

APPENDIX

Finding a Staff Job

If you like what you've heard about feature writing, and you are ready to spend time out in the rain knocking on doors as Jimmy Breslin once defined the profession, then you are ready to make a decision. You can either take the freelance approach or you can go for a regular job. Either way, you won't find it easy. Most in the profession have had to work their way up, and working your way up is harder now than it has ever been in the past. Feature editor Richard Cheverton provides some of the good news and some of the not so good news about finding a job in feature writing. Once again, the emphasis is on newspapers, but the advice applies to many other avenues in publishing as well.

A Great Editor Tells Who He Would Hire (and includes some dirty little secrets)

Richard Cheverton

First, Some Bad News

It's tougher to get a job in newspaper journalism than ever before. That's because there are fewer newspapers — and those that have had the good fortune to survive the shakeout of the past few years are being run by hard-eyed managers who are far more interested in

ever-increasing quarterly earnings than in adding to fixed expenses by hiring more people.

In general, newspapers are finding ways to do more with fewer people. My own newspaper, *The Orange County Register* in booming Southern California, is a good example. Circulation is increasing at about 6 percent a year, outstripping the county's 2 percent growth rate. The paper was numero uno in advertising lineage in the country last year, displacing the mighty *Los Angeles Times*. We'll probably repeat that feat this year.

You'd think we'd be in Fat City when it comes time to figure the budget.

Naaah. Last year, we added two bodies to the features department—one, a restaurant critic (a highly specialized position that almost no beginner would be eligible to fill, unless his name was Wolfgang Puck).

The other position argued for itself.

And here we get to our first dirty little secret:

If You Are a Beginning Writer, and if You Don't Absolutely, Positively Burn to Write, Become a Copyeditor

Yes, the second position we added was on the desk. Growing newspaper equals growing copy desk: it's a gimme.

The nasty fact is that there is, generally, an oversupply of writers. If you, as an editor, want to put a lot of ink on a lot of paper, there are dozens of willing wage-slaves available.

But copyeditors?

Look at the ads in *Editor & Publisher* classifieds: My guess is that on any given week, help-wanted ads for copyeditors (always written with a slight note of yearning and desperation) will outnumber ads for writers (and, in particular, beginning writers) by a factor of ten.

There's a reason for that. Copyediting is tough.

Copyeditors do the grunt-work: they stare into VDTs all day; they wrestle with the myriad ways that writers fracture the mother tongue; they contend with the composing room; they live with the knowledge that, like the warrior-king in the Golden Bough, tomorrow always brings more problems, more errors . . . that the copyeditor's job always involves paranoia and defeat.

But . . .

Copyeditors are valuable little jewels to be collected and pro-

tected and guarded by the astute editor-manager. You could send every writer in a newspaper home, and the paper would come out on the morrow: you'd simply turn on the wire machines. But guess who has to turn raw copy into the stuff that comes off on your fingers?

Copyeditors. Without them, the operation grinds to a halt.

It's no surprise that so many managing editors or executive editors have come up through the copy desk route. On the desk, you have an intimate view of the way the newspaper actually works. Or doesn't, which is even more important.

So, my advice to someone who yearns to be in newspapering (and who wants, one day, to run the show) is: consider copyediting.

The work is there; you can chuck the job if the editor so much as looks cross-eyed at you and know, with certainty, that you'll be snapped up overnight; you'll have your choice of garden-spots and, if you are sufficiently footloose, you can copyedit your way across the country and back again.

So, end of aside: at least think about becoming a copyeditor.

(This message brought to you by the Desperate Assistant Managing Editor's Society of America.)

But, of course, you yearn to write, don't you?

(And, unfortunately, your father doesn't own the local daily.)

It's time to face another unpleasant fact.

How can one put this delicately?—it's tougher than ever before to break in if you're a white male.

Which is the reverse of saying: Times have never been better for women and minorities in the newspaper business. Many newspapers have very aggressive affirmative action policies in their newsrooms. At *The Orange County Register*, for example, all editorial managers must find a qualified minority finalist for each job opening. We're aggressive in promoting women into management positions, which means that, as women climb the ladder, they tend to be replaced by either other women or by minorities.

The hard, cold, inescapable truth is that white males now have to be extra-talented—almost irresistible—to muscle their way to the front of the hiring line.

And, as we've observed, the line is getting longer as the newspaper business shrinks. And, guess what? As the business contracts, people tend to cling to their jobs longer and take fewer risks. Job-jumping is way down; as the baby boomers mature, they put down roots. The "churn" that's so essential to opening up jobs to relative

newcomers (or even mid-career types) is slowing.

And, while Newspaper Guild units are losing power at many papers, being a member in good standing is the closest thing to tenure outside a university.

Bottom line: Getting a good newspaper job is like jumping into a pool of molasses: you can make it to the other end, but it's going to be slow.

