

## CHAPTER THREE

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# Getting the Story Down on Paper

**P**eople come into feature writing because they're confident they can write. So, in the beginning at least, most believe they are writers first. If they were just reporters, they would probably work on the news side. But the lesson all these would-be feature writers must learn, and a lesson that is preached over and over again, is that feature writing is nothing without reporting. And what is reporting? It is everything that precedes writing. I have asked the contributors to this section to break the process down in terms of research, interviewing and then organization. Beyond that there is the art of simply hanging around, of being there for the right moment. David Finkel, a writer at the *The Washington Post Magazine*, puts it all together for us, and we see how the best nonfiction writing can't happen without solid reporting.

### On Being a Reporter First

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*David Finkel*

One day, long ago, an editor took aside his new feature writer and tried to make a point.

"I just want to tell you, you're some kind of writer," the editor said. "In fact, it's an interesting thing. Whenever there's a hole in one of your stories, you write around it so smoothly that most readers probably aren't even aware a hole is there."

"Thank you," I said, missing the point.

And with that, I was put on the police beat.

"It's time you learned to be a reporter," the editor said. "Some-day, you'll thank me."

Well, I don't know about that, but in the dozen or so years since that day, I have learned two general truths about journalism.

One is that writing, for the most part, isn't a lot of fun. Some people may think otherwise, and that's fine. I have met all kinds of people over the years, including those who think it's fun to mock the injured and razz the dead. In such a world, surely there's a place for those who think writing is a good time. Not me. Writing and I have had our moments, but for the most part I'd rather be reporting.

Truth number two: reporting, for the most part, is fun. Tracking down the arcane, interviewing the reluctant, observing the hidden — all of that can be a joy. And a good thing, too, because in the line of work we've chosen, reporting — hard, solid reporting — is at the center of what we do.

Think about the best journalism you have read, and you'll realize this is true. The best stories may seem to turn on wonderful writing, but if you look closely enough you'll discover the true strength of these stories is that every sentence reports some specific piece of information. Maybe it's a fact that gives context. Maybe it's a quote that establishes tone. Maybe it's a description that defines the background.

Whatever it is, it provides some kind of essential detail, and when all the details are added together, the result is a story that takes a reader to a particular time and makes it so real it's as if the reader is his own witness.

The best stories, in other words, are more than a retelling, they're an experience of the senses. A reader doesn't only learn something from a good feature story, he feels it. He sees it, smells it, hears it. He comes to know it down to its most affecting details. He is there.

That's the reader's end.

The writer's end is to regard feature writing as anything but a soft, comfortable undertaking. Put simply, the best stories require a lot of work. There is no formula for producing these stories, but there is a general process to follow that can be broken down into three broad areas: research, interviewing and observation.

In this process, writing is the translation. Reporting is the key.

## Research

A colleague of mine, Jack Reed, knows about research.

One time, tracking down a trail of receipts involving a local sheriff, Reed ended up in a small building in North Carolina. "It was a metal shed, like something you'd put your lawnmower in," he says. "It had a metal door and one window that didn't open. It was hot and filled with boxes of gas-purchase receipts for airplanes. It was right off the end of an airport runway, and when jets took off the noise was deafening."

Reed spent a day and a half in that shed sifting through thousands of receipts and never found what he was looking for. A year and a half later, the miseries of those hours were assuaged when he received a Pulitzer Prize for the things he did find. But to this day, the time in the shed remains fresh in his mind. "I'll never forget it," he says. "It was like hell."

The point is, Reed did it because of the potential to make a good story better, and that, at its most basic, is what research is. It's an essential source that can provide you with all kinds of information, from what you don't know to what you haven't thought of. It's a necessity no matter if you are doing an investigative piece like Reed or a simple feature story.

The wonderful part of research is that the paths it can take you down are almost limitless. There are the obvious sources, such as newspaper and magazine clippings, but I've also gotten information from probate files, divorce files, voters' registration records, the Census Bureau, the Weather Service, old high school yearbooks, even the documentary stamps attached to someone's recorded land deeds.

At the least, research provides names, addresses and other starting points for interviews. At best, it provides the kind of authoritative detail that can set a story apart.

Such was the case when I set out to write about a man named Charles Griffith, who was about to go on trial for first-degree murder. This was the lead I wrote:

MIAMI— He was a distraught man that day, a man who sang lullabies and wept. With one hand, he held a gun. With the other, he stroked the smooth face of his daughter, a 3-year-old existing in limbo between life and death.

An hour before, he had given her what he thought was a fatal dose

of Valium. But here she was, still breathing, her tiny chest rising and falling rhythmically, if ever so slightly.

