

# A FOCUS ON NEWSWRITING: WHAT BEGINNING WRITERS CAN LEARN FROM THE PROS

---

BEVERLEY PITTS

Teachers of writing have often turned to professional writers for help in understanding the composing process. However, the professional writers who have usually been studied are novelists, poets, or essayists. Sometimes it is difficult to help students see the relationship between their short essays and the prose of a well-established writer. A journalism teacher as well as a composition teacher, I began to look increasingly closer at my friends who were daily news reporters. I found that their daily task was much more closely related to the writing processes of my freshman composition students than other forms of writing I had studied. Consequently, I began to look at the daily news reporter as a source of help in understanding the composing process.

Successful reporters, I came to realize, had overcome some typical obstacles that often plague beginning writers. Reporters produce more prose in a week than other writers might produce in a month, and they compose under daily time pressure, noise, confusion. No deadline waits for the reporter who has a writer's block or just isn't in the mood. Reporters considered successful by their peers had learned many techniques which helped them produce clear, concise,

Beverley Pitts is Chairperson of the Department of Communication and Assistant Professor of Communication and English at Anderson College.

logical writing under circumstances most of us would consider as negative influences on the writing process.

To gain better understanding of the newswriting process, I conducted an in-depth case study of three practicing journalists using protocol analysis based on Linda Flower's and John Hayes' work. Three average metropolitan daily newspapers were selected for the study. The editors of the newspapers selected the reporter who they felt was the best news writer on the staff and who had been writing news stories for at least five years.

In protocol analysis of the writing process, subjects are asked to think out loud as they compose. Subjects are given instructions to verbalize everything that goes through their minds including interruptions, false starts, and wandering thoughts. The writing sessions are tape recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed. In addition to the protocol sessions conducted with the reporters, interviews were conducted after each story was completed. All of the research took place in the news room during the regular working hours of the reporters. All of the stories were regular beat assignments for the reporters, and they appeared in the newspaper the next day. The conditions were as much like normal working conditions as possible. No attempt was made to record the newsgathering process, although newsgathering had taken place within twelve hours of the writing process. Protocol sessions began when the reporters sat down to begin working on the stories.

The most significant conclusion from the study was that the lead served a far more important function for the writer than just getting the attention of the audience. Although the journalism world has long recognized the importance of the lead, it has emphasized the lead's importance as a concise capsule of the event for the reader. The study showed that lead writing provided a more important function for the writers. The writers used the lead selection and writing process to narrow down and select a concept around which the story could be built. The lead writing task was such an important part of the story writing process that the writing of the remainder of the story could not take place until a lead of some kind was complete.

The lead writing task determined the direction that the story would take by determining what element was the most important to the story. It was also the most time-consuming part of the writing process, taking from one-third to one-half

of the total time used to write the story. The writers reviewed notes, analyzed information, and sorted out ideas until they had written what they considered a lead that provided the key to the direction of the story. They said, for instance, "This is a step in the right direction." Or, "I have to find a key to this whole thing." One reporter, after scanning the notes said, "That's the lead," which was the only goal statement for the whole story. Sometimes the reporters knew when they were gathering the news that they had hit upon the key idea that would result in the lead. That lead selection process was the point at which the writers conceptualized the meaning of the story. Because the news story structure must grab a reader's attention, it forces the writer immediately to come to grips with the subject matter of the story. It forces a judgment on the writer. All of the writers said, "Once I have the lead, the story is essentially written." Is our goal so different with student writers?

It appeared that it was not necessary for the newswriters to plan or organize their stories in advance. The lead writing activity centered upon conceptualizing the main point, not dealing with the other material for the story. Although organization through outlining has been a traditional part of the prewriting stage as described in some composition models, the newswriters did not at first plan or organize their stories. Also, they did not consciously rank facts in order of importance, a technique which has been the described form of organization as presented in the traditional inverted pyramid pattern of the news story. The writers found that organizing a story as it was being written facilitated continued movement through the writing task and did not hinder logical development. Information already written in the story itself led the writers to decide what should be written next. Paragraph ideas were spawned from previously written paragraphs or from recall and notes; each paragraph topic developed from the writer's judgment of what would logically follow what had just been written. For example, one writer had just completed a paragraph which stated that construction would begin in June on a new building. She said, "I wonder when its going to open? I know he told me it would take six months." She then moved to gather information and write a paragraph on the opening date of the building.

Editing was an integral part of the writing process, not a separate act of refining the product. Although editing has

traditionally been defined in journalism as a final act of polishing sentences so that they conform with standard English, the editing act was used for a much more important purpose than surface structure refinement. The complex relationship of ideas was refined through editing. When the reporters were composing at the typewriter, they would edit in type at the end of sentences or paragraphs before they would move on through the writing of the next paragraph. When the reporters composed at the video display terminal, they edited sentences much more freely. They seemed to put any sentence on the screen, then look at the sentence and construct its meaning through editing. Editing was one of the tools the writers used to clarify the meaning and keep the story a logical, integrated whole. Editing itself was a complex act, often involving setting new goals and re-evaluating the concept of the paragraph.

