

CHAPTER FOUR

Elevating Mundane Writing to the Sublime

Too many news stories are filled with talking heads. By that, Jack Hart of the *Oregonian* in Eugene, Oregon, means people are simply quoted without us learning any more about them. In straight news stories, that's fine. Often all we want are the facts, nothing more. But in features, and especially in profiles, the readers want more. Hart compares it with writing novels. In great fiction you have more than just people talking. You have characters being developed. The same is true in literary nonfiction and should be true in writing profiles.

Writing Profiles Means Going Beyond Talking Heads

Jack Hart

If we wanted to spend our time reading résumés, we'd all be personnel managers.

And yet, the conventional newspaper profile all too often consists of nothing more than a tedious recounting of biographical facts. "He was born near Linton," writes our profiler, "and attended high school in Corona."

Such profiles usually go beyond the list of basic job application stats, of course. They add the personnel office's screening interview,

too. The nervous job applicant stands before the reader as quote after quote rolls out, each purely informational, each devoid of color or character, and each largely unrelated to the others. "I'm responsible for all shipping orders," says our applicant. "And I also like to jog."

Thus the personnel-office profile takes shape. A lead that identifies the subject. General biographical background with no particular focus. Then the chain of quotes, each joined to the next with a brief transition.

Such stories do justice to the word "profile" only in the first and second dictionary sense of the term—"a side view" or "an outline." They're holdovers from the antiquated view of the journalist as nothing more than a collector of bald facts, a recording device with no responsibility to serve readers by placing information in a meaningful context. They have nothing to do with what *Webster's New World* gives as a third definition of the profile—"a short, vivid biographical and character sketch."

Contrast the personnel-office approach with the form exploited by master profiler Gay Talese, whose more memorable character sketches were gathered in the 1970 anthology, *Fame and Obscurity* (reprinted in 1981 as a Dell paperback). When Talese tackles the likes of Frank Sinatra or Joe Louis, the subject lives on the page, breathing personality with all the intensity of a character by Larry McMurtry. When Talese finishes with his subject, the side view bores through the center of the subject, and the outline is fleshed out with human emotion, motivation and character. The resulting portrait meets the fundamental standard of success in profile writing: It explains why this particular human being ended up in this place, at this time, doing this thing.

Such a profile presents a theory of personality that persuades the reader through a careful recitation of evidence. In the end, it leaves the reader with new insight that goes far beyond bare biographical background and random utterances. It gives the why of a human being in a way that helps the reader understand the course of an individual life. A good profile leaves the reader confident that he could predict how the subject would act in a situation as yet un-lived.

The key to that kind of profile lies in the tricks of characterization developed in 250 years of writing the novel. They work equally well whether the subject is a product of life or of imagination, and Talese uses them profusely to explore the truths of human behavior

that often surface in the novel and remain hidden in the newspaper. Most of them show up in "Mr. Bad News," a classic profile of former *New York Times* obituary writer Alden Whitman. To construct his Whitman profile, which appears in *Fame and Obscurity*, Talese relied on a narrative line, vignettes and anecdotes, physical description and telling details.

A Narrative Line

A narrative line gives a novel its plot, but also serves as a vehicle for furthering characterization. Talese begins his portrait of Whitman as the obituary writer slips out of bed in the morning. The specifics of Whitman's early-morning habits tell more about his character than a volume of abstract observations. Talese could have described his subject as calm and measured. Instead, he revealed him as a morning tea-drinker and pipe-smoker.

Talese then followed Whitman through his morning routine, his daily commute to the *Times*, and his work in the newsroom, thereby pursuing a "day-in-the-life" action line common to newspaper and magazine profiles. The approach fits neatly into the limited space available for most newspaper profiles, but it allows readers a glimpse of the subject in a variety of personal and professional situations.

Still other narrative schemes can fit an expansive portrait into a tight frame. "The journalistic visit" takes the reader along on a trip to the subject's home or workplace. The extended anecdote breaks away from a revealing episode in the subject's life to slip in background and then returns to continue the action. Just about any story line with a beginning, a middle and an end will do:

His real teeth, all thirty-two of them, were knocked out or loosened by three strong-arm men in an alley one night in 1936 in Alden Whitman's hometown, Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was twenty-three years old then, a year out of Harvard and full of verve, and his assailants apparently opposed opinions supported by Whitman. He bears no ill will toward those who attacked him, conceding they had their point of view, nor is he at all sentimental about his missing teeth. They were full of cavities, he says, a blessing to be rid of them.

As it develops character, a narrative line adds yet another element missing from all too many newspaper profiles—it adds the

dramatic tension of a true story and makes readers eager to see how the episode comes out.

