Jim Molnar, a travel editor at *The Seattle Times*, makes a distinction between travel writing and travel guide writing. The 1960s brought us the resurgence of travel writing, which at its best is feature writing that makes the leap to great literature. Just as in any other kind of writing, it demands hard work and research, plus an extra dose of integrity in a field where special interests are constantly trying to exchange freebies for favorable writing. Of course, the best guard against this is to reject the freebies and write it as you see it.

**The Art of Travel Writing**

Jim Molnar

Of all the romantic myths surrounding the role and work of the travel writer, the most mistaken is the one that supposes that she or he is somehow exempt from the responsibilities of other journalists and from the travails of other travelers.

While travel writing does allow—in fact, demand—greater flexibility in form and style than, say, conventional feature writing in most contemporary newspapers, it’s bound by the same compulsions: accuracy and fairness, thoroughness of observation and research, and conciseness of expression.

And while travel writers with legitimate markets may find more
doors open to them than average tourists—government bureaus and the tourism industry are only too willing to curry good press—the best writers find that only by traveling as their readers do, or would like to, can they develop the kinds of features that meet the highest standards of their craft: the kinds of features that sell.

Successful travel writers must realize that the avocation requires two basic skills, neither of which is easy to master and the effective combination of which is rare.

First, and truly foremost, they must know how to travel. That doesn’t mean just going on vacation. It doesn’t mean just finding a good hotel or restaurant in a foreign capital. It doesn’t mean simply venturing off the beaten track any more than it means toeing the line that tourism promoters have drawn to standard and manufactured attractions. It doesn’t mean insisting that the world meet one’s expectations. It doesn’t mean sifting, like some itinerant miller, the wheat of a trip from the chaff, then baking it into some idealized memory for a movable feast.

Traveling is a way of thinking and seeing, a way of relating honestly to the world and the people in it, a way of accepting the world on its own terms.

Second, obviously, travel writers must know how to write—not just gather information, not just observe, not just describe, and not just put together a lucid sentence.

Writing, travel writing in particular, is a way of evoking an experience in the world. It’s a way of re-creating in literate and literary prose not a place, but a thoughtful and intimate appreciation of a place, and the physical, social, political and cultural forces that form it and distinguish it.

All good writing implies an intensely personal relationship with a reader, an acknowledgment at least of the writer’s and reader’s mutual humanity. A good travel narrative focuses that consanguinity on a shared desire to understand not just a particular destination, but our place in the world at large.

Any travel writing undertaken without those skills and that sense of responsibility, I think, is doomed to disappointment.

Freelance Opportunities

Certainly, making a living as a travel writer is easier when you can arrange and finance your trips from a desk at an established maga-
zine or metropolitan newspaper. Especially now, as more publications ascribe to ethics policies that preclude features subsidized to any degree by a tourism bureau or the tourism industry, the freelancer faces an uphill journey.

But why should a travel writer, any more than any other professional in literature or journalism, expect an easy, uncomplicated or lucrative future? This is a tough way to make a living—a tough field to break into.

I was a writer long before I could afford to become a traveler. I struggled academically with poetry and prose, playwriting and story telling, then taught literature and writing part-time. I stumbled accidentally into journalism as a way of financing the peanut butter and beans I needed to stave off starvation. After working at a series of small daily newspapers as a reporter covering education, politics, the arts and general features, I became a city editor and a writing coach. A couple of years on a metropolitan newspaper’s copy desk put me in position to compete for a rare opening in a travel department with a staff of three.

Making proposals for perhaps a half-dozen major trips a year, I can expect assignments for two or three of from two to three weeks’ duration each, based on the needs of my newspaper, schedules and budgets. Each trip yields from two to four lead articles accompanied by color photographs, plus any number of secondary features and columns. Turnaround time, from the date of my return until a story’s publication, can range from a few days to several months.

In any given week at The Seattle Times travel desk, we receive more than 30 unsolicited manuscripts from freelance travel writers. Some are trying to make their living at the craft; most are casual, at best occasional, writers and photographers who have packaged the events of a vacation for sale. The Times, with its two travel sections a week, represents a standard market in metropolitan dailies of regional scope. We publish an average of three to six freelance features a month, including those by our own staff reporters from other news and features departments—about 3 percent of what we receive. The pay, based on onetime publication rights, is competitive: generally from $200 to $375, extra for photographs.

To understand what The Times—and most other publications—are looking for, it can be helpful to look at travel writing in an historical and literary context.
Historical Roots of Travel Writing

A hundred years ago, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, travel writing was one of the most respectable, distinctive and distinguished forms of popular literature. As both a journalistic and literary form, it reflected a new energy flowing through Western civilization. For the first time, traveling was the province of not only the upper classes and of explorers patronized by aristocrats and merchants and colonial powers, but of an increasingly affluent middle class with leisure time flowing from society's democratization and industrialization.

The most respected poets, novelists and essayists of the day were among its practitioners, and created what still rank as classics of the travel-writing genre: Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, D.H. Lawrence.

Like Tennyson, in the voice of Ulysses, these writers were possessed of a need to fling themselves and their readers into a wide world newly vulnerable to general inquiry and observation—"I cannot rest from travel: I will drink / Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed life / Greatly . . ."

Like Mark Twain, the common people found themselves in the role of "Innocents Abroad." Both from their libraries and living rooms and in the embrace of tour groups devised by Thomas Cook and other entrepreneurs in the vanguard of mass tourism, they could experience a world that previously was a realm of fantasy. Honest shock and enthusiasm were common tones in the "literature of place," as in this passage narrating Twain's cruise into the Golden Horn and his first impressions of Constantinople:

Ashore, it was—well, it was an eternal circus. People were thicker than bees, in those narrow streets, and the men were dressed in all the outlandish, idolatrous, extravagant, thunder-and-lightning costumes that a tailor with the delirium tremens and seven devils could conceive of. . . .

The shops here are mere coops, mere boxes, bathrooms, closets—anything you please to call them—on the first floor. The Turks sit cross-legged in them, and work and trade and smoke long pipes, and smell like—like Turks. That covers the ground. Crowding the narrow streets in front of them are beggars, who beg forever, yet never collect anything; and wonderful cripples, distorted out of all semblance of
humanity, almost; vagabonds driving laden asses; porters carrying
dry-goods boxes as large as cottages on their backs; pedlars of grapes,
hot corn, pumpkin seeds, and a hundred other things, yelling like
fiends; and sleeping happily, comfortably, serenely, among the hurry-
ing feet, are the famed dogs of Constantinople; drifting noiselessly
about are squads of Turkish women, draped from chin to feet in flowing
robes, and with snowy veils bound about their heads, that disclose
only the eyes and a vague, shadowy notion of their features. . . . A
street in Constantinople is a picture which one ought to see once—
ot often.

In that so-called Golden Age, the Western travel writer’s voice
came to carry exotic sights and sounds and odors from the perspec-
tive of a culture settling into a world it had just about finished col-
onizing. The writer didn’t simply observe and reflect, she or he tended
to evaluate, compare and judge. The writer sometimes became a con-
tentious and aggressive consumer of foreign places and cultures—
someone at often uncomfortable odds with a new and very big world.

From the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, mass tourism be-
gan to shrink the world. Guidebooks proliferated: Baedeker and Field-
ding, Fodor and Frommer. But these presented less travel writing
than catalog journalism: lists of attractions, hotels and restaurants
with a tad of history and a smattering of practical advice for tourists
who were starting to leave the tour buses but still covering the same
old ground.

As tools for tourists they had—and still have—their merits, but
guidebooks never have been the medium for true travel writing. They
simulate travel writing, as, says historian/essayist Paul Fussell, tour-
ism simulates travel (“It is to travel as plastic is to wood.”). Guide-
book prose doesn’t evoke a sense of place; it tends to subordinate
the individual, both the traveler and the native of the host culture,
and the ideal of personal experience to broad-brush, panoramic de-
scription; it tends to elevate the familiar, the conventional, the com-
mon experience.

As tourism became more subject to the exigencies of mass mar-
ket, only a relative few practitioners of the travel-writing craft per-
sisted, writers such as Hemingway, Capote, Kazantzakis, Laure-
nce Durrell, and Jan Morris—and they found only a limited outlet
in a handful of magazines.

Whereas travel dispatches had been a staple feature of major
newspapers before World War II, from the late 1950s through the
early 1970s newspaper travel sections became extensions of advertising departments. The stories became largely promotional pieces wrapped around ads and often subsidized by airlines, hotel chains and tourist bureaus.

But all that has been changing. The successful travel writer is one who is responding to those changes, and in some senses leading them.

Surveys during the past several years have indicated a number of trends: Travel and tourism have become one of the largest, if not the largest, industry in the world — employing one in every 16 workers in the world and accounting for more than $3 trillion in revenues annually, according to the World Tourism Organization.

More people are traveling independently than ever before, choosing more adventurous itineraries to more remote and exotic destinations as Third World nations open their doors to visitors. Domestically, the affluence of middle-class professionals who compose the bulk of the traveling public, combined with their more stringent schedules, has created a trend toward more, albeit shorter, holidays. Americans are more often turning away from urban destinations toward beaches and less-developed areas, such as national parks and forests.

At the same time, more high-quality travel writing is being published now than perhaps ever before, both for tourists and armchair travelers. Travel books — novels and personal narratives — are a booming trend. And, with a raft of new travel-oriented magazines and the refocusing of many newspaper travel sections, travel writers are starting to find a more active marketplace. As author and travel writer J.D. Brown puts it: "... the '80s may well be remembered as both the Era of Travel and the Era of Literary Travel."

Travel Writing Guidelines

What does all this mean for the would-be travel writer? How can she or he catch a corner of the wave? To what are publishers, editors and readers responding?

Here are some guidelines:
First, remember that your writing must be very good. Standards are high these days, in part because there is so much writing to choose from.

Quintessential practitioners such as Jan Morris, Paul Theroux
and the late Bruce Chatwin have gone to lengths to disassociate themselves from the term "travel writer," hoping to distance themselves from the standards and guidebook formulas of the 1950s and 1960s. They want to be known and judged simply as writers who employ the devices and conventions of the novelist and storyteller in the "literature of place."

A good travel story is just that: a story, with all the plot and tensions and sophistication that it implies. A story is, for all that, a simple thing. It generally is about a person reacting to circumstance, to a place, to other people. For the travel writer, that main character is often her- or himself. It is through the writer's emotional response to a place that the reader becomes involved, gains insight, and is able to savor a taste of a destination.

Travel writers who overreach, who attempt to define a place based on a few days or even weeks of observation and experience, tend to lose their own perspective—not to mention the reader—in a bog of generalizations. Just tell what happened, what you saw and felt. As in the Twain passage on Constantinople, that means using detail to evoke rather than simply describe: to show rather than tell. As any good writer knows, the successful travel writer learns that his most effective tool is the verb, not the adjective.

Take this passage from a piece on Ireland by Mike Nichols, humor columnist with the Fort Worth Star-Telegram:

Geographically, Ireland is an island rumpled and ridged. It is an island of sharps and flats—the topography rises and falls, like the notes of an Irish jig. . . . You can drive north to south, tip to tip, in a day.

But that would be living on American time. On Irish time, the same trip takes longer. So slow down. Match your metabolism to the pace of a gray old squire as he strolls along some village high road, walking cane in hand, glen-plaid cap on head. Match your heartbeat to the 4/4 time of an Irish ballad. . . .

Pack a poet's paraphernalia in your bags when you go. Take a trope or two for the road: Metaphor, simile, eponym, metonymy, even a judicious hyperbole now and then—they all have their place in this literary journalism. Let a single detail create an entire panorama.

Because a story without people in it usually isn't much of a story, the travel narrative that depends on descriptions of buildings and landscapes, city streets and bus routes, becomes plodding. Populate your stories with the people you meet along the way.
Often, the most successful travel feature is a simple account of a serendipitous encounter with a character you have met—a dialogue that encapsulates and illustrates your impressions of a place, evoking an emotion or spirit that lets the reader share your relationship with a land or culture.