She was in a crib at Miami Children's Hospital, lying on her back. She had been there for eight months, since the day she nearly suffocated. He leaned over the crib railing and looked at her eyes. They were open.

They stared ahead, mirrored no emotions, saw nothing. It was the same for her other senses. The damage to her brain was total and irreversible, and because of it, she couldn't hear his weeping, and she couldn't feel his last touch goodbye before he aimed the gun at her heart.

He shot her twice. He dropped the gun. He prayed that her suffering was over. He fell into a nurse's arms, cried and said he wanted to die. He said, "Maybe I should get the electric chair to make things even. I killed my daughter. I shot her twice. But I'm glad she has gone to heaven."

What makes that lead worth bringing up is that it was built entirely from documents. Griffith, in jail at the time, would only consent to a brief interview. It was the same for the police and attorneys, and none of the witnesses scheduled to testify would talk at all.

Fortunately, there was a fat court file. At first I went through it for basic information, such as names of nurses and other witnesses to call. Then, when it became apparent that none of them wanted to talk to a reporter, I went through the file again, this time concentrating on sworn statements the witnesses had given attorneys in pre-trial proceedings. Those statements, balanced against each other and bolstered by police and hospital reports, provided every detail in my lead as well as the emotional heart of the rest of the story. Documents, nothing more, allowed me to write of the little girl's life:

She would sleep with her eyes open. She couldn't swallow. She was fed through a tube into her stomach. For the first few months, a bolt was inserted into her head to monitor any swelling in her brain. She was kept from further deterioration only through incredible medical wizardry: Nystatin in her mouth to fight off infection. Lacri-Lube in her eyes when they got too dry. Tylenol as a suppository to control her temperature.

And an entire medicine cabinet fed into her through the gastronomy tube: Pedalyte for nourishment, Colace for constipation, Phenobarbital to control seizures, Bactrim to control infection, Valium to relax her muscles, and more.

Also:

He would dab lemon juice on her lips. He would run a cloth under cool water, lay it on her leg and say, "Joy, this is cold." He would put filters over a flashlight, aim it toward her eyes, and say, "Joy, this is red."

He would say, "This is Daddy. If you can hear me, move your toes. If you love me, blink your eyes."

Admittedly, it's a rare case when documents are so complete. In almost any story, though, a few hours of research will at least provide a solid beginning. It will give you background. It will help you focus an idea. If you start the reporting process by building a foundation of information, it will be easier to move on to the next step, which is going out there to meet your story head on.

### Interviewing

COCOA—Behold the fat man. Go ahead. Everybody does. He doesn't mind, honestly. That's how he makes his living. Walk right up to him. Stand there and look.

Stand there and stare. Gape at the layers of fat, the astonishing girth, the incredible bulk. Imagine him in a bathtub. Or better yet, on one of those flimsy antique chairs. Boom! If you're lucky, maybe he'll lift his shirt. If you're real lucky, maybe he'll rub his belly.

Don't be shy. Ask him a question.

"What's your name?"

"T.J. Jackson. Better known as Fat Albert."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-three."

"How much do you weigh?"

"Eight hundred and ninety-one pounds."

"Gawd! How many meals you eat a day?"

"Three."

"What—three cows?"

Now there was an easy interview. For three hours, I stood next to Fat Albert and watched his night on the midway unfold. I was prepared to ask him all kinds of questions, but I didn't have to. The people who came by asked every question I had thought of, and more. They asked him how much he weighed, how much he ate, whether he had a girlfriend, whether he had sex, exactly how he

was able to have sex, and on and on. They asked, and I became a stenographer.

If only it was always that easy. It isn't, though, which is why so many writers worry endlessly over interviews. They worry about the order of their questions. They worry about impressing the person they're interviewing. They worry about whether to come across as tough or sympathetic. They worry about what to wear and whether to use a tape recorder.

I know they worry about these things because I worry about them, too.

In truth, though, I know that interviewing isn't a complicated process. Here's what you do: You think of some questions. You start with the easy ones. And then you let things drift where they might until the interview becomes a conversation. Sometimes it happens right away. More often, it takes several attempts. But it does happen.

I interview the main subjects of a piece two, three, four times, usually over a period of days, until I feel I've gotten a true sense of who they are.

I remind myself that I'm not conducting the interview to impress the person I'm writing about, that my obligation is to readers. In this equation, no question is too trivial or inane if it leads to a clearer, stronger piece.

Finally, I remind myself that lots of things are going to go wrong. Maybe everything.

That's what happened when I interviewed a man named Jack Bowman, whose daughter had been murdered by serial killer Theodore Bundy. For 10 years, Bowman never said anything publicly about the case. Then, two hours after Bundy was executed, Bowman consented to an interview.

