


OUT OF THE BOX

Tim Knight



What
Newspaper
People
Can Learn
From
Television
People

Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), 1961



n this hell-hot night in the Salisbury Press Club, tired ceiling fans stir air thick as mealie-meal, and old Africa hands sweat like bush pigs. The bar is empty except for a table of Brit and Yank foreign correspondents abusing world-class expense accounts. And me, a 22-year-old reporter on the local

Salisbury Herald trying to match beer-for-beer with the big boys. I'd sell my soul to be a Brit or Yank foreign correspondent abusing a world-class expense account.

It's after midnight when the Englishman strolls in as if he owns the place. He's pink, thin and arrogant — paisley cravat, desert boots by Clarks, bush jacket straight from Austin Reed of Regent Street. Not a wrinkle, not a sweat stain anywhere. I swear I can hear the strains of

Rule Britannia playing soft in the background as he stands at the entrance inspecting the natives. He recognizes the CBS correspondent next to me, walks over to our table, sits down unasked, orders a pink gin. He's so English he can hardly speak. The CBS correspondent — who's based in London and understands some of the language — translates for the waiter. The waiter is grateful.

The Englishman is in town looking for a reporter to join a brand-new TV station starting farther north in Kitwe, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), near the Congo border. The only job description, it seems, is "a likely young chap who can write."

I'm a likely young chap who can write. But I've always written for newspapers and magazines. I ask the Englishman, "How do you write for TV?"

"Never actually done it myself, of course" he says. "I'm a newspaper chap. Bloody proud of it too ..." He remembers my question. "All TV chaps have to do is write newspaper stuff, only shorter," he says. "Then the TV chaps read the newspaper stuff out loud over moving pic-

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tures.” He digs deeper. “Newspaper chaps *write* the caption under still pictures. TV chaps *read* the caption out loud over moving pictures.”

He sips his pink gin, triumphant. “Dead bloody simple, if you ask me.” He looks at me dubiously. “You can read out loud, can’t you, old chap?” Which is how I stopped being a newspaper chap and became a TV chap.

The Englishman wasn’t as stupid as he sounds. Thirty-five years later, TV chaps everywhere still read newspaper stuff out loud over moving pictures. They call it TV news. I won’t bore you with long explanations about why it doesn’t work and why much of the stuff TV journalists pour out is incomprehensible nonsense.

For more, you’ll have to fork out a few bucks for my brilliant new book*. You newspaper chaps will particularly enjoy the chapter *The Unfortunate Newspaper Legacy*. The point is that the people who designed TV news 50

* *Everything you always wanted to know about how to be a TV journalist in the 21st century but didn’t know who to tsk Or Storytelling And The Anima Factor.*

years ago were all newspaper people. And the rules they made 50 years ago are still in force and still screwing up TV news. So it seems only fair that after all the serious damage you newspaper chaps have done — and keep doing — to TV news, I turn a table or two and suggest a few things you can learn from us TV chaps.

And there *is* stuff to learn. Because slowly, with considerable pain and even more considerable *angst*, TV news is changing. There’s a new breed of TV reporter out there trying to crawl from under the heel of newspaper lore, newspaper culture and newspaper thinking. The new breed of TV journalists understands that it’s not enough to *tell* people something. They have to be made to *feel*. The new breed believes that once people *feel* the story you’ve got them by the emotions and their hearts and minds will follow. They are experimenting, trying different, more human, more efficient ways of telling news stories — ways even you newspaper chaps might consider.

If you ask the new breed of TV chaps how they would improve newspapers, it’s likely they’ll say things such as:

Kill the inverted pyramid

Some schools and newsrooms still teach this ugly, convoluted method of news reporting — despite the serious damage it does to the creation of understanding, which, after all, is supposed to be our job.