Bob O'Sullivan, a highly successful travel writer frequently published in the Los Angeles Times, The Seattle Times and other newspapers, focuses his narratives on other tourists. The technique, applied sensitively, gently, emphatically, can allow readers to see themselves—their virtues and their foibles—in relation to places they travel.

Most of my trips for The Times have been to Europe. The stories I've been happiest with have centered on people: the peasants I stopped to talk with in a sugar-beet field in Romania, who shared their lunch with us under the chestnut trees that lined a dusty Moldavian road, who gave my young son a ride on the back of an ox; the Gypsy women in Sofia, Bulgaria, who, keening wildly, chased me several blocks through the marketplace for suggesting that I take their photograph; Shamus, the grizzled, pipe-chewing Irishman who explained that it could take as long as a day to contemplate the perfect stone to fit into the wall he was building along a County Mayo pasture; the Greek olive farmer on the slopes of Mount Parnassus who insisted on giving me a ride back to town on his tractor because he couldn't understand why anyone would choose to walk for recreation.

Finally, be aware that, especially now as tourism assumes a greater economic profile in the world, travel is surrounded with issues that reach beyond the sphere of the individual tourist. Tourism has profound impacts on the social, natural, cultural and economic environments of the places that embrace it. Deforestation, waste and pollution, energy depletion, exploitation and erosion of native traditions—they all are issues that the tourism industry and individual travelers are just beginning to be aware of and that the travel writer should not ignore.

A travel writer must pay close attention to the environment she or he is writing about. The days of composing idealistic travelogues that foster tourists' sense of isolation from the complexities of the often dark and desperate lives that swirl about them seem to be drawing to a close.

Readers can sense shallowness in a story, just as editors can sense a writer's ignorance and lack of perspective. I usually spend triple or qua-
druple the time researching the culture, history, politics, economy and environment of a destination that I spend on the trip itself.

A 1,500- to 2,000-word feature—the longest stories that will find a warm reception from most newspaper and magazine editors—should have a veritable library of research to support them and give them context.

In the end, travel is hard work. Travel writing, I think, is even harder work. And both, for our readers, touch the same chords.

As Paul Fussell says: Travel has a touch of the illicit to it; it “triggers the thrill of escape from the constrictions of the daily . . . from the traveler’s domestic identity.” But it is no less a humbling experience, a desire for growth and a pursuit of understanding: “It is as learners that explorers, tourists and genuine travelers . . . come together.”

Jim Molnar has been an editor and writer with The Seattle Times travel department for more than six years. He’s worked as a reporter, feature writer, copy-editor, news editor and writing coach in California and the Pacific Northwest for some 20 years. He has also taught writing, editing and the oral interpretation of literature part-time at several colleges and universities.

Perhaps the biggest revolution in the United States during the last 30 years has been in what we eat. In the 1950s we were primarily a white bread, meat loaf nation with the occasional take-out container of chow mein. As we became more of a polyglot nation and a better traveled one, thoughtful food writing became a necessity for readers. How else would we know what was being served to us each day? We learned to eat with chopsticks and how to make our own pasta. At the same time we were all paying attention to our health. Again we turned to the food pages to find out what was best for us. During this time there emerged a host of food writing superstars and among them is Mimi Sheraton. Here, using her years of experience, she provides advice for the novices who wonder if food writing is right for them.

Eating My Words: What It Takes to Be a Good Food Writer

Mimi Sheraton

Now that eating is “in” and chefs so often achieve the status of superstars, food writing has become a glamorous profession. Barely
a month goes by during which I do not receive two or three letters from young (and not so young) hopefuls each asking, "How can I learn about food?" It is a temptation to answer, "If you have to ask, you're never going to make it." But remembering what it felt like to be young and hopeful, I resist and instead write an expanded version of, "You have to know how to write well and you must know food."

In fact, the first answer would be more accurate, for I really believe that a passionate love of food is essential to success. The best practitioners in the field are those who ate first and wrote later, who followed a natural inclination to learn all about dishes and ingredients, who loved visiting food markets and buying cooking utensils and who found their way to the literature of food, all at considerable expense of time and money. Finally, such dedicated eaters came to their rewards: They were paid to do what they like to do best.

All would be to no avail, of course, if these blessedly obsessed buffs were not able to transmit their enthusiasms and findings to readers. That is where writing well comes in, but that is the talent most easily understood by anyone who will be reading this, and so needs no elaboration.

Passion, then, is the first essential and to that add a lively curiosity that drives a reporter to eyes-on research. "How do they make smoked salmon anyway?" he or she might wonder, just enough to find out, thereby learning the different quality points. Originality and ideas are needed because believe it or not, with all of the food articles around, there are hundreds of ideas that have never been explored.

Add to the above generous handfuls of cynicism and skepticism, the twin allies of any good reporter, and the dish known as a food writer begins to jell. With luck there will be a healthy sprinkling of personal disinterest, prompting the writer to report on findings, letting the chips fall where they may. Too many food writers are corrupted not by money, but by the desire to be popular with each other, or with restaurant owners and shopkeepers and anyone else who can ease their paths with plenty of cushioned red carpet.

In fairness to writers, it should be said that too often their editors and publishers are susceptible to the same blandishments and so short-circuit or discourage copy that tells the whole, ungarished truth. Which brings us to the subject of advertisers and their role in all of this, which should be no role at all. They should just pay the bills and go away quietly. Reviews and reports slanted for advertisers lose credibility, and it takes a
few bad reviews to make the good ones believable.

In hiring young food writers, editors should restrict them to the stories they are equipped to cover. On-the-job training has no place in criticism, for example. Too much is at stake both for the food industry and for the readers. Few writers are interested in and capable of covering all aspects of the food scene. The nutrition-minded reporter has her place but it is rarely as a restaurant critic or as a judge of fancy foods. Criteria applied would not be fair or valid and many a restaurant owner would be given a bum rap. Unless the writer is interested in the subject, the article will not be convincing. Good writers write what they want to read but cannot find, not what they think their peers, their publishers or their public wants to see.

With it all, the successful food writer makes it seem like fun, always aware that this most human of subjects is part spiritual, part scientific, part physical, part psychological. Food is all things to all people and the food writer is its champion.

Food has always been a hobby for Mimi Sheraton, who for seven years was a writer for the New York Times. She is now under contract to Condé Nast Traveler, where she travels around the world as the magazine's food editor. She also publishes Mimi Sheraton's Taste, a newsletter that primarily reviews New York restaurants. Mimi Sheraton's Favorite New York Restaurants is scheduled for publication by Prentice Hall Press in 1991. In spring, 1992, a similar guide to dining out in the United States will come out. Other books in print include The German Cookbook and a new edition of From My Mother's Kitchen.

If I remember the statistics correctly, the average American watches some 27 hours of television a week. With cable and the reruns, we can see just about everything that ever appeared on this relatively new medium. So if you are a TV addict you may already be an expert of sorts and have as good a chance as anyone of breaking into the field of television criticism. The tack you want to take is up to you, but since we are all experts you had better be clever, wise, and write well.

**On Being a TV Critic**

*John Voorhees*

The secret of being a TV critic is that it's a position that's still in the process of being defined—and that's partly due to the nature of TV itself.
The Complete Book of Feature Writing

Whatever your interest is, chances are that interest is prominent on television in some form or another, be it sports, music, drama, news, personalities, history, humor, religion — you’ll find ’em all on TV and in a great variety of formats, from the inspirational to the silly.

In some ways, writing about TV is like that group of blind men describing an elephant. And because of the all-encompassing nature of the medium, it pretty much allows the individual critic to define the job as he or she sees it.

Television may take a drubbing — like the weather, everyone complains about it — but nevertheless if you write about TV, you’ll not want for readers. Everyone is interested in and aware of TV and while just as many may disagree with your opinion as will agree with you, they’ll still be interested in what you have to say.

The best TV critic wants to do it all, even while recognizing that’s impossible. In the earliest days, TV criticism was limited to writing about what people saw the previous night on a couple of networks. Today, TV includes not only the three commercial networks but public TV, cable TV, pay TV, public access TV, as well as videocassettes, and the emphasis has changed to previewing programs.

But because of the wealth of TV that exists, TV criticism can handle any number of approaches and I find, as I survey my colleagues, that the best TV criticism is related to the characteristics of the individual practicing it. If that individual is intelligent, perceptive, has curiosity, an active mind, and can write, it’s likely his or her criticism will reflect those qualities — and be interesting and thoughtful to read.

Pick Your Own Approach

Some TV critics are more fascinated by the inner workings of the industry than that product it creates — the People magazine approach. Some like to ponder Whither Goest TV? since, after all, it is one of the most pervasive and powerful mediums of communication yet devised.

Others, and I number myself among them, like to think of newspaper TV criticism as a useful service for the reader — and one, incidentally, unavailable elsewhere on a daily basis. All of us, I’m sure, try to include aspects I just mentioned, but I see TV as yet one
more aspect of our culture clamoring for our time and thus I see my
primary function as a surrogate viewer checking out what’s happen-
ing across the board and offering recommendations, always quali-
ified, of course, with one’s own prejudices and interests.

TV criticism will undoubtedly reflect the publication itself. USA
Today’s TV reviews are very much in the vein of that newspaper—
brief, to the point, and without much chance of subtlety, either in
writing or thought. The New York Times, on the other hand, has sev-
eral critics—one concentrates on documentaries and news-oriented
programming, while another reviewer concentrates solely on enter-
tainment programs. Here there is space available—and a chance for
the writer to ruminate on the topic at hand.

One of the very best TV writers is the Washington Post’s Tom
Shales, who manages to be entertaining while also providing a good
deal of information and a thoughtful examination, whatever the
subject. But a newcomer would probably be best advised to concen-
trate on communicating information to the reader, letting style de-
velop over time.

After you’ve been writing for a period, readers begin to know
your weaknesses and strengths, your likes and dislikes, and behave
accordingly. If you recommend something, readers who generally
agree with you will try to see it; others, who know your tastes are
dissimilar, will avoid it—and make a point of seeing something you
have dismissed as trivial.

The key to TV program criticism, as I see it, is to try and discern
how successfully any program—newscast, TV drama, comedy,
sports, children’s show—has achieved what it set out to do, and
judge it accordingly.

Sure, sometimes it may be just another cop show or sitcom—
but within each programming genre there are highs and lows, suc-
cesses and failures. And the readers, in order to make up their minds
whether to invest valuable time in watching it, need this kind of
information. You need to ascertain what you think the producers
were aiming for—and whether they succeeded or not.

Reaching Your Goals

So far we’ve been talking optimum conditions but if you begin to
write in this area, you’ll soon become aware of how seldom you feel
you’ve reached your goal.
First of all, there's the simple problem of time. Forget 40 hours a week. If you're trying to keep track of what is happening in all areas of the medium, you're going to be spending a lot more time than that looking at cassettes of everything from children's cartoons to adult dramas for cable. If you don't like watching TV, this is not the career for you. And if you try to write about it without really looking at it, you can find yourself in trouble. We may be told people don't watch TV that closely, but make one mistake and someone will call you on it. Writing about that movie you didn't finish seeing is just asking for trouble.

The second major problem after time is space. If you like writing about TV and watch a lot of it, you'll never have as much space as you'd like.

Most newspapers allot a set amount of space to the subject, and it's up to the critic to decide how to use it. One of the biggest dilemmas is the choice between the long review or article and one containing a number of short pieces of information. I can't say that I've necessarily resolved this question. It can be very rewarding to write in depth about a certain topic but you're also left with the nagging feeling: What about the programs I didn't mention? If viewers miss them because you didn't write about them, even briefly, preferring to write at length about one, have you served the reader to the best of your ability? Who wins?