This was the lead I wrote for a sidebar to my newspaper's main execution piece:

Jack Bowman was up most of the night. At 6 A.M., when it was clear he couldn't fall back asleep, he got out of bed and walked down the hall toward the kitchen. His wife Runelle already had the coffee on. He said good morning to her. He turned on the radio. He turned on the TV, too, keeping the sound low.

At 7 A.M., the news came on, and Bowman watched intently. The pictures were of the scene at Florida State Prison. The prison itself, a long flat shadow, was in the background. In the foreground was a steady stream of cars, and in the cars were people holding signs. One

of the signs read, "Burn Bundy Burn." Another read, "Roast in peace." Another read, "Chi-O, Chi-O, it's off to hell I go."

At 7:18, the phone rang. It was the Florida Attorney General's Office in Tallahassee. "Mr. Bowman, this is Paul Freeman," the caller said. "This is to let you know that the sentence has been carried out. The execution occurred at 7:07, and he was pronounced dead at 7:16."

In St. Petersburg, Jack Bowman hung up. A sensation of relief spread through him. It was a vague feeling—"flat" is a word he would use to describe it later—but relief nonetheless. Theodore Bundy was dead. At last.

What's instructive about the lead is that it came from an interview that went as badly as one can go. Bowman didn't want to talk at his house so he came to the newspaper where I work. The small room I had reserved for the interview couldn't be used after all, so we ended up in the middle of an auditorium. I decided the best way to begin the interview was to ask Bowman about his daughter; as soon as I did, he began to weep. Things disintegrated from there. My questions were awkward. My pacing was awful.

The saving grace is that Bowman, even in grief, was a decent man who allowed me to ask questions endlessly. And I did. I knew I wanted the story to begin with Bundy's death, and when Bowman wouldn't let me be with him during the time of the execution, I knew I would have to ask the kind of trivial-sounding questions that would allow me to put the reader there anyway.

So for a couple of hours, I asked Bowman what time he got up, what time his wife got up, who made the coffee, who turned on the TV, how many steps it was from the bedroom to the living room. I asked everything I could think of until I had enough material to describe a private, pivotal scene as if I had been in attendance.

The interview never did achieve the level of conversation, and yet it was ultimately successful because it did the most important thing of all. It got the details, and the details are what make a story vivid.

In a good story, in other words, the TV isn't just on, its volume is at a certain level.

In a good story, a paranoid schizophrenic doesn't just hear imaginary voices, he hears them say, "Go kill a policeman," and "You can't tell Aretha Franklin how to sing a song."

In a good story, an 11-year-old girl isn't just trapped in the rubble of the Soviet Armenian earthquake . . . "she was afraid to

open her eyes out of fear of what she might see. She heard a noise and grew more afraid until she realized it was the sound of her own breathing. Only then did she conclude she was alive. She opened her eyes, saw nothing, held her breath and listened, heard nothing, tried to move, couldn't."

### Observing

The girl in the rubble was named Ani Gabrielian. I met her a few months after the earthquake when she and her father Simon came to the United States for medical help. Shortly after they returned to Armenia, I traveled there to find them. The result was a series of stories that, for me, reinforced the importance of observation in the reporting process.

To anyone who has written a story, the value of observation is obvious. The most compelling stories are often a succession of pivotal moments, and seeing those moments unfold, rather than trying to re-create them, leads to a stronger, richer narrative.

It's obvious—and yet when I go out on stories, I often get so wrapped up in interviews that I forget to step back and become a passive observer. Lately, to overcome that, I've started doing two things.

When I arrive in a strange town, I don't go immediately to my first interview. Instead, I drive around for a while to get a feel for the landscape, the neighborhood, even the street the person I'm interviewing lives on. Doing this helps me settle down after a plane flight, and it also allows me to have a sense of place in mind when I begin asking questions.

I also try to look at any site that will be the focus of a narrative passage as if I were a photographer. I not only stand near something, I move away for a long view, I crouch down, I move left and right. I try to view it from every angle possible to see what might be revealed.

As you might imagine, I do see different things, all of which end up in my notebook. I fill up lots of notebooks on stories because I tend to write down everything I see, even if it's something like, "2 rocks off to left—sedimentary??—resemble poodle."

My hope is that as the reporting process continues, the significance of my notations will emerge. Usually, that doesn't happen; out of a 50-page notebook, I'll have 5 pages of possibly usable quotes, 10 pages of other possibly usable notes, and 35 pages of hieroglyphics.

Sometimes, though, as with Ani and Simon Gabrielian, it does happen.

