

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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# Getting to The Top

**N**o new writer will totally enjoy Jon Franklin's advice on becoming great. You see, he offers no overnight formula. But he does offer a long-term plan, a plan good only for those willing to stick to it as he did. And for him it paid off with two Pulitzer prizes. He shares more of his secrets for writing dramatic nonfiction in his book *Writing for Story* (A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1986).

### How Feature Writers Become Great

*Jon Franklin*

Like many of my students today, I came to journalism as an orphan child of fiction. I had literary ambitions and, given that, would far rather have written short stories. That, after all, had been the training ground for the Great Ones, for Hemingway and Steinbeck and all the rest.

But they lived in a kinder world. I was of the first luckless generation to enter my apprenticeship after the extinction of the magazine giants and the concurrent demise of the short story as a commercial form. The door had slammed shut in my face; there was no way I could feed a family writing short stories.

Hemingway's edict was clear, though: If you were going to be

a writer, you had to write. The ante, then as now, was to put a million words through your typewriter.

Worse, those million words had to be *published*. History was very specific on that point. Exposing your writing to editors and audiences and suffering the consequences was critical. If you got applause, you learned something; if you got raspberries and rotten tomatoes, which was more likely, you still learned something. You never learned much of anything when writing for yourself, which was why writing for yourself was to real writing what masturbation was to sex.

It was also necessary to get paid for what you wrote, a truth that in my case had to do with family responsibilities, but which also had larger implications. For, as W. Somerset Maugham had so acidly reasoned it through, writers were supposed to be smart, weren't they? And it was definitely not smart to starve. Therefore, the phrase "starving writer" was a contradiction in terms.

Given these realities I looked around and saw only one opportunity: journalism.

What? Covering muggings and traffic accidents, quoting politicians, sitting through town council meetings? Me? To a young man of my literary pretensions, this was not a very satisfactory answer.

Still, it seemed better than, say, selling insurance.

And besides, I told myself, I'd only be doing it for a while. I'd be slumming, but they'd see real quick what a fine young writer I was—too good for the newsroom, clearly. So they'd move me over to the feature desk. I'd make my reputation writing features. Then, when the time came, I'd take some time off and write the Great American Novel.

### Facing Newsroom Realities

The ambience of the newsroom, of course, was anathema to all this.

The city room culture, then as now, was dominated by the Jack Webb school of journalism. Just the facts, ma'am. Who, what, when, where and why . . . always assuming there's time for a why.

Keep it under 14 inches. Can I quote that? Is that "Philip" with one "l" or two? *Whadda you mean you don't know? What kinda reporter are you? Copy over!*

*Hey, Franklin! The cops have a floater at the inner harbor. Run down and find out what's going on! Take a photographer with you!*

It was a brutal experience, the truth is, for one whose heart so warmly beat to the rhythms of Joyce, say, or Remarque. I responded in the only logical fashion, which was by trying to write it better than the normal stuff you see wrapped around the tire ads.

The gods aren't totally cruel, though. There always seems to be an editor around who does care, someone who will play mentor for a young writer. I had one . . . or maybe, come to think of it, he had me. In any event, one day early in my career he pulled me aside.

"Franklin," he said, "you tried to make this a great piece. Well, it's not.

"It could have been, maybe, but who knows? All I know is that it's not—and that there's only one way of making sure that you won't write a great piece, and you found it."

I stared at him, waiting. Well? Well?

"The only way to insure that you won't write a great piece," he said, articulating very precisely as though I was a seven-year-old, "is to set out to write a great piece."

I stared at him, bewildered. Now, what kind of thing to say was *that*? What did he mean?

Did he mean I was being too self-conscious? Should I spend more time being conscious of the self-consciousness of my copy? I could have grabbed him by the necktie!

*What was I supposed to do? Tell me what to do!*

He looked at me sort of sadly, for a long time.

"Nah," he finally said. "Nah. Forget it."

So what was one to make of that? Was it some kind of code? Was he supposed to understand?

Was he supposed to understand *any* of what was going on?