Writing TV criticism is one of the best ways to learn to write concisely. True, there are frustrating moments when you'd like to write just one more paragraph to call attention to some subtlety, some fascinating inside information you'd like to pass along. But there's also a satisfaction in re-reading a column in which you may have had to leave out certain details but which still communicates essential information that will help as wide a range of readers as possible. And as you agonize over what to leave out, you'll discover new ways, shorter ways, to deliver the information. A good sentence can sometimes be as on the money about what you want to say as a paragraph—and remember that readers are as pressed for time when reading a newspaper as they are for watching TV.

My response convinces me that readers appreciate concise information they can trust.

One of the best ways to get into writing about TV, if you are not already working for a newspaper, would be to attempt to make
contact with a community or area weekly newspaper or even monthly magazine.
This in turn, would allow you to contact your local TV stations and make arrangements to view upcoming programs, either via cassette or at the station. All TV stations, network or independent, are eager for more publicity and they are likely to be sympathetic to your requests—especially if you can soon show them some examples of your work. You can also get a foot in the door by asking to write about their local programming. Each station does some local programming, in addition to the news, whether it be religious programs or children's programs. This kind of programming too often gets lost, when it comes to the major newspapers, and a station will probably take kindly to your interest along these lines.

Beyond Just TV Watching

Thus far we've been pretending the job consists mostly of viewing cassettes and writing about them. Wrong. Those are the things you sandwich in between other things, such as reading news reports about TV, dealing with mountains of publicity mail, fax reports and phone calls from producers, networks and agents. You'll be bombarded by calls wanting to know if you wouldn't love to interview almost anyone connected with a program. (I make it a rule never to talk with anyone unless I've been able to see the program prior to the interview.)
Then there's the public that calls to (a) chat, (b) complain, (c) ask questions, (d) accuse you of taking their favorite program off the air, (e) ask how that movie ended last night because they fell asleep before it was over, (f) tell you how stupid you are because you don't like their favorite series, possibly even accuse you of racism, and (g) occasionally even say they like your work and read you every day—even when they don't always agree with you.
The latter calls are the best, of course, and make it all worthwhile.
Readers are more prone to call than write—remember their time is precious, too—and more likely to write when unhappy than when they approve of what you're doing. How many of us write letters of commendation but are quick to fire off a note when annoyed or angry? I take the small amount of personal mail I receive as an indi-
cation most readers are reasonably happy with the quality of my work.

In addition to convincing your superiors that your approach to TV criticism is the best one—especially if a competing newspaper might take a different one—there's still one more problem: TV schedules. Every day you have dozens of chances to make mistakes, to write about a program and place it on the wrong day at the wrong time on the wrong network—or any combination of the three. It may not be your primary responsibility to worry about schedules but it's still a necessary chore. Nothing can make you look stupid faster than making mundane errors involving schedules and nothing angers a reader more quickly than to interest him in a program—and then give him the wrong information about when to view it.

After all, how are they going to believe you know what the program is about, or whether it is good or bad, if you can't even get the date, the time and the channel right?

That dad-blamed TV critic . . .

John Voorhees reviewed television full-time for The Seattle Times from 1971 until 1990. He started at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer in 1953 where he reviewed art, music, film, theater and TV.

In music criticism there is no faking it. Either you know music or you don't. Just being a great writer is not enough. Besides, we know great writing is built on information, and if you are not informed about music you can't be a very good music critic. Of course, there are various levels of music criticism. A rock critic needs less training than someone reviewing classical music, and a local weekly will require less training than the New York Times does, but all writers should strive to know all they can about the subject matter they are covering. Daniel Cariaga is a classical music critic at the Los Angeles Times, but much of what he says can be transferred to all forms of music criticism.

Being a Music Critic

Daniel Cariaga

A lifetime of intelligent listening is the first and inescapable requirement for one who wants to be a music critic. Nothing less will do, and much more may be needed.
Being a music critic means being an interested and analytical listener, an observant member of the audience, a well-equipped writer, and an advocate for the musical consumer.

While wearing each of these hats simultaneously, one must also make sense of the world he covers; each review or article should reflect the reality of the year and place in which it is written.

Daily newspaper critics, like all working journalists, cover the news as it happens. This means the critic will attend concerts in the evenings, on weekends, and whenever they take place. He will be on call to conduct interviews when, and often where, the subject agrees to talk. He will also be expected to attend press conferences when they promise to offer breaking (as opposed to already leaked) news.

One prepares for the profession by studying music, listening to it for years, having broad musical interests and, ideally, if not always, being a member of one of the musical professions. As one grows in the job, he will acquire the skills of musicological research and interpersonal networking which will add to his effectiveness.

Have Varied Musical Experiences

Being a music critic is easy. Just get a job, then hold onto it.

You get a job by being qualified. Which means, if you are interested in classical music, you have experience in hearing, and writing about, opera, symphony, piano recitals, choral and vocal music, and the repertory of chamber music and instrumental literature.

There is no substitute for having known Beethoven’s “Pathétique” Sonata (and Opus 7, or Opus 110) since the age of 13, or having heard “Aïda” (or “Bohème” or “Boris”) regularly over a period of years. Or having hands-on experience of the chamber music repertory. This is knowledge which makes individuals civilized, and being civilized is an asset to a critic.

In addition, the music journalist should understand, by having observed, the workings of the music business and the day-to-day operations of symphonic organizations, professional presenters and academic institutions. What he does not already know or understand when he comes on the job, the conscientious critic should endeavor to learn or master. This means asking questions, keeping files, reading other periodicals systematically, and in general keeping abreast.

Ideally, the critic himself will have studied conducting, piano, voice, one or more instruments, composition, music theory and the
history of the art. Such studies give you the background to observe knowledgeably the field you now cover.

Avoid Clichés

Your reviews should be descriptive, colorful, cogent and uncluttered by technical terms. An intelligent, music-oriented adult should be able to read and enjoy them without resorting to a dictionary.

Writing is easy; make a point and move on; keep it short; vary your vocabulary. Don't fall into ruts. Stay away from other people's clichés, and try to avoid inventing your own.

The verb "to be" is the bane of the critical profession; avoid it—nothing is as deadly as using the verb "was" time after time in describing an event. Use active verbs, find colorful alternatives, vary your sentence length. Short, declarative sentences are tonic, but they must be true.

Comparisons are the soul of reviews: "Krips' tempos emerged slower than Jorda's, but less articulate." "Rubenstein's approach to the ballade became muscular and gutsy, Brailowsky's more analytical."

The job of writing about music for a general audience demands an ability to describe performances and report events, a background of sufficient listening experiences to enable one to make refined and illuminating comparisons, an instinct for recognizing quality, and an ear and eye for detail. A sense of humor, always present, and judiciously applied, is a bonus for the ordinary critic, a necessity for the serious practitioner.

A critic must be incorruptible. His devotion to fair reporting must override all other considerations. There will be certain artists he cannot judge fairly because of friendship, bias, past association or present lust. He should decline to review those artists. And if he is true to himself and his standards, he will eventually command the respect of his readers.

A prize-winning critic, Daniel Carliaga began his musical life as an accompanist to singers and violinists, a pianist for dancers, and a pit conductor. He was for eight years the music and dance critic of the Press-Telegram in Long Beach, California. In 1972, he joined the music staff of the Los Angeles Times; over the years, he has interviewed for the Times numerous major figures in the field. He also serves as Southern California correspondent for OPERA NEWS. Since 1970, he and his wife, mezzo-soprano Marvilee Carliaga, have given more than 400 recitals in North America, and at sea.
The arts and entertainment side of the features department at a newspaper is usually a little world unto itself. The larger the newspaper, the more focused and specialized the jobs become. The theater critic has one of those most specialized of jobs. It's not a place where a general assignment reporter can come in and take over. It requires an understanding and love of the theater. Magazines with theater critics present the same situation—the critics have to know theater and know it well. Once you start with that foundation you can begin to take Dan Sullivan’s advice on how to break into the field and also how to discover if this is what you really want to do with your life.

How to Become a Theater Critic

Dan Sullivan

So you want to be a theater critic. Very well. Arise. You are now a theater critic. There is no accrediting committee. There is no qualifying examination. You are a theater critic if you can convince people that you are one.

This will involve getting your stuff printed. (We will get to the idealistic part of this essay in a minute.) You will probably not be able to get the editor of your local daily to print it because he has no evidence that you know the first thing about writing for a newspaper. Your PhD dissertation on “Doctor Faustus” will be of no help here. He wants to see clips of stories you have written.

If you don’t have any clips, forget about working for a daily paper for the moment. Find the editor of a humbler publication—a community college paper, a weekly, a shopping mall handout. Tell him that you’d like to review plays for him and that you’ll do it for nothing.

Get 50 reviews published and paste them into a scrapbook. Now you have clips. Go to see the first editor. Maybe he’ll give you a stringing job. If not, tell him that you’ll call him again in three months, and continue at your present post. But ask the editor for some sort of payment.

Well, how do you like it so far? Is it as much fun as you thought
it would be, getting in to see all those shows for nothing? If the routine is getting burdensome after only 50 shows, then you don’t want to be a theater critic. I have been attending shows for a living for more than 25 years and I still think it’s fun. Some nights it’s even fun to write about them.

It’s work, as well. If only we could just say Yes or No to a show, and then go home! Unfortunately, we have to find reasons for our yeses and noes. This takes thought. Thought takes effort. Virgil Thomson, whose music criticism you should look up in the library, used to say that a review isn’t an exam that a critic gives, but one that he takes.

And one that he takes in public. Let the critic attribute one of Lady Bracknell’s lines to Miss Prism, and there will be a letter to the editor about it in the Sunday paper. (If you don’t know who Lady Bracknell is, maybe you should think about reviewing TV.) As a critic you will also hear from people who were offended by something you wrote. Perhaps you’ll hear from the leading lady’s brother, a linebacker for the Minnesota Vikings.

The Bottom Line Is Truth

Should it bother you that your review upset somebody? Yes, a little. Critics who enjoy wounding artists are creeps. So examine your conscience. Did you accuse the actress in question of being a bad person? No. Did you say she was a bad actress? No. You said that she gave a bad performance last night, and here is why it was bad. In other words, you dealt with the work. In other words, you did your job.

What is the job? Theater people will argue that you and they are in the same business. You’re both working towards “better theater” in the community. True. But they are in the business of putting on plays, while you are in the business of writing articles for a newspaper. Two different processes.

Your job isn’t to promote theater. It is to say what happened at the theater last night. The reporter in you doesn’t even care if the show was good or bad—either way, he’s got a story to get out. Happily, the reporter in you is balanced by a theater lover who cares a lot whether the show was good or bad. But not to the extent that he will lie on its behalf. The critic’s bottom line is the truth.

Whose truth? Why, the critic’s truth. It won’t be everyone’s truth. Some nights it won’t be anyone’s truth but the critic’s. But he
is stuck with it. And if he sticks with it, and doesn’t waffle, he and his readers will work out an understanding. I’ve had couples tell me that I’m an infallible guide to theater in Los Angeles: If I hate something, they’ll love it. Fine, we’re communicating.

But if I start to hedge, the line goes dead. Say your “noes” with respect, then—but say them. Not only does it keep you honest, it keeps the theater community honest. As Claudia Cassidy of the Chicago Tribune used to say: “The critic who puts up with the second-rate, will soon find himself presented with the third-rate.”

Do Your Homework

Be careful to make your yeses and noes specific. Specifics are arrived at by asking oneself a series of questions. Was it useful to have Lady Bracknell played by a man? Was it a good idea to set the tea party scene by a Hollywood swimming pool? Why did you like Gwendolyn but not Cecily? The more times the critic has seen the play, the more informed his answers will be.

But he must never stop doing his homework. This poses a problem for the critic who also serves as his paper’s theater editor. Too much time will go to office chores—making out schedules, arranging photo calls, proofreading copy, explaining to one’s publisher that we can’t cover his niece’s high school show without covering them all—and not enough to preparing himself for the evening’s exam. Yet ultimately that’s what he’s graded on.