The inverted pyramid has much to answer for:

- ◆ It takes perfectly good stories and mutilates them. It forces premature climax by starting with the end. Once you give the climax away, everything is predictable. There's no tension, no suspense and no drama to intrigue and hold the reader. And no climax worthy of the exalted name.
- ◆ It sums up the facts of the story in the first two or three paragraphs so only readers fascinated by the *subject matter* keep reading. Everyone else wanders away to read the comics and check the horoscope.
- ◆ It buries the context — the information we need to understand the story — way down in the second act.
- ◆ It grades information according to some mysterious

order of importance that forces the story to trail off with ever-flagging energy until an advertisement gets in the way, and the story simply stops dead.

The inverted pyramid was invented for the benefit of 19th century telegraphers who frequently lost their connections. There was, therefore, a perfectly logical reason for the pyramid style: It allowed the gist of any story to be transmitted first — just in case the natives cut the wires halfway through the transmission.

The inverted pyramid does a grave disservice to the reader and should be killed while there are still newspapers around to kill it.

TRY STORYTELLING

Consider that there are, in the main, only two types of news:

- ◆ The event — something that happens. Like most of the news we cover. Like most plane and train crashes, fires, storms, crime, politics and news conferences. Events take up almost all the space in news-

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papers, although they have little meaning beyond the fact that they happen.

- ◆ The story — a natural, timeless and wonderfully efficient way of translating dull chunks of data into fascinating drama. The storytelling is the best way humans have ever invented of efficiently conveying information and creating understanding.

Storytelling is a metaphor for life. It's mostly about morality. Right and wrong. Good and bad. It uses parables to report the particular, which illuminates the general. Storytelling makes the intangible tangible.

Storytellers take the reader on a voyage of discovery. Understanding dawns as the story unfolds. The final, overall understanding comes at the climax. The better the storytelling, the longer the reader will keep reading because the better the storytelling, the more the reader needs to know how it all turns out. The better the storytelling, the more the reader thinks and, therefore, feels.

The better the storytelling, the more likely the reader will move from sympathy to empathy — actually experi-

encing the events and emotions of the people involved. The better the storytelling, the more information is retained by the reader.

An absolutely key element of storytelling is the use of real sweating, freezing, crying, laughing, winning, losing, living, dying *people*. People are fascinated by people. So storytelling uses people as bait to touch the reader's humanity and, through that humanity, the reader's self-interest. So the reader cares.

Storytelling is about values. It's about people in conflict, people on quests and people changing. It's often about people seeking a prize, having to overcome obstacles to reach a desired goal. All storytelling in all tribes, all cultures and all languages is pretty much the same. Always has been, presumably always will be.

Classic storytelling looks like this:

- ◆ **Context** comes first. It's the *foreplay* that gets rid of the housekeeping (who, what, where, when), introduces the reader to the situation and characters and sets the emotional tone.

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- ◆ **Foreshadowing** comes next in many stories. It's the *tease* that suggests something unexpected.
- ◆ **Dramatic unfolding** is the body of the story. It's where the *seduction* develops and progresses toward an inevitable conclusion. Every scene takes the story further as expectations and tension build.
- ◆ The **climax** is, of course, the crowning moment. It's the end of the journey, the reaching, or not reaching, of the desired goal.
- ◆ Some stories have a **denouement** after the climax. This is the wrapping-up of the details, the tying up of loose ends, the *afterplay*.

Storytelling is almost always chronological. That's because our lives are chronological, and because cause and effect are chronological. Going chronologically doesn't mean every story has to start with "once upon a time," although that's not a bad way to think the story through. It does mean that if you really want the reader to understand and be involved, events should be allowed to unfold in their natural order.

There are two big exceptions to the chronological guideline:

- ◆ When, for journalistic reasons, the event is so important that the climax dominates everything, and you have to lead with it. War breaks out, for instance. The Canadian Prime Minister or U.S. President is arrested. When that happens, there's no choice. The story has to start with the climax. Even so, once you've got the climax out of the way, get back to storytelling.
- ◆ When, for dramatic reasons, you want a flashback. Flashbacks are an old storytelling device, but should be used sparingly and only for good reason. The story itself should still be chronological up to the flashback, during the flashback and after the flashback. The same guidelines apply to flash-forwards.

