

Narratives for the hurried

Ever actually considered how much time our readers have to give our newspapers or yearbooks? Professional papers would settle for 15 minutes of a reader's day. Even the *Sunday New York Times* only hopes for about 48 minutes from a reader.

How many minutes would it take to read your whole paper (or yearbook)? According to Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, the average reading time (ART) is 200 words per minute. So a 400-word story might be thought of as a two-minute story, if you begin to think like a reader.

To the right is a 300-word story (about 1.5 minutes ART). It ran on the front page of a daily paper, along with a cool photo. Check the editor's note at the end. Want to see the photo on-line, and perhaps check out more examples of the series? Point your browser to:

www.sptimes.com/2005/05/14/Southpinellas/The_man_in_the_mirror.shtml

Shouldn't we be doing more of this sort of narrative?

Q & A from Poynter with Brady Dennis

MICHAEL WEINSTEIN: How did you come up with the idea of writing 300-word stories?

BRADY DENNIS: I first dreamed up "300 Words" while working as a night cops reporter in Tampa. For starters, I wanted a project that offered a break from the usual murder and mayhem that I typically covered (and enjoyed covering). But more importantly, I wanted to take a chance and offer something in the metro section that readers weren't used to seeing, something different that would make them slow down and take a breath and view the people they passed each day a little differently. I knew I wanted the pieces to be short -- they never jump from 1B -- and to highlight people that otherwise never would make the newspaper. Luckily, I [worked with] a photographer who shared this vision and a brave editor willing to try new approaches and fend off the skeptics.

A big inspiration for the series, by the way, were the "People" columns that Charles Kuralt had written for the Charlotte News back in the early 1950s [see www.charleskuraltpeople.com].

What was the easiest thing about doing them?

The easiest thing was my complete confidence in the people we would find. I believe that each person not only has a story to tell, but that each person has a story that matters. I've always felt humbled in the presence of everyday, "ordinary" people who are willing to share their lives with us. Give me them any day over politicians and celebrities.

What was hardest?

The hardest thing, I suppose, was finding a theme in each piece that was universal -- love, loss, death, change, new beginnings. Something everyone could relate to on a human level. I didn't think it was enough to say, "Look, here's an interesting person." I wanted to capture that person in a moment when readers could say, "I understand. I've been there."

What did you learn about writing short stories with a beginning, middle and end?

I learned it doesn't take 3,000 words to put together a beginning, middle and end. A good story is a good story, no matter the length. And sometimes the shorter ones turn out [to be] more powerful than the windy ones.

That said, there's a risk of sounding like I'm advocating super-short stories with no traditional nut graph. Not so. I believe no matter how long or short the story, people should know why it is important and worth their time. It's not enough just to paint a pretty picture. We must strive to tell them something about the world that matters, to be journalists and not simply storytellers. Hopefully, in a non-traditional way, "300 Words" does that.

The man in the mirror

By BRADY DENNIS, St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer
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He's standing there in front of the mirror, dressed in more pink than he's ever worn in his life. He's 17, a senior at Lakewood High School in St. Petersburg.

Josh King can't stop staring into that mirror. The seconds pass. He poses. He pauses.

The boy stares out at the man. The man stares back at the boy.

And there they are.

The man in him paid for this tuxedo -- pink shirt, pink socks, pink shoes -- with the money he earned mowing lawns. The man paid for his haircut and the tickets to tonight's prom. The man is paying for dinner.

The man in him helps look after his younger brothers. The man will graduate later this month and yearns to escape Florida. He's the one who will head to college in Virginia.

He's the one who will study business, then find a job, find a wife, find his way in the world.

And then there is the boy in Josh King.

He's the one who still has baseball trophies on his dresser and a Porsche poster on his wall.

He's the one who feels nervous tonight, the one who will feel a shiver creep down his neck when he picks up his date -- a girl he thought was out of his league.

The boy in him will forget to open the car door for her. He will play his music too loud and be too shy to say much during dinner.

The boy in him still doesn't know how to tie a tie. So his father shows him. And as the father slips the tie from his neck and puts it on his son's, he smiles and says, "This is a classic moment."

They both look at the mirror, knowing how soon the boy will disappear.

Editor's note: 300 Words provides glimpses of everyday life that often go unnoticed.