

# Preface

This is the eleventh edition of *News Reporting and Writing* and though much has changed in the classroom and in the media since the first edition, the fundamentals remain, as does the purpose of *NRW*:

1. To teach the skills necessary for a variety of media work.
2. To provide the background knowledge essential to accurate and informed reporting and writing.
3. To suggest the values that direct the practice of journalism.

Learning to report accurately and to write precisely and vigorously is no simple task. Digging through the clusters of events and the torrent of verbiage to find useful, relevant information and then capturing these nuggets in purposeful language require mastery of a demanding discipline.

This may seem a daunting task. Don't worry. The guidelines in *NRW* provide ample help. They have shown the way for successful news writers over the years. Here are some of the journalists who will help you on your way:

**Guides** We will accompany a young reporter as she conducts her first interview, and we will watch an experienced reporter dig through court records to reveal a shameful part of our past.

We will look over the shoulder of a reporter as she makes her way over the Internet for the background essential to her story. We will venture into newsrooms where multimedia news workers write for online, broadcast and print media.

We will sit in the press box with reporters covering high school football and major league baseball games. We will join a police reporter as she races to cover a triple murder.

We will watch a reporter labor over his story until “little beads of blood form on his forehead,” as Red Smith described the agony of the journalist's search for the words that will accurately portray the event. And we will share in the reporter's joy when the story is finished and is given a byline and placed on the front page or makes the evening network newscast.

We will stand at the side of newsletter and magazine writers, alternative and special-interest journalists, and we will watch how a news release is prepared.

In other words, we will be concerned with the processes of reporting and writing—how reporters gather information from sources and from their observations, how they verify the material, and how they put it together in news stories and features.

The journalists we will be watching work for small newspapers in Iowa, South Dakota and Oregon, and they are on the staffs of metropolitan dailies in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. Some serve online news services. One reporter writes for a network television station in New York; another covers local events for a television station in San Francisco. We will see how general assignment reporters and the men and women assigned to cover politics, sports, business, the police, city hall, education and other beats do their jobs.

## The Basics

Whether covering a college basketball game, writing an obituary or reporting the president's State of the Union address, the journalist follows the same basic process. The sports reporter, the entertainment writer, the general assignment reporter in a town of 25,000 and the Associated Press's White House correspondent all share a way of thinking and a similar set of techniques that have guided journalists through the years, whatever the changes in technology.

In their reporting, journalists seek out the new, the significant, the material they decide will inform their readers, viewers and listeners. And they find a suitable form for this information in a story that satisfies the public's need to know.

The journalists we will be following not only show a mastery of the basics. We will see that they share an ethic that directs and gives meaning to their work.

## The Morality of Journalism

### Power of Knowing

"Knowledge will govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both."

—James Madison

The literary critic Northrop Frye could have been describing journalistic morality: "The persistence of keeping the mind in a state of disciplined sanity, the courage of facing results that may deny or contradict everything that one had hoped to achieve—these are obviously moral qualities, if the phrase means anything at all."

James O. Freedman, former president of Dartmouth, might have been speaking of the practice of journalism when he described his experience as a law clerk to Thurgood Marshall: "In that year, I learned from a great advocate that law must be practiced not only with craft and passion but also with a tenacious commitment to ideals."

Mary McGrory, the Washington columnist, described an aspect of how journalists approach their work in comments she made after interviewing 45 journalists who had applied for Nieman Fellowships at Harvard. She said she found these journalists to have a "great deal of commitment and compassion." Most had a trait in common, she said: "They knew a great deal about what they were doing. They did not think it enough."

McGrory was a role model for generations of journalists. At a time when too many reporters seem umbilically attached to their computers and rarely venture from their office chairs, McGrory prided herself on being a shoe-leather journalist.

"I have to see," she said. "I have to hear. I don't want anyone doing my listening or watching for me."

McGrory understood the morality of journalism. “No great men call me,” she said. “You know who calls me? Losers. I am their mark. If you want to abolish lead mines. If you want to save children from abuse or stupid laws or thickheaded judges, you have my telephone number.”

McGrory’s spirit animates this edition, as does the work of the reporters whose work I have borrowed to provide instructional material . . . reporters like Clifford Levy, whose series on the abuse of the mentally ill won a Pulitzer Prize. “Of all the praise I got for the series, the most meaningful was from other reporters at the paper (*The New York Times*) who said it made them proud to work there because it was a classic case of looking out for those who can’t look out for themselves.”

