Nieman Reports

April, 1950

READING, WRITING AND NEWSPAPERS

--- *A Special Issue* ---

devoted wholly to a discussion of the conditions that affect newspaper writing . . . twelve articles by the reporters and editors now Nieman Fellows at Harvard University.

With a Challenging Introduction

by Theodore Morrison

Director of 'English A' at Harvard and of the Breadloaf Writers Conference.

Nieman Reports is published by the Nieman Alumni Council, elected by former Nieman Fellows at Harvard University. It aims to provide a medium for discussion by newspapermen of problems common to their profession. Nine out of ten subscribers to Nieman Reports and very many of its contributors are not themselves former Nieman Fellows but share a belief in the purpose of the Nieman Foundation "to promote and elevate standards of journalism in the U. S."

Nieman Reports

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Reading, Writing and Newspapers

Writing is only one of the tools of journalism and not the one that is commonly rated highest by newspapermen. When they speak with proper respect of "a natural newspaperman," they are apt to have in mind other qualities, beginning perhaps with Kipling's "insatiable curiosity" and are as likely as not to forget even to mention that instinct that Philip Gibbs described as "a feeling for the quality of words." Gibbs was English and of a generation ago, and on both counts given to more concern with style than can be claimed for the current run of American news men.

Indeed it is a central criticism of the London *Economist's* recent appraisal of American journalism that it has no style. To discharge an American reporter on the ground of poor writing would be considered "irrelevant," they say. That is putting it pretty strong. It is characteristically American to care more for the matter than the manner and so more for facts than the form of presenting them. That is not to be deplored. Yet finally the effectiveness of the reporting is capped by the writing. Its quality may lift a good story to a great one or reduce it to run of the mill.

American newspaper writing at its best needs no defense from anyone. It is a lean economy of language that moves on active verbs in a simple structure that is effortless to read, and is given life, vigor and color by a sound ear for the needed word. But our great news services confess a good deal when they employ "readability" experts to show their staffs how to write sentences that make sense to the readers. One of the first troubles the experts diagnosed in news writing is what they aptly called "fog." That is, the writing gets in the way of its own meaning. Under the tutelage of the word doctors, our news services and some leading newspapers have been making progress toward the fundamentals of clear, concise and simple sentences that use words to mean something. It was high time. "Journalese" had earned a place of reproach in the language as a synonym for slovenly writing. This despite a notable list of writers developed from journalism, from Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Stephen Crane to Damon Runyon and Henry L. Mencken, and in the face also of distinguished contemporary writing by such newspapermen as Walter Lippman, Meyer Berger, James B. Reston, James Morgan, Lucien Price and Anne O'Hare McCormick, to name only a few. People very generally think of their articles, however, as individual exceptions to the quite undistinguished writing they expect in the bulk of their newspaper reading. And they are right.

The pressure of time in newspaper work has been too glibly assigned as the cause of bad writing. The late Presi-

Continued on back page

A READER UNBURDENS

And Comes Up With Some Sound Criticism

The head of Harvard's 'English A' and the Breadloaf Writers Conference poses the questions: what are the conditions of newspapering that cause bad writing, and what can be done about them?

By Theodore Morrison
Lecturer on English

I am a rank outsider to the newspaper business. By exposure to several groups of Nieman Fellows, a little of my innocence may have been rubbed off, but I remain an outsider, without any direct experience in the production of news. Anything of value that I may have to say about the project presented herewith will come from the very fact that I am an outsider, a totally unprofessional reader of a few newspapers and a somewhat more professional observer for the last six years of the copy offered to an informal seminar by volunteer groups of Nieman Fellows at Harvard.

The history of the in-and-out Nieman Fellows seminar in writing which I have conducted is incidental to the present project, but some readers of *Nieman Reports* may be interested to hear a word about it. In the fall of '44, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., had the idea that Nieman Fellows while at Harvard might well devote some study to the craft of writing. He and others of his vintage offered me the flattering but alarming privilege of presiding over a shop course. Besides Guthrie, Robert Bordner, William H. Clark, Edward Edstrom, Kendall Foss, Ben Holstrom, Nathan Robertson, Charles Wagner, and Houstoun Waring took part. I can remember that we considered magazine articles, editorials, short stories, and verse, with other kinds of copy. Undeniably the lucky excitement of this first seminar was the chance to hear a succession of chapters of Guthrie's novel, later published as *The Big Sky*. Guthrie's extraordinary talent for fiction, a talent as natural as water finding its level, has been widely recognized; he has permanently enriched the record of America in his novels. But I should like to pay him a tribute on another score, too, as a generous human being, interested not only in his own success but in the success of others, notably newspapermen. The Nieman Foundation exists "to elevate the standards of journalism." I don't know how one man can do more to accomplish this end than by watching out for ways to open gates and enlarge opportunities for younger men in the business in whom he has perceived talent and imagination.

In later years the fortunes of the seminar that began with Guthrie's generation have been variable. Once it petered out. It hasn't always been a seminar. Sometimes a few Nieman Fellows have joined my undergraduate course, and have not met as a separate group. Such was the case in '46-'47, another high point of productivity for Nieman Fellows who submitted themselves to my critical idiosyncrasies. Out of that Nieman generation came William McDougall's two volumes, *Six Bells off Java* and *By Eastern Windows,* recounting his escapes and imprisonments as a correspondent, and Henry Hornsby's novel, *Lonesome Valley,* which at its best is almost more natural than water finding its level.

Of course, only a few of the total number of Nieman Fellows have offered themselves to my ministrations. Many others have written valuable books and articles without my interference. Some even of the few have written much more successfully on their own than when they tried to satisfy me. What I did for those who succeeded under my nominal direction, if anything, was to help clean some rust out of the tap so that the reservoir in them could run freely and clearly in its own way. Most of this rust, I think, was journalistic corrosion. But if a man becomes a better writer, does he necessarily become a better journalist? The answer to that question, it seems to me, depends in good part on the conditions that govern writing in the newspaper business. Hence the present investigation.

Early in my acquaintance with the writing of newspapermen I began to receive on my nerve-ends a sharp impression. I was wisely timid about expressing it. Presently one or two Nieman Fellows themselves put into words the conviction I had been forming, or came close enough to expressing it so that I felt confirmed. Now I have become less timid and no doubt less wise. I'm willing to say it straight out.

Newspapering, from the *writer's* point of view, is a highly conventionalized business. Many of its conventions and rigidities obstruct and prevent good writing, that is, writing planned and expressed in the way most appropriate

to making the given facts and ideas, their relations and their importance, readily available to the understanding and memory of the reader. But in their effect on the writer, newspaper conventions and rigidities are sometimes even more profoundly destructive than if they merely prevented him from exercising a skill he might otherwise use. They destroy that skill, or overlay it with thick accretions of wrong habit until it is as good as gone.

Journalistic Habit

One can sometimes very sharply perceive the crippling effects of journalistic habit when a newswriter tries to write a piece of fiction or a magazine article. A journalist with a novel or an article on his mind thinks that though he may not have tried that kind of thing before, his professional experience as a newspaperman at least puts him a long jump beyond the amateur. Just give him a little more time than he is used to, he thinks, and his years of practical operation as a journalist will count in his favor. They may not do so at all. They may count against him. He may first have to see what journalism has done to his writing habits, then slowly learn or recover quite different habits before he can go ahead. But it doesn't matter, you say, whether a journalist writes a novel or an article. It's a pleasant success if it happens to him, but he should stick to his profession of journalism. I should say that his helplessness in the face of his story or his article is a *measure* of how journalistic convention has affected his mind, a measure of the difference between writing cut to the conventions and rigidities, and writing that thinks only of the best way to transmit the material and the intended effect to the mind of a reader.

I have put the matter sharply, no doubt extremely. Many newspapermen write admirably, many papers are earnestly experimenting and studying ways of escaping conventions and rigidities where it is possible. Still, the conviction I have expressed has enough general truth, I believe, to be worth exploring. At any rate, I suggested to this year's Nieman Fellows that they consider, in the light of their own experience and knowledge, the *specific conditions of the newspaper business* that obstruct good writing or make it more difficult, and that they report their findings. Part of the task, it was agreed among us, would be to decide which conditions looked pretty fixed and inescapable and which could be to some extent controlled or changed, either by management or by newspaper writers themselves. The Nieman Fellows themselves decided what topics to consider and who would deal with each; they are naturally responsible for the *content* of the articles that follow. I am still an outsider. While they do not present the following articles as a unanimous view, they have jointly criticized each one and have exchanged recommendations about each, so that the whole series makes in effect a set of group conclusions, though no point necessarily expresses the complete or exact conviction of every individual.

I should like to say one thing about the temperament of the group who wrote these articles. They all give me the sense that they like being newspapermen, that they are, within ordinary human limits, devoted to their profession, in no way hostile to it or at odds with it in principle. They have their own criticisms of it, their own humor and cynicism toward it, as we all do toward whatever jobs we hold. But I have the impression that at least some of them were uncomfortable at being called on for as much adverse criticism as this investigation demands. They would have welcomed more opportunity to praise—to praise good newspaper practices and examples of good management and good newspaper writing. A considerable amount of praise and of good example does occur in these articles. But after all, the purpose of the project is to analyze the conditions of the business that affect writing adversely or make it harder for the writer to do a good job. If anyone resents this purpose, I am the proper target for abuse.