Your readers already know a lot about chronology, storytelling and the structure of storytelling. They were brought up on fairy tales and parables. They read books and magazines. They watch something like 300 TV dra-

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mas and sitcoms a year. And, unlike newspaper chaps, readers haven't been trained to forget what they know. Your readers also understand — certainly subconsciously — that facts are neutral. That facts have no particular meaning by themselves. They understand that it is storytelling — a form of communication they already know — that structures the facts into recognizable form, gives them human meaning, makes them accessible, digestible, relevant and retainable.

Storytelling is at the very heart of our humanity. It goes back, through the mists of the millennia, to our very roots. It touches something ancient, primary and elemental inside us. Storytelling is magic.

Try it sometime.

FOCUS THE STORY

Somewhere in the story research, huddled there, waiting to be born, is the story's meaning, its essence, its soul. TV chaps call it the focus. Focus is the midwife of storytelling. It dictates and controls the single coherent idea at

the heart of the story. It's the powerful, guiding, liberating and central theme of the story. It's the single motivating force that drives the story and defines the values at stake.

Focus is a storytelling aid that demands you do the research, identify the best story, discard everything that isn't relevant to that story, then tell that story and *only* that story. From beginning to end. If you have other stories to tell, tell them separately.

Once you've done the research and decided what the story is, start work on the focus. *Write a single, simple, vivid, honest, active, declarative sentence expressing the soul, the essence, of the story.*

The focus sentence:

- ◆ Defines the single coherent and controlling idea at the heart of the story.
- ◆ Contains cause and effect — not necessarily in that order.
- ◆ Names a real, breathing, living person — somebody doing something for a reason.
- ◆ Identifies the role of the principal player or players.

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- ◆ Dictates the chronology of the story: What comes first. What comes next. What comes last.
- ◆ Defines the emotional as well as the factual meaning of the story and, therefore, evaluates the stake involved. The greater the stake, the stronger the story.
- ◆ Decides what the story is not. It concentrates on the main player or players; it rejects great masses of experts, authorities and spokespeople.
- ◆ Pushes the story as far as it can legitimately go.

Warning: Don't fall in love with the focus. The focus must change as events change. The better the focus, the better the story. The better the focus, the more likely it will betray you.

To illustrate and oversimplify this focus thing:

- ◆ Do the research and start with the focus: *The poor state of education in our high schools.*
- ◆ Take it further, make it more human: *Thousands of high school kids are graduating but can't even read.*
- ◆ Put a person in it: *Johnny is 18, he's graduating from high school but can't read.*

- ◆ Add cause to the effect: *18-year-old Johnny is graduating from high school but can't read **because** there were always too many kids and not enough teachers in his classroom.*

The last focus has a person in it. So we care. It has cause and effect. It has a point of view. It has tension and conflict. It even has a moral basis.

You're doing a feature or a series. Dig deeper, keep asking *why* — the only really important question in journalism — and you have endless separate focuses in the Johnny story.

- ◆ 18-year-old Johnny is graduating from high school but can't read **because** there were always too many kids and not enough teachers in his classroom.
- ◆ Johnny's classes were overcrowded **because** the government prefers building roads and airports to hiring teachers.
- ◆ The government prefers building roads and airports to hiring teachers **because** the speculators who build them give more money than teachers to re-

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election campaigns.

- ◆ Speculators give money to re-election campaigns **because** if they don't they won't be allowed to make huge profits raping the environment.

Each complete and self-contained story follows the other in a logical sequence. No reason why you can't keep the stories going until the end of time. But, if you want to stop there, you can sum up the entire series or feature with the wonderfully illogical overall focus:

- ◆ *18-year-old Johnny can't read **because** speculators bribe the government so they can make huge profits raping the environment.*

Focus saves time and money. Focus makes better stories. Focus is good for you. More important, focus is good for the reader.

LEARN TO INTERVIEW

Interviewing is much more than asking questions on the subject matter. Real interviewing is an art — the art of persuading the interviewee to speak of things that mat-

ter from the *heart* rather than the head. Consider the thought that all of us are, in fact, three people.