Vignettes and Anecdotes

"Mr. Bad News" contains more than a dozen anecdotes and at least that many vignettes. Each entertains in its own right, but each also reveals something of the theory Talese developed to explain Whitman's talent as an obituary writer. The subject emerges from the barrage of entertaining yarns as a fastidious, unflappable man, his "magpie mind" crammed with useful trivia. He has the romantic streak needed to appreciate the accomplishments of great artists and statesmen, the obsession with routine needed to love a sedentary assignment, and the passion for accuracy appropriate to the *New York Times*.

The tight focus displayed in Talese's anecdotes highlights two more attributes of the winning profile.

First, a short character sketch cannot hope to explain the complexities of an entire human being. So the successful profile writer concentrates on the one or two personality traits that seem central to the subject's newsworthy accomplishment. Virtually all of Talese's anecdotes relate to Whitman's personality and its contribution to his virtuosity as an obituary writer.

Second, Talese obviously culled the anecdotes he actually used from a much larger number. Focus grows out of careful selection, and anecdotes so perfectly focused suggest especially ruthless selection. And that, in turn, drives home the point that thorough, extensive reporting is an absolute requirement for each good profile. A quick interview and a couple of phone calls just won't yield the raw material needed for the sifting, winnowing and funneling that produce a controlled personality portrait.

Physical Description

By the time Talese wrote three lines of "Mr. Bad News" he'd launched an anecdote and told readers that Whitman is short, wears horn-rimmed glasses, and smokes a pipe. Other telling details follow within a page. Whitman has a full head of brown hair and a full bridge of false teeth. His face is round and his habitual expression is serious. He has surprisingly small blue eyes and a thick, reddish mustache.

An involved reader visualizes the profile subject acting out the ac-

tion line as it unfolds. A few carefully chosen visual details allow readers to construct their own images. The photo that runs with the copy won't create that kind of active involvement, and the only details necessary to create an image are the three or four that set the subject apart from other human beings. Yet many newspaper profiles contain only mundane physical details of the sort shared by half the human race. Surprisingly often, they contain no physical description at all.

Telling Details

Alden Whitman owns two or three suits and wears a bow tie. He subscribes to the *New Statesman*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and "nearly every journal in the out-of-town newsstand in Times Square." He's seen *Casablanca* three dozen times.

Of such pieces human beings are made. The details are concrete, tangible attributes that readers recognize as signs of a particular style. They involve readers accustomed to reaching their own conclusions about other people on the basis of visible bits of information. They're the most persuasive possible evidence for a theory of personality because they make the case by showing, rather than telling.

But the temptation always is to tell. Too many profile writers draw their own conclusions—the subject is aggressive, diffident or cynical—and pass them along without substantiation. They risk not only the reader's willingness to believe, but his interest as well.

Tom Wolfe cites the special importance of a particular kind of telling detail, which he calls the status indicator. One of the main reasons we read (and why we read profiles in particular) is to gauge our place in the social fabric. What image do we project through our choices of possessions—clothing, furniture, automobiles and the like—and what does that say about our essential character? Observant profile writers focus on objects that are telling because they carry a status code shared by readers. Only a man of a certain stripe wears a bow tie and smokes a pipe.

The list hardly exhausts Talese's repertoire of literary devices. He unifies "Mr. Bad News" by weaving death metaphors throughout its narrative fabric. He maintains the narrative line by slipping in background with the techniques of exposition refined by short story writers. He begins his profile with a bit of dialogue that reveals character while generating a vignette.

In the end, we leave a familiar Alden Whitman leaning over his

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typewriter in the *Times* newsroom. We know something of his history and his style. We've seen him at work, on the subway, at a dinner party, and in his bedroom. We understand why he relishes a job that most reporters would shun.

With fewer than 5,000 words, Talese has defined the perfect obituary writer at a level of insight that goes far beyond the most detailed job description. No résumé, no battery of psychological tests, could reveal more about a potential employee.

In the final analysis, it seems talented profile writers have something in common with the best personnel managers. They buttress the biographical facts with insight and keen observation. They make their decisions by sifting through a broad array of often subtle clues to personality. And if they spotted another Alden Whitman standing in a line of applicants for an obituary writer's job, they'd hire him on the spot.

Jack Hart is the *Oregonian's* staff development director and writing coach. Before taking his present job, he served as a general assignment reporter and as the editor of the paper's Sunday magazine, *Northwest*. He earned a B.A. in journalism from the University of Washington and a Ph.D. in mass communication from the University of Wisconsin. He has been a member of the journalism faculties at the University of Oregon and various other universities. He is a member of the Poynter Institute's visiting faculty and conducts writing workshops throughout the United States.

Often the novice will ask: Why write description? After all, the story is more than likely going to have photographs. But often the photos just show what someone or something looks like. Written description can do that, but should also do much more. It should make connections between what we see and the theme of the story. Using active words like Kim Ode does in the last paragraph of this next essay not only tells how someplace looks, it also shows us how it feels to be there. Throughout the following essay on description, writer Bob Ehlert reminds us to make those connections and also that if we are going to describe that gun above the mantel, we had better well use it.

