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Resources to help Journalists Thrive and Survive

presents

Edit-Proof Copy: How to Write More Powerfully— and Avoid Embarrassing Writing and Reporting Mistakes

Featuring

- **Bob Baker**, Newsthinking.com Editor and “Nuts & Bolts”
Founding Editor, *The Los Angeles Times*
- **Chip Scanlan**, Senior Faculty Member in Writing,
The Poynter Institute
- **David Satterfield**, Managing Editor, *The San Jose Mercury News*
- **Brian Pittman**, Editorial Director, WorkingJournalist.com

Welcome to the WorkingJournalist.com audio conference

“Edit-Proof Copy: How to Write More Powerfully—and Avoid Embarrassing Writing and Reporting Mistakes”

Thanks for listening to our After Hours presentation of “Edit-Proof Copy: How to Write More Powerfully—and Avoid Embarrassing Writing and Reporting Mistakes” originally broadcast on April 21, 2005. This conference manual contains important information you will need to prepare for the audio conference.

Your Conference Manual

To help you prepare for the audio conference, we have created this conference manual containing:

- Agenda for use during the conference
- Speaker bios and contact information
- Pertinent handouts, checklists and articles from speakers

Conference Details

As a reminder, you may listen to this audio conference any time between 5:00 pm and 6:00 am weekdays and all day on weekends.

The conference lasts 90 minutes.

How to Listen to This Conference

–Dial 800-756-3819 whenever you have your team gathered and are ready to listen to the call

–Enter your Conferencing PIN Code: 185095 followed by the # key

Agenda

Speaker introductions and opening remarks (5 minutes)

How to write with more accuracy, credibility and power: three views (25 minutes)

Planning for perfection (reporting tips, finding stories, story mapping) (15 minutes)

Best practices in news writing (techniques, examples, mistakes to avoid) (15 minutes)

Cleaning up copy (checklists, enhancing accuracy, boosting credibility) (15 minutes)

Essential links and resources to bookmark now (15 minutes)

Audience Q&A (15 minutes)

We here at WorkingJournalist.com are excited about this advanced seminar on how to push your writing, reporting and grammar command to the next level. Our panel of veteran editors shares techniques for creating stronger journalism . . . and avoiding the copy editor's hatchet. Should you have questions, please call us at 800-959-1056.

Audio Conference Worksheet

“Edit-Proof Copy: How to Write More Powerfully— and Avoid Embarrassing Writing and Reporting Mistakes”

Bob Baker, Newsthinking.com Editor and “Nuts & Bolts” Founding Editor,
The Los Angeles Times: _____

Chip Scanlan, Senior Faculty Member in Writing, The Poynter Institute: _____

David Satterfield, Managing Editor, *The San Jose Mercury News*: _____

Action Items: _____

Planning, Organization and Story Mapping Ideas

Writing Best Practices and Mistakes to Avoid

Toolbox: Writing Web Sites, Books and Resources

Action Items:

Polling Question

During this conference, we asked a polling question of the listening audience:

What's the single most important thing you want to take away from this audio conference?

Answer one: The most common bad writing habits every reporter is guilty of—and how to break them.

Answer two: Tactics for taking virtually unassailable notes without learning shorthand.

Answer three: Best practices for writing copy that is more compelling, more readable and more credible.

Answer four: How to keep copy from getting chopped: Words and phrases I must banish from my writing forever.

Speakers' Biographies and Contact Info

Bob Baker is a freelance writer, editor and writing coach. He has been a newspaperman for 35 years, most of them with *The Los Angeles Times*, where he served as deputy metropolitan editor and the paper's first full-time writing coach, creating its first writing newsletter, "Nuts & Bolts." He is the author of "Newsthinking," a textbook devoted to mental organization for journalists, and runs the writing website, www.newsthinking.com.

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Chip Scanlan is the Senior Faculty member in Writing at The Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida. A former reporter for the *Providence Journal*, *St. Petersburg Times* and Knight Ridder Newspapers, he is the author of "Reporting and Writing: Basics for the 21st Century" (Oxford University Press.) and co-edited "America's Best Newspaper Writing: A Collection of ASNE Prizewinners." His writing advice column, "Chip on Your Shoulder," appears on Poynter's website at www.poynter.org/shoulder.

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David Satterfield is the Managing Editor of *The San Jose Mercury News*. He became managing editor in August 2003, after overseeing the newspaper's business department for the previous 2½ years, joining the paper as a business editor in 2001. Prior to joining *SJMC*, he worked for 17 years for the *Miami Herald*, covering banking and the economy and during his time there, won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for covering Hurricane Andrew and the Miami mayoral election coverage.


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Brian Pittman is Editorial Director of WorkingJournalist.com and the weekly email newsletter Journalists Speak Out. Previously, Brian served as Editorial Director at Infocom Group, where he edited, reported for and launched titles such as *Media Relations Insider*, *PR Agency Insider*, *Ad Agency Insider* and *Managing Partner*. Prior to that, he served as Editor of *Utah Business* magazine, among other titles. He is a season reporter with extensive experience interviewing such personalities as Steve Forbes, Bob Edwards and Margaret Thatcher.

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The logo for workingjournalist.com is presented on a yellow, torn-edge paper strip. The text 'workingjournalist.com' is written in a black, monospaced, typewriter-style font.

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Resources to help Journalists Thrive and Survive

Background Resources

Provided by:

David Satterfield, Managing Editor, *The San Jose Mercury News*

EDIT-PROOF COPY: CHECKLIST

Post these quick tips next to your computer when filing news for stronger copy—and to avoid embarrassing writing and reporting mistakes:

Planning the Story

- Discuss with editor. Talk about length, time, how much attention.
- When reporting, get detail, detail, detail. Colors, sights, sounds, smells.
- Don't settle for weak quotes. Keep asking.
- Set realistic lengths, deadlines.
- Talk about art, graphics. Is there a way to improve story-telling with visuals?

Writing the Story

- Does an outline help?
- Find the place where you think the best. Where do you go when hit by writer's block?
- Throw out the extraneous copy (and there's always more than you think.)
- Keep it simple.
- Finish early to give yourself time to self-edit.

Post-Writing

- Walk away. Clear your head.
- Come back and read the story like an editor. Where are the holes? What will make it better? Where can I trim?
- Encourage strong editing.
- Read story when published. Compare it with competition.

Source:

David Satterfield

Managing Editor, *The San Jose Mercury News*

workingjournalist.com

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Provided by:

Bob Baker, Newsthinking.com Editor and "Nuts & Bolts"
Founding Editor, *The Los Angeles Times*

'I want to write with more authority'

The best way to write with authority is to make an extra phone call every hour. Authority is not a matter of style, it's not even primarily a matter of writing. It's a matter of reporting, of sweat. But once you live up to that obligation, there are a number of tricks you can use to give your copy a greater sense of command and perspective--to make it live up to the quality of your reporting.

The half-dozen suggestions that follow are arbitrary and incomplete, but they create a baseline for you to work from. You could, if you had time, do a separate self-edit on each of these qualities. So just pick a couple and start with those. After a while you should feel yourself being able to integrate all six of these standards simultaneously. That, in turn, will help you look for and invent others.

1. COMPRESS YOUR LANGUAGE TO GAIN SPEED

Cut as savagely as you can to create a quicker read. Watch how well-placed trims make the top of this feature, a profile of the image-conscious L.A. head of the Nation of Islam, go faster and put you in the groove more quickly.

It first read like this:

The place was swarming with cops. Judges, attorneys, police commissioners turned out, too, in a tribute to Los Angeles Police Chief Bernard Parks and his 37 years of service earlier this month at the Sunset Room in Hollywood.

