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CHAPTER 2

Pepperoni Pizza

Where Are the Stories?

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times: "There's nothing to write about." Man, it's like being trapped in a locked, padded room while the same old song (one that you hate) plays over and over and over again. "This school's boring," you say. "Nothing's happening. What can I possibly write about?"

If it will help you to understand my and thousands of other advisers' pain, say those words while whining like a 4-year-old child. Now say it again and again and again. You get the idea.

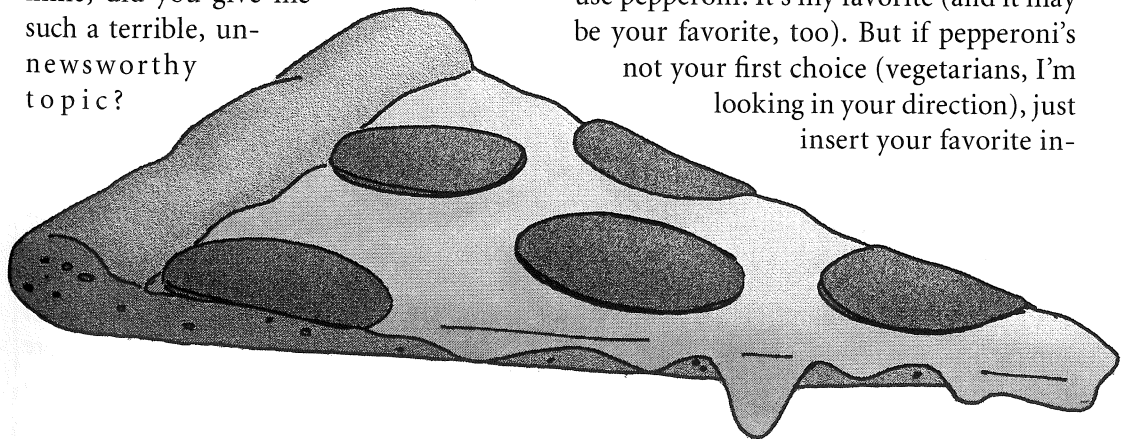
But rather than wince away from the needling, simpering voices, I will take this opportunity to do battle with those words. I will, once and for all, quell the growing tide of nagging phrases and blood-curdling pleas of "Why, oh why, hated adviser of mine, did you give me such a terrible, un-newsworthy topic?"

What can I possibly write about (insert name of hated thing here)?"

Yes, I will take up arms and rage into the fracas. But first, allow me to choose my weapon. It must be a stout weapon to fight such an annoying verbal assault. The weapon must be sharp. The weapon must be strong. It must, perhaps, contain some sort of magic to counteract the evil words of those throngs of disheartened pupils.

Or I could just choose pizza.

You heard right, pizza. That gooey, cheesy, pepperoni-laden Italian pie. Thick crust or thin, it doesn't matter. Take your pick. Deep dish. Stuffed crust. Whatever. You may choose any one topping you like, too. Olives, sardines, mushrooms, extra crunchy peanut butter. No matter. Of course, for the purposes of example, we'll use pepperoni. It's my favorite (and it may be your favorite, too). But if pepperoni's not your first choice (vegetarians, I'm looking in your direction), just insert your favorite in-



MAD LIB JOURNALISM

These were fun when you were, like, 8. But your readers aren't 8 anymore. Try the exercise below. Do your stories sound like this? If so, you need to find the angles behind the topics.

It's _____ time again. And that means that _____
(name of event) (number)

students at _____ High School will be ready for the
(name of school)

festivities.

This year's activities include _____, _____
(activity) (activity)

and _____.
(activity)

_____ is one of the students involved in planning _____
(name) (name of event)

He said, " _____
(generic quote about event)

_____."

The dates of _____ are _____
(name of event) (dates)

redient wherever the dreaded "P"-word appears from here on out.

And here we go.

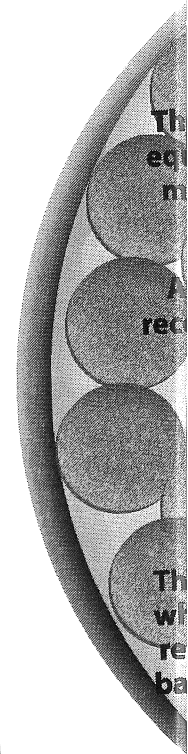
Imagine that you're about to eat a pizza. You're looking at it with one longing eye as you read this with the other. Imagine, too, that this is the best pizza in town. It's got the best cheese, the best crust. It's piping hot, and it's just sitting there, ready to be eaten. But hold off for just one more minute, just long enough to take a really good look at that pizza. Now there's a pizza

place near where I live that boasts a pie that has "edge-to-edge" toppings. The pepperoni stretches from one extreme side to the other. You can't even see the crust underneath for the amount of toppings. The pizza is just laden with pepperoni.

The thing is, I can't eat the whole thing. Not by myself, at least. I don't want to end up with a stomach ache, and, more importantly, I don't want to gain 20 pounds at one sitting. So I can only afford to eat a little bit. Just one small part of the larger

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pie. I can save the rest for later if I want, but I don't have to because in a lot of ways, one small taste is enough. The rest of the pizza will taste pretty much the same as that first bite. Sure, there will be some small variations, but for the most part the whole pizza tastes exactly the same.

