Introduction

MARK KRAMER AND WENDY CALL

No one, not even the greatest writers, creates good first drafts. "I have to write crap before I can write anything that is not crap," says Walt Harrington, who has been writing well for thirty years. "Writing is thinking. It is an extension of the reporting process." A first draft might have promising sentences or paragraphs, a brilliant conceptualization, a few surprising turns of phrase, or a sturdy framework. All that, however, will probably be barely visible, entangled in the general messiness of half-formed ideas. Those promising elements will reveal themselves as the writer begins to tease apart the mess with the next draft and the one after that.

Still, as you read through a flawed first draft, remember that the hardest work is behind you. You have moved closer to defining the topic and developed strategies for explaining it. You have picked a research site (or several) and spent a day or a week or several years there. You have reviewed your notes and ideas as well as done your homework at the library or the courthouse. You have stared down the blank page and begun building something on it.

Good writing is far too complex to get right in one draft or two or five. Good writers are most often plain ol' writers who go the extra mile and then a few more.

High-quality articles, essays, books, and documentaries put words and scenes to work systematically. They present events, ideas, and characters in an order that clarifies them, carefully guiding the reader's reactions. Structure is the deliberate and purposeful sequence of the reader's experience. The strength and tone of your voice determine how enjoyable that experience will be—even in the

most conventional news story. The most mundane tale, imparted by an inspired storyteller, captivates.

DeNeen L. Brown, a *Washington Post* writer, says, "An editor once said to me, 'Come on, you aren't writing a novel. Hit the button; send in the story.' Well, why not think of it as a novel?" This section of *Telling True Stories* explores everyday applications of novelistic structure: narrative stance, dialogue, strong beginnings, and satisfying endings.

What Narrative Writers Can Learn from Screenwriters

NORA EPHRON

A lot of college graduates approach me about becoming screenwriters. I tell them, "Do not become a screenwriter, become a journalist," because journalists go into worlds that are not their own. Kids who go to Hollywood write coming-of-age stories for their first scripts, about what happened to them when they were sixteen. Then they write the summer camp script. At the age of twenty-three they haven't produced anything, and that's the end of the career. By the time I became a screenwriter, I knew a few things, because I had worked as a journalist. When I wrote *Silkwood,* I knew what a union negotiation looked like because I had been in on several of them.

I have also learned things through screenwriting that would have been good to know when I worked as a journalist. As a young journalist I thought that stories were simply *what happened.* As a screenwriter I realized that we *create* stories by imposing narrative on the events that happen around us.

Structure is the key to narrative. These are the crucial questions any storyteller must answer: *Where does it begin? Where does the beginning start to end and the middle begin? Where does the middle start to end and the end begin?* In film school you learn these three questions as the classic three-act structure. This structure is practically a religion among filmmakers. Learning it is more instinctive among journalists.

I started working at the *New York Post* in 1963 when there were

seven daily newspapers in New York. No one would talk to reporters from the *Post.* We were the least among the papers, so we had to report much harder than anybody else. I often found myself writing long pieces about people who wouldn't give me five minutes on the phone. I had to talk to fifteen or twenty people who had known them since college or had made a movie with them or had run for office against them. Very early in my life as a reporter I learned to collect a lot of material.

The *Post* was an afternoon paper. Writing for an audience that had read a morning paper, I had to find what we called the "overnight angle" on the story. When we covered the same news events that the *Times* covered, we had to turn them into features; that meant developing a strong writing voice. I had been working as a journalist for nearly eight years before I could easily write in the voice that I turned out to have. The skills that I learned at the *Post* became enormously helpful when I moved into narrative journalism and then into screenwriting.

There is more justice in the print world than there is in the movie business. If you write something for print and it's any good, it will probably get printed somewhere. That's not true with movie scripts. People ask writers, "Do you have anything in your trunk?" I used to think, "Of course I have nothing in my trunk. I'm a writer. What I write gets published." But by the time I started writing screenplays, I had a *big* trunk.

When we began writing the screenplay for *Silkwood,* a lot had already been written about Karen Silkwood. There was a ton of daily journalism, narrative journalism, and even a couple of books. I didn't find any of it interesting, in part because Karen was a mixed bag, and all that writing didn't reflect that. Liberal journalists completely whitewashed her, while right-wing journalists turned her into a sort of devil. That made our movie very difficult to write.

All the regular questions that face writers also faced us. Where does the story begin, where is the middle, and where is the end? Each of those things is entirely up to the writer. They are the hardest decisions for any writer to make about any story, whether fiction or nonfiction. If you make the right decision about structure, many other things become absolutely clear. On some level, the rest is easy.