Among this particular power elite, one man stood out as a puzzle: Tony Muhammad, Western regional minister of the Nation of Islam, was here to praise a police chief.

Yes, *that* Nation, those hard-talking advocates of Islam and black nationalism notorious for four decades of bad blood with law enforcement—a bitter history of raids and recriminations, shootouts and street battles. These are the guys who took on 75 LAPD officers in a 1962 shootout that left one dead and 22 injured. They hang a portrait in the lobby of their Vermont Avenue mosque not of Nation leader Louis Farrakhan, but of Oliver X. Beasley, a brother killed by sheriff's deputies in 1990.

Yet as Muhammad stood at the podium, he praised Parks for helping him see the world beyond race. He thanked the chief for building bridges with his members. He hailed a new era.

"For the first time in history, there has been healing between the Nation of Islam and the Los Angeles police department," Muhammad declared to the audience. "We have been misunderstood in many circles, but now it is time for this city to begin to heal."

Healing is not a word usually associated with the Nation of Islam...

Then top was cut by nearly 30%, from 241 words to 169 words, so that it read like this:

Among the judges, attorneys and police department brass who recently gathered to honor Los Angeles Police Chief Bernard Parks, one man stood out as a puzzle: Tony Muhammad, Western Regional director of the Nation of Islam.

Yes, *that* Nation, those hard-talking advocates of Islam and black nationalism notorious for four decades of bad blood with law enforcement. These are the guys who took on 75 LAPD officers in a 1962 shootout that left one Muslim dead and 22 injured. A portrait hangs in the lobby of their Vermont Avenue mosque of Oliver X. Beasley, a member killed by sheriff's deputies in another shootout in 1990.

Yet Muhammad came to the party this month celebrating Park's 37 years of service as a welcome guest. He thanked Parks for building bridges with his members. "For the first time in history, there has been healing between the Nation of Islam and the Los Angeles police department," Muhammad declared to the audience.

Healing is not a word usually associated with the Nation of Islam...

2. USE YOUR OWN VOICE TO GAIN IMMEDIACY AND PRECISION:

A. The use of a question allows the writer to supply the punchy answer in the second graf in this off-the-news follow:

This month's flap over whether Korans containing anti-Jewish commentary should be pulled from public schools underscores a question of growing prominence in today's pluralistic times: How do you make sure ancient scriptures mesh with modern-day sensibilities?

The prevailing answer among scholars: You can't. No scripture is politically correct--nor, many scholars argue, should anyone expect them to be.

New religious movements emerge precisely because the prevailing faiths are deemed flawed in some major way, says Reuven Firestone, a professor of medieval Judaism and Islam at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. So if their scriptures rail against others as arrogant sinners, unbelievers, idol-worshippers and the like-well, that's their job, Firestone says.

B. The writer hits you in the face with wedding dates in the first graf, then uses the second graf to summarize a little-noticed consequence of Sept. 11.

Oct. 26. Jan. 30. Sept. 28, 2002. Those are some of the days that would have flowered into weddings had it not been for Sept. 11. Instead, the terrorist attack left white gowns hanging in closets, awaiting a first fitting. It left homes where, each month, a copy of Bride's magazine arrives to find no bride.

And it left fiances and fiancees facing a drastically revised future, with little of the legal protection for claiming benefits, estate money or any federal awards that widows or widowers have.

See how much more powerful that statement--the writer's own definition of the story--is, compared to a simple anecdote?

Those who were betrothed are also left to navigate their loss in fragile solidarity with families that may have been prepared to welcome them, but that they had not yet joined. That tandem grief has been strained, for some by simple awkwardness, for others by battles over what was left behind.

Only now does an anecdote fit:

For Rachel Uchitel and the family of her fiance, who worked at Sandler O'Neill & Partners, the tension has fallen somewhere in between. "They lost their child," Ms. Uchitel said. But, she

argued, "My everyday life has changed. I don't come home to the same person. I don't even come home to the same home." She insisted it would be no easier for a fiancé or fiancée to move on than it would for any family member.

There is no count of how many engagements were broken by Sept. 11, but at Cantor Fitzgerald, which lost more than 600 employees, 44 fiancés and fiancées have registered with the company's relief fund. One of them is Susann Brady, a registered nurse who lives in Montclair, N.J. She was set to wed Gavin Cushny last Oct. 26, in a 12th-century church in Scotland where his late father had served as a minister.

C. Got obscurity problems? Writing about something your audience doesn't think it cares about? Identify the heart of the story--the part that creates a common denominator--with a punch line, the same way you'd tell it to a friend.

CAIRO -- When does an emir get to become a king? When he says so.

That may sound like some obscure monarchy joke, but it was in fact a historic moment Thursday in the tiny Persian Gulf emirate of Bahrain, where, with a stroke of his pen, Sheik Hamed ibn Isa Khalifa anointed himself king.

Of course, a king can't be king without a kingdom, so map makers will have to get busy and rename the sliver of oil-producing sand "the Kingdom of Bahrain"--just like its big cousin next door, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

But unlike Saudi Arabia, where the royal family rules with a heavy hand, this kingdom will incorporate elements of democracy, making it a standout in a region where, generally, rulers rule as they like.

In announcing his promotion, the fledgling king also approved plans to create a constitutional monarchy.

He called for the first parliamentary elections in more than two decades to be held in October and municipal elections in May.

"We are keen to resume democratic life as soon as possible for the glory of Bahrain, its prosperity and development," his royal highness said in a nationally televised address Thursday. "Men and women will be allowed to vote and run for office."

A few years ago, this country of just 650,000 people was in the grip of a violent uprising. Bombs rocked the capital, Manama, destroying banks, offices and hotels, and the jails were filled with political prisoners.

In 1974, the new king's father, Sheik Isa ibn Salman Khalifa, had imposed an emergency law under which anyone could be arrested and held for up to three years without being charged. Over the years, thousands of people were arrested, locked up or exiled. He also suspended the constitution and dissolved parliament.

In 1999, the emir died and his son took over.

Hamed shook the nation to the core. He opened the jails and released....

D. Got an ongoing story? Exploit the fact that the reader has context. In the example below, the writer used a sweeping first line to create a sense of drama:

THE HAGUE--Slobodan Milosevic finally got his day in court Thursday, and he made the most of it.

Representing himself in his war crimes trial at the international court here, the former Yugoslav president unloaded an opening salvo portraying himself as the victim of a hypocritical Western conspiracy.

Milosevic denied the charges of genocide and crimes against humanity, claiming that the thousands slain and hundreds of thousands driven out of Serbia's Kosovo province three years ago were mostly victim of a civil war between Serbs and ethnic Albanian terrorists--and, later, NATO airstrikes.

Milosevic's opening statement was an aggressive, essentially political attempt to turn the proceedings into a trial of the Western nations that he accuses of committing war crimes themselves during the 11-week bombing campaign and then "crucifying" him.

3. AVOID A CONTRADICTION FLOW. This is a constant problem in more complex stories, and writers often blunder by forgetting that your story can be about only one thing. Many interesting, noble stories die when the writer lets a secondary point rob the story of momentum and purposefulness. The reader quits in frustration, asking himself: What's this story about?

A. The story changes direction twice in five graf. In the second graf (underlined) we see a despair turn to hope. Then in the fifth graf (underlined) we see hope turn back into despair. Which way are we going? The fifth and sixth graf's contradictory flow not only sends us in a different direction but does so with overly long sentences. Would you keep reading this story?

MILWAUKEE--Late for school, the 7-year-old girl was hurrying along South 18th Street, going as quickly as she could in her puffy snowsuit. The man appeared suddenly, wrapped his hand around her right wrist and pulled her behind a house. He raped her. Then he disappeared.