Which brings me to my point (and as you know by now, you must have a point when writing). Imagine this pizza represents your topic. It doesn't matter what that topic is. Need some help? Look at an old issue of a yearbook, or maybe last year's newspapers. There they all are, the

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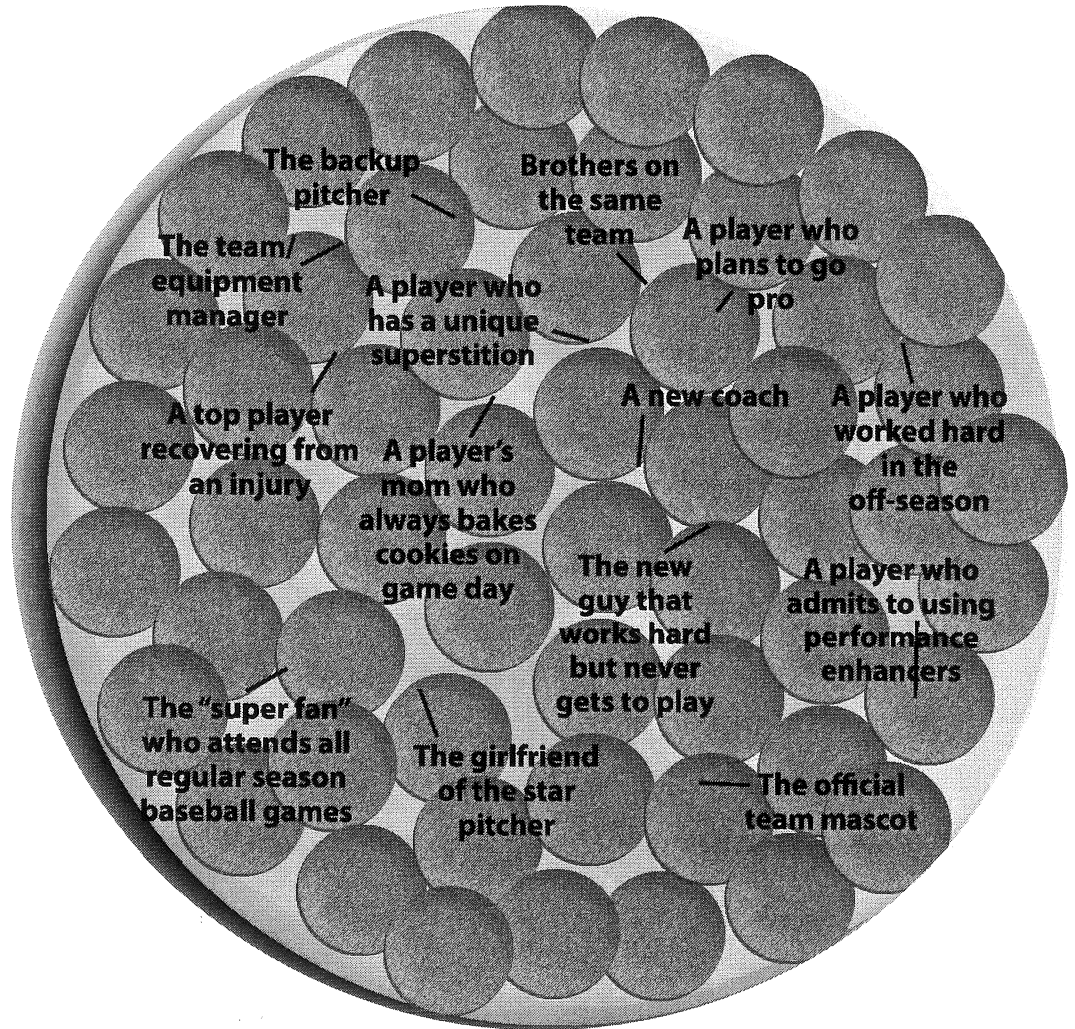
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THE STORY PIZZA

Remember, topics are not stories. Imagine that this pizza represents a topic — say, the men's baseball team — and each piece of pepperoni represents a different face, or story, that you could use to illustrate your larger topic.

TOPIC: THE MEN'S BASEBALL TEAM



“boring” topics. Homecoming. Prom. The soccer team. Tattoos. The archery club. Same old, same old. Day after day. Month after month. Year after year.

What have we learned? Simple, topics do not change, people do. So from year to year, the topics remain static. I admit, in some ways this can be a little boring. If all you’re writing is a story that outlines the events each year, then, yes, it is boring. As a matter of fact, if that’s all you plan to do, then I can make your job so much easier. Here’s how:

Step 1: Grab a copy of last year’s newspaper or yearbook and open to the appropriate page (Homecoming, baseball preseason, prom, etc.)

Step 2: Cross out the old names and dates.

Step 3: Replace those crossed out words with current names and dates.

Step 4: Recirculate the publication.

Step 5: Repeat.

But if you care about your readers (and your own sanity), you can try a different approach, one that takes a little more effort. And it all starts with people.

Take a look at the faces in each of those stories or photo essays. They’re different, aren’t they? Sure, they compete in the same events, but they do them differently. They bring to those events a whole different set of life experiences.

Think of that pizza again. You remember it, right? How could you forget the pizza, what with it sitting there so tantalizingly delicious right next to you as you read. Before you eat, though, think of the entire pizza as a topic. You’ve just ordered the “Prom Special” or the “Math Department Surprise,” or something along those lines.

Now pay attention to this part because this is the key to the whole pizza analogy: Each piece of pepperoni repre-

sents a different story that relates to the larger topic. In other words, just like if you take one bite of the pizza you pretty much get the idea of what the rest of the pie will taste like, focusing your story on one particular piece of pepperoni (one person’s story) also will give your readers a pretty good “taste” of the larger topic. And the thing about pepperoni (i.e., stories within a topic) is that there are a lot of them. Remember edge-to-edge toppings?

Let’s say you’re writing about Homecoming. How many people are involved in your school’s Homecoming festivities? My guess is that most, if not all, have some connection to the celebration. Of course, some folks have more prominent roles than others (remember prominence from Chapter 1). There’s the Homecoming queen, the star quarterback, the float building chairperson. But these aren’t the only people who have Homecoming stories to tell. What about the kid whose family donated the little footballs that cheerleaders always seem to throw into the stands? Or perhaps the girl who works on the decorations for the dance? Then there’s the guy who donates his convertible for the parade. The freshman who paints his entire body in gold glitter paint. The football player who doesn’t get to play because he’s injured. And on and on and on.

