Welcome to PJP’s "The Mighty Pen," a newsletter with writing and reporting tips for incarcerated writers looking to develop journalistic skills and get published in PJP and elsewhere. My name is Raz. I’m a journalist and a journalism educator, who has taught college courses in prison. I’ve been working with writers inside for seven years now, and I’m pleased to be your coach via this new instructional newsletter, which we think is a first of its kind.

I aim to send this newsletter twice a month. Every issue will include a mix of five topics: 1) journalism basics, 2) reporting tools, 3) how to write like a journalist, 4) a "Try this!" section in which I suggest a little reporting or writing exercise, 5) an "Ask Raz!" section in which I answer your journalism-related questions. So here we go:

**JOURNALISM BASICS: FACT CHECKING**

All humans tell stories. Journalists are not unique in that regard. What separates them from everyone else, though, is that they strive to be accurate, and they verify every bit of information that they pass on to their readers. They are also transparent about who or where they got the information from, and what is opinion versus a verified fact.

If you write in your story that they served chicken and fries for lunch on Thursday, you have to make sure first that they did indeed serve chicken, that they did indeed serve fries, that they served them for lunch and not for dinner, and that it was indeed a Thursday. Fact-check every single piece of information you put into your story. If you can’t verify a piece of info, don’t put it into your story.

**REPORTING TIPS: INTERVIEW 101**

Much of the information that journalists put in their stories comes from interviews — that is, from the journalist sitting down with someone and asking them a lot of questions about what they saw, what they heard, what they experienced, and what they think. Regardless of the topic you’re working on, you always want to ask the person you are interviewing for the following info: 1) full name, 2) date of birth (so that you know their age), 3) whether they’re ok with having their name mentioned in the story.

A story that includes more than one voice is better than a story that only includes your voice because it tells readers that you’re writing about something that a lot of people care about. Interview people, include their words in your story, and identify them as clearly as possible. That usually means mentioning
their full name and their age. In some stories, it might make sense to mention race or length of incarceration.

If, however, they don't want to have their name in the story (because they're afraid of how some people will react to what they said), ask if they're ok with having other identifying information included in the text, such as just their first name, or their initials, or a pseudonym. Anything that makes this person more real in the mind of the reader helps with the credibility of your story.

TIPS ON WRITING

When you've interviewed someone and you want to include what they said in your story, you have two ways of doing that: 1) Using direct quotes, 2) paraphrasing their words. Using a direct quote means putting into your story the exact words that your interviewee uttered. You're not changing anything; you're just adding the necessary punctuation. Direct quotes must be enclosed in quotation marks. ("Like this.")

TRY THIS!

Walk around your facility. What are the signs of summer? Look, listen, smell, touch. Make a list of 10 things that you didn't see in the fall, winter and spring but are indicative of seasonal change. What is on the list that is particular to a prison environment? Is there something that you think would surprise an outside reader? Could it be further developed into an actual story? Write it up and submit it to PJP.

ASK RAZ!

What do you wanna know about journalism? Send a JPay message to PJP, Attn: Coach Raz, and I'll do my best to answer it in future issues of The Mighty Pen.

This is it for today. I hope you found it useful. If you know other writers who would like to receive this newsletter, send us their name and prison ID, so we can add them to our JPay. You can also send a message with your mailing address to request our Introduction to Journalism handout.

By the way, have you figured out why this newsletter is called "The Mighty Pen?" It's a reference to the saying "The pen is mightier than the sword."

Best,
Raz