As we wrote *Silkwood,* we realized that we had to condense the period before Karen's death. We knew the movie would end with the automobile accident that killed her even though parts of her story continued long after her death. Since Meryl Streep was playing

Karen, we couldn't eliminate our lead character before the end of the movie. After we made that decision, it was clear that the movie had to begin before plutonium plant worker Karen became whistleblower Karen Silkwood.

We had one other major problem, one that always faces screenwriters. What do you do in the middle of the movie? In the middle of any movie complications ensue and the whammies mount up. In the middle of *Silkwood*, Karen becomes a political human being. Well, that's boring to watch. How could we show this process without turning off the audience?

The answer was to make the movie very domestic, about three people in a house. Martin Scorsese says the dream movie scene is three people in a room. We had that: Karen, her roommate, and her boyfriend, Drew Stevens. These three people, all going in different directions, gave us a huge amount of material to play against the story that we wanted to tell: *A young woman becomes political.*

Because I started out as a journalist, I believe that if you just keep reporting, eventually you will come to know the structure that your story should have. A certain moment will come when you have figured out how to start, what to put in the middle, and what can wait until the end.

My move from print to film was gradual. Every nine months I took three months off from screenwriting and worked on a novel. After three years I had written my novel, *Heartburn*, and one of my scripts had been made into a film. *Silkwood* and *Heartburn* both came out in 1983. Twenty years later it is a lot easier to see *Silkwood* than it is to find a copy of *Heartburn*.

Too few journalists become screenwriters. I say to all the would-be screenwriters: *Become journalists.* And I'll say to working journalists: *Do not stay journalists. Become screenwriters.*

To Begin the Beginning

DENEEN L. BROWN

The hardest thing about the beginning is the blank screen. Writing is like scraping off a piece of yourself; people can see beneath your skin. I sit at my computer with a container of Slim-Fast bars on my

left, a box of Godiva chocolates on my right, and books surrounding me. Many of those books are short story collections. The screen stares and the cursor blinks nothingness, taunting me. It says, "Ready, set, *go!* What are you going to write this time?"

I sit down to write, but I want to rise above the story, as if I am going to tell the story to someone sitting in front of me. I summon a voice strong enough to say, *Sit down and listen to me.* The beginning is important, because you are establishing a relationship with the reader. You are asking to be invited in for a while. Tom Wolfe wrote in his introduction to *The New Journalism*, "Why should the reader be expected to just lie flat and let these people come tromping through as if his mind were a subway turnstile?"

Beginning to read a story should feel like embarking on a journey, starting toward a destination. The writer must decide what larger meaning the story represents and lead the reader to that. Is it about fear? Is it about shame? Pain? Love? Betrayal? Hate? Faith?

As I consider how to begin, I ask myself: What is the story about? What's the theme? What can I use to place a character quickly in a scene? How can I tempt the reader? How can I allow a reader to enter the subject's thoughts, share her feelings?

I wrote a story about a woman who went to an abortion clinic the very day that John Salvi attacked it, so she couldn't get her abortion. Later, she sued the state for the cost of raising her child. I spent a couple of days with her, and then went back to the newsroom and talked with my editor. He said, "What is this story about?" I said, "Well, it's about this woman who went to the clinic . . . and now she is suing the state." He repeated, "What is the story *about*?" And I repeated, "Well, it's about this woman . . ."

"No," he said. "It's about *choice.*" I thought about that. In the end, every scene of my story focused on the central theme of choice.

Here are other questions to ask yourself as you begin: What would you write if you were not afraid of your editor? If you didn't care whether the story appeared on the front page of the newspaper or was published at all? If you were telling the story to your mother on a long-distance telephone call? If you had enough space to run with the full dialogue of your characters, letting in the truth of how people really speak? The full truth of what you saw?

Where would you begin if you were an omniscient narrator? As journalists, we must give ourselves permission to be reporters *and* writers. We must write our stories as natural storytellers would, letting the fingers fly across the keyboard, writing what the muse tells us to write.

Don't even stop for punctuation, just let the words fly, because you know that particular story better than anyone else in the country. You have tracked down every detail and read all the documents.

Each sentence in your story should build on the one before, tugging the reader through the material until she is hooked. I often begin with the tensest moment I've encountered in my reporting. I start the story on a pinpoint but then spread out. Start with a tight shot and then pan wide. Films often begin with the most intimate moment; then the camera pulls back. I begin with the specific and then explain the story. Not only must your story have a beginning, middle, and end, but each scene needs its own beginning, middle, and end.