Now here’s the trick. You don’t have to cover all of these people. If you did, your publication would be a million pages long and would cost an arm and a leg to produce.

No, the trick is, you only need to find one of these stories to tell.

One.

That’s the magic number.

One.

Remember it.

One.

I’ll say it again.

One.

For each year, for each time your staff tackles the same topics, remember the number.

One.

That's one face. One person. One experience to illustrate the larger topic.

One.

And what do you do with all of the rest of those stories? Save 'em until next year. Or the year after that. Or the next issue. Or the issue after that. See, the irony of the statement, "There's nothing to write about," is that, in fact, there's far too much to write about. The real trick of journalism is not searching for a source but, instead,

narrowing down the plethora of potential sources to just, you guessed it...

...one.

Some people call this piece of pepperoni — this "story" within the larger topic — an angle. **The angle is simply the way you choose to focus this particular story to get your point across.** An angle depends on the people you use to illustrate your focus, to help readers to know what to think about, as we discussed in the previous chapter.

But if it helps you to think of the angle as pepperoni — and it seems so much more appealing to me — then so be it.

MAD LIB V. PEPPERONI PIZZA

Two stories, both the same length. One focuses on an event. Insert different names, different dates, and it's the same year after year. The other focuses on one group of people. One event. One moment. Which is more successful?

Playing in the near-freezing weather, the Lions stopped a late fourth-quarter drive to preserve a 14-7 victory over Jefferson in the state championship game. The Lions finished the season with a 14-0-1 record, the best mark in the school's history.

"The kids surpassed all of our expectations," Head Coach Ernest Buckner said. "More than a few times, they could have given up, but each time, they reached down deep and found the character to win."

"We sure were excited," quarterback and senior Mike Calumet said. "It was an amazing accomplishment for all of us. We worked really hard all season to make this a reality. We all dug down deep and found the strength to win."

The season opened with a 20-17 win over Roosevelt, followed by consecutive wins over Glenview, 14-10; Kennedy, 28-24; and Taft, 17-7.

Twenty minutes after the game had ended, they remained on the frozen turf of Remington Field, players and their girlfriends, coaches and parents, hugging one another, slapping backs and strutting up and down the field.

They pinpointed where Jeff Reymer scored on a crucial third-down fingertip catch and where Ron Vaught planted his helmet in the ribs of Jefferson's all-state quarterback Patrick Whaley, knocking the football loose to stop a late fourth-quarter drive and preserve the 14-7 win.

Long after most of the fans had escaped to their cars, they braved the 25-mile-per-hour winds and near-zero wind chill, refusing to surrender the moment and thumbing their noses at Mother Nature as only state champions can do.

"I wanted the moment to last forever," Bill Gammon, offensive guard and senior, said. "I doubt that I'll ever have as big a thrill as winning the state championship."

Brainstorming

It's easy to tell young reporters to find "faces" behind their stories. It's also easy to read excellent examples of writing, if you know where to go to find them. But where does that leave you? By now you know the elements of news. You know what topics to write about. And now you understand that putting a face on a story—finding someone who is affected by the news, in other words—is the key to getting readers to relate to that newsworthy topic.

But where do those ideas come from in the first place?

What follows is a plan that will help you to find the story ideas—and faces—that you need to tell readers important information and, more importantly, to give them something to think about.

The key is in brainstorming.

Brainstorming. Now there's a word you've heard before. "OK, kids. Today we're going to do some brainstorming." Or, "Let's brainstorm some ideas," your editor might say. A good concept, brainstorming. I mean, we can all agree that the ultimate goal of a brainstorming session is to generate a lot of ideas. So why is it that when you ask people to brainstorm they all look at you with blank stares and groans?

It's because most people don't brainstorm correctly.

"Brainstorm" has become one of those words like "nice" in the English language. It's been used so much that it doesn't mean much anymore. It's such a ubiquitous word, too. It's a noun: "That brainstorm really wore me out." It's an adjective: "Let's get this brainstorm session over with." It's a verb: "If we brainstorm for a minute, I'm sure we'll have all of the answers we need." It's gotten to the point that people just have no concept of a right and wrong way to brainstorm. The word means so much,

it's so overused, that, in fact, it means nothing.

Let's put a stop to that right now. Follow these steps to find out how.

Elect a Brainstorming Leader

For most staffs this decision is made pretty easily. The brainstorm leader can be your editor in chief or your page or section editor. This allows these people in leadership positions to practice using their leadership skills as they guide the brainstorm group through the process.

But the leader doesn't have to be an editor on staff. Actually, allowing other staff members to lead discussions and brainstorm sessions may help to give some of those staff members a better feeling of belonging and empowerment.

The job of the leader is pretty easy, too. As leader, you should stand up front (or sit somewhere in a prominent location) and be prepared to clearly and legibly write down ideas as they come. And just because someone's the group leader doesn't mean he or she is off the hook for generating ideas. While this person is the "leader," he or she should also be a contributing member to the brainstorm process being conducted.

Everyone's Ideas Count

The first concept to remember in brainstorming is that everyone should have an equal say in the process. Easy to say, not so easy to put into practice because every group of young people seems to have its own dynamic. You've got the brown-noser kid to your left who always wants to contribute regardless of whether his ideas are valid. You've got the quiet kid to your right (or maybe it's you) who would rather be at home sleeping than paying attention to some silly "brainstorm session." And then you've got the other ones in between.

FREEWITING 101

Like brainstorming, lots of people say they know how to freewrite, but few people do it correctly. Here's what you should be doing:

1. Have a blank sheet of paper and a pen or pencil.
2. With the topic at the top of your page, write constantly for the designated amount of time (30 seconds or a minute or five minutes).
3. Don't stop writing. Once you've placed pen (or pencil) to paper, you can't stop. You also can't go back. If you can think of nothing to write, write "I can think of nothing to write" (or whatever else) over and over until you can think of something else to write.
4. Don't worry about grammar or spelling or punctuation. Nobody's grading you on your freewrite. The only person who needs to read what you've written is you.