No definition of "good writing" will be found in these papers. Such a definition could only be abstract at best, a useless verbalism. We have construed the term "writing" liberally, perhaps even loosely. We have not attempted to isolate something called "writing" and free it from entanglement with content or moral choice. If it is a condition of the trade that a writer must sometimes blow up a news story out of nothing, then to that extent he is injured as a writer—and his reader is injured, too, whether he knows it or not—for any purely literary skill that makes one piece of emptiness more adroit than another is too unimportant to bother about. The same may be said about editorial writing. If a man is put to the moral choice of expressing views that he regards as false or dangerous, or asked to take a heroic stand on an artificially manufactured and unreal issue, his problem as a man is the same as his problem as a writer. We think of newspaper writing as the responsible and skillful transmission to a reader of what the reader needs to know or has a claim to be told for his enlightenment or his interest. Hence the recurrent emphasis throughout these papers on a need for greater opportunity to supply interpretation and background with the news, for bolder and more skillful copy-desk work toward this end, for more time and more facilities by which the reporter or editorial writer could post himself on topics requiring special knowledge. Conditions that affect the choice of one kind of content rather than another, and affect the strategy of presenting the content, are conditions that very importantly affect *writing*. Writing is words, but skill in words comes into play only after the writer has digested his material and found its appropriate method of presentation.

Enough has been said, I hope, of the origin and purpose

of this project. I should like to end by carrying further my outsider's view of the worst traits in newspaper writing as they appear to me. Four points, all of which obviously overlap, call for attention. They are all sufficiently discussed and illustrated in the accompanying articles so that I can deal with them briefly and as matters of principle, and go on to speculate on the important question *why* these departures from normal writing procedure seem to be widely entrenched in the newspaper business.

(1) Organization

The competent expository writer follows one simple but absolutely cardinal principle, and follows a second principle up to the limits of his skill and his opportunities. The first principle is to group related ideas together. The second principle is to keep the reader reading ahead with a sense of expectancy akin to suspense in fiction. What's coming next, or, even better, I can guess what's coming next, but how is it going to affect what I have already been told? These questions are the very definition of interest in the mind of the reader. They are questions as important for the expository writer as for the fiction writer. The newspaper writer often seems to feel forbidden to use these two principles. Compelled to give the main news in his lead, uncertain how much of his copy will be printed or where it will be cropped, he crowds what he thinks is most important at the top and trails off with the rest of his material in diminishing order of importance. Along the way, ideas, facts, quotations that are closely related and ought to be grouped together are shuffled and dispersed, for the principle of organization is not determined by logic or craft, but by the supposedly necessary conventions of daily journalism.

(2) The Hugger-Mugger Sentence

Closely related to the organization of the story as a whole is the form of the sentences in which it is cast. For some fine examples of the hugger-mugger sentence, see those accompanying the article "Readability Isn't Enough." A rhetorician could discuss these sentences in terms of misused connectives, improper subordination, etc. Entirely true, but mere advice to be more responsible toward grammar and sentence logic will not touch nor even come near the root of the disease. *Why* should the hugger-mugger sentence be so prevalent in journalism, and why should it take the form it takes? For I am convinced that it takes a characteristic form. Writers who aren't newspapermen write just as disorderly and asthmatic sentences, but they write them in a different way. No one can write worse than some academic writers; but their entangled sentences belong somehow to a different species of entanglement from the journalist's and come from different mental habits. In composing a sentence, the good writer feels for its natural subject and its natural predicate, and tries to build the sentence as a whole in a shapely and economical fashion around these two elements. I suggest that a writer is not likely to accomplish this end if under joint pressure of time and conventional newspaper organization he is trying to crowd his main news into the top of the funnel and dribble the rest out the bottom, expecting that the spout may be torn off and thrown away and the top sealed and delivered to the public by forces beyond his control. The organization of the whole affects the organization of the parts. Though the hugger-mugger sentence is an

TOO MUCH PAPER?

The newspapers in the United States suffer, above all, from a surfeit of newsprint. To this surfeit nearly all their weaknesses can be traced. It is obviously impossible for any one man to edit a paper of over a hundred pages and, without the firm hand of an editor, even the New York *Times,* the most valuable of them all, becomes a diamond mine when it should be a jeweler's box. It is the job of an editor to do the mining and present the results to his readers. Too often they are left to do their own. So large a paper must also, if it is to fill its space, employ many men whose talent for their job is doubtful. The best are used as reporters, and sub-editing is often left to the ignorant and illiterate.

Size is also responsible for the divorce of editorial opinion from the news. Since few papers have enough presses to print a whole edition at once, leader pages and, in some cases, whole editorial sections are printed early in the day. The leading articles are, therefore, comments on the news of the day before, and often have no relevance to any news in the same paper. At times stories and comments in the editorial section are made unnecessary or ridiculous by later stories in the news pages.

These are technical problems, and they are technical problems created by the surfeit of paper. There are also moral problems, of which the pressure of the advertiser, who is impotent when paper is scarce, is the most dangerous.

A more regular source of irritation than the effect of advertisers on policy is their effect on the appearance of the paper. To accommodate their needs, stories are cut up and shreds of them printed in different parts of three or four columns. The Washington *Post* (which in many other respects, it should in fairness be added, is one of the best newspapers in the country) some time ago achieved eminence in this sport; it managed to print all but two lines of a story in one column and then divided the balance between two others—one line to each.

—*The Economist,* Dec. 31, 1949

outrage on rhetoric, the man who writes it doesn't necessarily lack respect for rhetoric, nor is he necessarily ignorant of it. What happens, I think, is that he falls into a habit of mind bred by the conditions in which he works. More of this later.

(3) Suppression of Transitions

A good prose writer can be defined as one who has learned skill enough to get along with a minimum of formal or conspicuous transitional sentences or phrases. But the minimum is indispensable. Good expository writing is a tissue of general and particular, principle and fact, thesis and illustration. A skillful and needed transition is not a mere formality. It distributes emphasis, makes a distinction, sets relative importance in order, puts a rib in the skeleton, or generalizes the particulars and illustrations. In a good deal of newspaper writing, transitional sentences seem to be forbidden. Anyone who has watched a reporter trying to recover the lost art of transition will understand what I mean by the effect of his working conditions on him as a writer, will understand my emphasis on the *habits of mind* apparently bred by the business as the source of much lamentable newspaper expression.

(4) Fake Emotion, False Color

A writer is concerned with two things, with his data, material, facts, news, his content of any sort, and with its *importance*. What does it matter, and to whom? Toward the material itself his relation is intellectual. He tries to encompass it, analyze it, understand it. Toward its importance, his relation is at least in considerable part emotional. It follows that a good writer must be emotionally responsible. He will not want to palm off a fake emotion on his reader; he will not believe that it can be done except by a few successful cynics operating on especially vulnerable clients. Most men are not successful cynics.

The late Hervey Allen, one of the most gifted conversational humorists I have been lucky enough to listen to, once achieved an enviable effect. He swayed his formidable shoulders like a polar bear, snorted through his nose (a signal that something was coming), and, not feeling any great love for New England, he asked, "What would happen if someday the Atlantic seaboard got shaken up by an earthquake and sank, just a little, leaving the town of Boston under the Atlantic Ocean?" Hervey always spoke through totally motionless lips, lips like "a hole, rather worn out than made," as John Donne once expressed it. And as he neared his climax, his voice went down into his boots and became a whisper of sepulchral urgency. "Do you know what the folks in Kansas would say?" Very quietly, when he got to the folks in Kansas; then, almost inaudibly, "They'd say, 'My, My!' "

In one's more pessimistic moods about the American press, one could imagine something like the following dispatch in some of our most lurid newspapers:

EAST COAST EARTHQUAKE--HOLOCAUST KILLS MILLIONS

BOSTON UNDER ATLANTIC

FAMED HUB VANISHES IN TIDAL WAVE

ALBANY, Sept. 3. With a swoosh like the blast of an H-bomb, following what seismologists described as a temblor of giant proportions off the New England coast, Boston and its noted Back Bay center of culture was swept into watery annihilation at 5 p.m. today by a tidal wave beginning far out at sea and ending with its hungrily licking crest atop famed Beacon Hill.

The folks in Kansas: "My, my!"

And whose would be the *genuine* emotion, the reporter's, or the perhaps inadequate but natural response of the readers in Kansas?

It is easy enough to see why the newspaper often forbids normal expository organization. Unfortunately, there are cogent reasons why. The careful and thoughtful article on organization in this series explains the reasons, but goes on to suggest how the tyranny of the "inverted pyramid" could be reduced and how greater coherence could often be gained in the body of a news story after the lead. The reasons for fake emotion and false color also seem obvious enough. But what are the reasons for the hugger-mugger sentence and for the suppression of transitions?

I suspect that they often spring from a false idea of conciseness, whether in the writer, or in the editor who gives him his orders and his standards, or in both. I tried in my imaginary dispatch about the disappearance of Boston to parody the characteristics of the hugger-mugger journalistic sentence. These characteristics all come, if my guess is right, from trying to stuff as much into one packed lump as possible. Syntactically, the hugger-mugger sentence uses all the connective resources of our loose and sturdy English grammar to glue as many pebbles together as it can—and uses them badly, so that all logic and subordination are destroyed. It uses conjunctions, participles, appositions, and every kind of rhetorical yoke, in the effort to wad in between the initial capital and the full-stop as many facts (and sometimes as much "color") as possible. The result, in a way, looks concise. A lot of items have been huddled together between the terminals of the sentence. But just to the extent that the reader has been confused by the violent conjunction of things that should be kept apart, just to the extent that the sentences ride roughshod over fundamental relations of time sequence, cause and effect, main statement and subordinate statement, the

result is not conciseness, but its direct opposite, *wasted space*. The same can be said of the suppression of a transition. It saves space to leave out transitional sentences or phrases, guidepost sentences, general statements that sum up groups of facts or relate paragraphs or sections of a story with other sections. Or does it save space? What is space for? To the extent that the omission of a really needed transitional statement blurs the reader's view of the structure and relations of a news report, I should say that space is not gained, but lost. The space given to the story as a whole is by that much wasted.

