

Writing the column

Your voice... loud and clear

A few basic thoughts...

Columnists always report first. This begins with observation. Most of us just stumble blindly through the halls and classes and street and homes we encounter each day. Pay attention! But you should also get people to talk, and then use their anecdotes in your commentaries, if appropriate.

Take risks. Readers want to be surprised. One of our jobs as journalists is to make people just a little uncomfortable from time to time. Push your readers to think a little differently, or in a different way. But don't take risks with the facts.

Don't chat. Too many writers mistakenly believe that people will read anything they write just because it's in the paper. Remember that the easiest thing for a reader to do is stop reading.

No commentaries beginning: "I was sitting at the computer wondering what to write about last night. After all, my editor was insisting that I make deadline, but nothing was coming to me. So I decided to take you, dear reader, on a trip into my mind as I try to create a column..." Ugh.

Target an audience. We are writing for readers, not for ourselves. On the other hand, we shouldn't think that everyone in the school will be riveted by our prose. Get a picture of the group of people you most want to read your writing and keep them firmly in mind.

Three basic types of columns

- 1 Editorial topic columns. These can be closely related to staff editorials, but usually discuss a timely issue with more emphasis on a personal response and less consideration for the entire staff. These are similar to formal essays. An example might be discussing whether the United States is "stingy" in giving to poorer nations.
- 2 Personal reflection columns. These are centered on the writer herself, and more universal messages grown from these focused memories, anecdotes, scenes, fictional dialogue, etc. They appeal to emotions more than logic. Humor columns are a subset of this type of column.
- 3 Special interest columns. Here the writer is an "expert" on cooking, travel, music, movies, TV, etc. Then the writer shares her insights with those of us not possessing that expertise.

** If a writer does not regularly publish one of the above, that writing would properly be called a commentary.*

Check out a great column



Rick Reilly, long-time columnist for "Sports Illustrated," begins the column on the next page with 10 consecutive questions – something no introductory

journalism textbook would ever condone. In fact, most of the time we are wise to avoid opening with even a single question. But great writers find ways to break rules when doing so adds meaning to the writing.

Note the rhythm, the syntax, of the questions, and you will see that Reilly did not haphazardly slap 12 questions into the lead. "Why do they come?... Why do they cry? ... Why do they do it?" focus each of the first three paragraphs, and then come more complex, detail-rich questions in each paragraph.

And then one word.

Reilly writes as if he is speaking to you directly, and part of his voice is to make people laugh. Another part of his voice is to make people cry.

Reilly is a sports writer – now writing his column for "ESPN Magazine" – but is this really a story about sports? Or are sports simply his way in to discussing, to analyzing, to reflecting on what it means to be human? I guess that was a leading question.

Note Reilly's extensive use of similes and metaphors, of hyperbole (often for comic effect), of strong verbs and telling details.

In a way, Reilly's column on Ben Comen should resonate with other stories of relatively little known people who achieve something noble, without ever winning awards. These people are not heroic, will set records or change the world – unless you consider how our world, the world of readers – was changed just a bit when we got to know them a little.

It turns out that the columns that really stick with us tend to not focus on the writer but rather on the writer's perspective, on the writer's attitude, on the writer's insight.

It's not about you. Or is it?

Be present

Great columnists are great observers. and often they see and hear things that the rest of us do not. Slow down and really look at your school, your community – our stories are out there, waiting for the right person to tell them. Why shouldn't that person be you?

Models on the web... worth checking out

By Rick Reilly – http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/inside_game/archives/rick_reilly/

By Dan Barry – http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/us/16land.html?_r=1

By Garrison Keillor – <http://www.tmsfeatures.com/columns/political/liberal/garrison-keillor/>

Worth the Wait

By Rick Reilly / Sports Illustrated

Why do they come? Why do they hang around to watch the slowest high school cross-country runner in America? Why do they want to see a kid finish the 3.1 miles in 51 minutes when the winner did it in 16?

Why do they cry? Why do they nearly break their wrists applauding a junior who falls flat on his face almost every race? Why do they hug a teenager who could be beaten by any other kid running backward?

Why do they do it? Why do all of his teammates go back out on the course and run the last 10 minutes of every race with him? Why do other teams do it too? And the girls' teams? Why run all the way back out there to pace a kid running like a tortoise with bunions?

Why?

Because Ben Comen never quits.

See, Ben has a heart just slightly larger than the Chicago Hyatt. He also has cerebral palsy. The disease doesn't mess with his intellect – he gets A's and B's – but it seizes his muscles and contorts his body and gives him the balance of a Times Square drunk. Yet there he is, competing for the Hanna High cross-country team in Anderson, S.C., dragging that wracked body over rocks and fallen branches and ditches. And people ask, Why?

"Because I feel like I've been put here to set an example," says Ben, 16. "Anybody can find something they can do – and do it well. I like to show people that you can either stop trying or you can pick yourself up and keep going. It's just more fun to keep going."

It must be, because faced with what Ben faces, most of us would quit.

Imagine what it feels like for Ben to watch his perfectly healthy twin, Alex, or his younger brother, Chris, run like rabbits for Hanna High, while Ben runs like a man whacking through an Amazon thicket. Imagine never beating anybody to the finish line. Imagine dragging along that stubborn left side, pulling that unbending tire iron of a leg around to the front and pogo-sticking off it to get back to his right.

Worse, he lifts his feet so little that he trips on anything – a Twinkie-sized rock, a licorice-thick branch, the cracks between linoleum tiles. But he won't let anybody help him up. "It messes up my flow," he says. He's not embarrassed, just mad.

Worst, he falls hard. His brain can't send signals fast

enough for his arms to cushion his fall, so he often smacks his head or his face or his shoulder. Sometimes his mom, Joan, can't watch.

"I've been coaching cross-country for 31 years," says Hanna's Chuck Parker, "and I've never met anyone with the drive that Ben has. I don't think there's an inch of that kid I haven't had to bandage up."

But never before Ben finishes the race. Like Rocky Marciano, Ben finishes bloody and bruised, but never beaten. Oh, he always loses – Ben barely finishes ahead of the sunset, forget other runners. But he hasn't quit once. Through rain, wind or welt, he always crosses the finish line.

Lord, it's some sight when he gets there: Ben clunking his way home, shepherded by all those kids, while the cheerleaders screech and parents try to holler encouragement, only to find nothing coming out of their voice boxes.

The other day Ben was coming in with his huge army, Ben's Friends, his face stoplight red and tortured, that laborious gait eating up the earth inch by inch, when he fell not 10 yards from the line. There was a gasp from the parents and a second of silence from the kids. But then Ben went through the 15-second process of getting his bloody knees under him, his balance back and his forward motion going again -- and he finished. From the roar you'd have thought he just won Boston.

"Words can't describe that moment," says his mom. "I saw grown men just stand there and cry."

Ben can get to you that way. This is a kid who builds wheelchair ramps for Easter Seals, spends nights helping at an assisted-living home, mans a drill for Habitat for Humanity, devotes hours to holding the hand of a disabled neighbor, Miss Jessie, and plans to run a marathon and become a doctor. Boy, the youth of today, huh?

Oh, one aside: Hanna High is also the home of a mentally challenged man known as Radio, who has been the football team's assistant for more than 30 years. Radio gained national attention in a 1996 *Sports Illustrated* story by Gary Smith and is the hero of a major movie that opens nationwide on Oct. 24.

Feel like you could use a little dose of humanity? Get yourself to Hanna. And while you're there, go out and join Ben's Friends.

You'll be amazed what a little jog can do for your heart.

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