The ones who may not feel like their ideas are any good or the ones who don't take the process seriously and try to turn everything into a joke.

But remember, everyone should have a say in the brainstorm process. You can't ignore people just as you can't focus all of your energy on the one or two people who seem to be actively contributing. Why? Because everyone involved in the project (the newspaper, the yearbook, the magazine) should feel like they have an equal say as to what gets included in the publication. Even if their ideas ultimately don't get picked, they have as much a chance of having them discussed as anyone else. And why is that important? Because if you don't validate these kids' ideas, after a while they'll give up on you entirely. And there's nothing worse than having a staff half-full of people who don't feel like they're part of the process.

Getting Started

The first step in the brainstorming process is to start with a topic. Remember, topics are not stories (it's the stories that you'll be trying to generate in these brainstorm session), but you've got to start

somewhere. Sometimes you may even need to step back to brainstorm the topics, too. Whatever. For our purposes, we'll assume we know the topic. Let's say it's "prom." That's your "pepperoni pizza," if you will. We know we want to cover the prom in our publication, but we don't know how. Here's what you do:

Step one: The leader should put the word "prom" at the top (or the center) of a large workspace — maybe a chalkboard or a large sheet of paper.

Step two: The leader should instruct the group to write ideas in a notebook for one to three minutes focusing on the word "prom" (see alternative coverage about freewriting for more information).

Step three: Give the group members a few seconds to go through their lists and mark their top two or three ideas.

Step four: Go around the group in a circle twice, having each group member share one idea from his list each time it's his turn. The leader should write each idea down on the workspace, and everyone in the group has the option of passing his turn only once.

One important note: Do not discuss any of these ideas as they are being placed

on the large work space. Discussion about these topics will come later. Remember, at this stage you're just generating ideas and you're trying to give everyone an equal chance to contribute.

Narrowing the List

At this point, you should have a pretty good list. If you want, you can add more rounds to the circle, having people share four or even five ideas. Or you could take a few of the subtopics that you brought up and do a whole new brainstorm. It all depends on your group and the ideas it brings up. One thing is true, though, and that's that your final list should incorporate actual angles to the original topic. If the topic is "prom" and your list includes words like "tuxedo rentals," "the dance" and "dinner," you need to keep working. Those words and phrases aren't stories yet; they're merely subtopics within the larger topic of prom. And if your list still includes these subtopics, don't despair. Chances are your main topic was too broad anyway and these subtopics have allowed you to narrow the focus even further.

In the end, though, look for faces and people to crop up in your list. If your list includes phrases like "the prom queen candidate whose sister was a prom queen," or "a kid without a driver's license who can't drive his date to prom," or "a girl who makes her own dress," then you're in pretty good shape.

The Final Step

Once you've gone this far and you have a pretty extensive list on the board, now is the time for discussion. Up to this point you've remained pretty quiet, and that's a key concept. Everyone in the brainstorm session needs to feel equally important to everyone else; everyone's ideas are

valid. Sometimes your best ideas come from the quietest students, and sometimes the "stupid" ideas can be the catalyst to lead to brilliant ones.

But now that the ideas are there, the group leader should facilitate the discussion by posing a series of questions:

What seems to be the most newsworthy angle?

What angle affects the most readers?

What stories have we already covered in past issues and years?

Narrow your list to the top two or three and don't agonize over your decisions. The idea of brainstorming is that by the time you get to your final list you should have lots of great ideas, most of them equally as great as the others. But you simply don't have time to cover them all. You only have time and space for, you guessed it...

One.

But do save the lists you made for later. Why reinvent the wheel? The stories may be just as valid next year or the year after only they'll include different faces. Like computers, brainstorming is just a tool. You use it right, and you reap the benefits. You use it wrong, and you're no better off than when you started. Understanding the concept of brainstorming is one thing, but you've got to practice it yourself to get better.

Summary

The problem with journalism isn't that there's nothing to write about, it's that there's far too much. Like a pepperoni pizza, we don't need to eat the whole thing to understand what the pizza tastes like. If readers are faced with stories that are too broad or that try to cover too much, chances are they'll simply avoid reading al-

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together. The problem that most staffs face
is how to narrow the topics down to just a
few angles that could then be presented to
readers.

Proper brainstorming is a big key to
finding story ideas. Make sure when you

brainstorm that everyone gets an equal say
in the process. Additionally, make sure
your ideas begin to focus on the people that
are affected by the topic. Once you have
that list of angles, you're ready to begin
gathering more information.

STUDY GUIDE

Terms and Concepts

Topic—a general term that refers to events
or things.

Story and angle—Topics are things or
events. Stories are about the people who
are affected by those things or events.
Good journalism focuses on stories, not
topics.

Brainstorming—a process that generates
lots of ideas in a short time.

Freewriting—a method that can be used
during brainstorming to generate lots of
ideas.

Here's Your Chance to Try Brainstorming

1. Start with a topic.
2. Find ideas to correspond to that topic.
You're looking for "faces" here. Who is
affected by this topic?

And Here's an Example

Topic: Prom

Story ideas:

The student who can't afford to go.

The kid with no date.

The student whose mom will help chaper-
one.

The girl who's up for prom queen.

The girl who's up for prom queen whose
older sister was also prom queen.

The kid who refuses to go to prom.

The students who choose to forgo dining
at an expensive restaurant and choose,
instead, to eat at home.

The girl who can't seem to find "just the
right dress."

The girl who made her own dress.

The freshman who got asked to go to the
prom by a senior.

The kids who go as friends rather than as
"dates."