I once sent a story to my editor, Phil Dixon, and he returned it to me, saying, "This could run on the Metro page or even the front page. But you haven't evoked the soul of the place." I walked away from him thinking, "If it's good enough to go on the front page, then put it in the newspaper and let me move on." I had no idea what he was talking about. I sent him several other beginnings for the story, and he kept returning them, saying, "No, this isn't it."

I finally came to believe that he meant: Don't just tell me what so-and-so said and what so-and-so *felt*. Tell me what so-and-so *meant* to say and *why* she said it, and what had brought her to this point in her life that would *make* her say it. He meant: *Create multidimensional stories and characters. Go deep.*

Thinking about Phil Dixon's phrase, *evoke the soul of a place*, led me to the idea that good stories are like good songs. Like Aretha Franklin songs, they ebb and they flow. Like James Brown, they repeat themselves; they grunt and grind, rise and fall. Sometimes they just scream. The beginning of the story is the first note of the song. Finally, that story Dixon had rejected so many times was published with this beginning:

> Jessica Bradford knows five people who have been killed. It could happen to her, she says, so she has told her family that if she should get shot before her sixth-grade prom, she wants to be buried in her prom dress.
>
> Jessica is 11 years old. She has known since she was in fifth grade what she wanted to wear at her funeral. "I think my prom dress is going to be the prettiest dress of all," Jessica said. "When I die, I want to be dressy for my family."
>
> In the last five years, 224 children younger than 18 have been killed in the District [of Columbia] either as targets of shootings

> or as bystanders. The carnage has been taken in by children who live close to the gunfire, such as Jessica, and by some children removed from it.
>
> As they've mastered Nintendo, double Dutch and long division, some children have sized up their surroundings and concluded that death is close at hand. So, like Jessica, they have begun planning their funerals.

Each one of us has a storytelling voice deep inside. We've been listening to stories since we were knee-high, and we know how stories should be told. In her book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, novelist Margaret Atwood writes, "The story is in the dark. That is why inspiration is thought of as coming in flashes. Going into a narrative—into the narrative process—is a dark road. You can't see your way ahead. . . . The well of inspiration is a hole that leads downward."

Go deep into the darkness and find the story.

Narrative Distance

JACK HART

Narrative distance describes the stance of the writer as the story's narrator. Also called *psychic distance*, it's a concept I learned from John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. The book is aimed at fiction writers, but it also applies to what we do. Whether or not the writer realizes it, he or she is choosing a narrative distance—deciding how close to stand to the action—in each scene. Changing this distance is analogous to a documentary filmmaker mixing close-ups and long shots.

Mid-range narrative distance is like watching from a hanging balloon. The writer describes the scene from about ten feet away and eight feet off the floor. For example: *She stood, walked across the living room, and pushed the door open. Snow was falling.*

We can get a little closer, moving onto the protagonist's shoulder: *She pulled her feet under her, pushed both hands against the cushion, and rose from the couch. She glided through the living room into the foyer and pushed on the door. It creaked open, wind hissed, and snow*

blew across the porch at a steep angle. In this case we're next to her ear, experiencing something close to what she experiences.

Finally, there is the internal view, describing the scene as though you are inside the head of the protagonist, looking through the protagonist's eyes: *The brocade of the couch upholstery pushed into her palms as she lifted herself off the couch. She glided over the soft give of the Persian carpet and the foyer's cool tile. She grabbed the icy brass doorknob and twisted. The door creaked open. Wind whipped her hair across her eyes. Snowflakes burned on her cheeks.* The reader feels the experience almost as the protagonist did.

We are trained as journalists to describe action secondhand, through quotes and observation. Skilled narrative writers put the reader there and let her witness it, have the experience, feel it. That's much more powerful than a secondhand version of reality.

Hearing Our Subjects' Voices: Quotes and Dialogue

KELLEY BENHAM

Looking back at the stories I especially admired while growing up, I'm struck by how sparsely and carefully writers like Rick Bragg used quotes and dialogue. That's my first rule about including a subject's exact words: Do it sparingly. Using fewer quotes makes me a more disciplined and thoughtful writer. It forces me to think harder about my job and take better control of the story.

I wrote a profile of a Colombian man who had come to the United States after having been kidnapped and robbed. He had been a famous magician in his home country; here he worked at Wal-Mart. He spoke very little English, so he used one of his tools—a deck of cards—to explain the situation in Colombia to me. I wrote:

> He takes out his cards.
>
> Here is the seven of diamonds, on the table. It represents land. Say, a farm in a small Colombian village, with a peasant family living on it.

