Welcome to the second issue of 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.

In the last issue, I talked about the importance of verifying all the information you put into your story, what to ask every person you interview, and how to include someone else's words into your story. I also offered a quick reporting exercise about noticing "the signs of summer" in prison.

JOURNALISM BASICS: ATTRIBUTION

As I explained last time, journalists must be transparent about who or where they got the information from. That means that whenever you make a statement in your story that would make someone ask "Says who?" you should include the source too. For example, when you write something like, "In the New York prison system, 44 incarcerated individuals have died of COVID-19 as of June 14," you can easily imagine your readers asking, "Says who? Where does this number come from? How do I know it's accurate?" You have to give them the source. So you write: "In the New York prison system, 44 incarcerated individuals have died of COVID-19 as of June 14, according to the COVID Prison Project."

This "according to X" part is called the "attribution." Attribute all numerical data that you use in your story, all direct quotes, all controversial statements, all accusations. Use "according to X" or "X said." Your source might be an organization (example above), or a person ("This is the longest time this facility has been in lockdown since 1990,' Smith said"), or a document ("Starting on July 1, all prices will go up by 10%, according to the June 10 'Updated FCI Commissary List'").

If you got your information from a publication (book, magazine, video, podcast, news website, etc.), attribute it by listing the publication name and the year when it came out (or the month, if it came out in the past 12 months). Example: “According to a 2015 New York Times analysis of abortion-related legislation...”

You do not have to attribute information that everybody knows or that can be very easily verified by most people. Examples: "World War II started in 1939", or "In 2022, the president of the United States is Joe Biden." But, when in doubt whether to attribute or not, err on the side of attributing.
REPORTING TIPS

Story ideas come from everywhere: a conversation with someone, something you overhear, something you read on a poster, something that happens to you or to someone you know, something you remember, something you are just curious about, and so on.

Here’s an example: Let’s say you are chatting with a cellie one morning. And he’s telling you, “Man, I couldn't sleep all night. I got allergies to mold or dust or something, but when it gets hot like this my throat hurts, I sneeze all the time, my nose is running, and I’m miserable for most of the day and night!” You tell him you’re sorry to hear that, and then the two of you talk about how hard it is to get any treatment for smaller afflictions (as in, not life and death) in prison. And then it dawns on you: this would be a good story to report and write!

TRY THIS!

So try this: ask a bunch of people if they have allergies, and, if they do, how they deal with them in prison. Collect at least five stories. What do these stories have in common? Where do they differ? Write up an article based on them and submit it to PJP.

WRITING TIPS

Nobody likes to read long paragraphs that look like uninterrupted chunks of text. Break up your story into paragraphs (like we did with this email). Leave a space between the paragraphs. One paragraph, one idea, one person quoted or paraphrased.

Don’t use any exclamation points at the end of your sentences. Your readers will generally not appreciate being shouted at in writing.

ASK RAZ!

What do you wanna know about journalism? Send a JPay message to PJP, Attn: Coach Raz, and we’ll do our 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.

Best,
Raz and PJP Editors