Using Description Effectively

Bob Ehlert

Several years ago photographer Marlin Levison and I decided to go on an impromptu feature story roundup in a remote area of Minne-

sota that the locals call the North Shore. We wanted to see who was holed up from life in this region that borders the northwest shore of Lake Superior, a place where a few thousand folks have the run of millions of acres.

Sure, it is peaceful and pretty up there. Tourists come from all over the Upper Midwest to hunt and fish and play along the North Shore in summer. All but the hardest Shore dwellers leave when winter settles in along Cook and Lake counties.

What we wanted to know is what kind of folks were living there with the black flies and the black bears, at the ends of dirt roads through cabin fever cold spells, downshore from the Split Rock Lighthouse and along the inlets of the big lake they call "Gichegume."

You get the picture: a dream assignment in a beautiful place. There was no deadline. No agenda. No preprinted text from a speech to fall back upon. It was like a free fall with nobody but the editor watching.

In Search of a Theme

After spending two weeks in the wilds up there, my mind, and more importantly my notebook, came back full of facts and tastes and smells and feelings.

I spent my first night on the Shore, for instance, in a roadside inn where there was a fire blazing in a great room that afforded a wonderful view of the lake. There, on a cool June night in the city of Two Harbors, I stayed up well past sunset reading about Lake Superior shipwrecks, geology and lore. That's because I believe every story needs a tone or a kind of theme.

I took notes about the unrelenting tides crashing on the rocky shores, about the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, which left Two Harbors bound for the East in November of 1975.

Never to return.

I believe in getting steeped in what's around you.

Just as a news reporter takes notes about what goes on at a city council meeting or a fire, feature writers ought to be taking even more notes. That's because their job goes beyond the objective facts about what happened. They should also record what happened between the lines. I call that subjective reporting.

From that kind of mood research I fashioned one of the opening

paragraphs about the lake which, by then, seemed like a friendly legend:

“Ever so slowly, Superior carves out coves and caves. She transforms cliffs and stout formations into pebble beaches. She goes where she wants and she takes what she will from the land and its people, the North Shore people.”

Using the magical powers of a little description, the feature writer can take the reader along to the North Shore, the city council meeting—whatever it is—and make him feel as though he was there.

Since that was my goal on the North Shore trip, that’s why I dug in and tried to learn the history and lore of the place—all the while taking notes. Sometimes I scribbled by hand and sometimes I dictated into a tape recorder.

Beyond my empirical observations I did things like taste the water or react to the cool temperature of the streams that fed it. I took notes of the bird, the wildlife and foliage.

Such research netted paragraphs such as this one, which is included in a section about hiking along a series of waterfalls:

Suddenly there is a sensation of walking through, or acting out a daydream on the trail. A daydream whose setting of swirling pools, rushing eddies, seagulls, robins, woodpeckers and silver birch forests is all so real.

I was convinced that I was in a very special place discovering it for others, perhaps for the first time, or rediscovering and defining it for those who had grown too familiar with it. All of this—call it data or whatever you like—became the bank from which I made withdrawals later when I wanted to describe things.

The First Draft

But what do you describe? When do you describe? And why do you describe in the first place?

I think we should describe anything out of the ordinary when we sit down to write a first draft. Subsequent editing will reveal what works best.

When we choose to describe depends upon how important the person or thing being described is to the story. In fiction writing, or general story telling, there is an old maxim that goes like this: Never describe the gun above the mantel unless you’re going to use it. In

other words, don't describe people or things that won't play into the theme of your story.

Once, when I was writing a profile of a former Minneapolis police chief, I wrote that the lines in his forehead went up and down like the slats in Venetian blinds.

I set that image up early in the story because I knew, later on, I was going to dramatize his reaction to a difficult question I had asked. When he gave his less-than-honest answer, the lines in his forehead seemed to go down—just like the blinds that are pulled when people want their privacy.

The answer to the question of why you describe is the simplest of all for me. I describe because it is fun. It is writing. Description breathes life into the copy. It is the reason I am a feature writer rather than a hard news writer.

In hard news, space is often at a premium. The facts are stacked at the top and, as a matter of course, often lopped from the bottom. Feature stories are more like a canvas. The space is still defined, but you can choose the colors and tones and shadings you like. However, just as you can't paint from an empty palette, you can't describe things out of thin air. When I talked to people on my North Shore sojourn, I listened to what they said and how they said it. I recorded where they said it. When they said it. And, perhaps most importantly, why they said it.

Writers should never be passive tourists. They should always be actively engaged in life, describing how it looked and felt when they were there so they can recount it when they write.

After gathering a mass of objective facts and subjective impressions, a writer is ready to describe what it is he or she has experienced. Sometimes the descriptions themselves come almost word for word from recorded observations.

