

Le Bon Journal

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Volume 2 Issue 1: The joys and pains of writing and editing

These are the reflections of a writer at work.

Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable...

That's the job of journalists, my line editor once remarked.

Earlier, another veteran editor had painted journalism as a parasitic profession. He said, "You're always bothering someone, asking the person to stop what he's paid to do and to talk to you."

The seasoned journalist is far from an idealist. Skeptical about everything, he is a self-proclaimed cynic.

True journalists are neutral and independent. They have nothing to sell but the content of the stuff they write. In this sense, what they write is more credible to the reader who knows that the journalist owns no stake. In contrast, even academics have ulterior motives - they are out to prove they know something and that they are experts in their field. Consultants are out to get their next assignment. Vendors have something to sell.

Journalists walk the middle road, ensuring that all sides of the equation are addressed. They're the ones that ask questions nobody else would ask or answer. In comforting the afflicted, they tell it like it is. In afflicting the comfortable, they keep them on their toes.

Crafting an article

It's much better to be chased than to do the chasing and risk getting rejected. I said yes to this freelance opportunity before I had time to think.

My first thoughts were 1) I've written about this topic already, 2) it's going to be easy, 3) why not?

I spent all evening making phone calls while surfing the Web to update myself on the industry. It

was full of bad news. Who will feel like talking to me?

Like previous times, the first few phone calls were very informative. I thought I had the storyline nailed down. The next few calls started to confuse me. People disagreed. There was no consensus.

Do I write about the big picture? Or drill down to the nitty gritty? I want to get views from both sides of the Atlantic and from different types of players. But I also want to deliver real value.

I don't want to be buried in information that I can't use. This is not a dissertation, but merely 1,800 words which will fill three or four pages.

As I agonise over this, I feel it taking over my life. I can't sit down and practise piano with ease anymore. I have a deadline.

I told my friend, it's like figuring out what to cook for a dinner party. You've been to such dinner parties before and you know what you like. But you're not sure what the others like. You have to survey previous guests, look at previous menus.

At some point, the information collection stage has to cease. Then I will choose the ones that I will use. By that time, I should have a plot. But until then, I'm a slave to the deadline.

Making you want to read it

My professor friend told me that in his academic world, "publish or perish" is really true. He doesn't care if nobody reads it or understands it as long as it's published.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work for newspapers and trade magazines. You have to write such that people will want to buy and read. Similarly, well-written content on web sites will attract traffic.

If two sources are both accurate, I would choose to read the one that is easier and more interesting to read.

Readable but incomprehensible

When I received the first submission of this article, I scanned it. It read well, that is to say, there were no bumps or hiccups. So I congratulated the press agent and put it aside.

Two weeks later when I had the time to pay attention, that is, not packing, travelling, or unpacking, I read it again. This time I had a few questions.

Initially my line editor, the re-write guy, had also thought there was no problem with it. The second time we talked about it, we went through the entire article line by line. The more we dug into it, the more questions we had. This went on for an hour before we discovered that we had both fallen into the same trap. It was readable, but incomprehensible.

If we apply the same standards of readability and comprehensibility of newspaper articles to technical articles, we would be equally demanding. Why should technical articles be reserved for post graduate students? Why can't they also be easy reading like the kind of gossip columns we like to read to relax us?

Just because the subject is deep doesn't mean it has to be fearful.

So I scheduled a meeting with the author. Over a long cup of coffee, we tore the article apart. Sentence by sentence I grilled the young author. He had re-written the original white paper from four years ago as it was too technical for his clients. After two-and-a-half hours, he also became convinced that his version needed a major rewrite.

These days I find myself reading numerous technical articles without fully understanding what they are about. It's like a kind of sleeping pill that my doctorate thesis once served while I was still fine-tuning it. Are such incomprehensible monsters a deliberate strategy that consultants

use? Readers read it, don't understand it, but conclude that it must be very important. So they engage the consultants who wrote it.