Writing for the paper, that is, for the physical sheet on which words are typed or printed, is one thing; writing for the mind of a reader is another. I think that the hugger-mugger sentence and the suppression of transitions are ways of using printed symbols with an appearance of economy, but it is only economy on the physical sheet, not economy when the reader tries to translate the symbols into meaning. And to the practicing journalist who insensibly falls into the habit of the pebble-and-glue sentence and the suppression of transitions, this habit becomes profoundly corrupting.

The Act of Reading

If this discussion of sentence and transition has any value, it will raise the whole question of the attitude of the press toward the reader. The newspaper business, I gather, is acutely conscious of the reader. It surveys him, polls him, studies him as if he were a rat in an experimental maze. It discovers that his education and mentality remain on the average at the "level" of the eighth grade or twelfth grade, or whatever the point may be. It listens with respect to experts who define "readability" in terms of freedom from affixes and suffixes and number of words per sentence. All knowledge derived from such sources is relevant and welcome, to the extent that it is knowledge. But in all such approaches to the concept of the reader, I cannot help thinking that an attitude is wrong and an element is missing. How does a writer learn to judge his reader, how does he learn how to write in order to be read? *From his own experiences in reading!* Not by thinking of his reader, surely, as an average on a chart, high or low, an abstraction to be approached by rules about affixes and suffixes and word counts. Dr. Flesch himself, I am confident, would never say so. A man can only write for a reader with whom he himself feels that he has some natural and human link, and I believe that one important way in which a writer gets a sense of this link is by watching himself as a reader, or by intuitions unconsciously derived from his own experiences in reading. Newspapers apparently think and worry a lot about the reader, but I sometimes feel that in doing so they forget the *act of reading*.

Without being a psychologist, I will hazard one or two simple propositions about the psychology of reading. In the first place, people forget, but they don't want to forget, and are ashamed when they are caught out in any really humiliating lapse of memory. When we read, we want to remember, *at least till the end of the story*. We want to remember from paragraph to paragraph, we want to remember the beginning when we get to the end, we want to remember the important parts and subsections; if we don't, we can't see them as *related*, and hence can't *understand* what we are reading. People also want to understand. Confusion, bafflement, is not a satisfying state of mind.

Memory, in reading, is helped by two conditions. It is easier to remember if we are led by the writer along a path of expectancy which is progressively satisfied. Also it is easier to remember a structure with related parts than a succession of mutually exclusive items the relations between which are missing or obscure. If these propositions about reading are true, their bearing on organization, hugger-mugger sentences, the use of transition, and false color should be obvious. False color? Yes, because it is a form of disorder and irrelevance, like the other vices in the list.

The accompanying articles appear to reflect a certain concern among newspapers about their readers, a fear of progressively losing readers. More than once these articles betray the feeling that radio is a formidable competitor in giving the public "spot news." Yet there will always be a place for a press that tries to report news of fact and news of opinion, tries to interpret and to judge both, and to put its findings and judgments in the form most accessible and effective for understanding. In order to do this, the press must surely take every advantage it can of all the known and proved methods of organization and expression that best convey fact or judgment to the mind of the reader. It is exactly from this point of view that examination of all the ways in which the conditions of the trade make good writing more difficult seems important. The authors of this project don't think of it as the *end* of such an examination, but as a *beginning*. It is an invitation to all who may be concerned—management, editors, newspaper writers—to carry this examination on from the starting point we hope we may have given it here.

The Basis of Good Narrative

The basis of good TIME writing is narrative, and the basis of good narrative is to tell events (1) in the order in which they occur; (2) in the form in which an observer might have seen them—so that readers can imagine themselves on the scene.

Time Magazine, Mar. 8, 1948

WHAT IS A NEWSPAPER?

The Medium Itself Imposes Conditions on Writing

Newspapers are first and foremost business enterprises. They have an obligation to themselves to compete for readers and to meet costs. In addition, they have an obligation to their readers. Competition, costs and conscience all have their effect on news writing.

In examining the problems of newspaper writing, we turn first to the medium itself. Here we seek to answer this question: what is there about a daily newspaper—produced by so few for so many—that affects the writing that goes into it?

We suggest that the very nature of newspapering exerts three major influences on writing. These are competition, cost and conscience.

Competition for the readers' money and attention is of two sorts. Both have a strong bearing on writing. In its strict sense—rivalry between two or more papers in a community—competition has been declining, but there are still cities where it exists. In its broader sense, competition continues everywhere. Even in a monopoly town, a newspaper must vie with other media of communication and entertainment for the time, the interest and the support of the public. Thus competition has its influence even where a paper has no immediate journalistic rival.

In a situation of direct competition, the primary pressure is the demand for speed. James Kilgallen won an important press citation in New York City for a six-minute beat on the first Alger Hiss verdict. Until recently, one major press association repeatedly centered its promotion advertising on its achievements in beating its rivals by two minutes or two hours. In direct competition, newspaper executives continue to believe that getting on the street first is a major commercial advantage.

The Racing Clock

Other sections of this study discuss how this pressure spreads its influence. It is sufficient now to note the Kilgallen story as an example. Probably at least five men were concerned with writing it. It began with the reporter, whose hurried phrases, telephoned from the courthouse, set off a chain reaction. A rewrite man translated that rush of words into a lead. A city editor scanned the copy hastily, and a copyreader marked it for a linotype operator. Before it went speeding to the composing room, a news editor gave it a final inspection. It's safe to assume that none of these men had time to think of writing. Instinct had to guide them; competition would not permit time for studied judgment.

A variation of the same competitive pressure develops when four to six editions are scheduled each day. On major front-page stories, new headlines and new leads must usually be provided so that each edition will look new, whether or not there have been major developments. All rewrite men know the agonies of freshening a story repeatedly when they have had no word from reporters at the scene of action. Wire service reporters constantly find "new leads," "precedes" and "inserts" demolishing careful writing because editors want something different for each successive edition. Most reporters have had to quit gathering facts when the racing clock became more important than completeness or coherence. If the facts are "thin" and a deskman is growling "Gimme something I can write a head on," he is asking the reporter to consider the competitive pressures.

The second and broader type of competition is concerned with other demands on readers' time and attention. This rivalry is less pressing in a "monopoly town," for few citizens will attempt to get along without their daily paper. But even the habitual readers will not tolerate too much careless or dull writing. The faithful subscriber may continue to buy the paper, but won't read it. The decline of reader interest will be noticed by the alert merchandisers who buy advertising space. Advertising dollars will soon be withheld from the publishers who still gets nickels from uninterested subscribers.

There appears to be a growing consciousness of this broader problem of competing for the busy man's time. "Immediacy is no longer a prime consideration of a newspaper," Erwin Canham has said. The able editor of the *Christian Science Monitor* said radio news bulletins have replaced the newspaper extra, but no news broadcast has been devised to give each citizen a detailed news report at the time of his own choosing.

Granting that radio is a faster means of communication and has changed the newspaper's place in our society, we suggest that many papers have not discovered the corollary. Readers now want details and explanation. No longer does the newness of news blind them to poor presentation. The new pressure of competition calls for careful and intelligent press reporting. The news magazines have at least pointed the way in this direction.

Cliches

Many newspapers could begin by substituting meaningful details for the clichés they are palming off as newsworthy expressions. The prevalence of trite words and phrases is a major flaw in much reporting. It recalls the order of a former Chicago managing editor who told his staff, "The boss says we're using too many old clichés; we'll have to get some new ones." Perhaps someone had tired of reading about death cars, manhunts and limelights. Or about aldermen having a stormy session, mystery surrounding some possible action, or a police chief speaking out in no uncertain terms. The boss may have returned hungry from a hotel meal of stringy roast beef, cold potatoes and tired peas, only to see his paper describe the event as a banquet.

Many clichés, hurried into type to meet competitive demands, are actually errors. An "unknown man" is usually unidentified. Heart failure seldom causes death, though it occurs simultaneously. Not many cities have a "heart of the business district." There is redundancy, too, in "painful cuts" or "resting comfortably."

Some clichés prevail because reporters are lazy. "Farm parity" wouldn't appear in print so often if it had to be explained. "Writ of certiorari," "demurrer" and "recognizance" appear with a similar, bold assumption that the reader will understand. But lazy reporters may have an easy alibi: we don't have time or space to explain. Generally there's enough competitive pressure to make the claim partly true.

Costs

Linked with competition as an influence on writing is the factor of costs. We waste no time hedging on this point: newspapers must have money for expenses and profit. That's a situation that exists, is not going to change, and has favorable as well as unfavorable influences. Since this study aims at improving professional effort, we are concerned here with the unfavorable.

The most obvious of these in immediate effect on writers and editors centers around the newsroom budget. Salaries can be counted on to attract men of a certain level of ability. It is not romanticizing, however, to add that not all newspapermen are drawn to their work by the money involved. Pay is seldom large enough to satisfy those who don't like the work. Many men continue, though they realize that they will never earn as much money as they desire, because they wouldn't be equally happy doing anything else. It is debatable whether higher salary levels would attract those skilled writers who never work for newspapers; but budget economics indicate that if a newspaper employed such men, it would probably overwork them. An earlier Nieman group, proposing an ideal newspaper, suggested that top writers be paid $10,000 to $25,000 a year. We wonder how many such salaries an ideal newspaper could afford, and whether the experts could maintain their high levels under the pressure of newspaper routine.

