FROM INITIAL IDEA TO FINAL SELF-EDITING, A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO REPORTING AND WRITING AS A CONTINUOUS, INTERRELATED PROCESS—WITH EMPHASIS ON STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

THE ART AND CRAFT OF

FEATURE WRITING

BASED ON
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL GUIDE

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CHAPTER 4

PLANNING AND EXECUTION

Writers are crazy people when they write, engaging in strange rituals that would earn anyone else a trip to the Rubber Room at the nearest mental hospital. They are obsessive about the paper and notepads they use, about pens (I take notes with one kind, draft copy with another, write letters with still a third), about the placement of items on their desks.

Some behave queerly long before they are ready to assemble a finished piece, and often before they begin reporting it. This behavior, however, usually signals more than quirk or superstition. These writers are thinking far ahead, doping out what their story might be, how much emphasis to give certain parts of it, and how it might string together when finished. Watching them, a fellow writer may have no idea of what is actually running through their minds but he understands their central purpose, however oddly it is manifested.

As a beginner I worked with a colleague who laid out eight blank sheets of copy paper on a table before reporting a story. He then blocked out the elements of his tale as he'd preconceived them, assigning each a varying amount of space and a specific location in the layout. This mapmaking, this physical visualization, served him well as a rough reporting and writing guide.

Later, I worked beside another reporter who seemed to have no plan at all. Unlike most of us, who report first and write

later, he did both in short, alternating bursts, following no pattern I could see. After reporting for a few hours or a day or two, he laboriously wrote one or two perfect paragraphs (not necessarily related ones) and dropped them into a basket on his desk. When the slips of paper reached optimal depth, he taped them together. Amazingly, this seemed to work for him; he apparently carried a detailed story map in his head and didn't need a physical one.

Neither of these approaches may work for you. They certainly don't for me. But the specific techniques you employ aren't important. The only important thing is that you have a plan, however loose and informal, and use it to good effect. The good writers I know always do some kind of planning before they report and again before they write. The people who rely on divine inspiration to carry them from interview to interview, from sentence to sentence, usually turn in gibberish or are found sitting, stumped, before their VDTs long after the planners go home.

What follows is my plan. It's not an outline, just a guide; I don't believe in strict outlines, which tend to murder spontaneity and creativity. You're welcome to try it entire, to adopt only parts of it, or to dismiss it as unsuitable. It doesn't work for every story and I'd be suspicious if it did. Something has to be wrong with a system that invariably turns out stories like so many cans of peas. But it works for an amazingly high percentage of the pieces I do, makes them better, and helps me work much more efficiently than I would otherwise.

This guide nags me with questions about six different aspects of every story I do, both at the beginning of the reporting and later, when I write. Let's see how the guide applies to the reporting phase of the most common type of story, one that centers on some kind of occurrence and its consequences. We'll discuss profiles later in this chapter, and learn in the next how to use the guide in organizing the writing of the story, too.

Step 1: Noodling Around

My story idea is shaped and approved. I have a little information on hand, though probably not much. Now I look at my idea and at the six-part guide and ask this: How important, relatively speaking, are each of these six things likely to be in this particular story? Usually only one or two of them need to be fully developed in reporting and later in writing, with perhaps one or two others getting brief attention. But I start by considering all of them. They are:

I HISTORY

A. Does my main theme development have roots in the past? What are they?
B. Is it a clean break with the past? How?
C. Is it clearly a continuation of the past? How?
D. If history seems a potentially relevant part of my story, are there any historical details that I can use to lend authenticity and interest? Can I relate them *briefly?*

We're seldom interested in the past for its own sake, only in how it relates to the present, but we've already seen how vital this linkage sometimes can be. Without material on the unbroken line of mountain men, we can't see that Finis Mitchell is a continuation of the past and not a throwback. Without Lt. Ives viewing the howling desolation of the Colorado Plateau and judging that the white man will never come that way again, we lose, when we look at Las Vegas today, the sense of a total break with the past he lived in. (We also lose the chance to catch a forecaster with his pants around his ankles, and that's always fun.)

In the last item, D, we seek the little things that add glitter points of contrast. A modern cowboy's lunch of steak and beans may be a mildly engaging detail to those who always have salami on onion roll, but it gains interest when we're also told that a century ago he would have been having son-of-a-bitch stew instead. We can see that his life has changed in this small way.

II SCOPE—How widespread, intense and various is my development, the event or current of events that is at the heart of my story?