Six years later, at midnight on Dec. 2, the unknown rapist would have been forever free from punishment, saved by Wisconsin's statute of limitations for sexual assault. Instead, he has been charged with rape and kidnapping.

His identity, such as it is, was revealed for the first time in the November arrest warrant: "John Doe, unknown male, with matching deoxyribonucleic acid [DNA] at genetic locations D2S44, D4S139, D5S110, D10S28, D1S7 and D17S79."

In a novel effort to beat the statute of limitations on a pile of unsolved sexual assaults, an enterprising team of investigators and prosecutors here is testing the legal boundaries of DNA evidence. Instead of listing the traditional name or physical description used in a John Doe warrant, they are detailing the suspect's most basic genetic makeup.

But the tale of one young victim's second chance for justice also is a sobering story of the nation's state-run DNA databanks--and, in turn, the FBI system designed to link them. Hobbled by a lack of funding, a mammoth backlog of samples and fundamental differences between systems, the promise of DNA databanks--perhaps law enforcement's most promising tool since the FBI's fingerprint catalog--is far from being realized.

Wisconsin is ahead of most states, and yet the semen from the girl's rapist sat untested in a police property room for nearly six years. Now that the sample has been cataloged, Wisconsin

still can search for the rapist in only 22 other states, since the rest don't yet have the funding to tie into the FBI's year-old Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS.

In the end, the girl, now 13, was the beneficiary of investigators with a heart-wrenching task: Go back to cases on the verge of expiring and decide which might be salvaged by an untested legal tactic, and which to write off for certain.

"We had to pick the ones where we had good evidence and the victim was still available," said Det. Lori Gaglione, a soft-spoken, hard-boiled veteran of the city's Sensitive Crimes Unit. "We had to choose."

The girl didn't know the man, or even where he came from. She knew that he was wearing jogging pants and that they were still pulled down when he told her she could go.

A detective took the semen sample from a sidewalk behind the house on South 18th and sent it across town to the Wisconsin State Crime Laboratory. There it would sit, untested except to verify that it was semen, for about 1,934 days--a length of time not at all extraordinary in the United States for cases without a suspect.

This is a difficult story to tell. The essence turns out to be the disparity between technology's promise and practice. It would have been better to jettison the anecdotal lead to focus more directly on what the story's really about.

B: Same problem: The story reverses itself twice--in the fourth and sixth grafs (underlined). The sixth graf makes you unsure whether the story is going. That second "but" should have been replaced by the nut graf:

It's just after 8 a.m. as Mike Scanlan paces into Terminal 8 at Los Angeles International Airport, a rolled-up stack of flight schedules clutched in his fist, his eyes scanning like search beams. Thick-chested and spike-haired, with the wide stance of a policeman, Scanlan became United Airlines' general manager in Los Angeles three years ago.

The station was in full flower then, a budding hub painstakingly nurtured to seize the biggest share of LAX's departure board. For Scanlan, the post was the culmination of 30-plus years with United--the best gig imaginable for a self-described "airport rat."

Back then, Scanlan's morning patrol was guaranteed to provide a certain satisfaction, even on days scuttled by weather or human foul-ups. Signs of United's ascendance were everywhere.

But on this Tuesday in mid-December, Scanlan turns onto the concourse and deflates. In what should be the heart of the morning rush, the gleaming expanse is utterly deserted.

"Look at this, it's just awful," he said. "We invested a lot of money here."

But he has to move on, to shake off the sting, to complete the circuit every day, just as he must believe United will rebound from autumn's wreckage.

In the months since Sept. 11, United has gone from an expansive behemoth to a company "struggling for its life," in the words of its recently departed chief executive. The new era has chiseled out a smaller, humbler, more anxious community at LAX, where United once generated \$1 in every \$6 of its revenue.

United made deeper service cuts at LAX than at any other hub, slashing departures by more than one-third and scrapping its Western shuttle service.

C. Too long a windup robs your story of the very authority your reporting possesses. Here, the contradictory flow (underlined) make it difficult to determine what this well-intentioned and interesting story is actually about. It will eventually break into a narrative structure, but only after far too complex a windup:

In the beginning, just after the attacks, the leaders of the National Association of Home Builders, an industry group with 205,000 members, wanted simply to write a big check. Better to let an established charity dispense their millions to the victims, they said. What did they know about disaster relief?

But then came the stories about Red Cross foul-ups and United Way donations gathering dust. And so the home builders resolved to go it alone and distribute their millions directly to Sept. 11 victims through their own fund. They would use common sense, they told each other. Surely they could do it faster, with less red tape.

Alas, they had no idea how hard it would be to give away \$10 million.

Today, after all their heated debates and feuding over whom to help, how to define need and how to guard against freeloaders, very little has turned out as planned. Their deadlines for delivering aid have been blown, and most of their money remains unspent. Their method for distributing relief checks is a convoluted bureaucracy in which a widow from New Jersey, for example, is expected to apply for help through a builders' group in Staten Island.

Yet for all the missteps and amateurism, theirs is also a story of grit and perseverance, and in the end they brought a modest measure of financial relief to hundreds of families. If the home builders failed to coordinate their plans with other charities, they nonetheless agreed to direct much of their money toward a group of people--laid-off hotel and restaurant workers--who have been relatively overlooked. And if some money is going to those with no pressing financial needs, far more has made it to those facing foreclosure or fending off bill collectors.

The transformation of the home builders association from check-writers to social workers is hardly unique in the aftermath of Sept. 11. Dozens of charities have sprung from nowhere, raising and spending hundreds of millions of dollars.

In this way, the example of the home builders is also a window into the strengths and weaknesses of a sprawling relief effort that is still struggling to distribute nearly \$2 billion in donations, often through charities that are rookies to disaster relief. It is a messy, uneven effort. And yet there is so much money, so much good will that, amazingly, few legitimate victims appear to have slipped through the cracks.

As a reader, I was simultaneously drawn to the story at this point and frustrated. It engaged in so much foreshadowing that it was robbing itself of a forward momentum--almost shifting too much side to side, like a running back who is doing too much feinting when he ought to be moving up the field.

Today, the home builders acknowledge that they were unprepared emotionally and administratively for the outpouring of human misery unleashed by their efforts. Their fax machines were overwhelmed with....

4. SAY MORE OF WHAT YOU KNOW

A. Take advantage of that extra reporting by injecting more perspective grafts into your copy. The following example does it with an introductory phrase (a functional dependent clause, not a frivolous or overly long one), a clause in the forth graf and a seven-graf background sequence that unfolds in the middle of the story:

JERUSALEM--In a sign that Israeli military and diplomatic pressure is opening fissures in the Palestinian leadership, Yasser Arafat reportedly denounced his West Bank security chief, Col. Jibril Rajoub, during a violent argument Tuesday.

Palestinian sources described what appeared to be a serious rupture in relations between Arafat and one of his top officials. The Israeli military claims that the Palestinian Authority president's ability to control militias and even his own security forces is weakening.

Arafat lashed out at Rajoub after the colonel's officers did nothing to stop a mob in Hebron that freed 17 prisoners from the West Bank city's jail Monday night, sources close to Rajoub said. The mob broke down the jailhouse doors and helped inmates escape after Israel launched airstrikes on a Gaza City security compound.

The Hebron breakout, captured on video by television news crews, embarrassed Arafat, who has been trying to convince the Bush administration and the European Union that he is cracking down on gunmen, said the sources, who requested anonymity.

Relations between Arafat and Rajoub have been strained recently by policy disagreements and by comments from some Israeli officials that they would like to see Rajoub replace Arafat.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government has declared Arafat "irrelevant" and refuses to deal with him. Israeli tanks have confined the Palestinian leader to Ramallah in the West Bank for more than two months as Israel has chipped away at the infrastructure of his regime.

