

How I Became a Nooze Reporter



by Lee Duigon

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I don't know what they're teaching in journalism school these days. You see a headline that provokes your curiosity—"Woman Carried Off by Pet Gorilla," say. But when you read the story, you find no abduction and no trace of a gorilla. At best it'll be an insignificant detail tacked onto the last paragraph, just in case there's anyone who read that far.

Reporters and headline writers—they write like monkeys anymore.

Years ago, as I scrambled for a job in a market saturated with recent college grads like me, I had the good luck to stumble upon a brand-new weekly newspaper in need of editors and reporters. I got in the door first and was hired as associate editor. The editor on loan from the parent paper liked my way with words. Next thing you know, I was at my own desk interviewing and hiring reporters. Was that cool or what!

Well, gee. I'd only been reading newspapers every day since I got out of diapers. And most nights I watched "news" on TV. I knew perfectly well what news was supposed to look like—hardly unknown territory. It wasn't like I was guessing how to do heart surgery.

With just a little guidance from the boss, who couldn't wait to get back to his own paper, I learned how to do my job by doing it. In ten or fifteen minutes he taught me to write in the "inverted pyramid" style—important stuff at the top of the

article, minor details at the bottom. Why do it that way? Because many of our readers would be scanning the newspaper as they're having breakfast, or riding on a train to work, taking a lunch break, or giving it a few minutes after supper until they turn on the TV. They had no time for lengthy articles. After a week or so of practice, I had it down pat. Really, just about anyone could learn this.

I learned how to do interviews by doing interviews, imitating what I saw on television. I already knew what kinds of information constituted news; and once I knew my way around the towns I covered, I knew who had that information. Meanwhile, I kept an eye out for unusual or humorous events that would make good feature stories.

All of this without a single day in J-school.

At one paper where I was the managing editor, the publisher demanded I hire a recent grad from the publisher's own alma mater. The guy came highly recommended. But he couldn't write or report his way out of a paper bag. He covered a meeting of a support group for people with terminal diseases, and came back saying, "They didn't do anything." He covered a meeting in which the school board voted to spend \$10 million for an extension of the high school, but he missed that little detail: "They didn't do anything." Finally the publisher ordered me to fire him. Him and his saucy little handbag.

What do newsies do anymore, besides carry water for the Democrat Party? What do they do in journalism school for four or five years—bet on cockroach races? Every day I encounter poorly-written stories with misleading headlines. And sheesh, the job is not that hard!

Well, if they don't read—and I find no evidence that they do—how can they be expected to know how to write?

Our schools at every grade are failing us.

I have discussed these and other topics throughout the week on my blog, <http://leeduigon.com/> . Click the link and drop in for a visit: real reporting guaranteed. My articles can also be found at www.chalcedon.edu/ .

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