Everyone familiar with newspapers recognizes that few men can set their own pace. Almost without exception reporters and editors work rapidly; many can honestly argue they do not have time to do their best. Giving them more time would certainly multiply costs.

The influence of advertising also affects costs. We carefully avoid saying the influence of advertisers, because we consider the editorial wishes of businessmen to be far less important than generally argued by press critics. But the flow of advertising to a newspaper has its effects. It determines the number of columns of open space, which, in turn, determines whether a writer has to hold it down or let it run. If he lets it run, the odds are that copyreaders will be less concerned whether each paragraph or sentence is essential.

Readers Affect Writing

A newspaper may be seeking to stimulate certain types of advertising, and therefore may allot space to television, travel or movie columns while sacrificing it elsewhere. In Boston, considerable portions of the front pages are sold as advertising and inside space for "jumps" is limited, so that some major news stories are trimmed excessively. Thus some of us look askance at the Boston papers, forgetting that our own papers frequently have the pressure of huge display advertising that sometimes restricts and constricts stories that are to go inside. Many news editors have ordered "Cut this to ten inches" to fit a story into a particular space. The writer seldom knows of this, but the copy desk plays an important part in determining the quality of the story that will reach the readers.

The greatest pressure of economics, however, results from the need for mass readership. Big circulation is needed to attract advertising. In the early days of American newspapers, each publication sought to satisfy its segment of the public. Each depended for success on relatively small groups of readers. Then Bennett, Pulitzer and Hearst found that if readers were given enough entertainment the barriers between different newspapers' would be broken down. The development of huge circulations followed. Those newspapers that have been most successful have

carefully sought to aim their news writing, as well as their entertainment offerings, at great numbers of readers.

There was an example of how readers affect writing when General "Hap" Arnold died in January. The New York *Times'* lead was:

> SONOMA, CALIF., Jan. 15—Gen. Henry Hartley (Hap) Arnold, wartime commander of the Army Air Forces, died of a coronary occlusion. . .

We don't suggest that the *Times'* circulation is small, but we point out that it generally appeals to readers of considerable intelligence. The United Press, serving many papers, recognizes that some of those publications serve another level. Its lead on Arnold's death said:

> SONOMA, CALIF., Jan. 15—General of the Air Force Henry H. Arnold, commander in World War II of the Army Air Forces, died at his home here today. He was sixty-three years old.
>
> He died quietly at 7:25 a.m. of a heart condition. . .

General Arnold's physician probably announced that the "coronary occlusion" caused his death. The *Times* presumed its readers would understand. The UP did not. Perhaps both were right. But we suggest that too much newspaper writing does not consider the readers, and that newspapers haven't tried sufficiently to get information on readers and readers' habits.

If newspapers don't know enough about their readers to guide their reporters, two results are possible. One is a presumption that reporters must write down to the readers. The other is a tendency for reporters to go to the other extreme, assume that readers know details of technical subjects, and forget that they are closer to the topics than the reader can possibly be. We suggest, from our own experience, that most reporters need more specific guidance than they get. Many will hit the target when it's pointed out to them.

Conscience

If costs and competition are twin influences on writing, there is a third that transcends both. It is conscience. If newspapermen feel a constant challenge to do their work well, their alertness will produce good writing and intelligent editing. Reporters will make unending effort to find the truth and present it in understandable stories. Copy desk men will share the ideal. City editors and managing editors will provide continuing leadership.

The owner of each paper, however, is the one who must determine how strong the paper's conscience will be. Some publishers may set their marks too high, but these can count on constant effort from their staffs. The greater danger is that publishers may aim too low, or even take no aim at all. When they fail to care, their newspapers will become mediocre. And if they establish other targets, such as seeking to influence readers by trespassing on truth, they may have temporary success at the expense of the whole institution of the press. The few examples of such effort are so glaring that they need not be cited. More common, we believe, is the attitude expressed by Mrs. Oveta Culp Hobby, vice-president of the Houston *Post*, in her 1949 address as president of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association. Mrs. Hobby declared:

"Newspapers are great ones for doing things as they always have. But just because you've done something for a hundred years—whether it is bookkeeping, morgue filing, stereotyping or covering the city hall—is no reason why one should go on that way.

"The margin between success and failure narrows daily. And between those tightening lines there is increasingly less room for inefficiency caused by laziness, laissez-faire, habit or even sentiment. We owe it to our staffs and stockholders to operate a successful newspaper. We owe it to ourselves and our families. But greater than any of these obligations is that we owe to the American public, with its constitutional right to a free press. Without a press, without a press of many voices, that line in the constitution would be void.

"Success as a newspaper publisher is not only an opportunity. It is a duty."

Thus speaks conscience, viewing costs and competition with an understanding of realities. This study aims at a similar realistic application of conscience to specific problems of news writing.

Is Writing Irrelevant?

The competition for advertising affects the policies and the appearance of newspapers and distends their bulk to a point where they cannot be properly edited. The competition, equally fierce, for news has largely destroyed all style and literacy in its presentation. The ability to find news is more important than the ability to write it coherently. Reporters are becoming more and more technicians in news-gathering. If an editor were to dismiss one of his staff on the grounds that he could not write, the reason would be felt to be irrelevant. The form of a story has been standardized, and almost anybody can be trained to pour his own into the mould. The whole story must be compressed into the leading paragraph and then its separate parts expanded in later paragraphs. As editions follow each other and new stories appear, with more importance, or at least more novelty, the original story can be shortened by cutting off its tail again and again until only the first paragraph is left. And after each operation the story must still seem complete.

—*The Economist*, Dec. 31, 1949

THE NATURE OF NEWS TODAY

Its Meaning Goes Over Too Many Heads -- Why?

As news has grown more complex, it has put a premium on clarity and background. The reader is bewildered by the jargon of specialists. The reporter must learn to think big in small words.

During the Russian blockade of Berlin in 1949, an army officer was explaining the blockade system to the House Foreign Affairs committee. On a wall map, he outlined the Soviet, British, French and American zones of occupation. He then noted, in passing, the area of Germany under Polish Administration.

"What the devil do you mean?" exclaimed an excited committee member in the rear of the room, apparently envisioning a secret pact of partition. "What are the Poles doing in Germany?"

The officer was momentarily bewildered. Then he haltingly explained that Poland (as any astute newspaper reader *might* have known) had occupied a great slice of eastern Germany since 1945 under terms of the Potsdam agreement.

"That's the first I heard of that," said the embarrassed legislator.

It is easy to smile at that. That Congressman, however, was a generally well-informed member of the Foreign Affairs committee. His lack of information may be inexcusable, but it is typical of the difficulty most Americans have in following the complex news affecting the United States in this complex era.

News is neither so simple nor probably so entertaining as it was a decade or two ago. News, like the life it seeks to portray, becomes more intricate by its very nature as time passes.

For generations, we have been placidly aware that the water we drink contains hydrogen; now hydrogen may supply the means for violently reshaping civilization. Peace was once the absence of war; but war now comes in degrees of hot and cold, and peace is a relative matter. Laboring men, if they were not on strike or unemployed, were working. That was before the short work week.

Yet, other generations of news writers were required to cope with new forms of news. In their inception, such theories as evolution, thermodynamics, socialism, bacteriology, and aeronautics all challenged the comprehension of laymen. Many, it may be argued, still do. But all of them, to be understood by the average reader, required translation into terms he could grasp if he wished.

This need to explain technical matter for the lay reader does not spring entirely from the so-called "low level of average intelligence." Too often the reporter says, "I can't make this any clearer. Most people can't understand these tax (or political, or labor, or science, or financial) stories, anyhow."

Many current news stories that the reader with "average" education cannot understand are equally baffling to the reader with a college education. Education, of course, affects understanding, but reporters often fail to realize that frequently they would not understand their subjects either, if someone had not explained the basic material in common terms.

There is a truism in Washington reporting to the effect that a week or two after a new man appears on the scene, he will be grinding out government jargon and gobbledygook which would have been incomprehensible to him a week or two earlier.

Various causes for unintelligible news writing are discussed elsewhere in this study. It is not always wholly the fault of the reporter. In many instances, however, he simply is not familiar with his subject.

It is impossible, with the present complexity of politics, science, economics, labor, medicine, and sociology, for a single reporter to become competent in handling all forms of news in these fields.

Too often, the reporter thinks he can get by with a "fill in" from someone on the scene, or that he can rewrite a handout and convince his editor that he has control of a story—rather than admit he can't cope with it. This is usually an easy "out" for the editor concerned, who is probably unwilling in such circumstances to replace the reporter with the specialist required, or to give the reporter the opportunity to explore thoroughly, even if time permits it.

The usual result is that the reporter wraps his confusion in the murky—but safe—language of a handout. There are veterans and specialists, in turn, who reach the other extreme—and the end product may have the same effect as the inexperienced reporter's work.

Unlike the writers who try but are not able to report the news in layman's language, many specialized reporters seek to impress with their great store of knowledge. They probably once explained the terms they use, and if you weren't "listening," that's your misfortune. Their failure

results from a familiarity with the subject that breeds contempt for the reader.

In economics, they seize you by the hand and drag you, without explanation, through dollar pools and over tariff walls. In science, they ignore the oaf who doesn't know the difference between atomic fission and hydrogen fusion. In labor, they blithely skip from secondary boycotts to preliminary injunctions and into an open shop, slamming the door in the face of the uninformed.

"By now," you might say, "those terms should be familiar to every newspaper reader." But you know they are not.