A. Quantitative Factor:
   1. Can I partially define the scope of my development with numbers or other expressions of quantity? If so, what numbers would be most meaningful?

2. Can I define it with comment and observation?
B. Locale Factor:
1. What is the physical range of my development? Is it international, national, regional, local?
2. Where are the hot spots?
C. Diversity/Intensity Factor:
1. In how many *different ways* is my development likely to show itself? to what *degree* are people, places and institutions involved in it?
2. Is my development waxing or waning, spreading or contracting?
D. Perspective factor:
1. Do other developments bear on mine? Do they magnify its importance or temper it?

This last factor puts the story in wider context. For example, if the U.S. is losing prime farmland at a rapid rate, the importance of that single development is *magnified* if we also are told that per-acre crop yields are flattening out; that pressure for farm exports is soaring; and that the warehouse of new agricultural technology is almost empty. Against this background, the loss of land is more ominous. If instead we learn that export demand is down and new high-yield grains are on the way, the importance of land loss would be *tempered.*

Obviously, the scope section gets stress when the central development itself is newsy. But even when that development is *not* the focus of the piece, if we're concentrating instead on impacts or countermoves, we still will use the factors of scope to help define those other action sections. So in one place or another, scope is a consideration in almost every story. Notice the variety of elements it includes: We are trying to come at the reader from several angles, not bash him over the head repeatedly with the same class of material.

III REASONS—Material that shows why something is happening *now*.

A. Economic. Is there money in this? Where does the money trail begin and end?

B. Social: Are changes in culture, custom, morals or family life likely to be affecting this story? How?
C. Political/Legal: Are changes in laws, regulations or taxes affecting this story? How?
D. Psychological—Are such things as ego, vengeance, wish fulfillment apt to be major driving forces in this story? Does the personality of a major actor bear heavily on it?

I treat reasons separately because many of us get so wrapped up in story action that reasons may be forgotten or dusted off too lightly. Item D is neglected most often; emotional motives are difficult to dig out, and when they exist are usually hidden behind a screen of other reasons erected as justification.

Look closely for emotional motives and personality factors when some action does not, on analysis, make convincing sense. Company A, say, is trying to take over company B. It swears up and down that the two will make sweeter music together than they ever could separately, and that all shareholders will benefit. But Wall Streeters are scratching their heads; A is already overextended and the other company's businesses don't seem to fit into A's operations that well. This mystery is solved in part when we can show that the chairman of A has a Napoleonic complex and detests the chairman of B to boot. Hard material to get? You bet—but necessary in a story like this.

Sometimes an entire tale rides on this one element. In 1976 Roy Harris convincingly showed that the rise and fall of Rohr Corp., a humdrum but profitable aviation subcontractor that transformed itself into to a leader in urban mass transit and then failed in that business, was traceable to the mesmerizing personality of its CEO, Burt Raynes. Highly intelligent, a genuine visionary and a man of enormous magnetism, Raynes exerted such a powerful influence on those he worked with that they became blinded to the faults in his thinking and failed to challenge it.

The story detailed this process and emphasized the irony of what happened in the end: Raynes' great vision, imagination and leadership ability, qualities much prized in executives, helped shatter his own dreams for his company because he had these

gifts in such abundance. It was a case of too much of a good thing.

IV IMPACTS —The consequences of a development.

A. Who or what is likely to be helped by what is happening? How? What is the *scope* of that help? (See section II and apply it here.)

B. Who or what is likely to be hurt? How? What is the scope of the damage? (See section II again.)

C. What is the *emotional response* of those helped or hurt?

The last is missing from many stories in which it should appear. You can bring it out by asking actors in the tale how they *feel* about what is happening as well as what they *think* about it. The answers may be very different in character and intensity.

A woman in Detroit, let's say, running a federally funded preschool for ghetto kids, has to close it because her funding has been eliminated. Ask her what she thinks about the closing and she may say she wishes the government's priorities leaned less toward weapons and more toward the poor.

Then say to her, "You said you've been doing this for 10 years; you must have a lot of yourself tied up in the school. How does all this make you feel, personally?" And she may reply, "It just rips my guts out. The day I heard there wouldn't be any more money I went home and cried for hours."

When we ask people what they think, many will automatically suppress emotional response or cloak it in reserved, reasonable language that doesn't fully express what's going on inside them. That's because we're showing interest only in their minds and not their hearts. When we ask them what they feel, we give them license to express that other side of their natures. The reader then gets a whole person, not half of one.