Another pressure is that of the deadline. Whether your deadline is midnight or noon, you’ll always wish that you had ten more minutes. Sometimes you’ll hear yourself grunting at the typewriter as you try to nail down the particulars of a performance. At other times—when the show is either wonderful or wonderfully horrible—you’ll write with ease. You will write in good moods and in bad moods, in sickness and in health, always trying to keep your eye on the show, not on your own private twitches, which will manifest themselves without help. Virgil Thomson again: “Keep your opinions in your back pocket. They’ll come through anyway.”

Criticism is personal, though. I’m sometimes asked if I ever do any “real writing.” Reviewing is real writing. Compared with the fiction writer, the critic may be “hugging the shore,” to use John Updike’s phrase. But he does get into the boat and push off. His subject isn’t just the play. It is himself at the play, and things happen
to him there. Watching *Death of a Salesman* with Dustin Hoffman, I was so moved that I almost stopped taking notes. If you can relate to that, you'll probably make a very good critic.

Dan Sullivan has been a theater critic at the *Los Angeles Times* for 20 years. Before that he was a theater critic at the *New York Times*, and reviewed theater and music for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. He is writing a biography of the playwright William Inge to be published by William Morrow, Inc.

If you think you might want to be a film critic, it will be painful to read Stephen Hunter’s piece on becoming a critic. He does a head count and finds that there simply are not that many film critics in this country. Should that discourage you? Yes, if you are not 100 percent certain this is what you want to be. But if you're 100 percent certain, then you will have no choice but to fight for one of those 650 slots. Once you have made that decision, you will find Hunter’s advice very useful.

**Becoming a Film Critic**

*Stephen Hunter*

If they don’t ask directly, they ask with their eyes or in the halting, shy, worshipful way they address you. And who can blame them? For years I myself wondered, and would have given anything for a succinct and practical answer.

The question is: How do you become a movie critic?

And yet now that I've been one for eight years, I still haven't got an answer, or at least a satisfactory one. I can tell them how I became a movie critic, which had to do with internal politics, a shift in management theory, some success that validated me outside the newspaper itself; but that's not it, not it at all. What they want to know, really, is how they can become movie critics.

Of course there is no typical way; a lot of it is the sheer physics of the right-place/right-time, which cannot be managed without inordinate amounts of luck; but a lot of it is desire, wanting it so bad you want no other thing.

I tell them this is foolish, although it's a sin I committed daily from the time I was 12 until the time I was 33 when someone who owned a big newspaper finally said, “Okay, you're a movie critic.” I tell them there are reasonable jobs to want that can be gotten in
journalism. Do you want to be in a Washington bureau and cover the fastest track of all, national politics? It can happen. Most dailies have bureaus; most bureaus have rotating staffs. This means openings come and go and enterprising reporters can get to Washington, sometime, if that's what they want. They can get overseas, if they work hard enough. They can cover whatsoever it is that tickles their brains or imaginations; they can have interesting, fruitful, passionate lives. They can count.

But can they be movie critics?
Probably not. There are about 1,300 dailies in this country; probably less than half of them have full-time movie guys, the rest filling out the page around the movie ads with wire service copy. So there are probably fewer than 650 of us. We do not want to give up these jobs, for reasons that are obvious—they are the best jobs in America, and only a fool would give up soft hours, a sniff of glory, and the subversive pleasure of turning down interviews with beautiful women. Women who in real life wouldn't spit upon you.

So this is how you get the job: Any way you can, that's all. Does a degree in theory from film school help, or an M.A. in Criticism from one of the well-known master's mills? How should I know? I have neither. So the interesting question isn't how you get the job, it's how you keep it. You work like hell, is one way, the best way. In my town, one man, if he hustles and doesn't treat himself too preciously, can pretty much cover the market and throw himself against the 250-odd feature and art films that hit the screens every year. Of course distinctions must be made. When I first got the job, in a blast of crazed missionary zeal, I saw and wrote everything. I do mean everything, and that was one of the big years of the teen death-o-rama movies, where men in hockey masks shish-kebabbed entire graduating classes and cheerleading squads. The first year I saw more than 300 movies; I must have seen a thousand people die, in revolting detail, learning secrets that only surgeons should know.

Finally, I said enough is enough. I was losing the capacity to discriminate and was dreaming about slicing up a few producers. I decided to skip a few of the more odious atrocities, such as Dr. Butcher, M.D. Nobody noticed, and that was years ago. If you won't tell them, I won't.

Recipes Ruin Writing

Still, seeing the movie is only the smallest part of it. The most important part of it is writing the review. It's really the only thing you do.
I have no recipe for writing a piece, and if I did, I'd advise you to
tune me out. Recipes ruin writing for the same reason they help
cooking: they make it turn out the same each time.

I can tell you that the spine of a piece of newspaper criticism
must be a discrimination delivered as an argument, and that it must
adhere more to the topic at hand than the mood in mind. People
sense when critics become more interested in themselves than their
movies and, rightly, they turn away.

The review begins with a judgment, sometimes rushed to,
sometimes not discovered until the last paragraph. But a judgment
there must be.

I make that judgment based on certain things: First, my own
emotional reaction. I don't try to ignore my feelings and become
some remorselessly mechanical creature, Robocritic. I try to put my
politics and prejudices aside, and become a blank slate, and let the
movie strictly happen. It doesn't work, of course; but the effort is
important, because if you cease to make the effort you soon become
a set of inevitable political twitches, tiresome and grating no matter
how correct. Back to feelings; I try to cultivate and refine them, to
ask myself why I feel what I do. But no movie exists in a vacuum; I
try to put it in some larger context, relate it somehow to its genre
and then to the culture that spawned it.

And, yes, of course, each movie is comprised of six elements,
and each movie emphasizes one more than the other. It may be a
movie of performance, where the actors pull you into the story by
the neck; it may be a movie of effects, thrilling you with dark and
troubling visions no man has ever seen before; it may be a movie of
its auteur's voice, where you sense the director's artistic sensibility
in every frame, like it or not; it may be a movie of photography,
where the cinematographer is the principal creator, evoking an ex-
quisitely lit patina of muted fuchsias and glistening magentas, so
vivid the look is the movie; it may be a movie of pace, so seamlessly
edited it whistles you along; or it may be a movie of ideas, written
by someone who knows exactly what he means. You've got to know
which of these is important enough to mark in 600 words; and which
can be ignored.

Then, having worked that out, I labor to find a voice to express
it. Perhaps this is the hardest trick of all: In some sense, the film
critic is the newspaper's gigolo. He—among few others—is permit-
ted, indeed encouraged, the indulgence of a personality. He is paid
to charm, to beguile, to infuriate, to be the Robin Goodfellow of the
dim gray pages of the grown-up newspaper.

So how do you “do” it? The answer is, you don’t. It’s not a thing of
doing, it’s a thing of being. You are it, or you’re not. It helps if
you’ve seen a million and a half movies, but you’ll always bump into
somebody who remembers the name of the seventh gunfighter in
The Magnificent Seven when you can’t; it helps if you’ve read a lot of
film criticism, and mastered what we now think of as “the voice”:
ironic, sarcastic, allusive, articulate, vivid, passionate. It helps if you
have some talent, and this sort of thing comes naturally to you, the
words seem to bleed from your fingers. But if you don’t, perhaps you
can make up for it by working very hard, rewriting until you bleed,
beating yourself in some way into a publishable critic. Some critics
don’t write well at all; but they know movies back and forth and
their judgments are considered and provocative.

I think, really, it comes down to neither talent nor luck, but to
a belief in the medium. No matter how many dozens of movies
you’ve seen that month, or how many that day, you try to cling to
an essential, childish part of you that was, many years ago, first
enchanted by the power of the movies. You try to recall that icy,
delicious shiver that overcame you alone in the safe dark when that
white and piercing beam of light fired out of the darkness and
smeared itself across the screen.

You’ve got to remember the part of you that always said, when
the lights went down, “Hey, neat. A movie!” If you can’t, you ought
to get a real job.

Stephen Hunter is film critic of The (Baltimore) Sun, where he has also been
a feature writer, the book review editor and a copy reader. A graduate of the
Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, he is also the author
of five novels, most recently The Day Before Midnight.

You are not going to make a living from writing book reviews, but
of all the ways of breaking into print this may be the easiest. And
Elliot Krieger of the Providence Journal-Bulletin points out many
of the non-monetary benefits. But can it really be an entrée into the writing
field as Krieger contends? Well, read the piece by Maralyn Polak later in
this chapter. The magazine editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer read her
book reviews, contacted her, and for more than a decade and a half she
has been writing a weekly interview for that same magazine.
Writing Freelance Book Reviews

Elliot Krieger

Don’t stop to figure out how much money you can make by writing book reviews. You’d find the answer too discouraging.

Most newspapers pay from $25 to $50 for a book review. That’s not too bad a pay rate if it takes you, say, two hours to write the review. But you also have to read the book, and sometimes that’s the hard part. A $50 paycheck for reading and reviewing a 500-page novel doesn’t work out to a particularly profitable use of your time.

But who’s in this for the money, anyway? There are lots of other reasons why you might want to write book reviews.

The book review is the best way for a freelance writer to influence taste and opinion and to address the literary and intellectual community. Editors, publishers, agents and writers all read reviews—especially of their own books—avidly.

Also, the book review is the best way for a beginning freelance writer to get some clips. Most likely the book pages use more freelance writers than any other section of the newspaper. Newspapers with book sections are always hungry for reviews and on the lookout for new reviewers.

Writing book reviews keeps you sharp and fresh. You’re really forced to think about what you’re reading, to engage your mind in active debate against or discussion with the author and with a huge potential readership. And there’s always the reviewer’s special pleasure in being among the first to read a new book.

Getting Review Assignments

I was the books editor at the Providence Journal-Bulletin for four years. During that time I published reviews by more than 200 freelance writers. Many had never written for a newspaper before. I always welcomed hearing from freelance writers who wanted to review for us and I kept an active list, which I consulted regularly, of potential reviewers.

The best way to get on an editor’s list of potential reviewers is to write to him or her. Phone calls and visits tend to be annoying
interruptions in an editor's day, but a good query letter stating your interests and credentials is a perfectly sensible way to get the editor's attention.

You have a much better chance of getting a book review assignment if you're quite specific in your letter to the review editor. A would-be reviewer who says, "I read just about everything" is of no help at all to the book review editor. What kind of fiction do you read—mysteries? horror? highbrow? European? What's special about your background and education that might lead the reviewer to assign you a particular book? Did you live in Australia as a child? It's true that the editor may only rarely assign books on Australia for review, but it's also likely that there are relatively few people with that interest or expertise on his list.

Let's face it: everyone wants to review top quality fiction. And a surprisingly large number of people want to review poetry. (Everyone who reads poetry wants to review it, I suspect.) If you want to break into reviewing, you'll probably find poetry and literary fiction to be crowded fields; you'll also probably find that most newspapers have a columnist who regularly reviews the major genres: mysteries, science fiction, children's books.

But there are areas in which the review editor is always looking for reviewers. It's hard to get good reviewers on contemporary affairs. And it's especially hard to get people to review mainstream bestsellers. If these are your interests, you're a step ahead of the game.

On the other hand, it's inadvisable to request a particular book for review in your initial query letter. For the most part, by the time you've heard of a book, the review editor has already decided who, if anyone, is to review it.

You may want to review that new novel by John Updike or Anne Tyler. But I've got news for you—so does everyone else, and a review editor is unlikely to assign a plum to a reviewer he's never worked with. Yet if you ask to review a particularly obscure book, you'll probably raise the editor's suspicions about your motives. When I started in the job I was burned several times by people who asked for particular books to review; it turned out they were reviewing books by their friends or colleagues—a nice favor to the friend, but bad journalism and a sure way to scotch your reviewing career.

It's a great idea to enclose a résumé in your letter of inquiry to the review editor. Also enclose clips of your past stories, especially
reviews if possible. If you've never published a review, don't let that stand in your way. I'd suggest writing a review of a recently published book and enclosing that with your inquiry letter—not in hopes of having that review published (although who knows?) but at least to show the editor the quality of your writing.