- ◆ The public person — the official person we put forward for public view. The person we like to be seen as.
- ◆ The personal person — the off-duty person acquaintances claim to know. The person of ostentatiously respectable, rational and acceptable likes, dislikes and beliefs.
- ◆ The private person — the person behind the mask. The person only close friends really know. The real person of wants and needs, desires and prejudices, passions and hungers, strengths and weaknesses.

As the interviewer, your job is to ignore the public person, slip past the personal person and get to the *private* person. It's not easy because all our tribes insist that we mustn't talk of things that matter to strangers. So how do you stop being a stranger?

First, write a focus statement for the interview in exactly the same way as you write one for a story. The focus

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statement tells you precisely where the interviewee fits into the story. It defines the contribution you need from the interviewee. In a way, it defines your relationship with that person.

Then, when you meet the interviewee, you build a cocoon around the two of you. The cocoon is a place where the interviewee can open up, talk from the heart. You're used to building cocoons with people socially, now build one professionally:

- ◆ If you have a photographer with you, get the pictures out of the first, leaving you alone with the interviewee. It's hard enough for the interviewee to talk from the heart to one stranger, never mind two. Particularly when one of them is slinking around muttering, "Just pretend I'm not here."
- ◆ Realize that the interview starts as soon as you meet the interviewee. Thousands of messages pass between you in the first few seconds. In fact, the success or failure of an interview can be decided while you're still shaking hands.

- ◆ Set up the tape recorder. Make it unobtrusive and turn it on immediately. The idea is for the interviewee to get used to it and forget about it. Unless you're playing gotcha, make sure the interviewee knows it's on. It's the only ethical thing to do.
- ◆ Start by talking nonsense. It's the way all of us begin a relationship. It's the way we decide whether we trust one another. Weather and sport do nicely. Religion, politics and sex don't.
- ◆ Right after talking nonsense, get the housekeeping out of the way. What the story's about. The interviewee's role in it. Who else is part of it. When the story will be published. Spellings. Titles. That sort of thing.
- ◆ Prepare the interviewee. It's part of your job to help the interviewee get to a stage where she or he can talk from the heart. Be incisive, courteous and generous. Show that you know your job and know what you want. Show respect. Show that you want to share, not just wade in and take.

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- ◆ Start wide. Find out what the interviewee feels about the situation before you get specific. Figure out how far into the private person you will be allowed to go. Move carefully, methodically, toward the subject matter.
- ◆ When you're ready and you think the interviewee is ready, ask the first question with no change of tone and no interruption of the conversation. If you've cocooned well, the interviewee is now talking from somewhere close to the heart and will keep talking from there as long as the cocoon lasts.

Cocooning is the most important part of building a relationship, persuading a stranger to give a from-the-heart, personal interview. But cocooning, by itself, isn't enough. You also have to give edge.

Edge is the other side of the cocooning coin. The sour with the sweet. The yang with the yin. Edge isn't bullying or interrogating.

Edge is challenge — pushing the interviewee to go tighter, further, deeper. Edge is helping the interviewee

go to the heart — the core — of the matter. All the way to the private person.

Interviewees *need* edge. It gives them permission to abandon caution and search inside themselves for truth. Without edge, the cocoon produces mere pablum.

Some other thoughts about interviewing:

- ◆ Travel chronologically unless you have a damned good reason not to.
- ◆ Ask one simple question — in simple language — at a time.
- ◆ Encourage illustrative stories.
- ◆ Ask open rather than closed questions.
- ◆ Ask questions readers would ask.
- ◆ Listen. Listen. Listen.

The interviewer's job is to find a player in the story and build a relationship within which the player can talk from the heart, rather than the head.

The interviewee has a much harder job — to supply the life blood, the emotional truth, the humanity and human passion, without which the story is merely a suc-

cession of dull and bloodless facts. Interviewees need help to do that. Good interviewers know this, give the help and give it generously. In the end, no bad interviewees. Only bad interviewers.