Can you readily explain the meaning of "trade gap," "stabilization of exports," "unrequited exports," "bilateral" and "multilateral" trade, and "hard currency" and "soft currency?" You see them every day as they hit page one in stories about the Marshall plan, devaluation crises, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc.

Economics, admittedly, is well-named "the dismal science." But however dismal, it is the machinery of modern life. It is about time we realized that until the day when all the technical terms we use are understood as least as well as the terminology of baseball and gambling, they will have to be "translated" for newspaper readers.

Undigested Information

In many ways, we actually have made the news complex. We have done it by default.

We have done it by moving the trade language of the financier, the lawyer, the tax expert, the budget director, the city planner, the scientist, the diplomatist, and the labor leader onto page one, and assuming that the language is self-explanatory.

We have done it by mistaking quantity of news for quality of news; by smothering the reader in a mass of undigested information.

Not every reporter, nor every newspaper, is guilty. There are some reporters, like James Marlow of the Associated Press, who perform an excellent job of explaining technical terms and complex subjects. There are an increasing number of penetrating and easily-absorbed news accounts which bring into focus a broad area of news, such as the series entitled "Asia's Red Riddle," written last winter by five reporters for the New York *Herald Tribune*.

Most reporters could cite dozens of other examples. But the mere fact that we think of such work as unusual or outstanding demonstrates the gap between what can be done and what is being done.

There is real need, every day, to explain the news if it does not explain itself. We must make room for this kind of clarification.

"Integration" is one of those favored government terms, paralleling "know how" and "implement." It can be used to mean many things in many situations. It had several months of glory last winter when it was applied to the European economy. While it was being bandied about with only rare attempts at explanation, Joseph C. Harsch, chief of the Christian Science Monitor's Washington bureau, decided it was worth a story.

His story began:

> The damage which overuse of big words can do has seldom been more extravagantly illustrated than by all the fuss and fury kicked up lately over the word "integration."
>
> We have been told that if Europe didn't "integrate," there would be no more Marshall plan.
>
> And we have been told that Britain had refused to "integrate" with western Europe; and so presumably the western world which has stood together fairly well through a lot of rough times over the past four years would, of course, now fall apart.
>
> And we have been told that the real reason our Secretary of State rushed off unexpectedly to Paris was to pound his fist on the table and demand quick European "integration."
>
> Well, for the fun of it, let's see if we can review what has been happening, without using the word "integrate". . .

Harsch then used several hundred words to explain the situation. It was worth it. He didn't use the words "integrate" or "integration," and he wrote one of the few intelligible stories on the subject.

The increasing use of such background material in news stories, or use of the background story to stand alone, is one of the best hopes for the confused newspaper reader.

There is nothing novel about this. Background material was important when torch slayings, love triangles, and gang warfare commanded page one. But there usually was little damage if you failed to comprehend that news. Today, with the daily struggle between war and peace, capitalism and communism, federal aid and laissez faire, often the stake in the news is your own welfare.

Background

The premium on news space places continual pressure on the amount of background permissible in most news stories. Should the story be angled for the reader who probably knows all the background, a little of it, or none? It is far better to err on the side of too much background, rather than too little.

The reader who is already familiar with the background is rarely annoyed to see it repeated in summary. If he knows it, his eye almost automatically will skip the summary paragraphs, anyhow. Somewhere in every story there should be enough background to give the new reader an acquaintance with the issues.

Most of us are too inclined to report only the spot de-

velopments and leave the real fabric of the story to the Sunday or editorial section. And the desk man, faced with a tight news budget, too often says, "We carried that once—anybody who's interested in this should know that."

The same kind of thinking leads into the rut of dull, stereotyped reporting, which skims the surface of the news. We report the trivial—what happened most recently—and ignore the basic, penetrating developments. It is the old story of the forest and the trees.

Sometimes it is because the reporter, pressed for the spot story, is never given the opportunity to grapple with the main trend. Sometimes the reporter is dimly aware that he hasn't approached the heart of the story. Richard Wilson, veteran Washington correspondent for the Des Moines Register and Tribune, in describing Washington reporting, once said, "One has the ghostly impression of being in the basement while a cosmic revolution is going on above . . ."

From June, 1945, to December, 1949, the United States extended nearly twenty-five billion dollars to foreign countries in outright grants and credits. That is a sizable sum even in these days. Yet, has your newspaper attempted to find out how that huge outlay affects your community? Does the local iron works or shoe plant ship any of its product abroad? What does the Marshall plan mean in terms of business to your own town? Does Great Britain's reduction of imports affect the merchants in your area? Has the British devaluation of currency boosted the sale of British goods in your community?

Some newspapers have answered such questions for their readers. They have recognized the news. But not all, or even most newspapers, have accepted this as their job.

It is easy to say you expect to get stories of this nature from Washington. But you can't get them from Washington, because Washington can supply only the most generalized kind of story. The real news is in your home town.

In many instances, the same kind of handling can be used for news of housing, education, medicine, labor and science to give it a down-to-earth meaning that readers can easily grasp.

We already have come a long way in this type of reporting since the sociological repercussions of the depression and early New Deal days led us to begin taking a closer look at the news—digging into the causes instead of being satisfied merely with the effects.

The results have been most apparent on the local, rather than the state, regional, and national scene. Vigorous newspapers have demonstrated what can be done in reporting why things happen: why there is a high crime rate in their area; why hospitals or schools are overcrowded; why taxes are increasing; why the city does not have adequate administrators; why there is race prejudice; why there is a lack of recreational facilities.

Instead of simply reporting statistics in these fields, the alert newspapers realize that if a story is worth printing at all, it is worth printing in its complete setting, so that it will mean something to the reader.

It is a relatively expensive way of gathering news. It is far easier, and cheaper, to report that a tenement house has been condemend as an unsafe dwelling place than it is to survey an area and report its housing needs. It is simpler to report juvenile crime than to portray the causes of it.

While many of us recognize the need for basic reporting on these subjects, and concede that the time, expense and effort are worthwhile, by some quirk of reasoning we tend to forget or ignore this when the news carries us into other fields.

This is especially true in economics and science, and in politics above the local level. Instead of reporting fully what is happening, too many of us exhaust our news space with speculation about what might happen. We forsake today to guess about tomorrow. We decide that today's news is old stuff before we even print it, and rush to forecast what is to come.

News Sources Are Only Human

Somewhere in the course of events, a lot of us also seem to have forgotten part of the basic art of story telling. Perhaps we are blinded by the magnitude of the news. We tend to report news with an air of unqualified certainty and complete detachment from the human factors involved. We frequently forget that people make the news, and that people are not perfect.

We let ourselves be browbeaten with tools we have created. Almost everyone, except the candidate running for office, seeks to speak off-the-record. Too often we listen. The wiser reporters, when they suspect that this device will tie up usable news which may be available from another source, say "No, thanks."

One day, about a year ago, a State Department official not familiar with dealing with the press, was required to make a press conference statement. Before the conference began, an associate briefed him on the meaning of off-the-record and "background statements," to differentiate between information which should not be used in any way, and news which could be used without identification with the State Department.

In his nervousness, the official got the two terms confused. What should have been background information was handed out on an off-the-record basis, and vice versa. His associates were appalled, but for fear of embarrassing the State Department, they decided to take no corrective action, and awaited the expected howls of anguish from the departmental hierarchy when the newspapers came out.

You might have guessed what happened. Nothing! No one even printed the story, for neither the off-the-record nor background material contained secrets of newsworthy nature.

Newspapermen similarly are prone to exaggerate their sense of the important—and sometimes grossly mislead the public as a result.

Forced News

In Washington, it is almost a fetish that when news of general significance happens anywhere in the world, congressmen immediately must be asked to comment on it. Often this demand, which generally comes from the news room, assumes ridiculous proportions.

Despite the fact that both reporter and editor are only too aware that most congressmen, in due time, will comment on anything that occurs to them, newsmen vie to rush their comments into print.

Here is a hypothetical, but typical, example:

A British delegate to the United Nations, in a long speech, urges construction of certain projects in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan with United Nations' funds earmarked for the development of backward areas of the globe.

In Washington, Reporter X, who covers the capitol, is asked to get comment from congressmen. His office supplies the bare essentials of the story as quoted above.

The reporter buttonholes congressmen in the lobby of the house. Three men he solicits refuse any comment, on the grounds that they have not seen the British delegate's speech. The reporter resolves to settle for Congressman X, an Anglophobe, who will comment on anything.

Maybe the conversation goes like this:

Reporter: "Hello, Congressman!"

Congressman: "Oh, hello . . ."

Reporter: "Some British delegate made a speech today in the U.N. My office knows you're up on all these British deals, and we'd like to get a suitable quote from you."

Congressman (brightly): "Well . . . that's possible, I guess. What'd this delegate say?"

Reporter: "Our man in the U.N. said . . ." (He recites the one-paragraph summary quoted above.)

Congressman (doubtfully): "Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, hmm?"

Reporter (envisioning his last resort fading): "Sure, you know, in Africa."

Congressman: "Yes . . . Of course it is. Let's see now, hmm . . . Suppose I say this—'This latest appeal from Socialist Great Britain, seeking to play on the sympathies of the good American people, is the last straw. How long are we to continue carrying the British on our backs at the expense of the American taxpayer, while the British with one hand grab our hard-earned dollars, and with the other hand steal our trade?' How's that?"

Reporter: "Well . . . It's U.N. money they're asking for, not ours."

Congressman: "Well there's not much difference. You can patch the statement up to take care of that, can't you?"

Reporter: "Well . . . yeah, I guess so. O.K., thanks a lot, Congressman."