V COUNTERMOVES—The gathering and action of contrary forces.

A. Who is likely to gripe loudest about what is happening? What are they saying?

B. What actually is being done to offset, combat, change or deflect the impacts of the development? What is the *scope* of this effort? (See Section II and apply it here.)

C. How is this effort working out?

Countermoves is the last action element and one present only in a mature story. In gauging the likely importance of this section in his own piece, a reporter should give more weight to what is being done than to what is being said. Talk is cheap, action precious.

If the story is still pretty raw—i.e., the central development is fairly new and still building—often the only countermove element that has had time to develop is the grousing and handwringing of those opposed. By all means include one or two such lamentations, but keep it brief; if talk is all that's going on, your countermoves section will be of minimal interest. A lazy man could do well as an editorial consultant, even build a reputation as a guru, by scrawling the same criticisms on almost every piece of copy without bothering to read it, and playing golf the rest of the day. The criticisms: Less talk, more action. Fewer opinions, more facts.

VI FUTURES—What *could* happen if my development rolls along unchecked.

A. Are there formal studies or projections that address the future of my development, and what do they say?

B. What are the informal opinions of both observers and actors on the scene? How do the latter see their own futures?

C. Can *I* indicate what the future might hold?

In C, note the use of the word "indicate." We have no business drawing flat conclusions about the future—but we do have a right and a duty to present material the *suggests* what may happen, particularly if there seem to be holes in the projections of others.

In the story about the Colorado River, for example, the weight of reporting showed that the Southwest was already overusing the river resource and that the problem would become critical if rapid growth of the desert civilization continued. A minority, however, treated the threat less seriously, maintaining that the Colorado's flow could be raised sharply through cloud seeding. I

found the evidence for that less than overwhelming and closed the story this way:

> But what if there are few clouds to seed? More than 700 years ago the Classic Pueblo civilization reached its apex. Nourished by streams and rivers flowing from the mountains, the Indians irrigated land, built cities, and developed a culture. In 1276 a great drought gripped the region and this civilization withered, leaving behind only the empty, eerily silent pueblo cities nestled under cliffs.
>
> That drought lasted about 25 years. Today's desert civilization relies on the Colorado's two main reservoirs, Lakes Powell and Mead, to tide it over during drought. They hold a four-year reserve.

The conclusion is unstated but nonetheless clear: One flick of nature's tail and all the mighty dams and plumbing works along the river system, all the plans and projections, are junk.

The above guide is little more than an assembly of the kind of commonsense questions good reporters address in planning and executing stories. But considering these ordered, written questions in advance has helped to make me a more complete and efficient reporter. I can *see* what kind of material I probably will need, and I can check off the material as I get it. Above all, the structure of the guide compels me to consider and include where possible some of the most important dimensions of storytelling—time, scope and variety in particular.

As written, the guide applies to nonprofile stories. For **profiles,** I use a slightly altered version, as follows:

I HISTORY

- A. How has my subject's past shaped the nature of him/her/it today?

II QUALITIES (replaces scope)

- A. What are the qualities of differentness—personal, professional or other—that make my subject worth writing about? (Emphasize this in a general profile.)
  1. What kind of actions or behavior by my subject would reveal these qualities?
  2. How have these qualities affected my subject's fortunes and his life?

- B. What qualities of *typicalness* does my subject have? How is he/she/it like others in the same class? (Emphasize this in a microcosm profile.)
  1. Do they share certain characteristics? Which ones?
  2. Do they share experiences? Which ones?

III VALUES AND STANDARDS (replaces reasons section)

- A. What does my subject believe in most strongly? How does this shape the subject's actions in striving toward goals?
- B. Are these beliefs different from or similar to those held by others in the subject's class? In what ways and to what extent?
- C. Where did these values, standards and goals come from?

IV IMPACT

- A. How does my subject affect those around him or other members of his class? What are these effects, both positive and negative?
- B. How is my subject *being affected* by circumstances or those around him or other members of his class? Again, positives and negatives.

V COUNTERMOVES

- A. How are others actually responding to my subject and his/her/its actions and attitudes? Show me in action where possible.
- B. How is my subject responding to circumstances, those around him or members of his class? Again, show me in action.

VI FUTURES

- A. What does my subject think his/her/its future looks like?
- B. What do others think it looks like?

This profile guide stresses action and reaction. Without such reminders, the reporter may be seduced by an engaging and garrulous subject and produce an overly talky piece in which little really happens. The profile subject he found so charming then becomes just a windy bore in print.