Writing the Review

Ah, the quality of your writing—there's the rub. A book review, like all newspaper writing, should be clear, concise and accurate. It should have an enticing lead paragraph. When scanning a review I would often apply this test: If the author could have written the lead paragraph without reading the book, it's not a good review.

The review should give the reader a sense of the flavor and style of the book, but it should not rely excessively on quotation. It should let the reader know what the book is about, but it should not devolve into plot summary or synopsis. It should place the book within a context, but the references—to other similar books, to other books by the same author, to other works in the same field—should not be obscure or pedantic.

That's admittedly a tall order, and not all reviews measure up on all scores. But clarity is the most important. If you can at least describe the book comprehensively you have a shot at getting your review published.

Where to Get Started

Once you've drafted your query letter and written a sample review, what do you do? Send it to book review editors, of course. But to whom? Your best bet for starters is the major metropolitan newspaper in your area. It's true that the largest newspapers—the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post—make no regional distinctions when assigning books for review. But most newspapers do prefer to assign reviews to writers living within their circulation area.

Many smaller papers do not run book reviews, or else they run only wire service reviews. Still, I think an enterprising reviewer might be able to break into print through one of these smaller papers—even if it means buying the books yourself and convincing an editor to institute a new feature. You'd be surprised how eager editors are for good copy and for reliable writers.
You can get a list of book review editors at daily newspapers from *Literary Market Place*, an annual reference available at larger libraries.

All this said, the fact remains that reviewing books is unlikely to become a lucrative sideline—which is a roundabout way of saying no one ever got rich from writing book reviews. The standard fee at the midsize metropolitan dailies (circulation from 200,000 to 500,000) is about $25 to $50 for a 750-word review. At larger dailies, perhaps you could get $100. Only the largest dailies, with circulations higher than 1 million, regularly pay more—and they’re much more particular about assigning reviews.

Still, a good reviewer can expect to get regular assignments, and perhaps a boost in pay once your reliability is established. You can also expect to get—and should certainly request—more pay for reviewing a longer book. To be crude about it, an approximate rate of 10 cents a page ($75 for a 750-page book, for example) seems a fair minimum.

Remember that when you’re assigned a review, the editor is usually buying only onetime rights (check to be sure); if so, you can try to sell that review to newspapers in other circulation areas. Many reviewers send copies of their reviews on spec to a large number of newspapers. If only one or two pick the review up, the reviewer has still come out ahead.

In addition, your first published review can be a calling card that will get you in the door elsewhere. You can begin to build a file that can get you more and better assignments—perhaps review assignments at larger newspapers, or feature assignments at a newspaper or magazine.

The best way to keep on top of events in the book review field and to get in touch with others who write and edit book reviews is through the national Book Critics Circle. The group publishes an annual membership directory that lists reviewers seeking assignments and editors seeking reviewers. For membership information, write to Dave Wood, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 425 Portland Ave., Minneapolis 55488.

Elliot Krieger was the books editor at the Providence *Journal-Bulletin* in Rhode Island for five years. He is now the editor of the newspaper’s *Sunday Journal Magazine*. 
Since fashion writing in magazines and newspapers is often secondary to the photographs, it is an unusual field of expertise. Indeed, Ellen Kampinsky of The Dallas Morning News notes that, at times, fashion writing is simply reduced to cutlines running next to photographs. Sure, there are longer stories; however, often the fashion "writer" is a hands-on person who keeps in touch with the fashion community, searches and gathers the right clothes for the photo shoot, and may even have to dress the models for a well-styled photograph. Of course, at larger publications, fashion stylists are hired to pull the clothes and dress the models, but in entry positions the fashion writer often does it all. The freelance writer who wants to break into fashion writing may want to become a hands-on expert as well as learn all the other traditional writing and reporting skills.

Fashion Writing

Ellen Kampinsky

You could put the philosophy of fashion writing in a fortune cookie. Good fashion writing is good writing. Period.

But it’s not that simple. For one thing, no one is really writing stories about clothes anymore. Page through the autumn issue of any major fashion magazine and you’ll see what I mean.

In one 386-page issue of Elle, you’ll find about 250 pages of advertising. Of the 130 or so pages of editorial copy left, there are five pages of stories profiling designers, two pages of writing about short hair, three pages extolling the merits of bathing, and two pages of reviews of fashion books. Everything else related to fashion is photos. And captions.

Captions are the essence of fashion writing.

They are condensed emotion, tiny poems, half-haiku. They deliver the message with a whiplash of wordplay. "These boots are made for stalking," notes Elle. "All's fringe on the western front."

The good caption is elegant in its inevitability. It does not repeat what’s in the picture but adds an extra dimension to it. It produces in the reader a silent "ah" of satisfaction. Only those words could go with that photo.
Thus the first prerequisites of the would-be fashion writer are a good ear for language and the gift of synthesis. In fact, they are good requirements for any writer. After all, Dorothy Parker got her start writing captions for Vogue: "Brevity is the soul of lingerie."

Of course, there is more to fashion writing than captions. But even in newspapers, which traditionally place greater emphasis on words, the craft is turning into something of a headline service. In my own paper's weekly "Fashion! Dallas" section, stories on fashion trends have been getting shorter and shorter. A lead piece on the latest in sweaters might once have been a thousand words. Now it's down to as few as 200.

What's replaced the long-winded descriptions of garments is the brief, to-the-point overview. And lists. Five things you need to know about suede. Six top picks for your fall wardrobe. Be quick about it, and be clever.

Clever, yes. Clichééd, no. Unfortunately, fashion writing has been even more stereotyped than sports reporting. Generations of writers and editors have distorted the style of the late, great editor Diana Vreeland, who made pronouncements. One movie parodied her with the character of a fashion editor who ordered minions and readers to "think pink."

Vreeland gained legend status a half-century ago with her "Why Don't You" column in Harper's Bazaar: "Why don't you wash your blond child's hair in dead champagne, as they do in France." (Humorist S.J. Perelman countered that he'd let his blond child go to hell in her own way.).

At their worst, fashion writers overuse the imperative and hyperventilate all over the page. Throw away your animal prints! These are skirts to die for!

What arrogance. Nowhere else in journalism do we order readers about as if they were servants. The fashion writer's job is to inform, not badger.

A Letter to Mother

Finding the proper voice in which to tell a fashion story isn't always easy. My newspaper's current fashion writer joined us after working at a retail store. When she wrote her first piece for us, we bounced it back like a bad check. It read too much like an advertisement, something on the order of, "You'll love this season's new swimsuits."
Frustrated, the writer called her friend and predecessor in the job. The friend’s advice was good: Write the story as if you were writing to your mother. People talking to their mothers usually don’t use the second person, they don’t throw around a lot of French words, and they don’t sound like commercials. They use simple, descriptive language.

Besides being able to write, the fashion writer must be able to see. He or she must be able to vacuum up and process everything that comes into view, to recognize style not just on the runway but in the streets, not just in the cut of a dress but in the precise placement of a plastic hairclip or the lacing of a sneaker.

The good fashion writer is like a character in one of Nabokov’s stories, “a giant eyeball rolling in the world’s socket.” Everything is useful. Billboards and MTV and Janson’s History of World Art. The dedicated fashion writer will go into debt subscribing to foreign magazines.

Beyond Just Clothes

The fashion writer should love fashion, but not be obsessed with it. It is important to have a perspective, to realize there is much more to life than just clothes. Good things don’t just come in $5,000 packages with a designer’s tag on them. It helps to have a sense of humor.

Where do we find such fashion writers, those with perfect pitch and unerring eye? Sometimes, but not necessarily, at journalism schools. At my paper we’ve hired former ad copywriters, as well as ex-cop reporters and former city editors.

Such latitude is possible because fashion journalism extends beyond the coverage of clothing. In fact, while the amount of copy written about clothes is dwindling, fashion coverage is expanding into areas that traditional journalism explores.

First, and always, there is the news. In fashion, the news is made in Milan, Paris and New York. Twice a year, designers show their new collections six months ahead of when they will appear in the stores. When it’s spring in Italy, it’s autumn on the runways.

Covering the collections is a rite of passage for any fashion writer. It requires the stamina of a marathoner and the strength of a pack mule. The shows attract thousands of apparel buyers and manufacturers and wholesalers and media from around the world. They descend on the city and gather in front of a tent or showroom
for hours in a life-threatening crush. Then they wait inside the tent for another hour or two for the show to begin.

There is a blast of music and a swirl of color as scores of designs parade before eyes heavy with jet lag. Afterward the audience waits in another mass to emerge from the tent. They do this six or eight times a day. It is all very glamorous. In retrospect.

Seeing the Trends Firsthand

Writers working for major newspapers file daily stories from the shows. While it is important to get this news to the general public, it is only half the reason to go to Europe or New York. The real value is that the writer gets to see firsthand what the trends are, both in the tents and on the streets. Months later, when the clothes begin arriving in Des Moines or Dallas and it's time to run stories about what's new and available, the writer will be able to make intelligent, informed decisions.

Not all the news is made at the collections. Fashion is a big industry. Most media cover the news of sales and mergers and deals and acquisitions on their business pages. But the good fashion writer must know what's going on in the trade, even if it serves only as background. The best fashion writers will cover the business angle as well as the designs.

The other main area of fashion coverage is features. One of the most heartening developments in recent years has been the willingness of fashion publications to tackle consumer issues.

Readers benefit from stories that tell them what anti-aging creams will and won't do (mostly won't), explorations of why clothes cost so much, and comparisons of designer dresses and half-price knock-offs.

To cover news and features and investigative stories properly demands that fashion writing be held to the same standards as the rest of journalism. This means fairness and balance, good research and proper sourcing.

After all the hymns to creativity and integrity have been sung, the main thing to remember is, it's only fashion. And fashion should be fun. Once it stops being fun for the writer, it stops being fun for the reader. And when that happens, it's time to quit.

Ellen Kampinsky is assistant managing editor of The Dallas Morning News. She oversees all of the newspaper's feature sections. In 1978 she started the News' weekly "Fashion!Dallas" section, which has been called the most widely cop-
Lighten Up! Get Some Humor Into Your Writing

Leonard Witt

I don't think you can teach someone how to write humorously. It comes naturally. I know the best of the humorists are funny in person as well as on paper. I have heard Art Buchwald, Dave Barry, Russell Baker, and Calvin Trillin speak in person, and they make audiences laugh.

Now this does not mean you can't put levity into your writing. You certainly can, but if it doesn't come naturally, you will not be able to do it on a regular basis as the humor columnists do.

The nonfiction writer will see the humorous situation and go for that. That doesn't mean he will make fun of people, but he can write lines such as the one Sam Hodges of The Orlando Sentinel did about a bird watching expert: "You'll see birders in action!" promised . . . a Chattanooga nurse anesthetist, who is surprisingly lively for someone who puts people to sleep for a living."

Or let's take another example from The Orlando Sentinel, where writers have been given latitude to have some fun. In this story about ugly Muscovy ducks, Michael McLeod begins his piece like this:

Maybe the Muscovy duck was on a peaceful reconnaissance mission. Or maybe it had a kamikaze attack in mind from the beginning.

But something made the Muscovy swoop out of the sky and zero in on the wavering little object in the water below. What seemed like a perfectly legitimate target to the Muscovy duck was actually the sun-dappled, bobbing head of a little girl playing in the small neighborhood lake, unaware that 15 pounds of poultry was bearing down on her from four o'clock high.

Having a duck land on your head can be something of a shock. At touchdown, the little girl screamed, floundered and windmilled towards land.

The Muscovy flapped towards shore behind her, where ground
forces awaited it. Someone who had just seen a duck try to use her granddaughter as an aircraft carrier mounted a simple but effective counterattack: She grabbed the duck and tried to wring its neck.