Which brings us to dirty little secret number two:

Hiring is a Crap Shoot . . . and Nobody Really Knows How to Play the Game

I have lost count of the number of people I've hired in my seven years at *The Register*. I'd guess it's 30 or so, and that's an extraordinary number for most editors. (But *The Register* has undergone an extraordinary period of growth and reformation; essentially, the newspaper's staff was replaced, top to bottom.)

In making those hires—and, thank goodness, most have worked out really well—I've come to know that hiring is the ultimate gamble. You never, ever really know what a person is going to do when he or she moves into a new job.

It's similar to what you see in major league baseball. A big-ticket free agent goes to a new ball club and has a terrible year. A star pitcher can't find the plate; a slugger goes into a two-year deep freeze.

I've seen the same thing happen in the newspaper business—so often, in fact, that I've finally learned that:

No Hire Is Predictable . . . for Either Party to the Transaction

It goes, I suppose, to the hiring process itself: The applicant shows up, freshly scrubbed, on his best behavior, alert, adrenaline pumping, slightly disoriented.

There ensues a ritual as elaborate as the mating dance of the prairie chicken. There's much preening and cooing, with each party to the transaction trying to discover what the other person really wants to hear. It's a classic courtship.

But—as with courtship—you can never know what the person looks like in the morning until it's too late.

Actually making a hire is really one of the great existential leaps

of faith. Some editors tie themselves in knots, agonizing over real and imagined differences between candidates. One set of editors, who shall remain nameless, interviewed a flotilla of job-seekers for the better part of a half-year, then finally hired a person who worked at the newspaper and who was one of the first applicants they interviewed.

Did these editors really know what they were doing? Not likely.

The result is that a lot of bigger newspaper outfits — the chains, in particular — resort to elaborate stratagems to winnow out the potential .300 hitters from the future million-dollar bench-warmers. Knight-Ridder, for example, has its infamous hiring test, the most daunting quiz this side of the SATs, full of worrisome little traps (do they still analyze a candidate's handwriting?) and questions for which there are no "right" answers (and if you believe that, let's talk Florida swampland).

Having sat in on a few sessions with corporate headshrinkers discussing the potential of either job-seekers or current employees up for promotion . . . well, all I can say is that I was (and am) appalled. It's far too easy for managers to abdicate to the self-confident men in funny-looking sports jackets (who dresses most of these psychologists, anyway?); it's easy and it's harmful.

The newspaper business used to be the last refuge for the terminally different; for the square pegs who refused to be jammed into round holes. For people who bore some resemblance to the newspaper's actual readers, in all of their idiosyncrasies.

Now, the news biz is full of the certifiably sane.

Guess what newspaper executives discuss with alarm these days?

Declining (some might say plummeting) circulation and penetration and readership (particularly among the young) numbers.

Do you think that maybe, just maybe, newspapers are too sane? Think these problems are interrelated?

The prospective writer needs to know that, in many cases, he or she will be scrutinized by unseen persons . . . a shrink, perhaps, or a zealous personnel department.

I'm damned if I know what to tell an aspiring writer confronted by this, beyond: fake 'em out, if you can. I know this is heresy coming from a manager, but I'm convinced that any newspaper is better off with a few talented misfits.

You might as well be the one.

An Aside: Let's Talk Clips

The classic double-bind: how's the beginner supposed to amass a great-looking portfolio of clips? How important are they, anyway?

This, in turn, suggests yet another double-bind: how can the beginner amass good clips without being written into the ground?

It's my opinion that, while entry-level jobs are fairly easy to come by (there are always small newspapers willing to pay minimum wage to college graduates with several internships at major newspapers on their résumés), many of these jobs are perilous to the emerging writer.

Too many smaller papers are run by big chains that, putting it gently, have no understanding of journalism. It is a great tragedy of the business and of the country that many, many smaller papers have fallen prey to conglomerateurs and takeover artists who could just as well be putting together empires of toxic chemical plants.

A beginning job at one of these rural or suburban sweatshops is worse than no job at all. The editors at these papers will not give the beginning writer the kind of instructive editing necessary to learn the craft—let alone the art—of good writing. In many cases, they will insist that the young writer learn bad writing habits.

And, above all, they will cause the young writer to value production—sheer verbal tonnage—over quality.

As an editor who has hired dozens of people, I have seen too many candidates whose files are thick, brimming over, with clips. And all of them are formulaic, predictable, mechanical.

Personally, I think it would be better for the young writer to spend a little less time writing (and career-building) in his or her formative (meaning: immediate, post-college) years.

If you have to go to work, pick the brightest, quirkiest, most individual small paper you can find (yes, they still exist); work long enough to save some bucks and then travel. You'll find a good market for travel stories (and travel writing can be an entrée to a bigger newspaper). You can string for wire services or even for larger newspapers. Sometimes there are local English-language papers that count on the passing stream of traveling journalists.

Or take the opportunity to get involved in a political campaign; there's no better way to prepare for being a political reporter. Or find a garret and write the Great American Novel.

In other words: if you're young, you're supposed to take risks. Take them.

How About Something That's Not Quite a Newspaper?