The boy who helped organize the prizes for
the school's official "after-prom" event.

The student whose older brother or sister
died in a car accident during prom.

The kid who knows there's pressure to
have sex on prom night but who sticks
with his decision not to.

Gold Coins

What Is the Role of Observation?

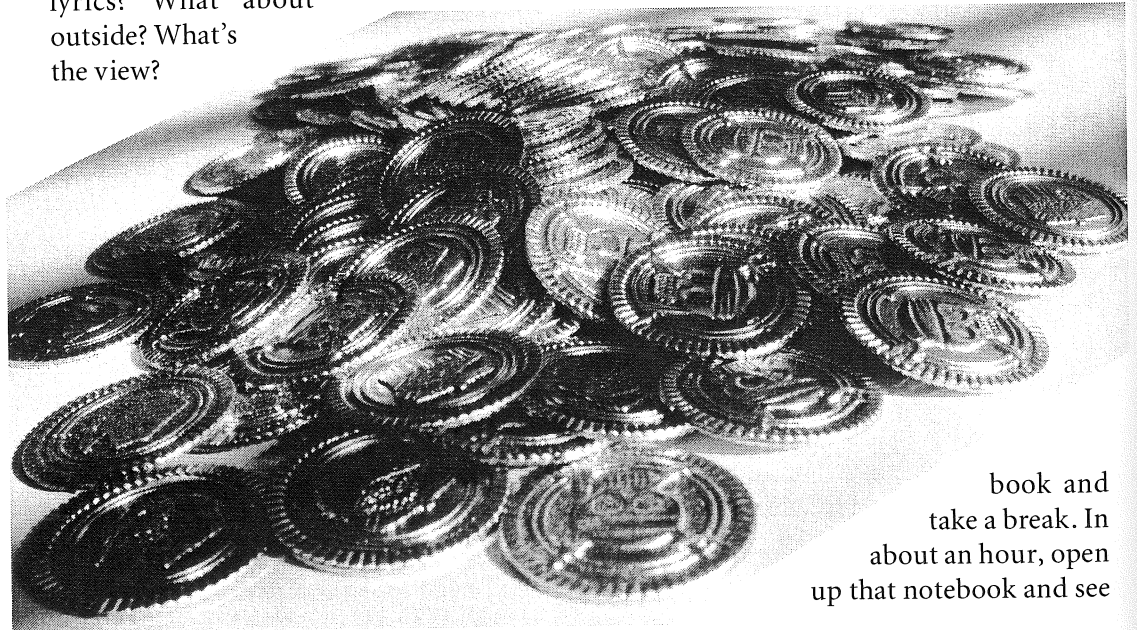
Do this. Get a blank notebook and a pen, just something to write on and to write with. Now go home. Go to your bedroom. Close the door. Find a comfy spot, take a deep breath and look.

Look around you. What do you see? What do you hear? Smell? Feel? Be specific. Do you have CDs? What are their titles? Do you have a desk? What's on it exactly? Books? What condition are they in? Is music playing? What song? What are the lyrics? What about outside? What's the view?

Is there a dog frolicking in the backyard? What's his name? How does he bark? Do you have any pictures? Who's in them? What are they doing? What are their names?

Now write it all down. Spend 10 minutes or 20 or 30. Longer, if you want. Just get it all down. No detail is too minute. Everything is valid. You cannot be too specific here.

When you're done, close your note-



book and
take a break. In
about an hour, open
up that notebook and see

what you've written. Now ask yourself, what do the observations that I've made say about me? If you've done the exercise correctly, they should say a lot. They should, for example, let an outsider know some-

thing about your musical tastes. Are you into punk or rock? Pop or jazz? Is your room yellow? Maybe you're perky. Dark brown? Subdued. Do you have pictures of family and friends throughout? You're per-

THE HUNT FOR GOLD COINS

Remember first that you need to have a story to tell and a face that will connect readers to it. But once you have that, you've got to grab your readers' attention and then keep it throughout the story.

What are Gold Coins?

Most often, gold coins take the form of details, description and dialogue.

- **Details**

Is your main source a fan of music? What are the specific titles in his music library? What's the CD in his car right now? What kind of car is it? Does your source have a dog? What's that dog's name? How old is it?

- **Description**

What color are your source's eyes? How tall is she? What mannerisms does she display as you interview her?

- **Dialogue**

What does your source say when she's not answering your questions? How does she respond to the people around her? What do they say back?

How do I organize gold coins? How many should I have?

That's up to you. Just remember that not all stories are best told chronologically. A good rule of thumb: the longer the story, the more gold coins it should contain. Another rule: Your two most important gold coins are the ones at the beginning (your lead) and at the end.



What about the information in between the gold coins?

This is the path of the story. The information in between gold coins brings out the point of the story, what you want readers to think about. These "spaces" in between the narrative contain relevant facts, quotes from expert sources and solid transitions. The gold coins keep readers on the path. The gold coins keep readers' eyes on the path so that they'll be more likely to access the important information there.

Why have gold coins?

Without gold coins, readers have no way of entering your stories. Without gold coins, your stories are merely collections of facts and data and quotes. Readers—particularly your visual readers—can't connect with those things. Gold coins provide a "face" for the story and a way to help readers to relate to the information that lies within.

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sonable. Are your clothes hanging neatly in the closet or are they thrown haphazardly on the floor? Can you see the floor?

Get the idea?

Information gathering is the key to good journalism. And there are three elements to solid information gathering — observation, interviewing and research. When most people think of journalism, they think of the latter two (interviewing and research). They think of a reporter with a notebook asking questions to a source. Or they picture that same reporter in front of a computer screen sifting through scads of data. Certainly, these two forms of information gathering are important; as a matter of fact, they constitute two-thirds of good reporting. But that leaves one-third unaccounted for. And for your visual readers, it's probably the most important third — observation.