Then the grandmother, a quiet, respectable, mid-50ish woman, did something ungrandmotherly. In the sober officialese of the police report, she “picked said duck up by the neck and swung said duck into a nearby tree.”

Said duck somehow survived and wisely retreated into the pond. The grandmother jumped into the water and splashed after it, but the duck eluded her.

Call it a tie. Call it an air assault repelled by an amphibious counterattack. Call it just another webbed footnote in the history of the Muscovy Duck War.

Lines like those above won’t make your reader fall off the chair in laughter, but they certainly put levity into the story and set a light, fun tone.

If the story line is appropriate, work for the humorous quote, the humorous observation or the humorous twist. Editors at magazines and at newspaper feature sections around the country are telling their writers to lighten up. Newspapers, especially, are too serious.

The story I like best about Denise Grady isn’t in her essay. Several years ago, she and I were graduate students at the University of New Hampshire studying nonfiction writing. She had read in passing that Time, Inc., was planning a new magazine called Discover. In the article the potential editor was named. Denise wrote to him and said if the magazine was ever started she would love a job. Months later it was indeed started. The editor called her and she was hired as an original staff member and worked there during the magazine’s early years. I like that story because it shows a little moxie coupled with talent can go a long way to gaining success. Now on to morbidity and mortality.

Hooked on Morbidity and Mortality

Denise Grady

Listen to this. I tell my husband. We have just had dinner, and he is trying to read the newspaper or do some work, and I see him cringe
when he looks up and notes what I am reading—the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report from the Center's for Disease Control in Atlanta—but I cannot seem to help myself. This week, a fourteen-month-old baby in Missouri has a fever and diarrhea, and the lab tests turn up a weird tropical bacterium that's hardly ever found in the U.S. (except once in a while in people who eat raw oysters). But the baby hasn't been anywhere, except to day care and her babysitter. (And who would give a baby raw oysters? What baby would eat them?)

Eventually, the state health department finds out that the babysitter keeps piranhas in an aquarium, and the aquarium is also full of the same kind of bacteria that infected the baby. And, well, yes, the babysitter admits, it is possible that she might have given the baby a bath immediately after dumping the aquarium water into the bathtub. The baby is treated and cured, the babysitter is told to clean her bathtub with bleach every time she empties the fishtank there, and, in the meantime, the health department tests 18 aquariums from around the state, and finds the nasty bacteria in 22 percent of them.

My husband finds all this pretty disgusting. I am enthralled. How exactly did the health department find its way to the fishtank? Didn't the bacteria make the piranhas sick? How did the investigators get the sitter to admit that she "might have" bathed the kid right after cleaning out the tank? (I imagine her sweating it out under a spotlight, during interrogation by a bunch of nerdy-looking guys in white coats.) God, I love this stuff, I say to my husband. He replies (good-naturedly, I think) that I have a sick mind.

I don't know if you need my particular kind of sick mind to write about medicine and science, but it certainly doesn't hurt. I'm hooked on Morbidity and Mortality. It covers everything from the flu to cholera, toxic shock, AIDS, syphilis, salmonella, dengue, rabies, and people falling into holes on the job. I read the case histories in medical journals, hoping to guess the diagnoses (I'm usually wrong), and the first stories I generally turn to in newspapers and magazines are the ones about health. I still remember the details of a New Yorker article by Berton Roueche, which I must have read at least 15 years ago, about a man who turned orange from eating too many carrots. I get huffy sometimes and try to convince myself that I am a Writer, as opposed to a medicine- or health- or science-writer, but the fact is that nine-tenths of what I write concerns medicine.
I find medicine endlessly interesting. I have always been curious about biology and physiology, but what really sustains me is that medicine is the one branch of science that touches everyone's life. At one time or another, we are all patients. Medicine has people, and real stories with beginnings and endings. It has mystery, drama, suspense, life, death, birth, heroes, villains, tragedy, triumph, right and wrong: all the corny stuff that everybody likes to read about, even if we're loath to admit it. Medicine stories even have the potential to do some good; how often in life are we afforded the privilege of helping someone else?

If I seem to be dwelling on how wonderful medical writing is, it's because I want to emphasize that to be any good at it, you've got to like it. Of course, that's true for all types of journalism, but it's surprising how often people will ask science writers how to take dry, boring material from journals and make it interesting to the general public. The best answer I can think of is, if you find it boring, don't write about it. Bored writers produce boring stories. Granted, some stories are more interesting than others, and we who write for a living don't always have the luxury of picking our subjects. I have written a few clunkers. So I don't mean to sound flippant. But I still think it's possible to find a different, interesting angle on most stories, even those that have already had a lot of play in the media.

For instance, it has been widely observed over the past few years that doctors are delivering far too many babies by Cesarean section, and that cesarean rates can and should be reduced. I have seen article after article about it. I have just finished writing a magazine piece that includes several interviews with women who want no part of the movement to protect them from unnecessary cesareans: They insisted on cesareans even though their doctors encouraged them to try giving birth naturally. I got the idea for that piece from my own experiences with childbirth, as well as those of many friends and acquaintances. In another article, I examined the public outcry over supposed health risks from the "tropical" palm and coconut oils used in so many processed foods—and found out some disturbing things about the domestic oils that will be used to replace the tropical ones.

Just today, I saw a newspaper story that begged for better reporting: Medical researchers have found that when people switch from regular to decaffeinated coffee, their blood cholesterol goes up, increasing their chances of having a heart attack. The scientists think the effect may be related to the different beans used for regular coffee
vs. decaf. The news story left so many questions unanswered! Could chemical residues from the decaffeination process have been the culprit? Did the groups really drink the same amounts of coffee? Did they lighten and sweeten it the same way? The type of bean used for decaf is also used for instant coffee; do people who drink instant have higher cholesterol, too?

I cannot overstate the importance of trusting your instincts and your intellect in this type of writing. Ask the questions that come to your mind, no matter how weird they seem. Take nothing for granted. And don’t repress or disregard your own opinions and impressions about your subject. People who read features are looking for more than just the facts: they’ll respond to the writer’s sensibilities. Whether they agree or disagree, love you or despise you, they’re more likely to finish your story if it takes a stand.

Readers Want Information

One of the worst pitfalls in this field is getting jaded and failing to see a good story because you’ve written about the subject before. People will always be desperate for information about heart disease, cancer, obesity, arthritis, backaches; there’s so much research going on in these fields that there’s often something new to say, and you might even have a chance to do a little good. It doesn’t matter what you’ve written before; most people haven’t read it anyway, and those who have probably forgot about it. The few who remember it are probably so interested in the subject that they’ll want to read about it again. And there will always be people who’ve suddenly developed a burning interest in your subject because it has suddenly come to bear directly on them or their families.

I once worked in the science section of a general interest magazine, with two reporters who knew so much medicine that I was actually scared of them. You couldn’t propose a story that one of them hadn’t already done. Frequently, they would scan the week’s medical journals and scornfully toss them aside, saying there was nothing worth covering. But I soon came to realize that I could pick up the same journals and find two or three articles that I thought deserved a story; most of the time, a day or two later, the wire services and daily papers would cover the same subjects I had picked. I’m not trying to say I’m a genius. I just have a certain type of news judgment that comes from identifying very closely with my audi-
ence: We happen to be interested in the same things. I am the kind of person who reads the kind of stuff that I write.

A number of years ago I covered a conference about cancer at which a doctor described research showing that chemotherapy worked differently and caused different degrees of side effects, depending on what time of day it was given. This doctor figured that the variation had to do with the body’s own circadian rhythms—daily fluctuations in hormone levels, metabolism, cell division and so on—and that these daily changes might alter the effectiveness of all sorts of drugs.

This was news to me. I found it fascinating. I love stories in which science confirms ideas that appeal to common sense and intuition and logic.

Two other reporters—both at least 15 years older and more experienced than I—tried to discourage me from doing the story. One of them was from the same city as the university where this doctor’s research group worked. The other reporter’s attitude was, basically, hey, kid, you don’t know it, but this guy gets up every year at this meeting and says the same thing, we’re sick of him already; it’s an old story, don’t give him any more publicity.

I think they were, in part at least, trying to help me avoid being taken in. They did make me feel naïve. But I still liked the story. As it turned out, my editors at Discover loved it. None of us wanted to make that much of it; we ran it as an item of 40 lines or so, in a department called “In the News.” The headline was “Fascinating Rhythms.” Reader’s Digest picked it up right away, and ran it in their “News from the World of Medicine” department. It may still be that the other reporters were right about this doctor talking up the same study over and over again, but I still think their news judgment was off: people wanted to read that story.

I cannot resist concluding this piece with a list of miscellaneous advice for people who want to write about medicine: Beware of plastic surgeons and diet doctors with their own public relations people. Remember that your readers are not planning to splice genes in their kitchens, so you can spare them the “methods” sections of technical papers, which even I find boring, although you should read them yourself to make sure nobody has tried to pull a fast one. (If, for some reason, you must include an explanation about teeny little enzymatic scissors snipping up bits of DNA, at least pull it out into a box so that it doesn’t mess up your story.) Check your facts thoroughly on the telephone, but don’t let your sources
pressure you into letting them "review the manuscript for accuracy." Even if you believe in peer review, you're a reporter and they're scientists—not your peers. Don't waste your space (and your reader's time) by naming every last test tube washer on the research team, or every agency that chipped in for the research. Even though you want to keep your sources happy, your first obligation is to your readers, who don't care where the money came from. Avoid, if possible, the kind of piece that pits six experts on one side of an issue against six experts on the other side, without any resolution; articles that take a stand are more satisfying. Finally, in moments of righteous indignation, remember that even bad publicity is better than none at all: I once wrote what I thought was a scathing denunciation of a quack arthritis remedy, only to have readers call and ask me where they could buy it.

Denise Grady spent five years as a staff writer at Discover. She has also been an editor at The Sciences magazine, the New England Journal of Medicine and other scientific publications. Her work has appeared in American Health, Time, Reader's Digest, Self and other magazines. She has won several awards for science writing.

Each week Maralyn Lois Polak interviews a different celebrity for the Philadelphia Inquirer's Sunday magazine. That's a wonderful assignment for a freelancer. So she must be an outgoing person who has a way with celebrities, right? Not quite. Read on, and remember that the way people write often has nothing to do with the way they act. In fact, writing allows those of us who are not perfect to polish and polish until we indeed sound as if we are.

The Celebrity Interview

Maralyn Lois Polak

I can't talk. That's why I write. I stutter, I stammer, I flush, I blush, I falter, I sweat. I'm desperately petrified of audiences. When I started doing interviews, I was shy—a real wallflower-type who couldn't even think of what to say to strangers at parties.

Paradoxically, I have come to specialize in interviewing mostly famous people, like Ralph Nader and Jimmy Stewart and Oprah Winfrey and Brooke Shields and the late Andy Warhol. That hap-
pened accidentally, when an editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer's Sunday magazine invited me to write for him in 1974, after he noticed some zany book reviews of mine. I did not begin as an interview specialist, but developed an expertise as I progressed. More than 15 years later, one interview each week, 52 interviews a year. I'm still learning.

   Interviewing looks easy, right? Two people talking? Hah! No matter how often I do it, writing interviews is always hard work for me. But the actual process is enjoyable. First I research the subject's background. I go to the library. I read newspaper clippings. I check the computer files. If they've written a book, I make sure I read it so I can look them straight in the eye. Then I think of my questions and list them on yellow legal paper. Then we're ready for the interview itself, which I record on tape.

   We usually talk for about 90 minutes. Then the tape's transcribed—a horribly boring, tedious and time-consuming process. Why do I tape instead of taking notes? Accuracy and verité. I want every word, every gasp. Then I pore over the transcript and search for a theme I can explore in 1,500 words.

