alice In wonderland

ALSO BY CHARLES HADDAD

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CHAPTER 1

ALAS, POOR READER

Alas, the poor reader. Ever pelted with a heavy rain of words. Junk mail and Spam, E-mail and tweets; E-zines and streaming news. Preached at and scolded, befuddled and misled.

Tortured with unpronounceable words and bored with cliché. Is it any wonder that people grow ever weary of reading?

I undertook this book not just to help aspiring writers, but to help myself and my dwindling brethren: We who still love words. For us, few joys surpass a sentence that moves one to tears or laughter. That's true whether it's found in a book, a magazine, a song, on a blog, Facebook post, Tweet or over a urinal.

Such love borders on sickness. It's a disease I intend to spread. I aspire to be a one-man epidemic. If I can help raise a better crop of wordsmiths, then we poor readers may have more that's worth reading.

That said, this book is neither grammarian nor manual. I'm afraid you'll find it of little use if you're looking to learn the difference between a colon and semicolon, the nominative and objective case. There are plenty of such tomes gathering dust in the back shelves of bookstores and libraries.

Instead, consider this slender volume a rapier. Wield it to cut through the trope and drudgery that dulls most writing today. It's a pirate's manifesto on writing well, an un-textbook.

What, pray tell, does that mean?

It means this book is a philosophy in the 18th-century meaning of the word. Think of Machiavelli's "The Prince," John Stuart Mill's "Principals of Political Economy" or Sun Tzu's "Art of War." All of the above embodied more than their particulars: stagecraft, economics and war. "Know you the enemy and know yourself," Sun Tzu counseled Chinese generals, "and you will fight a hundred battles without defeat."

Sun Tzu's adage is as much attitude as military strategy. So, too, is writing. It's neither job nor career. To write well you must learn how to think like a writer. This book, then, is a way of perceiving the world.

Writing well is also a way of living. Like Sun Tzu's ancient Chinese warriors, writers are fighters, too. They live to slay ignorance and misconception, fabrication and pretense.

It's a fight anyone can wage. Writers have long come from all walks of life. George Orwell served the British Imperial police in Burma and India. Victorian novelist Benjamin Disraeli was elected twice as Prime Minister during the height of the British Empire. Cao Xueqin, the author of Chinese classic "A

Dream of Red Mansions," was a disgraced bureaucrat in the Qing dynasty. Cervantes fought against the Turks. And Thomas Paine, probably our most famous essayist, taught school, collected taxes and served as a privateer.

The lesson here is that you don't have to call yourself a writer to know how to write well.

This is also a book of illusions. Writing, if nothing else, is the art of deception. Sincerity of purpose, I'm afraid, is never enough. Readers have to be tricked into not only reading your work but believing in what you write. Within you'll find a useful bag of tricks.

As any skilled illusionist knows, you can't deceive an audience without first seeing the world through its eyes. You must sit in the lowliest of seats, eating stale popcorn. Writers struggle to empathize with readers, not judge them. Nor do they preach. As Claudius says in Robert Graves' novelization of his life, writers "compel men to truth." That is, they don't cherry pick the facts that fit their moral assumptions; they try to portray the world as it is, warts and all.

If you learn to pity the poor reader, your writing will sing. And if your writing sings, readers will sing your praise.

Then again, even if you sing like a canary, who will hear you at a time when so few are listening? In other words, giving the waning interest in reading, why bother to learn how to write well?

It's a fair question — with a Machiavellian answer: It's in your own best self-interest to do so. No matter what profession you choose — law, medicine, accounting, astrophysics or prestidigitation — writing well will help you to stand out.

Look at any field. Most of the top people write and speak well. Examples include Oliver Sacks in psychiatry, Stephen Hawking in physics, James Grant in finance, Paul Krugman in economics and Doris Kearns Goodwin in history.

Take David Card, a Nobel Prize winning labor economist at UC Berkeley who examined the 1980 Cuban refugee crisis in Miami. In 13 pages, Card skewered the conventional wisdom that illegal immigrants drive unemployment up and wages down. His terse paper also punctured the academic balloon that quantity of words equals quality of thinking.

In making his research understandable to all, Card was answering a call issued by another Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman, a theoretical physicist who first imaged the smartphone back in the 1940s. Feynman said to his fellow scientists: "If you can't explain what you do so that a six-year-old can understand it, then you really don't understand it yourself."

If great thinkers such as Feynman and Card struggle to make their ideas understood by all, what excuse can there be for you — and anyone else — not to?

Thinkers such as Card and Hawking understand one of the great ironies of our time: The more there is to read, the less there is that's worth reading.

Editors and publishers despair at finding people who can be heard above the din of clacking keyboards and smartphones and tablets. People who can write material that's not only entertaining but engaging.

Anyone can tweet or email. Only a few can do so in a way that commands attention, draws an audience. Says Brian Sugar, who runs a network of blogs called Sugar Inc., "It's actually really hard

creating compelling content that brings an audience."1 A mere 10 percent of blogs garner nearly 90 percent of all readers. Write well and you'll be in high demand, a canary among crows.

It has taken me years of hard practice, but I've finally mastered how to befuddle my students. Within the first minutes of any new class I never fail to leave them flummoxed.

The secret to my success: I greet every student with a sizable hunk of rock candy. It's not for eating, mind you; it's for contemplation. Behold your candied quartz, I tell my class, and consider this question: Why is writing like rock candy?

Confused? Good. Now you're ready to learn how to write well. I require all my students to be confused, even lost. They must set sail from the safe harbor of their assumptions, of what they believe to be true. Only in uncharted waters can real learning take place.

I'm afraid that there aren't any cute videos or computer games, with their singing cartoon characters, to soften the hard work of learning to write. The basic lessons are darn hard to sink your teeth into, let alone digest. Compensation comes later in the sweet satisfaction of having mastered something difficult, like completing a marathon.

Starting to see why learning to write well is like eating rock candy?

Writing well is hard because it's a balancing act of the highest order. You're trying to arrange words in a way that's clear yet pleasing to the ear, meaningful yet entertaining. Mozart called this the golden mean of truth: Artistic expression that's sophisticated yet accessible.

Few things are harder to achieve. Even the great Mozart struggled. Here's what he once wrote his father in frustration: "In order to win applause one must write stuff which is so inane that a coachman can sing it, or so unintelligible that is pleases because no sensible man can understand it."

You've probably begun to wonder. "Okay, so this guy can quote Mozart, but what does he really know about writing?" Now you're starting to think like a writer.

Allow me to present my credentials. What qualifies me to talk so high and mighty about writing is years of failure. Sure, I've had my share of success, writing six novels and scores of high-profile stories in national publications such as the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune and Business Week magazine.

But the peaks of my career pale in comparison to the valleys. It's slogging uphill that teaches you how to think and, better yet, how to think for yourself. Writing is nothing but thinking in its purest form.

In the ups and downs of my career, I've had the privilege of rubbing shoulders with some of our best writers. I filled notebooks with random bits of their advice and tested it out in my own writing. Some of it worked, most of it didn't. It's the stuff that didn't work that egged me on to try and make sense out of the craft of writing.

Lao Tzu didn't invent Taoism. He did, though, give it meaning. This wandering Chinese philosopher gathered up, sorted and compiled the disparate wisdom of a dozen scholars and priests. His i Ching, or book of changes, has influenced thinkers around the world for two millennium.

This book is no i Ching, but Lao Tzu is my inspiration. Little here is original to me. Rather, I've attempted to spin the disparate threads of wisdom gathered over 25 years into whole cloth.

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[1] "An Advertising Shift Helps Blogs Survive as Businesses," New York Times, 9/14/09

The lessons of this book are agnostic. They apply whether you want to write news, magazine stories, memoirs, blogs, tweets or even fiction. The book offers successful examples to emulate from all of these forms of writing.

Agnostic as well is my intended audience. This book is written for all who want to improve their writing, whether age 15 or 50. You're never too old to be a student. At 51, I began studying Chinese. I guess you're never too old to be foolhardy, either.

This book is assembled from six interlocking conceptual blocks:

- Think Like a Writer
- The Tao of Writing Poorly
- The Art of Brevity
- The Artful Tease
- The Power of a Great Idea
- Difficulties be Damned

The first three blocks lay the philosophical foundation of my method. It illustrates that writing well is as much attitude, the way you live and perceive the world, as craft. These blocks also lays bare the common mistakes and misconceptions that hobble most beginners. Its designed to encourage readers to laugh at how little they know about writing and how poorly they've been taught about it. You can't start to improve until realizing how little you understand. That realization sets you up for the fourth block, which explains the techniques of our best writers. The fifth block explains how the foundation of all good writing begins with a good idea. No fancy writing techniques will save a stinker. And the sixth block illustrates the importance of gathering meaningful information to write about. Writing and research or joined at the hip. You can't write well unless you have good stuff to write about.

I've included several cheat sheets as addendum. One lists words that are sure to deaden anything you write; another is a list of words sure to enliven your writing. Lastly, there is list of common mistakes, which I call the "Un-Commandments." Feel free to cut and paste any of these lists to the top of your laptop, your writing journal or your forehead.

That said, this book works best when read from start to finish. My technique won't make much sense until you understand its philosophical underpinnings. Nor does it make much sense to just read the book's opening philosophy. What's the point of it if there's no practical application? Nor can you write well if you skip the section about how to gather information or meaningful detail. It takes silk to spin fine cloth. And research and reporting are the silk of great writing.

I do try to keep the book short, in the spirit of less is more. And I try my darnedest to make the lessons entertaining, using my own experiences and those of other writers as comic relief.

Any writer worth his Puma sneakers has stumbled time and again.

Learning to write is slapstick comedy. Feel free to laugh at your own stumbling, first steps. A self-deprecating sense of humor helps ease the inevitable bruises suffered in the long journey of learning how to write well.

CHAPTER 2

FEED YOUR HEAD

It wasn't that long ago that only a handful of people could read, let alone had access to books. Indeed, if an early American family owned a book, it was either a copy of the Bible or Ben Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac. Possessing a library — and the ability to read it — marked you as special.

No longer. Today, not only can nearly everyone read, but we all have access to millions of books, magazines and newspapers, thanks to public libraries and the Internet. You can live in Peoria, Illinois and read Beijing's China Youth Daily, if you're fluent in Chinese.

Even the poorest of our poor have access to infinite knowledge. Visit any inner city public library and you'll find it jammed at midday with the homeless reading newspapers and cruising the Internet.

Riding on top of this tsunami of information is a new age, but it's hardly one of enlightenment. It's a time that would make even Alice wonder. Like her famous looking glass mirror, everything seems to work in reverse.

Consider:

Few people bother to read more than their email yet everyone wants to write. And write they do. Written material — books, magazines, Web sites, blogs email and tweets — swamps the world. Never mind that much of it goes unread. Thirty-five percent of all blogs, by some calculations, have no subscribers.

While the number of college applicants rises ever higher, their qualifications — despite all the SAT prepping — wanes. College admission officers say that, if they considered just the quality of personal essays, they'd have to slash admissions in half. "No one knows better than us the appalling state of writing by young people," says one top admission official at Emory University.

Don't be fooled by the lower acceptance rates championed by colleges. Except for a handful of elite schools, admission standards at many places are actually falling apace with applicant qualifications. A growing number of community and for-profit colleges are accepting students without high school diplomas.

Says one such community college student, "High school was too hard so I decided to skip it and just go to college."

Is it any wonder, then, that a dwindling number of college graduates are well educated?

Only a third of them can read a challenging book. More graduates can name the three stooges than the three branches of American government. Many think gerunds are some kind of hamster.

In fact, if recent research is to be believed, college today can even make you dumber. No less an august establishment figure than former Harvard President Derek Bok laments that students are graduating less able to reason, argue and write. “Too many Americans just aren’t getting the education that they need,” concludes a recent report by the U.S. Education Dept.'s Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

“There are disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing and thinking skills we expect of college graduates.”

Such students represent a new fraternity on campus. Its members read Monarch Notes, not original texts. They value libraries, all right, but as comfortable places to crash after a night of hard drinking. To them Mogadishu is Starbucks newest latte.

Rather than do homework they work their parents, persuading them to browbeat teachers into granting the As and Bs necessary to win college acceptance. Members of this fraternity can regurgitate every lie Teen People and Entertainment Tonight has fed them about Tom Cruise, but they know nothing about Tom Paine. These are students who choose ignorance over learning. They are the willfully uninformed; they have what Bob Dylan calls a “passion for dumbness.”

The willfully uninformed is one fraternity you don't want to join. Not if you want to become a writer. For writers, ignorance is death.

You can’t write well unless you read a lot and are well read. Reading a lot involves more than devouring every popular thriller, romance and fantasy novel. There’s nothing wrong with such escapist entertainment — unless that’s all you read. For writing is about immersing yourself in life, not running away from it.

Writers are intellectual billy goats. There’s little they won’t read: Twain and Wharton, Voltaire and De Tocqueville, Thucydides and Plato, Confucius and Lao-tzu.

They read graphic novels such as “Ghost World” and the short stories of Woody Allen. If liberal they’ll read the Weekly Standard; the Nation if conservative. Every point of view interests writers, especially ones they disagree with.

Writers read the menu of an authentic Bengali restaurant and the ingredients on the box of their morning cereal.

Reading all of the above and more is what it means to be well read.

Why bother, as Dylan once sang, to fill your head with all this seemingly "pointless and useless" knowledge?

Foremost, reading is a sharpening stone for the mind. That's especially true if you read work that challenges you to consider: What does it mean to be alive; what does it mean to be young; who do I want to become? Struggling with such questions is like weight training for the soul. And anyone who writes well is soulful.

Reading isn’t just metaphysical. It’s practicum, too. A writer reads the way a musician practices scales. Twain, Dickerson, Morrison and Baldwin train the ear. Your mind soaks in vocabulary, style and technique the way a sponge soaks up the spill of a fine wine.

There's no better — nor pleasurable — way to learn grammar than through reading. Read a lot and you'll find commas come as naturally to you as breathing.

All art is derivative. One idea sprouts another, the way an acorn becomes an oak. That’s why there’s no shame in mimicking others, especially if they’re good.

In folk music, there's a long tradition of putting new lyrics to old melodies. Writers do the equivalent, harnessing old themes to produce new work. Kafka learned from Voltaire; Voltaire from Cervantes and Cervantes from Shakespeare. And everyone has copied Homer. Thomas Jefferson lifted his famous line in the Declaration of Independence "We find these truths to be self-evident" straight from the writing of Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid.

Remember the Hollywood movie "Clueless?" It's screenwriters cribbed from the plot of Jane Austin's "Emma." Neil Simon modeled the characters of his "Odd Couple" on Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Writers are more than bookworms. They visit art galleries, play in recitals and fling themselves onto the upraised arms of fellow attendees at Pearl Jam concerts. They hike along the Continental Divide, cycle across Europe and go on safari in Kenya.

If in Beijing, writers will learn at least a little Mandarin and wander the winding hutongs behind the American-style high-rises that dominate the skyline. They'll try chicken feet and jellyfish salad, anything to experience what it's like to be Chinese.

There's a long tradition here. Mark Twain worked on the riverboat steamers plying the Mississippi in the early 1800s. Ernest Hemingway fought in the Spanish Civil War. Not only did Cervantes fight in a pivotal battle that turned back the Turks from Europe. He also was captured by Barbary pirates and held prisoner for five years.

This is not to suggest that you should get yourself captured by pirates. But a little life experience goes a long way for a writer. "Experience," American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton said, "is the oracle of truth."

As they're out there mucking about, writers are listening in, eavesdropping on the human condition. A writer tunes into a group of teenage boys at Starbucks as they trade tips on how to master the online game Guildwars. He listens as girls compare Manolo Blanik sandals at Neiman Marcus.

Conversation is only part of what a writer is listening to. He's also paying attention to vocabulary, idiom and cadence — anything that would enable him to authentically capture in words how people sound in real life.

A writer looks as well as listens, noting the woman with the tattoos of black cats on her triceps. Nor does he miss the boy who trips on the cuffs of the jeans drooping below his derrière.

Why muddy your Jimmy Choos in the grit of life? Because experience goes hand in hand with reading. Each enriches the other, like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. Together, reading and writing provide an encyclopedic grasp of the world. The pair also affords a trustworthy reality check, enabling you to ensure that your work has the ring of authenticity.

The imagination is a hungry furnace, requiring constant tending. You need a steady supply of fresh material to keep it well stoked. But if well tended, your imagination will reward you with a steady stream of the metaphors, analogies and similes that enrich any well-written material. Why Hank Williams' voice is like a beautiful thorn; why working as an attorney is like writing with a box over your head.

Knowledge also sharpens your vision. It enables you to see the threads that bind things, to discern connections between the seemingly disconnected, to make sense of the seemingly senseless. It's this ability, to serve as an intellectual Jedi, to see what others cannot, that makes a writer's work meaningful and lasting.

So, as Grace Slick once sang, “Feed your head.”

CHAPTER 3

THINK LIKE A WRITER

Writers are as varied as the colors in a box of crayons. Yet the good ones are cut from the same wax. They share a common belief: You can't write well unless you know how to think well. For writing is nothing but thinking in its the purest form.

This idea shapes not only how a writer works but how he lives. In fact, how a writer works and lives are as inseparable as air is from breathing. Let's take a look at why that's so.

The great English writer Robert Graves penned novels, poems and critiques of world history, politics and culture. But when it came to counseling aspiring writers, he had but four words: "Learn to cultivate leisure." Graves wasn't advising his acolytes to lounge around the pool all day, sipping Margaritas. He certainly didn't. The man traveled everywhere and read everything, including Homer in the ancient Greek. Hardly a leisurely pursuit.

Rather, what Graves mean was this: Make time to immerse yourself in life. Hear all, see all. Notice that some girls go barefoot, even when it's below freezing, while others wear furry boots in the heat of summer. No detail is too small if it's meaningful. The trick is to find the meaning and that requires the time to think deeply about life.

With an army no bigger than the New York City police force, Alexander the Great conquered most of the civilized world in the 300 years before the birth of Jesus. His greatest moment came when he sent a mere 300 commandos to subdue a rebel army that thought it was safely perched atop a cliff in Uzbekistan. Alexander's commandos scaled the cliff, overwhelming the surprised rebels.

If he hadn't been a warrior King, Alexander would have made a fine writer. He was the ancient embodiment of the writer's credo: Less is more. The guy knew how to do a lot with a little.

Consider "less is more" as the Zen Koan of writing well. It represents an ethic that makes writers the sworn enemy of all pretense and bloviation. Writers worship clarity. They struggle to reduce all ideas, people and places to their essence. Writers say as much as they can in as few words as necessary. Writers are, above all, men and women of few words.

Like his fellow Englishman Graves, Benjamin Disraeli was no slouch, either. He busied himself running the country and writing histories and novels. Despite his awesome workload, Disraeli wasn't so grave. He always credited both his artistic and political successes to his "strong sense of the ridiculous." He tried never to take anyone – especially himself – too seriously. Hence, his preference for pirate garb and Turkish baths.

Whom or what configured the motherboards of our souls seems to have purposely crossed many of the wires. We're forever shorting out, acting inconsistently and contradictorily. People's behavior

doesn't add up neatly like the columns on a balance sheet. There's always some unexplainable gap. How else to explain why Disraeli, a conservative idolizer of the landed aristocracy, extended suffrage to the British working class and laid the foundation for the modern welfare state?

Writers try to capture such contradictions, not excuse or explain them away. You don't have to pretend in your writing that life makes sense. Leave that to the experts. Lord knows there are enough of them today, pontificating on everything from economics to friendship.

Not that you should take experts too seriously. You'll learn that most of them are wrong most of the time. Remember, it was highly paid experts who were certain Y2K would destroy computers worldwide and that the Pet Rock would be the hottest thing since the wheel. As Yogi Berra once said, "It's tough to make predications, especially about the future."

This is not necessarily a bad thing. If the future were predictable our service economy would collapse. There'd be little work for the legions of economists, financial planners, online pundits and late night TV soothsayers.

As an aspiring writer, rejoice in life's unpredictable. It has kept writers employed for a millennium.

A growing sense of the ridiculous, if left untreated, will fester into doubt. This is a good thing if you're a writer.

Think of doubt as a nagging parrot. It sits on a writer's shoulder whispering incessantly. "Is this person telling me the truth? How can I verify what he's saying. Are these documents believable and why?"

Don't confuse this nagging with cynicism, believing the worst about everyone or everything. Rather, it's an attitude a newspaper editor I once knew called a "healthy pessimism." Writers assume nothing until it's proven.

Doubt is part of a never-ending struggle to remain independent in thought and deed. It's a struggle that requires questioning yourself, continually asking: "Am I sure and why? What evidence supports my theme or point of view?" Let doubt keep you humble and humility will save you from the blindness of arrogant self-confidence.

"Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong," wrote Philip Roth in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel "American Pastoral." "The illusion that you may get it right is the perversity that draws you on."

If Roth, considered among our greatest living writers, can retain his humility, so can you. Arrogant self-assurance is a wet blanket that will smother any spark of ingenuity.

Nurturing doubt can be a bit dangerous. A modest amount keeps you honest and humble.

But too much will strangle your initiative like kudzu enveloping a live oak.

A touch of courage helps to temper doubt. It inspires you to take chances, to wander away from cliché and convention, pushing the envelope of understanding, thinking the unthinkable. That's how you gain the insight that drives a truly fresh voice.

Of course, taking chances is never easy. There are times when you're going to end up in a ditch. "Writing is like driving a truck in the dark without headlights," said writer Gay Talese.

Still, if you've never felt lost or afraid when writing then you are not trying hard enough.

You have to learn to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Take heart, though. All who wander are not lost.

In fact, writers like to wander. They're self-starters who are happy to find their own way.

Ever restless, writers tend to live life as a never-ending quest for the next good challenge. All the better if it's one they've set for themselves.

For restless striver types, writing makes a worthy pursuit. That's because writing is an ever-rising hill with no peak. If there's no peak, you never reach the top, always leaving room for improvement. Indeed, it's by challenging yourself – trying new genres, techniques, and voices — that your writing improves.

Climbing that ever-rising hill is not unlike some kind of lifelong marathon. To ascend any distance requires rigorous training. Writers must learn not only how to push themselves; they must master how to weather hard but constructive criticism as well.

The key to benefiting from criticism is to embrace failure. It sounds counter-intuitive, I know, because you've been mislead to believe that failure is a bad thing. In fact, successful people from all walks of life learn to see it as the boot camp of excellence. It's only through trial and error, missteps and detours that one can grow and improve. You can't stand tall until you've tumbled down a lot of stairs. No one understands this connection between excellence and failure better than basketball legend Michael Jordon. Here's how he once put it:

"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I succeed."

Like basketball, writing is often not a solo endeavor. Writing in particular is too hard to do alone. Every writer needs a demanding yet supportive coach — or a knitting circle.

Finding advice isn't hard. Plenty of people – parents, friends, lovers, even rivals – will offer opinions about your writing. The problem is that most of it will stink.

How, then, to discern the diamond from the glass, the valuable from the worthless? The secret is to become your own best critic. That requires two things.

First, deafen yourself to mummery. Be wary of anyone, including your mother, who offers undeserved praise or likes everything you write. While well intentioned, such praise will soften your intellect like a rotting melon.

Instead, seek out voices that prompt you to stop and think: Are my facts right; have I fairly represented them and is my writing clear and persuasive? Don't expect to find many who can provide such constructive critique. But when you do find such people, embrace them.

Second, as suggested earlier, read the best. Discover writers you admire and explore their work. Study what makes it so compelling. It will tune your ear to hear the best in your own work. All the best have done this across history. Take, for example, the 1930s movie star and comedian Groucho Marx. You may know him today for his ubiquitous cigar and black grease mustache, which has lived on as motif long after his career and death. Before the release of any new movie, Groucho, often along with his fellow brother actors, would perform his lines before live audiences across the country. He would vary them in word, tone and emphasis to see what combination evoked the biggest laughs. Then he would go back and change his performance in the movie based on his real life research.

Words are the notes that make writing sing. That's why writers treasure them the way a gemologist does amethyst or malachite. Writers are forever on the hunt for new gems.

Words such as purl, sough and widdershins. A strong vocabulary makes your writing shine. Even seasoned veterans keep an ever-growing journal of vocabulary, gathering words from reading and conversation. I've been collecting words now for more than 25 years, having started when I was in college. Make gathering words a lifelong hobby, even an obsession.

CHAPTER 4

POWER OF A GOOD IDEA

Good stories blossom from strong ideas that are well cultivated.

What soil sprouts the best ideas? A mind richly seeded in history, literature and current events. Such a mind draws naturally toward the new and the interesting. It weeds out the cliché from the original, the tired from the fresh.

Good ideas share common attributes:

• Timeliness. The Japanese have an ancient concept called “reading the air.” It means to sense what’s collectively on people’s minds. Writers try to cultivate the same sense. They are forever reading the air, trying to sense what concerns people, what people want to read about. That’s why writers pay such close attention to current events. The news provides clues to what’s on the collective mind. For example, if there’s been another school shooting, people want to read about why America generates so many homicidal loners. Skilled writers riff off of the news.

• Relevancy. Good ideas help us make sense of the world and our lives. They inform and explain: How can we lose weight, live longer and die with dignity. There’s no point in rhapsodizing about eight track cassettes when iPod sales are soaring.

• Drama. Life is change. A good idea reflects that reality. It embodies a sense of movement, never sideways, mind you, but always up or down. Good ideas represent a debate, a controversy, even a conflict. Two schools of thought battling to become the next conventional wisdom. A once popular band losing fans. A heretical idea gaining converts. If an idea contains no drama then it’s got about as much pop as flat soda. Get the idea?

• Universality. We never grow tired of some story lines. The tortoise who overtakes the hare. The comeback struggle of a fallen hero. A villain who finally gets his comeuppance. Find stories that embody these ancient and universal themes. Think of Lance Armstrong. His story, rising from cancer victim to champion bicyclist, exemplifies the come-from-behind underdog. Is it any wonder that people worldwide couldn’t read enough about him?

The best of contemporary writing isn't about stenography, the jotting down and listing in no particular order facts and figures. Nor is it about rehashing what's already been written. Both of the above represent the flaccid craft of term paper writing. Save such work for clueless professors who don't know any better. You know the type; they're the ones who confuse quantity with quality.

Real writing is about parsing real events in real time involving real people. History and context serve as backdrops that help real people, places and events come into sharper focus in the here and now.

The trick is to find things to write about that represent what's going on in the world today in a way that will grab readers' interest.

The best ideas push the envelope of understanding. They give voice to the unspoken, expose a hidden wrong, reveal a new trend or answer pressing social, economic or political questions: Why do so many black children drown in city pools and waterways; why do so many young women hate their bodies and why do some gay men continue to practice unprotected sex, when such behavior has already killed so many people?

A writer is always on the prowl for good story ideas. Luckily, good ideas are everywhere, if one knows how to look for them. Again, here's where it pays to think like a writer, a keen observer forever wondering about the world.

Consider a few examples of some of my best students at Stony Brook and Emory universities.

Diana once heard a friend complaining about the difficulties of dating a Jewish boy as an Indian Muslim. This friend feared telling her parents, who wanted her to marry a good Muslim boy, preferably Indian. Yet she liked this Jewish boy better than any other she'd ever dated.

Her friend's dilemma got Diana thinking: How many interfaith couples were there? Did many of them share the same worries as her friend? Such wondering is the first step in developing a story idea. But it's only the first step. As a good writer, Diana knew to exercise skepticism. She didn't assume her friend represented a trend; she set out to see if it were true.

Diana's quest led her first to the Internet. Could she quickly find numbers that quantified interfaith couples? Such numbers did exist, so Diana next tried to find bulletin boards or chat rooms where interfaith couples discussed their problems. Then Diana checked to see if experts, either academics or advocates, had written or spoken about the problems of interfaith couples. It wasn't long before she had confirmed that her friend did indeed represent a trend. Diana's quest exemplifies how a writer hunts down and bags a good story idea.

Tina discovered a great story idea while exploring what to do after graduation. At a campus job fair, she dropped in to hear the pitch from metro Atlanta's DeKalb courthouse officials, who were looking for social workers. What Tina heard didn't grab her as a job prospect, but it did pique her interest as a writer.

The DeKalb County police, trained to catch thieves and murderers, were flummoxed by the soaring numbers of mentally ill people on the streets. As example, they told the story of a big man who donned an Indian war bonnet and spent the day screaming obscenities at passing police officers in downtown Decatur. Should they fear, ignore or feel sorry for this man?

As Tina listened she wondered: Was DeKalb representative of a larger trend? She buttonholed county administrators and police officers after the presentation. Had they heard of other counties experiencing the same problem; would they let Tina ride with police to witness the problem firsthand? These are the kinds of questions a writer asks to not only confirm an idea but devise a strategy to develop it into a story.

Another good source of ideas are newspapers, magazines, books, academic journals and Web sites. Not for copying what's already been written, but in finding fresh ideas in old material. Is there a hole in a story, some big question that has gone unanswered, or an important area left unexplored? Better

yet, is there a pattern across a series of stories? Some of the best ideas involve connecting seemingly disparate events, as if a series of dots, to reveal a hidden trend.

My student Rachel found just such an unreported trend in a series of newspapers she had been reading. Newspapers from Portland, Ore. to Atlanta had separately reported on students leading lobbying drives to persuade state legislators to provide tax incentives to encourage the development of biofuels. Could these separate movements, Rachel wondered, be part of a larger, orchestrated effort? To find out, she emailed each of the student leaders quoted in the separate stories. The leaders confirmed Rachel's hunch. They were indeed operating in unison. Rachel discovered an original, first-rate story idea, beating out the likes of the New York Times and the New Yorker.

Having a good idea, I'm afraid, is not enough to get published. Writers have to persuade editors of the worthiness of their ideas. That's true whether they are self-employed free lancers or salaried employees of a Web site, newspaper or magazine. Employment doesn't guarantee a showcase for one's work.

Few trades are as competitive as writing. Competition takes many forms. There's competition among publications. Every one prefers to get the jump on a rival. While at Business Week magazine, I could work months on a story, only to see it killed because a rival such as Fortune or the Wall Street Journal beat me to publication with a similar story. The same fate befell my competitors if I beat them to publication.

Competition is stiff within publications, too. Space is finite, even on a Web site. There are always more ideas than a publication can accommodate. Writers and editors compete to get their stories in. Nor does competition end when a story is slated for publication. Next a struggle ensues for how much space a story deserves. Will it get one page or three? Often, one writer's gain is another's loss.

Newbies face particularly stiff competition. They must sell not only their ideas but also themselves. Why is an untried writer - and not some experienced hand - better qualified to write a particular story? If a newbie fails to adequately answer that question, he'll see his idea lose out to another - or worse: another writer assigned his idea.

All this is to say that writers must be as versed in pitching stories as in writing them.

Pitching an idea, like writing, requires craft. As discussed above, the foremost skill is the ability to identify and develop a good idea. The most ardent and enthusiastic of pitches won't turn a toad of an idea into a prince of one.

That said, a poor pitch has doomed many a good idea. I know of what I speak. As both a teacher and an editor, I've watched green writers mangle their own ideas. They ramble, bloviate or bury the idea's point or can't seem to find any point at all. I've struck mute many a student with a simple question: Why should anyone read this story and read it now? Failure to answer that question is sure death for any good idea.

Here's how to save a good idea from getting spiked.

Like Diana and Tina, develop the idea as if expecting to be questioned, even challenged about it. Become the expert. Know enough about an idea to explain and defend its premise. Such expertise

builds confidence in an editor that a writer can execute an idea. That's especially important for fledgling writers.

New writers should subject their idea to this tough question: Why would anyone want to read about it? Cast your pitch from the start to answer this question. It will help to defuse challenges upfront.

Keep the length of pitches to three compelling sentences. All of them should work together, each one building on the prior, telling us the story of an idea.

The first sentence of a pitch should encapsulate the idea dramatically. Think of it as a headline designed to catch an editor's attention. Use active verbs and end the sentence on a strong word that embodies the idea.

The next sentence should explain an idea's relevance. Use at least one big fact that documents the idea in a dramatic way. Finally, the last sentence should answer the question of why anyone would want to read the story and read it now. Here's where it pays off to think big. Try to imbue the idea with broad appeal. Better yet, try to pitch a story forward, explaining how it speaks to the future.

Let's consider an example. See below a pitch for a story about how an indiscreet social networking site can hurt a student's job prospects.

"Facebook and MySpace have helped many students find friends, but these popular social networking sites might cost some of them a job. Two-thirds of employers now say they're vetting all job applicants against Facebook and MySpace, discovering scores of sites featuring candidates' tales of drunken debauchery and even nudity. Such a tactic showcases employers' increasing sophistication in using the Net to sift through applicants and it represents the latest battleground in the ageless struggle between youthful exuberance and authoritative control."

Notice how the first sentence portrays the idea of the pitch with drama and sweep. It tells an ironic and surprising story about Facebook and MySpace, wasting no time in casting the idea as new and interesting. The second sentence uses a big figure — "two-thirds of employers" — to give the idea magnitude and credibility. This is not some vague, unmeasurable trend, but one the reader can quantify and describe in meaningful detail. And finally, the concluding sentence imbues the idea with broad appeal, characterizing as part of universal human behavior.

