

## TIPS ON WRITING ON DEADLINE (AND OFF)

1. Look for the single most revealing anecdote, quote, statistic, detail or fact. Really focus in on that. Don't wait till you're back at your desk.
2. Each story must have one dominant message or theme. Kurt Vonnegut: "Don't put anything in a story that does not reveal character or advance the action." Keep moving the story forward to its final meaning.
  - a. A sense of people, of place, of time, of drama.
  - b. Why should I care?
3. Ask the questions the reader will have, and then answer them. Think like a reader.
4. It's an experience, not a news item. Let your readers share the experience (but keep yourself out of it). Write with your heart and your mind, not your fingers. Make me see. Taste, touch, hear, smell. Make me smile, cry, think, imagine.
  - a. A beginning that captivates a reader, a middle that explains and enlightens, and ending that lingers in the reader's mind (as Chip Scanlan says) "like the reverberations of a gong."
  - b. Choose your voice. Don't just assemble facts and quotes. Write with authority. NOBODY knows more about this story than you do. So write it that way. Follow your values.
5. Draft a lot of leads, a dozen or more if that's what it takes. Just the first line or so. Do it quickly until you find the lead that focuses the story. Then develop that lead.
6. Now, outline the main points.
7. Draft a section without your notes. What you remember is probably the most important or most interesting material. Insert notes to yourself. Then go back and get the facts and quotes precisely correct.
8. Develop characters, not sources. Who are these people talking in your story? What motivates the people you are writing about?
9. Have an ending. Remember the experience, the emotion, the message, the theme? Close with it. Not a cliché. Not a benediction, usually. A twist, a thrust, a parry. An ending that rewards the reader for staying with you to the end.

References: Chip Scanlan, *Reporting and Writing Basics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Harcourt Brace); Donald Murray, *Writing to Deadline: The Journalist at Work* (Heinemann).

**WRITING FOR IMPACT:  
A TALE OF TWO LEADS**

(from Chip Scanlan)

A 28-year-old Queens woman was stabbed to death early yesterday morning outside her apartment house in Kew Gardens.

Neighbors who were awakened by her screams found the woman, Miss Catherine Genovese of 82070 Austin Street, shortly after 3 a.m. in front of the building three doors from her home.

-- *The New York Times*

The neighbors had grandstand seats for the slaying of Kitty Genovese. And yet, when the pretty, diminutive 28-year-old brunette called for help, she called in vain.

-- *New York Herald-Tribune*

## ON “FINDING” THE STORY

“I did this story the way I always work on deadline: I wandered and watched and listened and wrote down everything as I waited for the story to emerge. Until I figured out the what and the why, I had no way of knowing what details would prove important.

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“Once I figured out what the story was, I targeted my reporting to find details that would drive it home.”

-- David von Drehle, *The Washington Post*, on covering the funeral of Richard M. Nixon, 1994, in The Poynter Institute’s *Best Newspaper Writing: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Scrapbook*, edited by Roy Peter Clark and Christopher Scanlan (1998). Story filed about 90 minutes after the funeral ended. Winner: American Society of Newspaper Editors Award for Deadline Writing, 1995

### **Men of Steel are melting with age**

*[The Beginning]*

YORBA LINDA, Calif., April 27 – When last the nation saw them all together, they were men of steel and bristling crew cuts, titans of their time – which was a time of pragmatism and ice water in the veins.

How boldly they talked. How fearless they seemed. They spoke of fixing their enemies, of running over their own grandmothers if it would give them an edge. Their goals were the goals of giants: Control of a nation, victory in the nuclear age, strategic domination of the globe.

The titans of Nixon’s age gather again today, on an unseasonably cold and gray afternoon, and now they were white-haired or balding, their steel was rusting, their skin had begun to sag, their eyesight was failing. They were invited to contemplate where power leads.

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*[The ending]*

But none of that kept him from the leveling end that awaits even the most vigorous and clever wielders of power. The cannon boomed; the rifles popped; the polished wooden coffin sank into the wet ground. Chilled, the mourners hastened across the green grass to a gathering where canapes were served by uniformed staff. And though their smiles returned, the end of power lay before them, down the path, beneath the trees, under the ground.