   Interviewing celebrities has ameliorated my shyness somewhat. As long as I have my list of interview questions on a sheet of yellow legal paper, as long as I've done my research, I'm safe. That's my script. I walk in, and drop my notebook. I'm a klutz, my cord is tangled. They see I'm no threat. My clumsiness makes them feel superior. This puts them at ease. They open up. This usually works with even the most reluctant folks. They trust me. I transform my vices into virtues. And, usually, then, we have a conversation, not an inquisition. Try forgetting the intimacy is simulated.

Making Discoveries

I like doing interviews because I'm interested in psychology, human development and character formation—why people are the way they are, how they became that way. I like reading, thinking, reasoning, and making connections between ideas. I love making discoveries about a person. That's my personality—and my secret for keeping fresh despite doing the same thing, week after week, for so many years. Each person I interview represents a different puzzle to be solved to my satisfaction—and hopefully, to readers'.

   Even if you're a student, an aspiring feature writer, or a new
freelancer, it should be possible to break into celebrity interviewing. Remember, almost everyone you read about (or write about) is selling something, or has something to sell. That's when they're ripe to be approached for an interview. Don't assume that because you write for the college paper or a small-town daily, you won't ever get anyone famous to say yes to an interview.

Check your region's listings. Who's coming to town to give a speech? Anyone famous? Who's making a special appearance at a department store in a shopping mall? Any authors on autograph tours? Any actors doing a play? What music group's performing nearby? Who's promoting what on local radio or TV talk shows? Call the stations' managers or the concert hall promoters. Ask for the shows' publicists. Have them send you all the background information they have and get more phone numbers from them. Then call the star's agent or manager or public relations person and try to set up an appointment. It helps if you have an approved assignment from your publication, and can give a brief summary of what size and type of audience your article will reach. You might have to show them some clips of other pieces you've done. You have to start somewhere.

Framing Questions

If you're not sure what to ask your celebrity, you might begin collecting good general questions you notice in other articles. Often, long questions get short answers, and short questions get long answers. Be direct, and thorough. Some journalists ask the questions rephrased several different ways. What you ask may be less important than how alert you are, how acute you are, how quickly you respond to an opening, how mentally sharp you are in this tennis game of wits that you are conducting. It's your interview. You're in charge, no matter how famous your interviewee is.

Courtesies is always a must. Confidence and charm are also helpful. Think of it as a highly compressed "date." Make them like you.

Be calm. If you're a fan, leave your swoons at the door. You're working. Don't be intimidated. You're just two people talking at a table. If you're nervous, don't have a drink to relax—you'll probably ramble on and forget what points you're interested in exploring.

Begin the interview with a compliment or positive remark—but be sincere. Insincerity has a way of boomeranging back in your face.
If your subject launches into a filibuster, politely but firmly excuse yourself and interrupt, moving on to what else you wish to cover.

Memorable Interviews

Every interview is a challenge. In this business, you learn you can’t really have heroes. Dick Cavett, for instance. He was sitting eating lox and bagel and cream cheese, with a snaggle of smoked salmon hanging from his incisor, and suddenly he starts saying, hey, kid, why don’t you get your boss to buy a better tape recorder? He used humor as a weapon to deflect intimacy, and I liked him a lot better before we ever met.

My favorite interview subject is always the person I’ve just talked to. Memorable interview? John Cardinal Krol, a formidable Catholic leader in the city of Philadelphia, who explained that his badly scarred knuckles originated in a high school job he had at a butcher shop. “You can’t get good soupbones any more,” he lamented. I confided to him that as a teenager I wanted to be the first Jewish nun. “Come to us now,” he urged, his eyes twinkling. “You’re ripe.”

Portrait painter Alice Neel, who compared herself to Gogol by echoing his “I am a collector of souls,” was wonderful. She confessed, “My dear, all my men philandered. That just gave me more time to paint.” Commenting on her unhappy Philadelphia suburban childhood, she recalled, “I was so bored I would sit on the front porch and will my blood to stop flowing.”

I learned to expect interview moments that catch me by surprise, but enrich the story. Singer Kate Smith had a huge boil on her cheek, and during our chat, the scab fell to her plush carpet as we stood admiring her magnificent collection of Hummel figurines. And once a local TV weatherman dropped to his knees and begged, “Don’t print this interview; marry me, instead.”

Artist Andy Warhol was one of my most unusual interviews. I was on guard in case he had sent out an Andy Warhol look-alike to do the interview for him. I think the one I met was the real one. I asked him what he thought about sex. “I’d rather sweep up,” he revealed.

Buckminster Fuller was a short fireplug of a man who rambled perilously. He listened to himself so hard he seemed deaf. I felt I was in the presence of God—possibly because he thought so, too.
Some interviewers, like the indomitable Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, pride themselves on being aggressive adversaries who seek to intimidate their subjects into deep revelations. Fallaci may come on strong. But that's dangerous. My theory is if people get mad at you, they tend to throw you out, or leave, and then you don't get your interview. Save the tough, prickly, controversial questions for the end.

Be a listener. If I have to, I'll come on like an awed little girl. Fallaci uses being a woman differently. She wants the men she interviews to feel she is as powerful in her way as they are in theirs. They often rise to that challenge and reveal more of themselves than they might to a male interviewer. Can you imagine Henry Kissinger boasting to, say, David Letterman or Pat Sajak that he'd once wanted to ride off into the sunset as a cowboy?

I'd like to think that the interviews I do are unconventional. The structure is not standard alternating paragraphs of quotes and summary in chronological order. I do not go in for celebrity worship. I do not fawn or glorify or promote. I do not seek to regurgitate biographical details or reprint mundane facts. What finally concerns me is gesture, nuance, epiphany—the expression of personality, the essence of character. What intrigues me is the ineffable made real.

My technique seems to be the absence of technique. Alternating between richly detailed narrative and occasionally inspired banter, I seek to achieve a level of revelatory discourse rare in fiction, let alone journalism. My sly, droll questions can range from humorous prods to impertinent goads. Frequently, through my subjects, I meditate on the fleeting significance of fame.

Sometimes, though, I wouldn't mind a bit of celebrity reticence. From the lead of my Oprah Winfrey interview: "Little or nothing is sacred, secret or left to the imagination with TV talker Oprah Winfrey, who seems compelled to reveal, confess, admit, expose or share every last flaw, thought, fault, crack, fissure, fact, feeling, detail and speck of her personal and professional self..." The last line in the piece indicated I had finally become drenched and oversaturated by her confessional zeal. "Thank you, Oprah," I wrote. "Now, please, hush up."

Granted, interviewing can be like getting paid to be a voyeur. People actually tell me their secrets! Journalism aspires to extract and reveal these secret parts of people. And yet, I deeply hope there's a shrine hidden deep in the heart of each of us that no interviewer
could penetrate or plunder or publicize—a shrine, however, where a poet might kneel in ecstasy.

Maralyn Lois Polak—poet, journalist, editor, teacher, lecturer, radio personality—has, since 1974, written a weekly celebrity interview column for the Philadelphia Inquirer magazine, where she is contributing editor. Her work has been nationally syndicated by Knight-Ridder and also appeared in such publications as Mirabella, Andy Warhol’s Interview and West. Her book of author interviews is The Writer as Celebrity (Evans).

End Words

Afterthoughts: More Points to Remember

1. If you want to be a critic, you have to be a student of your discipline. You have to learn all you can because criticism, like any other kind of writing, is based on knowledge, and requires converting that knowledge into information for your readers.

2. Big newspapers and magazines have only a few full-time staff jobs for critics and columnists, and the chance of landing one is remote. On the other hand, freelancers who cultivate an expertise have many opportunities open to them, especially on a regional level. Even in small metropolitan areas there are regional magazines, alternative newspapers, shoppers and big dailies. All run a host of specialized columns, and finding the right people to write them is not easy. If you are good, you will get assignments.

3. Often specialists aren’t writers, and writers aren’t specialists. Freelancers who mesh writing talents with expertise in theater, finance, food, travel, fashion, home decorating, health, science, media, film, arts or literature have a real chance of placing stories regularly or even gaining contributing editorship recognition on the alternative or regional magazine’s masthead.

4. Even a tiny publication will help you gain access to the stars and experts in your field of expertise. Whether you are a freelancer or staff writer, you’ll get a chance to meet the celebrities passing through town. Once you start writing for a local publication, you will also better see local trends that will help you develop stories for national markets. In this business, success, no matter how small, breeds greater success.
5. The best way to make contact with editors of smaller publications is with a well-thought-out letter of introduction. Tell what specialty you can bring to the publication. Make the letter lively. Include a résumé and, if you have been published, include copies of your best stories. If you don’t hear from the editor, follow up with a phone call. Then another letter. On the one hand, editors complain about nuisances; on the other, they like people who are aggressive. Aggressive reporters get good stories. Figure out a proper balance. If you get a rejection, then what? Don’t quit. Get more writing experience, and then try again. For most of us, this is a business of small steps, each leading further up the career ladder.

6. Conflict of interest worries editors, so if you can’t be a full-time writer, you are sometimes better off making your field of expertise an avocation rather than a vocation. In other words, a homemaker who knows a great deal about food and takes writing seriously may have a better chance of becoming a contributing freelance food critic than a chef employed by a particular restaurant.

7. In talking about television criticism, John Voorhees gives the following advice that can be translated into any form of criticism: If the critic is intelligent, perceptive, has curiosity, an active mind, and can write, it’s likely his or her criticism will reflect those qualities and be interesting and thoughtful to read.

8. Once you begin to write for a publication, no matter what its size, be sure the editors send you all the press releases they receive in your specialty. And get yourself on mailing lists. If, for example, you aspire to be a TV critic, write to all the local channels and also to the networks. Ask to be put on their mailing lists. Much of it will be junk mail, but occasionally the nugget will be there to set you up for a story.

Exercises

1. Compare how the television critics write in USA Today, the New York Times (or Los Angeles Times), and a smaller regional paper. Compare them over a few days and keep notes on your observations. What is each paper’s story selection like? Are they giving in-depth analysis or just a brief overview of what is going to be on tonight’s
TV? Are they cheerleaders or truly critical? Do the critics concentrate on one show or many? Which fits your style best? After you have compared the television coverage, you might try other disciplines.

2. Now you be the critic. Find a recently released book and write a book review. Or go see a film and write a review. Or go to a play and review that. Try your hand at whatever specialty you favor. When you are finished, go to the library and look up reviews of the same piece of work you reviewed and compare. How did you do?

3. Following celebrity writer Maralyn Lois Polak’s advice; try to track down all the celebrities who are coming to your area in the next couple of weeks. Check your region’s listings. Who’s coming to town to give a speech? Anyone famous? Who’s making a special appearance at a department store in a shopping mall? Any authors on autograph tours? Any actors doing a play? What music group’s performing nearby? Who’s promoting what on local radio or TV talk shows? After you have made your list, think if there is any local or national market where you might convert your findings into a celebrity interview and story.

How the Pros Do It

Writing Sample Number 5

I first saw this story by Steve Sonsky while judging a major feature writing contest sponsored by the J.C. Penney Company and the University of Missouri. We awarded it a first prize in arts and entertainment writing. There were stories that required more research and more important stories, but none that fulfilled their own missions as well as Sonsky’s piece did.

He wanted to show how five years of “Miami Vice” on television changed a city. He did so with solid research, but also with a pace and tone that never made the story sound academic or dull. He did his homework. This story is filled with facts, but he turned the right phrase when it was necessary.

Like most of the examples in this book, this story is not beyond the capabilities of most feature writers, yet after judging the contest I realized how poorly focused articles can be and how perfunctory the writing often is. Some writers are so interested in letting the experts speak that we never hear the writer’s voice, or get a sense of his style or tone.

Sonsky’s voice is here, but it never overpowers. You hear it when
necessary as you feel the tone he sets. In one section he writes about "Miami Vice's" quick cuts and when he does, his own writing pace quickens also. I've marked several other places where his words fit the subject he is writing about. If you get a chance, look at some "Miami Vice" reruns and see if you can match Sonsky's tone and the tone of the show itself.

Bye, Pal!