And what does one do, the young artist, when some fool of an editor strips off the whole first paragraph of his story, thus deleting a half-day's work and agony . . . and then sends the rest of the piece through mostly unchanged?

And how does the young artist react, in the secret, sensitive artistic center of his mind, when some Hun of an assistant city desk man laughs at him for the way he uses commas?

Well, one slinks away and licks the wound in private.

What the hell is so funny about my commas?

And what was wrong with the lead?

And then, in simple self-defense, one sets art aside for a day or two and learns everything there is to know about commas. That way,

the next time that idiot makes a snide remark about your commas you'll make mincemeat of him!

Life is cruel, though, because no word is ever said again about commas. There are instead other slings, arrows and humiliations.

*Hey, Franklin! Where'd you get this sentence? Outta a textbook in some college library?*

And so again the young writer slinks off, setting aside his literary ambitions for yet another little while, to spend the time instead brushing up on the niceties of sentence construction.

*Hey Franklin! You got three paragraphs here. Gawd, they're beautifully written! Love the syntax! Get off on them verbs! Oh wow, lookit them metaphors! Only thing is . . . you don't say anything . . . yuk, yuk, yuk!*

Oops.

By this time the writer is getting very good at, if nothing else, slinking away from the city desk. He plops down in his chair and glowers at the computer tube for a while. In his mind he dismembers that editor, starting with his fingernails. And then finally, and with resignation, he calls the story up, deletes the offending three paragraphs, and starts over.

It is a deadly combat, an endless circle, a Sisyphian task. You try, you rail, you try again, you fail, you try again, you succeed. Then, having succeeded, you reach farther . . . too far, oh Lord, too far . . . and you fail.

You lose track of small things, like the passage of years.

You forget why you came here in the first place, and what you were going to do. The place where once you were an artist is now nothing but a hollow ache. You ignore it.

In your struggle with the desk editors you arm yourself with knowledge and skill. You learn ever finer points of syntax, of sentence construction, of paragraph sequencing, of story structure. You learn to use character, and the specific but limited uses of the quote.

More and more, the problem becomes clear. There is a world out there, and in that world inexplicable things happen. You are supposed to understand these things, and represent them in a simple way in your copy. When the reader reads your copy, some more or less accurate picture of reality should appear in his mind.

Transitions, for instance . . . you once thought transitions were merely ways to get from point A in your copy to point B. But no. They are much more. They are the fault lines in the psychological world, the seams of reality. They can be sewn, and unsewn. James

and Faulkner showed us the techniques; even a humble newswriter can adapt them and use them.

The newswriter can defy everyday logic by flitting from one scene to another, or from one group of people to another, or even from one era to another. For example, in one paragraph I have kids walking down an alley, and then in the next paragraph I have a man in an adjacent house traversing the world.

Using these logic-defying stream-of-consciousness transitions in modern newswriting is a simple idea, a simple thing to say. You can argue with it, if you like. Discount it. Whatever. But the writer, this one anyway, spent two years analyzing the possibility. *Two years.*

They passed quickly, so absorbed was I. At the end, I was using stream-of-consciousness transitions. The editors loved them. Well, anyway . . . they loved them until I made the mistake of pointing out what I was doing.

(That's another rule you learn. Never, ever, tell your editor what you did. Stories are like sausages. Nobody wants to know what goes into them.)

But two years pass.

### Time Keeps Moving

More years passed in wrestling with the subtle idea of *clarity*. What is clarity, exactly? Can clarity be truth? In an unclear world? Or is it a construct? How can you clearly describe something that's intrinsically unclear and, if you do, are you adequately re-creating reality . . . or are you writing fiction?

Then there were more years devoted now to the study of structure. Note, if you will, that the nut paragraph of an analysis story corresponds to the proposition or contention in an argument or the complication of the short story. And be aware, if you would write well, that good analysis stories also have summary bolt paragraphs at the bottom, the same way arguments have conclusions and short stories have endings.