The perspective segment begins here

As it has sought to weaken Arafat's grip on power, Israel has increasingly targeted the many security forces that underpin his government. Israeli airplanes and attack helicopters have destroyed Palestinian police headquarters, jails and other security structures. Dozens of Palestinian police and security officers have died in the air raids, and more have been killed in clashes with Israeli troops.

Israel says it has struck Palestinian security forces when they have been involved in attacks on Israelis or have failed to prevent attacks. It also holds Arafat responsible for the attacks, even when they are carried out by groups opposed to the Palestinian Authority, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Israel says it will continue to hit Arafat's security buildings until he takes strong measures against militants.

The pressure on Palestinian security forces has had the side effect of eroding the rule of law in Palestinian-controlled territories, where citizens say they can no longer count on the police to investigate crimes or capture criminals.

"The police spend most of their time trying to protect themselves these days," said Said Zeedani, director of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights, a human rights group based in Ramallah.

From his office window, Zeedani can see Palestinian policemen sitting under the olive trees outside their offices in a converted apartment building they moved to after Israel destroyed their

station. The officers are too frightened to work in the building, which they expect will eventually be targeted by the Israelis, he said. So they park their cars far away and sit on chairs under the trees.

Similar scenes can be found throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Security officers balance case files on their laps while sitting outside buildings they fear might be hit.

As a result, even egregious violations of public order are going unchecked by security services in the Palestinian-controlled territories, Zeedani said.

Most recently, a mob of about 200 from the Kalandiyeh refugee camp rioted...

B. Edit and re-edit to strike the proper balance between news and perspective. Watch how this story went through the wringer.

First version of lead: Good perspective in the first graf, but the facts come in the second graf:

Global Crossing Ltd.'s John Legere appears to have broken new ground in the ability of chief executives to pocket generous compensation packages even when their company is sliding into financial ruin.

Legere is drawing \$1.1 million in salary as chief executive of the troubled Bermuda-based telecommunications giant and collecting as much as \$3 million in severance pay after being promoted from its biggest subsidiary, Asia Global Crossing.

The 43-year-old Legere became the top officer at the fiber-optic network company four months before it filed the fifth-largest bankruptcy in U.S. history. The company has been criticized for the lucrative pay packages it has granted to senior executives in recent years, even as its underlying business crumbled amid in the telecommunications meltdown.

Second version: The facts come up, but the perspective is demoted to the fourth graf:

Global Crossing Ltd. Chief Executive John Legere collected as much as \$3 million in severance pay after being promoted from the troubled telecommunication company's biggest subsidiary.

The terms of the payout, outlined in regulatory filings, come on top of a \$3.5-million signing bonus given to Legere for joining Global Crossing four months before it filed the fifth-largest bankruptcy in U.S. history.

As part of his new pay package, the 43-year-old Legere also had his salary doubled, to \$1.1 million, and the \$10 million balance of a \$15 million loan from the subsidiary, Asia Global Crossing, erased.

The giant fiber-optic network company has been criticized for the lucrative pay packages it has granted to senior executives in recent years, even as its underlying business crumbled amid the telecommunications meltdown.

Third version: By using a two-sentence first paragraph, balance between news and perspective is achieved:

Even as his company was sliding into financial ruin, Global Crossing Ltd. Chief Executive John Legere collected as much as \$3 million in severance pay after being promoted from the telecommunication company's biggest subsidiary. The payout is highly unusual and likely to fuel

more controversy over the compensation that Global Crossing granted executives in the months before its downfall.

Legere's severance package, outlined in regulatory filings, came on top of a \$3.5-million signing bonus he received for joining Global Crossing four months before it filed the fifth-largest bankruptcy in U.S. history.

The 43-year-old Legere also had his salary doubled, to \$1.1 million, and the \$10-million balance of a \$15-million loan from the subsidiary, Asia Global Crossing, erased.

5. CUT DOWN THE SPACE IT TAKES YOUR ANECDOTAL LEAD TO CONNECT TO THE NUT GRAF.

A. Suppose you decided to limit your anecdotal leads to two graf--or to find another approach if the anecdote required more detail. You might create a tone of authority like this story, in which the first two graf show us a contrast, and the third graf proclaims it:

WASHINGTON--Here was the U.S. military in Afghanistan: a bearded soldier riding horseback in a storm of desert sand, looking like something out of "Lawrence of Arabia." But instead of a dagger, he carried a global positioning system, a sophisticated radio transmitter and a laser for marking targets.

Flying 35,000 feet above him was a Vietnam-era bomber that had seemed headed for the scrap heap--until the Pentagon loaded it with smart bombs and linked its pilot with the guy on horseback.

Since Sept. 11, the United States has harnessed the most outlandishly modern of its capabilities to the seemingly obsolete, creating a new kind of fighting force capable of finding and demolishing a new kind of enemy.

Its success at combining old and new has been a transforming lesson for America's military. For years, believers in the ultimate power of high-tech have wrestled for defense dollars with traditionalists who say you can't win a war without boots on the ground. The Pentagon has learned from Afghanistan that it needs both--although Congress now must decide whether the country can afford both.

"We had these guys on horseback, literally, making the difference in these airstrikes. We had, in some cases, 50-year-old bombers flying above them," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz said in an interview. "But we took a 50-year-old bomber and combined it with horse cavalry and turned it into a 21st century" fighting force.

From training academies to military bases, from laboratories to shipyards, a new doctrine is emerging. It says that in a world where threats can come from anywhere, America's military must train and equip itself to be nimble and mighty at the same time--and...

B. Here's what happens when you don't push yourself hard enough: Six graf of anecdote lead us to an apparent nut graf which is merely a foreshadowing of the real nut graf, which also suffers from its failure to tell us what we've been watching. Only in the ninth graf do we learn the name of what we have been watching. What followed did a nice job of trying to tell the story through scenes--action--but the structure of the story almost certainly convinced many readers to give up before it fell into synch.

Standing on stage, Stan Winston braced himself to defend his latest creation--the fuzzy, dancing robotic teddy bear that starred last year in the film "A.I. Artificial Intelligence."

Hundreds of his rivals and fellow members of the visual effects branch of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences sat before him. Their job on this night was to pick the three films that would be considered for an Academy Award.

Winston, the man behind the Terminator in "The Terminator" and the aliens in "Aliens," had been here before. To win an Oscar, he first must win the crowd at the Samuel Goldwyn Theater in Beverly Hills and prove that no computer-generated demon or crashing Black Hawk helicopter holds a candle to Teddy.

"There are far more points of motion in Teddy than any dinosaur," Winston bragged.

Out in the audience, Oscar competitor Dan Taylor--the animation supervisor who helped build the dinosaurs in "Jurassic Park III"--ground his teeth. Minutes later, when it was his turn to stand beneath the 20-foot Oscar statue, Taylor was as catty as any Hollywood starlet.

"Our dinosaur could devour a teddy bear in one gulp," he shot back. "Our spinosaurus kicks Teddy any day."

Far from the red-carpet glamour and sequined sparkles of Oscar night in March is a down-and-dirty fight where the technicians behind the big screen's illusions wage an increasingly high-stakes war. Their Oscar rules over robotics, miniatures, computer-generated visuals and wildly destructive explosions, which increasingly are the key to a film's success. Their academy category, once an occasional honor, now sits on par with best actor and best picture.

The path to glory started last week at an annual ritual that, in un-Oscar-like fashion, is called the Bake-Off. It's a rare process for the academy, whose top-tier categories such as best picture are nominated by voters from the comfort of home.

Unlike actors, directors and composers, whose work usually speaks for itself in a film, visual effects require hours of explanation about the grand illusions that, if successful, are invisible and spectacular at the same time.