It is not intended to imply that every newspaper will indulge in that kind of coverage. But it is an example of what sometimes happens when news is "forced," and the basic elements of factual reporting are cast to the winds.

It was a sad day for newspapers in general when politicians discovered that Monday is usually a slow day for news. On any given Monday, pick up a newspaper that carries a fair amount of Washington news and you are likely to find several declamations by politicians which would not make the news columns on any other day in the week.

The Monday morning statements have become so much of an institution that if they are not now made on the politicians' initiative, reporters are ordered to get them to fulfill the demand for "spot news."

Sometimes, there is limited justification for the statements; more often they are deliberate distortions in effect, for they force the news into misleading focus. They frequently have an additional damaging result: shoving out of the news columns well-reasoned, necessary, background stories.

Fundamentals

It may seem naive to remind seasoned reporters and editors that they must observe reporting fundamentals, but it seems to us that sometimes we do forget them.

Let's report the news in all its dimensions, with its basic meaning, its full flavor, its real setting.

If a local civic Committee of 100 is meeting, let us not have the reader assume that 100 persons are present if only 38 are there.

If the state highway budget is released close to deadline time, and we can get only part of the news into the paper that day, let's tell the readers that, and run the complete story the next day. The news will still be usable, and the readers will still be there.

If a Senate Subcommittee on Establishing New Waterways, for example, issues a report calling for the construction of a network of canals in the mid-west, let us put that news in its perspective by reporting that there are only two men on the subcommittee, that they have issued four similar reports in the past, and that no action has been taken on any of them.

News is complex in itself these days without obscure or misleading reports to add to the readers' confusion. Readers won't bless us if we do an adequate job of reporting. But they'll damn us if we don't.

'HISTORY IN A HURRY'

How the Nature of News Affects the Writing

Deadlines, the rush of competition, the use of jargon to create news, and the leg man system all militate against good writing. Even if they are all here to stay, an understanding of the problems they present may minimize their adverse influence.

Red Smith, the New York *Herald Tribune* sports columnist, tells the story of an old-time reporter who was taken drunk while on assignment.

A friendly Western Union telegrapher covered for him by piecing together sections of other reporters' copy and filing them under his pal's by-line.

After three days the drunk staggered into the Western Union office and complained: "Listen, if my stuff doesn't improve soon, I'm gonna file with Postal Telegraph."

Things are tougher for today's reporter. Postal Telegraph has gone out of business.

Also, there has been a change in reporters' habits. They may drink, but they are less apt to get drunk on assignment than their predecessors were. The problem of getting and writing a good story is sufficiently complex without the added hazard of liquor.

The simple fact that a writer is working for a newspaper, rather than a magazine or some other medium, imposes enough restrictive and peculiar limitations.

There are at least five major conditions of news reporting that can take the rap for bad writing on metropolitan dailies, wire services, small city newspapers and weeklies. They are deadlines, libel, competition to beat rivals, the leg man system and the use of jargon to create news.

Deadlines

News has been defined as "history written in a hurry." Both history and writing suffer.

The wire service reporter has a deadline to meet somewhere in the world about every minute. The reporter for the metropolitan newspaper has four or five deadlines a day. On a continuing story he may have to write a new lead for each edition to cover new developments. The reporter for a small newspaper with only one edition has a time problem that the magazine writer or novelist escapes. Even the reporter for the weekly knows the influence of the clock.

A 100-page state department document is released an hour before deadline. The first edition story doesn't do it justice. A developing story crowds the deadline. The reporter sends his information in batches, writing background first, sending inserts and kills as more information becomes available, holding the lead open for last-minute developments. The story lacks the cohesion and smoothness of a piece written in leisure when all the facts are known. A columnist tries to outguess the news. For his November 3 assignment he writes a think piece on why the Democrats lost the election. He's lucky if he can get it killed in the late editions. The World's Greatest Newspaper wants to beat its rivals to the street. Its headline reads, "Dewey Beats Truman."

Preoccupation with deadlines can be lessened if we realize that quality rather than speed is the test of a good modern newspaper. To sacrifice accuracy, news judgment, good writing or an understanding of the meaning of a story in the interests of speed is not our purpose.

Too many reporters, pressed by a deadline, write an inadequate story and then forget it. They have been taught that time is the controlling factor in news and a late story is no good.

Some events, which necessarily receive cursory treatment in early editions, warrant a follow-up or a Sunday piece, written in leisure and with full understanding of the facts and background material. Dean Acheson's statement of American foreign policy, a city budget or the China white paper don't lose news value five minutes after they have been made public. The weekly news magazines have proved that. By refusing to let go of a good story until it has been treated fully, even if full treatment must be delayed two or three days, the reporter can do something about the deadline.

Libel

The deadline is the obvious and frequently the most significant restriction on newspaper writing. But there are others. Fear of libel, though a relatively minor influence, is a particular hazard for the reporter. Small newspapers, the ones that are least likely to have access to good legal

advice, can be bankrupt by one adverse libel decision. As a result, their reporters tread with extreme caution when they cover court or other potentially explosive news.

Here is an example from the Rutland (Vermont) *Herald*:

"Stephen Falco, a minor, of Rutland, through his father, Peter Falco, has entered a suit in County court against Peter S. Finlay of Dorset for $15,000 damages as the result of a highway accident.

"The action of tort claims Stephen Falco was seriously and permanently injured on June 20, 1949, in an accident when a pick-up truck driven by the defendant crashed into a sedan in which Falco was a passenger. The accident allegedly took place in Dorset on Route 7.

"Due to Finlay's negligence resulting in an accident, the writ claims, Falco suffered head injuries, cuts of the right hand and wrist, wrenched back and shoulders and nervous shock.

"It is further claimed that Falco was confined to a hospital for a long time and was prevented from working for 16 weeks because of his injuries, which include permanent scars on the forehead and a drooping left eyebrow.

"The Falcos are represented by the firm of Abatiell, Radigan and Delliveneri."

The stilted language follows the legal obtuseness of the writ. It is bad writing, caused primarily by fear of libel.

Jargon

Using jargon to create news often ties in with competition to beat rivals. On a continuing story that fails to produce an adequate headline every day, the need to find new angles is frequently fostered by fear that the competition will seem to be doing a better job because it has a daily report. Or it may be fostered by the impatient man on the desk who is far removed from the scene. The Commission on Freedom of the Press had this to say about coverage of the United Nations conference in San Francisco:

"On many days during the weeks the conference was in session there was nothing to report. But the reporters had to send in their stories. Somehow there had to be news. The result on lower levels was a series of personal items modeled after the Hollywood fan magazine and on the higher levels a distorted account of what took place. Because drama and tension were demanded by the editorial desks back home, drama and tension were manufactured at San Francisco. Hence calm was turned into calm-before-the-storm. Silence became the silence-of-impending-conflict. The passage of time became a portentous period of delay. So completely was the task of manufacturing suspense performed that, when after some weeks an acceptable charter was signed, the effect on newspaper readers was one of incredulous surprise."

The Cliches of Rewrite

Although many newspaper stories give the impression of omniscience, the fact is that reporters have to rely on second-hand accounts of spot news events and on "reliable sources" for information about what goes on at closed conferences. The reporter's story can be no better than that of his source. The bias, inaccuracy and inadequacy of untrained observers who furnish news to reporters are responsible for generalized news writing, designed to give the author an out if his source proves incorrect.

The rewrite man who gets the facts of a story from leg men or from correspondents in outlying areas has developed a competency for second-hand reporting. Through experience in covering almost every kind of event with a telephone nestled between his shoulder and cheek he knows what questions to ask, and he is conscientious enough to spell names correctly and learn the proper middle initials. But his story must inevitably lack the reality of first-hand reporting.

Too often the rewrite man has a niche for each story. A story about a monkey has to be funny. The wedding and the obituary follow a set pattern. Accounts of speeches or football games fit into established grooves. The rewriter's accident and weather stories have a sameness that ranks them among the dullest reading in most newspapers.

Second-Hand Reporting

Reluctance of news sources to talk for publication or to talk at all is an obvious problem for all reporters. It leads to stories like this one in the New York *Times:*

> WASHINGTON, Feb. 7—A Senate appropriations subcommittee was understood tonight to be ready to recommend an expansion of the staff of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. J. Edgar Hoover, director of the bureau which carries a heavy load of investigative work in the atomic-hydrogen bomb programs, appeared before the subcommittee for more than two hours in closed session in the afternoon.
>
> Mr. Hoover declined any comment as he emerged. He was said on Senatorial authority to have told his hearers. . .

The story then elaborated on what Mr. Hoover said at the closed hearing according to the unidentified Senatorial authority, who might have been planting false information because of personal prejudices towards the FBI or might have been guilty of inaccuracies. The point is that the reader is depending on an unidentified man, other than the reporter, for his news. As a story is told, retold and then retold again, the chances for accuracy and clear writing lessen.

A lot of second-hand reporting can be eliminated. Congressmen, the state department, and the school board in

your home town can be convinced that they are not necessarily working at cross-purposes with the press and that many closed meetings should be opened.

There is no excuse for the attitude of the cabinet officer who, according to Homer Bigart of the New York *Herald Tribune,* has "openly boasted that he would not hesitate to tell a lie to a newspaperman if he thought that the lie 'was in the national interest.'" Mr. Bigart adds, "His friends remark that he always seems to be speaking in the national interest."

This confusion on the part of some officials, whether they are cabinet officers or local chamber of commerce secretaries, is what leads to closed meetings and forces reliance on second-hand news sources. Frequently these same officials are the ones who most often complain, "You can't believe anything you read in the papers."