WRITE SIMPLY

I pick up my newspaper this morning. As usual, it irritates me. Not just because it slobbers over the doings and sayings of far too many experts, institutions and organizations. Not just because it's obsessed with power and the powerful, but because so much of it is so densely and badly written.

The right-wing zealots are wrong. In the unlikely event that there's any conspiracy in the news profession, it's not a left-wing, bleeding-heart, tax-the-rich, kiss-the-seals, tree-hugging conspiracy. It's an obfuscation conspiracy. It's a conspiracy to make information so cryptic, obscure and ambiguous that no one out there understands it.

When I lead writing workshops for TV journalists, I first ask *them* for guidelines on how to write news. The

unanimity always amazes me. In Iqaluit and Québec, in Massachusetts and Texas, in Spain and Ireland, in Jamaica and Finland, in Mauritius, Germany and South Africa, everyone agrees on the same guidelines.

I suspect newspaper journalists would come up with fairly similar guidelines:

- ◆ **One thought to a sentence.** Not all the time because good writing is music and music needs change, contrast and surprise. But one thought to a sentence is always the best *base* for good news writing.
- ◆ **Conversational language.** The best way to communicate is with the slightly cleaned-up language used by reasonably educated, reasonably intelligent people talking to each other about things that matter.
- ◆ **Strong, simple, vivid words that paint pictures, evoke emotion.** Words with guts and power. Even elegance and beauty. Taut, tangible, edible, potable, smellable words coming together to make vivid images.

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- ◆ **Active verbs.** “The mouse kicked the elephant” rather than “the elephant was kicked by the mouse.”
- ◆ **Go chronologically.** Let the story unfold as it happened. It makes everything so much easier for the reader to understand. This applies to individual sentences as well as stories. Start with what happened first, and end with what happened last.
- ◆ **No clichés, jargon or codes.** Particularly no journalistic clichés, jargon or codes.
- ◆ **Rewrite. Rewrite. Rewrite. Rewrite.** The first write gets something down. The second write shapes and structures the story. The third write tightens and livens. The fourth write sharpens and polishes.
- ◆ **Less is more.** Boil down the choices until you write only those words that absolutely must be written.

Of course, almost nobody in TV news actually respects these guidelines. Most TV newspeople are far too busy obfuscating and pontificating.

It's also possible they don't respect the guidelines be-

cause writing is hard work. It demands that you genuinely understand the story and have got the facts dead accurate. Even worse, the people you write about, powerful people such as politicians and titans of industry and lawyers who like to sue journalists, will understand it.

But just because TV reporters write a few guidelines and ignore them, it doesn't mean newspaper chaps can't try the guidelines now and then. Readers would be pathetically grateful. Last word on writing goes to Montréal writer Pierre Foglia: “... to write is also to scream, to bleed, to shoot, to spit.”

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

While on the subject of what you newspaper chaps do and how you do it, a few questions:

- ◆ Are you losing your journalistic souls? Has journalism become business? Once upon a time it was all very simple. We had this dream: Our first loyalty was *not* to any employer, union, nation-state or cause. Instead, we saw ourselves as servants of the

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people and guardians of that magnificent democratic ideal — the free marketplace of ideas.

Journalism was a public trust. Free journalism was the one *essential* ingredient of a free and democratic society. Free journalism was the shining jewel in the crown of democracy. Nothing was more important than the people's right to know.

Do corporate needs and priorities rather than journalistic needs and priorities define the profession today. Are church (journalism) and state (management) forming a sordid and illicit union? Do you care?

- ◆ When did you become so damned respectable? There was a time when the powerful loathed journalists as irreverent, disrespectful, disreputable trash. Now, you're *part* of the powerful. There was a time when your job was to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Now, you *are* the comfortable.
- ◆ Where did you get this crazed obsession with pow-

er? Why are you so fascinated by who's got power? Who's lost power? Who wants power? How many of your readers share your delusion that the blood sport of power politics is the most important story, page after page, day after day?