The actual composing was an intricately orchestrated and complex process of many activities all directed at the immediate task at hand — writing the paragraph. The writers developed a strategy for keeping the writing task proceeding, namely to concentrate on planning, writing, and editing two or three sentences at a time, the normal length of the news paragraph. The writers were able to write rapidly and with few breaks despite any concerns or distractions that led them away from the immediate task. They did not set goals for the entire story or worry about the value or worth of the story. They did not stop and re-evaluate the entire story. *They set short-range goals and plans for the paragraph or sentence which could be met immediately.* They continually used recall, notes, analysis, planning, translating, rereading, and their own judgment and general knowledge to propel them through the writing of paragraphs. Even interruptions did not create major problems because returning to the task meant only returning to the sentence or paragraph, not the concept of the story as a whole. One writer said, “I’m more or less blank, I’m rereading.” At another point, the same writer couldn’t think of a man’s name, so he rearranged the sentence so the name could be deleted and he could go on with the story. When another writer was writing a story about a school auditorium, he didn’t like using the word auditorium, but he couldn’t think of a better one. Instead of stopping to work on one word, he said he would use the word auditorium temporarily

so he could go on and complete the idea. He said he would come back later and think of another word, and he did.

Memory was the writer's most important tool for obtaining information during the writing process. Recall of the incident was initiated through cues provided by the notes. Recall of a general idea often led the writers back to the notes for detail. Memory helped the writers recreate detailed mental scenes and dialogue which were then translated into words. The close link between recall and notes indicated that the writers worked best when they collected the information themselves. The use of notes to trigger memory was as much a part of the writing process as it was of the newsgathering process. The newswriting process often began before newsgathering was completed because the concepts for the story and selection of the lead sometimes were determined during the newsgathering process.

The reporters' notes, also used in the study, were mostly cryptic phrases and code words. Notes were used to trigger mental images. The reporters said in interview sessions that they used notes to help create the "scenario." One reporter kept talking about the picture in his head. During one protocol, a reporter said, "What I'm doing here is visualizing the establishment." The reporters said that they rarely tried to copy down quotes verbatim, yet they were all considered to be accurate reporters. They described what they did as "listening to the tape." They replayed the situation in their heads as they wrote about it.

Confidence in the ability to write and in the ability to make decisions were necessary for successful newswriting. The writers never questioned their ability. They used their own judgment to make many decisions including the credibility of their sources, the importance of facts, and the location of information in the story. They depended on their ability to recall information and believed that they could recall accurately. They made decisions quickly and without hesitation, never judging the value or quality of their work or concerning themselves to any extent about others' assessment of the quality of their writing. Their concern with readers was in the assessment of the accuracy of their writing rather than in the quality of their writing.

Not everyone likes reporters; some would describe their confidence as brashness and their writing as mundane. But one thing about them is true: they are paid to write, and they

have had to learn how to write quickly, logically, and accurately in order to survive. They may not be Faulkners. In fact, they write in an environment that is far more like the classroom than the novelist's den. Perhaps we can learn some techniques from them.

Although their lead selection process might seem similar to the writing of a thesis for an essay, one significant difference exists. The newswriters knew everything about their subject matter before they ever selected the lead. They didn't decide what the lead would be before they gathered the information for the story; they evaluated that vast pool of information they had gathered and then decided what the direction of the story would be.

The newswriters' concentration on the immediate task at hand rather than on the whole story facilitated their avoidance of periods of overall evaluation, which probably would not have been beneficial after the lead selection. They concentrated their decision-making on the direction of the story at the beginning of the process. After they had made that decision, they did not go back and second guess their direction for the story. They concentrated on techniques to keep them involved with the smaller unit, and they let the direction of the previous paragraph lead them to the new paragraph idea.

Through the newsgathering process, note taking, and a developed sense of recall, the journalists provided themselves with an immediate pool of information from which they could draw. Writing about the immediately familiar might help students learn to develop a keener sense of controlled recall.

Not all student essays will follow the news story model. But some might. The news story is factual, interesting, immediate, and concrete. It provides students with an opportunity to polish observation and recall skills. It can be a good model for classroom use.

Perhaps what we can learn most from the journalists is that practice helps. As one reporter said, "I can turn out a decent story in thirty minutes; when you do this every day, it's second nature."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barritt, Loren S. and Barry M. Kroll. "Some Implications of Cognitive-Development Psychology for Research in Composing." In *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, pp. 49-57. Edited by Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978.
- Britton, James. "The Composing Processes and the Functions of Writing." In *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, pp. 13-28. Edited by Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978.
- Emig, Janet. "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing." *College Composition and Communication*, 15 (February 1964), 6-11.
- Ericsson, K. Anders and Herbert A. Simon. "Verbal Reports as Data." *Psychological Review*, 87 (May 1980), 215-251.
- Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problem Writing." *College English*, 41 (September 1979), 19-37.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and John R. Hayes. "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem." *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (February 1980), 21-32.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and John R. Hayes. "Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process." *College English*, 39 (December 1977), 449-461.
- Robert M. and Ernest C. Smith, Jr. "A Study of the Effects of Verbalization on Problem Solving." *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 63 (1962), 12-18.
- Perl, Sondra. "Understanding Composing." *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (December 1980), 363-369.
- Simon, Herbert A. and John R. Hayes. "Understanding Complex Task Instruction." In *Cognition and Instruction*. Edited by D. Klahr. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1976.

## UNPUBLISHED WORKS

- Flower, Linda S. and John R. Hayes. "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing." Paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, D.C., 13-15 March, 1980.
- Hayes, John R., and Linda S. Flower. "Writing as Problem Solving." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 8-12 April 1979. Bethesda, Md. ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 166 222, 1978.
- Karph, David A. "Thinking Aloud in Human Discrimination Learning." Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1972.
- Swartz, Heidi; Linda S. Flower; and John R. Hayes. "Protocol Analysis of the Writing Process." Paper presented at the Research on Language Arts Workshop, National Council of Teachers of English Convention, Cincinnati, November 1980.