Writing a smart pitch, while hard work, does more than raise the odds of selling a story idea. It sets a writer up well when it comes time to write. A well developed pitch sharpens a writer's understanding of his story's theme and audience. Such understanding has saved many a writer from losing his way when crafting a story.

CHAPTER 5

THE TAO OF WRITING POORLY

Dear reader, riddle me this: What do the passages below share in common?

• *Sir Francis Drake circumcised the world with a 100 foot clipper which was very dangerous to all his men.*

• *Johann Bach was the most famous composer in the world and so was Handel. Handel was half English, half Italian and half German. He was very large.*

• *Abraham Lincoln's mother died in infancy. He was born in a log cabin which he built with his own hands.*

• *Moses led the Hebrew slaves to the Red Sea where they made unleavened bread, which is bread without any ingredients.*

• *Socrates was a famous old Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. After his death, his career suffered a dramatic decline.*

• *Ancient Egypt was old. It was inhabited by mummies who all wrote in hydraulics. They lived in the Sarah Dessert. The climate is such that all the inhabitants have to live elsewhere.*

The answer to this riddle is twofold: Each of these passages was gleaned from the work of some of our best high school and college students. All of these students are practitioners of the Tao of Writing Poorly. This is the dark art of befuddling readers. The Tao represents practices honed through decades of trial and error.

Well, mostly error.

Mastering the Tao is no small task. It requires an unswerving commitment to vagueness, passivity and bloviation. The Tao teaches its followers to favor the circular over the straight. It scorns all that's simple and direct. Exalted are the wooden, the unverified assumption and the cliché. A Tao master can stupefy any reader. His writing is as lively as a dead hamster.

The Tao achieves its highest form in that ugly duckling of modern prose, the term paper. This is a style of writing that aspires to neither inform, challenge nor entertain. Rather, it's primary function is

to serve as filler. As one of my students put it, "Many professors are more impressed with quantity than quality." I would say they confused the latter with the former. Either way, term paper writing is designed to be read only by those, such as professors and writing coaches, who are paid to read it. After all, who would read such dreck without compensation?

Let's examine what un-distinguishes the Tao.

Taoists display a supreme self-confidence. Unclouded are they by introspection and doubt. Their lives are guided by a simple principle: "Always assume you're right." Such a concept liberates Taoists from the onerous duty of double checking facts, sources, spelling and grammar. They're free to write such wonderfully entertaining sentences as "Sir Francis Drake circumcised the world" and "mummies wrote in hydraulics." For the Taoist master, wikis, dictionaries and encyclopedias are for the weak; doubt is for sissies.

A Taoist boldly defies all grammar and syntax. Words are strung together willy nilly. Random is his punctuation or he doesn't deign to punctuate at all. Take your cue from this sentence from a young writer:

"Newsday newspaper has a long history since the 1940s when it began."

This writer is well on his way to becoming a Taoist master.

The Tao teaches worship for the verb "to be." And little wonder. Reliance on it offers so many ways to hinder writing well. For one, it relieves a writer from the burden of building a large vocabulary of interesting and descriptive verbs. Verbs such as "galumph, festoon" and "hector." Such descriptive verbs are the engines that drive a powerful sentence. But why bother with them if you intend to write sentences with all the oomph of a wooden plank. Better to dull every sentence with "is, was, were, there's, to be" or "being." That ensures no one will ever accuse your work of challenging or entertaining readers.

Relying on the verb "to be" also enables a writer to bloat a sentence and slow down its pacing. Consider the difference between these sentences: "Dick sees Jane" and "Jane was seen by Dick." Both say the same thing, right? Yet the two sentences differ in a small but significant way. Notice that the writer of the latter one has added two simple words: "was" and "by." In doing so, he manages to not only slow the pacing of the sentence but also cast it in a passive voice sure to lull any reader to sleep. Now that's an efficient application of the Tao of Writing Poorly!

Any true Taoist holds such bloviation dear to his heart. He strives to use three words when one would do. A committed Taoist would never just write "Mr. Jones said," but rather "Mr. Jones responded by stating." Nor would "Mr. Jones add." Instead "he would go on to say." See the difference? In each of these two examples, three words are doing the work of one. Think of it this way, as any good Taoist surely would: Words are used best as a smoke screen to conceal the fact that you have little or nothing interesting to say. The more the words, the better the cover.

When it comes to words, a good Taoist favors the wooden over the interesting or the descriptive. The best wooden words effectively deaden the music of any sentence or paragraph. Examples of wooden words include "incenticize," "utilization" or "totalizing." Say these clunkers aloud and you almost hear the wood hitting the floor. For a lengthy list of words to wooden your writing check out the Order of the Wooden Tongue, an appendix at the end of the book.

The most wooden words sound important while saying little more than a smaller one with the same meaning. Examples include "facilitate" for "ease"; "utilize" for use and my personal favorite, "conversate," for speaking.

If a Taoist can't find a word wooden enough for his purposes he'll make one up. I'm not talking about the wonderful tradition of Ogden Nash and Lewis Carrol, who invented such beauties as "runcible" and "chortle." Rather, the Taoist favors the big and the unpronounceable, words that grate like fingernails on the chalkboard of readers' minds. Consider this beauty I recently tripped over in a professor's essay: "Mythofucation." This word sounds faintly pornographic and the way it violates the beauty of the language is surely obscene.

Writing is nothing but thinking in its purest form. Alas, thinking is hard work and a committed Taoist works hard not to think. Many are his ways to feign insight and originality. He knows, for instance, how to belabor the obvious. This takes many forms. One is to re-inflate a tread worn idea like an out tire. Say, for example, the sun always rises in the East; teenagers hate rising with the sun. Another involves taking credit for the obvious as your own insight. Consider the example below:

"Humans are creatures of habit, accustomed to their surroundings and sometimes a little uncomfortable to change their everyday routines. Urbanites are used to walking, hailing taxis and taking buses or subways."

I bet you never knew that.

A Taoist master tries hard to confuse complexity with comprehension. He knows how to hide the idea of a sentence or paragraph within a maze of detouring dependent clauses and non sequiturs. Reading his work becomes a game of hide and seek. It takes a resourceful and determined reader to ferret out the meaning of a Taoist's words. Consider this beauty of obfuscation:

"The mythofucation of Abraham Lincoln was begun when, comfortably unaware of the danger that awaited him as he sat with his wife, Mary, at Ford's Theater, his life was terminated by assassin John Wilkes Booth, who, as a disgruntled Southern sympathizer, held Lincoln accountable for the Confederacy's inability to win its independence from the North."

What a magnificent blizzard of words; such detours in logic and sequence. I challenge anyone to find the main idea of this paragraph, let alone its subject. This paragraph also displays remarkable discipline. Not once does the writer stray into the active voice.

All those who aspire to befuddle readers: Let this paragraph serve as your guide. It represents nirvana in the dark art of the Tao.

CHAPTER 6

THE ART OF BREVITY

I know learning how to write poorly wasn't easy. It required years of suffering through misinformed instruction and the steady application of poor practices. Establishing a bad habit is like driving a stake into a dry riverbed: hard to embed and even harder to uproot.

Yet uproot I shall try.

This chapter is about how to write well. I'll start with the principles that guide good writing and then illustrate how they work in practice. In short, this chapter will move from philosophy to craft; from the panoramic to the microscopic.

The philosophy behind writing well can be expressed in three simple words: "Less is more." I call this the Zen koan of good writing. A Zen koan is a simple Buddhist riddle that, on first blush, makes no sense. Consider this classic Koan: "Imagine the sound of one hand clapping." Nonsensical, right?

Yet, if you ever were able to imagine the sound of one hand clapping, congratulations. According to Buddhist tradition, you'll be heaven bound. No more earthly reincarnations for you, struggling like the rest of us to reach enlightenment.

Thankfully, "Less is more" isn't so tricky a koan to decipher. Nearly anyone can crack it with hard practice. On the downside, though, deciphering "Less is more" won't lead to heavenly nirvana. But I can promise with some assurance that understanding the meaning of it will lead to mastery of the secrets of writing well.

Modern writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, is about the art of brevity. Writers try to say as much as they can in as few words as possible. The best of their work is simple but not simplistic. They make less become more.

Terse writing is as American as video games and rocketry. The Japanese invented the first and Nazi engineers the second, but we've long since made them both an integral part of American culture.

Ditto with brevity in writing. It was introduced by ancient Athenian poets such as Pindar, who favored a sparse, literal, factdriven style. Scholars say this Greek sensibility in words first came to America with the Puritan settlers in the 1600s. They considered it sinful to use adjectives, deeming them showy and pretentious.

Puritan Plain, as scholars call it, has gone in and out of style throughout American history. James Wilson, among the first justices to sit on the Supreme Court, believed all court decisions should be written in clear, straightforward language, shorn of all legal and technical jargon. That way any American could understand them.

By the 1800s, Puritan and Wilson's ideas about clear and compelling language had gone out of fashion. At that time, much newspaper and magazine writing was as florid as a flowering lilac. Here below is a representative example from the front page of the New York World in 1896. At the time, the World was the country's largest and most influential newspaper. It had sent star correspondent James Creelman to cover growing Cuban resistance to Spanish rule. Of the Spanish response to the rebels, Creelman wrote:

"The horrors of barbarous struggle for the extermination of the native population are witnessed in all parts of the country. Blood on the roadsides, blood in the fields, blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood! The old, the young, the weak, the crippled, all are butchered without mercy."

As Creelman and his ilk were drenching readers in blood, some American editors were crying foul. One of the loudest voices of protest came from William Cullen Bryant, the longtime editor of the influential highbrow newspaper, the New York Evening Post. Bryant was a curious figure, having been a poet who came to journalism in the mid-1800s. He drew his inspiration from the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who strived to capture the beauty of the natural world in prose anyone could understand and appreciate. In that spirit, Bryant counseled his writers to favor the speech of ordinary Americans. They were to use "begin," not "commence"; "fire," not "devouring element." Yes, respectable people really wrote like that back in the early 1800s.

Still, for most of his life, Bryant was often a voice in the wilderness. It wasn't until the 1920s that a new generation of writers arose to challenge the florid convention. Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, to name but a few, wrote newspaper stories, magazine articles and novels in short simple sentences in the active voice. Strong verbs drove sentences. Bryant was rejoicing in his grave.

In books such as Hammett's "The Maltese Falcon," Chandler's "The Long Goodbye" and Hemingway's "For Whom the Bell Tolls," there were no long inner monologues nor long character descriptions; neither were there long authorial asides nor moral preaching. Characters revealed their personality and inner thoughts through how they dressed, where they lived, what they ate, drank, and smoked and by whom they canoodled (Go look it up. You won't be disappointed).

Consider this passage from Chandler's novel the "Long Goodbye," in which private detective Philip Marlowe gives his no nonsense assessment of the newspapers of his day:

"Newspapers are owned by rich men. Rich men all belong to the same club. Sure, there's competition – hard tough competition for circulation, for news beats, for exclusive stories. Just as long as it doesn't damage the prestige and privilege and position of the owners. If it does, down comes the lid."

No blood and guts here. Chandler describes newspapers in simple sentences, squeezed dry of passion, coolly rendered.

As works such as “The Long Goodbye” gained commercial success, they influenced the writing in newspapers and magazines, which began to mimic the spartan techniques of Hemingway and Chandler. The art of brevity took hold and it remains the model of excellence to this day.

Here’s how it works in practice: Writers harness strong verbs to drive simple sentences in the active voice that express one clear thought. Now, let’s examine each aspect of this practice.

It begins with a relentless quest for brevity. Skilled writers struggle to squeeze out any words that either muddle clarity or slacken the pace of their writing. They strive for sentences that are simple and direct. Not that every sentence need read like “See Dick run.” A skilled writer can craft a 100-word sentence that runs as smoothly as a mountain brook and is just as clear.

But it takes a lifetime to learn how to adeptly handle a long sentence. It’s best at first to write simple sentences that you can control effectively. Add complexity only as your ability to handle it grows. Never sacrifice clarity for length or showmanship. As Confucius said nearly 3,000 years ago, “In writing, clarity is everything.”

The first step toward clarity is limiting a sentence to one complete thought. If a sentence opens with an explanation about why Red Delicious apples are so red, then it shouldn’t digress midway to rant about the artificial coloring of oranges. Below are two short examples, the first from the Economist and the second from the Wall Street Journal:

“There is no exaggerating China’s hunger for commodities.”

“The portly Mr. Slim is a study in contradiction.”

Both are superb sentences in every way, which we will discuss later, but first notice how each expresses one — and only one — compelling thought.

It’s fine to add modifying clauses, but only to deepen understanding of the sentence’s idea, not distract from it. A skilled writer resists the urge to let a sentence meander off into a warren of non sequiturs and parenthetical thoughts. Such writing produces an incomprehensible hairball of unfinished ideas. You saw how such sentences read in the scholarly example in The Tao of Writing Poorly.

Also, beware of the dilutive power of too many prepositions or prepositional phrases.

A prepo what?

I know that many of you can’t tell a preposition from a participle. This isn’t a book of grammar but a writer needs to know the name and function of his basic tools. A woodsman may not understand how a chainsaw works, but he knows its name and how and when to use it. Likewise with writers when it comes to grammar and syntax. A woodsman wouldn’t try to cut down a tree with a jigsaw and a writer shouldn’t force a preposition to do the work of a verb. Yet that occurs all the time in my college writing classes. No, “with” is not a verb. It’s a preposition.

Prepositions are little words such as “with, to, after, behind, ahead” that do a lot. They connect nouns and verbs to a string of descriptive words. That’s essential to understanding writing well, but prepositions can be troublesome in the hands of inexperienced writers. The problem is they tend to proliferate liked rabbits, gumming up the works, confusing meaning and slowing pace to a meandering amble. Save ambling for a Sunday walk in the park. It’s no good for writing, unless that’s the effect you’re going for.

Here’s an illustrative example of the dilutive power of too many prepositions:

"A major power outage at Stony Brook University on Wednesday morning at 1:20 a.m. in the center of campus prompted hundreds students to march in protest."

Readers have to wade through four prepositional phrases strung together in a row before they reach the action of the sentence. See how that slows the pacing of the sentence and makes it tedious to read? The sentence would read much better if the subject, "a major power outage," were more directly linked to its action. Consider this rewrite, which removes most of the prepositions:

"Stony Brook University suffered a major power outage early Wednesday morning that prompted hundreds of students to march in protest."

The best way to shear your writing of unnecessary prepositions is to write in the active voice. It employs an easy-to-follow logical construction that not only squeezes out unnecessary words but gives writing a sense of movement. That movement helps draw readers through a story.

The construction of the active voice is simple: A subject acts upon something or someone. Verbs transmit action from subject to object. In grammatical terms, a noun is followed by a verb, which is followed by a direct object. Don't worry about remembering these terms. What counts is that you grasp the concept.

Here's a simple but effective example: "Dick sees Jane." Dick is the subject who does something to Jane, he sees her.

The best way to understand the power of the active voice is to contrast it to its evil cousin, the passive voice. Think of the passive voice as a rambling professor who hasn't thought through his lesson plan and is unsure of what he wants to say. Now there's a riveting class — not.

To see the difference between these two voices, let's put Dick and Jane to work again. Here's the same sentence as above, but rewritten in the passive voice: "Jane was seen by Dick."

Notice how the passive voice bloats this sentence with two unnecessary words, "seen" and "by." Not only do these words add nothing to the meaning of the sentence. They slow down its pacing. All three elements that signify the passive voice are present in this sentence: the verb "to be," a past participle (seen) and the preposition "by." If a sentence is missing any one of these three elements then it is not in the passive voice. That means the sentence, "The second step is to write in the active voice," is not in the passive voice, although it uses the verb "to be." It's missing a past participle and the preposition "by."

At the heart of brevity are strong verbs. Harness them to pump life into your writing. A rich repertoire of descriptive verbs will not only make your work interesting to read. It will also propel your stories, adding a sense of momentum essential to drawing readers through them.

What, then, constitutes a strong verb? For one, when read, it should prompt a vivid, active picture in the reader's imagination. Such action verbs abound in the English language, but the best of them are small words that say a lot. Such verbs include titter, bristle and wallow; festoon, pester and roil.

Little words that say a lot trim writing of unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. Why write, "walk leisurely," when "amble" says the same thing? Ditto for "talk incessantly" and "jabber; "look into deeply" and "probe." Each of these little verbs acts as a scalpel to pare writing down to its essence.

Adjectives and adverbs do have their place in writing — but only when they add new information that drives understanding deeper. Never use them to repeat what has already been said or to add fluff or glitz. Adjectives and adverbs work best when used sparingly. Heaping them onto a sentences is like adding four spoons of sugar to a cup of tea. It becomes too sweet to enjoy.

Verbs such as festoon, pester and wallow represent another important principle of strong verbs: They sound like what they mean. Take "wallow," for instance. Say it aloud and you can almost hear someone or something enjoying a good roll in some muck.

A vocabulary rich in interesting verbs, while invaluable, is not enough to write with brevity. You need to know how to use these verbs effectively. The key is to harness them as the engines that drives your writing. That means using the right verb at the right place at the right moment.

The best way to understand this concept is to examine one idea, but expressed in three different sentences. Which one of the sentences below do you think best expresses the idea, making the best use of a verb to squeeze out unnecessary words while remaining vivid?

- *"Wallowing, the pig enjoyed the mud."*
- *"The pig enjoyed a leisurely roll in the mud."*
- *"The pig wallowed in the mud."*

I would argue the last sentence. To understand my choice, you'll need to understand what's weak in the first two examples. Let's start with sentence one. It starts out with an interesting word, "wallowing," but it's not a verb. It's a gerund, or a noun masquerading as a verb. Here "wallowing" means the act of enjoying a roll in the muck. That means the second half of sentence repeats what's already been said in using the gerund "wallowing." Hardly a model of brevity.

The second sentence is a bit better. It's written in the active voice, but "enjoyed" isn't the most interesting verb. Nor does this verb paint a picture of action. And, once again, this second sentence is wordy. "Wallow" could stand in for "enjoyed a leisurely roll…."

Let's look at the third sentence. It's written in the active voice and uses a small yet interesting verb that says a lot. "Wallow" gives this sentence a sense of movement, serving as the coachman that drives it forward. It's positioned in the right place at the right moment.

Now our wallowing pig embodies the art of brevity.

CHAPTER 7

SHOW NOT TELL

Consider this passage:

"Have you ever seen a corpse burned? I have, in India. They put the old chap on the fire, and the next moment I almost jumped out of my skin, because he'd started kicking. It was only his muscles contracting in the heat – still, it gave me a turn. Well, he wriggled about for a bit like a kipper on hot coals, and then his belly blew up and went off with a bang you could have heard fifty yards away. It fair put me against cremation."

Unforgettable, right? These words pain a spare but indelible picture in the reader's imagination. It's as if you're standing beside the writer as he watches "old chap" crackling upon the pyre.

The writer here is George Orwell, an Englishman who lived in the 1900s. You may know him from his classic political novels, Animal Farm and 1984. But Orwell wrote more nonfiction than fiction and this excerpt is from his account of living and working in Burma and India, both of which were then a part of the British Empire, during the 1920s.

Orwell was a master of conveying what one of our own great writers, Flannery O'Connor, called "experienced meaning." What O'Connor meant was that modern writers, whether novelist or journalist, strive for the effect of total immersion. Not only do readers see what's unfolding in a story but also they feel and think what they would if they were a character in it. Writers achieve this effect through the skilled use of meaningful detail. That is, they show, not tell, their stories.

Here's a quick example of the difference between showing and telling:

- *"It was bitter cold."*
- *"Barometers shattered, brandy froze indoors."*

Both sentences say the same thing, right? Yet how it's said makes all the difference. The first sentence tells us it's bitter cold. But the second sentence, from a New Yorker story about winter in St. Petersburg, Russia, shows us what that cold looks like. It paints a living picture in the reader's imagination.

Painting a living picture with words is a technique I call show, not tell. It rests on four principles: meaning detail, favoring the specific over the general, descriptive verbs and artful comparison. Let's take a close look at each of these principles.

At the heart of shown not tell is the concept of meaningful detail. That is, detail that makes a person, place or thing distinctive yet universal. Sounds like another one of those koan things, doesn't it, and I suppose it is. Allow me to illuminate.

Any one person is a rich tapestry of detail. Yet you'd hardly make somebody stand out by describing him with hair, a nose and a mouth. All are true, but they're true of anyone. Such detail is meaningless. If instead you described that same person as smirking under spiky pink hair, his mouth riveted with metal studs, then you'd be starting to reveal personality, to make this person come to life. That's meaningful detail.

Thanks to the Internet, there's no shortage of detail in the world today. We're awash in facts and figures, description and quotation, commentary and opinion, memoirs and confessions, some of which are actually true. Trouble is, most of this information is as fleeting and as meaningless as the air escaping from a balloon.

That's why writers pan relentlessly for those rare nuggets of fact, description or quotation that are meaningful. Such details are found only through developing a keen power of observation. The sweet spot of writing well involves seeing what others have missed, of identifying and highlighting details that infuse the ordinary and the everyday with meaning. To take, say, a banana and use it as a vehicle through which to illustrate the destructive power of anorexic obsession. That's exactly what Lindsey, a former Emory University student of mine, did in this passage from her story about anorexia:

"For Colberly, eating a banana was a daunting undertaking. She would cut the fruit into 100 pieces. Each piece was then further sliced into four fragments. She chewed each fragment exactly 30 times. Eating one banana could take Colberly up to three hours. No wonder she dreaded meals, failed to see the necessity of them. Still, she forces herself to eat. "It's like medicine to me," she says."

Lindsey could have simply written "Colberly found eating difficult." But that would have been telling the reader about Colberly's struggle with anorexia. Instead, she showed us what that struggle looked like. Marshaling her keen power of observation, Lindsey used a banana to paint an indelible image of anorexia in the readers' imaginations.

Notice, too, how Lindsey's passage favors the concrete over the vague. Writers shun vague language such as walk, talk or look. Instead, writers show their readers how someone walked, how they talked, how they looked. In the stories of skilled writers, people saunter, amble or galumph. They murmur, prattle or shout. They glower, glimpse or ogle. Lindsey didn't write that Colberly disliked eating but wrote instead that "Colberly dreaded meals."

Show not tell champions the specific over the general. Again, Lindsey's passage illustrates. Colberly didn't cut up a banana a lot. She "cut the fruit into 100 pieces. Each piece was then further sliced into four fragments. She chewed each fragment exactly 30 times." Lindsey uses these few meaningful details to etch this image indelibly in the reader's imagination.

A big part of making your writing concrete is to anchor it in time and place. Practitioners of show not tell would never write that some person spoke at some place at some time. Rather, they would write Professor Charles Haddad spoke at noon in the Stony Brook newsroom in Melville Library.

In the stories by writers practicing show not tell, real people do real things in real time — even if they are writing fiction.

In show not tell, verbs again play a starring role. They give life to your words, animate the picture you're trying to paint in the reader's imagination. Not just any verbs, mind you, but ones that show the reader what's occurring. Think of the verbs cited in the Art of Brevity. Let's look at some examples that illustrate how action verbs can enable a writer to show rather than tell:

• *"Hamilton Court, with its private school, groomed lawns and security guards, is just one of the exclusive gate communities that have blossomed across India in recent years."*

• *"Write a sentence as clean as a bone."*

•*"In recent weeks, rumors have swirled that the embattled president would quit."*

In each of these sentences, an interesting, descriptive verb, deployed at the right moment, enlivens the image. In the first, from the New York Times, it's the verb "blossom," which portrays modern development as a flowering. The writer could have said "grew up" or "arose" instead, but see how less interesting that would have been? In the second example, from the New Yorker, the use of the verbs "shattered" and "froze" make the cold come alive, animating the picture in the reader's imagination. And in the third example, from the Wall Street Journal, the writer uses "swirled" to paint the image of a maelstrom. He could not have painted that image using such pedestrian verbs such as "surrounded" or "revolve." A writer's choice of verbs can make the difference between an image soon forgotten and one long remembered.

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There's no better way to etch a lasting image in the reader's imagination than through the artful use of contrast and comparison. That is, likening a fleeting idea to a rapidly deflating balloon or making the meticulous eating of banana represent anorexia. Such comparisons emphasize and highlight, clarify and enliven. They drive understanding deeper. It's easier to grasp a new idea when a writer compares it to an old one or to a familiar icon of everyday life.

I liken the artful use of contrast and comparison to the concept of dark matter in astrophysics. Dark matter is the unseen force that binds the universe. It's what gives the illusion of form to our eyes, makes a rock a rock, a ham sandwich a ham sandwich. In truth, the world around us is a mist of floating particles. To understand the concept of dark matter — to see the unseen ties that bind the world — is to understand how everyone and everything is ultimately interconnected.

Think of artful comparison, then, as a writerly spotlight. It illuminates the dark matter that binds seemingly disparate facts, figures, ideas and events. Revealing those hidden ties helps readers see the world around them in the bright light of understanding.

Artful comparison takes four forms: analogy, simile, metaphor and — at the highest level of writing — allegory. Now, I've been writing for some 30-odd years, and I still confuse analogy with simile and vice versa. But I do understand each of these concepts, if not by name, and know how to use them effectively in my work — and that's what counts. You can always look up the definitions when it's necessary to appear knowledgeable (as I did in writing this chapter).

Let's take a quick look at each of these tools of artful comparison.

An analogy compares two things that are similar in structure or likeness. A writer, for example, might compare the workings of the human brain to a machine or an autocratic society to an ant colony. I once read a story about World War II in which the writer likened Nazi Germany to a colony for army ants, with each citizen mindlessly carrying out his prescribed role. Here's more examples:

• *"The dark stain of his blood on the dusty road was a clear as the outlines of the mountains ahead."*

• *"They lay down sandbags as if making peace offerings to a vexed god called the Mississippi."*

In the first example, the blood and the mountains share a similar structure, with each forming a jagged outline. In the second, the writer likens fending off the mighty Mississippi to paying homage to an angry god.

In contrast, a simile compares two unlike things. The contrast helps to clarify. Consider these two examples:

• *"The birds plummeted from the sky like stones."*

• *"Heat stood in the room like an enemy."*

Birds, of course, aren't like stones. Yet comparing them to stones emphasizes through contrast. It helps us see just how hard those birds fell. Ditto with heat. How can it be an enemy, given that it isn't a person or thing? But likening it to an enemy highlights the oppressiveness of that heat.

Like analogy and simile, metaphor is a form of comparison. But it's a form that imbues a person or object with a larger meaning. Think of Lindsey's banana, which became the window through which to see the destructive obsession of anorexia. Here's a famous example:
"You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

This evocative line uses the metaphor of crucifixion to frame the debate over whether Twentieth Century America should continue to peg its currency to the supply of gold. Clearly, this writer thought this an idea harmful to working Americans. He was William Jennings Bryan, who many historians consider our greatest orator. Bryan used this striking metaphor in a speech that won him the Democratic presidential nomination in 1896. While he lost the election, Bryan's metaphor of the gold-crucified working man won a place in American history.

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Allegory is metaphor exalted. It's a technique that imbues not just an object or person with a larger meaning but an entire story. At first read, allegorical stories seem simple tales. Think of the story about the Gingerbread Man, who entrusts a fox to ferry him across the river. But a closer read reveals a deeper, second meaning, typically a lesson in ethics or morality. It was the Gingerbread Man's foolish pride that blinded him to the danger of entrusting his safety to a fox. In Western literature, the greatest examples of allegory are Homer's Iliad and Aesop's fables.

While practiced since ancient Greece, allegory is as modern as rock ‘n roll. Consider this example, the refrain from a Jimi Hendrix song:

“Castles made of sand melt into the sea, eventually.”

At first glance, this one line story seems simple enough. It describes the natural dynamic between sand and sea. Yet much more can be read into this line. Think of the castle as hubris or power and the sea as time or the sweep of history. In other words, time erodes all hubris. The powerful eventually fall.

What helps to make this one-line refrain so powerful is its simplicity. It contains a mere nine words and anyone can remember and understand them. Hendrix was a master of not only allegory but the art of brevity.

Quotes

The use of dialogue represents another effective way to show, not tell. What a person says, how he says it and when, reveals personality, upbringing, worldview and bias. Consider what's more persuasive: labeling someone a racist or hearing that person use a racial epithet?

In fiction, writers can put words in the mouths of their characters. Nonfiction writers don't have that luxury. They must capture the dialogue of real people. That's no small task. There's no surer way to lull readers asleep than to quote people verbatim, especially at length. What sounds good in conversation often falls flat on the printed page, in a blog or on a Web site. Even the most erudite and articulate of speakers spout a lot of nonsense. It's only human to babble. Conversation, stripped of its accompanying gestures, facial expressions and emphasis, can quickly lose meaning. The best of dialogue is often as fleeting as a monarch butterfly on a spring breeze.

While challenging, quotation is well worth the effort. When done right, it adds authenticity and validity, variety and spice.

Capturing the best of what people say requires developing a keen ear for dialogue. A writer learns to always keep one ear dipped into the continual stream of conversation flowing around him. It's a practice that trains him to recognize authentic speech that's compelling. The practice also enables a writer to gather material. While letting pass most of what he hears, a writer snags those rare snippets that capture how people talk, what they think and why.

When I was writing my young adult novel I staked out coffeehouses and malls. I'd sit amid a herd of teenagers and pretend to write, slumped in concentration over my laptop. In reality, I was all ears. I jotted down choice snippets of teen dialogue. Many of those captured words ended up in the mouths of my characters. Even in fiction authenticity counts. No one will believe your made up characters unless they sound like real people.

To quote effectively requires an understanding of the role quotes play in a story. Let's take a look at each of the three primary functions of quotes in nonfiction.

Foremost, quotes provide validity. They substantiate a fact or a story's theme. If you write that a consensus of scientists agree that the concept of intelligent design is specious, then add weight to your argument by quoting a leading scientist to that effect.

In the winter of 2006, the New York Times depicted the destructive sectarian violence of Iraq through the plight of one Shiite family. It chronicled how Sunni mobs chased the family out one town after another in central Iraq. "We are a ship that sank under the ocean," bemoans Aziza Mustafa, the family's 46-year-old matriarch. I'm sure that the reporter of this story had a notebook full of dialogue from fleeing Shiite families. But he peppered his story only with a handful of quotes, such as the one above, which provided the best validation of the family's plight.

Mustafa's quote also is a good representation of the second role of quotes: spicing up a story. Keep quotes colorful, use them to say what you could have not said better yourself. Here's an example. In covering the 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, the Times tried to cast the war against a backdrop of ancient rivalries between Christian Ethiopia and Muslim Somalia and Eritrea. "The only forces we are

pursuing are Eritreans who are hiding behind the skirts of Somali women," an Ethiopian general told a Times reporter. This quote depicts better than any writerly paraphrasing of Ethiopian disdain for Eritrean fighting prowess.

The Ethiopian general's quote appeared after many paragraphs of description and it illustrates the third role of quotes. They can add variety to your writing. A colorful quote skillfully employed at the right moment can forestall monotony from taking hold, the killer of many a good story.

Despite their usefulness, quotes are easily abused. Here's a few simple principals to guide you in when to quote:

- Quote sparingly. Overuse dulls the effect of quotation. A handful of colorful quotes, judiciously placed, go a long way to adding variety and spice to a story.
- Use quotes when they further understanding. Don't repeat in quotation what has already been said, either in paraphrase or narrative. If you've just explained the mayor thinks the chief of police is a bum, there's no need to quote the mayor repeating himself. Choose either paraphrase or quote, although the latter is preferable if the mayor denounced the police chief with gusto.
- Avoid large blocks of quotes. As a rule, quotes tend to work best when as brief and colorful as possible. This rule isn't ironclad. The high-brow magazines, such as the New Yorker, are most apt to quote someone at length. These magazines do it because there are times when quoting someone verbatim adds credibility — say when you're trying to hang someone with their own words. There are some people who, through force of personality and articulateness, can say something better than any writer. But such people, in this age of the sound bite, are a vanishing breed.
- Quotes are not facts. Just because the mayor says the police chief is a bum doesn't mean it's so. You must marshal the evidence — documented incidences of incompetence, statistics that track the trend in crime rates under the chief's tenure — that give truth to the mayor's assertion. Quotes are the final confirmation of the facts, not conclusive evidence in and of themselves.

CHAPTER 8

THE PAINTBOX

You wouldn't attempt painting without brushes, easels or canvases. Why, then, undertake something as challenging as writing without the proper equipment? The most important tools in a writer's paintbox are words, sentences and paragraphs. Let's take a look now at each one of these essential tools in a writer's paintbox.

Words

Think of individual words as pigments. Putting them together on a page is like mixing up colors on a palette. The richer the colors, the better the story you can paint in the reader's imagination.

