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HOW TO DO IT

Four Jesuit Alumni Share their Experiences

HOW TO WRITE ABOUT CRIME

By Mike Wilson

“Excuse me ...”

These two words remain the most difficult part of my workday. Approaching complete strangers and asking them to answer questions — often, in crime reporting, on what has suddenly become the worst day of their lives — never gets easier. No improvement in technology, no iPhone app, no social network will change this eternal, analog part of the job: sticking a notebook in your back pocket and a pen in your front and walking out of the door to talk to people.

The great ones I studied at Loyola University in New Orleans made it look easy. Gay Talese’s “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” which I first read at age 19, tore the roof off what I understood journalism to look like, to be able to do, and it let in fresh air and color. It read like a novel, which I did not know was allowed. The complete immersion into the life of a subject — to do this for a living? I was hooked.

To this day, I tell everyone to read “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold.” I had dinner with Mr. Talese last year and struggled, star-struck, to explain the impact of the piece on my life. He cut me short, with questions about my work. Always asking questions. He carries around strips of cardboard from the dry cleaner in his coat pocket, for taking notes. Always working, always looking for a story. You can’t teach curiosity, but you can teach how the good writer channels curiosity into art.

In journalism classes at Loyola, we were assigned to write profiles of one another, and as a reporter at the weekly campus newspaper, *The Maroon*, I interviewed my fellow students about everything from sorority recruitment policies to a car wreck down the block. But one assignment, on travel writing, required us to go to a neighborhood that we knew little or nothing about and get a feel for the place by walking around and talking to people.

I borrowed a car and drove to an area called Mid-City, parked, got out, and froze. Now what? Whom do I approach, and what do I say? These were not fellow students with whom I shared a lot in common. To this day, 20-plus years

later, I can still remember the people — a woman in line in a convenience store, a man on his front porch — who were kind enough to pause and chat with an earnest, self-conscious stranger about the place where they lived.

It was an important day because it was uncomfortable. No one hiring college graduates for jobs in journalism is looking for someone to sit in an office, “using up Mr. (insert name of publisher)’s air conditioning,” as a former colleague in Alabama liked to say.

At the *New York Times*, I’ve sought pedestrian wisdom and reaction to everything from an attempted car-bomb in Times Square to an accumulation of slush in the streets. I’m still self-conscious. It hasn’t gotten any easier, but I’ve gotten faster. New Yorkers are far too accustomed to being



approached by strangers carrying a petition to be signed, or shaking a cup of loose change, or, yes, holding a reporter’s notebook.

Crime reporting can be very uncomfortable. Interviewing the relative of a murder victim is something you don’t ever get good at doing, but you hope, you become less bad at it. An editor at my first job threatened that if she ever heard a reporter ask someone, “How did it make you feel?” she’d fire him right there on the spot

with his pen in his hand. I never asked that question.

I offer the honest truth: I never met the victim, and I’d like to say something about him besides just the way he died. The same approach holds for the family of the bad guy. My favorite crime journalism is David Simon’s “Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets,” the fruit of a reporter’s frustration with the emptiness of his routine daily stories about this or that murder.

The journalism class with no classroom is no less important. Go Out and Interview People: 101. For some, it will be the toughest part of the semester, and the most valuable.

Mike Wilson, a graduate of Loyola University New Orleans and former editor of the Loyola Maroon, is a regular Saturday morning New York Times columnist on crime.

HOW TO WRITE ABOUT TELEVISION

By Hank Stuever

When school groups and other visitors take the tour of the *Washington Post* newsroom, they often make a brief stop near my dimly lit office in the corner of the Style section. I have some idea of what the guide says: *See that man there? His job is to watch TV all day and then write what he thinks about it. Can you imagine being paid to watch TV?* The job sounds cushier than it is, of course – and it still sounds tragic to my mother, who always begged me to shut the television off and go outside, play.

My first two decades as a journalist were spent in the newspaper equivalent of a raucous and occasionally upsetting playground, as a features writer who sought out people and stories that spoke to some theme of the human condition. I followed a bride-to-be through the self-manufactured drama of wedding planning. I followed a family of morticians who owned a discount funeral home in a strip mall. I traced the story of one acoustic guitar back through its five owners, each of whom dreamed of mastering it and being a campfire troubadour – and never really did. I wrote about rock bands and Dairy Queens, dilapidated roller rinks and dead shopping malls. I covered two Miss America pageants, six Oscar nights, White House dinners, a space-shuttle crash, a Winter Olympics, the events of September 11th and the Oklahoma City federal building bombing. I wrote about people who were mentally ill or just crazy in love. The point of it all was to write about people as they are, to get at the deeper truths we all sense in our everyday lives but can never quite articulate.