While watching an old commercial fisherman get his boat positioned at his dock, Levison, my photographer companion on the North Shore trip, noted that it was just like a farmer bringing his cow home. Here's how that apt observation got into my story:

And each night, Ragnvald Sve walks out on his water-worn pier to fetch his boat again. While the gulls watch from the rocky island just offshore, the old fisherman talks to the Viking (his boat) and leads it around with a rope as if it were an old cow.

The North Shore feature story excursion was a wonderful trip.

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I filled up my notebooks and cassette tapes with hundreds of observations. And when it came time to write, I was not only ready to describe things, I was anxious.

One of my favorite bits of descriptive writing came in the introduction of a story about a man and his daughter. He had "rescued" her from an ugly custody battle and now was raising her in a very liberal fashion. He was her teacher, her friend, her parent.

Home was a sorry-looking place in a miniature junkyard of art and decaying wood. They lived off the main road of the North Shore and far from the mainstream of a normal life. After talking to the man and his daughter and recalling the dilapidated structures in the area and the ramshackle nature of his own house, I made this connection between him and those deteriorating buildings:

He has a face like an abandoned house. His eyes are deep-set and empty like dark rooms on the second floor. His teeth are here and there like boarded up and broken windows . . .

There was plenty more where that came from on the North Shore. There is plenty more wherever a keen observer travels. As writers, our job is to take mental pictures and literal notes—the results of which can make for wonderful description.

This last bit of description comes from Kim Ode, a feature writer at the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis who, obviously, has come to know the Badlands in South Dakota:

The sun drops like a coin into a slot on the horizon, triggering a jukebox of coyotes. The full moon rises so huge and fast, you unconsciously brace yourself against the rotation of the Earth. Stars burst into view. You wouldn't be anywhere else. There is nowhere else.

Bob Ehlert is a staff writer on the *Star Tribune's* Sunday magazine. In 1989 he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing. He has won several other state and regional awards for his writing. He came to the *Star Tribune* from *The Virginian-Pilot* and *The Ledger-Star* newspapers in Norfolk, Virginia, where he was a feature writer and arts and entertainment editor.

Mark Patinkin is a columnist who makes his living by writing in the first person. Most of us will only do the occasional first-person piece. For it to work, it will have to be about an unusual experience or an experience so common that many readers can empathize with it. The more perceptive you are, the stronger your writing will be. Occasionally in a first-person piece you can get away without doing re-

search, but as with all writing, the more information and knowledge you bring to it, the richer it will be. One further thing: Few writers find immediate success by writing first-person pieces. Usually they learn the fundamentals of writing and reporting and then come to first-person writing with all their skills fully polished.

Writing in the First Person

Mark Patinkin

I'd just returned home from a two-month assignment writing about religious violence in Belfast, India, and Beirut. I was at a local restaurant, handing my VISA card to the waitress. She paused when she saw the name.

"Are you the Mark Patinkin who writes for the paypa?" she said.

In Rhode Island, my home state, that's how "paper" is pronounced. She was referring to my column, which I'd been writing four times a week for the Providence *Journal-Bulletin* for several years.

I told her I was. As someone who often writes about light, personal subjects, I was proud to be recognized after just completing a lengthy series on the world's war zones. At the time, mid-1986, I'd been the only American journalist to make it to the Moslem side of Beirut in months. I waited for the waitress to say something about my accounts of sneaking across the Green Line, of Sikh-Hindu violence in India, of Catholic-Protestant hatred in Northern Ireland.

Instead, she said this:

"I really like your stories about how you and your brothas used to eat red licorice for breakfast and stuff."

Brothas is Rhode Island for brothers.

And her comment showed one of the burdens of being a first-person journalist.

No matter how often you strive for substance, readers will remember you not for your insights on the drug problem, or the Warsaw Pact, but for the time you had a babysitter crisis, about your admission that you now have to ask your wife what you like to eat at restaurants, about being so "houseblind" you no longer see the piles of clutter around your living room.

A story about the trade deficit — possibly the nation's most serious long-term problem — will, if you're lucky, bring a single letter from an assistant lecturer on economic history. A column about the trauma of doing home repairs — and how the most difficult phrase in the language is "while we're at it" — will likely bring a dozen.

I've been a columnist now for 10 years. In addition to the series I did on religious violence, I also spent a month in Africa writing about famine. And a month in Eastern Europe just after the Berlin Wall fell — in both cases writing daily.

But a single column I did on how my parents met got more response than either of those two global projects. So did a column suggesting that, in my view, cats could best be used as skeet on rifle ranges.

The point of all this is that few things tend to engage readers as much as writing about yourself, and how you see the commonalities of everyday life. The letter "I" is a powerful means of connection.

Living Out Loud

It took me a while to get comfortable with "I." I tended to avoid it, writing feature stories with my picture on top rather than columns. I was wary of being too exposed. Write a mediocre third-person feature and people will turn the page. Write a mediocre first-person column, and people will say, "What an imbecile."