Out of 248 films released in the United States last year, only eight of the flashiest are chosen to be here by an executive panel of academy voters who work in the visual effects industry. The nominees will have this one chance to explain their art, defend their science and proclaim their methodology better, quicker, faster than all those other cheap gimmicks on-screen.

The dress is always casual--most academy voters opt for rumpled khakis and Gap shirts--but the competition can be over the top. Although it's fine to wear last season's fashion, woe be it to anyone who dares to present last year's technology.

This year's Bake-Off--held in the packed 1,000-seat Goldwyn theater--drew hundreds of fans, who scrambled to grab a chair and cheer for their favorite computer scientists.

Before the debate began, one organizer picked up a microphone and made a plea to the crowd: "There are not enough seats for the people who have to actually do something tonight. Your wives...

C. A good one: This profile uses a one-graf image, a one-graf confirmation from the subject and a third graf that puts the anecdote in a larger context.

Peter Olson, the chairman of the Random House division of the media company Bertelsmann, once accepted a challenge to a shot-drinking contest from a young executive new to

Bertelsmann. Colleagues discreetly filled Mr. Olson's glasses with water, and he drank the young man under the table.

Asked about the story last week, Mr. Olson responded, "I do like to win."

Mr. Olson's competitive instincts have become the subject of much speculation in the book industry as Random House, the largest consumer publisher, has carried out a round of cost cuts, including scores of layoffs among editorial, marketing, sales and administrative staff. (Random House has not disclosed the exact number.)

Although last year was by all accounts a poor one for book sales, no other major publisher has cut back so pervasively. Mr. Olson has maintained that Random House is simply planning prudently for a long spell of dark days ahead, and he is just speaking frankly about it. But speculation about his motives among rival publishers, agents, authors and others in the industry has centered on Random House's parent company, Bertelsmann, its bottom-line approach to compensating division heads like Mr. Olson, and its plans for an initial public offering some time in the next few years.

Mr. Olson's gloomy forecasts have seemed increasingly anomalous in the last few weeks...

6. KEEP AS NARROW A FOCUS AS YOU CAN. Read the first eight grafs of two versions of the same story: The Feb. 15 piece about the cloning of a cat.

First, the Los Angeles Times version:

WASHINGTON--Researchers in Texas said Thursday that they had produced the first cat through cloning, a button-cute, domestic short-haired kitten named CC for "carbon copy."

Where every other cat in history has had two parents, CC's genetic material comes from a single adult cat, named Rainbow. She was born through Caesarean section Dec. 22 in a laboratory at Texas A&M University.

As a scientific matter, CC's birth confirms that cloning is a durable technology that can be applied to many species, and perhaps one day to humans. But the bigger effect may come from the fact that CC is the first companion animal to be created through cloning, paving the way for pet cloning to become a commercial service.

"We've cloned agricultural animals--cattle and sheep and goats. But this really brings it into daily human life," said Philip Damiani, a cloning expert at the Audubon Nature Institute in New Orleans, which is also trying to clone cats.

A private company, Texas-based Genetic Savings & Clone, has the right to license the Texas A&M cloning technique. The company said Thursday that it would take at least a year to perfect the service. "We hope to keep it at about \$20,000 to begin with . . . but the cost could be double that," said General Manager Charles Long.

Hundreds of pet owners have already paid fees of \$800 or more merely to save cells from their pets for cloning, suggesting there is a strong demand for the service.

"I think this is spiffy," said Phyllis Sherman Raschke, of San Fernando, who has preserved cells from her late Cornish Rex, Sammy. "When you think of all the terrible things in the world, it's kind of dingy to think of reviving a cat. But this is wonderful news."

It is not to everyone. CC's birth comes amid an emotional debate in Congress over whether to outlaw human cloning. Some scientists say any ban should be narrowly written so that cloning remains a legal tool in medical research. But CC could add to the sense that scientists, if not strictly regulated, will inevitably produce a human clone.

Now, the New York Times version, which is arguably better because it makes a firm judgment that the commercial consequences of cat cloning are what really matter. Its lead hits that fact harder (the LAT, by contrast, doesn't deal with the \$\$ issue until the third graf). The NYT piece also deals with the ethical criticism sooner, in the sixth graf, compared to the eighth for the LAT. What the NYT sacrificed were some basic medical details. (The NYT notes in its fourth graf that some experts had long expected this advance.) Because the NYT had a stronger sense of purpose, it wins. Read for yourself and see what you think:

Scientists in Texas have cloned a cat, opening the door to what some experts say will be the first large- scale commercial use of cloning - to reproduce beloved pets.

The effort was supported by a company, Genetic Savings and Clone, of College Station, Tex., and Sausalito, Calif., which wants to offer cloning to dog and cat owners. It is investing \$3.7 million in the project.

The study will be published in the Feb. 21 issue of Nature, a British science journal, but Nature released the paper yesterday because the result, although not the details of the study, had become public. News of the company's success was first reported yesterday in The Wall Street Journal.

It was, some said, long expected.

"The commercial future of cloning is absolutely in animals," said Dr. Arthur Caplan, an ethicist at the University of Pennsylvania. "To put it bluntly, human cloning will turn out to be of interest only to the vain or the desperate, and companies know this. There is no commercial company that I'm aware of that is really interested in human cloning. But on the animal side, there is tremendous interest."

Yet there also is opposition and there are ethical questions.

The Humane Society of the United States issued a statement yesterday objecting to the cloning of pets, saying "it serves no compelling social purpose and it threatens to add to the pet overpopulation problem."

Dr. Caplan said he had two concerns. "Are you preying on grief and desperation that pet owners often have when they lose a pet to promise them something more than cloning can deliver?" he asked.

The 17 worst clichés in the newspaper business

So Sunday I'm reading the newspaper and on the front page of Section B is the following sentence, with a very familiar phrase that I shall underline:

Ground zero for [airport] expansion opponents was the Furama Hotel in Westchester.

And then I turn to the front page of Section C and there is the same very familiar phrase in another story:

But the calm is deceptive: This is ground zero in the leading online brokerage's high-stakes gamble to...

So I'm already hacked off about clichés, and then a couple hours later I'm listening to the Laker pre-game show before Game 3 of the NBA Finals and the fans are calling up and giving their predictions. And I'm hearing every sports cliché in the book, the winner being: "You can't stop Allen Iverson, you can only hope to contain him." And I'm thinking--as a listener, as a consumer of this stuff--how bored I am by having to hear everybody's ideas expressed in the same vapid way.

So join me this week in declaring war on clichés.

I started venting more about clichés last year because I was working full-time as a writing coach, and added a "cliché-of-the-month" to my "Nuts & Bolts" newsletter. As a result, every few days a staffer somewhere in the paper would e-mail me a new example. I'd check it in our electronic library and would be routinely horrified at how many times the offending phrase turned up. It wasn't that the cliché was being used in the wrong way; it was the sheer volume, the idea that a reader could keep being hit with the same cliché every second or third day. Didn't the writers know this? Didn't they read the paper? Didn't they read other papers? Didn't they have enough pride to resist sounding so ordinary?

What follows are 17 of my non-faves, each punctuated by enough examples to make you sick to your stomach and make you stop following the pack. If you have not used a single one of these clichés during your past dozen stories, e-mail me here at Newstinking.com and I'll proclaim you a hero in front of the entire gang of regulars. But I don't believe there are any of you out there that virtuous. We're all addicts, and we all have to cut back on our use of these little devils.

Prepare to cringe, and to then take the pledge:

1. To be sure

This cliché is a reminder we ceaselessly use for emphasis. But if you're writing with decent transitional logic, the reader is in synch and doesn't need this pretentious help. See how four examples, published over three days in my newspaper, would have read just as well without the cliché:

--To be sure, Compton, population 100,000, is not the first city to outsource a major department. Forty of the county's cities already rely on the county Sheriff's Department for police services, and 54 municipalities are...