In this chapter, we'll discuss that first element of information gathering, mainly because observation is the technique that's most often overlooked (pun absolutely intended) by high school journalists. To be a good journalist, you have to hone your skills in all aspects of the field, and the process might as well start with opening up your senses to the world around you.

Gold Coins

Pretend, for a moment, that Carl (you remember Carl the Caveman) is a nature lover. He enjoys taking walks outside, away from his cave. He likes exploring new paths and experiencing new scenery.

On this particular bright, sunny day, Carl has found himself with a dilemma. In front of him is a meadow, and beyond the meadow is the beginning of a wooded area. Carl likes woods. He likes the trees and the shade and the sounds. Taking a walk in the

woods is not the problem. The problem is that, carving long, curved gashes into the thicket, there are several paths. Each one is unique. Each one promises its own adventure and satisfaction.

So which path to choose?

Carl moves close to investigate. Nothing stands out on the first two paths. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. Nothing shows him the difference between the paths — one's just as good, or bad, as the other.

But as he passes the third path, something catches his eye.

It glints softly in the bright sunshine. Carl moves closer. The gleam doesn't move. As he bends down onto the rough grass, Carl sees the source of the light.

A gold coin. Or, in Carl's case (since his culture hasn't invented money yet), a shiny trinket. In other words, something valuable.

Now the choice of which path to follow is easier. Carl picks up the coin, pockets it and heads into the forest.

But he walks this path differently than he's walked trails before. Before today, Carl would let his eyes and his mind wander, scoping the scenery, listening to the birds (or approaching dinosaurs), whistling happy tunes. But today, his eyes remain riveted on the path before him. After all, he saw one gold coin, chances are, he might find another.

He walks a few more steps and, lo and behold, another gold coin. He places it in his pocket next to the first coin and resumes walking.

The walk down the trail continues like this, Carl moving methodically, purposely, his eyes only on the ground in front of him. The trail, meanwhile, doesn't fail to do its part, providing shiny gold coins at regular intervals. When Carl gets to the end of the path, his pockets are full of valuable trinkets and he smiles; the choice to follow this particular path was worth the trouble.

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vented money yet), a shiny
words, something valuable.
oice of which path to fol-
el picks up the coin, pock-
into the forest.

s this path differently than
before. Before today, Carl
es and his mind wander,
ery, listening to the birds
g dinosaurs), whistling
ut today, his eyes remain
th before him. After all, he
in, chances are, he might

Few more steps and, lo and
gold coin. He places it in
to the first coin and re-

own the trail continues like
g methodically, purposely,
he ground in front of him.
while, doesn't fail to do its
shiny gold coins at regular
Carl gets to the end of the
s are full of valuable trin-
es; the choice to follow this
was worth the trouble.

GOLD COINS IN ACTION

Need to see it to believe it? Check out the story below and notice how gold coins help to keep readers on the path of the story.

Gold Coin #1

Introduces readers to Jessica Green, one of many students who is or will be affected by the school's new dress code policy.

When senior Jessica Green went back-to-school shopping last June, almost three months before this school year began, she thought she would get a jump on the competition. She spent more than \$300 on several outfits, including almost a dozen midriff-revealing shirts.

Just a week ago, she found out that her planning was all for naught.

"I heard about the new policy and my heart jumped in my throat," Green said. "I mean, almost everything I bought doesn't meet the new requirements."

The Point

Illuminates the main idea of the story, what the reporter wants readers to think about.

Green is not alone. Many students must reevaluate their wardrobes because of a new policy just passed at last week's school board meeting. Now the dress code rules state that students must wear "tuckable" shirts.

The Path

This is the meat of the story. Shares secondary source (Skelding) as well as expert source (Hawkins). Outlines the specifics of the new policy.

"That's, like, everything I own," junior Mary Skelding said. Skelding, like Green, shopped early to avoid back-to-school store crowding. In addition to shirts, students can no longer wear hats and they can't don pants that reveal undergarments.

"We had to do it," Principal John Hawkins said. "I know there will be some dissention, but students' clothes can certainly be a distraction to the learning environment, and we want to provide the best environment possible."

Gold Coin #2

Brings the readers back to Green. Lets them know that this policy affects people just like them.

But this explanation doesn't help Green.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with all of these clothes," Green said. "I can't take them back because it's been more than 90 days since I bought them. I guess I'll just have to buy something else and wear these on the weekends."

Fast forward. Pretend you're a high school student (for some this is a stretch) and some industrious, young journalism student has handed you the latest copy of the school newspaper. In front of you are choices, paths, if you want to call them that. Only they're not paths into the woods, they're stories, and you must decide what, if any, stories you will read.

The problem is, each story looks pretty much like the one before it. Nothing stands out. Nothing catches your eye. And unlike Carl, who likes to walk down wooded paths for the sheer enjoyment of it, you (if you're like many teens) don't like to read. You don't have time for it. Something else is more interesting. Like sleeping. Like writing love notes to your girlfriend/boyfriend where all of the I's are dotted with tiny hearts. Like watching paint dry. And what do you, typical reader, end up reading?

Nothing.

Unless...

Occasionally, a piece of writing does catch your eye. There's something about it. Something unusual. Something captivating.

Something that seems to glint in the bright sun.

A gold coin.

When young readers find one of these, then it's off to the races. You can't stop them from finding more. They hunt those gold coins like prospectors in 1849. And along the way, they learn a little something.

Show, Don't Tell

If you read just about any book about writing—fiction, nonfiction and everything in between—you'll see the advice of "show, don't tell" crop up almost every

time. And journalistic writing is no different. Actions and images speak louder than words almost every time. It is this ability to show and not tell that is the basis for gold coins in the stories you craft.