And words, interestingly, are the inadequate measures of story length. Words are evocative and, being evocative, draw forth other words and images that are not to be seen on the printed page but exist there, nonetheless.

"Elephant," say, draws on the whole encyclopedia of ideas and images, from the parable of the blind men and the elephants to

childhood stories about Dumbo. "Elephant" is an evocative word with roots deep in the reader's mind, and the writer who uses it draws on those roots.

The word "neurotransmitter," on the other hand, is not evocative (unless you're a neurochemist). It can't be used without being explained, and the explanation is no good if it doesn't put down roots of its own so that, later in the story, it can be treated as evocative.

Words can be classified that way, for their evocative potential. They also have various degrees of emotionality. There are hot words and cool words, and all temperatures in between. And such meanings, of course, are often not in dictionaries. They come to the reader through his culture, and they change by the day. A writer must know these things, think of them consciously, keep track of what "elephant" means today and what it might mean tomorrow.

And there are levels of meaning, too, far above words. In fact, words turn out not to be the basic transmitter of message, after all. The unit of writing is the active phrase, which is to say a phrase or phrases constructed around a verb. "The sprawling oak tree" has no meaning unless it falls, or casts shade, or is used to hang a criminal; if it falls in the forest, and there is no writer to hear, it indeed makes no sound.

And patterns . . . there are patterns, and patterns of patterns, and patterns of patterns of patterns. We report on events, but patterns of events are even more interesting, and patterns of patterns can electrify. What are the stereotypes about your story, and why are they stereotypes? What does that tell you about your story? What are the accepted patterns by which your characters explain the world around them? How do those patterns render the characters' worlds predictable? What does their choice of patterns have to say to us, and our readers?

And when you really look at patterns . . .

This goes on, and on, and on. Writing is technique, techniques for seeing, techniques for remembering, techniques for analyzing, techniques for clarifying, techniques for writing itself. If you are a writer, these things are your life. You become totally absorbed in them, art forgotten, greatness no longer a viable concept.

And it is then that the Zen of it works its magic and you hear, out of left field . . . you hear someone yammering . . . some critic, perhaps, or some professor, saying, hey, look at feature writing! Look at what the new generation of writers are getting printed in, of all

things, newspapers! Lookit, lookit, lookit the new art form! Look at these writers! Some of them are great!

Art form?

Great?

Oh.

### Let the Audience Worry About Greatness

And here I was, Jon Franklin, feature writer, writing this piece to address the question of greatness. And what did I do? I drifted off, into that other world, the writer's world.

Sorry.

Yes, I'd wanted to be a great writer. I wanted, in the yearning, egocentric secrecy of my heart, to be Shakespeare. It was only later that I learned that Shakespeare wrote not for art, but money . . . not to be cheered, but to be fed, 'cause the baby needed new shoes.

Greatness is a different matter — and one of very minor interest. You see, greatness, and the quest for it, has but one purpose. Setting out to write a great piece is the only surefire, 100 percent way to make sure you don't write a great piece.

"Greatness" is simply not a writer's word. It's an audience word, a word that an editor, a critic or a reader chooses to use, or to withhold. It has to do with power achieved, and perhaps with batting average — with how often the writer writes something that moves or changes the audience.

A writer who is preoccupied with greatness is by definition still a beginner. He is still a member of the audience, wanting to crawl up on stage, wanting applause, wanting, wanting, wanting . . .

He is still too conscious of the payoff, and not conscious enough of the performance. He is thinking about what HE wants, and not about what the audience wants. He is self-indulgent. He is lacking both humility and confidence. Therefore he will produce nothing great.

The young writer's mind is full of such excess baggage — a humiliating condition, brought to the fore usually by editorial criticism. For the greatest and least forgivable sin of the editors is that, usually, they turn out to be right.

Students come to me, now, as I once came to editors, bearing copy. They have their literary pretensions, their sweaty little egotistical desires, just as I had. They try to conceal the fact that they're not

really committed, that they're slumming. But in this they are totally transparent. The fact oozes from their pores, and from their copy.