Not all pigments are equal and neither are words. Some words are as wooden and unappealing to the ear as plank. I'm talking about words such as "totalizing, whereas, incenticize, conversate" and "utilize." These are words are ugly and want to die. So let's let them go in peace. For a more complete list of deadened language, check the "Order of the Wooden Tongue" at the back of this book. It's a list of words guaranteed to make your writing as palatable as a mouthful of sawdust.

If, however, you want people to read your work, consider the second list at the end of the book. It contains words that will make your writing as vivid as a summer sunset. These are words such as "sozzled, galumph" and "ogle." Your writing will be only as interesting as your vocabulary.

Of all words writers prefer verbs. That's because they convey the action that keeps a story moving. But not all verbs are equal, either. Writers prefer the specific over the vague: gambol to walk; murmur to talk and slouch to sit. Any verb that paints as exact a picture as possible.

Thankfully, in their never-ending quest for interesting and descriptive words, writers have two wise and powerful guides. I know you've heard of them, although for most of you they're strangers. I'm talking about the dictionary and its kissing cousin, the thesaurus.

I know, I know. In this age of the educated un-read, when people with the vocabulary of middle-schoolers can score high on the SATs, dictionaries and thesauruses can be scary, unfamiliar things. So many pages. And then there are all those words!

Here's a little exercise that I've found effective in helping to ease aspiring writers' fears of these invaluable references. First, pick up a dictionary and hold it in your outstretched hands. Does it burn or pain? If not, then, open the dictionary up. Does it snap at you or bite? Now, take a deep breath and

hug the dictionary like a long lost friend. See? No harm done. What excuse, then, can you have not to embrace dictionaries and thesauruses?

Learn to use them as handily as a painter does his brush. Employing the right word at the right moment will enliven any story. Or, as Mark Twain put it, “The difference between the right word and the wrong word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.”

Sentences

If words are a writer's paints, then sentences are his brushstrokes. Like calligraphy, a good sentence is not only thoughtfully conceived and well-constructed but artful, too.

In the Art of Brevity, you learned about the basic elements of a strong sentence. To recap, an effective sentence harnesses strong words in the active voice to express one clear thought. Such sentences are simple enough so that any person with an eighth-grade reading ability can understand them.

Achieving clarity is harder than it looks. The easier a sentence is to read, the harder the writer struggled to make it clear. I suspect that some of you, as you begin to take the lessons of this book to heart, are beginning to discover this hard truth.

Clarity is the first step in writing an artful sentence, too. Art without sensibility is no art at all. Think about it. How will readers comprehend your artful play with words if they’re nonsensical? Your writing will read like Jabberwocky, Lewis Carroll’s famous children’s poem. While Jabberwocky sounds beautiful to the ear, it’s nonsense. Carroll invented most of the poem’s words. Do you think he was poking fun at writers who considered themselves artistes? I wonder….

The forms that a strong sentence can take are only limited by human ingenuity. Still, most of the best sentences share one or more of these three qualities:

- Effective emphasis
- Momentum
- Musicality

Let's look closely at each of these qualities.

There's a funny thing about the human mind. It tends to remember longest what it hears or reads first or last. The words that come in between are often forgotten. Science has recently confirmed this fact, which writers have known for a couple of millennia. In Homer's time, they saved the tragic irony of a poem for the end. Today, writers try emphasize an image or idea at the beginning or end of sentences, especially after a period, which marks the end of a complete thought. They resist burying an idea in mid-sentence. Consider the difference between these two sentences, which say the same thing:

- *"Most of the immigration can be blamed on Mexico's economic problems."*
- *"Poverty drives Mexican immigration."*

I'd argue that the second sentence conveys the idea better. The word "poverty" is a leaner, more descriptive and concrete way to begin a sentence than "most of the immigration." It captures in a word the reason for Mexican immigration. In contrast, the first sentence buries the idea in mid-sentence within a thicket of needless words. It doesn't help that the sentence uses a weak compound verb ("can be blamed") and vague language ("economic problems"). All that's missing to make this sentence a real stinker is the passive voice.

Effective emphasis often enables the next quality of an artful sentence: Momentum. The best sentences have a sense of journey. They pull readers through a story. By emphasizing an idea at the end of a sentence, you're giving readers a destination, a reason to journey along your words. Construct a sentence to build to that destination. The best sentences end with destinations that function as a punch line or a climax. As an example let's revisit that wonderful sentence from the Wall Street Journal about the Mexican mogul:

"The portly Mr. Slim is a study in contradiction."

"Contradiction" not only encapsulates the idea of the sentence but also serves as a punch line. See how the preceding words show us the contradiction that is Mr. Slim? "Contradiction" wouldn't work as well as a punch line without this effective set up.

Our portly Mr. Slim illustrates how the journey of your sentences should be interesting and easy to follow. Otherwise readers will veer away. That means avoiding detours off topic or into dead space. Each segment of the sentence should logical build on the one that preceded it. Time needs to past in a

way that readers can follow; events must unfold in proper sequence. Here's an example from a green writer of a convoluted journey:

"A major power outage at Stony Brook on Wednesday morning at 1:20 A.M. disrupted the peaceful environment as students set off fireworks, fires, and disobeyed authority."

The sentence begins interestingly enough but soon hits a wasteland of dead language, needless words and misplaced facts. I tip my hat to any reader who can stay consciousness while wading through "on Wednesday morning at 1:20 A.M. disrupted the peaceful environment." Worse yet, as the sentence is written, students are setting off fireworks and starting fires as the power goes out, not afterwards, a most curious turn of events.

Writers think carefully about how to order words and facts in a way that not only makes sense but also pulls readers through a sentence. Below is an example from a pro, Jill Lepore, writing in the New Yorker. While the idea of her sentence is complex, its journey is not:

"Fiction and nonfiction are like Austin's Darcy and Wickham: One has got to all the truth, and the other all the appearance of it."

Each segment of this sentence is like the leg of a journey; each is a step toward furthering understanding. The sentence also unfolds in a consistent rhythm of construction: fiction and nonfiction; Darcy and Wickham; got all the truth, the other the appearance of it. We're never confused as to who represents what. Darcy represents fiction and all the truth while Wickham represents the opposite.

Lepore's sentence is also an example of the third quality of artful sentences: musicality. The words in this sentence of hers sound pleasant in the reader's mind. Here's another example of how musicality can elevate an ordinary sentence to the sublime. The three sentences below use the same words but the order of those words are different in each sentence. Read each one aloud and ask yourself, which one sounds the best?

- *"Men's souls are tried by these times."*
- *"These are the times that try men's souls."*
- *"These times are trying to men's souls."*

I would argue that the middle sentence sounds the best. That's due, in part, because it's well crafted. The sentence is in the active voice, embodies one idea and builds to a climax. But there's also something magical about the order of these words that rings beautifully, unforgettably in the reader's head.

Although more than 200 years old, this sentence, I bet, sounds familiar, even if you don't know the name of the author. Now that's memorable writing. The author, by the way, was Thomas Paine, who is still considered by many scholars as our greatest essayist.

Here's a final example of the power of making your words sound like music. When the Protestant James the VI of Scotland ascended to the English throne in 1603, his first priority was to establish his branch of Christianity for all time. He decided the key was to produce a book that all could relate to and embrace. What would make the book memorable, King James, decided, was to make its writing sound pleasing to the ear.

To that end, he established a committee to write his book and commanded its members to listen aloud to every passage. The committee did its work well, producing the King James Bible. To this day, at least in the West, it remains the single best selling book.

So, listen to the sound of your sentence. Could you easily say it aloud, does it sound nice, does it make you want to hear more? If the sound grates or you stumble on the pronunciation of a word, so will readers. An irritated reader is one who will soon forsake you and your writing.

Paragraphs

If a sentence represents one brushstroke, then a paragraph is an image composed of many strokes. There are five strokes that paint the most effective paragraphs. Let's take a close look at each of these key strokes.

The first stroke begins in a writer's imagination. In constructing an effective paragraph, he tries to figure out what one idea — and only one — it will represent. Limiting a paragraph to one idea keeps it logically whole and consistent, making the paragraph easy to understand and follow. If a writer opens with the assertion that Dick differs from Jane, then the rest of the paragraph better explain why. Digressing in mid-paragraph about Dick's obsession with Paris Hilton will only confuse readers (and surely piss off Jane).

Conveying an idea may take a word, a sentence or a whole page. What dictates the length of a paragraph, then, is the effort to make an idea understandable. The key is to stay on topic. A good paragraph is never a hair ball of tangled topics or themes. If you find yourself drifting off topic, start a new paragraph.

News writing is the exception to this rule. Paragraphs are artificially configured to fit the narrow confines of a newspaper column. It's easier to read when broken up into small, digestible parts. In news stories, (except for the New York Times and sometimes the Wall Street Journal) paragraphs are limited to three sentences and are often shorter. That means one topic may span several paragraphs.

This old rule is finding new life on the Web. It's a platform build for short attention spans — and digital editions of magazines and newspapers are pandering to it. At InfoWorld, a former print magazine that's gone completely Web-based, stories are purposely written as "digestible chunks," according to editor Eric Knorr. Knorr sounds like the print editor he once was.

The second stroke of an effective paragraph is its opening sentence. It should introduce the idea of the paragraph. This opening, what some writers call a topic sentence, needs to paint an indelible image, vividly encapsulating the paragraph's idea. The shorter — and wittier — the sentence the better. Here's an example from a master of economical writing, the British magazine the Economist:

"There is no exaggerating China's hunger for commodities."

There's no mistaking the idea of this paragraph from its opening sentence. What follows documents that strong opening line:

"There is no exaggerating China's hunger for commodities. The country accounts for about a fifth of the world's population, yet it gobbles up more than half of the world's pork, half of its cement, a third of its steel and over a quarter of its aluminum. It is spending 35 times as much on imports of soya beans and crude oil as it did in 1999, and 23 times as much importing copper–indeed, China has swallowed over four-fifths of the increase in the world's copper supply since 2000."

Notice how every sentence documents and bolsters the idea of the opening line. Better yet, each sentence drives deeper the reader's understanding of why China hungers for commodities. It consumes half the world's cement, a third of its steel and so on. Not once does the writer veer off topic. Marshaling evidence to support one idea represents the third stroke of a well constructed paragraph.

This paragraph in the Economist also illustrates the fourth effective stroke: Keeping a paragraph consistent in construction, style and metaphor. The paragraph opens with a comparative measurement of China's hunger for commodities and sticks to that construction. Never does the writer interrupt his numerical analysis with a description of a factory burning coal or Chinese diners eating pork. He saves those images for another paragraph with a different construction.

The writer also keeps this paragraph consistent in style and metaphor. He opens likening China's need for commodities to a ravenous hunger. That metaphor is maintained throughout the paragraph, describing China as "gobbling" up more than half the world's pork and "swallowing" more than four-fifths of its cooper. The writer doesn't abandon the hunger metaphor in mid-paragraph, instead likening China's need to, say, a greedy youngster.

By the way, notice how this writer uses dramatic facts, metaphor and descriptive verbs — gobble and swallow — to enliven what could be a subject as dry as coal dust. He doesn't list the numbers in this paragraph but uses them to tell us the story of China's hunger for commodities.

In the best paragraphs, the final sentence is as strong as the first. It serves as a mini kicker, enticing readers to read on. These kickers take the form of one last dramatic fact, observation or memorable quote that underscores the idea of the paragraph. In the Economist example, the paragraph ends with a final dramatic fact: that China consumes most of the world's cooper.

The best final sentences serve as teasers to the next idea of the story. Consider, for example, the opening sentence of the paragraph that follows the one above in the Economist story:

"What is more, China is getting ever hungrier."

See how this next idea logically follows the preceding one? First the writer shows us that China is hungry; then shows us how its appetite is becoming insatiable. These two ideas are in lockstep.

A strong closing sentence represents the fifth effective stroke of a well constructed paragraph.

Let's look at another exemplary paragraph, this time from a 2007 profile in the Wall Street Journal:

"The portly Mr. Slim is a study in contradiction. He says he likes competition in business, but blocks it at every turn. He loves talking about technology, but doesn't use a computer and prefers pen and paper. He hosts everyone from Bill Clinton to author Gabriel Garcia Marquez at his Mexico City mansion, but is provincial in many ways, doesn't travel widely, and proudly says he owns no homes outside of Mexico. In a country of football fans, he likes baseball. He roots for the sport's richest team, the New York Yankees."

Again, this passage opens with a short vivid sentence that captures the idea of the paragraph. It then marshals the evidence to show us how Slim is contradictory. The irony is reflected in the construction of the sentences: Slim likes competition but continually tries to block it; he loves computers but never uses them. The paragraph ends with the big fact that Slim favors the patrician Yankees over the plebeian soccer teams of his home country.

Strong paragraphs make for strong writing. If thematically consistent, paragraphs serve as the building blocks of a well constructed story. A skilled writer organizes these blocks so that each idea builds on the one that preceded it. Understanding deepens with each new paragraph, creating a sense of momentum that pulls readers through a story. Such construction eliminates the ping-ponging among ideas and images that confuses and irritates readers.

Think of a well constructed story as an Egyptian pyramid. Its stone bricks were fitted together so snugly that mortar was unnecessary. So, too, it is with a well built story, with paragraphs as its stone bricks, each representing a clear and consistent image or idea. If each idea builds logically atop another, there's no need for a writer's mortar - transition words such as "but, and, furthermore, thus, nonetheless" and "moreover." The fewer the transition words, the less bloated a story, the quicker its pacing and the easier it is to follow.

Consider the two paragraphs cited as examples above. Neither of them opens with an "and, but" or a "moreover." Model your own paragraphs after either of these two examples and your writing will be as well constructed as the Sphinx.

"With" is not a verb

Let me close with a word about grammar.

While it's true that this book is no grammar guide, that's not to say grammar is unimportant to writers. Grammar is to writing what math is to physics. Math represents a commonly accepted set of rules in logic that govern communication in science. Without these rules no scientist could convey his ideas in a way that his colleagues could understand. Ditto with writers. They need the commonly accepted rules of grammar that govern how words are spelled, ordered and punctuated. Without them, no reader can understand what you've written.

Trust me on this; I speak from experience. As a freshman in college, my grammar was atrocious. I was among that elite group of students who thought “with” was a verb — and it showed. My classmates scratched their heads in befuddlement whenever I read my stories.

Shame drove me to learn what I’d tuned out in high school. I read a half dozen grammar guides, some of which I own and use to this day. Still, I’m no master grammarian. But I do know what I don’t know — and that’s what counts. I’ll never remember the difference between “who” and “whom,” “like” and “as if,” “me and I,” but I do know to look up their usage and not guess. That’s one of the traits that distinguishes a writer from someone who just puts words down on paper.

Sadly, this is a lesson many aspiring writers have yet to learn. Every semester, I watch bright young people with big ideas struggle to be understood. It’s often a losing battle. Their weak grasp of grammar and syntax renders incoherent much of what they say or write.

At times, I feel as if these students have reverted to practices of Elizabethan England 400 years ago, when few rules governed either the spoken or written word. Back then there could be a half dozen different spellings of a word, not to mention different pronunciations and meanings of it, too. The same held true in the United States until 1828, when Noah Webster wrote our first dictionary. Its successor lives on to this day. Perhaps you’ve heard of it.

As you can see, grammar is a relatively new phenomenon in the West. It arose out of need, not — as some suspect — as a way to torment young people. Think of grammar as the scaffolding that holds up our common language, imposing order on chaos.

Grammar aids in more than clarity. If used effectively, it can turn your words into music. That’s because punctuation adds meter to writing. Periods, commas, semicolons and colons set the tempo. When you pause — and for how long — decides whether your words sound in the reader’s mind like a waltz or a march. String together a series of short sentences and you’ve set your words to a staccato beat. Let your sentences flow, dependent clauses building on one another like gathering streams, and you’re writing in legato. Skilled writers wield punctuation as Mozart did musical notation.

While critical, the rules of grammar aren't sacrosanct. Language is not cast in stone. It’s alive, evolving in response to an ever changing world. Today’s profanity is tomorrow’s respectable language. In Shakespeare’s time, for example, the word “nothing” was slang for “vagina.” Throughout his plays, male characters are continually exhorting one another to spend more time doing “nothing.” It was a double entendre that left Elizabethan audiences sniggering in wicked delight.

Shakespeare’s double entendre is an example of writers at their best. They consider the rules of grammar made to be broken. But writers never break these rules by accident or out of ignorance. They do it only for effect.

CHAPTER 9

SWIM WITH “PORPOISE”

A writer versed in the arts of illusion never takes readers’ interest for granted. He works hard to hook readers and keep them hooked from his story’s first word to its last. Every word, sentence and paragraph is designed to draw readers ever deeper into a story. A writer composes with intent. Or, as the Mock Turtle put in Alice in Wonderland, “No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise.”

Writing with “porpoise” involves four principles:

- Thinking in two dimensions
- Thinking big
- Pushing for insight
- Writing with the power of the why
- Organizing by ideas

Let’s take a look at each principle.

Thinking in Two Dimensions

You must work your facts, find an order that reveals their truth. And that takes planning. That's why a skilled writer constructs his story as if playing a two dimensional game of chess. On the top level, he conceives a campaign for his story, the strategy that will best convey his material. He considers what are the facts, data, sources and scenes needed to make a story work — and then what order in which to organize them. Should he tell the story through the history of one person or place; or instead marshal the most compelling facts in a descending order of importance? Writing a story without some greater strategy is like "pasting feathers together and hoping for a duck."

A strategy, however, is only as good as its execution. That's why a writer also works the lower, or tactical level, of his story chessboard. He has to plot how to advance the campaign of his story line by line down the page. That requires figuring where to deploy his best material and when. The wrong fact at the wrong moment can slow the momentum of a story or derail it altogether.

Let's look at a writer's two-dimensional chess game in action.

Say, for example, you wanted to write about students struggling to find affordable college loans. As strategist, you'd ask yourself, what elements are necessary to make such a story credible? The answer might include credible data measuring both the lack of affordable financing and the number of students affected by it. You'd also want to find students who illustrate what's depicted in the figures. And then you'd want an expert to verify the students' experience as representative.

As tactician, you'd set out to find all these elements. You'd comb the Internet for government, nonprofit organization and university sites that track college loans and their affordability. While online, you'd Google for chat rooms where students are discussing their struggle to find affordable college loans, looking for some people to interview about their experiences.

With research in hand, you'd switch back to strategist. How best, you'd wonder, to organize your material in a way to make it persuasive and readable? That question might lead you to decide to open your story with a dramatic example, say, of a student who was accepted by Harvard yet couldn't find the affordable financing to enable him to attend. Next you might follow this dramatic opening with the best figures documenting how many students are faced with such a terrible dilemma. And then you might close the top part of your story with a quote from a respected expert on the topic.

This simple example illustrates that there is nothing random in a well written story. A skilled writer calculates what facts are needed and how to organize them. He carefully considers his every word, sentence and paragraph. Even a light-hearted parody is calculated down to the final word. As comic writer Peter DeVries once said, "Nonsense is such difficult business."

Think Big

Why would anyone want to read about a rooster attacking a little girl in South Florida? You might if the writer used the attack as a comic vehicle to lampoon our national obsession with crime and police jargon.

That's what a 20-something writer named Kelley Benham did at the the St. Petersburg Times. Her power of observation transformed a routine item on the police blotter into parody. The facts of the case were simple enough, even trivial. In a poor black neighborhood of St. Petersburg, Fla., a pet rooster attacked two-year-old Dechardonae Gaines as she lugged an Easy Bake Oven across the street.

But look what Benham does with those simple facts:

"Authorities apprehended the offending rooster, named Rockadoodle Two, and its sister, named Hen. Hen was not involved in the attack, police said." Later in the story, Benham wrote, "Everybody there knew Rockadoodle Two. Neighbors described the rooster as a normally well-behaved bird from a good family."

You can hear the stilted, self-important language of countless cop shows and television news reports in Benham's writing. In applying this language to such a trivial crime, Benham highlights our voyeurism when it comes to others misfortune.

The lesson here is to think big, even about the smallest things. A writer plumbs for what's universally appealing in any story, whether about a person, place or thing. The best can find meaning in the everyday: Greed in the price tag of a used car; thrift in a man who uses the same plate for every meal and obsession in the way a girl eats a banana.

I once used a buffalo nickel to represent a lifelong quest to fulfill a childhood dream. The child was media mogul Ted Turner and his dream was to own a herd of buffalo. As a boy in Savannah, Ga., Turner couldn't afford even one buffalo, so he collected buffalo nickels. "I've always been a collector, and the buffalo nickel was the favorite in my coin collection," Turner told me.

Turner's dream more than came true. Today (at last count), he owns 17,000 head of buffalo on nine ranches across the West. He uses his herds to feed a chain of restaurants named after himself that specialized in serving buffalo meat. You can see how those nickels began to add up to some serious change.

In another story, I used the outsized personality of a Dallas entrepreneur Billy Bob Barnett to represent a seismic shift in the Texas economy in the late 1980s. Here's how I put it:

"Ranch-reared, athletic and self-made, Billy Bob Barnett was a big man with even bigger dreams. And when Billy Bob dreamed, Texas dreamed with him."

My story portrayed Billy Bob as the P.T. Barnum of Texas's booming oil economy. He transformed an abandoned Fort Worth stockyard into a Disney-esque urban amusement park with a Wild West theme, complete with a mechanical bucking bronco. The park drew Dallas' nouveau riche transients like bees to nectar. But when oil prices collapsed so did Billy Bob's yuppie park. His fall marked the rise a new pragmatic group business leaders in Texas who began to wean the state off oil as the only piston driving its economic engine.

Push for Insight

All three of the examples above share a common thread. Each story exhibited a keen power of observation. The universal was teased out of the mundane, whether a neighborhood rooster or a

buffalo nickel. The writers of these stories saw what others had missed. In short, they wrote with insight.

What's drives insight is understanding and understanding comes from a thorough grasp of your material. That means seeing a person, place or event in 360 degrees. You'll know you've reached understanding when you can answer for yourself these questions about a story:

- What are the major conflicts?
- What's the important history?
- Who are the major players and what is the agenda of each?
- Who are the loudmouths and who are the ones with something meaningful to say?

Such knowledge well equips a writer. For one, it enables him to recognize cliché, the tiresome repetition of conventional wisdom. Cliché is the death knell of all that's fresh and original. Its use signals that a writer has unplugged his brain and is cruising on another's once fresh but now stale insights. Besides, who wants to read yet again that teenagers are callow and incapable of meaningful relationships because they love text messaging and Facebook? This, like most clichés, is bunkum.

Recognizing cliché is the first step on the road to insight. The next is pushing past the obvious. Once a writer is committed to shunning all that's cliché, he's free to question and challenge what others have said and written about a topic or person. Is there really any credible evidence that text messaging and Facebook make teens callow? Such questioning leads thoughtful writers to wonder, "What is my story really about?" It's a question that prompts writers to dig deeper to find new and revealing facts. And those new facts empower a writer to give a fresh take on an old story.

Here's an example from New York Times Health Writer Jane Brody. In August 2008, she combed through the scientific literature to puncture the myths about the dangers of caffeine, which are promulgated across the Internet by pseudo health and science sites. What Brody discovered should make the heart race of any tea and coffee lover. Her careful research showed that caffeine doesn't dehydrate. Neither does it raise blood sugar nor blood pressure. Caffeine does speed up the body's metabolism, Brody found, but not enough to prompt weight loss.

In puncturing these myths about caffeine, Brody displays a keen power of observation. She unearths just the right facts and then she wields them like a light saber to cut through the fog of misconception.

Often, meaningful detail isn't hidden or obscured. It's lying in the open for all to see. Yet it remains invisible to all but those who've honed a keen eye for meaningful detail. Here's another example, this time from Andrew Ferguson. In a 2008 Wall Street Journal book review, Ferguson uses facts we all know to push past the obvious and provide insight. "Like our common language, like our love of baseball and bleached flour, our resentful mistrust of Harvard is one of things that have traditionally bound Americans to one another, from the snootiest Yale graduate to the lowliest stevedore. Meanwhile, everyone is trying to get in."

In these two simple but lively and provocative sentences, Ferguson achieves something poet Emily Dickinson called "seeing the world aslant." What Dickinson meant was this: By tilting the world, if just every so slightly, it can be seen in a new perspective. Writers tilt the world by asking tough questions and questioning the obvious.

When writing, it's time to fire up the old noodle and put it to good use. Push yourself to rise above cliché and see beyond the obvious.

The Power of the Why

Attempting to explain the French Revolution in 1792, William Godwin penned a line that still guides writers today. The Englishman wrote: "He that knows only what day the Bastille was taken and on what spot Louis XIV perished, knows nothing." What Godwin meant is that facts, in and of themselves, aren't understanding, let alone truth. It's how you arrange them — in what order, against what backdrop and within what context — that imbues facts with meaning. "All historians know that facts never speak for themselves," says contemporary American historian Mary Beth Norton.

Facts will speak to readers if stitched together in a way that distills order out of chaos, that attempts to explain or make sense of the world. In such writing, facts represent something larger than themselves. They're marshaled to explain why Louis XIV's execution signaled the rise of a nobility no longer beholden to a monarch; why an upstart such as Barack Obama was able to defeat Democratic stalwart Hillary Clinton in the 2008 presidential primary. This is writing powered by the why. It infuses stories with a sense of purposeful direction; it gives people a reason to read.

Writing with the power of the why is not unlike making fresh bread. A writer kneads his material, rereading notes, trying out different openings and restructuring outlines, until what's meaningful rises to the top. But the meaning of a story has to be baked into a form that readers can digest. Otherwise his story is a formless mess that no one can make sense of.

What gives form to the why in writing is theme. Theme is nothing more than stringing together facts, quotes, data, backdrop, anecdotes in an order that provides insightful perspective. Constructing a theme is a ruthless process. It involves cherry-picking your material, using only those few facts that best illustrate a theme. A writer may have collected 10 notebooks worth of material, of which only a third may end up in his story.

In deciding what material to use, a writer asks himself three questions: What is my story really all about; why should anybody read it; can the story speak to something larger about American life or the big issues of the day? Answers to these questions won't come easily. But when they do, you'll have discovered a theme for your story.

In newspapers and popular news and style magazines, writers showcase their themes high up in their stories. Readers are told in no uncertain terms what a story is about and why they should read it. We'll talk more about this in the section about types of stories but here's some quick examples.

In profiling Beck in a 2007 New York Times Sunday magazine article, Arthur Lubow asked this question: What does Beck and his eclectic style have to say about modern music? He decided that Beck represented the ultimate example of how all art is derivative. The details of Beck's life and his rise to stardom were used to document this point. In doing so, the writer used Beck as a vehicle to talk about a much bigger issue, deepening the readers' understanding of artistic expression.

Another example is a 2007 story on the front page of the Wall Street Journal about the phenomenon of Japanese cellphone novels. A growing number of writers are composing novellas designed to be read on the ubiquitous cellphones of Japan. These are stories written quickly in the shorthand of text messaging and delivered in digestible screenfuls. The Journal arranged the facts of

this phenomenon to craft a theme that spoke to something much larger. While storytelling's form is forever changing, its basics remain the same. An effective story needs a charismatic protagonist who embarks on a difficult and meaningful quest. That's true whether the story is sung by heralds in the times of Homer or typed in the cryptic shorthand of text messaging.

In longer works of literary nonfiction, such a books and articles in the New Yorker and Vanity Fair, a story's theme is often hidden. The writer's influence is like Adam Smith's invisible hand, gently guiding the reader to understanding. The Italians call this technique, sprezzatura. It means the art of concealing art, or what some scholars call a studied carelessness. The best in creative nonfiction reads like a fable, with theme embodied in the telling of the tale.

Take a 2007 New Yorker piece by humorist David Sedaris. At first blush, the story reads like a funny retelling of a spat over airplane seating. Sedaris refuses to trade seats with a man in the bulkhead who wants to sit with his wife. He doesn't care for the bulkhead, a reason the man's wife, Sedaris' seat mate, considers selfish and she tells him so.

It soon becomes clear that this little story is about much more than who gets to sit where. It's a thematic fable about how even the most fleeting of human encounters soon becomes a power struggle over who's on top in any social setting.

Shunning Sedaris, the woman turns away from him and dozes off. Sedaris tries to ignore her, too, but can't. He accidentally spits up a cough drop on her lap. He's concerned, although not about soiling the woman's lap. Rather, he frets that the cough drop, if discovered by the woman, will confirm her opinion of him as a ill mannered lout. And that will mean Sedaris' loss of face and standing. Yet he's paralyzed with indecision. Does he try to retrieve the cough drop, risking awakening the woman. Or does he let her discover it when she awakes and then feign ignorance?

Nowhere in this tale does Sedaris state his theme, as a news writer would, but it's clear all the same. He uses only those details that illustrate and underscore his theme. There's not an extraneous line in the story.

Organizing by ideas

Our first inclination as writers is to organize a story as if we were retelling it in conversation. But what works in talking face to face with friends often falls flat in the written word. That's true whether it's written on a printed page, a blog, a Web site or the cramped screen of a cellphone.

In conversation, we enhance and enliven our words with facial expression and gesture. We grimace when recounting the taste of spoiled food and angrily shake our fist in the air at the memory of an unjust teacher. In addition, we're usually talking to people whom we share common experiences and assumptions, a set of understood associations. A group of friends who've devoured a hot fudge sundae together don't need to tell one another how delicious it tasted. The communal bliss of the experience is expressed in the chocolaty smiles on every face in the group.

The written word, however, must standalone. It is shorn of accompanying gesture and expression. As a writer, you're not there to signal a coming punch line with a wink or a beguiling smile. Nor do you know the people reading your work. There's not necessarily any shared assumptions or associations.

That's why, if recounted blow by blow, a written story soon bores. Too much of the wrong detail makes a story tedious and dull. It's easiest to see this problem at work in an example. Consider the passage below, written by a former student of mine. She's trying to capture the subtle but very real racism many Muslims Americans have experienced since 9/11:

"Atyah walked into the library and sat down in a chair among her friends. She stared aimlessly up at the ceiling for a moment while picking on the dry skin of a thumb. Then she turned to glance at the friends seated around her. With a sigh, she began to speak. She recounted a disturbing incident while working as a clerk at Home Depot the night before. As Atyah rang up a sale, a customer had blatantly but silently glared at her flowered head scarf. In the middle of her story, one of Atyah's friends said she had to go to the bathroom and got up and left. The friend returned in the middle of the story and Atyah glared at her."

This paragraph about Atyah might have worked if it were told verbally, accompanied with an exasperated look as Atyah's friend deserted her in mid-story. But a blow by blow account — Atyah sat down, picked at her thumb, then stared at the ceiling and so on — soon bores when recounted in the written word. Unaccompanied by gesture and facial expression, most of the paragraph's details come off as insignificant, even tedious. Unnecessary detail obscures both the drama and the point of the passage.

How could the writer make this account of Atyah more interesting and compelling? By organizing it so that the passage moves from meaningful detail to meaningful detail or from important moment to important moment. A skilled writer winnows his material down to its most essential elements. Remember, every word, every sentence, every paragraph must move a story forward. Anything that fails this test is extraneous. Unnecessary detail muddles a story and bogs down its pacing.

Let's practice how to move from meaningful detail to meaningful detail, using this passage about Atyah. First, we must ask ourselves: What is the writer trying to show with this paragraph, how does it move the larger story forward? I would say the passage is about illustrating Atyah's growing exasperation with America's stereotyping of its Muslim citizens — including hardworking but financially struggling college students — as homicidal maniacs.

With a clear theme in mind, we're now equipped for the next step: selecting just those few meaningful facts that will make this passage interesting and dramatic. Here's the facts I would use:

"Atyah sat down among friends at the library and sighed. She recounted a disturbing incident while working as a clerk at Home Depot the night before. As Atyah rang up a sale, a customer had silently glared at her flowered head scarf."

Notice how I got rid of anything that didn't illustrate the theme of Atyah's exasperation.

The passage now reads more direct, clear and compelling, focused on the key drama of the moment. I've made less more.

The passage would have been even better if the writer had included other meaningful facts to illustrate the theme. I would like to know, for example, how did Atyah sit, did it illustrate her exasperation? Were her friends in the library fellow Muslim Americans or a mixed group? How did they react to Atyah's story, did they share her exasperation? Who left in mid-story; was she an American, and did she leave out of indifference or an inability to relate? The answer to these questions would have painted a much more exact and compelling picture.

The concept of moving from key moment to key moment applies not just to a paragraph but also across an entire story. But in the story as a whole each moment should represent a big idea. In other words, ideas are the organizing principle of a story and each idea is represented by a scene. Scenes can be made up of anecdotes, collections of facts, description, quotes or all of the above. Like the paragraph, a scene must be whole consistently and thematically. It may take several paragraphs to complete a scene that represents a big ideas of your story.

The trick is to figure out what ideas are meaningful, find scenes to represent them and then organize the scenes into a compelling journey. In most stories, the scenes should build one atop another, giving the reader a sense of dramatic momentum. But in the highest order of writing, scenes are broken up for dramatic effect, letting the reader wonder, even worry, about what's about to happen next. I'll talk more about this advanced technique in the chapter titled "The Artful Tease."