--To be sure, recent turmoil in the stock market has not discriminated, taking a toll on Latino dot-coms with poor revenue-generating capacities. For example, Phoenix-based QuePasa.com, a bilingual portal targeting U.S. Hispanics, laid off a third of its staff in...

--Toyota's 2000 MR2 Spyder is a car of possibilities, some realized and some not. To be sure, it's an easy car to like: light, quick, nimble and quite well-mannered, which is the rule with modern sports cars. But this obvious competitor with Mazda's venerable Miata...

--"Turn It Up" boasts strong musical selections and an effective score by Frank Fitzpatrick. It has action and violence, to be sure, but it may prove considerably more serious and uncompromising than its audience expected.

2. Ratcheted up

It's hard to live in a world this pressurized. One hallmark is the number of times something is "ratcheted up." Writers, unable to resist the lure of a word that drips with tension, have beaten it into the ground. Consider these eight uses in a six-week period:

--Federal agencies have had to quickly ratchet up their knowledge of the perils of Ecstasy and their enforcement efforts.

--Deductible contribution limits would ratchet up for all taxpayers to...

--Chile relleno casero takes a fairly classic Mexican favorite and ratchets it up a notch or two.

--...the indicted leader continues to ratchet up his assault on the Serbian people.

--Metro Rail is a critical cog in the larger social engine of the city, because it helps ratchet up the sense of cosmopolitanism that makes cities worth living in.

--The arrival of the Japanese team ratchets up the competition.

--Bus and train operators for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority voted overwhelmingly Monday to authorize a strike, hoping to ratchet up pressure on the agency to agree on a new contract.

--Pyongyang has previously thrived on creating conflict. But Kwak, of the unification institute, argues that the Northern leader is unlikely now to reverse course and ratchet up military tensions.

3. Defining moment

Life is full of defining moments. But if life is too full of "defining moments," the moments lose value. When I did a check last year, my paper was publishing defining moments at the rate of about one every three days. This doesn't count a hefty number of quotes in which our own sources proclaim defining moments.

Consider these uses in a recent four-week period:

--In what could turn out to be a defining moment of sports serving diplomacy, the International Olympic Committee has invited the two Koreas to march together...

--In the years that passed, Munoz did everything at camp--counselor, backpacking instructor--but getting that first job was a defining moment in his life, he said.

--The Eagles, partly because of an injury to junior right-hander Jason Urquidez, got off to a slow start. Then came their defining moment.

--Johnson said playing in Williamsport, Pa., was a defining moment that has helped him deal with pressure.

--Indeed, Foley seems to have an instinct for picking out the defining moment, whether in a single poem or a whole generation of poets.

--If the trend is confirmed in other polls, Mexico's presidential race could be at a defining moment, analysts said.

--(Phil) Jackson's defining moment of those years came in 1994. Unbeknownst to fans and the media...

--The expected announcement by Celera will be a defining moment in the bruising, often bitter competition between the biotech firm and the international collaboration of academic researchers...

4. ...not alone.

The most comforting thing about reading newspapers is the knowledge that we are not alone. Virtually every day--14 times in one 13-day period, for example--my paper proved the existence of a group by saying that one of their members "is not alone."

Like this:

--MacFarlane, 34, can afford to live anywhere he wants. But this small-towner wouldn't think of leaving Santa Barbara for the big city. "I'm here to stay," he said. And he's not alone.

--Berewa, the justice minister, said authorities are investigating every twist and turn of Sankoh's sordid career and will make a recommendation about whether to prosecute. If he stands trial, Berewa said, he will not be alone: The intention is to include as many top RUF accomplices as possible.

--It seems like full-time work to her, and yet when she adds up her state-reimbursed wages at the end of the day, she says her hourly rate hovers somewhere between \$2 or \$3. She is not alone. Family day-care operators who provide subsidized care for the children of welfare recipients have long complained that they make less than...

--Hall has not journeyed alone from the life of a cop to a life of crime. In the seven years that U.S. Atty. Gen. Janet Reno has run the Department of Justice, the number of law-enforcement officers doing time in federal prisons has risen to 668--an increase of nearly 600%.

--And with the national economy in good health, California is not alone in boosting education spending. Illinois Gov. George Ryan and South Carolina Gov. Jim Hodges, for example, have proposed more money for education in their states.

This is, on one level, annoying in its repetitiveness. But it also speaks to a deeper flaw: intellectual laziness. If you really believe that your anecdote illustrates a collective number, you

owe your reader an honest explanation that is more specific than the mere fact that Character X "is not alone." It's the kind of low-common-denominator assertion that is begging for a "no shit, Sherlock" reaction. Are there lots of people like Character X? Scores? Hundreds? Thousands?

If a cop is one of scores or hundreds being prosecuted, say it. If California is one of several states boosting school spending, say it. And if you can't quantify the extent of a phenomenon--which is why "not alone" usually surfaces--be honest with the reader: Say so in the first place.

We fall into "not-alone" land because it's easier to describe something by what it's not than by what it is. That's why people wind up being described too often as "not angry," or "not surprised." Reporters evade grappling with more nuanced questions about how people did feel. By contrast, affirmative descriptions, by their specificity, are far more powerful and necessary. The next time your fingers type "not alone," ask yourself if you can't do better.

5. The Holy Grail

Do you know the real reason nobody can find the Holy Grail? Because writers use it so often as a figure of speech they have beaten it deep into the ground.

The Grail was the cup that touched the lips of Christ at the last supper. Joseph of Arimathea was said to have acquired it, and to have gathered the blood of the fallen Christ in it. The chalice was handed down, disappeared, became the object of endless speculation.

If it showed up as a literary device once or twice a month, we could live with it. But my paper's writers used it 27 times during the first four months of 2000, including the following five that ran during the last four days of April:

--For horsemen, the Derby is the Holy Grail, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the summit of Everest.

--For De Botton, none of this is of interest. In his view, philosophers are united by "a common interest in saying a few consoling and practical things about the causes of our greatest griefs." It is philosophy as therapy, and truth--surely philosophy's own Holy Grail--does not get a look-in.

--After 10 years of research on more than 4,000 subjects, gene therapy researchers may finally have reached their Holy Grail--curing a patient with a genetic disease.

--High-speed connections, which are in some cases 100 times faster than conventional phone lines, are necessary for consumers to tap into the Holy Grail of the Internet: the streaming of movies, games and concerts into the home over the personal computer.

--As exciting as the finding was, the images produced by COBE were blurry and indistinct. Obtaining images of the wrinkles with more detail has been something of a scientific Holy Grail.

6. The rest is history

--With O'Keeffe, the gender of the artist conformed with the gender socially ascribed to American art--and the rest is history.

--A year later, the Indians recognized their error and Herrington was hired. The rest is history.

--But these structures have come a lot farther than just a roadway's length over the years. They've found new life and new uses. The rest is history.

--...the Earth congeals from the cinders of spent stars, life animates the planet, asteroids bombard it, dinosaurs roam. The rest is history.

Had enough?

7. If you build it...

"Field of Dreams" is now 12 years old, yet several of our writers treat the movie's signature philosophy--"if you build it, they will come"--like a new toy. We published variations eight times in a recent five-month period. A few samples:

--If you build it...the butterflies will come... (headline)

--The saying goes, "If you build it, they will come." Guess what, 'they' are already here."

--If you build it, they will come. That's the mantra of certain Newport Beach movers and shakers who are committed to turning the 73-year-old Balboa Theater...

--But a jazz club is not like a fantasy baseball field. If you build it, they--meaning audiences--will not necessarily come, no matter how attractively it's put together.