What they want is for me to look beyond their copy, and to tell them of the greatness in their artistic souls.

That's not my job, of course; their artistic souls are *their* problem, not mine. My eternal job, as editor and coach, is to discuss with them the inadequacies of their skill as reflected in their copy. This is hard on both of us — and, to them, humiliating.

I remember so well, as I tell them all the things they least want to hear, things about commas and getting names right and the clarity of simple sentences.

And of all the things they don't want to hear, what they don't want to hear most of all is that art, whether journalistic or otherwise, takes time.

Why, at this rate they'll be old and wrinkled before they're really great!

Well, yes. But they will get old and wrinkled anyway, barring the even less acceptable alternative. The trick is to make an investment toward that day. And if you want to invest in yourself as a writer, the first thing you need to learn is patience.

Greatness in writing, like greatness in most else, arises from the acute consciousness of detail. Truth emerges not from art but strong verbs and well-placed commas. You can't change the world if you can't define the semicolon. Syntax matters. Grammar matters. Reporting matters.

Art submits to these things and grows out of them, not vice versa. So does the writer, who becomes a writer only by virtue of such submission.

The discipline that makes art what it is grows from the ability to observe both details and patterns of details. Seeing, for instance, is the core of the writer's art — and "seeing" has to do with consciousness. The writer who doesn't bother to notice how many "I's" there are in Philip Jones is a poor seer as well as a poor reporter. A good writer, in the end, must be an excellent reporter.

And it doesn't matter, in the end, whether the writing itself is classified as fiction or nonfiction.

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he won a Pulitzer for explanatory journalism. He is an author of the book, *Writing for Story*.

**F**eature editor Ken Doctor provides plenty of tips for getting training, but the one bit of advice that deserves to be repeated is that the onus for growth will be upon you. Writing and journalism courses, mentors and wonderful working conditions may or may not help, but only you will make the difference. Only you can map out your life. There will be plenty of obstacles, surely some detours, but ultimately success will be in your hands.

## Ten Surefire Ways to Train Yourself for the Next Millennium!

*Ken Doctor*

If you are wondering where your first (or next) job is going to come from, and what training you'll need to get it, you're not alone.

Print journalism absorbed more changes in the 1980s than it did in any other decade of the century. Wall Street tightened its oversight of major newspaper and magazine companies, making clear the bottom line was the only line of type that counted. *USA Today* started out as a joke in most newsrooms and by the end of the decade had forever changed the way newspapers thought about design and information and the use of color, forcing such a gray eminence as the *New York Times* to invest almost a quarter-billion dollars in a state-of-the-art color plant.

Specialized magazines of unbelievable specificity flourished in the marketplace. Where once a single health magazine occupied the newsstands, now more than a dozen compete for readers. There have been more titles and lots more circulation—magazines have doubled their circulation in the past 40 years, while newspapers have struggled to maintain what they had as the first baby boomers were entering the world.

Those newspaper readers, who are just now being introduced to the possibilities of audiotex and videotex, have voted with their ink-stained hands, tossing back the daily newspaper to the doorstep of the local newspaper company. As 1990 dawned, fewer than one

of two Americans bought a daily newspaper. The journalism press has turned near apoplectic about the future of the industry and what could be done to save it.

Newspaper companies have responded by making the readership crisis the center of each and every conference. Take-it-or-leave-it journalism is out; give-'em-what-they-want-to-read is in. Sunday magazines are out; quick-read graphics are in. Reporters are out; clerks are in. At a recent meeting of New Directions in News, one top editor of a major newspaper group suggested that reporters could soon be replaced by community residents who just call in their "news" to computers, who (excuse me, which) could do the requisite sorting and dispatch it to readers.

It's an industry without a compass, one that can too easily leave a would-be features writer directionless. But, out of chaos comes opportunity. Yes, the 1990s will mean more information-gathering clerk jobs. Readers are hungry for more information about what's going on and about what to do. And newspapers are learning they don't need highly paid writers to do these "lists." Though they'll hire more clerks, newspapers in the 1990s will also have greater needs for people with what psychologists call higher-order cognitive skills — the writer's gift of explaining, analyzing and interpreting the vastly changing world to readers. As the two-tier system develops, prepare yourself for the top one.