The journalists I know—my former colleagues and students, from whom I have shamelessly taken time and borrowed ideas—would shrink at being described as moralists. Yet they consider their work to have a large moral component. Most of them worry about the abuse of power.

**Adversary Journalism** Although adversary journalism is often criticized and sometimes ignored, it is as old as the Republic. Today’s journalists are descended from a press described by the historian Robert A. Ruthland as “obstreperous newspapers (that) signalled the rise of a new kind of journalism in America that would not truckle long to any officialdom.”

The journalist knows that democracy is healthiest when the public is informed about the activities of captains of industry and chieftains in public office. Only with adequate information can people check those in power. Jack Fuller of the *Chicago Tribune* put this simply: “To me, the central purpose of journalism is to tell the truth so that people will have the information to be sovereign.”

Walt Whitman, journalist and poet, described the fragility of democracy and its source of strength this way: “There is no week nor day nor hour when tyranny may not enter upon this country, if the people lose their supreme confidence in themselves—and lose their roughness and spirit of defiance.”

Confident, rough and defiant. An apt description of the journalist at work—but also characteristics that have aroused anger and animosity. In its role as watchdog for the public, the press has been relentlessly scrutinized and sometimes attacked for its revelations. Journalists understand that the path of the truth teller is not always smooth, that people are sometimes disturbed by what the journalist tells them.

This eleventh edition is offered to students with a commitment to and a belief in the traditional role of the press as a means of enabling people to improve their lot and to govern themselves intelligently. *News Reporting and Writing* takes seriously the observation in the Book of Proverbs: “The instruments of both life and death are contained within the power of the tongue.”

## Public Service Journalism

The kind of journalism that underlies this textbook can be described as public service journalism, a journalism that meets the needs of people by supplying them with the information essential to rational decision making. Public

service journalism has a long and glorious history. It has attracted writers like Charles Dickens, whose crusading newspaper *Household Words* carried stories that revealed his indignation at the indecencies visited on the young, the poor and the powerless—themes current today.

Dickens visited orphanages, saw for himself the conditions under which homeless women lived. He walked the streets teeming with the uneducated young. He described what he saw.

Dickens said his ambition as an editor was that his newspaper “be admitted into many homes with confidence and affection,” and it was. His biographer says the result of Dickens’ revelations was a “huge and steadily growing audience ranging in both directions from the middle and upper middle classes.”

Today’s journalists are worthy inheritors of this tradition of public service journalism, and we will be looking at their work. We’ll watch a reporter handle a news release from angry parents who charge the local schools with exposing students to racist books.

Journalism intends to entertain us as well as to inform us, and we will also follow reporters as they show us the zany side of life. We’ll eavesdrop on a truck-diner waitress as she trades quips and barbs with her burly customers.

## Journalism’s Tradition

Journalism has always had its down periods, and there has been no shortage of nostrums offered for a quick cure. Its survival, however, has rested on the bedrock of its tradition. Albert Camus, the French journalist and author, was sustained by that sense of his calling during the Nazi occupation of France when he wrote from the underground. Accepting the Nobel Prize for literature, Camus said, “Whatever our personal frailties may be, the nobility of our calling will always be rooted in two commitments difficult to observe: refusal to lie about what we know and resistance to oppression.”

Journalism “is something more than a craft, something other than an industry, something between an art and a ministry,” says Wickham Steed, an editor of *The Times* of London. “Journalists proper are unofficial public servants whose purpose is to serve the community.”

**Mentor** My model for this amalgam of artist, sentry, public servant and town crier is Ralph M. Blagden, who taught a generation of journalists their duty and introduced them to the power and splendor of their native language. Ralph’s classrooms were the newsrooms of newspapers from New Hampshire to California, where he worked as reporter and editor.

Ralph was my competitor as a state capitol correspondent, and never was there such a mismatch. As a beginning reporter, I reported what people said and did and stopped there. Ralph generously took the youngster in tow and showed him that a good reporter never settles for the surface of the news, that the compelling commandment of the journalist is to dig. He refused to make reporting divisible: All good reporting is investigative reporting, he insisted.

Long before investigative reporting became the fashion, Ralph was digging out documents and records to disclose truths. His journalism was in the tradition of Joseph Pulitzer and that publisher's crusading editor, O.K. Bovard. Those of us who were fortunate to work with Ralph feel ourselves to be members of a journalistic family whose roots are embedded in a noble tradition.