It's not the important journalistic work performed by my colleagues up in the investigative department. I always did better on the margins of the news. What I did – what my Jesuit-flavored education taught me to do – was listen to people talk about their lives. Listen and then listen and then listen still. Listen to the citizens of a millennial era – a time when nobody seems to listen anymore.

We have a moral obligation to listen to one another but we also have a moral obligation to ask questions, including the questions people would rather not answer. That was my main takeaway while studying journalism at Loyola University in New Orleans. It's about intellectual rigor applied to everyday life. It's about engaging the community and having the courage to ask critical questions. Being a student journalist is no route to collegiate popularity, I learned; when I think back to time spent at the campus paper, I mostly remember someone always being mad at the editors –



deans, Greek organizations, theater directors, my own professors. The questions we asked and the way we wrote wasn't always perfect, but no one questioned our motives and our work more than we did. This, to me, has always been the point of it all, to think critically and actually criticize, to question authority even when they won't answer, to enter a debate you might not win, and to write clearly about an event or an idea – but most of all to question yourself.

There's a lot of noise about popular culture now. Anyone can dash off something about a TV show or a celebrity, and everyone does. I became a TV critic a few years ago not because it looked easy, but because it looked difficult and clamorous, and because it is another way that I can write about society and culture in the present tense. The difference now is that I'm looking at it through the distorted prism of our flat-screens and iPads. I watch and listen to its content and then interrogate it, to a degree, with intellectual passion.

A few days ago, I reviewed a new reality show on NBC that features C-list celebrities and military special-ops veterans playing war games in quasi-combat scenarios. All in fun, you see. One of the military men, a Navy SEAL sharpshooter, boasted that he had 160 confirmed kills. His co-stars seemed thrilled to hear that. Once the show aired, various anti-war groups and a handful of winners of the Nobel peace prize voiced their disgust to the network.

But the TV critic is the one who gets to see it first. That's my job as a lifelong student of our mass-media culture. Listen closely and ask why.

Hank Stuever (Loyola University/New Orleans, B.A., '90) has worked as a reporter at newspapers in New Mexico, Texas, and, for the last 13 years, at The Washington Post. He is the author of Off Ramp a collection of essays and articles about modern American life, and Tinsel a nonfiction book about the emotional and economic impact of Christmas. This fall he taught at the University of Montana School of Journalism as the 2012 T. Anthony Poliner Professor.

HOW TO COVER THE WORLD

By Loretta Tofani

Fordham University's newspaper, *The Ram*, was my base from 1971 to 1975. The various jobs I practiced there as a student — reporter, features editor, editor-in-chief — gave me many of the skills I have used as a journalist during the last 35 years.

I worked as a staff writer for *The Washington Post* for nine years, and for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* for 14 years. Currently I'm a free-lance writer.

At *The Washington Post*, I began feeling some frustration. I kept seeing types of stories that did not seem to “fit” into newspapers. They were stories about social problems overlooked by government. These types of stories did not seem particularly interesting to my colleagues. Maybe I had judgment problems? I had my share of self-doubt.

I persevered. In 1983 I won a Pulitzer Prize for local specialized (investigative) reporting for a series called “Rape In The County Jail: Prince George's Hidden Horror.” (Receiving the prize helped me get over my doubt.) The series documented that rapes were occurring routinely in a county jail. The victims were innocent, awaiting trial on misdemeanors; they were in jail because they did not have enough money for bond. The rapists were convicted armed robbers and murderers. As a result of the series the jail changed its policies, separating violent from non-violent inmates. Fewer rapes occurred.

I became aware of the jail rapes while covering the courthouse beat. I did not know all the necessary techniques to report and write such a story, but that turned out not to be a barrier. I learned techniques as I needed them. (Need jail medical records? Visit the jail medical technicians at their homes at night, for many nights.)

What was important at the time was that I had a social conscience. All those years in Catholic grammar school, Catholic high school, and Fordham College had given me a moral compass.

My editor wasn't interested in stories about men getting raped in jail. I might have deferred to him. But my sense of outrage was high. And I could still hear the words of my journalism professor from Fordham, Ray Schroth, S.J. “A journalist's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” So I reported the rape story anyway. I did the work

during nine months, during my off-hours and while reporting other stories my editor did want.

There was something else guiding me as well: At Fordham, in a course called Books That Changed America, I had read the investigative journalism of Lincoln Steffens, Upton Sinclair and Rachel Carson. Journalism, I knew, could prompt government officials to correct policies that hurt people. I thought that was a worthy goal. At various times, I pursued that goal.