- ◆ How has it happened that news has become what the rich and powerful do and say, interrupted occasionally by some of the nasty things that happen to the rest of us?
- ◆ Why do you always see the world through the eyes of a small minority of us — middle-aged, middle-class, white, Western men?
 - Most of the world isn't middle-aged — median age of people alive today is around 24.
 - Most of the world isn't middle-class — three out of five of us earn less than \$2 a day.
 - Most of the world isn't white — three out of four of us are people of colour.
 - Most of the world isn't Western — four out of five of us live outside the West.

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■ Most of the world isn't male — more than half of us are female.

So why is there almost no view from the world's majority — the young, the working class, non-whites, non-Westerners and women?

- ◆ While on the subject of women, how have you been so successful in persuading women journalists to act, think, behave and write like men? Is there some top-secret school hidden away in the mountains where you train women to deny their anima (female) side and see the animus (male) view of the world as the only norm?
- ◆ Why do you cover so much blue-collar crime (murder, assault, rape, drugs, etc.) and so little of the white-collar crime that affects many more of us (embezzlement, bribery, fraud, price fixing, industrial pollution, political corruption, etc.)?
- ◆ When did you discover that reporting endless accidents and acts of God is easier and cheaper than real journalism? Why are far distant train wrecks, plane

crashes, floods, fires, storms and earthquakes so incredibly important to you? What makes you think they're of any importance to your readers?

- ◆ Why the love affair with authorities, experts and spokespeople for institutions and organizations? They're not participants. They're not players in the game. They weren't even *there*. They don't represent themselves. They represent other people. All they can say is what other people who aren't there pay them to say. Why do authorities, experts and spokespeople for institutions and organizations dominate and manipulate so much of the news?
- ◆ How come you go to so many news conferences? Only spokespeople and journalists go to news conferences. Real people are thrown out. When was the last time real news came out of a news conference? When did you discover that covering news conferences is easier and cheaper than finding out what really happened?
- ◆ I know it's a cliché, but why is there so much bad

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news? According to every study, the world's people are living longer, better, healthier, safer, richer lives. Sure, there are still problems. Lots of them. But there's also more hope than there used to be. Why do you give so little hope?

- ◆ Why does so much news reporting mask meaning, foster ambiguity, obscure the truth and spread a sad, sodden feeling of helplessness over the land?
- ◆ Where is it written that news has to be dull, lifeless, boring and institutional? Where is it written that news can't be reported with insight, wit, humor, even wisdom? You're not stenographers. You're journalists. You write the living theater of our times.
- ◆ Why does the incomprehensibility and irrelevance of a story increase with its proximity to the front page?
- ◆ Why do you almost always put the attribution at the end of the sentence? Surely, the reader needs to know who says something before finding out what that something is? Doesn't the view depend on

who the person is and where the person stands? Shouldn't the reader know the source first?

- ◆ Why are you newspaper chaps so great to drink with and so bloody dull and pompous on the page?

If the Englishman is still alive and reading this, he'll probably agree with the part about newspaper chaps being great to drink with, but he'll dismiss the rest. "Bloody nonsense," I hear him say. "In my day, we knew how to deal with artsy-fartsy chaps who want to change things that have worked for centuries. World's gone to hell when TV chaps think they can tell newspaper chaps what to do ..."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Knight is a Toronto communications and broadcast journalism trainer who's won both Emmy and Sigma Delta Chi awards.

He's worked for three newspapers, UPI, Zambia-TV, ABC, NBC and PBS. He was head of TV journalism training for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for 10 years and has trained thousands of working broadcast journalists in Canada, USA, Europe, Africa, Scandinavia and the Caribbean.

Knight has written three books on the profession: ***The CBC-TV Journalism Trainer's Guide, The Television Storyteller — A Guide For TV Journalists*** and the recently-published, ***everything you always wanted to know about how to be a TV journalist in the 21st century but didn't know who to ask or Storytelling And The Anima Factor.***

Storytelling And The Anima Factor can be bought directly from the author for \$30.

Phone: (416) 968-2947. Fax: (416) 922-1459.