Again, let's use the story about Atyah to explore the concept of organizing your writing around big ideas. The writer here probably has scores of facts about Atyah but only a few are meaningful. The reader doesn't care when she wakes up most mornings, what she eats for breakfast or whether she naps before work. None of these details would make for telling scenes that represented the big ideas of the story and enhance its theme of America's subtle anti-Muslim sentiment. What would work are scenes that illustrated important ideas such as: how anti-Muslim sentiment affected Atyah's self-esteem; how many of her friends have also suffered anti-Muslim incidents, revealing a larger pattern, and why Americans dislike or fear Muslims.

Here's a real life example. At Business Week, I once wrote a story that chronicled a whistle-blower's struggle to secretly document corruption at his drug company for federal investigators. His Chicago-based company had been bribing doctors — with everything from golf resort vacations to big screen televisions — to prescribe its prostate cancer drug to Medicare and Medicaid patients. I didn't open this story with the protagonist, Doug Durand, rising from bed on a sunny spring day. Rather, my story opened with a scene that depicted how Durand's colleagues suspected he was a whistle-blower. The scene reconstructed a meeting at which they tried to maneuver him into taking the rap for the company's bribe campaign. It illustrated the harrowing position of many whistle-blowers — the theme of my story. Next, the story showed Duran cooperating with federal investigators and then the following scene depicted how they used that information to win a $875 million judgment — a record at that time — against the company in federal court.

Notice how I composed this story to move from meaningful idea to meaningful idea, each represented by a scene, and each scene building on the prior one to escalate the dramatic tension. This is how sophisticated writers construct their stories.

CHAPTER 10

FACTS AREN'T MEANING

Riddle me this: What is the difference between what you know and what you see? This question is a real poser, as the Brits would say. So much so, that writers and thinkers have been struggling with this question for a millennium.

At first glance, the words "know" and "see" appear interchangeable, meaning the same thing. But in fact they represent two very different concepts.

Consider. I may know that Twitter founder Jack Dorsey sports a beard that would make Paul Bunyan envious. But that doesn't mean that I understand what his beard represents, why young men today hold Bunyan as their fashion icon. To understand that requires "seeing," or understanding the meaning of the things I know.

Here's how this dilemma plays out for writers. Interesting, credible information fuels all good narrative nonfiction. You can't write well unless you have a list of interesting facts. But a list of facts is just that, a list. It might serve well as a cheap thrill on BuzzFeed. Think a "Listicle" of the 10 best beards or 10 cutest kitten videos.

Yet, a list of the ten cutest cat videos neither tells a story nor provides insight into why we love them so much. It lacks insight and storytelling, the two essential ingredients for effective, memorable narrative nonfiction.

You can know a lot, yet see nothing.

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Writers have developed a series of techniques to squeeze meaning out of facts, even seemingly meaningless ones. Let's take a look at some of the more common techniques and the platforms on which they are used.

News writing remains the most basic of all nonfictional organizational styles. Its long rise began in the 1840s, when James Gordon Bennett invented the modern newspaper in the form of his New York Herald. The Herald was the first to promote itself through the immediacy and relevance of its content, what today we call breaking news. With that innovation began the ranking of information in order of importance — both within the newspaper and eventually within a story. It's a style of organization commonly referred to as the inverted pyramid.

While newspapers may be in irreversible decline today, the inverted pyramid lives on. It has been adopted by not only radio and television but the Internet, too. That's no surprise, given that news has become one of the Web's most popular features. The popularity of online news has generated media rivalries as fierce as of the penny press at the dawn of the 20th century. Vice versus BuzzFeed. MSNBC.com versus Fox.com. These are the New York World and New York Journal of today.

Online news media has embraced the inverted pyramid because of its simple but compelling formula to convey information: Facts are presented in a descending order of importance, with an emphasis on immediacy and relevance. Readers are told in no uncertain terms why they should read a story and read it now. A news story about a mayor indicted for embezzlement doesn't open with the details of his new haircut. It opens with a dramatic summary of his indictment. And then it tells the reader the who, what when and where of the story. These are the 5 Ws that every basic news story tries to answer within the first 1-3 paragraphs.

The inverted pyramid also uses a simple but compelling style of writing. Stories are clear, direct and brief. It's a style that was pioneered by newspaper baron Joseph Pulitzer in the late 1800s. He loathed the flowery, bloated language that characterized newspapers at the time.

Instead, Pulitzer commanded his writers at the New York World and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch to use words that any eighth grader could understand. His newspapers featured writing with simple, direct sentences that marched from subject to verb to direct object: Dick sees Jane — not Jane is seen by Dick. Strong, active voice verbs, such as "wrangled, ransacked" and "coerced," drove the sentences of Pulitzer news stories.

Paragraphs were simple, too. Most were no longer than three short sentences. An idea, rather confined to one long paragraph, was conveyed across several smaller ones.

By the turn of the 20th century, every major newspaper in the country had adopted Pulitzer's style. It continues to dominate every news medium today.

The beauty of the inverted pyramid is twofold: It enables readers to quickly grasp the news of the day, the details of an event. And it lets them skim a story. In short, reading is optional.

No wonder the inverted pyramid has been readily adopted by the rising number of online news outlets. It well suits the youthful audience that favors the Web. They tend to have short attention spans, are easily distracted and pride themselves on their multitasking prowess. Hmm, sounds a lot like the audience Hearst and Pulitzer catered to back in the 19th century. The more things change, they more they stay the same, to paraphrase the famous saying by French writer Jean-Baptise Alphones Karr. And he said this in 1849, nearly 20 years before the first Pulitzer newspaper.

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While well-suited for news, the inverted pyramid is a bore when it comes to any other type of writing. There's none of the dramatic tension nor sense of journey that draw readers through a story. Worse, it doesn't convey meaning.

Plenty of stories about current events aren't breaking news. These "off news" stories are typically about trends, issues or events. Stories about things such as illegal immigration and identity theft, global warming and economic growth — or the lack thereof; Then there's the profiles of interesting personalities or newsmakers.

Off news stories share a common recipe, first popularized by the Wall Street Journal. Today, this recipe has been embraced by most big newspapers and weekly news magazines, including Rolling Stone, Business Week, the Washington Post, the New York Times Sunday magazine and Newsweek.

Here's how it works:

A story opens with a compelling fact or anecdote. Next, the writer sums up what's to come in the rest of the story. And last, and most importantly, he sells readers on why they must read this story and read it now. Off news, or feature stories, share breaking news' sense of urgent relevance.

Why write this way? Because there's few businesses more competitive than commercial publishing. Readers perceive time as a scarce commodity. Whether that's really true, given how much time people spend playing Warcraft, prospecting for dates on Tinder and fiddling with their profiles on Facebook, is debatable. Might it be that we enjoy believing we're so busy because it makes us feel important?

One thing is for sure, though. Reading is but one of an endless list of choices — from television to online gaming to making TikTok videos — that people now have in spending their time.

Today, publications can never assume that, if they print it, readers will come. Every story in a newspaper or magazine — or BuzzFeed, for that matter — must sell itself. The sell starts with the first word of any story and continues to the last. A good publication, and a sophisticated writer, never takes the readers' attention for granted.

Good publications and writers also change with the times and, for media, the times they are always a changin'. The printing press forced the town crier into retirement. Radio forced newspapers to publish additions throughout the day. Television forced radio to abandon news for talk shows and the Internet has forced local television news to air Webcasts online. In media, it's adapt or perish.

No media has been more whipsawed by all this change than print, whether newspapers, magazines or books. It's no longer enough to publish facts or news. Events large and small, whether news about Brittany Spear's latest detoxification or Israel's invasion of Lebanon, are instantly airborne, available on television, portable computers or wireless phones. Long gone are the days when print media could compete on immediacy. Now people look to writers, whatever the medium, to help them understand events. That's why it's never been more important to think when writing, to be well-versed in history, literature and culture.

At its best, news feature writing embodies this new ethos. Facts aren't dumped on the poor reader. Now they're parsed and sifted and put into context. In fact, the Wall Street Journal in 2006 decided to remake itself to emphasize such interpretative and analytical journalism. The redesign is "meant to establish the Journal as the first newspaper rethought for now readers increasingly now get their news, often in real time, from many sources, all day long," publisher L. Gordon Crovitz wrote in a letter to readers.

Today, off news writing includes five or six parts, depending the level of sophistication. Let's take a close look at each part.

The Set-Up

All feature stories employ an opening technique called the set-up. It's the single most important part of any story. The set-up's job is to grab readers' interest at the outset. Otherwise, a writer has lost them for good.

Effective set-ups open with a dramatic, telling or colorful fact or anecdote. Not just any fact or anecdote, mind you. It should represent the point or theme of your story. Don't open a story about immigration with a ribald joke about a rabbi, priest and Buddhist monk at a bar — no matter how funny. The reader will feel cheated if he doesn't learn later in the story why this joke was relevant.

Writers often try to open in the middle of the action. They show the protagonist arrested; a hurricane swamping an unprotected town. Later, they set the opening in the context of a larger story.

Here's a few examples of catchy openings:

•*"Favoring plaid sports coats and bushy sideburns, Swedish developer G. Lars Gullstedt would seem hard to miss – especially among Atlanta's largely clean-shaven and pin-stripped development crowd. But miss him they did."*

•*"If the world were free of calamity, would there be a CNN?"*

•*"In a 135-year-old farmhouse, John Gay stands in muddy cowboy boots hunched over a computer. His weathered fingers race over the keyboard. The computer spits out a plan on how best to irrigate his 4,500 acres of sugar cane."*

•*"When they heard the screams, no one suspected the rooster."*

See how each of these openings paint an indelible mental picture or grabs you with an interesting question or fact? That's the secret to a good set-up.

Make no mistake, though. Set-ups are a tricky business. There's a thin line between tease and confusion. You want to give readers just enough information to understand and get hooked, but not give away the story. Did the arrested character get convicted, did the storm-ravaged town survive? Let your audience read on to find out.

At the big publications, set-ups are often more than a single paragraph. In the New York Times, set-ups can lumber on for hundreds of words. It's best, though, to avoid lengthy set-ups, unless you can write like James Joyce or Dave Barry. Remember, the set-up is a tease. Its is job done when the reader is hooked.

The Nut Graph

Once hooked, readers want to know what your story is about. Now is not the time to be coy. In three to five sentences, tell them what's to come and sum it up in sweeping drama. The drama should also convey a sense of urgency, employing such words as “now, increasingly” and “potential.” Such summary writing high up in a story is called the nut graph. Here's an example:

"College students are increasingly using the online social networking services of Facebook and MySpace as a pedestal from which to boast of their drinking and sexual prowess. But such braggadocio is increasingly attracting an unintended audience: Potential employers. They’re now cruising these sites, too, using them to weed out job candidates who post pictures of themselves drunk, naked – or both.”

Notice how this graph does more than summarize the story’s facts; It casts those facts in a dramatic story line that's rich in conflict. This is what lures people to read a story. Facts without contextual drama are like bread without butter: too dry to be appetizing.

The So-What Graph

The nut graph sinks the hook but doesn't set it. To do that, you need to persuade readers that your story is important and relevant. Writers do this through what's called the "so-what graph."

The so-what graph typically follows the nut and is between one to five sentences, shorter in newspapers and longer in news magazines. Together, the nut and so-what graphs comprise what some magazines call "billboarding." It tries to answer the unspoken questions about why readers should read a story and read it now.

A good way to make a story relevant is to cast it as representing a change or a new trend. Use the story to explain how this trend will shape the future. Give your story a forward spin, as writers say.

Take the example of the Facebook and MySpace story above. You might cast employers’ newfound interest in online networking services as a growing cat and mouse game, pitting young potential employees against employers, with each trying to outwit the other.

Better yet, try to pluck some universal chord in the billboarding. Again, let’s fiddle with the Facebook story as an example. You might amp up its cosmic relevance by saying employer background checks are the latest turn in some ageless struggle: between the young and the old, or the old guard and the upstarts, or between freedom of expression and authoritative control. The facts of the story could be cast in a way to make any of these themes. The trick is to make your story appear representative of some universal struggle that many readers can relate to.

The Caveat

A word of caution about billboarding. Life is rarely so clean cut as a good story line. It’s all too easy to sound all knowing about which little may be known — or knowable. That’s why honest writers have adopted an idea from modern scholarship: revealing the limitations of their research or reporting,

what it can't say for sure. A writer, say, may have interviewed a dozen family members or friends speculating about the motives of homicidal loner Cho Seung-Hi. However, nobody knows why Cho decided to massacred 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007, and he didn't explain himself. An intellectually honest writer admits such a limitation.

In the pursuit of good billboarding, it's also easy to sacrifice nuance, dissent or exceptions for dramatic effect. That's why honest writers will follow it with a paragraph or two that quickly summarizes any caveats to their theme. The White Knight doesn't save every damsel he tries to rescue. Here's an example from the Wall Street Journal, the master of effective billboarding. It's from a story about Democratic candidates in the 2006 congressional race successfully exploiting the voters' rising anger about the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. After laying out this theme, the writer adds:

"U.S. electoral history is littered with Democrats who tried to use the inequality issue only to find voters unswayed and Republicans accusing them of "class warfare" or "business-bashing."

Sophisticated writers concede exceptions to their theme. It conveys an intellectual honesty that builds trust with readers.

Writing effective billboarding requires that you understand your material down to its follicles. You can't explain the meaning of a set of facts to someone else until you understand them yourself. Again, here's where it pays off to have developed yourself as a keen observer who is well-versed in history, culture and literature.

If so well-versed, you'll recognize that, in truth, there's precious little that's new. Most of what we consider new is just new to us or our generation, a modern incarnation of ancient behavior. Or, as New Yorkers say, "a new look on an old schnook."

While there's little new, there are always new ways of seeing old trends. Or, as a conservative writer once put it in the Wall Street Journal, "The obvious needs to be made fresh." A skillful writer, who thinks deeply about life and tries to see the world aslant, can make a stale pretzel taste fresh.

The Body

Okay, you've grabbed readers' attention and sold them on your theme. Now you've got to deliver the goods. This is the function of the body of the story. It is here that you marshal the evidence to buttress your theme or argument. If you said employers use Facebook to vet potential young employees, then show us. Give examples of employers doing so. Quote participants in Facebook; cite studies and experts. Lash all this supporting evidence to the mast of your theme.

Be ruthlessly selective, including only information that moves your story forward. Don't introduce new points in mid-story that weren't mentioned in the billboarding. Readers find it disconcerting when confronted with a new issue in mid-story. They begin to wonder if the writer is in control.

It's okay if you don't use all your reporting. Writing is not unlike filmmaking. A director might shoot 10 hours of film for every 30 seconds that ends up in the final cut of a commercial. The ratio's not so

stark in writing, but on average a good writer uses only about a third of the information he's gathered. Save material that you don't use for another story on the same topic but with a different theme.

The Kicker

There's only one part of a story that's harder to write than the opening and that's the ending. I don't know why writers call it the kicker but the name fits. Figuring out how to end a story can be a real kick in the pants.

The kicker should bring readers full circle; give them a sense of closure or emotional satisfaction. A well-done kicker leaves a lasting impression and plays a big role in making a story memorable.

How to achieve that tall order? It's not unlike learning how to tell a joke. It's all in the timing. You have to develop a sense of how to deliver a punch line, to know just when and where to stop. I'm afraid that comes only with experience and practice, trial and error.

That said, here's some elements to strive for in a good kicker:

- End on the factual or emotional theme of the story. That doesn't mean rehashing what you've already said. Instead, drive home the theme with a final insight, quote or fact.
- Riff off the opening, especially if it raised a big question or introduced a mystery. The ending is a good place to solve that mystery or answer the question.
- It's okay, too, to keep readers wondering, as long as it's about some big question and not the theme of the story.

Most importantly, keep the ending punchy. The shorter the better.

CHAPTER 11

OFF NEWS

Let's take a closer look at what I call off news stories. Today, such stories make up the bulk of what's published. That's true whether it's the New York Times or the New Yorker; C/Net or BuzzFeed. It's true whether the platform is print, blog or e-zine. Indeed, news writing — especially simple breaking news — has increasingly become a commodity. So much so that Dow Jones recently announced it had designed a bot to automatically write routine stories about company earnings.

That means the ability to list facts in order of importance — the old who, what, when, where pyramid formula — no longer cuts it. Rather, to succeed today, a writer needs to be able to capture the dramatic essence of what's happening in the world and do so in a way that's captivating to a complete stranger.

We've already talked about the basics of such stories: employing the technique of theme, nut, so what and caveat graphs. But there's much more to off news stories. In the past fifty years, a rich variety of story types have emerged. This has expanded not only what's consisted legitimate topics but also how to write them. This in turn has made all kinds of publications, whether newspaper, magazine; Web site or blog, more interesting to read. Few people today, whether young or old, want to read a publication in which every story reads the same.

I'm sure you've heard the names of at least some of these story types: profiles and scene setters; debate and explainers. Ring a bell? In constructing one of these type of stories, writers don't start from scratch. Rather, they draw on a rich portfolio of templates. These are tried and true organizational structures that have successfully served writers well.

While individual templates differ in structure and emphasis, they all share the same key elements. Each is designed to tease out dramatic tension while binding seemingly random facts together into a meaningful theme.

This is not to say that writers can't be original. Indeed, originality is the key to longterm success. But even the best writers often struggle with how best to organize a story. The more complex the story, the bigger the struggle. That’s where templates come in. Think of it like this: Even the most skilled potter starts with the standard form of a cup, plate or a vase. Then potters remake that into an original take on these tried and true designs. The same is true of writers.

So a template is a writer’s standard vase, a place to start. The best writers adapt a template into something fresh and exciting. They put their own stamp on it. There’s nothing more boring, at least to

a sophisticated, well-read audience, than formulaic writing. And the very best break new ground by giving standard templates a new twist or inventing all new ones.

How then do writers decide what template to use for a particular story? They start by asking themselves this question: What is the best way to tell a particular story? For example, would the complex debate about immigration reform best be told through the life story of an immigrant who works 12 hours a day, six days a week and lives with four other men in a one room apartment? Or would it be better told through highlighting the clash between the different sides in the debate.

Let's look at some of the most common templates writers use.

Profiles

In contemporary news, magazine and book writing, a profile is not so much about someone's life story; but a story about what a person's life has to show the rest of us. Writers use profiles as a way to help readers understand complex issues or to illuminate struggles common to many of us. Readers might best understand, say, the need for immigration reform if they could see the struggle of a teenager whose undocumented parents have been suddenly deported. Or it might be easier to see the collapse of America's middle class through the story of a man who must work three jobs to afford a house in a safe neighborhood with good schools.

First, let's consider what a good profile is not.

It is not biography: A chronological blow by blow account of how a person's life has unfolded since he left the womb. Nor is it a laundry list — such as a CV or a resume — of a person's accomplishments. In short, profile writing is not about listing facts. Rather, it uses a handful of the most meaningful details to tell the story of a person's life. It's a big difference, which I'll explain fully in a bit.

Second, a good profile neither glorifies, defends nor champions someone. A writer's allegiance lies solely with his readers. What they want to know is threefold: Who really is your subject; why should they give a damn about him, and why should they give a damn now? A writer's task, then, is to paint an authentic portrait. That means including not only a subject's strengths and accomplishments; but also weaknesses and failures as well. Readers deserve a full portrait, warts and all.

This means resisting neat or happy endings. In real life, the account of peoples' actions don't neatly add up like columns on a balance sheet. In fact, people are unbalanced; they are the sum of their contradictions. They often say one thing while doing another.

Think of the politician who says he believes in the sanctity of marriage while sexting a mistress. Or a student who says he can't afford a $5,000 study abroad program while spending more than that on drinking every year.

That's real life, not a caricature of it. A Profile that fails to capture someone as he really is doesn't ring true. Worse, it's intellectually dishonest.

As is true of all effective writing, a successful profile begins with a good idea. A boring subject makes for a boring profile.

Who, then, is worthy of profiling? You may find the answer to that question surprising. It's rarely big shots such as politicians, executives, athletes, movie stars, war heroes or those with a million likes on Facebook. Rather, the best subjects are often regular people facing struggles common to us all.

I'm talking about people who face an uphill slog against a tough challenge with few resources. Think of a student who has to work two jobs to stay in college; a Starbucks barista addicted to Xanax who can't afford a six month leave of absence at an expensive resort-like clinic; or a maverick zoologist using his own money to track down and catch the Moby Dick of squids.

What makes these Jane Baristas more interesting than the next Paris Hilton?

Think about it. What could be more undramatic — hence boring — than someone who has never had to struggle? I'm talking about people such as Ted Kennedy or Kim Kardashian. These are people who had every advantage, such as attending the best schools, having access to the best tutors or a

father who could call the right person. That's just dumb luck. This is true also of someone for whom playing the harpsichord comes as naturally as blowing his nose. That's about as exciting as a dirty tissue.

Worse, these days such people are often so media savvy and rehearsed that they have a scripted answer to every question. Typically, they don't even write the script themselves. Some handler does. And if a question comes up that isn't on the script they simply ignore it. For example, when Hillary Clinton ran for the U.S. Senate in 1999, advisors told her: "be chatty; don't be defensive." Neither of which reflected her true nature.

In contrast, Jane Barista has never been interviewed. In fact, the mere idea of it probably makes her want to retch. She has no idea what to say, other than to say what she really did and what she really thinks. And, if pushing for some change or starting a new company, she's not sure she will succeed.

It doesn't get more real than that.

Nor do most people understand what they represent to a larger audience of strangers. That goes for the most determined of crusaders as well. A champion of same sex marriage may think she is all about her cause. But that may not be true at all. In your reporting, you may discover a much more interesting struggle. Say, for example, that this crusader also served as the surrogate mother for the child of a male gay couple. Doesn't such a role speak to the changing definition of what constitutes a family in the 21st Century? That's a fresher and edgier theme than legalizing same sex marriage.

Remember, as writer, your allegiance is to the reader. It's your job — indeed, your obligation — to plumb a subject's life for the most interesting, telling and relevant theme — even if your subject would prefer that you promote her cause or agenda. Stay independent at all times.

While essential, struggle is not enough for a good profile. A subject's struggle must be representative. A good subject is one of either two things: an agent of change or someone buffeted by change. In short, such people represent some issue larger than themselves. That is what makes them relevant and compelling.

An example of an agent of change is the most important civil rights worker you never heard of. His name is Bob Moses, and he traveled alone across the Jim Crow South in the early 1960s trying to persuade blacks to register to vote. It was an uphill struggle in which Moses — and those whom he tried to register — faced not only beatings but even death. Moses was a nobody compared to Martin Luther King Jr., but his effort represented the larger struggle of common poor folk for political equality.

As an example of a subject buffeted by change, consider the story of Jack Johnson. He owned a small but profitable tattoo parlor on Long Island that went belly up during the Great Recession of 2007. A student of mine chronicled Johnson's struggle to hold onto his house as he tried in vain to find a new job. His struggle represented how the recession knocked many once successful men out of the middle class.

For me, no one better depicts the challenge involved in writing a sophisticated profile than Carlo Goldini, one of Italy's greatest journalists. Here's what Goldini said:

"Everyman is three people: The man as he sees himself; the man as others see him and the man as he truly is."

Think about it. How many people have the level of self awareness to see themselves as others do? Maybe a Zen master or two. Tops. That means just interviewing the subject of your profile is not going to produce a very revealing, let alone interesting piece. It would be like painting a portrait using only one color.

Nor would such a portrait necessarily be accurate. It's not that your subject would lie. But it's only human nature for people to cast themselves in the most flattering light; to skip over failures and focus on success. And all success and no struggle makes for a dull profile.

Here's another pitfall in limiting yourself to just interviewing the subject of a profile. Ask yourself: Do you act the same way at home as you do at work or in a class; do you act the same way at work or in class as you do at a bar with your best friends? Do you act the same way in a bar as you do when visiting your grandparents or in-laws?

I suspect not. I suspect, too, that most of the time you aren't even aware of how your behavior subtly changes with every shifting backdrop; with every different character you encounter on a given day. It's difficult, if not impossible, for anyone person to know you completely.

Think again of your mother. Does she really know how you act with your friends in a friendly game of beer pong; does she even know you're an enthusiast? In short, no one person sees another in his entirely.

That means writers need to cast their nets wide when fishing for "who a person really is." A fiancee knows you differently, say, then your professor or your boss. Which means each provide information and perspective that the other can't. It's not usual for the best writers to interview not only a subject's friends, parents and siblings; but also his peers, rivals and even enemies.

Still, interviewing other sources about the subject of a profile has its own pitfalls. Few will see your subject impartially. They'll have their own agendas. Worse, they may have axes to grind and grudges to bear. It's your job to figure out what these are and cast them in the proper context. A skilled writer asks himself, why is this divorced wife of my subject calling him stingy; is it because she wanted a bigger settlement out of the divorce?

Consider this profile of PayPal founder Max Levchin, which ran in the New York Times. In reporting the story, Gary Rivlin interviewed a dozen sources. They included not only the 27-year-old millionaire entrepreneur's mother and friends. Also interviewed were his fiancee, rivals and an expert on Silicon Valley culture. Such a rich variety of sources enabled Rivlin to shatter the cliches that typify mediocre profiles, in which friends and family glorify the subject as a talented saint.

Boring.

Instead, Rivlin used Levchin as a vehicle to spotlight the dark side of ambition; to show the toll it can exact on not only the ambitious but also those close to them.

The success of this profile lies not just in the rich variety of sources. They would have been worthless if Rivlin had just asked them questions such as, “Tell me why Levchin is such a wonderful guy.” Instead, Rivlin asked questions such as: “How has success changed Levchin; what's he like to live with, what drives him and what was his lowest moment?”

In response, Levchin's fiancé said she wished that, every now and a then, he'd put away his ever present blackberry, if just while they were eating dinner. Adds Nellie Minkova: “He sleeps a few hours, he works out. But other than that, Max works.”

Adds friend Denis Fong, Levchin “makes this weird growling sound” anytime someone mentions the name of a competitor.

Such quotes not only enliven a profile; they make a subject real, revealing the type of imperfections that dog anyone, no matter how brilliant or talented.

Rivlin would never had the opportunity to ask such penetrating questions if he hadn't first won the trust of Levchin and those around him. He did that by spending significant time with him. A skilled writer will spend a day with a subject, tagging along to observe him in different situations. He'll do it several times, if given the opportunity by the subject and the time from his editor.

In hanging around with Levchin, Rivlin used all his senses. He listened to how Levchin spoke; watched how he acted — and noted the difference between the two. He also listened to how others spoke and acted around Levchin.

He also observed the world that Levchin inhabited to lace his story with telling detail. For example, Rivlin noticed that Levchin bought a 12-room Edwardian mansion at 27 that he never moved into; he slept in a sleeping bag under his desk at his cramped office while creating PayPal.

See how such detail shows us Levchin's obsession with success? Never once in the story does Rivlin tell us Levchin is consumed with ambition; he doesn't have to. He's shown the reader instead.

* * *

You may have reported the hell out of a person, garnering the most colorful of detail, but all that hard work will be meaningless unless you can present your reporting as a compelling narrative. In short, writing profiles requires all the reporting, writing and organizational skills discussed throughout this book.

First off, in writing profiles, a writer must work two jobs simultaneously, serving as both strategist and tactician. As strategist, he must first figure out what greater theme his subject's life represents. This can take some hard noodling. Often what truly makes a person's life interesting to readers is not obvious — especially to the subject himself.

Consider this example. Let's say you decided to profile Democratic U.S. Rep. Carolyn McCarthy because she announced her retirement after 20 years in Congress. At first blush, you might the think the profile will turn on why she's retiring. She might think so herself.

But I would suggest that the real story here is not her time in congress but what led her there. Her husband and son were victims of a mass shooting on a rush hour Long Island commuter train in 1993. That attack, which left six dead — including McCarthy's husband — and 19 wounded, transformed McCarthy. This mild mannered nurse became a leading crusader for tougher gun control laws. That struggle eventually led her into national politics.

Now, isn't that a much more interesting story than some longtime pol retiring from office?

Finding a subject's key thematic struggle is just your first step as strategist. Next you have to discover those few moments in a person's life that best illustrate this thematic struggle. These are moments that forged the subject's character; that made him the person whom we are interested in today. In the example above, a key scene might be the moment McCarthy learned of her husband's sudden and senseless death.

These handful of telling moments become the building blocks of your story. Consider them as the scenes in a play or novel. How you arrange these scenes — and what facts you use to build them — is the work of a tactician.

A savvy tactician doesn't necessarily let a story unfold chronologically. Rather, he tries to organize his shrewd selection of telling scenes as a dramatic journey that pulls the reader through the story. Profiles, then, lend themselves particularly well to the episodic storytelling techniques discussed in The Artful Tease.

You might, say, open a profile at a key crossroad, even if it's in the middle of a person's life. The Levchin profile, for example, opens at a moment of indecision. At 27, Levchin has more money than he can possibly spend in a lifetime, yet he is miserable. This leaves the reader hungering to know why. After all, hasn't Levchin become what Americans respect the most: a self-made millionaire.

Such an opening dramatically sets the theme of Levchin's life from the outset. The remainder of the story unfolds as if Rivlin were peeling back the skins of an onion. Levchin's life story — and what it has to say to us — is revealed layer by layer, drawing the reader ever deeper into the pathology of his restless ambition.

Never does Rivlin list the facts of Levchin's life. Rather, he arranges them one atop another to heighten the story's dramatic tension.

Let's examine this technique up close. The paragraph below is from a New York Times' profile of Harvard Law Professor Elizabeth Warren by Jodi Kantor. It was written years before Warren became a U.S. Senator. At the time, Warren was a little known crusader exposing how bank and credit card companies were gouging consumers. Her work would later become the foundation of today's Consumer Protection Act, passing during the depths of the Great Recession.

"The defining event of Elizabeth Warren's life may have taken place before she was born, when a business partner ran off with the money her father had scraped together to start a car dealership. She arrived a few years later, in 1949, another mouth for a strapped family to feed. But she used that mouth to talk her way into a debate scholarship at George Washington University at age 16."

Kantor could have organized this graph as a chronological listing of the facts of Warren's childhood: She was born in 1949. Warren's family was broke. As a teenager, she learned how to speak well and that won her a college scholarship.

Not very exciting, is it. How, then, does this writer take these same facts and make them interesting to read?

For starters, Kantor identifies a key moment, which occurs before Warren's birth. It is here she opens the paragraph. Kantor does so because she understands that what counts here is not when Warren was born, but the context into which she was born. Then Kantor shows us how that context

shaped Warren's personality. Born into a family impoverished by financial fraud, Warren had nothing but her wits to get ahead. In short, the writer shows us why Warren became such a dedicated advocate of consumer rights.

Kantor has carefully chosen her facts for this paragraph. Each one helps to illustrate her bigger theme: That Warren family's financial misfortune shaped who she would become. There is no extraneous fact — such as she worked at the local Carvel — that distracts from this big idea.

Notice, too, how there is never a dull moment in this paragraph, even though it is quite simple. The facts are arranged to create a sense of journey that builds to a climax: Warren's steady rise out of financial misfortune.

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In pitching a profile, focus on showing a subject's personal struggle and how that struggle represents some big issue that speaks to a wide audience. Let's take Max Levchin, for example. A profile pitch about this Silicon Valley entrepreneur might use him to show the dark side of success; how his driving ambition leaves him little time to enjoy either his wealth or his girlfriend. A pitch about him might read like this:

"Max Levchin just bought a 12 room hilltop Edwardian house. Too bad he hasn't had the time to even unpack five months after moving in. This founder of PayPal has been too busy scheming how to launch his next successful startup. Experts say Levchin is not alone. He represents the dark side of success, in which many young entrepreneurs are so consumed with ambition that they cannot enjoy either their wealth or their love life."

Scene Setters

A scene setter is a type of story that takes a living snapshot of the human condition. It captures a moment, scene, event or place — even a thing, if done right — that represents something larger than itself. A seasoned writer can bring a stone to life.

Scene setters are the epiphany of the concept of show not tell. They turn on the skillful use of meaningful detail to paint a living picture in the reader's imagination. A skilled writer, say, will use a deserted salad bar of wilting lettuce to illustrate the food preferences of college students. Or she'll use Tumbleweeds clogging a town's sewers to show how a historic drought is making the American West increasingly unlivable.

Although set in the here and now, effective scene setters are no less dramatic than any good story. They tease out and highlight the dramatic tension of a moment or event.

An effective scene setter shares the same elements of any good story. First and foremost, it's dramatic. No drama, no story. It's that simple. Although a skilled writer can make a barren desert bristle with life, she wouldn't have tried to do so as a greenhorn. Neither should you. Find something that is rich in action when attempting your first scene setters. Leave the deserts to the seasoned writers.

Second, a good scene setter has a sense of momentum. Even if you're writing about a beach of tortoises, you must convey a sense of momentum. Readers will turn away if they don't feel your story is building to some climax or punch line.

The best punch lines speak to something universal that any reader can relate to, even if describing a ghost town. This is especially important for a scene setter. It is what gives a reader who cares little about salad or tortoises a reason to read about them.