But for publishers, it's not enough to make it readable. It has to be understandable. And for me, even though my name doesn't appear on the article itself, I don't want to waste space publishing an article that will confuse my readers. Sadly many authors still measure their productivity and reputation by the number of articles they've published rather than the number of readers who understand what they wrote.

Bad writing

One doesn't know what bad writing is until one's seen good writing. I don't profess to write well, but it is painful to read bad writing.

What's bad writing? When it is tiresome to read. Indigestible. Incomprehensible.

How often have we been intimidated by the verbosity of the text - and fail to question what the author is trying to say? How often do we numb ourselves in passive tense and long sentences? The long and winding road to nowhere. When we eventually get there, we're lost.

Spelling mistakes, typing errors, and other grammatical inconsistencies aside, bad writing plagues the good. We are crippled by how we think we ought to write. Why can't we write the way we talk? No - oh- no. That's too informal. We think writing for publishing requires some kind of formality. So we handcuff ourselves to a communication medium that makes it more complicated than necessary.

Organised to write

Once you've collected your material, organised it, then free yourself to write. Writing is two-thirds research and organisation.

If you have it in your head, that's the first step. But you can't write until you've organised what you will write.

Writing can be so painful sometimes. When I complained of my shoulder

aches to a freelance journalist, he empathised. He told me how he locked himself in a room and typed. He got cramps from sitting in a weird position for so long.

Starting is difficult. I like to write the first draft without referring to anything. Sort of like what I'm doing now. But I forget that this is the way to start. I get carried away by "collecting" information without bothering to organise it. Then I try to start writing and realise I can't. I'm too intimidated by what others have written. What could I possibly add to this?

Draft an outline. How could I forget my basic English writing course way back in junior high school? Writing is repetitive. Draft after draft. Writing is rewriting. The way to better writing must thus be better organisation.

Learning to write

It took me almost five years to write like an academic. I had to unlearn my active tensed terse one-page business letters to adopt passive tensed, long-winded, 100% referenced and rigorously annotated reports.

News writing is just the reverse. It is short. Start by telling them the most important thing. Each sentence thereafter is less important and serves to back up the previous. The inverted pyramid can be cut from the bottom and still retain its meat.

Feature writing, on the other hand, is not a pyramid but a building. The feature article holds the reader's attention throughout. The ideas are more complicated. The hardest part is to write the introduction.

Piecing the jigsaw puzzle

I should write serious articles more often. Then it won't be an arduous uphill climb each time, for I forget what it's like the last time.

First I have an idea. It could be a simple question or a fragment of a topic. I speak to a few people and read a few articles. After a couple of days I determine whether there's a plot that is timely and relevant.

Sometimes it turns out there's nothing worth writing about. I reach a dead end and have to switch topics. It's agonising to have to start over, for time wasted is words wasted.

Searching is part of the process. I look for topics. I look for experts. I use my contacts. I surf the Net. I check corporate web sites and get the press officers (public relations, media contacts, etc) to help me locate the right person and set up a phone interview.

It's not the number of interviews that counts but the quality of the information I get. I try to get different kinds of interviewees to ensure a good diversity: by geography, by type of organisation, and by novelty (I like to quote people I haven't quoted before).

After various phone calls, I transcribe my handwritten notes onto the computer. I send back what I've written to get technical corrections or additions.

My interactions with my sources are almost always exclusively by telephone and e-mail. People who don't know me respond to me because of the publication I'm writing for. They get a confirmation of who I am by what I've done, in terms of my previous articles that have appeared in print.

The two constraints I work against are the space allocated to me (word count) and deadline. So I count the number of words while I piece together the interview notes. All along, I'm developing the theme and outlining the plot. Conscious of time, I need to reserve the last few days for rewriting.



Editor

Anne Ku writes everyday, via e-mails, instant messenger chats, in the *Bon Journal*, and various other places. After working full-time as a magazine editor for McGraw-Hill, she is now freelancing. She believes in continuous practice and feedback.

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