> The paramilitaries—he picks up another card—want the land so they can plant coca. Cesar puts that card on top of the first. The guerrillas want it for their own drug crops. He piles on another card. The drug cartels want it. Another card.
>
> What happens to the people on the farm? They are buried under the pile.
>
> Maybe the paramilitaries take the family's oldest son and threaten to kill the whole family if he resists. Then the guerrillas get word that the family supports the paramilitaries.
>
> And then?
>
> "*Muerte,*" Cesar says. "*Muerte.* Understand?"

That single word, in Spanish, was more powerful than paragraphs filtered through a translator.

Getting strong quotes from people who speak often with the media can be even harder. Sound bites by the famous aren't useful in narrative writing. I look for the less-crafted things they say. During the 2004 elections campaign, I had ten minutes to interview Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of Democratic vice-presidential candidate John Edwards. I started the profile this way:

> Emma Claire has lost a tooth. That was Monday, her mother thinks. Today it is Wednesday. Twelve days until the election. Four days since she saw her kids.
>
> "No," she says. "It must have been Sunday. She called and I was between things and I talked to Jack. . . ."
>
> Jack is 4. Emma Claire is 6. Their mother, Elizabeth Edwards, is 55. She is trying to nudge the direction of the free world, and be their mom. She's between one thing and another thing. She has 15 minutes until the next thing. Twelve days until the election. Ten days to Halloween. Three days until she sees her children again.
>
> "I talked to Jack," she is saying. "He said, 'I don't miss you.'"
>
> "I said, 'That's too bad, because I miss you.'"
>
> Jack told her, "Well, I miss you a little bit."

The best quotes, of course, aren't stand-alone quotes at all, but dialogue. I try to include dialogue even in stories about the city council. Dialogue is easier for people to read than straight narrative, because that's how we listen to the world and how we communicate. Dialogue opens up a bit of space on the page, gives the story some breathing room.

I sometimes use dialogue even if it doesn't exactly fit into the narrative. I wrote a piece about a man who owned a $17,000 lawn mower and a quarter-acre yard. I used several short snatches of dialogue as section breaks. Here's one of them:

> Kimberly: "I made the mistake of mowing one time. Like to have caused a divorce."
>
> Mike, to Kimberly: "But tell her what speed setting you had it on the entire bloody time."
>
> Kimberly:
>
> Mike: "Slow."
>
> Slow!

I like using quotes or bits of dialogue the way you might use the punch line of a joke. I want to give the subject's voice the best platform possible.

Even without direct quotations, I can let my subjects' voices through. In some of my stories, much of the text not in quotes comes from the subjects. I drop the quotation marks, but rather than rewrite it, I just tighten it. I try to remain as close as possible to the spirit of the subject's speech patterns.

Sometimes, when the people I'm writing about can say it better than I can, I just let them. I once interviewed an elderly saxophone player who had played in marching bands for almost ninety years. I interviewed her the first year of her life that she *wouldn't* march. She told me her life story—ninety-six years' worth. For the most part I just let her talk. I interrupted occasionally to move ahead to the next part of the story.

> "I was taking voice lessons in Chicago. I didn't have a voice, but I was taking voice lessons with a little French lady named Madame LeBrun. I always said when I got to be 25 I'd get married.
>
> "Well, here I was 25 and nobody in sight. I went to Madame LeBrun and I told her my story and I said, 'What should I do?' And she said, 'Well, I'll get you a job at the café on Wabash Avenue. You watch the door and whoever you're going to marry will walk in the door.' I believed her and I got my job and I watched the door. One day in comes this little guy in a little green felt hat and I thought, that's him. And I went back to her and I said, 'I found him. What do I do next?'"
>
> She married him.

I almost couldn't get a word in edgewise while interviewing her. If I had quoted her in a three-word chunk, it would have been dishonest.

In a college poetry class we crafted a poem from bits of found language: dialogue, books, cereal boxes. It was a surprising and joyful way to write. The rhythms of the little snippets played off each other and rolled across the page. People's voices are like found poetry—raw, uncrafted, imperfect. Still, we do them the greatest justice when we choose carefully and get out of the way.

Hearing Our Subjects' Voices: Keeping It Real and True

DEBRA DICKERSON

The *Washington Post* published a big spread about my first book, *An American Story*, and about me. It was extremely positive but included one quote meant to illustrate—as the writer noted—my immaturity.