8. Welcome to the world of...

Eighteen times in a 14-month period, my colleagues introduced a so-called phenomenon by saying, "Welcome to the world of..." There were, for example, five uses during a 32-day period:

--Welcome to the multicultural world of minor league baseball, where Chen's performance has...

--Welcome to the hardball world of senior softball, where explosive growth...

--Welcome to the wonderful world of color.

--Welcome to the murky world of major college football, which is controlled...

--Welcome to the world of Oaxacan folk carvings.

9. Fast forward...

"Fast forward..." appeared 27 times during a 50-week period as a device to indicate a quick jump in time. The numbing incarnations included:

--Fast-forward to this fall, when the media showered hype on the WB network's "Felicity"...

--Fast-forward to 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday of Super Bowl Week...

--Fast-forward 11 weeks. No sale has been announced, although...

--Fast-forward to the present. By coincidence, the market peaked at...

Shorter takes on other tired habits:

10. Brave new world: The title of Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel is often used as a sardonic reference to a future of universal happiness. How often? We did it 200 times in the last three years, including 10 times in a recent 52-day period Had enough?

11. Inner-city: Too often we use this geographic phrase as code language for poor, non-white people, exploiting the many images it carries. It's lazy. "Inner-city" is so freighted with symbolism that it has ceased to be specific. If you want to say something about a place's racial makeup, get the details and present them. If you want to deal with geography, then do it. In the same vein, try to stop using catch-alls like "gritty." Ask yourself: What do I really see, specifically--broken windows, overgrown bushes, dead trees, old tires, abandoned cars, graffiti layers deep--beyond the fact that people's skin color is different?

12. Move forward: This phrase is threatening to become the "closure" of the new decade.

13. Hammering out: "I want to spit every time I encounter in the L.A. Times that an agreement is being hammered out," one staffer writes with appropriate indignity. "It's a classic example of a once-vivid image that's become a mass-produced, off-the-shelf trope for word-lazy newspaper journalists. Lately, its awful cousin--*crafted*--has been working its way into the columns of the paper, too. (Craft doesn't equate to make or devise. It means to make or devise with unusual skill or artistry). Please do something to hammer 'hammer out' out of the heads of those who resort to it."

14. Quality: Offered, with our endorsement, by the same indignant staffer: "This is a classic example of semi-literate TV sports-speak contaminating our paper, which, as a last bastion of literacy, is supposed to be more sophisticated and exact. The word *quality*, thus misused, is meant to convey good quality or high quality. But the word itself is value-neutral. There can also be poor quality and shoddy quality."

15. Sea change: We're dropping this into syntax, quotes or headlines about every fourth day. It's time to drown it.

16. Level playing field: Seven uses in less than four weeks.

And, last but not least, my personal favorite:

17. Irony: 1 (a): the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning; (b): a usually humorous or sardonic literary style or form characterized by irony; (c): an ironic expression or utterance. 2 (a) (1): incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result; (a) (2): an event or result marked by such incongruity. (3) incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play--called also dramatic irony, tragic irony."

The words "irony," "ironic" or "ironically" appeared nine times on Jan. 1 in my newspaper and a total of 42 times during the first nine days of 2001. The three-year average is five times per day. That's right, 5.5395 doses of irony per day.

Sometimes, we misuse irony as a substitute for odd, or strange. Other times--many times--we hit the reader over the head with it. Consider:

In an ironic final chapter to the most disputed presidential election in modern history, Vice President Al Gore presided over his own defeat Saturday, as a joint session of Congress formally declared George W. Bush the next president of the United States.

**STORYTELLING THE NEWS:
A Bookbag for Reporters and Editors**

Books

The Art and Craft of Feature Writing: Based on the Wall Street Journal, by William E. Blundell. New York, NY: New American Library, 1988.

Becoming a Writer, by Dorothea Brande. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1981. (reprint of 1934 edition published by Harcourt Brace.)

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Best American Sportswriting of the Century, edited by David Halberstam (Boston: Houghton Mifflin)

Best Newspaper Writing, edited by Roy Peter Clark, Don Fry, Karen F. Brown and Christopher Scanlan, St. Petersburg, FL: The Poynter Institute and Bonus Books, 1979-2000.

Coaching Writers: The Essential Guide for Editors and Reporters, by Roy Peter Clark and Don Fry. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992

The Complete Book of Feature Writing, edited by Leonard Witt. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1991.


Follow the Story: How to Write Successful Nonfiction by James B. Stewart. New York, NY: Simon and Shuster, 1998.

How I Wrote the Story, edited by Christopher Scanlan. Providence, RI: The Providence Journal Co., 1989.

Read to Write: A Writing Process Reader, by Donald M. Murray. 3rd. ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993.

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Speaking of Journalism: 12 Writers and Editors Talk About Their Work, edited by William Zinsser. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994.

The logo for workingjournalist.com is presented as a yellow, torn-edge paper strip. The text 'workingjournalist.com' is written in a black, monospaced, typewriter-style font on the strip.

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Resources to help Journalists Thrive and Survive

Background Resources

Provided by:

Chip Scanlan, Senior Faculty Member in Writing,
The Poynter Institute

The question editors should be asking themselves is: If it's truly ironic, do we have to point it out?

If you want to see the collective hazard of seeking irony at every turn, watch what the Village Voice's press columnist, Cynthia Cotts, was able to do to the New York Times:

Not so long ago, irony was viewed as a menace on 43rd Street, where the tone was consistently sober and any humor that crept in purely unintentional. But that's all changed. No one can pinpoint the exact date, but sometime between the arrival of [Sunday magazine editor] Adam Moss and the departure of Abe Rosenthal, irony has received the imprimatur of The New York Times.

Consider the frequency with which the words "irony" and "ironic" appear in the Times. In fact, the Times' use of the I-words has risen steadily through the 1990s, to a record high of more than 1,050 in 2000, or an average of three times a day. That's almost double the irony quotient that Times readers were treated to in 1980.

Irony at the Times can be "dark," "sad," "terrible," or "tragic," but there are no small ironies and never enough. Long a staple of the arts coverage, irony has been quietly implemented by other Times sections of late, including the once-staid business and national desks. The trend surfaced on November 13, when Linda Greenhouse landed a spot on the front page to broadcast the "delicious" irony that Republicans, traditional defenders of states' rights, were determined to take the Florida case federal. By the time the case reached the Supremes, Times editorial writers had picked up the cry, writing, "It is ironic indeed to see the very justices who have repeatedly ruled in favor of states' rights . . . do an about-face in this case."

Times writers have apparently been instructed to find role models for the institutional pose of choice. Thus in 2000, readers learned that Lauren Bacall won an award for her "ironic look," that Madonna developed her appetite for irony in England, and that Martha Stewart, Pee-wee Herman, and Chevy Chase are ironic icons. Writer Bruce Jay Friedman is a veteran "irony man," while former Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti can carry off a sinister billboard ad because "there is a string of irony running through his personality." And let's not forget Helen Fielding, whose female characters are "complex ironic jokes."

But the master class should be reserved for magazine reporter Alex Kuczynski, who mines every situation for irony. Kuczynski kicked off the year with a profile of Time writer Joel Stein, whom she placed in the "openly ironic" tradition of Seinfeld, and ended it by taking The Nation's Caribbean cruise, where she found an irony under every bed. Last spring, she discovered the "terrible irony" that George [magazine] had a better chance of living after John-John died, then blasted another Kennedy for the "glaring" irony of being a lib who takes soft money.

How does my L.A. Times stack up against the New York Times on Ms. Cotts' scale of "irony" and "ironic"? We whacked 'em! The NYT's 2000 daily average was 2.87, far below the LAT's three-year average of 3.58 for those two words. Congrats! he said (ironically).