Second-hand reporting can't always be avoided, but we can do a great deal to improve the realism of our writing.

Meyer Berger of the New York *Times* is a reporter who uses skill and ingenuity to make his writing realistic. Assigned to write about the suicide of a witness against the Murder, Inc. gang, he refused to be content with the routine police explanation of how the witness jumped from a hotel window.

"I got there several hours after it happened," Berger said, "but by standing in the same window from which he jumped and listening to the sounds that he must have heard and studying the lay of the ground below, I was able to go back and put into the story details that a lot of fellows had to leave out of theirs because they hadn't bothered to take that trouble."

The Brink Story

Coverage by the Boston press of the Brink's robbery furnished an example of four of these conditions of news reporting—the deadline, competition to beat rivals, the use of jargon and the leg man system—operating simultaneously to influence writing.

Brink's was robbed of about $1,500,000 in cash and checks at 7:10 p.m. the night of January 17. Police received the alarm at 7:28 p.m. Reporters were on the scene about half an hour later.

The Boston *Herald,* which had a 10:30 p.m. deadline for its first edition, sent two reporters and two photographers.

To begin with the reporters had to rely on second-hand accounts. Perhaps, some day, robbers will realize the value of publicity and issue press tickets for their escapades. Until that millennium arrives there is little that can be done to eliminate second-hand reporting of crime stories.

The five employees who were bound and gagged were emotionally upset. They were not trained observers. Their accounts were subject to all the prejudices, inaccuracies and exaggerations of any witnesses. Three weeks after the robbery there was still no agreement on the number of robbers. The Boston newspapers settled for seven active thieves plus two lookout men. *Life* magazine said either six or seven entered Brink's vault.

In order to have a story for the first edition, reporters had to write without knowing the exact amount of the loot. The story was written in chunks, leaving room for late developments which could be inserted and for a lead covering the most important developments up to the time of the deadline.

The lead in the first edition contradicted facts that had been written earlier and were contained in the body of the story. Composed in haste, the first lead was obscured by unimportant details:

VALUE OF COLUMNISTS

During the war the pressure was relaxed. There was more advertising than paper; the cost of living and, therefore, of producing a newspaper was not rising fast; and the cost of employing war correspondents was largely paid for by a grateful Army and Navy. But since 1946 costs have gone up steadily and staffs have, as a consequence, shrunk. There are few left of the great corps of foreign correspondents who worked in Europe and the East during the nineteen-thirties; one of them is Mr. A. T. Steele of the New York *Herald Tribune,* who is still abroad. Mr. Drew Middleton of the New York *Times* and Mr. Howard K. Smith of the Columbia Broadcasting System, both of whom began work in the last days of the golden period, are the only new names fit to place beside those of the men who awoke the United States to the danger of what was happening to the world before 1939.

To take the place of that brilliant band of individualists, there has been an extension of the use of the columnist and of the new agencies. The good columnists—Mr. Walter Lippmann, the Alsop Brothers, Mr. Marquis Childs, Miss Doris Fleeson and Mr. Thomas Stokes—though they must be tempted, when they remember the size of their readership, to become pontifical, have great value in a country where distance prevents any newspaper from getting more than a local—or at best a regional—following. For a few dollars a day an editor in a small town can get material he could not afford in any other way. But there are also bad columnists and ignorant ones. Recently, one of them gave a detailed account of very confidential decisions which, he said, had just been made by King George of Greece. Most of the editors who subscribed to his column forgot that King George had been dead two years, and printed the story.

—*The Economist,* Dec. 31, 1949

"Seven armed bandits, disguised by Halloween masks, cowed five armed employees of Brink's Express, Inc., on the second floor of the company's garage at Commercial and Pine Streets, North End, at 7:10 p.m. last night and escaped with more than $1,000,000."

The same story had this contradiction:

"An immediate check of the loss could not be made, but later last night it was reported that the figure would climb above $500,000."

Of course, "above $500,000" also can be "more than $1,000,000," but that doesn't clarify anything for the reader.

The second paragraph of the original story read:

"The robbery, the biggest in United States history, was so skillfully executed and well carried out that the million dollars might well have been more, for when the bandits left with their loot leaving the five workers bound and gagged on the floor, the vault of the company was still piled with money bags."

The writer generalized—"piled with money bags"—because at edition time he didn't know all the facts. Presumably the desk would have corrected his faulty phrasing and questionable logic had there been time. If the robbery was so "skillfully executed" why were several money bags left behind? If the need for speed were not so great couldn't the writer or the desk have improved the clause, "when the bandits left with their loot leaving the five workers bound and gagged?"

The lead in the second edition changed "seven armed bandits" to "nine gunmen." The lead and second paragraphs in the second edition corrected other faults of the original:

"Nine gunmen seized more than $1,000,000 in cash last night from the second floor of Brink's Inc. armored car firm, at the company's North End garage.

"They left another million dollars behind because they couldn't carry it."

The first five paragraphs of the original story were yanked and replaced by 15 paragraphs. The last 28 paragraphs of both stories, including the information that the loss "would climb above $500,000," were the same. It was not until the third edition that the discrepancy was eliminated.

The third edition story was substantially the same as that in the second edition. Three relatively unimportant paragraphs were inserted about a third of the way down and two paragraphs were cut.

The 5 a.m. edition of the *Herald* contained the erroneous information in the lead that the cash loot was $1,500,000. The final 6 a.m. extra corrected this to read "Nine gunmen seized an estimated $1,500,000, at least $1,000,000 of it in cash . . ." etc.

Some inaccuracies of the early Brink's story might have been eliminated or, at least, qualified. Reporters must learn to proceed with caution. If an official estimate of the loot is not available at the time the first edition goes to press, the reporter should say so rather than make estimates of his own or print the prevailing rumor. He is not justified in using the largest estimate in order to make his story more sensational. And he need not sacrifice accuracy for speed.

The fact that the length of a newspaper story is severely limited is another influence on writing. In one edition several paragraphs were lopped off the end of the Brink's story in order to make room for new developments that had to be inserted in the body of the story or added to the lead. The writer knew it might be cut from the bottom and wrote accordingly. Important facts were near the lead and paragraphs, for the most part, had to be separate, expendable entities.

The story was worth page one in the Boston press the day after it happened. It also rated the first page for another few days. But more than a week later it was still on the front page of the highly competitive Boston newspapers, though there were no new developments. Under pressure to create news, reporters furnished a headline a day—offering readers a choice of conflicting rumors.

As a result, reporters exaggerated the news. In order to meet the requirements of a front page story, they sensationalized routine clues and inflated the importance of routine investigations.

For example, a week after the robbery the Boston *Eve-*

Telling the Truth

Your newspaper editor or publisher is fully conscious of the broad, tacit license that you as individual citizens and the public generally—in your need, and desire, and right-to-know—have given him to pry into all sorts of matters and places.

He understands the faith and obligation that underlie this trust.

Unless he is a bad newspaperman, he believes implicitly in his duty to you to publish any useful information he can find—without any restraint except considerations of human decency, good taste, and the public welfare. He knows he is strictly accountable—legally or otherwise—for every item of news or comment he prints.

All these and other responsibilities he recognizes—but with rather uncomfortable knowledge that neither he nor any other newspaperman is anything approaching perfect.

He leaves that assumption of infallibility to the vociferous kibitzers, who, never having tried to handle the truth in print, fail to realize how difficult it is.

Charles E. Fell, managing editor,
Birmingham (Ala.) *News-Age-Herald*

ning Globe headline read: "Seek Holdup Stool Pigeon." The Boston *Traveler,* the same night, headlined, "Giant U. S. Holdup Plot."

The *Traveler* story was based on a statement from "an official at Cleveland police headquarters" who said, "The gang was planning another Brink holdup here—like the one in Boston."

The *Globe's* "stool pigeon" angle was built on nothing more substantial than the fact that the Boston police were questioning a lot of people in an effort to find a clue.

The *Traveler's* inflated headline was pricked by this paragraph in the *Globe*:

> In Cleveland, Detective Inspector James McArthur discounted reports another Brink's holdup had been planned there. He attributed the reports to "big publicity hounds in the police department."

Both the *Traveler* and the *Globe* editions containing these contradictory reports were on the news-stands at the same time.

A reporter assigned to the story claimed competition for street sales among Boston newspapers kept the Brink's story on page one long after it should have been buried inside.

"We'd take it off the front page if everybody else would," he said.

Another complicating factor was that the FBI stepped in on the second day. The FBI, when it is working on a case, is not a news source. Reporters who wanted to know what, if anything, the FBI was doing relied on second- and third-hand rumors or made up their own.

What Can Be Done?

Problems arising from the deadline, competition to beat rivals, and the use of jargon to create news are our own responsibility. We can't blame them on anybody else. What can we do about them?

Education is in part an answer to the problem of creating a news story when none exists. City editors have to learn that there isn't a good story at city hall every day. Even a million dollar robbery doesn't rate banner headlines automatically every day for two weeks.

There is enough legitimate news in our home towns which we don't cover or which we brush off to fill the space now used by contrived news stories.

Sometimes there is a good story in a 50th wedding anniversary. Why not send a reporter to cover it rather than carry two or three paragraphs listing the names of sons, daughters and grandchildren who attended the celebration? Reports of fires and accidents aren't the only news available at fire and police stations. We could do a lot more with school news, accounts of meetings, housing, labor and health on the local level. While important news is being neglected why waste the time of both the reporter and the reader digging for news that doesn't exist?

Max Ascoli, writing in *The Reporter,* recently commented that "The major trouble with the American press —daily and weekly—is that it doesn't give its readers or writers time to think."