Benjamin C. Bradlee, who directed *The Washington Post* Watergate investigation that led to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, recalls the first story he wrote for Blagden when he was a young reporter.

"It had to do with the post-war housing mess," Bradlee said, "and he made me rewrite it 16 times. I've never done that to a reporter, but I suspect I should have. He had a great dollop of righteous indignation, which I learned to admire enormously.

"And of course he wrote with style and punch and clarity."

Bradlee says this of Blagden:

Ralph taught me to be dissatisfied with answers and to be exhaustive in questions. He taught me to stand up against powers that be. He taught me to spot bullies and resist them. He taught me about patience and round-the-clock work. He taught me about ideas and freedom and rights—all of this with his own mixture of wit and sarcasm and articulate grace. He could also throw a stone farther than I could, which annoys me to this day.

I recall the first story I covered with Ralph. He had heard that patients in a state hospital for the mentally ill were being mistreated. Some had mysteriously died. We interviewed doctors, nurses, attendants and former patients, and we walked through the wards and corridors of the institution. I learned that secondhand accounts are just a starting point, that direct observation and other techniques of verification are essential, and when we wrote the story I learned the power of the simple declarative sentence. I also learned that journalists can be useful members of society, for after the story appeared and both of us had moved on, the state built a modern hospital to replace that aging snake pit.

## New to the Eleventh Edition

This edition is accompanied by four free online supplements. You can find them at [www.mhhe.com/mencher11](http://www.mhhe.com/mencher11).

1. *The Student Workbook*: Now online and in an interactive format. Each chapter begins with "Check It," a section of writing exercises and journalism quizzes with suggested stories and answers to the quizzes in pop-up boxes so that students can check their work. Also, each chapter offers reporting and writing exercises and assignments on such current topics as student cheating, anorexia, the decline of civility and increasing juvenile crime. (Mencher)
2. *NRW Plus*: Now online and interactive, *NRW Plus* contains entire stories accompanied by the comments from the reporters who wrote them; interactive, self-teaching exercises; and audio and video clips. (Mencher)
3. *Brush Up*: Now online and interactive, *Brush Up* offers basic instruction in language use and mathematics. Self-teaching exercises relieve instructors of

the onerous task of teaching grammar, punctuation, style, percentages, fractions, averages and rates—all essential knowledge for the journalist in training. (Mencher and Wendy P. Shilton)

4. *New Reporting Simulation: A Fire Scenario*: Developed by Columbia University, this interactive simulation puts students on the scene of a five-alarm fire, as it rages late at night in a high-rise apartment in Freeport, a fictional Midwest city. Students act the role of the reporter on the police beat and are given a two-hour deadline to write the story. To access this interactive simulation:
  - A. Go to the URL [http://cero.columbia.edu/full/melvin\\_mencher.html](http://cero.columbia.edu/full/melvin_mencher.html)
  - B. Click on “News Reporting Simulation: A Fire Scenario.”
  - C. Click on “Click here to begin” in the next browser.
  - D. Click on the link “Unregistered users of Columbia Educational Resources Online” below “Non-Columbia User.”
  - E. On the next screen, enter your information in the form to register for a 60-day free trial subscription to Columbia Educational Resources online. Click the “Submit” button to send your information.
  - F. You will receive an e-mail confirmation from Columbia University Digital Knowledge Venture with your username and password.
  - G. You may use your username and password provided in the e-mail to access the simulation exercise, available at [http://cero.columbia.edu/full/melvin\\_mencher.html](http://cero.columbia.edu/full/melvin_mencher.html)
  - H. Follow steps B and C to get to the login screen.
    - I. Click on “Registered Users of Columbia Educational Resources Online” and enter your username and password provided in the e-mail to access *A Fire Scenario*.

(Mencher and John V. Pavlik)

## Instructor Resources

The instructor’s manual is available online at [www.mhhe.com/mencher11](http://www.mhhe.com/mencher11) and contains sample stories for the *Workbook* and a wealth of anecdotes and incidents that instructors can use in class lectures, as well as many useful pedagogical aids. (Mencher)

## Also Available

*Reporter’s Checklist and Notebook*, a handy guide to handling beats and covering a variety of stories. Checklists for 15 story types are included, as is “Useful Math for Reporters.” Sold independently. (Mencher)