So what exactly are gold coins in writing? Remember cheese on the broccoli way back in Chapter 1? In a lot of ways, gold coins are the same as cheese. Cheese, you'll remember, makes the broccoli more palatable. Cheese tastes good and it helps to take the edge off of the, for many, distasteful flavor (albeit goodness) of the green veggie. Cheese helps readers to relate to stories. For most, it's the "face" that a writer puts on the news that helps readers to relate.

Gold coins serve a similar purpose. They're just more specific.

We discussed your readers at the beginning, too. We said that your readers are visual people. They like their information presented to them visually. They expect their information (at least the stuff they choose to access) to be visual.

This idea of being visual relates to writing as much as it relates to design and photography. I'll say it again in a slightly different format: You must write visually for your visual readers if you want them to actually access what you've written. You must show them the information they need to know and not just tell them about it.

The Three D's

In general, gold coins constitute three D's—detail, description and dialogue. There are other types of gold coins—storytelling quotes, for example, or interesting or shocking facts—but we'll discuss those in the next two chapters. For our purposes, we'll explore the first three—the three D's, I like to call them—because these three are

most closely related to the information gathering technique of observation.

Description

What color is your source's shirt? Is there music playing? How loud is it? Does the source wear glasses? What's the weather like outside? Does the source wear perfume? How tall is he?

Description, the first D, involves paying attention to your surroundings. Interviewing, as you probably already know, utilizes your sense of hearing; you ask a question and you listen as the source answers. **Description, on the other hand, involves using the rest of your senses to tell a story.** If it's Christmastime, did you notice if there's a Christmas tree in the person's living room? Were there presents underneath the tree? How many? How were they wrapped?

So often, reporters spend much of their time worrying about their interview—their questions, their notebooks, their tape recorders, their pens—that they spend little, if any, time looking at the world that surrounds their source. But just like answers to questions, a person's possessions, the way he looks, the way he smells, say something about the source as well.

Let's say you walked into a source's house at Christmastime and you noticed that there wasn't a Christmas tree. Would that tell you something about your source? You'd have to ask to be sure, but it might.

And what if you walked into an interview and noticed that the source had hundreds of swimming trophies displayed prominently around the room? Or you noticed that the source's folders were really ripped and torn up with wadded up papers falling out?

What if the source was reading a book? A newspaper? A comic book? What if the teacher you're talking to had a picture

of him (or her) sitting on the back of a Harley Davidson motorcycle?

As a journalist, you have to learn to notice the world around you and that involves more than just using your interviewing skills. Your other senses—smell, sight, hearing, taste and touch—count, too. Now just because you notice something doesn't always mean it's relevant (and we'll discuss relevance later in this chapter), but before we talk relevance you have to first practice getting the information. Like just about anything else in life, learning to describe takes time and practice.

Detail

So you've practiced using description and you've gotten to this point:

An old man sits quietly in a bar smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. He's watching a TV that hangs above the stained counter.

Not bad. At least you're starting to pay attention. Your descriptions are getting better.

But it's not enough.

There's an adage that we journalists like to use: "If there's a dog barking in the background, I want to know that dog's name." I'm pretty sure the intent of that sentence had much the same intent that police who investigate crime scenes would use—everything is evidence; leave no stone unturned. In other words, if a journalist is doing a good job and being as objective as he can, then he should try to get as much information as he can.

While this is true, I will venture another reason behind "finding out the dog's name." And that reason is this: Readers like details.

Details are simply specific words that help to further describe something.

D's

Gold coins constitute three description and dialogue. types of gold coins—story—for example, or interesting ts—but we'll discuss those chapters. For our purposes, the first three—the three D's, m—because these three are

OBSERVATION IN ACTION

For this piece of writing, the reporter just spent about half an hour in his school's media center computer lab. It's not a story yet (it has no point — see page 42), but notice the use of the three D's — description, details and dialogue.

10:31 a.m.

"I know her password now," the girl whispers to her friend. Her long red hair, tied back with a blue rubber band in a ponytail that descends to the middle of her back, swishes over her left shoulder as she conspires with her partner.

The library computer lab is empty except for these two girls tucked neatly away in the back corner. The remaining 20 or so computer screens in the room stare back with blue backgrounds and a message:

*CHS Media Center
Students and Patrons
To use the INTERNET,
You and your parents must have
signed the Carmel Clay
Schools Acceptable Use Policy.
Copies available in Activities Office.*

"How do you know her password?" her friend says. She looks over her shoulder, glancing about the room, checking for eavesdroppers. The black girl wears a white, hooded windbreaker, a direct violation of this school's "No coats" policy.

"I don't know," the redhead replies. "I just guessed." She points to the screen, which has just popped up an error message. "Shoot," the redhead says. "I thought I knew her password."

At the top left-hand corner of each of the girl's keyboards is a space for them to put their student IDs, showing they have signed the appropriate permission forms, the same forms to which the blue screens refer. Both spaces on both of the girl's keyboards are conspicuously blank.

10:45 a.m.

Muted laughter fills the room as four photojournalism students enter the lab to work on an assignment. They heave their heavy backpacks from their adolescent shoulders and get to work. The assignment: to find photojournalistic Internet sites.

Three of them sit in a row, two boys flanking a pretty, thin, blonde-haired girl with tight black pants and a short-sleeved blue sweater. The third boy, a redhead with bleary eyes, a fleece vest and baggy khaki pants, sits in the row in front of the other three, his seat still a good vantage point to see the blonde. Almost simultaneously they arrive at Yahoo.com to begin their search.

"Aw, crap," the lone boy in the front row says as he frantically slams his finger on the mouse button.

"Having some trouble, John?" Tyler Kirsh, a bespectacled sophomore in a long-sleeved Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirt, says.

"I'm always havin' trouble, man," John says.

The room is quiet for a long moment before the blonde speaks. "Why do I suck?" she says, glancing at her screen and then at Kirsh's. She can't find the right website. Kirsh looks over and points to her screen, asking for her to follow his finger with her mouse.

