

CHAPTER TWO

Assignments That Make Great Stories

Writing coach and teacher Roy Peter Clark is about to tell you how to find great feature story ideas. However, if you are a freelance writer, finding ideas is only the beginning. Next, you have to be sure the ideas match your market. Even staff writers have to do this. An article about a football player might not fly in a feature section, but an article about how his family copes with the on-field violence will. On the national level, you might think *Sports Illustrated* for the player himself, but *Redbook* for his family. But that's the obvious stuff. On a more subtle level, page through the women's magazines at a big newsstand. I did it recently and found 36 different women's magazines. *LEAR'S* won't buy what *Good Housekeeping* does, nor will *Elle* buy what *Parenting* does. That's why many freelancers specialize in certain markets. When an idea comes along that's right for their market, they instinctively know it will appeal to their audience, and, equally important, to their editor. For in the end, an idea is only a good one when an editor wants it and guides it into print.

Finding Feature Story Ideas

Roy Peter Clark

The great journalists—reporters or editors—see the world as a storehouse of story ideas. They have a form of X-ray vision that allows them to see human action behind the thick walls of faceless institu-

tions. They are curious about everything, are fascinated with how things work, and live to uncover secrets.

Where do good story ideas come from? The answer is everywhere. They come from reporters and assigning editors, of course, but also from publishers and their spouses, copyeditors, copy clerks, readers and sources. Any idea can and should be tested. No idea is inherently bad. In fact, a story concept that seems to lead through dense jungles and impenetrable thickets may be the only path to lost cities and buried treasures.

The most important source of story ideas is your newspaper and its competitors. Newspapers are filled with undeveloped stories, announcements of meetings and events, of tiny clues that could lead to interesting narratives. One day I read in the paper an announcement concerning a young minister planning to spend the weekend preaching from a little house built atop a telephone pole. He called it his "polepit," and all were invited to hear him preach the gospel from on high.

The story reminded me of those ancient hermits who would preach from mountaintops or high trees or poles. So I rushed down to interview the minister. As soon as I arrived at his church, I understood what this event was all about. His church was on a street with about a dozen other churches. What I had was a story about this town's competition for souls, and the preacher's publicity stunt could be judged in that light. The seed for the story was the little announcement in the paper.

There are secret stories even in the press release describing the new phone book. When I received that assignment, I challenged myself to take this lemon of a story and make lemonade. I first thought that I would turn the story into a book review, imagining the phone book as having more characters than a Russian novel. Someone suggested that I call the first name listed in the book, but it turned out to be AAAA Roofing, followed by all the businesses with AAA initials. There was a business story there, perhaps. But I found my way while looking up the last name in the book: "Z. Zyzor." What a strange name, I thought, and what must it be like to be on the bottom of every alphabetical listing ever conceived?

I called the number and got the cafeteria of the local post office. I dialed again, and got the same number. No one knew of any Z. Zyzor. I used the city directory and discovered that, indeed, the address next to the name was that of the post office. I called the person-

nel department of the post office, but got nowhere.

When I had almost given up hope of solving this little mystery, I got a call from the postmaster. "I hear you've been asking about Z. Zyzor."

My palms were sweating. Finally he told me the story.

Back in 1948, the letter carriers decided to pitch in money to get a telephone installed at the post office for their personal use. "We invented the name Z. Zyzor. We told our families: 'If you need me in an emergency, just look up the last number in the book.' "

That is how a story about the new phone book made the front page of the local section on a pretty busy news day.

But what about reporters who are not so ingenious? What if they have learned, perhaps from bad editors, to see news, and the world, in the most conventional ways? What kind of coaching will help them open their eyes and ears? Try these approaches:

Find the Person Behind the Story, and the Story Behind the Person

A follow-up to a story about a postal rate increase became a tale about the unpopularity of postal clerks. The story began with this lead:

"When Marion W. McDonald went to work for the postal service back in 1945, you could mail a letter for three cents and a post-card for a penny."

After a description of the rate increases, there is this quote:

" 'Shakespeare could explain why the post office gets such bad press,' said McDonald to a reporter. 'Do you remember Mark Antony's words over the body of Julius Caesar?'

"The reporter looked down at his notes like a nervous school-boy.

"McDonald peered hard into the reporter's eyes. His forum was framed by scales, meters and postal charts. He spoke his lines accurately and with conviction:

" 'The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones.' "

I was fascinated and delighted by the postal worker who quoted Shakespeare. I wanted my readers to share that same experience.