Welcome to the fifth issue of PJP's "The Mighty Pen," an educational newsletter with writing and reporting tips for incarcerated writers looking to develop journalistic skills and get published in PJP and elsewhere.

**JOURNALISM BASICS: JOURNALISM GENRES**

There are several kinds of journalistic stories you might, at some point, be interested in writing. First, there’s the simplest of them all: the news story. Observe, or learn about, something important that happened recently and then tell people who, what, when, where, why and how. A bigger story that explains an issue (say, how COVID has changed the way people socialize in prison) or tells someone's story is called a feature story. A stand-alone interview with someone is called a Q&A. And finally, an opinion piece, in which you offer your perspective based on a set of facts, is called an op-ed.

Before you start working on a story, decide what kind of story it’ll be. Different kinds of stories come with different reporting and writing priorities. If you are proposing a story to an editor, it helps to let them know what kind of story you’re thinking of.

**REPORTING TIPS: NOTE-TAKING**

When you interview someone, you will want to record as much of what they say as possible in a notebook. Write down the hard facts that the interviewee is giving you, as well as things they say that make you think, "Now that's a good quote that I might wanna use in my story!"

It would be a good idea for you to develop your own style of shorthand. You might want to adopt some obvious symbols and acronyms (such as "@" for "at," or "w/" for "with," or "Y" for "yard"). Make sure you know which notes pertain to which story and to which interviewee. Label everything accordingly. Write fast but write legibly. As soon as you’re done with the interview, sit down somewhere and fill in your notes while your memory is still fresh.

**TRY THIS!**

Ask a buddy to tell you a story and practice taking notes. Get used to alternating between making eye contact with the other person and looking at your writing. Practice your shorthand. Then, start asking
questions in the middle of the story. Underline important information. Note down the interviewee’s body language when they say something important. (Did they smile or frown or shrug or tear up?)

WRITING TIPS: EDITING

Once you’re done writing a story, take it through at least four rounds of careful editing, as follows:

1) Edit for facts: Does my story have all the information it needs to have, or might it leave the reader wondering about something? 2) Fact-check everything again: every single assertion you made and every detail you included. 3) Edit for readability: Does the story flow smoothly and logically? Are there any distractions, ambiguities or repetitions in it? 4) Edit for language: Am I using simple, non-pretentious words? Am I using more words than I need to?

ASK RAZ!

Mr. Felix wants to know what to do when the publication that has accepted your story asks you to prove some of your assertions in the absence of a paper trail (which is difficult to obtain in prison, if it even exists). If you can’t get documentation, see if you can interview someone who can confirm the info. Clearly explain what in your story is proven fact, what is fact you know to be true but can’t verify, and what is opinion. Sometimes, you just won’t be able to satisfy an editor’s demand for fact-checking. Consider submitting your story elsewhere. PJP, for example, has a separate "Prison Report" section for reports without official comments.

What do you wanna know about journalism? Send a JPay message to PJP, Attn: Coach Raz, and we’ll try to answer it in The Mighty Pen.

If you know other writers who would like to receive this newsletter, send us their name and prison ID.

Best,
Raz & PJP Editors