The P.I.T. (Aka, “The Point is This”)

Jim’s Notes on Newswriting

VOL 1 ISSUE NO. 1: INTRODUCING THE P.I.T.

My name is Jim, and I’m a journalist. I haven’t worked in the business since Dec. 31, 2013, when I retired, but I learned from walking away that once you're a reporter, you're always a reporter.

My working career spanned 38 years and ranged from my first job on a small daily newspaper in Upstate New York to desk editor in the Chicago bureau of one of the largest international news wire services. I’ve covered police, courts, school districts, zoning boards, colleges, high school sports, college sports, pro sports, politics, business, finance, you name it. I am dedicated to the proposition that a reporter can write about anything, given the chance to learn about the beat. It's not about being an expert. It's about being an observer and communicator.

Early in my career I had an opportunity to edit copy as well as write it, and from there my career went back and forth between reporting and editing. I've looked at news from both sides, writing it up and chopping it down, and I hope to share what I've learned about the process with you, the writers of the Prison Journalism Project.

I know that, in prison, you may have very limited access to books, computers, The Internet, television, radio. I will recommend things that some of you can attain and some of you cannot. At the very least, I will offer advice you can think about and perhaps apply to your writing. Even if all you have is a pencil and some paper or a notebook, we can start to develop your writing and reporting skills.

On the editing desk, The Pit was the seat where an editor wrote news flashes on breaking stories. It was a nerve-wracking business as you raced to interpret vague copy, write a sentence of the most important information in a news release (often hidden in the middle of 10 pages of blather), and publish the news ahead of all the other news organizations that were trying to beat you. We won't be so frenetic here in The P.I.T. The point is this: we will explore the habits and practices that will enable you to produce vital and compelling journalism.

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WRITING. REPORTING. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Much of the writing in the Prison Journalism Project is personal writing, pieces written from the writer's observation with opinion and reflection. Writing takes many forms, from poetry to essays, novels to short stories and movie scripts, legal briefs to seed catalogs. It's all writing. But when does it become reporting?
Writing becomes reporting when the writer:

- Presents a factual account, to the best of his knowledge, in telling a story.
- Checks his facts for accuracy, as best he can.
- Supports the facts presented with evidence of their veracity or verification from witnesses. That is to say, he does his research.
- Interviews witnesses or others with knowledge of the story being told.
- Strives to tell both sides of the story. Every story is like a Buffalo Nickel: it has heads and tails, and the reporter digs into both.
- Tells a story that has not yet been reported in other news outlets or finds relevant information that further develops a story that was previously reported. That's what makes it news.

A reporter does not write his opinion about a story. He does not tell one side of a story. He does not analyze what the story means, outside of giving the reader the necessary context to understand why a story is important, or of interest. This distinction is very blurred today, when most people get their news from Facebook or cable television outlets that present opinion and news in ways that make it hard to discern which is which. But quality newspapers and broadcast outlets are scrupulous in following the demands of news presentation and take very seriously their obligation to present fair and balanced reports. That includes correcting their errors.

Writing news is a unique discipline, and one that cannot be fully applied when writing essays, op-eds and other pieces for the Prison Journalism Project. But applying some basic news practices can give your writing an added dimension, a measure of authority and veracity. It’s the difference between an impassioned opinion piece and a balanced, measured examination of an issue backed up by facts, interviews and observation. Newswriting can be learned, but it takes practice, patience, commitment, and a little guidance, which we hope to provide here in The P.I.T.

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A reporter is a reader. She reads the news, she reads history, she reads novels, she reads poetry. Everything that constitutes communicating through the written word is of interest to a reporter. A good reporter has a broad overview of his world, what is happening in that world, and what has happened in the past. Read, every chance you get, if you want to be a writer, a reporter.

Reporters tend to have personal libraries, sometimes quite large libraries, containing the books that inform, enlighten and inspire them. But if you only have one book on your reporter’s shelf, it should be a dictionary.

In this Internet age, many readers out here just look up words online, and that’s good enough to find a spelling or a definition. But a good dictionary tells you so much more. The history of the word, its origins, various shades of meaning or definitions, related words, all can often be found in a good dictionary. The poet W.H. Auden once said the one book he would take to a desert island was his Oxford English Dictionary. The OED is in fact a multi-volume set, like an encyclopedia, and Auden read his set so much that it eventually fell apart.
News organizations often designate one specific dictionary for its writers and editors. For our purposes, a paperback edition of The American Heritage Dictionary is a good choice, but any dictionary from a major publisher will do.