My initial attempts at first person were the most blatant kind: the personal participation category. Instead of covering an event, I *did* the event.

I joined an annual two-mile swim across Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay, managing to finish about ten minutes behind a 70-year-old man. Later, I registered to be part of a male bodybuilding contest. My preparation was doing a set of 15 push-ups the day before. I arrived to find the other entrants shaved, oiled and pumped. I was thin and pasty. When it was my turn, they played the theme from Rocky and told me to go onstage and strike poses.

"Flex your pecs," a female audience member shouted at one point.

I already was.

I quickly learned that participation can be embarrassing.

But it led me to another, subtler category of the first-person journalist: writing about your own day-to-day life. It's what Anna

Quindlen, the *New York Times* columnist, has called, "Living out loud."

Ask yourself: Have you gone through anything recently that might make a first-person piece?

Not long ago, my doctor gave me a checklist to fill out, a mundane exercise, but when I was done, I saw the seed of a column. I realized that I was fudging my answers. It helped explain why so many Americans have medical problems: we lie on health forms. How often did I drink? Hardly ever, I said. Eat fatty foods? Oh, rarely. Exercise? Daily, of course. To impress my doctor, I'd trumped up half my responses.

Another time, I was with my wife when I pulled out my driver's license. She noticed I listed my height at 5-feet, 10½ inches. She asked why men always do that: add that extra half inch to our height? I insisted it was for the sake of accuracy. At that point, she took out a tape and measured me. I stretched my neck for all I was worth, but I only came out 5-10. I was crestfallen. She told me not to worry about it, since all that was important was that I had a good personality. That's like telling a woman she shouldn't worry about being ugly since she's fun to be with.

Again, it was the seed of a column: It helped me realize that men are more sensitive about one physical measurement than any other: height. I'm still angry at my parents for not making me at least 6 feet. When I'm barefoot and my wife's in heels, I walk around the house on tiptoes. And yes, tape measurements aside, I do plan to keep listing myself as 5-feet, 10½.

Commentary on Daily Events

A technique I often use to come up with ideas is to simply study each day's news stories and ask how they relate to my own life. I remember reading an article about a child who'd saved a choking playmate with the Heimlich Maneuver. The child, only about 7, referred to it as the Time-Life Remover. It got me thinking about all the words I'd mangled myself as a child. For years, I used to catch butterflies in the "bacon lot" at the corner. I also enjoyed eating "cold" slaw, and liked putting "catch-up" on everything from burgers to chicken. I had "romantic fever" when I was 6, and needed a "tennis shot" after cutting my leg on a rusty slide.

The technique of perusing newspapers also brings up another

key first-person category: serious commentary on daily events. Many writers shy from taking on global issues, feeling they have to be experts. But if you talk about how your own experience relates to such issues, you're always an expert.

A few months ago, I was reading about Wilson sporting goods being sold to a Helsinki firm. I began to think: "What does that mean to me?" While others wrote of what such foreign takeovers would do to our trade deficit, I decided to take a personal tack. I began to write about how Wilson was a big part of my childhood. I used to sleep with my Wilson baseball mitt under my pillow. I'd try wearing it to dinner. The mitt meant summer to me. It meant growing up in America. Now that symbol had become foreign owned. As was Bantam Books, publisher of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *John Carter of Mars* series—another staple of my childhood. As was the A&P, where I used to grocery shop with my mother. I continued the list: RCA televisions, Brooks Brothers clothing, Sylvania electronics. Things that were all part of growing up in the United States were being taken over by our overseas competition. "I'm sure I'll still buy Wilson from time to time," I said in ending, "but now, when I do, I'll be more likely to think of what's happening to our heritage than of treasured boyhood summers."

Inner Lives of Friends

Endings, I find, can be one of the hardest parts of a first-person piece, chiefly because when you use the letter "I," it's somehow not quite enough to end with a simple wrap-up quote; you're expected to come up with a wise—or at least conclusive—thought. I find that two simple questions sometimes can help. Sit back, look over the piece, and first ask yourself, "What, really, is going on here?" Then: "And how do I feel about it?"

Conversations with friends and family can also be a rich source of first-person material. Writers like Ellen Goodman have shown how the inner lives of friends can be a unique glimpse into forces shaping our time. Recounting a talk with an acquaintance about his or her divorce, job frustration or rediscovery of religion can end up saying as much about the subject as a set of interviews with sociologists. A weekend at my fifteenth college reunion helped show me an interesting shift in the outlook of many women. Five years before, at my tenth, few were at home with children; career was everything.

This time, one of the most frequent questions asked was, "Are you staying at home?" The answer, in more cases than not, was yes. You can always rebuild a career, one woman said, but you can't rebuild your children's childhood. One woman had decided to have a baby on her own and move in with her parents so she could stay home to raise it. I'd seen a number of studies on this kind of shift in women's choices, but an anecdotal first-person column on the subject, I think, helped bring it alive more than most third-person analysis pieces.

