

DEVELOPING GREAT STORIES

Traditional Story Development:

Writers produce defective copy, which comes in late

Report → Stall → Struggle with Lead → Write → Flip through Notebook
Feverishly → Write → Turn in copy late and too long when editor insists

Editors fix writers' defective copy

Badger Writer → Receive copy → Dismiss writer → Read story → Sigh in
disappointment → Decide whether to fix or kill (story) → Rewrite the lead
→ Move paragraphs around → Hurriedly rewrite (and get something wrong)
→ Turn in story.

The Coaching Approach:

1. Idea – Editor discusses Story Idea with writer and possible sources →
2. Reporting – Writer investigates story, alert to unexpected directions →
3. Organize – Editor debriefs Writer, and they discuss focus of story, significance,
major elements of story, and length →
4. Draft – Writer drafts story and revises/tunes, discusses with editor when
uncertain
5. Revising – Writer fine tunes story.
6. Completion – Editor approves story.

Comparison of Approaches:

FIXING

1. Improves Copy
2. Deals with NOW
3. Done quickly
4. Corrects errors
5. Focuses on story

COACHING

1. Improves Writers
2. Deals with FUTURE
3. Done gradually
4. Changes habits.
5. Focuses on writer

Steps in Story Development

*Thinking → Focusing → Reporting → Thinking → Reporting →
Organizing/Focusing → Drafting → Thinking → Revising*

1. IDEAS

- a. Ask sources for ideas
- b. Look for a story everywhere – sense of wonder and curiosity
- c. Brainstorm between editors and writers
- d. Writer: Make the idea “yours” by visualizing yourself in it
- e. Don’t just “take orders”
- f. Lean against prevailing winds.

2. REPORTING

- a. Don’t just “round up the usual suspects”
- b. Mine the archives
- c. Find the actors, not just the commentators and leaders
- d. Ask “green light” questions.
- e. LISTEN, DON’T TALK.
- f. Use a tape recorder, but don’t rely on. Pretend it’s not there. NEVER transcribe. Use only when you have focused to get quotes complete.
- g. Try out ideas/analysis on sources
- h. Write down EVERYTHING. If it’s not in your notebook, you don’t have it. You won’t get the detail in your story if you don’t get it in your notebook
- i. Take notes beyond what people say – clothes, décor, environment, distractions, episodes, anything that might be relevant, funny, revealing
- j. Capture dialog, not just quotes
- k. Annotate your notebook – stars, circles for important things
- l. Listen, take notes, formulate questions – all at the same time.
- m. Don’t interrupt unless time is short or interviewee is way off course
- n. Think about illustration – team up with photographer/artist
- o. Consider several possible themes at once – don’t limit yourself too soon – and gather information for all. Watch for surprises.
- p. Follow up questions. Stay curious, stay thoroughly involved.
- q. Ask about motivation, detail (“what’s the dog’s name?”)
- r. SAVE TIME TO WRITE.

3. ORGANIZING/FOCUSING

- a. Don’t start by writing your lead.
- b. List the characters, not just the sources
- c. Identify best quotes, most interesting facts.
- d. Think about “facets” of story.
- e. Color code notes or other annotation re: “facets”. Mark up notebook.
- f. Debrief with editors, negotiate space. “Sell” your story, but listen too.
- g. ASK YOURSELF: What’s this about? What’s my point? What’s the effect of this? Why does this matter?
- h. Keep your audience in mind: Tell it to your roommate/mother/friend.

- i. “Kill your babies” – great stuff that’s off point, be prepared to let it go.
- j. From whose perspective is this story best told?

4. DRAFTING

- a. Put aside your notebook.
- b. DON’T get each sentence perfect before you go on to the next one. Including the lead.
- c. Dictate to the screen. Just let it fly – get it out there at top speed. Gag your internal critic. Lower your standards.
- d. Write notes to yourself IN CAPS SO YOU WON’T FORGET to delete it, but note what you need (quote, fact) from notes later. (The more complicated the story, the harder this is.)
- e. KISS – Keep it simple, stupid.
- f. Go as far as you possibly can before starting to revise.
- g. Write what you experience, not just what people say – but also keep yourself out of the story. “Take me there.” “Make me see.”
- h. Show, don’t tell. Detail can clutter a story, but “telling” detail tells the story.
- i. Trust your judgment that what moved you will move the reader.
- j. Simplicity is the best way to convey complexity.
- k. Be objective in thinking, be analytical in story.
- l. Steady advance. Each sentence leads to the next.
- m. Develop characters, suspense.

5. REVISING

- a. Fine-tune the lead (see “organize/focus”)
- b. Grammar, spelling, stylebook, tight sentences.
- c. “Kill the babies.” Get rid of tangents.
- d. Let it cool to get perspective.
- e. Be sure you have the lead right; test for multiple leads and endings.
- f. Read aloud (or at least move your lips).
- g. Make sure it flows logically and tells a coherent story. You want it to be a narrative, not just a string of paragraphs.
- h. Save something really compelling for the end. Reward your readers.
- i. BEGINNING . . . MIDDLE . . . END.

“File First, Procrastinate Later.” – Don Fry, Writing Coach

References: (1) Roy Peter Clark and Don Fry, *Coaching Writers: Editors and Reporters Working Together*. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992). (2) www.poynter.org -- Ongoing discussion of writing and editing (and lots of other topics).

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