Here, we'll skip the long, turgid story about problems of daily journalism and get right to the sidebar: how smart training can help you profit from the current depression.

### 1. I Meant to Get a Mentor

We think of ourselves as being the object of training. We dream of finding the ideal mentor, but fail to remember that we're in the driver's seat. Work hard to train *yourself* because the odds are long you won't find anyone else who can set and keep your own life and career on course.

You're a writer, right. Write it down. Today. Who are you? What are you best at? What do you want and need to learn? How can you do it?

What kind of training have you had; what kind do you need?

Make the list and update it at least once a year. Make it your birthday present. Need help with the list? See point 9 below.

## 2. Get Training: Formal Journalism Education

As you are allowed, pick and choose those classes that play to your strengths and weaknesses. Stress the skills classes: interviewing, writing, reporting, computer skills. Volunteer for role playing assignments. Talk to the professor out of class, seeking training and interning opportunity tips. Work on the campus newspaper. Immerse yourself.

If you're beyond journalism school, take the opportunity to refresh your mind with several good books on feature writing. A weekend spent with one of the following paperbacks may stimulate new thought:

*Writing to Learn* and *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser;

*Mastering the Message*, by Lauren Kessler and Duncan McDonald;

*Writing for Story*, by Jon Franklin

Working journalists should also check out such in-service training opportunities as offered by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the American Press Institute.

## 3. Get Training: The World Outside Journalism

Remember, journalism should only be an approach to the world, not a world unto itself. Get what you need out of journalism school and get into whatever other studies interest you. Don't think you have to stick to a straight liberal arts regimen. Consider film studies if you love movies, etymology if Greek and Latin roots could enrich your language, public health if you're interested in fitness writing, gerontology if you want to be ahead of one of the greatest demographic trends of the century, Middle Eastern cooking if you are hungry, Russian literature if you want to pull your writing away from newsese. Take a course in story telling, and apply these ancient techniques of oral history to what you do as a writer.

Don't forget your computer skills. The necessity of word-processing skills are self-evident, but don't forget on-line data research skills. In the coming age, when only the best and timeliest information will do, those who only use the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, in book form, will be unemployed.

Pick up these classes at four-year schools, community colleges, community education classes, or cooking stores—employers of the

21st century won't be checking where you went to school, but what you know.

#### 4. Put Yourself in Training: On the Streets

Stop by the best magazine stand in town; the best bookstore. See what the readers are reading. Read something beyond your own local newspaper.

Forget writing for awhile. Volunteer to work with southeast Asian refugees, help out in a literacy program for the homeless, do communications for a local political campaign. Do the traveling you've always wanted to do. See the world differently, and then see what you'd like to write and what you now know to write about.

#### 5. The Age of Generalists Is Dead, Generally Speaking

Have #2 pencil, will travel, is no longer what hiring editors want to hear. Unless you want to work a 60-hour week covering everything from bake sales to sewer board hearings for the local weekly, you'll have to specialize. What are your passions? Write them down and figure out what kind of writing you can do about them that will sell to current or potential bosses.

#### 6. Focus on the Work, Not the Money

If you can afford this luxury, buy it. You may be able to obtain salaried work, or you may have to take it article by article. Journalism, unlike surgery or space science, allows you to work on speculation.

Remember, future employers will not hire you—for an article or for life—off your résumé. Journalism is a business of clips: the proof is in the paper. Find the situations that will yield the best clips.

After you've assessed your own abilities, write down a list of publications you believe may realistically accept your work. Inventory dailies, weeklies, monthlies, in-house organs published by corporations and hospitals, business-oriented publications, alumni magazines. When you've got your list, you're ready to go to point 7.

#### 7. Time Is Time

Whether you are going to test life as a freelancer or want to develop your versatility as a writer, try the shingling exercise. "Shingling" is

