

Basic Column Writing 101 - a 'sort of' how it's done

If this column sucks, just wait till next week, pens Ted Brown



TED BROWN
Column

You know, I sometimes forget how long I've been writing this column.

I recently checked my files (around 2,000 columns) and realized I started writing here December of 1990.

It began with my Christmas column, and in January 1991 I was asked to continue, as Managing Editor Hartley Coles was retiring and incoming Managing Editor Robin Inscocoe asked me to take over his column space.

Yup, 28 years, give or take, (with one medical leave for minor surgery and a few months of sabbatical when I 'retired' from the Independent & Free Press), I've been writing this column pretty much every week.

I do love what I do, and I enjoy having total strangers come up to me to ask about The Sidekick, Hamish the dog, McDuff and Fergus our two rams, not to mention the Mustang, the F150 and the L'il Red Rocket, and a host of other 'characters' who appear from time to time in this space.

And when I do run into readers out and about, there is one question that seems to be the most often asked.

"How do you come up with ideas for your column?"

That's a tough question to answer, as there is no pat answer.

I do however have a few ways to find inspiration or ideas.

When I was on the IFP staff, column ideas basically came to me - some ideas I picked up at events, perhaps something of interest that crossed my desk, or recognizing someone who gave beyond the call of duty.

Now that I'm not in the office, I still find things to write about.

I've learned that first and foremost, I don't fret about my column.

I usually sit down and write some sort of a lead - and if no good ideas come to mind within 15 minutes - I walk away.

I've learned that the human brain has a capacity to work in the background.

I can sit on the verandah for a bit and watch the world go by, while my mind is sorting through what I've just written. I understand longtime Toronto Star columnist Gary Lautens used to kick back and read something totally unrelated when he was 'blocked', allowing his brain to work in the background. Another Toronto Star columnist, Joe Slinger, said he read the sports section.

One way or another, it's a simple distraction that

allows our minds to process and organize thoughts in the deep recesses of our brains.

And I can honestly say it works.

I also keep a pen and paper nearby my bed, just in case an idea comes to me in the night.

Writing it down is a must. Do you have any idea how many GREAT column ideas have been totally forgotten by morning?

Another thing I've learned is to not over analyze my work.

I can spend hours working on what I could convince myself is a literary masterpiece, only to have no reaction or comments when it's published.

Yet I can peck out something that I've spent less than a half hour banging out on the laptop, and I receive a pile of emails.

You just never know. And finally, never try to second-guess your readers - it's impossible.

I believe it was Gary Lautens who suggested the best analogy of writing columns. He was an avid baseball fan, and suggested that writing a column was a bit like being the designated hitter (DH) on a major league baseball team.

Every time the DH walks out to the plate, he intends to hit a home run.

But it just isn't going to happen every time.

However, most importantly, if you don't hit it outta the park this week...

Well, remember, there's always next week.

- Ted Brown is a freelance writer for the IFP. He can be reached at tedbit@hotmail.com.

THE WAY WE WERE



EHS photo

A familiar Georgetown landmark since 1883, Berwick Hall was designed by Edward J. Lennox, who also designed Toronto's Old City Hall and Casa Loma. A good example of Queen Anne style architecture with a multi-pitched roofline, detailed brickwork and woodwork, it's associated with paper mill owner John R. Barber, and named after his mother's birthplace. The structure at 139 Main St. south is a listed cultural heritage property.

OPINION

New computer system may make election-rigging easier

To the editor:

We usually look at politicians when we hear of vote-rigging, but it seems that Elections Ontario's new online registration system is putting them in the frame as well.

I went online, as advised by Elections Ontario, to check my family's registrations, fully expecting that all would be well as for couple of decades we have always received our registration cards without fail.

I was totally floored to find that my wife's registration could not be found. I retried several times to be sure, and then got her to complete the online regis-

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tration process as there was no trace of her to be found.

A couple of days ago the Voter Information Cards dropped into our mailbox: One for me, one for our son and two, yes two, for my wife.

Both cards have the identical information on them, same name, same address, same electoral district and same polling station number. Only one thing differed, a discreet little 10-digit number (pre-

sumably the roll number).

If my wife was dishonest I suspect she could go and vote twice without being challenged. After all, everything would tally with her I.D. and the card is genuine.

Clearly the computer system failed to find her original entry on the electoral roll and happily allowed her to make a duplicate entry.

I wonder just how many others have had the same thing happen?

Andy Turnham

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