

## News gathering

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**News Gathering**

**By**

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## NEWS GATHERING JULIE CHATTERJEE

### PLANNING A STORY:

Even before we do our research, there are questions we must ask ourselves if we are writers. However, if we are editors, it's the same questions that we must ask our writers so that at every point in the story, these questions become echoes in the writer's head:

- What does the reader want to know?
- How can you make this clear
- What's the story about
- Have you found a focus?
- What's your best quote?
- Who are the most interesting people in your story?
- Have you thought of an ending?
- How do you know that?
- What did it look like?
- What happened?

These questions, asked again and again, become lenses through which the writers see the world.

### GOOD EDITORS STUDY GOOD WRITERS (HUMAN SIDE OF EDITING)

Story of Stuart Dim of Newsday about AL Marlens, managing editor of Newsday.

Coverage of gangster trial. White sharkskin suit, white-on-white shirt, blue silk tie, his stickpin, pinky ring, et al. Proud of having painted a good picture, Stuart turns in his story.

Hey Stu, says Al, what about the handkerchief? Was he wearing a kerchief?

Stu thought he was kidding. Call a gangster and ask him whether he was wearing a kerchief in his jacket pocket in the middle of the night? But his editor wasn't kidding.

So, Stu called him, sweet talked him. White, with five points the gangster explained.

Al Marlens, as editor, recognised in Stuart Dim a reporter a nose for a story, an eye for detail. But he also refused to settle for merely good work. He pushed the writer to a new level of specificity, excellence and expectation of good news gathering.

As senior women journalists it makes sense to remember that many good writers bleed rather than speed. One NYT sportswriter, Red Smith used to say good

writers "open a vein" when they write. Because their standards are so high, they must be allowed the time to process and agonise over their copy.

Best reporters, a Times of India editor used to say devote a lot of time to mechanical drudgery and "donkey work". They pace about, chain smoke, have junk food orgies, and then finally in the last one hour turn out a great story.

The rehearsing reporter who sat in the cafeteria 40 minutes before deadline at the Times of India, and thought about his story, moving his lips silently.

Same with R.K. Laxman, who shuts himself up in his room for a whole day, without lunch, just to come up with one punchy cartoon.

#### HOW TO DO AN INTERVIEW:

Includes the eight-fold path. As I see it, you've got to work out beforehand:

- The aim of any interview: Helps us not having to pad or ham. It's a way of ousting a publicist.

- our role as an investigator: Especially in broadcast journalism this is very apparent when interviewers talk more than the interviewee. Oprah Winfrey and Barbara Walters are good examples of good interviewers.

- methods for taking control: Take the attitude of a collaborator. Demonstrate your vulnerabilities, no matter how minute, to create an atmosphere of mutual trust.

- strategies for dealing with uncooperative subjects: Let the subject come out with something that's on his mind-like a load off his chest. I remember a politician I was going to be interviewing and he had just had a son in a car accident. I had to let him get it out of his system. Then, he could talk about his election gameplan.

- for throwing tough questions: Give similar personal anecdotes you want a celebrity to disgorge so they trust you.

- staying the professional: If you are interviewing a sportsman for information of his track record, don't irritate him by poking him about break-up with his recent girlfriend.

- evading digressions and interruptions: Let the interviewee ride but tactfully channel the flow. Ask a specific question again to bring him/her back to the point. Say, "That would make a great story for later. Let me have the pleasure of meeting you soon."



## CHECKING BACK ON QUOTES AND GUARDING THE SOURCE'S PRIVACY CANNOT BE STRESSED ENOUGH.

**CULTIVATING SOURCES:** Can't ring them up one day and say you want this like she was your fairy god mother. Constant touch with sources. Knowing who is whose enemy. Not being partisan with one group. Key word TACT.

**GETTING OVER THE NUMBERS HURDLE:** Taking the road not travelled by

Cite eg of Father beating your mother story. Experience has taught us that head-on questions like how many battered women do you deal with? doesn't work. What does is. Average monthly call from women with domestic problems.

Then you continue to chat and say, you know we had a neighbour whose husband was an alcoholic and used to beat her. He finally turned over and became a great father and husband when he became a member of AA. What do you do, how many cases do you successfully treat a month? DO you get a lot of calls?

## PROJECTING NEWS WITH CLARITY: the art of good news packaging:

- Envision a general audience: The writer's sense of audience controls his voice

- Tell the story to a friend. It often helps if you are writing for a single human being, particularly, a familiar one at that.

The editor can often play the role of this friend. One editor I trained under in Australia, asked me to do memos to her before doing a difficult story titled Dear Alice. No gobbledygook.

- Slow down pace of information. Too densely packed stats and info overwhelms a reader

- Introduce new characters or difficult concepts one at a time.

- Recognise the value of repetition. Preachers at the pulpit know this only too well. Tell them what you're gonna tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them. Make it with a figure, an anecdote, and then may be wrap it up in a quote. Variation saves boredom. But reader memory is short, so it's your craft that will make the news stick in your mind.

- Don't clutter leads with confusing with statistics, technical info or bureaucratic names.

- Simple sentences.

- Numbers can be numbing. Select only the most important numbers. Informational graphics are far more effective.

- Translate jargon: avoid words like capitalization, depreciation, amortization. This sort of corporate gibberish to the reader, is a sure put off.

- Look for the human side to tell a story. Show some real humans, whenever you can. Even when you do a story as technical as "New Agricultural yields with miracle fertiliser" your news is far more palatable to the reader if you talk about Noor Mohammed was four years old when he first walked behind a mule plowing up a field in Kedah."

- Eliminate unnecessary information; Keep the focus. Or it distracts the reader and he comes away saying "So what?"

- Read the story aloud before you print it. The clearer and simpler the style, the easier it is for the reader.

*Invaluable lessons from: Don Reeder ex-bureau chief of Us World and News Report, Roy Peter Clark and Don Fry from the the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.*