In my opinion, some of the best nurseries for creating talented writers are the so-called "alternative" newspapers.

In case you haven't noticed, some of them have gotten very big: the *Phoenix* (Arizona) *New Times* prints tabloid issues of well over 100 pages. Their classified ads must bring tears to the eyes of the ad guys at the *Phoenix Republic* (which, in its usual, clumsy way, once tried to put the *New Times* out of business by publishing its own weekly entertainment tabloid, which quickly flopped).

The owners of the *New Times* have bought or opened papers in Miami and Denver. In Boston, the *Phoenix* is equally hefty. There are healthy alternative papers in just about every metropolitan area and, in general, the level of writing in most is far more passionate, more committed, more interesting than in most big metro papers.

Oh, the metro editors look down their noses at the supposed lack of "objectivity" in the alternatives but, again, ask the question: Who's getting the younger readers?

In plain truth, your future as a writer may not be with a big metro paper—which may, in fact, be a dinosaur stumbling toward a future tar pit.

What the hell; with the costs of desktop publishing plummeting, you can just as well start your own newspaper. (As A.J. Liebling said: "Freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one.")

The newspaper business—big, troubled metros aside—is wide open to those willing to innovate, take risks, dare to fail. The future of newspapers may not involve "paper" at all. A person with a FAX machine has, in effect, a kind of printing press; who knows what impact these technologies will have on the business of communication?

But You Want to Work for a "Real" Newspaper . . .

Haven't talked you out of it?

Well, yes, there is the incomparable rush of going down to the press room and watching thousands of newspapers streaming off the big Goss presses; it's then that you begin to sense the real power

of newspapers. These objects will be held, read, consumed by real people.

So, a final few thoughts for those of you who (like this writer) simply cannot imagine life outside a newspaper's newsroom. First, another rule:

There Are No Rules in Hiring

Every manager has his or her own quirks. Some like to do all the talking; others challenge the applicant to fill the silence. Some ask off-the-wall questions ("What's the funniest thing that ever happened to you?"), others revert to the formulaic ("What are your strengths and weaknesses?").

Some rely on clips—heavily. Others see them as a minefield, full of rewriting by editors who have covered up an applicant's fondness for libel.

Some managers succumb to the Romance of the Other—the idea that an operation always needs a transfusion of "fresh blood"; others seek stability and continuity by promoting from within.

Your job as a job-seeker is to do your research: call around, get a handle on the person you'll be confronting. It's a small, incestuous business: somewhere there will be someone with a book on the person you're going to be dealing with. An aside:

You Can Never Know Too Much

In hiring, I've been impressed by how little most applicants know about *The Register* or Southern California; how little, in short, they've prepared themselves.

An applicant with so-so clips could bowl me over by telling me what my problems are, what my newspaper needs to do to succeed, what that person can do for me in filling a gap in coverage.

It's not hard to figure out: there are materials available on most communities that can give you a fast picture of its demographics and of the newspaper's success in reaching its market.

A few calls to people who know the business will tell the job-seeker chapters about the internal politics of a newspaper. Ex-employees are invaluable in this regard.

Anything that will give you an edge is fair game.

I'll never forget how impressed I was with one job applicant. As

a rule, *The Register* (and many other newspapers) asks candidates to critique the paper; we send out a dozen issues or sections and usually work the critique into our interviewing process.

This applicant did the critique—on videotape. He flipped through the pages on camera, told us what he liked, what he would do differently, what he'd change.

You can be sure that he had the editor's undivided attention. And he got bonus points for inventiveness and chutzpah.

Anything that will give you an edge—use it. A final insight:

You're Not Being Hired For a Job, You're Being Admitted to a Club

Whether or not a manager admits it to himself, when all of the clips have been read, all of the reference calls made, all of the tests or interviews totaled up, it comes down to a guess about the person's character.

And the big question is: How will this character fit the other characters in this newsroom?

It's a matter of adding to the mix; the smart hiring editor thinks of each job opening in relation to the strengths and weaknesses in each of the other persons holding jobs in the newsroom.

At *The Register*, we use the expression "tread life" (as in tires) a lot when we're hiring. By that, we mean that we're looking at that person's potential to learn and grow, to add to the "mix."

Yes, we're looking for people with edges, interesting rough spots, the square pegs for our round holes. But, still, it's every manager's nightmare that he'll hire someone who is talented, brilliant, qualified in every way, and that the person will come into the small, hermetic realm of the newsroom and create instant discord and havoc.

I've made a couple of those hires. It's an unending hangover.

What does this mean to you as a job-seeker?

I would be stunned (and impressed) if a job-seeker asked me, at some point, "How will I fit into the mix of people in this department? What do you see me bringing to the mix of talent that you need?"

I'd pay a lot of attention to that sort of applicant.

I'd also pay a lot of attention to an applicant who was concerned

with what my newspaper could teach—in the near-term and the long run. In other words, an applicant who had a sense of what the newspaper was trying to do and how he or she could fit into that.

I'd be impressed.

And I'd probably try my damndest to hire that person.