In the 1990s, I was based in China as a staff writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. My husband, John White, M.D., and infant daughter, Nicole, now 20, shared my Beijing apartment. I wrote many hundreds of stories from China, as well as from Japan, North and South Korea, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, India and Nepal. Most of my work was more similar to a firefighter's (chase the crisis) and an air traffic controller's (requiring logistics skills) than to a journalist's with a social activist heart.

Nevertheless, I am proud of my series on Tibetans who were arrested and tortured in prison by Chinese authorities for their loyalty to the Dalai Lama. To report part of the series, I covertly scrambled with fleeing Tibetans through the Himalayas at night. One night, at 18,000 feet, I broke my leg. My friends called my stories “Tibet Your Life.”

More recently, in 2007, I reported and wrote a series called “American Imports, Chinese Deaths” that was published in The Salt Lake Tribune. The series won several national awards, but it had little impact. (It can be read at <http://extras.sltrib.com/china>.) Chinese factory workers still are getting fatal occupational diseases and limb amputations while making products for America.

I have learned that journalism has impact in democracies, not in totalitarian regimes. Although some of my investigative stories — particularly in China — have not brought about positive change, I feel privileged as a journalist to be a witness. And for that I am grateful to my Catholic school education and my professors at Fordham.

Loretta Tofani now lives in Idaho. A newspaper series she didn't mention is her long investigative piece on how AIDS is communicated all over Africa.





THE MANAGING EDITOR'S JOB

By Rene Sanchez

It's 6 p.m., deadlines are fast approaching, and another rough-and-tumble day inside the *Star Tribune* newsroom in Minneapolis is reaching its

strong news judgment. You need it every day. The best way to acquire it is on the front lines of the profession. Through the trials of your own stories, you learn over time about what's most worth reporting and what's mere spin, you get thick skin and learn humility, and you discover that you really can be both fair-minded and relentless pursuing stories the public needs to know.

Good editing also demands an unflinching *commitment to ethics*. That must be part of your daily DNA. Anyone aspiring to be a newspaper editor, or teaching students how to be editors, ought to spend a lot of time scrutinizing seminal journalism cases in which editors either showed moral courage and upheld high ethical standards — or failed to do so.

Another necessity: *Know your history*. And not just journalism history, although that's essential, too. As an editor, supervising coverage of vital subjects such as politics and government, or education and poverty, you need to grasp how they've evolved not just recently but over decades or more. Understanding the long arc of stories allows you to coach your reporters to think and write with depth and sophistication.

Lastly, no editor really succeeds without understanding *good writing*. It's the lifeblood of our work. On my office wall, I have a quote from an old New York newspaper editor: "If you don't hit a newspaper reader between the eyes with your first sentence, there is no need of writing a second one."

Editors can have reporting experience, high ethical standards and good news judgment, but they won't have much impact unless they can also bring the daily work of a newspaper to life with writing that has authority, clarity or emotional force.

Too many newspaper stories are listless, dull or dense — and the pressure of daily deadline is not a good excuse for tolerating it.

Mediocre writing puts the vital mission of what we do as journalists in peril: If the writing is not compelling to readers, what's the point?

A good editor has to insist on good writing. But that cause is doomed, especially amid the swirl of daily deadlines, unless anyone aspiring to be an editor studies the best work in journalism, reads great books, and makes sure he or she knows first-hand the joys and rigors of the craft.

A graduate of Loyola New Orleans, Rene Sanchez is managing editor of the Minneapolis Star Tribune.

usual climax — with stories suddenly emerging, others falling apart.

The website needs a fresh jolt of news, and the front page we're building is still hostage to a display photo that should arrive any minute. Unless it doesn't.

Tick, tick, tick.

Exactly as I predicted when I walked into the office nine hours earlier.

In newspaper journalism, as an editor presiding over the daily news, you learn to expect the unexpected, no matter how meticulously you plan. You learn that the credibility of the stories you publish, and thus your credibility as an institution, pivots on even the smallest of facts — so you have to be very careful, even in haste. And in this journalistic era, even on constant deadline, you learn that you always have to be innovating and adapting to our dynamic new digital world. But, just as importantly, you have to do that without ever forsaking the principles or priorities that define the best newspapers and the role they still must play as fearless watchdogs of the public interest.

It's quite an adventure. No two days are alike. And it's good for the soul — you're rooting out the full truth of issues that really matter in the lives of a community.

So, how do you prepare for life editing a daily newspaper and website?

First and foremost, I'll say something that you might find surprising: Do not aspire to be an editor, at least for a while. The best editors usually have had sustained, successful careers as reporters. They've lived that work and all its challenges and nuances — from learning how to cover many subjects, to cultivating sources, digging for records, and mastering the craft of reporting and writing.

One of the most important aspects of an editor's life is