I should admit something here. While talking to those women at that reunion, I didn't instantly think it would make a column. Even when the weekend was over, I never connected the conversations as the seed of an idea. It only occurred to me the following Monday when I got to work and faced a blank page. By mid-morning, still lacking an idea, I began to brainstorm hard for ideas. What had I been through recently? The reunion, of course, had been my most marked recent experience. But what about the reunion? I began to sketch out notes, remembrances of talks, and then a pattern began to come together—the pattern of women's choices.

Deadline Inspirations

What I'm trying to say, I think, is that just because first-person ideas are, well, personal, it doesn't automatically mean they grow out of inspiration. Like most story ideas, they best grow out of desperation. If I didn't have to write four columns a week, I'd write one a month. Three-quarters of the time, I arrive at my office having no idea what I'm going to write for the next day's paper. It's taught me that the most prolific first-person writers aren't those with a fertile imagination, but those with regular deadlines. It's not enough to wait for ideas to present themselves; you have to set aside time, every day if possible, to pace, to brainstorm, to grope. Ideally, get yourself locked into steady deadlines. There's nothing like a dynamite stick beneath the seat with the fuse lit.

First-person writing can take on one other form, a hybrid form. It can be a combination of personal column and reportage. I've tried this most pointedly on a number of foreign assignments I've been given. At first, I was surprised when my editors suggested sending me abroad—as a columnist. The idea was to write about the African famine of 1985.

Why not send a feature writer? I asked.

They explained they wanted to try personalizing a faraway event by chronicling it through a voice familiar to our readers. It was the same idea behind the reporting of Charles Kuralt — or Ernie Pyle. So I went, as much a columnist as a reporter.

One of my first stops was Korem, Ethiopia's biggest famine camp. When I sat down afterward to write the lead, I tried to think not just of what was in my notebook, but how I reacted personally. I wrote:

The first thing that struck me was the sound, except it was not sound. It was the absence of sound. People everywhere, and so little sound. Starvation does make a noise. It is silence. And it is very loud. Then I noticed the flies. They covered the eyes of the weaker children. And the weaker men, too, and the weaker women. I once worked on a farm. The flies on the cattle were not as bad as the flies I saw now.

When I got to the end of the piece, I tried asking myself the same question I do at the end of columns: "What, underneath, was going on here?"

I wrote:

On our way out, we pass lines for everything. Water, medical help, food, of course. The lines stretch hours long.

No one complains. No one jostles.

The people crowd around as we climb into the car. They smile and reach out.

"Ferengee," they say. Foreigner.

Other than that, there is no sound.

We drive away in silence. I look back, watching them begin their day: 55,000 of the most desperate of people, living in near-impossible conditions.

And it occurs to me that there are no police in this city of refugees. And no crime.

I had never before been to a place so inhuman. Or more civilized.

The same technique, of course, can be used on a more local plane: a visit to a press conference, a criminal trial, or a simple interview. I recently profiled the victim of a drunk driver. I began with the phrase, "He met me at the door in his wheelchair." That kind of image, I think, allows a reader to feel more of a connection.

It's also a writing technique I borrowed from another columnist — Bob Greene of the *Chicago Tribune*. While still a general assignment reporter, Greene once wrote, he used to get together with his

colleagues after work. Over drinks, they'd ask each other about their day's assignments.

"What really happened?" they'd say.

When Greene began writing his column, he made himself a vow: He'd write to his readers the way he talked with his colleagues after work—a conversational telling of what really happened. It's a technique that can work as effectively in a story about a college reunion as one about the fighting in Beirut.

But once again, be ready for columns of such substance to fade more quickly in the minds of the reader than the ones where you confess that you're utterly dependent on your wife to pick out your clothes in the morning. Be ready, in other words, to be remembered for light instead of heavy.

Be ready, also, to be judged.

When you use the letter "I," for every supportive letter you get from someone who related to your one year old having a scene at a restaurant, you'll get another from a reader tired of hearing about your kid.

Be ready for the rewards, and the price, of having yourself as a subject.

Mark Patinkin has spent more than 10 years writing a four-times-a-week column for the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*. His column is syndicated by the Scripps-Howard News Service. In 1986, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in international reporting for a series he did on religious violence in Northern Ireland, India, and Beirut. In December of 1984, he spent a month traveling to five African countries to chronicle famine, later publishing a book about the experience called *An African Journey*. In 1990, Random House published *The Silent War*, a book Patinkin co-authored on the global business battles shaping America's future.