Miami's Vice: It Was a Case of Art Imitating a Slice of Life and Life Imitating the Art

By Steve Sonsky
The Miami Herald, Florida

We take like one-tenth of one percent of the objective reality of Miami and that's what we render. What we capture is the spirit.
—"Miami Vice" executive producer Michael Mann, after the first season.

In the end, we find our best metaphor for "Miami Vice" in its very beginnings.

As the fresh images recede into the eternal loop of Runland, perhaps it is the question asked by a confused Crockett in the very first show that we need to be considering again.

Maybe you still remember the scene from that September 1984 Sunday premiere, 107 adventures ago—a bookend to tonight's denouement. It was the most vivid image in a pilot movie full of stylish visuals, the beginnings of a show that would go on to change the way television looked—and the way Miami looked at itself—forever.

Betrayed by his partner, abandoned by his wife, Crockett was on his way to the final shoot-out with drug lord Calderon when he suddenly pitched the original black Ferrari to the side of the road.

A ghostly phone booth glowed in the dark. The skyline was hazy in the distance. The car had kicked up a silvery dust. An ephemeral pink and blue neon sign hung in space over the phone booth. A still life in celluloid.

Crockett was calling his wife Caroline. He needed to know, he told her, nearly pleading, needing an anchor . . .

"It was real—wasn't it?" he asked.

"Yes it was," she said.
It was real—wasn’t it?
It was far more real than we perceived it to be at first, back before Michael Mann’s .1 percent solution, his fictionalized essence-of-Miami, became the reality.

Wasn’t it an extraordinary thing to watch? Art imitated a slice of life. Then life imitated the art. The slice became the whole loaf.

It happened because NBC wanted a TV show that "looked contemporary," and Miami became the lucky beneficiary of innovation. For as it reinvented the look of television, “Miami Vice” reinvented the look of Miami, too, reinvented the way Miami was perceived by the world.

And we in Miami liked what we saw. And began to replicate it.

Richard Brams, Vice’s co-executive producer who oversaw logistics in Miami, notes how in the early years they had to build sets for the indoor looks they wanted. Later, they were able to do more location-shooting as “Miami began trying to duplicate much of what we designed as discos, or entertainment places,” Brams says. “We saw people designing their new establishments the way we had dressed our sets.”

It wasn’t always that they had created the vision either, Brams points out.

"It was here," he says. "It was the real world of Miami imitating what was already here, but not in such volume. I mean, look at South Beach now. It’s not that they copied us. They responded to those things that we spotted and (put on film)."

"They rehabbed and went back to the original look, the integrity of what was there in the beginning."

We knew the city was dangerous. We didn’t need Vice to tell us that. But we needed them to show us how we could be cool, and look exotic, as well.

Mann had his crew shoot in a style he’d begun to perfect with his cult film Thief. No earth tones. Water down the streets. Slick and shiny. Quick-cut editing. Electronic score.

(Tangerine Dream in Thief. Jan Hammer for Vice.) It was a compressed reality, too—from Arquitectonica’s Pink House in Miami Shores, to the steel and glass towers of Brickell, to a post-modernist dreamhouse on Indian Creek Island, to SoBe. (Which in ’84 was merely South Beach—
where folks feared to tread. Nightclubs? Restaurants? You're dreamin', pal.)

The car-chase in-an-instant was an hour-commute in real life. Mann took the one-tenth kernel of Art Deco/postmodernist truth, and edited it to make it seem the whole burgh looked this way. Eventually, more of it did.

"Miami Vice" reinvented Miami in the eyes of the world—that was not surprising. TV does that. What was unusual was how Miami then bought into the vision—how a city reinvented itself in the stylized, glamorized image that a TV show had of it.

**Humble Beginnings**

Vice's beginnings were humble.

It was the vision first of Anthony Yerkovich, an Emmy-award winner for his writing on "Hill Street Blues." Yerkovich had been fascinated by a newspaper clipping reporting that one-third of all the unreported income in the United States either originated in, or was channeled through, South Florida. Guess why.

Even while working on Hill Street, he began to accumulate more information about "the drugs, the life-style, the immigration influx." He began to formulate his own variation of the Miami-as-Casablanca theme. Miami as the epicenter of the drug holocaust. "A sort of Barbary Coast of free enterprise gone berserk," he once called it.

He pitched the Miami idea as a two-hour series pilot to NBC President Brandon Tartikoff. Tartikoff had an idea of his own, scribbled on a piece of notepaper. "MTV Cops," he had written—a notion of how to give a new twist to an old network standard: Integrate what were essentially music videos into the context of a drama show. There would be a separate budget of $10,000 an episode to buy the rights to actual tunes—unprecedented for TV.

The ideas were merged.

A few months of writing and research later—traveling around Miami with undercover cops and dopers—a script by Yerkovich called "Gold Coast," later retitled "Miami Vice," was born.

It's hard to think back now to all the local hubbub preceding that initial show. In the wake of the *Scarface* fiasco, local xenophobes were again up in arms over a film project whose violence, they feared, would further reinforce Miami's image problems. The county suggested it wanted
script-approval powers if it was to cooperate; at the very least, couldn’t they take Vice out of the title? No and no, said Universal, and if the county didn’t want to cooperate, the studio would simply do the show in L.A.

They cooperated.

As the show kicked off, much of the early criticism about story lines—beyond the ubiquitous complaints about muddled plotting and style over substance—was directed toward the drug-crime emphasis and crooked cops. Unrealistic! Overstated! cried the critics. Why is the show about drugs and police corruption every week?

In this era where the phrase “national drug epidemic” is part of the lexicon, it’s easy to forget that just five years ago, this sensibility had not yet matured. Vice was prophetic in yet another way: in Yerkovich’s and Mann’s recognition that drugs were so pervasive, and not just in Miami, but nationally. That it was where the bulk of vice resources were increasingly being targeted.

In the midst of the criticism, Mann was buoyed, he once recounted, by something several real-life Miami vice squaddies had told him: “You guys,” they said, “haven’t scratched the surface of what’s actually going on down here.” By 1986, Miami Police Chief Clarence Dickson was saying that 10 percent of his force was corrupt.

Ratings Struggle

In that first year, Vice was struggling in the ratings. The turning point was a New York Times piece on Jan. 3, 1985. “The most talked about dramatic series in the television industry since ‘Hill Street Blues,’ ” the Times gushed. Newsweek followed, then a Rolling Stone cover, then this from New York magazine, with John Leonard carrying on about “Miami . . . A dream city . . . Seen through filters of psychedelic lollipop, dissolved in montage, piled under by superimpositions of the ghostly and the slick, angled at from stars and sewers—a surreal sandwiching of abstract art and broken mirrors and picture postcards . . . There is no murder; there is only art.”

The public’s curiosity was piqued.

The show ended that first season ranked 47th but during summer reruns, it moved into the top 10—and stayed there through season two, which began with another media blitz: the covers of People, Us, TV Guide, Rolling Stone again, even Time.
Dumped in chocolate sent the writer from explaining just how unknown the actors were. Always search for ways to economize.

Generalization quickly backed by facts. More research, but it never intrudes.

The writer has a point of view, and it is pulling the reader through the story.

[Philip Michael] Thomas and especially [Don] Johnson, just a year earlier journeymen actors who graciously allowed themselves to be dumped in vats of chocolate for a local charity function, were now national icons. A relative snubbing by the Emmys—just four awards from 15 nominations (the only Emmys Vice would ever receive), for art direction, editing, cinematography and to Edward James Olmos for best supporting actor—hardly slowed the rush. Nor did, at first, a succession of indecipherable scripts.

There were parades. Department store chains featured Miami Vice fashion sections. Anyone wearing socks was uncool. Crockett-like stubble was all the rage.

The stars' every move was chronicled in the tabloids—sordid tales of Johnson's romance with a teen model, of Thomas' several illegitimate children. Johnson and Thomas were invited to a state dinner at the White House. "A couple of cops from the most talked-about show on television stormed the White House Tuesday night, nearly upstaging a president and a prime minister," the Washington Post wrote.

The tragedy of "Miami Vice," from a creative sense, was that the height of its popularity was never in sync with its best work.

It was the ninth most popular show on TV its chaotic second year but in its superior year three, following Don Johnson's celebrated contract holdout, after NBC committed the strategical blunder of moving it to 9 P.M. to blunt "Dallas," it dropped to 16th. A new white Ferrari, and darker duds for the boys were no match for "Dallas'" stratagem of bringing Bobby Ewing back from the dead.

There were occasional sparks, but the script quality was never consistent and the public grew further disenchanted.

Attempts to develop Crockett and Tubbs as fuller characters seemed like afterthoughts—as did co-stars Saundra Santiago, Olivia Brown, and Michael Talbott, whose roles as Gina, Trudy and Switek grew more limited each year. Only Olmos' Lt. Castillo, a stark triumph of black-garbed minimalism in a sea of cinematic overstatement, was able to escape Johnson's shadow.

The series never got the credit it was due for some of the timely, politically inspired tales it spun. One example: The chilling show in October of '86 with convicted Watergate G. Gordon Liddy playing a retired right-wing rene-
gade general illegally recruiting American mercenaries to fight alongside the Contras in Nicaragua; it aired a week before Eugene Hasenfuß's plane was shot down.

But those occasional brilliant episodes were lost among the too-frequent missteps.

A parade of big-name guest stars didn't help. In season four, despite another flurry of publicity over Crockett's marriage to a character played by singer Sheena Easton, ratings continued to erode. Down to number 44 among network shows.

The cliffhanger fourth season ending—Crockett getting amnesia and thinking he was his drug dealer alter ego, Sonny Burnet—did nothing to stem the tide. Early this season, Mann announced that year five would be Vice's last.

Even Johnson's uncanny knack for staying on magazine covers—in the fall it was the romance with Barbra Streisand; in the spring it was the reconciliation with former wife Melanie Griffith—didn't help. Vice's average rank this year was 65th—NBC's lowest-rated full-order series.

After the big event "finale" airs tonight, NBC actually still has four more new episodes it's quietly looking to shoehorn somewhere in the schedule. So Vice, no matter its reception tonight, is assured of dying not with a bang—which would have been appropriate—but with a ratings whimper.

Vice Legacy

So in the end, what will we remember "Miami Vice" for?

In the television world, it's credited with irrevocably upgrading the quality of TV-filmmaking. It showed that TV viewers do appreciate superior imagery—as well as superior sound. Pop sound tracks, from "The Wonder Years," to "China Beach," to "Tour of Duty" to "Wiseguy" are now de rigueur.

It leaves behind a $20-million gap in the local economy—the estimated money it spent here each season.

But it also leaves behind a movie-making infrastructure, and a local corps of expert film professionals, that didn’t exist when it first blew into town. Moreover, as Vice continues to be syndicated abroad—it's now shown in 136 countries, from Abu Dhabi to Zimbabwe—more foreign filmmakers are drawn here.

Which brings us to the final, big question about "Miami
Vice’s” legacy: As its immediacy recedes, will it be remembered more for the Miami, or more for the Vice in it?

Bob Dickinson, treasurer of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, is bullish on the aftershock. Tourism, as measured by resort tax collection, has been up every year since Vice began. The jury’s already in, he argues. The cachet Vice has lent the town far overshadows any reinforcement it gave to our shoot-'em-up image.

But Mike Collins, vice president of marketing for the tourism bureau, disagrees. “The steady stream of stories involving drugs and violence have a kind of cumulative effect (after the) beauty of the scenery fades away,” he theorizes.

Maybe the larger issue:
Was it real, Crockett asked?

Now that the show is gone, will the Miami panache fade, too, like an illusion? Will the new facades on the old buildings crumble? Will the SoBe clubs wither and die? With the cameras off, who will define us? Do we cease to be cool when TV stops watching?

Now, the next step in Miami’s evolution: Now, we just have to dress ourselves.

Goodbye, “Miami Vice.” And thanks. Thanks for the memories. Thanks for lending the vision. In the end, it has been real. For in this town, you were more than just a TV show. You were life.