If ever a story called for observation, it was Armenia after the earthquake of December 7, 1988. More than 25,000 people were killed in the earthquake, including Ani's mother and four of her seven brothers and sisters. Ani's primary injury was physical: She had a leg amputated. Her father Simon's injury was psychological: He was destroyed when he lost most of his family, and then he was destroyed again when, after seeing how well people in America live, he returned to Armenia where he had no place to live but an old railroad boxcar.

He and Ani spent four months in America. While they were here, I visited them frequently, interviewing them about what their lives had been like and what happened to them when the earthquake began. I also read everything I could find about Armenia, and I conducted dozens of interviews with academicians, geologists, architects, search-and-rescue experts, Soviet officials and Armenian-Americans.

Then, Ani and Simon left for Armenia, and I followed a few weeks later. The interviews and research I'd done helped tremendously, providing context for what I observed. But in the end, I used almost none of it because it was the observations themselves that made Ani and Simon's story at all affecting.

One section in particular demonstrates what I mean. It was the ending to the third day of a four-day series, and it described a private moment in Simon's life that came upon his return to a relative's apartment after he visited the graves of his wife and children:

The day is cool. The window is open. Simon sits in the living room, just sits, until his sister-in-law brings him an album of photographs of his children.

He opens the album and looks at the pictures slowly. After a while, his niece, Irina, comes in and begins playing the piano. She plays a piece by Beethoven, a sonata. Simon stops looking at the photographs, closes his eyes and listens.

In any city, in any place, there are the sounds of a day going by. On this day, in this place, the sounds are of some people whose lives are slowly coming to order.

There are footsteps crunching in the gravel.

There is a hushed conversation, too quiet to really hear.

There is a baby crying, and a car door closing.

There is a sonata being played on a piano.

There is a man beginning to cry.

And, soft as a whisper, there is the sound of someone bringing some photographs to his lips, photographs of some children who have died, the quiet sound of a kiss.

I remember the day that story was published. I was awake before dawn. I waited in bed, listening for the sound of the paper being delivered, and when it arrived, I remember reading those nine paragraphs and thinking that, after 12 years of writing newspaper stories, I finally wrote something I liked.

Six months later, those are some of the only paragraphs I've written that I can reread and feel a sense of accomplishment over, and the reasons are twofold.

First, being with Simon that day was one of those privileged moments that make feature stories worth doing. As I sat with Simon, I learned not only about him, but about people in general and about myself. When measured against the devastation of much of a country, the act of Simon kissing some pictures was a little thing to be sure, but it revealed a universal kind of emotion that helped readers see how deep and prolonged someone's grief can be.

Second, I was able to witness that scene because of preparation. I had done enough research about Armenia to have a basic understanding of its history. I had done enough interviews to understand the severity of the earthquake. And I had spent enough time with Ani and Simon for a rapport to develop. I have had people cry before in interviews, and often, as their tears flow, they look at me to see if I have noticed. It wasn't that way at all with Simon. At that time, he trusted me enough to act as if I wasn't there. I was transparent that day, and he was a grieving man alone. It was the purest of reporting of all.

### A Sense of Control

What all of this means is that a good story isn't just a bunch of pretty words. It's a flow of information in which every sentence has something to say. And—as my editor suggested so long ago—it's reporting that allows that to happen.

It's getting to know your subject. It's interviewing for the tiny details. It's watching events unfold.

If you do these things, you'll finish the reporting process in good shape. You'll be able to focus your story. You'll be able to organize your notes. You'll feel like you're in control. You might even feel giddy with success. And then, just when you thought you were having fun, you'll sit down and begin to write.

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**I**nterviewing is an unnatural act. You must sit with notebook and pen in hand, while scribbling notes, perhaps as a tape recorder runs nearby. In the back of your mind you know that accuracy is primary. That means you might have to frame a question several ways until you understand what is being said. At times you will feel a question is embarrassing or dumb, but you must ask it because it is much dumber and more embarrassing to write a story that is incomplete. Fortunately, most people want to talk about themselves. Often they will tell you things they have never said to anyone else. Sometimes an editor will ask you to do a simple interview, let's say with an author passing through town who will give you just an hour on his busy schedule. Then you will want to focus your interview around one theme. It might be as simple as how he came to write his new book. Some magazines have a vitae-like section where you might just have to ask the questions to fit the format. At other times you will be asked to do a full-blown profile, in which case you want to spend as much time with your subject as possible. One interview will probably be less than ideal because you want to dig beneath the veneer to find out what the subject is really made of. No one is better at this digging than Kay Miller of the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, who can get people to reveal things they normally would reserve only for close friends.

## Interviewing Techniques: Get Them to Talk

*Kay Miller*

I love interviewing. I love preparing to talk to someone I don't yet know. I love sparring with people who don't expect me to know as