"Click here on the 'How to take better pictures' link," Kirsh says. The blonde does as she's instructed and a large yellow and white Kodak emblem fills her screen.

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"Thanks, Tyler," she says. "What about you, Tim?" She looks to her left to see how the plaid-shirted boy there is progressing. Tim doesn't respond. Instead he just moves his mouse and clicks, meandering in some other area of cyberspace.

"Tim's lost in his own world," Kirsh replies laughing.

Finally, Tim hits something. He looks over at the other two, oblivious to their conversation about him. "Go to the 'Playground,'" he says.

Kirsh brushes him off. "I don't wanna go

to the playground," he says. Then Kirsh looks up to the boy in front of him. "Hey, John," he says. "You do that website and I'll do this one, and we can copy each other. What do you think?"

John pauses for a moment. "OK," he says finally.

The students continue to work, moving from Web site to Web site jotting down notes. Kirsh figures out how to print and his pages come spilling out of the Hewlett-Packard laser printer in the back of the room.

Often, those details include specific names of items, words on pages, etc.

Here are some images:

- *Facial tissue v. Kleenex.*
- *A rap CD v. Limp Bizkit's "Chocolate Starfish and the Hot Dog Flavored Water."*
- *A poisonous snake v. a black mamba.*
- *An expensive watch v. a Rolex.*
- *A soda v. Diet Coke.*
- *A thick book v. Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.*

Get the idea?

The old man in the bar is good. It incorporates some description (the first D), but it lacks an ability to really bring us in to the scene. That's where details come in.

Try the same scene this way:

A 72 year old wearing a worn John Deere cap sits quietly in Mickey's Pub, a half-smoked Winston dangling from his lips and a half-empty Budweiser in front of him. "Monday Night Football" airs on mute on the old Sony above the counter.

See how the second example brings you in? Details can do that for readers. If our big concern is that we need to show rather than tell, often these details can

show more than a more general description.

Consider this description:

A light-brown dog with shaggy hair that stands about three feet high and weighs nearly 80 pounds.

And this:

A golden retriever.

It's the same dog, but which one can you picture better in your head? This example actually brings up the other benefit of details (besides their ability to show better than tell)—conciseness. The first example contained 17 words; the second used three. Which one was a more efficient use of space?

In journalism, space is at a premium. We have a finite amount of room to fit the news that our readers need to know. On the other hand, in order for our readers to actually access that information, we have to incorporate gold coins, which take more space. Specific details can help you find a happy medium.

Dialogue

A quote happens when you ask a source a question and that source answers

OBSERVATIONS AREN'T YET STORIES

They're just random words on a page. But they're a start. Look at how the observations from pages 40 and 41 could lead to some pretty decent story ideas.

1. The problems with how students choose to use their study hall time. Is this schoolwide program a waste of time?
2. The rules governing Internet usage. Who makes the rules? Why are they there in the first place?
3. Inadequate technology and software throughout the school. Should the school be more consistent in the way it sets up labs? What should be available? Who will pay for it?
4. How collaborative learning works or doesn't work within the school. Can some students just get by without trying very hard?
5. How schools monitor student computer usage. What is and is not acceptable and how will the school know what you're doing in the first place?
6. How the Internet helps or hinders the research process. Does the Internet have all the answers or are there other alternatives?
7. Dress code and how students get around the rules. How difficult is it for faculty to monitor and enforce?
8. How adept students are at using available technology. Are teachers able to keep up?

your question. Dialogue, on the other hand, is the words that a source says to other people and what those other people say back to the source. That's why we'll discuss getting good quotes in the next chapter (interviewing) and we'll discuss listening for dialogue here. Like description and detail, getting dialogue in your stories is just another form of observation.

In your English classes, you've probably learned the three basic ways you can find out about a character:

1. By what the character says and does.
2. By what others say about the character.
3. By what the author tells us about the character.

These three guidelines apply to journalistic writing as well. If we want our readers to see and understand the people we're writing about, we need to provide information that will help them under-

stand. The way a person speaks to others and the way those people speak back to him can say an awful lot about who that person is.

Let's say you're writing a story about a student who volunteers at a nursing home (larger topic: Why do students volunteer their time with no pay? What benefit do they receive?). You want to show readers how this person really cares about these elderly people and how he's really made some valuable connections. So you go to the nursing home on an evening when your source will be working (a good start, by the way) and you follow your source, notebook or tape recorder or both in hand, throughout the night.

Along the way, you notice some things. First, you watch how the elderly people start gravitating toward your source from the moment he walks in the door. They all have smiles on their faces (description). After a few pleasantries, your

STUDY GUIDE

Terms and Concepts

Gold coins — Places in writing where readers stop and take notice. These are often areas of detail, description and dialogue.

Description — A reporter's ability to use his senses— sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste — to provide information for a story.

Detail — Specific words that help to further describe something. Often this means using proper names for elements rather than just physical descriptions.

Dialogue — The words that a source says to other people and what those other people say back to the source.

**Practicing the Information
Gathering Technique of
Observation**

For this activity, you need a notebook, something to write with and 30 minutes of time.

Step 1: Find someplace to become a fly on the wall. In other words, find a spot where you have a lot to look at and a comfortable place to sit, preferably a place where people converge. Maybe it's a seat in the library, or perhaps you could go to a local park or coffee shop.

Step 2: For 30 minutes, jot down as many observations as you can while you sit in this location. Be aware of all of your senses—the way things smell, their sounds, the way things feel to the touch — not just the way they look. Listen for any snippets of dialogue that you may hear along the way. No detail is too small.

Step 3: Take your notes and try to put them in some sort of coherent essay (see example on Page 40 "Observation in Action").

Step 4: Look through your essay and try to determine if any story ideas emerge (see example on Page 42 "Observations Are Not Yet Stories").

Step 5: Save these notes for later use when you're looking for story ideas.