

Creative writing

Good writing 101: More creativity leads to better stories

by *Clifton Barnes, communications director
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A well-known writer was once asked to teach a class in creative writing. He walked onto the stage and reached the podium. The class grew quiet in anticipation of his words of wisdom. The writer surveyed the crowd of eager students and then said, "So you want to learn to write? Go home and do it." With that, he left the stage.

No one can really teach someone else to think and write creatively.

I do have a few more words of wisdom than that writer, but I do believe forging ahead and writing is the best way to learn to write creatively.

One of my favorite stories about creative thinking regards a young Abraham Lincoln, who, by the way, later wrote the classic Gettysburg Address in only 272 words. Try to get your bar president to write a column of that length. In fact, try to get me to write this article that length.

Anyway, Lincoln was the captain of a militia company in 1832, but he understood that he was no expert. He was not well versed in military procedures. One day, he was leading his men across a field and they approached a bridge. He could not for the life of him remember the command to get them in position to march through a narrow gate and across the bridge.

In desperation Lincoln ordered, "This company is

Internet for nothing in particular. Just get on a search engine and experiment.

I recommend watching television and using the remote to get a broad range of what is out there. I know, I know . . . I'm a typical male.

I recommend hanging around some people who are intellectual equals. Going to the NABE's Communications Section workshop every year is like a cerebral spa for me. This is not to sound pompous, nor is it to say we shouldn't have friends of all ilks. Just remember that the tennis player who only plays against inferior opponents never gets any better. For you media trainers out there, don't use the word "inferior" like I just did. I'd better leave this subject while I'm behind.

Getting back to the writer who taught the class in creative writing: write. Just write. Write all the time. Write in your mind. Bring a notepad with you. Take notes. Send pithy emails to friends. Write letters. Write a journal with 50-100 words about your day or your week. I "write" into a tape recorder when I'm on long trips.

Write at least 100 words. Keep the fingers moving. Don't think ahead. Don't edit. Don't stop and cross out. And don't worry about grammar.

Exercises like this one not only help get creative juices flowing but also simply help you break through the dreaded writers' block.



Clifton Barnes

In other words, just write anything to get started.

In his book "Writers' Block," Zachary Leader writes, "A writer's block can be manifest in a feeling that everything, including your name, could use some work."

The causes of writers' block are often self-inflicted, irrational and imaginary. We have feelings of failure or of not living up to past performance or our good reputation.

To start, I generally try to pull out my most exciting quote or anecdote or statistic, and then work around it. I put all my work in the lead and let the story flow naturally from there. Others sketch out an outline of the story. You may have your own little tricks to get you going.

Having a creative lead gets the reader into the story quicker. Most of us have publications that come out once a month or once every other month or even quarterly. That means we have to deviate from traditional newsy leads and write more creative "featurey" leads.

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Some time ago, I wrote a profile of the director of the state's Administrative Office of the Courts. We wanted to find out how he got to where he is in life and what he had in store for the court system.

A traditional lead might have been something like: *Franklin Freeman says that after five years as assistant, he is ready to oversee the Administrative Office of the Courts, and its 143 employees and the more than 2 million cases filed each year.*

Freeman will soon present a budget in excess of \$175 million to run the judicial branch of government in North Carolina, which is the largest centralized court system in the country.

The actual "creative" lead I used was:

If you know the tune "Down By The Fishin' Hole," the theme to the Andy Griffith Show, this would be an appropriate time to whistle it.

You see, Franklin Edward Freeman Jr. has lived the life of Opie and has gone on to use those small-town values in one of the most powerful positions in North Carolina government.

As director of the Administrative Office of the Courts, one of Freeman's duties is to present and administer a budget for 4,300 people — that's seven times more folks than he grew up with in Dobson, N.C.

Dobson is the county seat of Surry County, where Andy Griffith was born and raised.

*"I had an idyllic childhood," Freeman said, as he stared up with a faraway look in his eyes. *It was like Mayberry — everybody knew everybody else and I used*

to wander into the courthouse whenever I wanted."

You'll notice that my cultural literacy of the Andy Griffith Show and Andy Griffith himself came in handy.

Now, the drawback to the creative lead is that it usually takes longer to get into the meat of the story. But, I'm sure more people read the article than would have had I stayed with the dry traditional lead.

There is nothing wrong, however, with traditional leads in certain circumstances. Many of us are former newspaper journalists, however, and we sometimes get stuck on doing articles one way — the traditional way.

Break rules. Try new things. One rule is to never begin a sentence with the word "and." My most famous lead (only famous lead is more like it) became a bumper sticker in North Carolina after the UNC Tar Heels won the national basketball championship in New Orleans 16 years ago.

Coach Dean Smith is considered a god by many in North Carolina yet his teams had been to the Final Four six times and never won. So, the lead to my story became, "And on the seventh try, Dean created National Champions."

Try short leads, even shorter than that one. There are many types of leads. Try question leads. Try quote leads. Try imperative leads.

Try the conversational lead: "So you're one of the more than 16 million Ameri-

cans expected to quit smoking today in the Great American Smokeout. But how long will you stay quit?"

As for being conversational, that's a key element in getting good quotes during an interview. Good quotes help your story be more creative.

I recommend using quotes extensively when appropriate. People would rather read quotes for a variety of reasons. It shows authority. It brings an actual human into the story. It breaks up the type and it helps the story flow.

During an interview, ask questions unrelated to the topic at hand to get the conversation going. Know something about the subject but don't act like you know too much. Let the subject do the talking.

Have prepared questions but listen carefully and be willing to take the conversation in a direction you didn't expect. You'll get more interesting quotes that way. But of course you have to stay in control of the interview and save tough questions for later in the conversation.

Try interviewing people, especially for personality profiles, away from the office to provide a better environment for good quotes.

If you try too hard to be creative, your writing can be stilted. Good conversational quotes can help.

As I mentioned earlier, many of us are former newspaper journalists. Not only do we write leads in a traditional manner but we also write the story in the traditional "inverted pyramid" style. In that story technique, the writer arranges materials in de-

scending order of importance. Many times we assume the reader knows more than they do and we bury necessary information deep in the story or leave it out completely.

Again, our deadlines generally make it so that feature articles work better for us as bar communicators. The most closely related and most effective story technique is called the "narrative mode."

The narrative mode tells a story with actions performed by real characters in time sequences. There is a beginning, a middle and an end. Quotes retain characteristics of real speech. Actions and quotes reveal motives. The mode reveals mostly by showing with a little telling for framing.

A study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors shows that while the most educated readers, including lawyers, considered traditional, inverted pyramid stories to be of the highest quality (probably because they are accustomed to them), they learned the least from that mode and the most from narrative stories.

In fact, the study shows that significantly more readers went to the jump of the narrative story than the traditional story.

Try storytelling, even in news stories. Be creative. Take chances.

As David Kelley, the CEO of IDEO Product Development, said, "Enlightened trial and error beats the planning of flawless intellects. The more you experiment, the more you learn; the more you learn, the more you create." Go write.