In the preceding article, Mark Patinkin's own experiences are the essence of his first-person stories. In newspapers, columnists often are given the latitude to write about themselves. But the first person is banned in most news stories. The objective reporter keeps himself out of the story. However, some would argue, since the reporter is writing the story, he *is* in the story; why hide it? Walt Harrington of *The Washington Post Magazine* introduces himself in stories that are essentially about other people. If newspapers are reluctant to use this method, magazines are not. Often the writer becomes an active participant in the story. *Vanity Fair* uses the technique, as do many magazines that value writers with distinct personalities. As a freelancer you should define these markets

and use the technique when appropriate. But use it sparingly, for you don't want to switch the balance and cause a story about someone else to become a story about you.

When a Reporter Becomes Part of the Story

Walt Harrington

I started appearing in my own stories when an occasional "I said" would replace "a reporter said," or an infrequent "I asked" would replace "a visitor inquired." But before long I'd gone all the way and interjected myself as a character in my *Washington Post Magazine* profiles of Vice President George Bush and Jesse Jackson.

It was a surprisingly painless transformation. The sky didn't fall, old journalism professors didn't threaten to revoke my degree, Hunter Thompson didn't invite me to his place for the weekend. In fact, I came away with a refreshing sense that readers know intuitively that it isn't always self-aggrandizing to become a part of our own stories, and what counts is how and why we put ourselves into our articles. Readers know this, I suspect, because they are on to us: They know that our reporters' claim to third-person omniscience is bunk, and that third person can be far more pretentious and misleading than acknowledging through first person that our personal insights are simply that, personal insights.

I got to this place after more than a decade of news and feature writing and editing. I'd written any number of first-person articles over the years, stories about my childhood, my marriage, my father and my son. I knew that saying "I" in print wasn't necessarily an ego trip, as is so often pounded into the heads of young reporters, but simply one vantage from which to tell a story.

If I could recognize in my own life the kinds of intimate details that make for a good story, I reasoned, then I also would be more attuned to those details in telling the stories of other people's lives. I also figured this sensitivity would help me develop a better reporter's eye for anecdotal detail. All of these things turned out to be true, and I'm convinced now that if you can't tell an honest story

about yourself, you're a long way from telling an honest story about someone else.

Yet in writing about other people, there's an obstacle that can't be overcome: The observer can never become his subject. So try as we will to feel or think or imagine what another person feels or thinks or imagines, we can't ultimately do it. We are not in his skin. Sure, any decent feature writer today knows the Tom Wolfe checklist of methods used to capture the tone of naturalistic fiction in their stories—use actual dialogue, re-create scenes, watch for little details that speak volumes, spend time with your subject in varied settings. But what's left out of this list is you, the reporter. Because right in the middle of all of this observing and gathering and re-creating is you, asking the questions, collating the anecdotes, determining the order of events that will determine conclusions. And if your subject is at all media savvy, the odds are he's bending and massaging what you're learning based on what he knows or perceives to be your biases or reportorial needs. In short, you aren't a bystander at this dance, but a partner.

Reporters know that this relationship between reporter and subject is often a wonderful source of insight about people, particularly the way they cajole, flatter, harangue and, in general, treat us while hanging out with them. I've also learned that after writing about somebody with a public image, my friends, neighbors, even colleagues inevitably ask, "So what did you really think of him?" They assume I haven't already told them in my story what I really think. Eventually, I vowed to be more up-front about how my beliefs and biases were shaping my stories, since that's what readers seemed most interested in, anyway.

I had a recent test of my theories when the *Washington Post National Weekly* reprinted a version of my free-wheeling *Post Magazine* profile of Jesse Jackson. The weekly denuded my article of its first-person references and anything even close to an opinion. The rewrite made the story a straight third-person piece. I soon received an angry letter, the likes of which I hadn't gotten when the story ran in the magazine earlier. The writer said of me: "He has not the courage to express his own opinions forthrightly." As I said, readers are on to us when it comes to the idea that a third-person story is objective.

Finally, one more kind of journalism, typified by the *Playboy* interview and the Mike Wallace interrogational style, also shaped my thinking. I'd always enjoyed the give-and-take of the interview

format, its tension and unpredictability, its quality of unbridled debate. In standard third-person profiles, these qualities are lost because the reporter strips his questions, often obnoxiously direct questions, from the telling and leaves only the subject's answers. The writer sets up the answer one way or another, often using convoluted constructions such as "a visitor asked" or relying on a third-person rhetorical question—a question rarely in quotation marks. The unspoken message here is that the writer has fudged the reconstruction of his own question, probably to make it look more forceful or thoughtful than it actually was. The subject, of course, gets no second chance.

Besides playing straight with readers, using the real give-and-take between reporter and subject in an article captures the best qualities of a *Playboy* or Mike Wallace interview. In a feature piece it also takes on the tone of dialogue. It's just that you, the reporter, are half of the dialogue. To the reader, the story becomes more personalized, allowing the reader to identify with the reporter or the subject. Either way, the story gives the sense of two people talking, whether they are clashing or enjoying each other.