How do you make readers care about a salad bar? As explained earlier in Pity, you need to make it speak to something larger, make it representative of a issue or idea that anyone can understand and relate to.

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As in all writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, you need good material to make a good story. This is true, even if you're writing a story of only 800 words. As the famous nonfiction writer Neil Sheehan once said, "It takes a lot of mash to make good whiskey."

In other words, you have to sift through a lot of dirt to find the few gems that will make a story sparkle. It's not unusual for a writer to fill a legal pad or two with notes, which include everything

from Internet research to hours of observation to interviews. Most of this material will never make it into the story. But that doesn't mean all this reporting was wasted. Rather, such work was essential to inform a writer about what was important about a event or place and how best to show that to readers.

Still, this is a hard lesson to learn.

Most first timers do little research. That's true whether it's their first time attending a game of Lacrosse or visiting a Starbucks. They show up once, stand in a back corner, interview no one and then leave after 15 minutes.

But think about it. How can such a method enable you to understand, let alone verify, what you've seen? It would be like observing a mosh pit at a concert of the Dead Kennedys from atop a skyscraper. You might mistake it for a riot.

Here's another common mistake: To want to use a favorite coffeehouse, tattoo parlor or sports arena as a scene setter. It's only natural to think you understand a place or event you're familiar with. In fact, the opposite is probably true.

Why? Because familiarity is often blinding. Without thinking about it, you've made lots of assumptions about your favorite coffee house. These assumptions are in turn bolstered by your friends. But if truth be told, most of your unconscious assumptions are not only untested. They are also probably untrue. In contrast, a writer tries to see things as they really are; not as how she — or her friends — would like them to be.

Consider this example. Say you are an English major who often studies at a campus Starbucks. Sitting next to you is a guy hunched over a laptop. Earbuds dangle from his ears as he bobs along to some song. Beside him stands a tall plastic cup filled with a milky coffee colored drink.

In short, he looks just like you and your friends. That drink he holds? Why, it must be a Cinnamon Ribbon Crunch Frappuccino such as your own. Which means that, like you, he's listening to Lady Gaga as he studies. In fact, if you were actually to talk to him, you'd discovery he's playing SimCity, drinking a skinny Chai Latte and listening to Beck.

It's easy to be all wrong about people.

Now let's look at how a professional would approach using a Starbucks as a scene setter.

First, a seasoned writer will go online and do some research, reading the company's homepage and some of its financial documents. This professional would be looking for things such as what drinks and pastries sell well; does Starbucks try to cater to or attract a certain demographic? Next this writer will search for any recent articles written about the company. And, if really diligent, she'll research the history of coffeehouses. What role have they played in American life through history?

The point of this prep work is twofold: First, a skilled writer doesn't want to rehash or repeat what's already been written. Nor does she want to belabor what is already well known. Her aim is to cast Starbucks in a new light, to show readers the true role it plays in America today.

To do that she needs an insightful theme, which represents the second goal of prep work. It sharpens a writer's power of observation, enabling her to better understand what she's seeing — or what she's not — and its significance. In other words, she is armed to shatter conventional wisdom.

Let's say our writer learned through her prep work that Starbucks designed its Frappuccinos to lure students, most of whom were raised on cookies and ice cream. Now she's equipped to discover through observation whether Starbucks' strategy is working.

To test her working theme, she goes to a suburban Starbucks on a Saturday afternoon. There, she finds it packed but not with students gouging themselves on $5 sugary drinks. Rather, she finds gray-haired men buying a $2 cup of the daily coffee blend and then gathering around a table, where they sit and chat for hours. She wonders if these men just consider these cheap coffees the price of entry to a common grazing ground. That might mean Starbucks' success isn't based on its officially stated strategy but on something altogether different.

Wondering is not enough. A writer has to find out for sure. So the writer sits down with this group of men and begins questioning them: Why the $2 coffees and not the fancy sugary drinks; do they come here everyday; is this part of some daily ritual?

Her questioning reveals that her initial observation is misleading. The men tell her they don't necessarily want to be at Starbucks. They'd much rather be home, watching the Mets lose on television. But their wives insisted they get out. In short, they face a vexing choice: Either accompany their wives shopping or be dumped off at a Starbucks. From these men's point of view, they've chosen the lesser of two evils.

In observing this Starbucks, our writer fills her notebook with details that anchor the moment in time and place. She notes what time the men are there. Are there 4 customers or 25? How many of those there are like the men she has interviewed?

She also takes note of details that place this Starbucks in the country's social fabric. Does it sit along on a busy four lane suburban road or within a city block of retrofitted brick factories; within a strip mall with a pawn shop and a generic pizzeria or in one with an Anne Taylor outlet and a sushi restaurant?

A diligent writer will visit this Starbucks several times. She wants to verify whether these men really are here everyday as they assured her. Next, she'll check out a couple of other Starbucks. She's exploring whether the men she interviewed are outliers or representative of Starbucks' clientele overall.

In doing all of the above, this writer now has all the mash she needs to distill a potent story.

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As we did with the reporting, let's look first at what not to do in writing a scene setter. The most common mistake beginners make is this: They write a scene setter as if painting a still life rather than a living picture etched in the reader's imagination. Remember, if there is no drama, then there is no story. That's true from the first word of the story to the last.

Consider the example below. It is the first draft of an opening written by one of my students.

"Laura cannot find a seat so she leans on the nearest door of the train. She doesn't feel comfortable and can't wait to reach her stop. What makes her ride even worse is some guy is leaning against her listening to loud music. No wonder Laura hates her commute."

First off, this opening is as thrilling as a wet mop. Nothing interesting occurs. It's a blow by blow account of routine behavior.

Secondly, it commits the ultimate sin of writing well. It tells, not shows the reader what's going on. The people in this scene are faceless and indistinct. It's as if the writer viewed them from the back of the train car. There's no meaningful detail that distinguishes one character from another, reveals personality or portends drama.

Thirdly, this opening is anchored in neither time nor place. The main character could be any person, on any train, at any time, at any place. It paints no concrete picture in the reader's imagination.

In fact, this scene was very much rooted in time and place. The main character is named Laura Askew. She's a college student who boarded the 6:30 a.m. Long Island Railroad at the Hicksville station, which is about a hour east of New York City. Laura is beginning an hourlong commute father east to Stony Brook University. But how would a reader know any of these meaningful details from reading this opening scene?

In short, this opening was written by a Master of the Tao of Writing Poorly. She's given a stranger no reason to care either about Laura or why she is on that train.

I sent this student back to her notebook, and asked her to pose this question to herself: What does depicting a rush hour ride on the LIRR have to offer a reader in Peoria; how could she use it to not only say something larger but do so dramatically?

Luckily, this student had done her reporting well. She had interviewed not only Laura and several of the people around her. She had observed and recorded several other scenes on the train. Her notebook was filled with rich and meaningful detail. She had set herself up for success, with several possible scenes from which to choose as an opening.

Better yet, all this reporting had given her a thorough understanding of what she'd witnessed. In rereading her notes, it didn't take her long to discovered a compelling theme. A morning rush hour commute on the LIRR captures the ever deteriorating state of our country's mass transit systems and the rising misery of those who must use them. Doesn't that sound both meaningful and dramatic?

Her next challenge was to figure out how to dramatically represent this theme in an opening paragraph. How could she show — not tell — a stranger just how bad it was to ride the LIRR.

Here's how this student rewrote the opening of her scene setter:

"Laura Askew found herself standing back pressed against the doors of the 6:30 a.m. Long Island Railroad train as it left Hicksville. In her left hand, she tried not to spill a paper cup brimming with Dunkin Donut coffee as the train rattled 30 miles east toward Stony Brook University.

"Crammed against her shoulder stood a young man in a black tee shirt and pink Mohawk, who listened to a neon green iPod Touch as if it were an old transistor radio. "I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me," Beck begged from the iPod.

"Laura seriously considered Beck's suggestion when a conductor passed through the cramped compartment, ignoring the blaring iPod – even though a sign overhead banned loud music on the train."

See how this second draft differs from the first? For starters, it is anchored in time and place. We now know exactly when and where the scene is unfolding. It no longer floats in a fog of imprecision.

Secondly, it features real people doing real things in real time. And the reader sees a memorable scene: a boy in black tee shirt and pink Mohawk; a train rattling hard enough to spill coffee. And this student captured some dramatic tension in showing Laura tormented by that blaring iPod.

In short, this scene setter offers the elements necessary to hold any reader's attention: a dramatic theme depicted in meaningful detail.

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In pitching a scene setter, give readers slice of modern life and show what it represents. Let's take a look at a fine example done by my former student, Jessica. She used the campus Starbucks to illustrate how Generation Z eats differently than her parents and why that matters. Her story was simple enough. It showed students lining up to order whip-cream topped Frappuccinos and sugary muffins at 11 in the morning. Then she matched the students eating behavior to numbers that showed such sugary, high calorie breakfasts have triggered an explosion in cases of diabetes, hypertension and heart disease among her fellow students . Here's how Jessica pitched her story:

"If you want to see what breakfast looks like today to many college students visit a campus Starbucks at 11 in the morning. There, you will see students not dining on the "Cream of Wheat" or oatmeal of their parents' generation. Rather, students are ordering whip-creamed topped Frappuccinos, which contain more than 2,000 calories. Such a change in dining habits is showing up in the national health statistics. Today, 35 percent of college students are overweight or obese, which is triggering an explosion in everything from diabetes to hypertension among the members of Generation Z."

Debate Stories

Outdoor cats: earthy cousins of their housebound brethren or mass killers? Some experts worry that the country's 50 million feral cats are decimating what's left of the wildlife in backyards across America, wiping out everything from rabbits to rare songbirds. Others say such worries are unfounded. The numbers of wild cats, they contend, can be easily controlled through a program of catch and release sterilization.

Never has this debate been more important. There's a growing body of evidence that the earth is undergoing its sixth mass extinction, with an ever rising number of species dying off in the past decade alone. What role, if any, are feral cats, playing in this die off of American wildlife?

It turns out that's no easy question to answer. Each side in this debate can marshal legitimate facts and figures to make a strong argument. Yet neither has definitive, overwhelming proof that they are right and their opponents wrong. No wonder such debates tend to leave most people bewildered.

But that needn't be so. Not if serious nonfiction writers step up. Indeed, sorting through such complex debates are the bread and butter of modern nonfiction writing. That's true whether the debate is about withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan, shuttering schools in the face of an epidemic or eating a diet free of carbohydrates.

Skilled nonfiction writers sift through and assess the contradictory claims and evidence of heated debates. It's an exercise that often requires translating technical and scientific jargon into everyday

English. Nonfiction writers also put debates into context. Is an issue new, is it perennial or has it been debated across history, with every generation settling on a different resolution?

Sophisticated nonfiction delineates what's fact and what's supposed; what's knowable and what's not. It exposes what's mis — even dis — information; what's self-serving myth from what's verifiably real.

Most debates turn on a discussion about trade offs. Take the recent debate about whether and how the federal government should financially assist the millions of workers who found themselves suddenly unemployed because of the coronavirus. Should the U.S. Treasury emphasize speed or accuracy in distributing aid? It could speed funds out the door, but in doing so would probably make lots of mistakes. Some would be paid twice while others would get nothing at all. Or it could favor accuracy, which would keep mistakes to a minimum but delay aid to people struggling to feed themselves and pay rent. In short, there is no clear, or even right, solution to this dilemma. Just a series of difficult tradeoffs.

In covering such debates, a writer's goal isn't to tell an audience what to think. Rather, it's to help people think through the choices. Then, if nonfiction writers have done their jobs well, an audience can make up its own mind. Everyone doesn't have to agree.

This section explains how to effectively execute a successful debate story, from pitch to published story. This includes identifying good sources, framing an issue properly and writing in a way that engages readers. The best debate stories, as with all writing, illuminate. They challenge an audience to see a debate in a new, more edifying light.

That is no small feat. Never has been. Four hundred years ago, Englishman Jonathan Swift, author of "Gulliver's Travels," summed up the challenge like this: "Falsehood flies, truth comes limping after it." Nonfiction writers do their best to hurry the truth along its way.

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At its heart, a debate story is about a heated struggle involving something of consequence. "Heated" and "consequence." Take these two words to heart. Use them as a guide in choosing a debate to write about. Both of these elements must be present in an effective debate story.

First, let's take a look at "heated." It represents the drama necessary in any successful story. There's little challenge in finding something people are all worked up about. Think of someone dissing your favorite YouTube celeb or the half frozen lettuce in university cafeterias. But are these dust ups of any consequence? I'd argue not. DewDiePie's fans can simply tune out his critics; university students can switch from salad to cooked spinach to get their greens. And, of course, most people couldn't care less about either issue.

Here some problems real people do care about: Rising seas swamping homes; Onerous debt preventing university graduates from buying their first cars. Or feral cats wiping out the last of our songbirds.

Each of these issues also has reach. Many people are touched by them, giving writers a potentially wide and diverse audience. Take rising undergraduate indebtedness, for example. As of 2020, some 70 percent of college seniors graduate with some debt. That's a big audience, which includes not only these students; it also includes their extended families and the sellers of homes and cars.

The thornier the problem the better the debate story. What I mean by thorny is this: Simple answers or solutions are elusive. Which means those affected are wrestling with the best way to tackle rising seas or student debt. The more the struggle over what to do, the greater the dramatic tension. Which, as you learned earlier, is the secret sauce of all good storytelling.

Let's take the debate about how best to battle climate change. Sharp differences have emerged nationwide, exemplified by the contrasting approaches taken by The Midwest and Greater Miami. In the Midwest, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is prodding homeowners to abandon low lying areas along big rivers such as the Mississippi. In contrast, Greater Miami officials are spending billions to raise streets and sewers above rising waters. Whose approach is right, Miami or the Army Corps? Too soon to tell. But that doesn't mean writers can't use the facts now at hand to examine and assess each approach.

A word of caution. Be wary of debates in which no side seems able to marshal compelling facts to verify its arguments. You might be surprised just how many heated debates are so fact-free. Effective writers press their sources: How do you know this; show me the evidence?

Indeed, a major task in writing a debate story is to separate and clarify what people feel from what they actually know. There is often a big difference between the two. Take, for example, the debate over whether college is worth its high price. Many, if not most, public university students tell me that they feel college is a "necessary evil" and not worth its cost.

In fact, all the best research shows otherwise. An undergraduate degree adds, on average, $500,000 to a person's lifetime earnings. College graduates earn more than twice the average wage of those with just high school diplomas. They also suffer much lower unemployment rates. A half a million dollar return on a $30,000 investment looks like a smart move indeed.

Why, then, this gap between perception and reality? Research shows that undergrads perceive college as a cost rather than an investment. And that cost has indeed been rising over the past 30 years, although recently it has plateaued. So it's not surprising that students focus on the real time pain of borrowing rather than on any future financial returns from earning a degree. Universities also do a poor job in explaining the long term benefits of a degree.

I learned all this from an excellent debate story that one of my students wrote. It examined whether college was worth its high price. Her story was later published. And for good reason. It exhibited nonfiction writing at its best, upending conventional wisdom and driving understanding deeper.

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As with any story, one about a debate begins with comprehensive and sophisticated reporting. Your task is to explore a debate, serving as independent guide through a thicket of contradictory and confusing facts and claims.

In this journey, your opinion, I'm afraid, doesn't count. Nor does your past experience, except as a guide to asking probing questions. That means, for example, no hateful or leading questions to banks if you are struggling with student loans; but you can ask tough questions about why a bank lent money to a student who didn't have the income to handle a loan. See the difference? The first is prejudicial, the second impartial.

The best debate stories rise above the simple back and forth among arguing factions. That's all heat and no light, to paraphrase the cliche. Just because someone is highly quotable doesn't mean he or she is speaking from facts or are telling the truth. Quotes are not facts. Let me say that again. Quotes are not facts. It's your job as the writer to see if the facts support what someone says.

Indeed, a sophisticated writer parses not just quotes but every argument with the available evidence. What's known and what's supposed; what do the facts support and what isn't factually supported. And what is, at present, unknowable. That can be as important as what's known.

This reportorial journey begins with hearing out every side in a debate — and there is often more than two. Search out all positions, not just those represented by the loudest advocates. Often the quietest voices speak from fact and are the most credible.

There's no better example of this than the 2020 outbreak of the coronavirus. At first, the person with the loudest voice and the biggest platform was President Trump. He repeatedly dismissed the rising threat of the virus, saying at one point, "One day it's like a miracle, it will disappear."

Given that he had the biggest megaphone as president, Trump initially drowned out the voices of scientists and historians who knew better. They cautioned that scientific evidence and the historical record showed the coronavirus was indeed a serious threat. Time has shown us who was right. Take to heart this cautionary tale. The loudest voice is often not the most knowledgeable nor the wisest.

That said, this doesn't mean you can be dismissive of any point of view. Your first job in reporting out a debate is to listen carefully and deeply to every side. Stand in an advocate's shoes and see the world through his eyes. This is true no matter how offensive some arguments, such as those by white supremacists or misogynists. How can you effectively refute such points of view without first understanding the falsehoods and misunderstandings that support them? That includes the economic, religious or emotional needs that often underpin fear and loathing. Skilled writers will even repeat back offensive speech or ideas, just to be sure they have heard it right.

Listening equally to all sides doesn't mean all sides deserve equal treatment in your story. That's called false equivalency. Instead, a story should emphasize two threads: Those arguments supported by the most credible facts and those arguments spreading the worst misconceptions or most damaging falsehoods. Remember, your task is to assess the arguments and guide the audience to the voices and information it should most heed. It's not about giving every side equal say.

In writing a debate story, writers typically discover that all sides are deploying at least some unsubstantiated assumptions, or urban myths. Examples abound but let's take two popular ones. The first, touted by fitness instructors and health gurus alike, is that your body needs eight cups of water a day to stay healthy. Experts trace this urban myth to a study done decades ago that showed that, on average, people drank eight cups of water daily. It didn't say people need this much. In truth, it remains a scientific mystery how much water the body actually needs day to day.

The second urban myth is that undocumented immigrants commit most of the violent crime in America. That is easily refuted by all the best publicly released data, including that by the U.S. Justice Dept. It shows that, sadly, we Americans overwhelmingly commit most of the violent crime in this country, whether it be domestic abuse or gang related murders. In contrast, undocumented immigrants, fearing deportation, are exceptionally law abiding.

The errors above are innocent ones, committed unknowingly. But in heated debates some advocates will knowingly twist facts or serve up ones they know to be false. Or they will put forward opinions supported by no facts at all.

Again, let's take student debt as an example. It's true that, as of 2020, average debt per student has risen to about $33,000. Does that mean most graduates today face default or financial ruin? The publicly known facts show that this is not so. What advocates for free tuition don't mention is that defaults are concentrated in those students who never complete degrees or attended for profit colleges such as Devry University. But those who do earn the degree, by and large, successfully pay back their loans and prosper. In short, the debate about student debt is complicated and that's what a good debate story illustrates.

So, keep an eye out for misrepresentations and half truths, whether intentional or not. Don't be duped or become anyone's patsy. Remember, your allegiance is not to any one side in a debate but to the audience, who is counting on you to sift fact from fiction. Emphasize those statements and arguments that you can find facts to support.

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In my many years of teaching, I've found that students and professionals alike struggle most with how to pitch a debate story. So let's take a detailed look at how to do it effectively.

A debate story pitch follows the same basic rules of all pitches: a terse yet compelling opening sentence that encapsulates the idea of the story; a sample of strong evidence that shows a story is real and an explanation of why a debate is important and important right now.

What's different is that a debate pitch must sum up a dramatic struggle over an issue or idea. One side says this, but another side says that. And still another disagrees with both. You don't need to provide an answer; just dramatic, fact driven summary of the most important sides of a debate. Let's examine a sample. Here is the pitch my student wrote about wild cats:

"Feral cats may look just as cute as their housebound cousins, but don't be fooled. These skilled hunters are decimating everything from mice to songbirds, triggering a heated debate about whether they are contributing to the planet's ongoing sixth mass extinction. Some argue that the country's rapidly reproducing feral cats, now 50 million strong, need to be culled themselves to save the ever dwindling wildlife in America's backyards. But others call such measures inhumane, arguing that a program of catch and release sterilization will effectively reduce the number of feral cats. All sides agree, though, that something needs to be done now. Otherwise America's backyards will become as quiet and lifeless as a mall parking lot on an early Sunday morning."

Notice how the opening line is short and dramatic, yet teases at the idea of the story. Then the pitch offers some big facts: 50 million wild cats and an ongoing sixth mass extinction. Next it jumps right into the debate. And it's very clear what that debate is: How should we control the destructive rise of wild cats? No one solution is offered. Rather, my student succinctly sums up the two big arguments of the debate. She also makes clear what's at stake and why we should care. Failure to control feral cats

will mean the possible extinction of everything from rodents to songbirds, all of which support many other creatures.

Let this pitch be your model. When you write your own debate pitch, ask yourself: How close am I getting to the one above; does my pitch sound like this and does it have all the same elements? If you follow my student's model you won't go wrong.

CHAPTER 12

THE INFORMED ESSAY

I have long forgotten both the names and faces of all my high school teachers, except for one. To this day, I can see my senior year English teacher standing atop his desk at the head of the classroom. Wagging a finger and foaming at the mouth, he scolded us for not following his rigid, detailed instructions in how to write an essay. All we heard, of course, was "blah blah blah." Still, this performance made a lasting impression. It taught me everything *not* to do in trying to sway a skeptical audience. Thank you, Mr. Gullet.

An effective informed essay neither lectures, scolds nor harangues. Nor does it rant or express feelings that defy facts. Save such writing for your social media feeds, where it will be much appreciated.

What, then, is an informed essay? Here's my definition: An informed essay marshals independently verifiable facts to tell a meaningful story. The best ring with a strong, independent point of view, which is not used as a stick to beat the reader about the head and shoulders. No, in an effective informed essay, the point of view rises up off the words like a penetrating mist, seeping undetected into readers' consciousness. Readers experience the meaning, or truth, of the essay as self-evident.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Like all good writing, effective essays are an illusion. Skillful writers lead readers down the path they want them to travel, let them see only the sights they want them to see.

Informed essays represent much, if not most, of the writing done today. They can be about everything from a reappraisal of Afro-American history to the rise of the coronavirus to changing tastes in footwear. You'll find them in newspapers as columns, commentary, and op-eds. They also constitute much of what's written in publications such as The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Medium and Substack.

Such essays are not necessarily written by so-called professional writers. Many, if not most, of them are written by a rich variety of people from all walks of life. Think of a nurse marshaling facts to show why her colleagues should get vaccinated; a U.S. diplomat explaining why the West should keep Russia out of Ukraine, or a student showing the crushing burden of the rising cost of attending university.

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Don't confuse informed essays with their evil twin, the term paper, the writers of which suffer from a condition I call term paper-itis. It is a disease that kills all that is fresh and interesting in writing.

Anyone who has attended high school or college knows the tell-tale symptoms of term paper-itis. It begins with an urge to open an essay with a summary list of facts about a subject. Then sufferers

proceed to list or regurgitate those facts in the body of the essay. They end with a conclusion that reiterates the opening summary.

In style, the sufferers of term paper-itis love to open paragraphs with such dead and unnecessary words as "Therefore, Hence" and "Nonetheless." They also favor the passive voice, which they believe conveys a sense of impartiality. The use of the passive voice then breeds a fondness for wooden language, including such boring verbs as "was, become" and "have." It also excels at bloating a sentence with unnecessary words. In short, they are skilled practitioners of the "Tao of Writing Poorly."

If this all sounds familiar, it should. The passive voice was examined at length in the chapter "The Art of Brevity," which cautioned against it. Remember the difference between "Dick was seen by Jane," and "Dick sees Jane?" Sufferers of term paper-itis favor the first sentence over the latter.

Let's examine a typical case of term paper-itis. See below an opening paragraph from one of my students:

"Car crashes have drastically increased since 2021. Also, nationwide deaths have gone up the highest since 2006. According to the DMV, there were an estimated 256,115 crashes. Self-driving cars might help to reduce accidents."

While such an opening would make my former English teacher proud, I dare others to get through this paragraph before their heads hit their desks. It exemplifies all the symptoms of term paper-itis. Let's identify each one.

For starters, this opening paragraph lists facts, rather than using them to tell a story. Nor does each sentence build logically atop the one that came before, creating a sense of journey that pulls the reader along. There's not an interesting, active verb in the paragraph, with the writer leaning hard on the dull, inactive verb "to have."

The paragraph also lacks one big idea that holds all these facts together, giving them meaning. Instead, each sentence starts a new idea, and then drops it to move on to another one. Will this essay be about the rising number of car accidents, or about accident death rates or self-driving cars? Damned if I know. And I doubt the writer knows, either.

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A well done, informed essay does none of the above. It opens in an interesting place that represents a theme or point of view. Facts are used to tell a captivating, meaningful story, whether it be about the rise of the coronavirus or the fall of the Roman Empire. The essay moves from big moment to big moment, not fact by fact. It doesn't end in a closing summation, but instead comes full circle, ending on the opening theme or point of view.

In constructing essays, writers employ all the techniques discuss in this thin volume. Sentences are clear, interesting, and well-constructed. They use verbs that convey action or paint a picture. Sentences build one atop another to form well constructed paragraphs that represent one clear idea. There are few sentences in the passive voice that read like "Dick was seen by Jane."

Informed essays are intellectually rigorous. They anticipate opposing arguments and dismantle them with facts. An essay taking on anti-vaxxers, for example, will show readers the difference in death rates between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated. Another challenging those who question the

value of a college education will marshal the figures to show graduates earn more than twice as much as those with just high school diplomas.

Informed essays are also intellectually honest. They accept that the world is a complex place with few perfect solutions. Writers explore the trade-offs required in solving any problem. New or improved roads, for example, will make travel less taxing on cars, but they will also attract ever more traffic, slowing down any commute. Mandatory vaccines will reduce the spread of a dangerous disease, but they will also prompt some nurses and doctors to resign, reducing the quality of care to those who are hospitalized.

And informed essays are humble. They concede what is uncertain or unknowable. Consider, for example, an essay in The Economist, a weekly British news publication, about rising meth abuse in Thailand. It shows that the only figures documenting the rise in drug arrests are from the government, but adds that these figures are unreliable, given that the police are rewarded for arresting lots of people. In an essay in The Atlantic, a scientist shows that tornadoes in the South and Midwest are growing ever stronger, but he concedes the evidence linking this change to global warming remains, at best, tentative.

Why do writers admit trade-offs, caveats and weaknesses? Because it strengthens the persuasive power of an essay. It signals that writers not only thoroughly understand a subject, but that they also have no hidden agenda. Such writers are not trying to manipulate their readers. In short, they can be trusted. There can be no persuasion without trust.

Again, this is nothing but a skillfully constructed illusion. Writers of effective informed essays are using well-worn techniques to guide their readers' perceptions.

Now, let's take a closer look at these concepts in action through the work of one of my students. Ted wanted to write about rising inflation. I asked him to find an example or symbol that best illustrated the problem. The more dramatic, the better. He found a wonderful example in floundering Venezuela, where a cruel dictatorship had driven the economy down and inflation up.

Alas, in writing his first draft, poor Ted came down with a serious case of term paper-itis. The symptoms manifested themselves in the essay's opening paragraph:

"Inflation in Venezuela has become very high. It has risen more than 1,700 percent in the past five years. Most Venezuelans can no longer afford to live there. Therefore, many of them are leaving for the United States."

See how Ted is listing the big facts of his story and doing so in the passive voice? His language neither conveys action nor paints a vivid picture of what inflation looks like in Venezuela. Worse of all, it's boring.

Luckily, the class came to Ted's rescue. They gave him an incisive critique that dispelled his term paper-itis. The second draft of Ted's opening read like this:

"For groggy Venezuelans, affording a cup of coffee has become a grind. Five years ago, a cup cost the equivalent of 15 cents. Today, that price has jumped to $1.15 – a 1,700 percent increase. No wonder many Venezuelans have forsaken coffee for boiled water."

This new opening engages readers from the first sentence. It shows, rather than tells, what inflation looks like in Venezuela. Readers can see how it has impoverished the country's citizens. Gone, too, are the dull, passive sentences with wooden language. The most dramatic fact, a 1,700 price increase, is not buried in the middle of a sentence, but placed at the end for dramatic impact. Ted's sentences end on strong words such as "grind." And he uses strong verbs such as "forsaken" and "jumped."

The body of the essay resists the listing of facts. Rather, it uses them to tell a story about how hyperinflation has made life in Venezuela unbearable. That story moves from big moment to big moment, each one building on the one that came before. Here is how it unfolds: First, Ted shows us what triggered inflation; next he shows us what inflation looks like. Then he portrays how inflation has hurt Venezuelans. Finally, Ted shows how they are coping. The story ends where it opened: With the prediction that coffee may cost $2.50 a cup by the time you read his story.

I can well imagine that Ted's essay would make Mr. Gullet foam at the mouth. But rest assured that, if you write like Ted, other readers will applaud you. Better yet, they will read what you have written.

CHAPTER 13

THE CHEAP GOURMET

"Hey, man, can I write about myself?"

Such a request often marks the opening of my college nonfiction writing courses. Here's my universal response: "You can try." Which then prompts this puzzled response from my students, "Is that a yes or a no?" To which I reply, "It's neither."

At this point, students give up trying to get a straight answer out of me and forge ahead with writing about themselves. Hey, my students tell me, it'll be easy. Who knows more about me than I do? My students soon make a disquieting discovery: Just how little they indeed do know about themselves.

One of today's reigning pop psychology tropes is that everybody has an interesting story to tell, and everybody should have the right to tell it. You may have the right to tell your story, but that doesn't mean anyone will listen to it. Sure, friends and family may feign interest, if only in exchange for you listening to their stories. But strangers don't have to abide by this pact. They quickly give writers the cold shoulder of indifference if what they write rings false or is uninteresting.

In truth, writing about yourself or writing as a first-person observer is among the hardest — if not the hardest — technique to pull off in narrative nonfiction. It requires a level of observation and self-awareness that few can muster. How many of us understand why we do what we do? Either we are unaware, or are unwilling, to acknowledge the hidden conditioning and impulses that drive our actions. Why must I begin every day with a cup of hot tea and two newspapers? Is it out of a love for current events, or am I just blindly mimicking my parent's behavior. Damned if I know.

It's also a sad truth that the less we know, the more we think we know — and want to showcase our ignorance to the world. Conversely, the greater our knowledge, the more we realize how little we actually do know, or will ever know. That insight breeds a humility important to writing about yourself. Effective first-person narrators cop to stupidity, frailty, and cowardice. In short, they show vulnerability, which makes them recognizably human and thus an interesting and compelling character to follow. But how many of us are willing to stand naked before friends and family, let alone strangers?

While difficult, writing about yourself can be a powerful technique. It creates an aura of authenticity and credibility when done right. That's what a Bordeaux nobleman named Michel de Montaigne discovered 500 years ago, when he became the first in the West to use himself as a crucible to examine what it means to live and die well.

Many have since followed in his footsteps, including such diverse figures as Mark Twain, James Baldwin, Ernest Hemingway and Anais Nin, the most famous diarist you have never heard of. Nin invented the modern confessional style of writing, laying bare her infidelities and struggles with sex. And she did it a hundred years before our modern celebs started imitating her style on Twitter,

Instagram, and Facebook. And, of course, there is Joan Didion, who brought the technique to modern narrative nonfiction in the 1960s.

While each of these writers was as different from one another as Mozart is from the rapper Biggie Smalls, they all drew on a common bag of writerly tricks. First and foremost, these writers trained themselves to be keen observers, of both their inner lives and others. They learned how to be well-informed and insightful, never settling for the conventional or the cliché. Each was willing to be brutally honest about themselves, and thus vulnerable. In short, writing in the first person narrative draws on all the key techniques discussed in this book, from show not tell to the use of meaningful detail to the artful tease.

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The most effective writing in the first person does one of two things — or both at the same time. It either makes us laugh at how foolish we mortals be, to paraphrase Shakespeare's character Puck. Or, it makes us squirm at the recognition of our cluelessness or frailty.

Think Margaret Cho, who writes comic monologues that probe her Korean parent's naive prejudice against gays; or David Sedaris, who agonizes over such petty decisions as which pair of white socks to buy. Or, James Baldwin, who felt more comfortable as a Black man in Paris than in his native New York.

All three of these writers use themselves as foils to expose hard truths we may find difficult to hear. That parents are flawed, that even the smartest, most talented people are frail and that your country may be unlovable. These are not easy nor popular things to say. Few people have the courage to do so. But these writers did and it made their work memorable, the gold standard of writing well.

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Although limited only by a writer's imagination, writing in the first-person narrative voice usually takes two forms. The first is to serve as the reader's guide, using all of your senses, to explore something or someplace in the outside world. Think Mark Twain traveling down the Mississippi River in the 1840s or Malcolm X showing us what it was like to grow up poor and Black in Boston during the 1940s.

The second form is to examine your own thoughts, experiences and feelings. Such inner exploration began in the Renaissance with Michel de Montaigne, a minor French nobleman from the Bordeaux region. He wrote a brutally frank collection of essays exploring why he felt and did things that has been copied by an ever widening group of writers through the centuries.