The problem was, the writer had misinterpreted what I had said. During the interview in a café, I looked out the window and a woman walked by. She wore a *very* hip dress with the most hideous shoes. There was no way that someone with the sense of style to choose that dress had intended to wear those shoes with it. I wondered to myself, "Did she just have a fight with someone?" I was thinking of a time that I fought with my boyfriend and then left in a huff. When I got home, I realized I had put my dress on inside-out. As I was thinking all of this, I said out loud, "Nice dress." I looked down, stared at her feet, and said, "The shoes don't match."

He printed what I had said as if I were judging her. Actually, I was empathizing with her.

Being the subject of profiles has been useful to me as a journalist because it has given me a better sense of what our subjects go through. One thing I have learned is that the most important thing about using quotes and dialogue—about *all* journalism, really—is to bring a strong sense of humility to the work. A journalist might think she knows the meaning of the words coming out of a person's mouth but be completely wrong.

When we publish a quote or a bit of dialogue, we're telling the

reader, "This is exactly what the person said." This is obvious but bears keeping in mind. Accuracy is essential. When I come to a conclusion about a subject, especially if it's a negative one, I return to that conclusion four or five times. If I've pegged someone as an arrogant jerk, I want to be sure the person really *is* one. I give the person many opportunities to repeat the offending behavior.

On the other hand, newspapers and magazines often publish quotes that are not what the person actually said. I have seen journalists unconsciously correct the English of professional people but not working-class or poor people. A journalist must make a conscious decision about correcting a person's grammar. I don't think that quotes should be sanded smooth; quotation marks mean that what is enclosed in them is verbatim. I face this issue a lot because I write about regular people in the community, and *real people talk real.* I'm using poor English here because that's how most of my subjects talk.

I wrote an article for *U.S. News & World Report* several years ago about the relationship between working-class Blacks and the Vietnamese immigrants who run the nail salons in their neighborhoods. I rendered their English the way they spoke it, angering many in the Vietnamese community. I used a translator for most of the interviews, but some of the things they said in English were more powerful as they actually said them. I don't regret my decision.

Letting people's voices come through, without having the reader think the person sounds ignorant, is an ongoing struggle. It is not just a question of craft, it's a question of our readers' assumptions and biases. The problem isn't necessarily people using nonstandard English. The problem is other people—the readers—judging them incorrectly because of that. The stories that my subjects live are amazing ones. Their humanity shines through the dangling participles.

On the other hand, we often have to write about people who aren't necessarily so amazing. One way to get people to say interesting things is to ask dumb questions. I ask really dumb questions. I let people talk as long as they want. If they don't talk, I sometimes remain silent. Silence makes people uncomfortable and people will keep talking to fill the space. Often, I'll play devil's advocate. When I was working on a story about a crack dealer, I spent a lot of time riding around his neighborhood with him. We passed some people who looked homeless. To test him I said, "Gee, look at those people. Why don't they clean themselves up?" He became very angry, telling me, "You're not better than those people!" After that he became sad. Little by little the true story of his circumstances came out. Making

people angry is a good way to get to the truth. I'm willing to be yelled at or disliked in the interest of the story. The real story, framed accurately and rendered honestly, is what counts.

A Story Structure

JON FRANKLIN

Narrative is chronology: This happens, that happens, the other thing happens, and then something else happens. All of our lives are narrative—usually a rather confusing version of it. Story is something else: taking select parts of a narrative, separating them from everything else, and arranging them so they have meaning. Meaning is intrinsic to storytelling.

That is one reason it's so difficult for those of us educated in newsrooms to understand storytelling. We're trained *not* to insert meaning in our news stories. But we mistake meaning for opinion. Journalism as we currently know it is relentlessly cognitive. We use facts; we prove things. Journalism has very little to do with meaning.

Narrative writers can bring meaning to journalism. The successful narrative writer presumes that he or she can find meaning in real life and can report on it.

Until the death of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1969, many people made their living writing short stories. With the demise of the general interest magazine, that livelihood all but vanished. No fewer writers are born today than fifty years ago, though. All the would-be writers had to go somewhere. Many of us were forced into journalism.

Like a lot of other writers, I soon grew frustrated by the limitations of journalism. I wanted to write stories. I found myself thinking that all good stories—fiction or nonfiction—must have some things in common. If so, we should be able to understand them and, with that understanding, more predictably find other good stories. I went hunting. I found that texts about writing published between 1900 and 1960, the age of the short story and realistic novel, talked a lot about what made stories powerful. They all focused on character and plot.

Anton Chekhov laid out the anatomy of story, defining a story by its points of change, or plot points. The first point of change, at the