Welcome to the fourth 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.

JOURNALISM BASICS: ANECDOTES

An "anecdote" is a story-within-a-story. In other words, it's a small story that you fit into your bigger story, usually in order to give the reader an example of the things you're discussing in your article.

For example, say an old lady just died, and you are writing a profile of her. You write, “By all accounts, she was one fierce woman.” And then you tell a mini-story that exemplifies her fierceness: a long time ago, when a big shot from the capital came to her small Hungarian town and berated the residents for not harvesting enough grain, she farted loudly in the middle of his rant and stared defiantly at him. People tried hard not to burst into laughter. The guy was so flustered that he stopped talking and was soon on his way back to the capital.

Now the reader really gets what you mean when you say she was fearless!

REPORTING TIPS: HOW TO FIND THE ANECDOTE

Say you are interviewing that old lady's grandson. He tells you that she was a fierce lady. No one could intimidate her. Ask the grandson if he can remember any stories about specific situations in which his grandmother showed her fearlessness. He starts laughing and says, "Oh, yes! The time when she farted in the middle of the Big Guy's speech! My granddad must have told us that story 100 times!" And then he tells you the story.

As soon as you hear, “The time when she farted in the middle of the Big Guy's speech,” you know that this will make for a great little anecdote in your story. So you make sure you learn exactly what happened, and you don't forget to ask for plenty of details: When exactly did this happen? How old was she at the time? Where in Hungary was this? Who else was there? What did she later say about the incident? etc. When you sit down to write the anecdote, you want to have the luxury of choosing which details to use.

So when you interview someone, don't just ask them to share with you their ideas and opinions; also ask them to tell you stories that are memorable. They can be funny or sad or just plain weird. Journalism thrives on real stories about real people.
WRITING TIPS
The anecdote should not feel to the reader like it's coming out of nowhere. It should have a clear, logical connection to the previous paragraphs. Feel free to use transition words, such as "for example," to signal that you are about to go into an anecdote.

The anecdote should take one or two paragraphs. It should be very readable. It should get to the main point quickly and make a strong impression on the reader. Keep your sentences tight. Don't ramble. You can include a quote or two, but make sure they are good, punchy quotes that carry the mini-story forward.

TRY THIS!
Interview three incarcerated people about one of their grandparents. Collect three anecdotes about a remarkable grandmother or grandfather. Write up each one in one or two paragraphs for a maximum of 200 words. Give them to someone else to read. Are the anecdotes interesting? Is the reader left wanting more details?

ASK RAZ!
Mr. Christopher asks: "How does one scale down a story? Some of us are comprehensive in our thinking but find it difficult to fit completeness into 1,000 words. Isn't long-form better journalism? How can bias and limited perspective be avoided when cutting down length? If a viewpoint or fact is omitted, those that remain can seem amplified or preferred."

I'm afraid there's no good answer to this question. Yes, a longer story means you have room for more perspectives. And more perspectives mean you can do a better job of challenging stereotypes. But, if no one reads your story because it's too long, what use is all that great stuff you put in there? And unfortunately, for any number of reasons that have to do with everyday life, considerably fewer people read long-form journalism than journalism that is less than 1,000-words. That can't be helped. What you can do is to ruthlessly edit your story (or have someone else do it) and cut away everything that is unnecessary, repetitive, rant-y or there just to show off your command of language. Saying a lot with a few words is one of the main skills of a good journalist.

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