Today those writers include Carmen Maria Machado, who recounts the emotional pain of queer abuse. And then there's Amy Tan, who discusses what it felt like to grow up as a Chinese American in San Francisco.

Machado and Tan, like many writers before them, began their work by keeping a detailed personal diary. They didn't just chronicle their victories or petty daily concerns, such as whom they had a secret crush on or who pissed them off. Rather, these writers used their diaries to confide fears, insecurities, evil intentions, prejudices, and failings.

Such material is the fodder that enables a frank self-examination. It empowers you to stand outside of yourself, seeing yourself as a stranger would. This ability is key to writing effectively in the first person. It is also difficult as hell. So, if you want to write effectively about yourself, I would recommend keeping a detailed and frank diary.

Now, let's take a close look at each of these two modes of writing in the first-person narrative, starting first with you serving as the reader's guide to something in the outside world.

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In the 1980s, a longtime art and entertainment writer in Buffalo, NY wanted to use food to explore the rich racial and ethnic diversity of his hometown. But how to do it in a fresh way that would engage readers? He came up with a wonderfully inventive literary device, dubbing himself The Cheap Gourmet and his wife Mrs. Clean Plate. Disguised as these avatars, the two set off to find and write about the best cheap dining, never paying more than $5 for a meal. The two sampled everything from pierogis, to chicken wings to chili dogs. To this day, their adventures offer wonderful lessons in how to use all the key lessons of this book to write effectively in the first person narrative.

First and foremost, The Cheap Gourmet shows us how a first person narrator can use something small to tell a larger story. Consider his visit to a Polish deli. As he munches on a spicy kielbasa, he observes that he is the only one inside this restaurant. Has it always been so empty, he asks the 70-year-old owner?

"Thirty years ago it was standing room only!" the owner proclaims.

To which The Cheap Gourmet replied, "What happened?"

The owner nods toward the abandoned steel mill across the street. At one time, he tells the Cheap Gourmet, the mill employed 20,000 workers, many of whom were Polish immigrants who barely spoke English. Now those workers are retired and their children dine on Big Macs and Kentucky Fried Chicken at the mall in the suburbs.

"Why don't you sell the deli and retire?" asks The Cheap Gourmet.

"I tried," replies the owner, "but nobody wanted to buy me out."

See how The Cheap Gourmet questions the deli owner to tease out a larger story. He uses the deli as a literary device through which to show Buffalo's transformation in the 1980s. The deli becomes the protagonist in a story about decline and transformation. As manufacturing fades in Buffalo, its immigrant population assimilates into American society.

The Cheap Gourmet serves as a keen observer. He makes each of the places he visits come alive through meaningful detail. Take his visit to a wing shack, a cubbyhole of a restaurant that sells chicken wings. He tells us how his nose stings with the smell of freshly diced red pepper. His gaze notices two black and white portraits, one of Robert Kennedy and the other of Martin Luther King Jr., that hang on the wall behind the cash register. Each is draped in crepe paper. Such detail efficiently portrays the political sensibilities of the owner of this wing shack.

Nothing of significance escapes the roving eye of The Cheap Gourmet. He also notices that, while the wing shack sits in the heart of Buffalo's Black commercial district, most of its customers are white college students. They are ordering the fare of poor Blacks in the Mississippi Delta: chicken wings,

collard greens and biscuits. Do the students realize this? The Cheap Gourmet asks. “Whatever,” the students answer. “It just tastes good.”

The Cheap Gourmet uses himself and Mrs. Clean Plate to keep the dramatic tension taut in every column. He does so by casting each of them as different and clashing characters. Their tastes and sensibilities are as different as a chili dog is from caviar. The Cheap Gourmet is willing to try anything, no matter how much it might roil his delicate stomach. He’s happy to take one bite of something and throw the rest away.

What a shameful waste!, scolds Mrs. Clean Plate, who can’t stand the idea of throwing out food. She will only sample what she knows she will enjoy and finish. Which tends toward the safe and conventional, such as hot dogs with mustard and hamburgers with French fries. So picky and unadventurous, The Cheap Gourmet chides his wife. Live a little, take chances once in a while. And so, the two bicker in column after column.

We, the readers, gleefully wonder what the two of them will fight over next week.

In writing about yourself, make your readers wonder, too. How can you turn yourself and those around you into interesting characters a reader will want to follow; how can you develop an interesting and informative narrative voice? In this pursuit, The Cheap Gourmet is wise in more than how to find a killer chili dog for under five bucks.

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Now, let’s examine the second form of first person narrative writing: Using your own experiences and feelings as story material. This may be the toughest form of writing. Why? Because it’s tough to admit that your brutish behavior drove away your girlfriend or that you deserved to be suspended for cheating on a midterm. Yet, these are the type of honest confessions and self explorations that make writing about yourself compelling.

Let’s consider a self-explanatory journey written by one of my best students. Her name was Brenda, and she was among the tens of millions of Americans who were reluctant, even fearful, to get vaccinated against the coronavirus. I suggested that Brenda’s fear represented a great idea for a story. She could use herself as a crucible to explore the fears of the many; to examine whether those fears were based in fact or driven by something else.

In writing about herself, Brenda’s primary challenge was to separate what she felt from what she knew. Often they are two very different things. The process begins by placing yourself and what you feel within a larger context. None of us live in isolation, even if we are holed up in a cave in Tora Bora. Just ask the late Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of 9/11 who tried to hide out in this mountainous region in Afghanistan.

So, Brenda’s essay began by exploring the history of vaccines. What she soon discovered was that her fear had a long tradition. Since first introduced to the West in the late 18th Century, vaccines have faced stiff resistance. Yet, that resistance has done little to slow down the adoption of vaccines, which have saved far more people than they have harmed.

These facts, Brenda admitted in her essay, did little to assuage her fear. She pushed on with her exploration. Her research showed that facts mattered little to people who distrust science, learning, experts, or government. That was especially true of people who felt science contradicted what their

religious or political beliefs had taught them. Could she be one of these people? Brenda had been raised as a Christian Scientist, a religion that forsakes all medical treatment. Christian Scientists believe that only a Christian god, and that god alone, can heal you.

While no longer a practicing Christian Scientist, Brenda still instinctually felt that vaccines represented a violation, even a poisoning, of the pure body her Christian god had given her. She feared that her body would be forever changed if vaccinated.

Yet, Brenda conceded, this feeling conflicted with what she had learned. As a biology major, she knew that she inhaled millions of microbes with every breath she took. Some of them, such as the flu and cold viruses, were indeed harmful. But most microbes were harmless — even essential — to the functioning of her body. Brenda revealed that she had once joked to her professor that the human body was a microbial bed and breakfast. We contain far more alien cells than human ones.

Now, Brenda wrote, her research had eased her fear of vaccines. But she still resented them. She was the kind of person who bristled at being told what to do or think. Yet, Brenda conceded, she always buckled her seatbelt, as required by law. And, obeying laws governing public decency, she had never walked into the supermarket wearing a dirty pair of underwear on her head. Why then didn't she object to seat belts and public decency laws if she were so concerned with freedom of expression?

Brenda's intellectual journey held her classmates at the edge of their seats. They never knew whether Brenda would allow herself to be vaccinated. In the end, she did talk herself into it, bridging the gap between what she felt and what she knew. But Brenda did so with gritted teeth and with her conscience grumbling in protest. Such are the honest explorations that make for effective first-person narratives.

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Brenda's journey illustrates how few struggles have tidy endings. Victory often triggers unintended consequences; victors rarely emerge unscathed. Consider this story from Carolina, a senior in one of my writing seminars.

Carolina wrote about her quest to ace a grueling midterm in organic chemistry. For two weeks, she locked herself away in her dorm room, leaving only to attend class. Carolina lived on candy, chips, and soda as she studied relentlessly for the exam. Her effort paid off. She earned the highest grade in the class of 600 students. This victory capped Carolina's first draft of her story.

But I was not content. I asked her, "What did your victory cost you?" She thought deeply about this and finally answered, "My stomach." Her sugary, nutrition-free diet had triggered the onset of Crohn's disease, a painful inflammation of the bowel that tends to inflict young women. "Was your A worth it?" I asked her. "I don't know," she answered. To which I replied, "Write about that." And she did.

In her second draft, Carolina probed why she was willing to sacrifice her health for good grades. What she discovered was complex, and it reflected the experience of millions of other students attending public university.

Carolina was the first in her immigrant family to attend college. Everyone in her extended family, including relatives back in Columbia, was chipping in to help pay for her education. In return, Carolina's kin expected her to become a doctor and raise the entire family up the economic ladder.

How, then, could Carolina not sacrifice all, even her health, when her family was counting on her to raise their economic fortunes?

The stories of Carolina and Brenda all illustrate how life is messy, rich in ambiguity, forcing us to make painful trade-offs. You can't be afraid to portray such things in your writing about yourself. Leave them out, and your work won't ring true for readers. Worse, it will be boring.

CHAPTER 14

THE ARTFUL TEASE

The New Yorker magazine once ran a sprawling story about the improbable modern day quest for the monster squid of seafarer legend. Nowhere in the 10,000-word story will you find a news hook, nut or so-what graph. Why, then, you might ask, would anyone read such a monster of a story — other than the handful of scientists, explorers and crackpots pursing this legendary creature? The answer is storytelling. A good storyteller can make even 100 tons of barnacled mollusk sound interesting.

In this story, writer David Grann casts the squid as a character in a story. It plays an elusive giant who has taunted sailors and scientists alike for centuries. The squid may have been repeatedly glimpsed, leaving behind tantalizing clues such as pucker marks and even limbs, but it has never been captured. Now a New Zealand marine biologist takes up the quest anew to capture the beast. He becomes an Ahab and the squid his Moby Dick. Man and squid are pitted against one another in an epic quest.

Such are the techniques of storytelling. Storytelling, or narrative, isn't about scooping up as many facts as you can, as quickly as you can, and then listing them in a descending order of importance. In fact, the opposite is true. Only a few lucky facts, the most colorful and telling ones, are chosen for a story. They're arranged in a way that depicts a transformative journey.

Nor do storytellers front load stories with a hard sell on why readers should read their work and read it now. There isn't any billboarding, as in a news feature story. Rather, what draws the reader is the power of the tale itself.

How does a writer make a tale powerful? There are several ways. One is to make a story represent an issue larger than itself. The quest for the giant squid, for example, embodies man's unquenchable thirst to understand the world he inhabits.

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Another is to tease order out of chaos. Good storytelling finds a pattern in a seemingly random set of facts, giving meaning to what had been meaningless. That satisfies the deeply felt human need to feel that the world makes sense. Never mind that it probably makes about as much sense as a bird that continually flies into a plate glass window. It's the illusion of order that we crave — and smart writers learn how to provide it.

Indeed, the techniques of storytelling are creeping ever more into news media. It prevails most noticeably in the long magazine stories of the New Yorker, Vanity Fair and Esquire. It's also used widely in nonfiction books. And increasingly national papers such as the New York Times, the Washington Post and, especially the Wall Street Journal, are embracing storytelling.

Newspapers and news magazines are adopting storytelling for good reason. It's a way for them to distinguish themselves from 24-hour news outlets such as CNN, Google and OhMynews. Increasingly, online media — not newspapers, magazines nor television — are the arbiters of what's news. It was the tech news Web site Gizmodo, for example, that first reported Wal-Mart had pulled the plug on its much heralded movie download service in 2008. And online columnist Matt Drudge was the first to reveal President Clinton's indiscretion with his intern, Monica Lewinsky in the late 1990s.

Readers also are driving the renewed interest in storytelling. In 2007, Northwestern University's Readership Institute released a study that showed readers learned more from stories written, well, as stories.

No offense to Northwestern's readership scholars, but writers have known that for hundreds of years. There's really little new about using fictional techniques in nonfiction. Narrative expert Mark Kramer has traced the origins of the practice back to the rise of the novel as a genre in 1700s England. He credits British writer Daniel Defoe, who helped popularize the novel with his book Robinson Crusoe, as the first to employ fictional technique in his economic and political writing.

The practice continued in the mid-1800s with the rise of the penny press in New York City. Newspapers such as the Sun, Tribune and Herald routinely used verse or doggerel to depict, even mock, events or public figures. Take, for example, this rhyme, written in 1836 by James Gordon Bennett and published in his daily, the New York Herald. It describes a madam named Rosina Townsend, a key witness in a trial about the brutal murder of a prostitute:

"Rosina parts for all mankind,

were open, rare and unconfined,

like some free port of trade;

merchants unloaded here their freights,

and agents from each foreign state, here first their entry made."

Hardly the modern news voice of disinterest. In a sense, such poetic license dates back to our first news carriers, the town criers and troubadours. They wandered from town to town, entertaining villagers with verse depicting events, both past and present. Infotainment has long informed history and news.

The modern incarnation of nonfictional storytelling began with the advent of so-called "New Journalism" in the 1960s. Its practitioners included such writers as Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Robert Caro, Norman Mailer and Truman Capote.

The first of this group to attract popular attention was Capote. His 1965 depiction of the brutal murder of Kansas farm family the Clutters by two drifters became a best seller. Reveling in his success, Capote declared that, in writing "In Cold Blood," he'd created a new art form: the nonfiction novel. It was constructed as a series of scenes that built dramatically to a climax. The book used a protagonist through which to tell its tale. And Capote plumped the psyche of his characters.

Journalism historians have shown Capote's claim of invention was an invention of his own. One could say he employed fictional technique to embellish his own reputation. Nonetheless, "In Cold Blood" inspired a generation of writers. Not only did they imitate him but the best built on what Capote had started.

In the 1970s, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese and Robert Caro used fictional technique to expand journalism's repertoire of what was considered legitimate material to cover. Wolfe, the best known of the three, explored the hippie counterculture, the inner workings of high society and the publicity machine of celebrities. In the "Electric Kool-Aide Acid Test," for example, he used novelist Ken Kesey and his entourage, the Merry Pranksters, to tell the story of the hippies' twisted rise to popularity.

In doing so, he expanded the meaning of meaningful detail. Wolfe depicted his characters in gesture, mannerism and dress. Through such detail, he tried to reconstruct, moment by moment, what people felt but left unsaid. Novelists have long used this technique.

Building on Wolfe and Capote, former Long Island newsman Robert Caro turned a shadowy New York bureaucrat into a complex figure worthy of Tolstoy. The figure was Robert Moses, who used an obscure state agency, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, to open up much of metropolitan New York to suburban development. Moses built a system of sculpted, landscaped bridges and freeways. He lined those freeways with beautiful new public beaches and parks. Tens of thousands of rising middle class New Yorkers used Moses' freeways to flee their crowded and decrepit city.

Caro used Robert Moses' life to tell the story of New York City's decline and rise of its surrounding suburban metropolis. In doing so, Caro made Moses a parable about the transformation of Post World II America into a paved paradise.

Caro, Wolfe and Capote. Their work revived and modernized the storytelling techniques introduced by Homer 3,000 years ago. Each broke new ground, both in the detail of their writing and what they wrote about, expanding the repertoire for all of the writers who've followed in their footsteps.

Let us, too, learn, from these writers.

Protagonists

Strong narratives need strong protagonists. Someone, something or somewhere that can embody the theme of a story. He or it must be rich enough in character, history and struggle to sustain readers' interest. And the protagonist must embody an issue larger than himself. The more timeless and universal the better.

That doesn't mean protagonists need be super heroes. In fact, the more imperfect, frail and vulnerable, the better. There's nothing more boring than a goody two-shoes who never stumbles.

Writers try to be imaginative in their choice of protagonists. Think of the squid in the New Yorker story, which the writer used to embody man's unslakable thirst for knowledge. Or Caro's use of Moses to explain the rise of suburban America.

The story of illegal immigration has been told through the lives of undocumented workers. New York Times writer C. J. Chiver once used Lenin's pickled remains (both someone and something, you might say) as a protagonist. Lenin's cadaver served as an ideal crucible to examine Russians' ambivalence about their soviet past. They couldn't decide whether to preserve, hide or throw out the remains of their former leader.

Finding the right vehicle through which to tell a story isn't easy. There has to be a strong connection between protagonist and theme. A writer can't draft the first person he meets while researching a story to serve as the main character. Nor can that character be dumped midway in the story when he no longer serves the writer's purpose. Readers will feel duped.

It takes mindful legwork to find the right protagonist. A writer might have to interview a dozen people, visit scores of places. Sample dozens of lattes until he finds just the right blend to represent a story about what's the cutting edge in milk coffees.

It's a tough job, I know.

Foils

Imagine the main character of a story, or protagonist, sitting alone in the dark corner of a big library. No one comes to talk to him; nor does he move from his corner. Instead, he spends the entire story sitting alone and twiddling his thumbs. Not very interesting, right?

What's missing here is any dramatic tension. And that comes only when a protagonist interacts with the world — talking, fighting, laughing, drinking, whoring — or all of the above. A protagonist needs someone, something or some place to react to in order to make a story come to life.

Literary types call these people and places foils. A foil can play two roles in a story: To add dramatic tension or to illuminate every corner of a protagonist's personality, making him complicated and nuanced, and thus human. It's often easier to see someone clearer when he's set in relief against another personality. The best of foils simultaneously add drama and illuminate character.

It's easy to see how foils work in fiction. That's true whether it's a novel, comic book, movie or video game. What would Atticus Finch be without his daughter Scout in "To Kill a Mockingbird," Batman without Robin, Jack Sparrow without Will Turner, Sonic without the Hedgehog? None of these protagonists would be half as interesting without their foils.

While harder to see at work, foils abound in nonfiction, too. But there's one key difference: Journalists, unlike novelists, never invent their foils. There's no need for invention, really. Real life is rich in foils. After all, people don't live in isolation. We're shaped and defined by those around us.

Look at your own life. Don't you have family, friends, colleagues, lovers, even rivals, all of whom prompt you to respond differently? I bet you act one way with your parents, another with your teachers and yet another way with your friends. I know that's true for me.

When I read one of my children's books at an elementary school, I'm silly and playful. But when I'm in a student conference at my university, I am serious and thoughtful, even demanding (check my reviews on RateMyProfessor.com). A child who had attended one of my readings wouldn't recognize me in conference with a college student and vice versa.

The same is true if you change my backdrop. Put me in front of a classroom and I'm animated, funny and engaging. But switch the classroom for my den at night and you'll find me slumped on the couch, zoned out. Alone, neither classroom nor living room couch defines me but taken together they start to give a full picture of who I am.

Foils come in all guises: Comrade and rival, lover and ex-lover, ally and nemesis. Let me offer some examples from my own work.

In writing about Ted Turner in the 1990s, I always tried to include Rupert Murdoch in my stories. The two media moguls detested one another and served as each others nemesis. Their hatred was rooted in a common desire: Each wanted to dominate world media, from news to movies.

Ironically, the careers of both men began in a similar place. Each inherited a faltering media business. For Turner, it was his father's Southern outdoor advertising concern; for Murdoch, a small chain of Australian newspapers.

But here the similarities end. Murdoch was a silver-tongued patrician with an uncommon feel for the tastes of the common man. He loathed to speak ill of anyone. He preferred to eliminate his rivals with a crowbar sheathed in a velvet glove.

In contrast, Turner was a loud-mouthed, profane and volatile college drop out who nonetheless could cite Ovid and Homer from memory. He never cared for velvet gloves and always kept his crowbar unsheathed and ready for battle.

He brandished it often against Murdoch, who Turner deeply envied. Murdoch had built the global media empire that Turner craved to own. That made Murdoch the perfect vehicle to add drama to any story about Turner. The men competed in every corner of the globe. Mention Murdoch's name and Turner would start to bluster.

In fact, Turner himself loved to use Murdoch as a foil. He'd paint Murdoch and his New York Post, News of the World and Fox News as the basest of panderers. It wasn't hard, given these publications fondness for half naked women, celebrity gossip, sex scandals and ranting right wing commentators. In contrast, Turner's CNN and TBS, with their documentaries about global warming and the Cold War, looked far nobler.

Here's another example, this time using a foil to add both drama and dimension to a protagonist. At Business Week, I once wrote a story about Ness Motley Loadholt Richardson & Poole, a small law firm in Charleston, S.C. that had won a giant liability settlement against the tobacco companies. The $246 billion settlement was a record at that time (It may well still be). It earned Ness Motley not only national recognition - lead attorney Ronald Motley won a flattering portrayal in the Hollywood movie "The Insider." It also won the firm $1 billion in fees. But that largesse proved to be Ness Motley's downfall. The firm imploded as its partners quarreled over how to divvy up the spoils of the tobacco case.

To make the story come to life, I tapped Motley as the protagonist. Then I pitted him against another leading partner, Terry E. Richardson, Jr. The two men couldn't have been more different. Where Motley was outspoken, theatrical and flamboyant, Richardson was the model Southern patrician: dignified, reserved and scholarly, a lawyer's lawyer. Each man also represented starkly opposing ideas on how to use the $1 billion windfall. Motley wanted to lavish the money on yachts, airplanes and other expensive rewards to himself and his legal team in the tobacco case. Richardson, on the other hand, wanted to invest the money into expanding the practice.

Richardson's staid personality made him the perfect foil. It served as a backdrop that cast Motley's theatricality in stark relief. And the struggle between the former partners added the dramatic tension that propelled the story forward.

Motley and Richardson - and their epic struggle - were the kind of characters a novelist might spend months, if not years to develop. Yet here they were waiting to be discovered in broad daylight. All it took was the keen eye of a seasoned and skilled observer. Train yourself to see what others cannot. Then you'll rarely lack for protagonists and their foils, both of which are important tools for enlivening your stories.

Quest

A strong protagonist needs a worthy quest. Think of quest as a struggle with legs. It’s a journey, at the end of which either the protagonist has changed, or he has changed the world around him. Such change gives a story momentum, helping to pull readers through to the end.

Consider this famous example: Wolfe's chronicle of the fledgling hippie movement of Northern California in "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test." In researching this book, he discovered that novelist Ken Kesey and his followers, who called themselves the Merry Pranksters, planned to wage a guerrilla war against square America. They bought an old school bus and painted it in Day-Glo flowers and psychedelic paisley. Then they set off to spread their gospel of sex, drugs and rock n' roll, a cross-country freak-out. In the Merry Pranksters' bus trip, Wolfe found the quest of his story, which became a best selling book. It remains one of the definitive works on the hippies to this day.

Wolfe illustrates the power of thinking imaginatively about what makes a worthy quest. Here's a more contemporary example. A writer might tell the story of reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina through the struggles of one Mississippi Delta town. Reconstruction may force the town to change forever, rebuilding every house on stilts or moving the whole town half mile back from the river. Or the town's successful reconstruction may inspire other towns nearby to follow suit.

It has to be one or the other: The protagonist changes or changes others. Otherwise, there's no story. At least no story that many will want to read.

At the heart of any quest is struggle. The greater the struggle, the more uncertain its outcome, the more interesting the story. The struggle need not be one of life and death - although that helps - but it should test a protagonist in some way.

For example, a writer could illustrate how a delta town battled looters, FEMA and insurance companies in its quest for revival. In the New Yorker's squid story, the New Zealand biologist suffered freezing nights and gale-force winds as he chased his prey.

For writers, hardship and suffering are bread and butter of good storytelling. Without them there'd be little worth writing about.

Struggle

What drives struggle is conflict. Peace, I'm sorry to say, is the enemy of good writing. Your writing doesn't have to ring with the clash of arms, but there has to be a clash of some sort.

This has been true since the first stories were told, from the Iliad to Beowulf, from Macbeth to Nacho Libre. There's something about the human psyche that craves conflict. Its allure explains the popularity of everything from the grainy black and white World War II footage on the History Channel to American Idol.

It's no surprise, then, that every storyteller, whether conceiving a video game, cartoon or news feature, struggles to tap into this most human of cravings. Wolfe found conflict in the hippies taunting Suburban America; Caro in Moses' destruction of Old World New York and Capote in the senseless butchery of the Clutter family.

Conflict resides not just in extraordinary stories such as the Clutter's murder. It's as everyday as sibling rivalry, woven into most every human activity.

If writing about a new idea, a writer could find those who oppose it. If profiling a rising young politician, he could look for those in power who feel threatened by him. If explaining a new trend, he could seek out those vested in the last big thing.

Stories need to be cast in conflict from the first paragraph. That's why the New Yorker piece about the giant squid opens in a squall on the high seas, signaling the great struggle of finding this mythic creature.

Voice

In addition to protagonist, quest and conflict, there's a fourth element essential to storytelling. It's called voice. Any good story has an interesting voice. I'm sure you've heard this term a lot. Writerly types love to talk about voice. But what does the term really mean?

Think of voice in a story as a kind of haunting. You as writer lurk behind the words, infusing a story with your obsessions, pet peeves, prejudices, imperfections, interests and insights. A good story reeks of personality.

I'm not talking here about merely sounding witty or clever. That's just style. Style by itself is like a mustard sandwich. And mustard's no good without roast beef, to paraphrase Chico Marx. Style provides little meat for readers to chew on.

That's not to say great writing can't be funny and full of wit. Nothing deepens understanding like humor. But wit, just for wits' sake alone, can pose grave risks to aspiring writers. It tempts them to fall in love with their own words, to become "self be-puffed." That's what Edgar Allan Poe, our Dark Prince of American Letters, called Transcendentalist writers such as Emerson and Thoreau. These New England-based writers of the early 1800s, be smitten with the simple beauty of the natural world, loved to write ornately fawning reviews of one another's work.

When writers fall in love with their own words it tends to taint their work with an annoying self importance. These writers care more about dazzling readers with technique than with the power of their insight. The why of a story becomes lost in the pyrotechnics of the how. In reading such work, I often feel as if I'm watching a male peacock parading his magnificent iridescent plumage.

Self puffery enfeebles a writer over time. It muffles his critical ear, ruining his ability to prune from his own work the unnecessary and the nonsensical. He can no longer distinguish between sentiment and sentimentality. What was once clever or witty in his work degenerates into the corny or the cliché.

Resisting the love of one's own words isn't easy. It's among the hardest and most painful lessons to learn. Imagine spending hours, if not days perfecting a dazzling sentence or phrase - only to have to jettison it at the last moment. Not an easy decision. Yet the skilled writer will do just that if the sentence doesn't move the story forward or deepen understanding. Skilled writers are ruthless in their pursuit of lean, muscular prose.

No one captured this hard-nosed sentiment better than Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, author of an influential book on writing published in 1916. In "On the Art of Writing," Quiller-Couch wrote:

"Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it – whole-heartedly – and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings."

Any successful writer is a serial killer.

What does make your writing memorable is insight. That's what really drives voice. Do you have a meaningful take on a person, place or issue? Getting one requires gathering a rich trove of material, thinking deeply about it and then casting that material in a new light that illuminates.

There are few new stories in the world. "Everything has been thought before," said 1900 century German writer and philosopher Goethe, "but the difficulty is to think of it again." In a sense, writers today are just retelling Beowulf and the Iliad. That said, old stories can be forever retold in a fresh voice.

It takes an interesting person to write in an interesting voice. That's why it's so important to feed your head, to lead an interesting life. Someone who knows only the cocktail lounge or swimming pool of the Acapulco Hilton can't write an interesting, knowing story about Mexico.

Your voice manifests itself in the facts you choose, how you order them and the words you use to express those facts. Consider this example. It's the opening paragraph of a 2003 New Yorker essay entitled "All washed up":

"My boss that summer prided himself on having kissed all the waitresses. According to others, he had made them all cry. I swore that he would neither kiss me nor make me cry."

There's no self puffery here. The author employs just a few facts, but oh what facts they are., simple yet telling. Although the writer reveals neither age nor sex, I bet you can surmise both from this passage. The writer shows - not tells - us her gender and age through the facts she chooses. I know of only one type of person who summers as a waitress: a high school or college student.

She clearly doesn't need the job, either. Why else would the writer swear she'd never suffer a kiss. Such wording reveals the writer's class. Any working stiff, thankful for a job in difficult times, wouldn't so breezily proclaim that she would fend off a boss's advances. She might suffer a kiss to keep a job. Not this writer. Her cocky defiance reveals a sense of entitlement, an affliction particular to the wealthy brood who inhabit our elite private colleges.

Notice how this young writer bared her class, age and personality in three little sentences. And she did so in an interesting voice that reeks of personality. Make your work smell like hers.

Greek or Roman?

Storytelling, whether in books, magazines, movies, video games or epic poetry, is all about timing. At its essence, timing is an artful tease. Reveal too little too late and you'll leave readers frustrated and befuddled; reveal too much too soon and you'll bore them. The secret balance turns on this principle: revealing just the right fact at just the right moment.

In short, organization is critical.

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Novelist and historian Robert Graves once said that, in Western tradition, there's only two ways to organize a story: The Greek or the Roman way. The Romans, being the no-nonsense methodical people that they were, liked to start at the beginning and then proceed chronologically. Hero born, hero grows up, hero vanquishes villain. In the best of the Roman-style stories, the hero meets an untimely demise. The more tragic, the better.

Nothing could be more boring to the contemplative and arty Greeks. Their stories might open with the death of the hero and then proceed backward through his life. Or a Greek story might open in the middle of a climatic scene and then branch out in all directions. The details of a hero's childhood might not appear until the end of the story.

Although Graves analyzed Roman and Greek styles of organization in the 1930s, what he said holds pretty much true to this day. Most books and magazine articles follow either the Greek or Roman form of construction. Caro followed the Roman, albeit with long discursive detours to give history; Capote the Greek, his story jumping wildly about in time and place.

Each form has its strengths and its weaknesses.

The great strength of the Roman method of narrative is that it's the simplest way to organize a story. It's easy for readers, too. They find it hard to lose the thread of a story proceeding from historical moment to historical moment. Trouble is, chronology easily becomes boring. A story that moves mechanically down a timeline quickly loses its ability to challenge and surprise.

Chronology works best with stories with a lot of events or dates. That's probably why Caro chose it to organize his profile of Moses, "The PowerBroker." Chronology also would work well to organize an article that reconstructs how President Bush botched the war in Iraq. In such a story, the reader needs to see how one event lead to another. There's no better way to convey that than through chronology.

Otherwise, save chronology for a boring professor who wouldn't know drama from a ham sandwich.

The Greek style of storytelling is anything but boring. It lends itself to dramatic effect. Mixing up scenes, if done right, builds suspense. That's probably why New Yorker writer Grann chose the Greek method for his story about the scientific quest for the giant squid. He opened aboard a research boat in a squall on the high seas. Researchers think they spot their prey on sonar but the reader doesn't find out for sure, at least not immediately. Instead, the story switches to a passage about why scientists believe the giant squid may not be mythical after all. See how this breaking up of the logical order of events builds suspense?

The trouble with the Greek style of organization is that it's tricky to manage well. It's easy to confuse the reader and lose the thread of the story.

Peeling the Onion

Still, most writers today prefer the Greek method, often called episodic writing.

Episodic writing strives for an effect that's the opposite of news feature writing. It doesn't front load stories with a hard sell on why readers should read a piece, and read it now. Rather, meaningful facts and details are scattered along the journey of a story like tantalizing bits of cake. Episodic writing is nothing but an artful tease.

In episodic writing, stories are conceived as a series of scenes. Each scene stands on its own yet connects to preceding ones and suggests at those to come. No scene is like any other. Each one reveals a little more about a person, place or event; each takes the reader ever closer to the heart of the story. Understanding emerges slowly.

Think of this technique as peeling back the skins of an onion.

The beauty of this technique is twofold. First, it generates a sense of momentum. Readers feel that they are moving toward some destination of enlightenment. Second, readers believe they are discovering the meaning of a story on their own, without being pulled by the nose to some conclusion. People are more apt to value and remember insight if they believe it was their own. In the hands of a skilled writer, of course, it's an illusion.

I won't tell, if you won't.

Episodic writing frees a story from the monotony of chronology. It's an effective way to build suspense. Take, for example, Capote's "In Cold Blood." He intersperses grisly but matter-of-fact descriptions of the murders, where the bodies are scattered and how they're butchered, with scenes of the murderers drifting from Mexico to Florida. They appear harmless bunglers. This contrast between the grisly crime and its seemingly hapless perpetrators keeps dramatic tension high. Readers want to read on, hungry to learn the how and the why of this grisly crime. Capote doesn't reveal the killers motivation until the end of the book when the two are caught and interrogated by police.

Unlike news and news feature writing, there's no rule book on how to organize a long narrative. Organization is limited only by a writer's powers of imagination and storytelling. Still, wise writers become master remixers, copying and tweaking techniques copied from the best stories. It pays off handsomely to read the works of many others. When it comes to art, the best always learn from one another.

Consider this example from rock 'n roll. In the late 1960s, the Beatles were the uncontested kings of pop music. Yet their reign was far from secure. The Beatles were badly shaken with the release of Pet Songs, the mastermind of Beach Boy song writer Brian Wilson. His Pet Songs broke new ground in terms of lyrics, harmony and sound - and the Beatles recognized it immediately. They tore apart Pet Sounds, trying to figure how Wilson made every sound on the album. The Beatles learned much and immediately put what they'd learned to use in making their own groundbreaking album, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

Artistic innovation inspires yet more artistic innovation.