Now the big question: When is enough of me in a story enough? The test I've used whenever I've gotten the urge to become a character is to ask myself whether my being in the article at any given point sheds light on my subject, or on me. The answer should always be "the subject." That's because these aren't true first-person pieces, but rather pieces that borrow some of the advantages of first-person stories to make a more compelling, intimate and exciting read. The reporter is in the story only as a vehicle for saying something about the subject, never the reverse. Please note: References such as "he told me" instead of "he said" are gratuitous; they add nothing about the subject.

All of this said, it's important to realize that every story will not come down this way, nor should it, certainly not on the front page and not even on the features pages. It's not an approach for the inexperienced. But I do think we too often assume that is grandstanding for a writer to enter his own story. It's not. Often it's much closer to the truth than staying out.

Walt Harrington is a staff writer for *The Washington Post Magazine*. He worked previously as an assistant editor on the *Post Metro* desk and as a reporter and editor at other newspapers, including *The Allentown Morning Call*. He has won two recent Sunday magazine writing awards, and he holds master's degrees in journalism and sociology from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

In putting together this book, I was struck by the varying voices of the authors. Some are serious, get-down-to-work voices; others, like those of critics Dan Sullivan and Stephen Hunter, are light-hearted. Of course, for most of them, it's precisely that individual voice that has helped move them to the top of their fields. If they sounded like everyone else, they would no longer be exceptional writers. And the point of this book is to help make you an exceptional writer because the way the communications industry is evolving, only the exceptional writers will be free to be individuals. The rest will be treated like interchangeable parts. Only those with a voice heard apart from the rest will prosper. So listen as Andy Merton explains how to develop, use, and control the writer's unique voice.

Finding a Writing Voice That's Yours Alone

Andy Merton

I am going to tell you a secret about feature writing. It is a secret so basic that you will wonder why you didn't think of it yourself, so simple that you will be able to use it to your advantage immediately. And yet, it is often ignored, misunderstood, even shunned, in newsrooms across America.

Before I tell you the secret, let me show you part of a feature by *The Boston Globe* writer Nathan Cobb:

The Day-Glo orange tyrannosaur appears to be starring in a Japanese movie entitled *The Beast That Ate Chisholm's Motel*. Rearing on its hind legs above the sixth hole of Route 1 Miniature Golf, the 12-foot metal statue bares its spotless white teeth casting a fearsome green eye across six lanes of traffic at its one-story target. You can almost hear the screams of the hapless couple inside room 18 as this Sunkist Godzilla hurdles the median strip and mercilessly drowns them amidst the waterbed, whirlpool and steam bath they have rented for the night at \$39 plus tax.

"It used to be hollow," says Joe Hallinan, a portly employee of the miniature golf course who is standing shirtless while admiring the

dinosaur's gaudy presence. "Some kids tried to steal it once, but all they did was turn it over. Still, we filled it with cement. Heh. I'd like to see somebody steal it now."

Where else would a Day-Glo tyrannosaur look so . . . so . . . perfectly at home? Certainly it has found suitable surroundings here on Route 1, beside the southbound lanes of this 7.6 mile ribbon of blacktop and neon which stretches from the confluence of the Malden/Melrose/Saugus to the Route I-95 turnoff in Peabody. Like the garishness of the strip itself, the bizarre orange figure oozes grotesque charm which is at once both appealing and repelling.

There is very little that is subtle about the strip.

Probably you don't know Nathan Cobb. I don't know Nathan Cobb. But we can guess some things about Nathan Cobb from this piece of writing. We can guess, for example, that his better judgment tells him he should be appalled by the excesses of the Strip. And we can tell that, against this better judgment, he admires the dinosaur, admires the whole strip, even while acknowledging that it is kitsch. Views it, tongue-in-cheek, as the best of its kind.

And we can tell that he has chosen to approach the whole thing as an innocent pilgrim, Pinocchio on Pleasure Island.

How do we know these things? From the sound of his voice. From his glorious fantasizing ("You can almost hear the screams . . .") to that little catch in his voice as he pauses for words, overwhelmed, nearly speechless: "Where else would a Day-Glo tyrannosaur look so . . . so . . . perfectly at home?"

Here, try another one. This is a story from the *Cincinnati Post* about the C.I.A. in Cincinnati. Writer Paul H. Harasim went out to uncover the real poop on what, exactly, the C.I.A. does in Cincinnati. He failed, but that's beside the point.

Gunn sat there in a gray suit. He talked from behind a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"I can't tell you," he said, "what else the CIA does in Cincinnati."

It was 1345 hours — 1:45 P.M. to most Cincinnatians — and Stephen Gunn, an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency in Cincinnati — had clammed up.

"How many people have you recruited for the CIA in Cincinnati?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Where were you stationed as an agent overseas?"

"That's confidential."

"How many people work for the CIA?"