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Jesse Vasquez’s PJP piece of Feb. 22, “The Hurdles of Reentry” (attached at end) was a fascinating look at the challenges of leaving prison. This was his first paragraph:

“Reentry after almost two decades isn’t easy especially when I went in as a 17-year-old juvenile and paroled as a 36-year-old man.”

It sets up his essay with the stark reality of the years he spent growing into a man behind bars.

So what would a news editor say about that opening? He might say, “What do you mean by reentry? After two decades of what? Went in where as a juvenile?”

When reading this piece on the PJP website, the context is pretty clear to the reader. This guy is reentering society after years of incarceration. But in newswriting we have to make the context clear at the outset, perhaps like this:

“Reentry into civil society after almost two decades in prison isn’t easy, especially when I went in as a 17-year-old juvenile and paroled as a 36-year-old man.”

To most readers outside, “reentry” brings to mind the space shuttle hurtling back to Earth. We can’t assume that the casual reader will instantly think “leaving prison” when reading that word. We want to make very clear what we are reporting straight up in the first paragraph.

I’m not criticizing Jesse’s piece, which I thought was very interesting. I’m editing. And reporters soon learn that’s part of the process of doing journalism.

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Reporting the news is a process steeped in discussion between reporters, editors, sources and others. So tell me what you think of, or what you want to learn from, The P.I.T. The point is this: we have a lot to teach each other, and it’s a team effort. (You can send letters to the attention of Jim at the PJP address)

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Below is the first half of Jesse’s Feb. 22 piece on reentering society. Notice how he sets up his story with three short paragraphs at the top, then illustrates the difficulties he faced with a fascinating anecdote about snatching food off his prison mates’ plates. I had no idea this was common in prison, and opened up the theme of the story to me very effectively. Read the story and think about how he organized the piece and used colorful, specific detail to bring his theme alive.
Reentry after almost two decades isn’t easy especially when I went in as a 17-year-old juvenile and paroled as a 36-year-old man.

I hadn’t thought much about the social, technological and economic gaps I would encounter until I had to face them in May of 2019.

During my first month out, I learned just how much I had missed and how much I needed to learn and grow in order to fit in.

In prison, I had grown accustomed to socializing with only men, and eventually transgender individuals. I developed habits that were perfectly normal in prison such as taking food off of my friends’ trays in the dining hall.

About three months after I got out, I remember taking one of those classy finger foods on a cracker off of an acquaintance’s plate at a gathering for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. I had done it without thinking about it, but I knew I had made a faux pas when people around me frowned and gave me an awkward smile. I didn’t realize that was something you don’t do in public.

In the past year and a half, I have worked with reentry programs providing transitional and emergency housing for formerly incarcerated individuals, and I have learned that reentry is as nuanced as the hues of colors.

Some of the challenges of reentry are obvious: employment is hard to get because references and resumes are nonexistent or have decade-long gaps. Renting, leasing or buying a car or property is complicated because long-term offenders have little or no credit history. Family reunions, socializing and networking is limited by parole conditions that restrict movement to a 50-mile radius without a travel pass.

Then there are the individuals’ personal limitations and preferences. After decades of incarceration, some people parole with physical disabilities, allergies and mental barriers. Some individuals find it hard to work in supermarkets because of the crowds. Others experience anxiety in close quarters, and some experience motion sickness because they haven’t been in a car for decades.

I didn’t know I needed glasses until I went to get my license for the first time. When I failed the eye exam, I told the DMV lady, “You better double check that line. I know what I saw.” She came right back at me. “You better have your eyes checked because you were nowhere near the alphabet,” she said.
When I had my eye examined, the doctor told me that my poor long-distance vision could be because my muscles in the area atrophied. I had been confined to close quarters and short distances for so long that I had developed depth-perception issues.

While working with reentry projects I’ve noticed that they often take a cookie cutter “best-practices” approach. Most programs are designed and implemented around grant objectives, and the services provided to the individual have to check off some, if not all, of the boxes.

The downside to that approach is that there are few case managers who go the extra mile to tailor a program to fit the needs of the individual.

For example, the needs of a person, who had been incarcerated for three to four decades is different than a younger person’s. They have “aged out of crime” as politicians say, but they have also aged out of the workforce and have become a liability to employers. Eighty-four-year-old formerly incarcerated individuals aren’t a high hit on LinkedIn.

Yet they are subject to the same rule that the board of prison terms in California has set. In order to discharge from parole, one has to demonstrate permanent housing, consistent employment and stable social and familial relations.