While highly effective, writing in scenes is daunting work. There's no one formula, per se, to guide you. Still, through trial and error, I've developed a five-step routine that works for me. Perhaps it will work for you, too. At least it's a place to start. Feel free to modify this routine to suit your own preferences and practice. No two writers work in the same way.

Step one: Sift through your reporting to find a theme or "so-what" of your story. As you read your notes, keep these questions in mind: Why write this story, why would anyone want to read it? What in your material speaks to the human condition; what does your story have to say about greed, sacrifice, love or suffering?

Be open to what you discover. Don't worry if your reporting suggests a theme that challenges or contradicts conventional wisdom. The best writing breaks new ground.

Also be open to the possibility that you may not yet be ready to write. You may have gathered some interesting facts, but not enough of them to make an interesting story. Or the facts you have don't say anything new or insightful.

Many a writer has made this disconcerting discovery. It means he has either too few facts, the wrong ones or both. There's no shame in admitting this. It's an insight that often leads to a better story. The thing is to be open to the idea that a story is half-baked and then act on that discovery. Never be

afraid or ashamed to go out and do new reporting. You need just the right detail to say something meaningful, to write with a theme.

Why all this bother with a theme? Because themes connote understanding. And understanding is what makes facts relevant and meaningful to readers. Consider a theme the thread through which you string the facts of your story. Without that thread, facts are no more interesting or meaningful than a tubful of colorful glass beads. It's stringing a few of the beads in a particular order that makes a beautiful necklace.

Step two: Glean from your reporting just those facts that illustrate your theme. This is not as easy as it sounds, especially if you've got a ton of notes. There's a tendency, particularly with green writers, to see unused reported as a wasted effort. Nothing could be further from the truth. Skilled writers typically use a third - or less - of their reporting in any one story. To snare the best facts, you must cast your reportorial net wide, especially at the onset. A successful fisherman throws back the old boots in his net, keeping only his best catch - and so do skilled writers.

Look at it this way. Gathering all those facts was a necessary step in preparing a good story. It helps you figure out what's new and meaningful and the best way to cast it. Exploring dead ends is part of this process.

Besides, unused material isn't necessarily wasted. Save what's unused for another story on the same subject but with a different theme. Successful writers squeeze many stories out of the same material.

Step three: Make a storyboard. This Hollywood construct helps in conceiving a story's organization. It forces a writer to figure out how to show - not tell - his story. Ask yourself, "how can I illustrate in a scene each fact or thematic point?"

Take the New Yorker's squid story as an example. The writer had to ask himself, what in his reporting illustrates the difficult quest for this elusive giant? Not surprisingly, the writer settled on the facts depicting the lead scientist aboard his ship on a troubled sea as an opening scene.

Step four: Summarize each scene. Index cards are the best tool for this step. Use one card for every scene.

Today index cards have gone high tech. There's several software programs, for both Mac and PC, that replicate the function of paper cards. These programs, I'm afraid, don't ease the hard work of figuring out the flow of your story. But they can display your ideas in lovely color schemes that are pleasant to look at while you wrestle with the organization of your story.

Step five: Shuffle your deck of index cards, whether digitally or by hand, to find a compelling order to the scenes of your story. Some of those writers who prefer the physical cards pin them to a cork board; others spread them on the floor or a bed. Still, others will pile cards across a room or house. It doesn't matter how you do it. What counts is finding an order for your story that's both clear and compelling.

Feel free to experiment. Shuffle and reshuffle your scenes. Try different openings. Is there one scene that best reflects the theme of your story, one from which the rest of the story flows most naturally?

Play with creating suspense. Break up the flow of action with backstory and history. Consider this 2004 Rolling Stone profile of anti-abortionist activist Troy Newman. The story opens with a scene depicting Newman's group, Operation Rescue West, intimidating abortion clinic workers with threatening letters and protests. Does the intimidation work? The reader doesn't learn right away.

Instead, the story jumps to a scene that begins to reveal Newman's backstory. He's portrayed as more "breezy Southern California surfer than one of the nation's most prominent anti-abortion activists." See how this organization deepens the mystery about Newman, intensifying reader interest in him and how his group operates?

Jot down various organizational schemes and compare them. When you find a scheme that seems to work walk away from it for a few hours or even a day or two. Does it still make sense when you return? If the answer is yes then you've got a winning organization.

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There are as many ways to organize a story as there are ways to organize your songs in iTunes. And, like an iTunes' playlist, change the order of your facts and you change the mood and theme of your story. Again, there's no one right way. The only criteria is that your organization enthrall readers.

Fact or Fiction?

While fiction and nonfiction are becoming increasingly similar in technique, there is a crucial difference between the two forms of writing. As Stephen King put it, fiction is about emotional truth; nonfiction about factual truth. In nonfiction, writers "seek truth through fact." Nothing is made up.

Contrariwise with fiction. Facts are made up to represent the truth. “The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse,” said Aristotle. “It consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be.”

Ironically, most good novelists are sticklers for accuracy. It lends credibility to their fiction. If writing a novel set in Elizabethan England, a writer will try to capture exactly how 16th century Londoners spoke, walked and dressed.

Inversely, there’s never any reason for nonfiction writers to invent protagonist, quest or drama. All three elements are everywhere, if you know how to look for them. It’s a matter of perception, seeing like a writer.

There’s only one reason I can think of for a nonfiction writer to fabricate and that’s laziness. It requires the highest level of reportorial skill to dig up the meaningful detail necessary to make a nonfiction story read like fiction.

Unfortunately, a few of our high-profile nonfiction writers have publicly admitted defeat, copping to making up scenes and characters in their stories. The list includes not only the now infamous diarist James Frey, the New York Times Jason Blair and Stephen Glass of the New Republic but Capote himself, who fabricated the final scene of “In Cold Blood.”

I don't recommend following in these writers’ footsteps, despite their high pedigree. Their more honorable colleagues hold them in low regard. Indeed, Capote has lost a lot of his cachet today.

Credibility is a writer’s most valuable asset. While easily tarnished, credibility takes a long time to regain its former luster.

CHAPTER 15

DEATH BY POWERPOINT

Tell me if this scene doesn't sound familiar. I sit amid a packed audience to hear a world renown mycologist explain why fungi are becoming a rising and largely untreatable threat. Sounds interesting and dramatic, right?

Alas, not if this mycologist can help it. He fired up a PowerPoint presentation that included slides dense with unpronounceable words like phytopathology and entheogen. His charts and graphs were more complex and mysterious than hieroglyphics. You need a Rosetta Stone to comprehend his message.

It got worse. He turned the back of his $3,500 Herringbone tweed jacket toward the audience, and then began to mumble aloud every word on each slide. You would have thought that we, the audience, whom he had invited, were irrelevant to his presentation. My students have a wonderful term for this all too familiar performance. They call it "Death by PowerPoint."

While incomprehensible, Dr. Herringbone's performance remains a good lesson. It represents everything not to do when presenting to an audience, even if your goal is to punish peers who have bored you senseless with their own presentations.

Doing it right matters. Despite the rise of Twitter, Slack and Zoom, we live in a time when speaking and presenting have become a big part of all modern professions, whether it be university, business or science. Yet so many allegedly sophisticated, well-educated people do it so badly; this, even though most universities today require students to study public presentation as part of their required curriculum. This is a riddle for which I have no answer. That said, I do know how you can prevent yourself from committing "Death by PowerPoint."

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Why listen to a writer when it comes to speaking? Because I have had to sell myself and my work to gain an audience for the seven books that I have written in the past 20 years. That required me to turn my work into countless presentations for all sorts of audiences, large and small. My presentations have won ringing applause from halls packed with some of the world's leading public health and government officials, charmed classes full of indifferent college students, and brought auditoriums full of school children to their knees in laughter.

Better yet, I have been lucky. I have had the good fortune to cross paths with and observe some true masters in presentation, such as Steve Jobs and Ted Turner. And I've read many of the classics on public speaking, such as Cicero and Seneca.

Still, I am largely self-taught. I learned the hard way through trial and error. Emphasis on error. Still seared in my memory is the first time I tried to speak Chinese in a packed auditorium at Tsinghua

University, China's MIT. It triggered an explosion of laughter among the sophisticated international audience. Not quite the response I had hoped for. I learned later that I had pronounced Tsinghua in a way that meant "frog."

These trials and tribulations taught me how to effectively hold and enlighten an audience. I succeeded through wielding all the core principles discussed in this book: The Art of Brevity, Show, Not Tell and The Artful Tease. In short, effective presentations are another form of terse, fact-driven storytelling.

Now, back to Dr. Herringbone. Our renowned mycologist has shown us how to lose an audience. Let's walk through step by step how to win one over.

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Google Slides or PowerPoint should never be the center of any effective presentation. Research has shown -- and you've probably have experienced it yourself -- the moment PowerSlide powers up, the brain powers down. That's true of both presenters and their audiences.

That doesn't mean slide presentations can't be powerful tools. You just have to learn how to use them effectively. That begins with this understanding: Any visual presentation is only a prop. Its purpose is to supplement or enhance a presentation.

You, the speaker, should always be front and center of any presentation, with an ear always attuned to your audience. Remember, any presentation is not about you, and certainly not about any slideshow. It's about the audience. More on this later.

That said, when used effectively, a multimedia slideshow can be a powerful tool to enhance a presentation. The best presentations use a rich mix of elements, including photos, video and sound.

Still, using multimedia material can be treacherous. Too many times I have seen audiences become lost in a complex video or sound, turning speakers into props. Then they struggle to regain an audiences' attention. Multimedia works best as a tease, so snippets are best.

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Here's the key to any slideshow presentation: Keep it simple but not simplistic. If that sounds familiar, it should. It's not only a big theme of this book, but also the underlying principle that guides all sophisticated and successful communications.

Conversely, long, dense and wordy slideshows reflect a presenter's lack of intellectual rigor. If you didn't bother to figure out the meaning of your material, then why should the audience do it for you?

The key here is to find a memorable takeaway message. What big idea or impression do you want your audience to walk away with? Think of it as a mathematician who boils down 20 pages of proofs to a simple equation. Or as the opening line of an effective pitch, as we discussed in the chapter "The Power of a Good Idea."

Here are some examples of complex researched boiled down to a memorable takeaway message:

- Fungal infections will kill a rising number of people without new treatments.
- Professional baseball will fade unless it figures out how to attract younger fans.
- Online gaming has ignited an explosion in illegal gambling that the government is struggling to control.

Finding a compelling takeaway message is the single hardest part of any presentation. It's an arduous journey that begins with mastering your subject. By mastering, I don't mean the ability to hoover up plenty of facts and data and regurgitate them on command. Any free AI program can do that today. Instead, what I mean is this: The ability to cull meaning, and better yet, insight from your research. What meaningful and interesting story can your research tell us?

To make your takeaway message memorable, you need to anchor it in an audience's mind. The best way to do that is to repeat the message three times in a presentation: at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. The brain loves repetition, but too much is tiresome. Three seems to be the magic number.

The hard work of developing a takeaway message pays big dividends. It demonstrates to an audience your diligence and hard work, which will win you respect. And, without that respect, no one will take either you or your presentation seriously.

Here's a devilishly fun way to see the power of an effective takeaway message. Next time you are forced to sit through a rambling or boorish presentation, ask the presenter — whether he is a professor, an expert, or an executive — this simple question: What's the significance of your work?

Watch as the presenter's face turns red as he sputters and bobbles about for an answer. Then notice how the audience responds to his fumbling response. That's not how you want an audience to respond to you and your presentation. If you have done the hard intellectual work to find a big takeaway message, you'll have a ready answer to any question about the significance of your work. And your audience will remember it.

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How you give a presentation is as important as what you present. As in writing, you can never take your audience for granted. Not for a moment. Few will pay attention until you establish a rapport that leads to a dialogue, even if it's an unspoken one. All successful presentations feel like a conversation with an audience. You know you've achieved that if your presentation prompts more questions than you have time to answer. As they say in Hollywood, always leave the audience wanting more.

Let's first talk about what not to do. Novices tend to make one, or all, of four big mistakes.

Resist the urge to introduce yourself, or say "Hello." While you might think you are just trying to be inviting and friendly, this practice is, in fact, a big turn-off. Remember, in most instances, the audience already knows who you are. Either they are a member of your class, your team, or your presentation is listed in a program. More importantly, an audience doesn't care about who you are until you do something worthy of attention.

Another common mistake is to start talking while in motion. Nerves drive many beginners to start talking while rising from their seats or walking onto a stage. Motion distracts the audience from what's being said. Worse, it conveys the message that said presenter is nervous and not in control.

Moreover, resist the temptation to launch headlong into a presentation once in front of your audience.

Both of these rookie mistakes are based on a false assumption: that an audience is eager to hear what you have to say. Alas, this is rarely true. People might be there because it's a required class, or their school or company paid for — or required — them to attend. Others show up out of a sense of obligation to support a colleague. Ask yourself: How many times have you reluctantly attended a lecture or presentation?

Any presenter's first challenge is to win over an audience. How to do so may seem counterintuitive.

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How, then, should a speaker start? Nothing speaks louder than silence. Sounds crazy, right? But consider this: Silence breaks an audience's expectation that someone will just start yakking. That, in itself, is dramatic and interesting, drawing attention. Silence is especially effective when it follows speakers who have made one of the rookie mistakes explained above.

For silence to work, it must be used effectively. Here's how to do it. Walk to the center of the stage and stop. Or, if in a more intimate setting, such as a classroom or conference hall, wade into the audience. Let your gaze sweep the faces turning toward you, making eye contact with everyone that you can.

Don't begin speaking until you feel most eyes are on you. Trust me, you will feel it, but it takes time, up to five minutes. This is the most difficult moment. You'll feel nervous energy egging you on to just start talking.

Now that you've got people's attention, you have to deliver. That's why you can't open by saying "Hello." Nor can you launch into a complex or bewildering explanation. Ditto for an incomprehensible slide heavy with text or a confusing graphic. A blurred photo or garbled sound clip is the kiss of death.

Instead, effective presenters, much like writers, open in an interesting place. That might mean using a provocative question, or a captivating quote. How about an arresting sound or picture. Openings are only limited by one's imagination.

Consider this example, which is among the best openings I ever saw. And it was from an undergraduate, no less. Her name was Abby, and this is what she did.

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Abby stood in front of the class and asked, "Can you tell me what's different about what I am wearing?" Every eye turned to scrutinize Abby's denim jacket, tee shirt and khaki pants. Standard public university garb, right?

Wrong, Abby explained to her mystified but curious audience. Every piece of clothing she wore had been made from biodegradable material. Her audience was hooked, eager to explain how this could be.

Abby's performance did more than hook her audience. It also represented the theme of her presentation: People could dress perfectly well without clothing made from polluting synthetic materials.

I consider Abby's entire performance as a model of effective presentation. She used PowerPoint as a prop, not as the center of attention. Not once did Abby turn her face away from her audience, keeping eye contact and speaking directly to them. Nor did she read off the text in any slide, each of which was easy to read and understand. She also incorporated a rich mix of interesting graphics, photos, and video.

Clearly, Abby had put a lot of thought and effort into her slides, yet she only made it through about half of them. Why? The audience of fellow students kept interrupting her with intriguing and provocative questions. Abby allowed herself to go where the audience was taking her, answering each

question with aplomb. She, in turn, asked her own probing questions. In short, Abby had achieved the nirvana of any successful presentation: A memorable conversation with her audience.

Our poor misguided Dr. Herringbone could learn a lot from Abby.

CHAPTER 16

DIFFICULTIES BE DAMNED

You can’t write well unless you have something worthy to write about. Good material makes for a good story. It's the grist your intellect needs to mill insight.

Gathering the grist for your writing is called reporting. At its heart, reporting turns on a simple maxim: Asking the right question of the right person at the right moment. Developing that instinct requires years of practice.

Like writing, reporting is more an attitude, a way of being, than an occupation. Good reporters are knowledgeable, resourceful, probing and skeptical. They’ve learned how to find out what they need to know, when they need to know it.

How the best gather information may surprise you. It's rarely accurately portrayed in books or magazines. Reporting well requires wearing many hats. In researching a good story, writers have been known to play amateur therapist or talk show host; detective or diplomat, historian or anthropologist. While writers never behave unethically (at least, the good ones), they’re masters at doing the unexpected and the unconventional.

Let’s look at the techniques used by the best.

A nose for change

Good writers have a nose for meaningful change, trained to sniff out any novel twist in current events, day to day human behavior or social media prattle. Journalists call this news.

How do budding writers develop a sense for dramatic, meaningful change? Training begins with keeping abreast of current events. But news often makes little sense, especially in far off places such as Tierra del Fuego or Ulan Bator. At least not without having a solid grounding in history, politics, world affairs and culture. Such grounding provides the context against which to understand unfolding events. It enables you to recognize that, if Chinese nuclear submarines were to enter Taiwanese waters, it could affect not only US foreign policy but the status of National Guard units across the country. Now that's meaningful change.

Know thy prey

In preparing to write a story, writers follow a simple mantra: Know thy prey. This mantra requires getting to know a person, place or issue as well as the back of your own hand. You do that by playing both historian and anthropologist, learning not only about the past of an issue or event, but its milieu, as well.

If writing about illegal immigration, say, learn how today's influx stacks up against those in the past. Is this the biggest wave or historically average? In writing profiles, get to know a person down to his cuticles. I once read a profile of Martin Luther King that portrayed him as an incurable scribbler, jotting notes down on everything from napkins to the back of his hand. Now that's a meaningful detail.

This is a lot of work, I know. But it's an upfront investment that pays big dividends, not only when you begin to write but after your story is published.

Let me explain.

Good prep enables you to finger the best sources for your story and figure out what are the right questions to ask of them. It helps you discern what's new and what isn't; what's important and what's trivial; what's spin and what's authentic. Know this and you'll be able to write not only with smarts and wit but with wisdom and humor. The ability to make people laugh about an issue - or themselves - represents the highest level of understanding.

A minutely observed story distinguishes it from the pack. That's especially true if you are writing about a big news event or a celebrity. Enrich your story with detail such as Dr. King scribbling historic ideas on soiled napkins, and it will be the one readers remember.

And, last but not least, good prep will save you from looking foolish. Allow me to demonstrate why.

My first writing job was in Monroe, La. It was a place that, for a Yankee boy such as myself, was as familiar as the surface of the moon. I was assigned to cover a mayoral election. That meant attending a never-ending round of fundraisers, political meetings and speeches.

At one late night fundraiser I encountered an unusual punch. It was unlike anything I had ever tasted: Sweetly tangy like Sangria yet with a fiery aftertaste. Could I use this punch to spice up what would be an otherwise bland story?

I asked the political operative staging the fundraiser about the punch. "You like it?" he asked.

"Very much."

"It's a brew particular to these here parts."

"What's it called?"

"Poontang."

I scribbled down the word, head bent over notebook, missing the growing smirk on the operative's face.

I rushed back to the newspaper, convinced I'd found a way not only to punch up my story. I would show off my street smarts, my intimate knowledge of local political culture. In short, I'd cover up my naked "Yankee-ness."

In my excitement, I hadn't bothered to double check the meaning of "poontang," either with anyone else at the fundraiser or back at the paper.

Not only did I use poontang in the lead. I used this punch with the wonderfully colorful name as a metaphor for the politics of the candidate: Sweet and spicy. My story passed from my typewriter to the desk of a fellow Yankee copyeditor, who chuckled at my clever metaphor. He wrote this headline: "Pol Serves Poontang to Faithful." From there the story moved to a Yankee typesetter.

No one actually from Monroe or even the South read my story until the first edition began rolling off the presses. That's when the managing editor, a Mississippian, usually returned to give the front page a final read. Good thing for me that he showed up that night. "Stopped the presses," he bellowed after reading the headline of my story.

Poontang was local slang, all right, but for a part of the female anatomy unfit to mention in a family newspaper.

Do your homework

Getting to know your prey begins with doing some homework. These days that begins on the Internet. A good place to start is with one of the big search engines, Google, Dogpile or Yahoo. Or you might start with the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. All will provide basic information, or sources of information, about issues, people and places. That's especially true if they're famous. If you want to dig deep into a person or place's past, try a site called The WayBack Machine. Named after a fictional device in the the 1960s cartoon series "Rocky and Bullwinkle," the site archives discontinued Web pages.

Be wary, though, of relying just on the Internet. It's a black sea of misinformation. Check the source of any information. Is it respectable and reliable? Wikipedia is especially notorious. Representatives of giant companies such as Wal-Mart and Pepsi have been caught editing their entries, substituting unflattering depictions with more supportive material[1]. This is but one example of why it's better to consider Wikipedia more tip sheet than gospel.

Search engines are just the beginning of any serious prepping for a story. Expand your net to the ever-rising tide of Web sites specializing in issues and topics. There's meta-search databases, too, that enable you to browse most major newspapers in the world or search across medical and scholarly journals. Other great sources include Ulrich's, a list of trade publications and COS Expertise, a compendium of experts worldwide.

Befriend thy librarian, whether at school or in town. Librarians are not only masters of online databases and the Web. They're skilled at finding obscure information, such as a political candidate's college graduating thesis or the number of times he's been quoted in the New York Times.

Prep work should cover more than background. Use it to find potential sources, the best people to interview for a story. In modern commercial writing, real people saying things in real time are the main source of information. If profiling Beck, you'd want to find his rivals and colleagues, friends and family. You'd also want to find independent experts and critics.

Why all the legwork? Because it's a never-ending challenge to find authentic and reliable sources of information. Many may claim to be experts but, in truth, few people are worth interviewing, including some with big titles and impressive degrees. Research helps a writer sift the genuine expert from the blowhard. And, once you've identified your prey, research enables you to understand a source's point of view and accurately portray it.

Equally important, though, prep work affords perspective. You want to discern what weight to give a point of view or fact. To answer for yourself such questions as: How influential is a person's work, where does he stand within the pantheon of his discipline? Is he liberal or to the right of Bill O'Reilly; representative of the conventional wisdom or an outlier?

Prepping well also serves as a reality check. It enables you to gauge whether someone is telling you the truth or just a part of it. Don't be surprised at how many sources you'll catch, if well prepared, in telling half-truths or outright lies. That includes professors, CEOs, even public interest and consumer advocates.

Sometimes people are just mistaken or forgetful. Other times they're engaging in self-denial or a cover-up. At times lying is part of some inside joke - on you and your readers. In his autobiography, Bob Dylan crows about making up fanciful stories about his past to mislead publicists and reporters. He considered his past private property. Trespassers beware.

Be as wary of numbers and statistics, too. A skillful manipulator of numbers, and there are many such people today, can make them dance to his tune. Consider Hollywood, that master of disinformation, as an example. In 2007, the major studios proclaimed that the all important summer movie-going season had been the best ever. Gross ticket sales hit $4 billion.

But was it really? A close look at the numbers suggest otherwise. When adjusted for inflation, 2007 summer box office sales were $3.79 billion, well below the peak of $4.39 billion in 2002. Even the number of tickets sold in the summer of 2007 were lower, 606 million versus 653 million five years earlier. The truth was that the big screen movie industry continued its long slow decline in 2007.

Hollywood's self-serving manipulation of its summer box office sales proves a warning issued more than 100 years ago by British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli: "There's lies, damn lies and then there are statistics."

If this all sounds depressing, take heart. There's little more thrilling than catching an officious, manipulative pol or chief executive in a whopping lie. It's one of the simple joys of good reporting.

Follow the paper

I.F. Stone is the greatest journalist you never heard of. Stone never made a video of himself on YouTube; nor appeared on the Daily show. He never worked for the New York Times, the New Yorker, Slate nor CNN. Nor did he ever break a big story relying on anonymous government insiders. Not once did he have an exclusive interview with a sitting president, a fallen tyrant or a reigning film idol.

In fact, all of the above would have shunned him. Little wonder, given that he was an outspoken supporter of the former Soviet Union for a brief moment in the 1950s and long accused of being a KGB agent. To his critics, Stone replied: “You may just think I am a red Jew son-of-a-bitch, but I'm keeping Thomas Jefferson alive."

Although shunned by the potentates of his day in government and Hollywood, Stone broke some of the biggest stories of the 1950s and 1960s. He caught some of the highest officials in outright lies and deception. His biggest scoop came in 1964, when he exposed how President Johnson’s administration had staged a phony attack against U.S. battleships in the Gulf of Tonkin to justify sending American combat troops to Vietnam.

Government and newspaper muckoety-mucks alike considered Stone the anti-christ of mainstream media. In effect, he was the Matt Drudge of his day, only far more credible. Stone published his exposes in what back then was the equivalent of a blog, a weekly newspaper named after himself. It never had more than 70,000 subscribers.

Stone may have never been popular but his work changed journalism. He pioneered what we today call investigative reporting. All today’s best investigative writers copy the techniques Stone pioneered. Not a bad legacy for an old Lefty.

If Stone relied neither on anonymous nor official sources, what was the secret of his success? It was deceptively simple. He was a diligent and meticulous reader of public records: court transcripts and depositions, the congressional record and hearing testimony, filings with Securities & Exchange and bankruptcy records, divorce and civil suits. No document was too obscure nor tedious for his inspection. He read everything, especially addendum and footnotes. In short, he did what most of the big shot journalists of his day considered either too unglamorous or too tedious.

No longer. The best writers now recognize that public records are an invaluable tool. People are often unreliable sources. They frequently misstate, misconstrue or misdirect. Then there’s the outright lying. It’s a sad truth that prosecutors and police often use the media to further their own agendas. For too many law enforcement officials, the news media is the vehicle through which to test case theories, attack political opponents or promote themselves through publicity of a sensational case. Sometimes public records provide the only true account of what they really think and do.

While valuable, public records are not an easy tool. Document reporting requires herculean intellectual effort. Assembling a story from documents, especially documents officials want hidden, is not unlike putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Clues are scattered across documents. It’s up to a writer to figure out how to piece together the clues into a coherent story line.

Still, document reporting can reap a bountiful harvest. Consider the example of Robin McDonald, a longtime court and police reporter in Atlanta. She has used public records to spot trends and even

solve murders. In the 1990s, McDonald wrote a cover story for Atlanta magazine that refuted police assertions that there were no serial rapists in the South's largest metropolis.

How could McDonald see what the police said they could (or would) not? She skillfully mined police records. Using Georgia's Freedom of Information Act, McDonald gathered 3,500 rape reports from jurisdictions across metropolitan Atlanta. She closely read these reports, documenting disturbing similarities in both how and where women were attacked. Her research showed a clear pattern that a handful of men were indeed committing the lion's share of rapes in Atlanta.

McDonald's story also illustrates the protective power of public records. It's difficult to refute a story that's documented in real estate deeds, bankruptcy filings, divorce settlements or police records. In effect, McDonald used the police's own data to make her case. Not surprisingly, the police didn't try to challenge her conclusion, although they were most unhappy about it.

Financial records are an especially rich place to find good stories. I uncovered the largest financial scandal in U.S. history (as of 2006) by reading the footnotes in the government financial filings of former telecom WorldCom. Those footnotes revealed caveats that raised serious questions about the credibility of the earnings Worldcom reported to Wall Street bankers and government regulators. It wasn't that I was any smarter than these financial experts. They, too, could have discovered Worldcom's $11 billion fraud - if they'd read the small print of the company's financial filings.

The value of public records as a reportorial tool as only grown with the Internet, which offers instant access to databases, records, blogs and chat. Better yet, little, if anything, posted on the Net is ever erased. It's only a matter of figuring out how to find something.

One Net miner who's found gold is Brian Grow, a investigative writer at Business Week magazine. He taught himself how to plumb the Net's vast resources, using it to write one big story after another. Rarely does Grow need to visit the cluttered, dusty confines of a court or government record office. From his desktop computer in Atlanta, for example, Grow was able to comb through 30,000 emails that were part of a federal case concerning the counterfeit manufacture of prescription medicine. Grow found an email overlooked by federal prosecutors: A complaint from counterfeiter to another, who felt his rival was besting him.

Plumbing records can reveal more than scandal and crime. Government and court documents are a mother lode of gritty detail, whether a writer is trying to recreate the scene on the day of a sensational murder or depict the true wealth of a tycoon. Posted on the Web site of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency, for instance, is the weather of any locale, on any day at any time. Divorce and bankruptcy records can reveal whether a tycoon owes more than he makes, say, paying thousands of dollars monthly in alimony to ex-wives.

Many of us make a mess of our lives. Much of that mess is documented in courthouses, government regulatory agencies and city halls. A skilled writer plumbs these sources to ferret out life's sad truths.

Hear all, see all

There's much more to reporting than mining records and asking questions. The best reporters try to hear all, see all. No detail is too small if it reveals character or meaning.

If interviewing a mayor, notice whether he's wearing cologne and, if so, what brand? Are his shoes scuffed or polished; his nails manicured or bitten down? What does his staff say about him in the hall; when he enters a room do they rush to greet him or scurry away?

Once media mogul Ted Turner jumped into the back seat of my beat-up Toyota Camry after a groundbreaking ceremony for a new corporate campus. Turner asked for a ride back to his downtown office.

He was using me, all right, but not as a taxi. As I tried to pull out of the parking lot, Tom Johnson, then head of CNN, and another top executive jumped in front of my car. Their faces were wet with fear. Turner chuckled at their frightened pleas for him to get out of a reporter's car.

That incident showed better who Turner was as owner and boss than anything he could have said. Clearly, he loved to keep his top executives off balance, ever fearful of what he might do next. If he'd jump into my car, what might he reveal about his executives or the inner workings of the company?

The lesson here is to report with all your senses. Pay attention to how people smell, look and, most of all, act. It's what people do, not what they say, that often reveals meaning.

Cultivate sources

Cultivate people, especially those in a position to know the inner workings of a company, government agency or charity. It was through cultivation of an offbeat, but highly knowledgeable source, that I managed to write a story about housing inspectors on the take in Buffalo during the late 1970s.

The quest for the story began with my befriending a mob attorney. I would visit his office to do nothing but listen to him brag about how he was smarter, richer and more important than his fellow mobbed up attorneys. Never did I take notes, let alone write a story. This went on for months.

Then one day, while I was walking down a narrow street with friends, a black stretch limo pulled up beside me. A door opened and a husky voice said, "Haddad, git in da car." My friends watched with furrowed brows as I disappeared inside the black limo with tinted windows.

Inside the limo my mobster attorney tipped me off to housing inspectors on the take. They were being paid to ignore code violations in buildings under renovation by mob-controlled union contractors. The attorney should know. His client was the one paying them off. The problem was, the inspectors weren't staying bought, but instead selling out to rivals bidding higher. Now the attorney wanted to punish the inspectors for their disloyalty.

The lesson here is to invest in relationships. Patient nurturing of a key source takes time, but if done right, it will bear fruit. My story also illustrates that it pays to cultivate informed outliers as sources. They are more likely to speak candidly than those with big stakes in the establishment. But remember, outliers, like my mobbed up attorney, have agendas. Find out what they are and let that knowledge temper and guide how you in use of a source's information. Be nobody's tool.

Think critically

It’s not easy to resist being drawn into the blinding white light of Steve Jobs’ charisma. His mere presence can send a hall-full of Mac aficionados into delirium. So when Apple’s high wattage CEO declared that the iPod would serve as the bait to hook new users of the Mac, most writers believed.

I wasn’t one of the believers. While facts often speak more softly than charismatic CEOs, they speak more truthfully. I listened to the facts. What the Apple's financial data said was this: The iPod was indeed attracting some new users to the Mac, but not nearly enough to lift the Mac’s worldwide share of the desktop PC market out of the low single digits. In fact, the iPod soared on a trajectory all its own. Its percentage of the fledgling market for portable music players rocketed to more than 70 percent. In contrast, the Mac’s desktop market share hovered between 3-5 percent.

Jobs and company weren’t happy about my coverage and complained bitterly to my editors. Why wasn’t I writing what everyone else was? My defense every time was the facts, which Apple could not refute. Time proved me right.

I wasn’t prescient; I just reported what others had chosen not to see. Too often writers find it more comfortable to run in a pack. Resist this temptation. It will lead you astray.

Mop up

Your reporting for a story doesn't end with the last scheduled interview. That just marks the beginning of the final stage, the mop up. The mop up consists of four parts: verification, assessment, update and the elimination of doubt. This stage is no less important than preparation, building trust and drawing people out.

A source may swear he climbed the Eiffel Tower as a teenager but that doesn't mean it's true. Even the most respectable of people will shade or embellish the facts - or lie.

Consider this example. In 2000, Worldcom Chief Financial Officer Scott Sullivan was the darling of Wall Street. He'd persuaded investors to give him billions of dollars to buy up rivals. That acquisition binge turned a piddling Mississippi telephone operator into the world's second largest telecommunications firm.

I covered Worldcom in the early 2000s for Business Week, and I began to hear concerns about the company's finances. In an off-the-record conversation, Sullivan told me such concerns were merely the gripping of envious rivals. Later, in trying to verify what Sullivan had told me, I documented how he'd orchestrated $11 billion in forged earnings at Worldcom. The company collapsed into bankruptcy and was eventually sold to a rival.