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Chip Scanlan, The Poynter Institute

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Chip Scanlan, The Poynter Institute

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“A Nonfiction Writer is a Storyteller,” by James Cross Giblin, *The Writer*, April 1988, p. 13-15, 46.

“A New Shape for the News,” by Roy Peter Clark, *Washington Journalism Review*, March 1984, pp. 46-47.

Writers at Work: A Process Approach to Storytelling on Deadline

Good writing may be magical, but it's not magic. It is the by-product of a rational series of decisions and actions. Fortunately for those of us struggling to write well, that process can be observed, understood and, on the best days, repeated.

No matter what the story's subject, length or deadline, good writing requires the same process of reporting, focusing, organizing, drafting and rewriting information into lively and clear prose. But there are special techniques and approaches that will help the writer who is writing short and wants to write well.

The process is the skeleton beneath any story. By articulating the steps that produce effective writing, writers can more effectively diagnose and solve their writing problems. Writers and editors who share a common view and vocabulary of the writing process become collaborators rather than adversaries.

Idea

Writers begin with an IDEA, either their own or an assignment from an editor. Good writers usually come up with their own ideas - editors expect that enterprise and rely on them to see stories that others don't see.

- ✍ **Move quickly from assignment to budget line.**
- ✍ **Brainstorm the reader's questions.**
- ✍ **Decide on a focus early but remain flexible, ready to change with the information you report.**

Report

We don't write with words. We write with specific, accurate information. Not just who, what, when, where and why, but how. What did it look like? What sounds echoed? What scents lingered in the air? Why did people care? The writer begins to REPORT, casting as wide a net as possible: interviewing, reading, observing, taking notes.

Storytellers aren't tied to their desk. They are out in the streets. They're the reporters who show up before the press conference and hang around after it's over, the ones who interview the victim two weeks after the shooting. They know that stories don't end after the arrest or the election.

"The importance of the writer," the novelist James Baldwin said, "is that he is here to describe things which other people are too busy to describe."

- ✍ **Keep in mind the “iceberg effect”. The strength of a story is the mountain of reporting that lies underneath, the interviews, details, understanding that the writer will never see but will infuse your story with power.**
- ✍ **Look for revealing details that put people on the page. The female police officer who wears “size four steel-toe boots.” The widow who sprays her dead husband’s aftershave on her pillow. “In a good story,” says David Finkel of *The Washington Post*, “a paranoid schizophrenic doesn’t just hear imaginary voices, he hears them say, ‘Go kill a policeman.’ ”**
- ✍ **Use the five senses in your reporting and a few others: sense of place, sense of people, sense of time, sense of drama.**

Focus

Once the writer accumulates a wealth of material -- statistics, quotations, differing opinions -- confusion often sets in. What does it all mean? What's the significance of what I've learned? As writers try to answer those questions, they begin to FOCUS on the elements that make their subject compelling. Good writers know that a story should leave a single, dominant impression.

"The most important thing in the story," says Thomas Boswell of *The Washington Post*, "is finding the central idea. It's one thing to be given a topic, but you have to find the idea or the concept within that topic. Once you find that idea or thread, all the other anecdotes, illustrations and quotes are pearls that hang on this thread. The thread may seem very humble, the pearls may seem very flashy, but it's still the thread that makes the necklace."

- ✍ **Be ruthless about finding the heart of the story: an effective story has a single dominant impression.**
- ✍ **Begin with two questions that keep track of the focus of any story: What’s the news? What’s the point? They address the reader’s concerns: What’s new here? What’s this story about? Why am I reading this?**
- ✍ **Ask David Von Drehle’s Four Questions: Why does it matter? What’s the point? Why is this story being told? What does it say about the life, about the world, about the times we live in?**
- ✍ **Address the question, “What’s the story really about?” and answer it in one word.**
- ✍ **Keep thinking through the entire process: What’s this story really about and what are the essentials I must include?**

Organize

A shape begins to emerge, and with it, a way to tell the story. The writer begins to ORGANIZE the story now. Some writers make a formal outline. Others jot down a list of the points they want to cover. Writers are always looking for a new way to tell their story, to stretch the traditional forms, to experiment.

Writing the lead often helps writers devise their plan of attack. Effective leads "shine a flashlight into the story," as John McPhee of the *New Yorker* puts it. It is the first step of a journey. Just as important, if not more, is the last step, the ending. A map also furnishes another essential ingredient for a journey: a destination.

✍ Look for pivotal moments that make story beginnings dramatic and irresistible:

- When things change.
- When things will never be the same.
- When things begin to fall apart.
- When you don't know how things will turn out.

✍ Use timelines to organize by incident, character, chronology

✍ **End it first. Once you settle on a destination, it's easier to plan your route.**

✍ **Try Rick Bragg's "Five Boxes: approach. Bragg doesn't outline his stories, but he does preach the value of the "five boxes" method of story organization.**

1. **The first box, the lead, contains the image or detail that draws people in the story.**
2. **The second box is a "nut graph" that sums up the story.**
3. **The third box begins with a new image or detail that resembles a lead and precedes the bulk of the narrative.**
4. **The fourth box contains material that is less compelling but rounds out the story.**
5. **The fifth, and last, box is the "kicker," an ending featuring a strong quote or image that leaves the reader with a strong emotion.**

"Even if you just completely scramble it later on, at least it got you rolling," Bragg says.

Draft

The writer is ready to DRAFT the story, almost like an artist with a sketchpad. It may start with a line, a paragraph, perhaps even several pages. The writer is discovering the story by writing it. Writers use the draft to teach themselves what they know and don't know about their subject.

Saul Pett, a veteran feature writer for the Associated Press, says, "Before it's finished, good writing always involves a sense of discipline, but good writing begins in a sense of freedom, of elbow room, of space, of a challenge to grope and find the heart of the matter."

✍ **Write early: Find out what you know, what you need to know.**

✍ **Write the end first. Most reporters concentrate on the lead. When you're writing short, especially, the ending is more important for time management and psychological reasons.**

✍ **Find a narrative line: process, problem-solution, chronology.**

- ✎ **Draft scenes—action occurring in a definite place and time—as the building blocks of your story.**
- ✎ **Put your notes aside before you start to write. “Notes are like velcro,” says, Jane Harrigan of the University of New Hampshire. “As you try to skim them, they ensnare you, and pretty soon you can’t see the story for the details.” Her advice: Repeat over and over, “The story is not in my notes. The story is in my head.”**
- ✎ **Mine for gold: With short stories you only want the best; the most illustrative anecdote, the most telling detail, the most pungent quote, the most revealing statistic.**

Rewrite

Good writers are rarely satisfied. They write a word, then scratch it out, or in this computer age, tap the delete key, and try again. The writer has begun to REWRITE.

- ✎ **Raise the bar: is it good enough?**
- ✎ **Read the story aloud. Diagnose the problems. Attack them one at a time.**
- ✎ **Trim quotes.**
- ✎ **Murder your darlings**
- ✎ **Select, don’t compress: Wholes, not parts**
- ✎ **Is there a beginning, middle and end?**
- ✎ **Is the ending resonant?**
- ✎ **Are the sentences active?**
- ✎ **Can I use punctuation as a tool?**
- ✎ **Role play the reader. Step back and pretend you’re reading your story for the first time. Does the lead make you want to keep reading? Does it take you too long to learn what the story is about and why it’s important? If not, are you intrigued enough to keep reading anyway? What questions do you have about the story? Are they answered in the order you would logically ask them?**

The writing process isn't a straight line. Often the writer circles back to re-report, re-focus, re-organize. Good writers are never content. They're always trying to find better details, a sharper focus, a beginning that captivates, an ending that leaves a lasting impression on the reader. Make every word count.

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