Verification, then, is an important part of any interview. That's especially true if developing a relationship with a new source or working with one experienced and skilled in talking to the media.

In fact, verification begins during an interview. It's a good idea, to paraphrase comedian Stephen Colbert, to test a source's "truthiness." Is he telling the truth as best he knows it? Or is he offering only a self-serving portion of the truth, or worse, lying?

Here's a good way to test a source's "truthiness" or reliability. Ask him some questions to which you already know the answers. Again, preparation proves invaluable. Find a couple sensitive things about a source — say age with a woman, a dismissal with a man — that he or she might be tempted to shade or lie about. Sprinkle these sensitive questions throughout an interview, disguising any pattern or intent. If a source lies about her age then a writer knows to be wary of any answers she gives.

Fact checking should continue after the interview. Try to confirm what a source has said through records or documents. Ask other sources who are in a position to verify. The Internet, with its vast repository of databases, government records and printed material, is an invaluable verification tool.

You can scale back fact checking as a source proves his reliability, but make him earn your trust. The reliability of some sources, though, should remain forever suspect. Examples include political operatives for any party, elected officials and celebrities.

Verification goes for opinions, too. They are only worthy of note if rooted in fact, not in unsubstantiated assumption and supposition. A vegan may assert that people will thrive forever if they eat only raw vegetables. History, however, suggests otherwise. For thousands of years, humanity lived on whole grain and fresh vegetables yet few people lived past their 30s. See the difference between fact and supposition?

Think of it this way: A house made of cards is not the same as one built out of brick and mortar. The first will collapse at the slightest probing. Ditto with opinions. Ones that are based in half-truths,

misrepresentations or fabrication easily fall apart upon close examination. Don't let yourself be used to promote or prop up a specious argument.

Verifying information helps you with the next step in the mop up, assessment. How much weight does a source's research, life story or opinion deserve; where might it fit within a story? Others can help you here. Bounce one source's viewpoint off others. Do they think he's an outlier or part of the convention wisdom?

It's not uncommon for events to buffet the original theme of a story, especially one that requires an extended period of research. Resist sailing blindly along the original plotted course of a story. Instead, tack with the buffeting winds. Circle back to ask sources if events change what they originally thought and said. Keep a story as current as possible.

Death to all doubt

There's nothing wrong in leaving an interview with a head full of troubling questions: "Did I hear that right; can that really be true?" What would be wrong is to let those doubts linger unquestioned. A wise writer never lets hubris prevent him from asking a stupid question in the pursuit of accuracy. There's no dumb questions; only writers too dumb to ask a stupid question.

Never feel ashamed to call back a source and admit you may have misheard or misunderstood something said. Such humility serves a writer well. Let me recount a couple of my own horror stories to drive home the point.

As a young police reporter in St. Louis during the early 1980s, I accidentally killed off a big time drug dealer. He'd been shot up so bad that the police assured me he couldn't possible live through the night. I took the police prognosis as gospel and never called the hospital.

The dealer not only lived through the night. He lingered for days after I'd pronounced him dead in the newspaper. His eventual death saved my career, killing the family's lawsuit against the paper.

I liked to say that this was my biggest mistake, but it wasn't. I went on to make an even bigger one at Business Week. I once let go unchallenged a small but critical change to the wording of a brief item. My editor changed "considering bankruptcy protection" to "filed for bankruptcy" in a story about HealthSouth Corp., a troubled owner of rehab hospitals. I ended up having to apologize to half of Wall Street for the error. The mistake was mine, not my editor's because I had failed to satisfy my doubts about the change. A simple call to the company would have caught this egregious mistake.

That close call taught me an invaluable lesson. Never take a fact for granted, no matter how small. In fact, it's the small ones that tend to have the biggest bite.

Misspelled names. Incorrect addresses. Three zeros after a number instead of four. A continual stream of such mistakes will deflate your credibility like a slow leak in a balloon. Inch by column inch, story by story – until no one believes what you write anymore.

When I mull over my own mistakes and those of others I see a disturbing pattern. We permitted doubts to linger, shrugging them off because we were almost certain. Almost isn't good enough in the quest for accuracy. And all writers, fiction and nonfiction alike, strive for precision and accuracy.

I learned this lesson from one of the biggest pains in the ass I ever knew. He was also the best editor I ever had. This editor was a fireplug of a New Yorker who I used to introduce as our "small" business

reporter. What Henry lacked in physical stature he made up for in tenacity when pursuing factual accuracy.

Everyday, Henry nagged me, “are sure that’s how his name is spelled, did he really say that, do those numbers really add up to that total?” To this day Henry's nagging voice lives on inside my head. It's not pleasant, true, but it has saved me from making many an embarrassing mistake.

Henry taught me that, when doubt comes calling, pay attention.

CHAPTER 17

THE CRAFT OF QUESTIONING

Anyone can ask a question; few can elicit a meaningful response. There's a craft to enticing people to speak frankly, of flushing out the truth. It involves purposeful method, a set of skills that can be learned, practiced and artfully applied. I call this method the craft of questioning.

The craft of questioning stands on five pillars: Staying impartial; knowing your prey, building trust, drawing people out and listening to the unspoken. Application of these principles requires the combined skills of a detective, therapist and diplomat.

And you just wanted to ask a few questions.

Why is interviewing so complicated?

Because truth is an elusive prey. Like a virus, it needs a host to propagate, hitching a ride on unsuspecting carriers. Many, if not most people do not understand the meaning of their lives, the truth they embody.

Through interviewing, then, writers perform a sort of exorcism. They tease out the truth concealed in people's lives. Unlike exorcists, though, writers wield neither crosses, Holy Water nor amulets. Their best tool is the informed question. Yet, when skillfully applied, the informed question is as powerful as any amulet. The right question to the right person at the right moment will lay bare any truth, no matter how well concealed.

Let's look closely now at each of the five pillars of the craft of questioning.

Impartiality is the highest nobility

Think of interviewing as a type of performance, one in which a writer effects the persona of impartiality. He plays the independent observer who's only interest is fair representation. This not a new, nor even a particularly modern Western, concept. Both ancient Greece and Chinese Taoism valued impartiality. For Chinese and Greek alike, it requires staying agreeable without agreeing; empathetic without sympathizing; interested without signaling a vested interest.

What does this look like in practice?

In being agreeable, a writer remains pleasant. He may smile or look pensive. Never, though, does he say a source is right or in any way signal approval of his views.

In being empathetic, a writer acknowledges a source's pain, anger or fear. He'll look pained if a source expresses something painful; he'll say, "That sounds frightening," if told a scary story. Never, though, will he say, "you have every right to be scared," or provide any justification to a source.

In being interested, a writer will lean forward, ear cocked toward a source, scribbling madly in a notebook. At times, he'll take notes even if what a source says isn't useful - just to convey interest. His interest remains, however, solely in the story, not the source. A writer declines any offer to champion a source's cause or further his career. His story may end up flattering a source, but only because the facts paint a flattering picture.

Remaining impartial in demeanor allows a writer to think in two dimensions. He listens while considering: "How does what I'm hearing stack up against what I know? Is a source omitting anything important?" A writer conducts a running assessment during an interview, adjusting course as needed. He stays nimble.

It's no small task to master the role of impartial observer. There are people who forever try to lure writers into their sphere of influence. These people tend to be those who have much at stake in how they and their interests are perceived. Think politician, executive and celebrity - or their handlers. They'll coddle, cajole or even coerce writers into seeing things their way.

Here's an example:

In the early 2000s, I wrote a computer column for Business Week magazine. My columns often poked fun at Microsoft, especially at its reputation as an innovator. I portrayed the company's true corporate philosophy as "first to be second."

Apparently, Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates demurred. He sent a team of young executives to show me the error of my ways. They traveled 3,000 miles from Seattle to my office in Atlanta to buy me coffee and a danish one morning.

At first, the executives tried to politely argue why Microsoft was an innovator, but I easily refuted the argument with examples to the contrary. Next they offered me an exclusive preview of upcoming Mac versions of Microsoft software, which I declined. Finally, the executives threatened to unleash on me the wrath of Microsoft enthusiasts in the Mac community. I knew Darth Vader had more fans.

Microsoft's effort to win my allegiance afforded me an easy column. I used the visit as an example of Microsoft's tendency to intimidate, not innovate. The company, never known for its self-deprecating

humor, was not amused. Gone for good were any more offers of software previews or free danish and coffee.

Why did I decline to cooperate with, at that time, the most powerful computer company in the world? Because I'd learned long ago that I had more to lose than gain in favoring any company, whether Microsoft or Apple. There's no quicker way to lose the respect of a source than to bow to his interests. He'll keep escalating the price for his loyalty, demanding ever more favors, until a writer has been stripped of all independence and respectability.

Better to anger a powerful source than to win his disrespect.

There's only one sin worse than kowtowing to a source and that's trying to bully one. It's largely myth, perpetuated by television personalities, that you can browbeat someone into talking. Intimidation makes for good theatrics - thrusting a microphone into the face of an uncooperative source who is scurrying away - but that's about it.

Learn from my own experience. As a young reporter in St. Louis, I once tried to browbeat a powerful city alderman. He had refused to talk to me — how dare he — and I confronted him about his recalcitrance during lunch at his popular downtown restaurant.

Not only didn't he answer my brusque questions. He grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and dragged me through his busy restaurant, finally tossing me out onto the sidewalk. It so happened that my newspaper was located across the street. Many a colleague returning from lunch saw me sprawled in the gutter. That wasn't the worst of it, though. In a final indignity, my editors at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch made me apologize to the alderman.

Play Detective

A skilled writer tries never to conduct an interview ignorant about a source. Here's where a writer plays detective. He learns through research what a source is qualified to discuss. Where does a source stand in the pantheon of his discipline or profession? Is he an establishment figure, representing the conventional wisdom or a defender of the status quo? Is he an outlier or an agent of change?

Such intelligence helps a writer sift the useful from the malarky during an interview. Experts love to expound on topics about which they know little. I've interviewed chief executives who've given political predictions and politicians who've given economic forecasts. As a rule of thumb, the bigger a person's title, the more likely he's a know-it-all.

A writer tries to know his source as a person, too. He learns his passions, his likes and dislikes. Is he on the board of the United Way or an avid fly fisherman? Do writer and source share in common a friend or acquaintance? Use this intelligence to connect with sources. They'll rarely confide important information without first establishing a bond with their interviewer. More on this in a bit.

Craft questions

Informed about a source's expertise and personality, a writer is ready for the next step in preparing for any interview: Generating a list of questions. What's asked and how it's asked - in what order and with what phrasing - affects the willingness of people to confide. Here's where a writer plays therapist.

In writing questions strive for clarity. The best questions are not unlike a good sentence: Simple but well informed, direct and easy to understand. A good question embodies one idea that's expressed in the active voice.

Avoid rambling introductory clauses that explain or justify a question. This doesn't mean forsaking questions about complex subjects. Rather, it means probing the complex with a series of related questions that are easier to understand and respond to.

There isn't time, of course, to prepare questions for every interview. That's especially true if writing a story due the same day. Yet even as a young newspaper writer, I tried to quickly jot down an outline of questions before impromptu interviews on the street or on the phone. Today, it's easier than ever to quickly prepare for any interview. The Internet can provide a snapshot of most sources in a few minutes. Take advantage of that power. It's always important to pay attention to what you ask and how you ask it.

As with much in life, effectively questioning people comes down to timing. The best writers develop an instinct about asking the right question at the right moment. That sense of timing is perfected through practice.

It's especially important, then, that beginning writers make time to prepare themselves for interviews. The benefits are manifold. For one, it trains novices to think through what they want to learn from a source, giving an interview direction and purpose. A checklist of questions also helps prevent a novice from forgetting to ask about something vital.

Besides, there's nothing like a neatly organized list of questions to gracefully demonstrate respect for a source's time and importance. And that goes a long way toward dispelling the skepticism many veteran sources hold about inexperienced writers.

Here's another trick. Open an interview with questions that demonstrate your knowledge of a source's profession or field of expertise. It not only conveys respect but gives him a chance to showcase his own expertise, something few academics, lawyers or scientists can resist. Let them strut like peacocks. It helps open up sources, especially during an initial interview.

While important, preparation shouldn't be cast in stone. Interviews often veer into thrilling, unexplored territory. This is a good thing, even if it trashes a lovingly prepared list of questions. Consider any plan no more than a guide, one that's readily amended or abandoned when necessary.

Build trust

The first task of any interview isn't to ask questions; it's to gain trust. Sources that trust a writer will reveal more, and more of what they reveal will be the truth, at least as they see it, and not a manipulative spin of facts or events. It's in gaining a source's trust that a writer plays diplomat.

Gaining trust is no easy task, especially in a country as diverse as ours. That diversity is growing all the time. Most of those whom a writer interviews will not be of his age, ethnicity, class or clan.

How, then, to win the trust of strangers? Think of it as a chess game of subtle moves, one in which gestures count as much as words. What you wear, how you sit, your tone of voice, your choice of opening questions - all can be useful in winning the trust of a source.

The most important gesture of all is empathetic listening. It can open up the most reluctant of sources. It's a lesson I learned early on in my career.

In the late 1970s, while a young reporter in Buffalo, N.Y., I was given a most challenging assignment: To interview members of the 60s rock band The Who. They were traveling to the city the night after several of their fans had been trampled to death at a frenzied concert in Cleveland. There, the band had been able to elude reporters. Slipping by me wouldn't be as easy. Or so I hoped.

I had a friend at the city's Convention and Visitor's Bureau and he tipped me off that The Who would be staying at a cheap motor inn out at the airport. By slumming it, the band hoped to elude fans and reporters alike.

That wouldn't include me. I booked a room the day the band arrived. That put me inside the security net - not outside it - when The Who checked in. A writer must be ever resourceful.

Getting inside the hotel was only half the battle. Now I had to find The Who and then get them to talk to me. My plan was simple. I would cruise the back hallways of the motel, keeping out of sight of management and gambling on a chance encounter with a band member. All night I wandered among the snack rooms and stairwells, all without any contact with the band.

Finally, at 3 a.m., I stumbled into a haggard Pete Townsend, The Who's lead guitarist and songwriter. He sat in the dark corner of a snack room, hunched over a half-empty can of flat Pepsi. Had he been here all night and I'd missed him earlier?

"Gee," I said, "you must feel terrible."

The question opened Townsend up like the can of soda in his hand. He spewed forth his dismay, frustration and sorrow. All I did was listen and take mental notes. He invited me back to his room, where the other band members, Roger Daltry and Peter Entwistle, were moping about.

I listened to the three of them for hours before I took out my notebook. Would it be all right if I told their story? I finally asked. Since I'd gained their trust through empathetic listening, they granted me permission.

Where you decide to conduct an initial interview can help to build trust. It's best to start at a source's den or throne, a place he feels safe or powerful. A source is more likely to open up if he feels in control of the interview.

I first interviewed media mogul Ted Turner's oldest son - a tragicomic figure of a Shakespearean proportions - at his favorite restaurant in downtown Atlanta. The restaurant staff treated Teddy Jr. like royalty, serving him his favorite lunch without any prompting. In a corner table, dining on sweet potato fries and Diet Coke, Teddy hailed the city's muckety-mucks as they entered the restaurant. All the while he sat scheming and chitchatting with friends and business associates. He glanced at me, checking to see whether I was suitably impressed. I tried my best to look awestruck.

This meeting with Teddy Jr. illustrates the importance of trying to schedule an initial meeting that's not a formal interview. Think of it as a "meet and greet," like one of those conferences teachers used to hold with your parents before the start of school year.

Informal meetings allow a writer to focus on building trust, not taking notes. In fact, if possible, keep a notebook sheathed during an initial interview. That allows a writer to focus on listening intently. Rare are the people who can resist the charms of an attentive audience. People instinctually find themselves lowering their guard and speaking more freely. That's especially true if they know they're speaking off-the-record.

Listening well is hard work and it's hardly passive. As he listens, a writer keeps an ear cocked for clues: What encourages a source to talk, does he speak with authority, is what he says reliable?

I was doing all this in my initial meeting with Teddy Turner in the restaurant. Not once did I take out my notebook. Instead, I sat and watched, encouraging Teddy to be himself. Later, I would interview him many times in many different places, but that first meeting was the most important one. It gave me an authentic sense of the man that proved invaluable in gauging everything he told me later on.

None of this is to say that writers won't jot down notes from memory after an interview. Any seasoned writer keeps pen and paper - or its digital equivalent - handy at all times.

Taking notes from memory is not as hard as it seems. Listening is a skill perfected through practice. In fact, it's a good idea to practice recording notes after an interview. This exercise helps train a writer to listen better. And the better a writer's listening skills, the more he remembers.

A word of caution about off-the-record or informal interviews. These are the times when sources tend to reveal the most sensitive and potentially explosive bits of information. It's hard to resist rushing a story into print, especially if a source has confided something sensational. Double checking such information is often lost in the rush to publication.

Sadly, many a writer has learned the hard way why such a move is foolhardy. For one, a false sense of infallibility taunts even the best of writers. The clearest of recollections can be missing a key caveat or be wrong. Secondly, it's dishonorable, a breech of obligation, to disclose information provided off-

the-record. A source spoke with the understanding that what he said would be for a writer's ears only. Otherwise he might not have spoken so candidly. A writer can't change the rules in the middle of the game for his convenience or his advantage.

Why risk tarnishing a budding reputation for accuracy and fairness, two traits invaluable to any successful writer? Better to double check recollections with a source. Chances are good that, if a writer built trust, a source will let him use material from an off-the-record interview.

There's an added benefit. Confirming information provides writers with a foil, a way to reality check their recollections and perceptions. It's not uncommon for a source and writer to disagree, triggering a discussion that helps to reconstruct what was really said. In the end, they may still disagree, but the give and take builds a writer's confidence in his interpretation of events. He's ready and prepared to defend his recollection if challenged.

A writer who's well-read and well-traveled has little trouble winning people's trust. He has so many ways to connect. Consider this example.

In prepping for my first sit-down interview with media mogul Ted Turner, I read that he loved fly fishing for trout on his Western ranches. I, too, had once fly fished out West, and knew I could hold my own on the topic. How, then, to subtly advertise my shared love of fly fishing? I recalled that an old girlfriend had once given me a tie festooned with famous trout flies. I dug out that musty old tie and wore it to my initial interview with Turner.

He took the bait. His secretary had penciled me in for only 15 minutes, but Turner and I talked for more than hour about trout fishing. It was during that interview that Turner first confided to me his plan to buy vast tracts of Western land. His idea was to save land with unique and endangered native plants and animals from development. I later wrote a sweeping story about Turner's daring plan. Part of my research included fly fishing with Turner on his New Mexico ranch.

Seasoned writers pay attention to the habitats of their sources, whether they be offices, dens, dugouts or canoes. These are the kind of places that are filled with clues for how to connect with a source. Is there, for example, an autographed baseball, a mounted trophy fish, pictures of family or the source shaking hands with famous people?

Say that a writer recognizes a picture in a source's office of him shaking hands with a former president. He'll ask what was that president really like in person. Such a question gives the source a chance to show off. Few people can resist such an opportunity - especially someone who has decorated his office with pictures of himself with famous people.

It's only human to enjoy talking about yourself, sharing your life story with others. That's especially true of the restlessly insecure, which defines many ambitious people. Why chase after title, awards and honorary degrees if such honors are going to remain unknown?

It's also human to feel good about those who are listening to you talk, especially if they're listening avidly. No one may utter the word "trust," but a bond grows between talker and listener all the same.

Draw out the truth

Building trust is the first step in a campaign to draw people out. The next step involves what a writer asks, how he asks it and when he asks it. Writers think a lot about how they phrase and order questions. The most effective questions are tailored to a source's temperament. The wording and sequence of the same question may differ with each source interviewed for a story.

A writer considers: Is a source combative or cooperative, humble or prideful, voluble or reticent. An opening barrage of pointed questions might offend a reticent person. Better to circle when questioning people of quiet intelligence, asking them a series of easy questions. That gets them comfortable first with talking. Nor would you want to flatter a humble source, while flattery works wonders in opening up the prideful. The point is to think strategically, considering how to persuade people to confide. Different sources require different strategies.

A few techniques, though, work well with most people. Avoid asking questions that require only a yes or no answer. A writer wants to encourage people to give as much information as possible. That means not asking, "Were you born in Bermuda?" but "Where were you born?" In answering this open-ended question, a source might respond not only that he was born in Bermuda. He might also disclose a love of skinny-dipping as a child. This is the kind of detail that distinguishes good writing from the mediocre.

Ask key questions several times in different ways. The first time round you'll tend to get the party line from heads of government agencies, advocacy groups and companies. The more they're questioned, the greater the chance they'll stray from their organization's dogma. That's especially true if they've begun to trust you.

At times, a source's reluctance to talk doesn't necessarily mean he's trying to dodge questions. He just finds talking about a subject difficult or painful. A skilled interviewer can help him find the words. Here again it helps to ask the same question several times, but each time using different wording. This technique often leads to the right combination of words that will unlock a source's reluctance to talk.

To make a cat purr stroke its head. It's no different with celebrities and the powerful. Few of them can resist flattery, even from the un-famous. You don't have to be false about it. There's usually something in a person's past or in his work that you can find to respect. Ask about that.

The right stroking will open up even the crustiest and most jaded of celebrities. While working in Los Angeles during the mid-1980s, I was assigned to interview a once famous but now forgotten Franco-German film director (Can you sniff out who it was?). He was visiting Hollywood to attend the Oscars.

The director greeted me in his hotel room seated in a push red velvet armchair he'd brought with him from home. It sat in the center of the room on a sprawling oriental rug.

"Greeted" isn't quite the right word. The director wouldn't look at me and drummed his ring-studded fingers on the arm of his magnificent chair. The young flack who'd ushered me in reddened with embarrassment.

"Isn't that one of Marie Antoinette's chairs?" I asked in French.

The director turned sharply to eye me with newfound interest. My question had signaled that I understood how privileged he was to own such chair. It was rare, expensive and coveted. It hadn't hurt, either, that I'd asked in French.

In truth, I knew little about the chair, other than that he'd recently bought it at auction in Paris. I'd read about the sale in prepping for my interview with him.

With a delicate wave of his ringed hand, the director signaled that I could now question him. I asked about how he acquired the chair, although I knew the answer. It was the right question, for he couldn't stop talking about the chair. And once he started talking, he couldn't stop when I began to ask more pertinent questions later on.

Again, a little knowledge, wisely applied, goes a long way.

Above all, a writer does whatever he can to encourage people to talk. We all love to hear the sound of our own voices. The longer a person speaks, the harder it is for him to stop. Savvy writers wait for a source to build up a good head of steam before asking a tough or challenging question. If comfortable enough, people often answer questions they previously dodged.

If talking for a good while, a source's every thought may begin to spill onto his tongue. At times this holds true for even the most jaded and media savvy of sources. Again, Ted Turner illustrates the point. At the end of a long, leisurely chat on the veranda of a New Orleans hotel, in which Turner was expounding on the merits of trout fishing with barb-less flies, he blurted out an astounding act of personal charity. He planned to give a $1 billion to the United Nations, the largest personal gift in the organization's history at the time. His revelation was a great story for me, although it ruined a month's worth of careful preparation by his sizable publicity staff. They wanted to keep tight control on the spin of Turner's donation.

Notice that Turner disclosed his UN donation in the closing moments of our chat. Last minute revelations are far from uncommon. Sources will reveal the most colorful or insightful material as a farewell gesture. "Funny," a source might say, "if I'd never been caught cheating in college, I'd never have learned to be the ethical person I am today." Such comments are often muttered or offered as a closing aside. They're easy to miss. That's why seasoned writers stay attentive even as they're escorted out the door.

The best writers learn to be inventive in drawing people out. They're forever dreaming up and experimenting with new techniques. Here's some of the more unconventional yet effective ones I've seen and used.

The power of silence

Ironically, sometimes the best way to draw out a source is to keep silent. This is especially true when dealing with naturally voluble people who, for whatever reason, are reluctant to talk with a writer. Here's an example of the power of silence.

At Business Week, I was once assigned to profile a big company in Memphis that was infamous for its secrecy. Predictably, its executives refused to grant me any interviews. Undeterred, I traveled to the company's headquarters uninvited and parked myself in the lobby. There I sat quietly all day, waiting to see if I could get an audience with a top executive.

Finally, my polite but unsettling presence got a response. A senior executive invited me upstairs, if only in a bid to chase me off. The moment I stepped into his office he began ranting about how his company would never talk to me. He glared defiantly, as if expecting me to leave. A reasonable expectation, I suppose, but I sat down in a chair and smiled.

I said not a word. Soon I could feel the silence growing as uncomfortable as a hair shirt. After a few minutes of the silent treatment the executive blurted again that he had nothing to say. Then he began explaining why he couldn't talk, which led to a detailed description of his company and its strategy. Soon I had as much as I needed.

Is it any wonder that writers can be at times people of few words?

Playing the rube

If you can pull it off (that is, keep a straight face) playing dumb can work wonders on some sources. I had a friend at the Wall Street Journal who was a master of this technique. He especially excelled at playing the rube with the powerful.

My friend even dressed for the part. He would show up at interviews with chief executives not only wearing a polo shirt, but wearing it inside out. He'd play dumber than a barrel of hair, too, asking a steady stream of the most simple-minded and ignorant questions.

Executives found themselves explaining away their businesses, telling far more than they'd planned to reveal. They never imagined that such a simpleton could understand their companies, let alone write incisively about them. My friend was Ali G a generation before the English comedian Sacha Baron Cohen dreamed up his faux nincompoop talk show host.

Vary scenery

It's best to interview a key source several times, preferably in a different location each time. A new place triggers new associations, prompts fresh memories. You'll find a source remembering something he'd long forgotten, say, some revealing childhood story.

In profiling Teddy Jr., I interviewed him four times. The first, as I said earlier, was in the his favorite restaurant. The second time was aboard Teddy's speedboat as it raced through Florida's inter-coastal waterway outside Jacksonville. Emboldened by controlling the powerful boat, Teddy boasted that his idea to start a new computer company would rival the entrepreneurial prowess of his dad.

The third interview occurred in the gloom of his new company's sparsely furnished office in a rundown building far from Jacksonville's central business district. Here, Teddy confided that his father's legacy was daunting, if not smothering. The last was at his father's sprawling ranch in New Mexico, where I could see how small Teddy figured in is father's legacy.

Truth emerges slowly. Give it the time and space to do so.

Listen between the words

I couldn't believe my ears as Buffalo Mayor Jimmy Griffin fumed. How dare the impoverished constituents of his old council district call him a fat cat. Couldn't they see that he was no better off than them? Surely I could see that, the mayor said to me, rattling the gold cufflinks of his Brook Brothers suit in my face.

I sat with the mayor in a corner booth of his popular steakhouse, "Jimmy's." It was packed with its usual lunchtime crowd of politicians and businessmen.

The mayor eyed me expectantly, but I sat mum. I pondered what, if anything, to say. It had taken me weeks to win this rare one-on-one meeting with the mayor. I considered it a coup to have secured it outside the official confines of City Hall.

Yet I struggled to bite my tongue. The mayor's outburst, while sounding earnest, struck me as contradictory. Surely he must know, as I did, that most of his constituents were on food stamps and could ill afford to dine at "Jimmy's." Nor did most of them own a car, let alone the chauffeured Lincoln Continental that the mayor used to cruise the Buffalo's streets, forever taking the pulse of his beloved city.

Tongue tied and confused, I had a revelation at the tender age of 24. It struck me that the significance of the mayor's pleading lay not so much in what he said, but in why he'd said it. Function — or the why — of the mayor's utterance trumped the what.

The best writers learn to listen deeply, asking themselves: Why is a person saying this to me, and why now and in a certain place? And what isn't he saying and why? Mine context for meaning.

Consider my interview with Mayor Griffin. Thirty years later, I still have no doubt that chance played little role in why the mayor invited me to his restaurant. It had began as a one-room storefront, serving coffee and white bread sandwiches to grimy steelworkers. What better place to underscore the idea of lifelong struggle?

Nor do I doubt that the mayor spoke in earnest. He wanted to see himself - and for others to see him, too - as the son of impoverished Irish immigrants struggling to better himself and his people. This was, as sociologists say, his self-myth.

While false in fact, this myth was true in intent. It represented the mayor's guiding spirit. Had I disregarded his outburst - and where he made it - as mere spin, I would have missed an invaluable clue as to what drove the mayor's civic and political calculations.

Think of words and gestures as part of a person's tribal garb. And we're all tribal, except maybe the Unibomber, holed up in the rocky wilderness of Montana. As individuals, each of us wants to be identified with some group. That's true whether we don tweedy jackets or tattoo our arms with Chinese characters; drink Iron City beer or Guinness, listen to Beck or the Beastie Boys. Be attentive to these tribal smoke signals. They reveal character.

Any interview is only as valuable as a writer's ability to hear the unspoken.

ADDENDUM A

THE UN-COMMANDMENTS

Thou shalt not preach:

Stash away your soapbox when it’s time to write. Never preach, lecture or scold. Lure readers in with the clarity of your observation, the compelling logic of your analysis or the accumulative weight of your reporting. You want to trick the reader into thinking he has reached your conclusion on his own. It's much more persuasive.

Think about it. When was the last time you heeded a scolding?

Ping-pongth not:

If "but, yet, and" - or worse, "moreover, furthermore or "nonetheless" - pepper your writing then you are ping-ponging. That is, the organization of your story is bouncing all over the place.

Dependence on conjunctions and adverbs to transition between ideas signals confusion. It's clear to readers that you haven’t yet figured out what you want to say and how best to say it. Your story hangs from wobbly organizational scaffolding.

The remedy? Layer ideas logically one atop another, forming a pyramid building to a pinnacle of higher understanding. Adverbs and conjunctions will fall away as ideas lock in step.

Leave ping-ponging to table tennis where it belongs.

Swellth not thy prose:

Good writing is as lean as a beggar. Squeeze out all but essential words. Don’t swell sentences with long-winded clauses, especially at the outset. Readers will give up reading before they get to your point. Say what you mean as simply and directly as possible. That's hard enough as it is, without adding all kinds of dependent clauses.

Beware of the verb "to be”:

It represents what grammarians call the passive voice. This verb construction tends to bloat sentences with unnecessary words and phrases.

Don't say, for example, "Dick was seen by Jane," but rather "Jane sees Dick." See how this active voice construction squeezes out unnecessary words and makes the sentence simpler and more direct?

Now, repeat after me, "Dick sees Jane." Make this your mantra when writing every sentence.

Thy story empurpleth not:

We're all imperfect at best. Let your writing reflect that simple truth. Please, spare us, the poor reader, from having to endure mayors, athletes, and Eagle Scouts who've never done wrong or made mistakes. Who believes such nonsense, anyway?

Writeth not with wooden tongue:

Avoid language that is deadening to both ear and soul. These are words that are either meaningless, unpronounceable or just plain ugly. Words such as "utilize, optimize, implement" and "facilitate." They're sure to petrify any sentence.

Turnth off not thy brain:

The grass is always greener; All's well that ends well. His eyes were bigger than his stomach. These clichés are as fresh as leftovers. If you've heard a phrase before, avoid using it. Clichés are a crutch, designed to save you from the hard work of thinking something through. Fire up your brain when writing and give us a fresh edge on an old saw.

Circleth not:

Avoid repeating the same words or phrasing sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph. It lulls readers to sleep. Instead, vary your words, phrases and sentences. Short to long, staccato to flowing, allegro to sombre.

Writeth not with groghead:

"Jam yesterday; jam tomorrow but never jam today." Such writing makes for wonderful limericks and nursery rhymes. But I'm afraid if you write like this you'll look a bigger fool than the White Queen who spoke these words in Alice in Wonderland. Watch what your words are saying. Do they make sense or are they Jabberwocky? If you're not careful you'll end up writing sentences like the ones below:

"Women are choosing careers that they hope will be sympathetic."

"The streets are littered with homeless hands."

"This presumption was fervently in attendance."

Neither Lewis Carroll nor Ogden Nash wrote these lines, although I bet they would have been happy to claim authorship of any one of them. I'm afraid the authors were some students of an elite private college.

ADDENDUM B

ORDER OF THE WOODEN TONGUE

(The words below are ugly and they want to die. Use them only if you want to deaden your writing)

Aforementioned
Ascertain
Conversate
Orate
Facilitate
Food insecurity
Incentivizing
Impacted
Informationize
Mythologification
Multifaceted
Pertain
Situadedness
Stated
Therefore
Utilizing
Thus
Totalizing

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In addition to "Pity the Poor Reader," Professor Charles Haddad has written six other books. His published work includes two adult novels and three children's novels. His latest novel, "Chasing the Albino Pygmy Giraffe," is expected to be published in fall of 2021.

At present, Haddad is an associate professor at Stony Brook University, where he teaches nonfiction writing. He also had a distinguished journalism career, which included writing one of the first successful online columns and many awards. His work appeared in such major publications as Business Week magazine, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, among others.