When radio became a competitor of the newspaper in the 1920's some newspapermen thought the daily press was on the way out. Efforts were made to restrict radio's news sources and to limit news broadcasting.

A few newspapers refused to list radio programs or give the new medium any publicity. As late as 1933 newspapers called radio "unfair competition" and tried to curtail bulletins to news of "transcending importance" plus two five-minute digests daily.

By now experience should have proved to us that the fetish for speed, which was the basis of radio jitters, is exaggerated. Radio can and does broadcast news faster than we can write and print it. Our strong point is that we can give the news more thorough treatment and discuss it in all its dimensions.

Writing for a newspaper, we admit, imposes limitations in addition to those innate in the writer. In varying degrees these obstacles confront all reporters. But to some extent their influence on writing can be reduced.

Recognition that quality is more important than speed in the long run can lessen the urge of reporters and editors to sacrifice accuracy, news judgment and good writing in order to beat the competition to the news-stand. The use of jargon to create news can be eliminated if reporters become more willing to admit the failure of an idea to develop into a story and their editors accept their judgment. Increased confidence in the press and its ability to report facts accurately and fairly will do away with a lot of the closed doors that require second-hand news reporting. A story that necessarily comes from second-hand sources can be made more realistic by a little ingenuity on the part of the reporter. And even the effect of the deadline can be offset by the reporter and editor who stay with a good story and refuse to let go until they have squeezed it dry, no matter how long it takes.

THE COPY DESK

Has Editing Degenerated to 'Copy Fixing'?

The fear of doing something wrong drives too many copy readers to doing nothing at all. Here is an attempt to delve into the taboos and phobias that cripple the performance of many copy desks.

You can pass the buck for bad newspaper writing just so far. Eventually, it's bound to wind up on the desk of your top editing executive. The chances are good that it will stay right on that desk, producing little more effect than a mild twinge of conscience.

The good news editor is indeed a great man. He is cool, collected, and graciously diplomatic. He has nerves of steel, a sharp mind, and printer's ink in his veins. In moments of stress, he is the Great White Father who always knows the safe path to the next edition. Trouble is that too often he is also lazy, unimaginative or just plain scared. As a result, the paper goes to press on time and the poor reader goes on taking a beating. Instead of doing a real job of editing, the editor and his assistants around the copy desk continue to perform an outdated, pussyfooting job of copy-fixing.

A major portion of the cure for bad newspaper writing lies within the delegated powers of the editing personnel. There may be a few instances in which the finger of blame might accurately be pointed still higher—at the people who pay the bills and make the profits. But usually the finger is pointed that way when there is no reason for it. Even the meanest of mean old publishers isn't going to be unhappy if his paper is more intelligible to its readers.

This doesn't rule out the need for the publisher's backing in carrying out a series of writing reforms. It is always nice to have the publisher on your side. That shouldn't present a great problem. The editing executive has no business holding his high level job unless he has the confidence of his boss. The editor, in turn, should hand down that same confidence to his copy desk.

Scissors and Paste

Unfortunately, this rule of brotherly love and common sense doesn't obtain in most newspaper offices. So the editor plays it safe. Things are done the way they always have been done. On the copy desk specifically, the men continue to make their minute pencil marks while ignoring the broader changes and ideas which might make the full meaning of the news more accessible to the reader.

Probably the greatest handicap to intelligent editing is the tradition that the copy desk, even more than the original writer, must express no editorial opinion. This notion spreads out and works in many ways. Sometimes it leads to self-created obstacles which in the copyreader's mind, at least, are insurmountable. It leads to the practice of not making changes in the copy of so-called experts. It leads to taboos against making changes in anything under a wire service dateline. Most of all, it keeps the copyreader from telling all he knows. It keeps him from adding the background, interpretation and clarification so often necessary to the presentation of the complex news of today.

Those are high sounding words, but they need mean nothing more than the judicious use of scissors and paste. Not so long ago, the announcement of the price increase by United States Steel was banner line news all over the country. The Associated Press reported the news this way:

> PITTSBURGH, December 15 (AP)—United States Steel Corporation today boosted the price of steel about $4 a ton and put the blame on higher operating costs.
>
> The increase also made it probable that many consumer products, such as automobiles and refrigerators, will carry higher price tags.
>
> "New demands by the CIO United Steelworkers for wage increases are a virtual certainty. . ."

A good lead. Easy to read and easy to understand. The second and third paragraphs are admirably interpretive. The rest of the story is written equally well. Yet the story as it stands needs some important editing—editing which a preponderant majority of Associated Press newspapers did not do.

The twenty-sixth paragraph of that story states:

> "Record profits were chalked up in 1948 by United States Steel and other producers."

Twenty-four hours later the controversy provoked by those profits as against the price increase became one of the day's top stories. Certainly those profits should have played an important role in the telling of the story on the first day. The necessary changes would have been simple to make, yet few paste pots had a finger laid on them.

Desk men aren't stupid. They can spot a story when they see it. But they can also do a lot of thinking about whether it's worth telling that story. In the steel case, the

thinking probably went like this: "The AP buries the item about the profits . . . Maybe it's done on purpose . . . U. S. Steel is big business. My boss is big business They are all touchy about profits. . . . If I alter the AP story, maybe somebody will think I am against big profits. . . . Maybe I will get fired."

Not getting fired is a very good reason for not editing a story, but the whole line of reasoning is probably a lot of bunk. Newspapers are big business, but they are also in the business of selling news. (At least the honest ones are, and those are the only ones worth worrying about.) The steel profits were an important factor in the news—as the next day's events proved. Anyway, the point of all this is not that editors are showing too much deference to the monied interests. The steel price example is merely a typical instance where the editor's self-created inertia works to the detriment of the reading public.

Hot-Shot Expert

Elsewhere in this symposium there is a section on the problems of the specialized or technical writer. Until all such writers correct their faults, copyreaders will have to continue acting as their interpreters for the layman. It shouldn't be, but somehow the hot-shot expert is often as much in need of editing as the beginner who gets his tenses mixed in a story about a trolley crash. Maybe even more. Look at this story which was on page one of the New York *Times*. It was written by one of their veteran Washington correspondents:

> WASHINGTON, Jan 12—Congress was urged today in a report of a joint monetary subcommittee to restore the supremacy of the Federal Reserve System over the nation's credit structure and to instruct the Treasury to manage the public debt in conformity with the board's credit policy.
>
> The report was made to the Joint Committee on the Economic report by its subcommittee on monetary and fiscal policy of which Senator Paul H. Douglas, Democrat of Illinois, is chairman. He said the proposal, if adopted, would reverse the present situation, which finds the Federal Reserve credit policy dominated by the debt management policy of the treasury.
>
> Its principal recommendation was a clear-cut victory for Marriner S. Eccles, member and former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors.
>
> Mr. Eccles told the subcommittee during its extended hearings that the agency's prerogative in the credit field had been pre-empted by the Treasury's easy-money under almost any and all circumstances. As matters now stand the Federal Reserve has to support the price of government securities by open-market purchases or accept responsibility for failure of Treasury financing. . .

In the depths of all this tricky language is the core of an intelligible story. Using just a few more tools than scissors and paste, a good copyreader might have dug out this core, but even on the New York *Times* (which we assume hires only the best) nobody tried it.

Suppose someone did. Without going beyond the facts in the original story, he might have come up with something like this:

> WASHINGTON, Jan. 12—Marriner S. Eccles, Federal Reserve board member, today won an important round in his fight against easy credit policies of the Treasury Department.
>
> Mr. Eccles scored his victory in a report made by a Senate-House subcommittee of economic experts. The subcommittee, headed by Senator Paul H. Douglas (Dem., Ill.), strongly endorsed Mr. Eccles' argument that the Reserve board should be able to raise interest rates on Government bonds.
>
> A backstage row over such fiscal policies between Mr. Eccles and Secretary of the Treasury John W. Snyder had previously resulted in Mr. Eccles being demoted from his job as Federal Reserve chairman.
>
> At present, the Federal Reserve board is forced to support the price of Government securities—as set by Treasury policies. The subcommittee recommended that Congress require that the Treasury now bring its monetary actions into line with the Federal Reserve desires.
>
> The subcommittee is a . . .

It could be that Bernard Baruch would have preferred the first version. But how many copies of the New York *Times* can Mr. Baruch buy?

The Real Waste

There are two main barriers that obstruct the editing of the expert's copy. First there is the chief editor. He has to say it's all right to go ahead and edit. Then there is the copyreader. He has to know enough to do better than the expert did in the first place.

Lots of desk men stop right there. If they do they are either all wrong or their desk needs some changes. No copyreader has any right to handle a piece of copy he can't understand or clarify. That goes for the Federal Reserve system as well as for the local triangle murder. It's a rare desk on which every copyreader is qualified to handle all subjects, yet on all subjects there ought to be at least one qualified man—or a man who knows how to become qualified in a hurry.

This calls for some cooperation from management—cooperation which is bound to cost money. More money might attract better men, not just old reporters who have developed a tendency to sit down. More money would buy a bigger crew and consequently provide more time to work on the individual story. The copyreader should have time

to think, to do research and to edit. Maybe buy him a few books from time to time. Maybe even send him out to talk to live people at intervals. The money wouldn't be wasted. The real waste is in having editors with an inferiority complex.

Too Much, Too Soon

Not all the evil around the copy desk is evil of omission. Sometimes the people who edit newspapers do things, too. Sometimes these are things which shouldn't be done. When this happens, the reader suffers once again. Over-editing results in a stilted product which is probably legally and technically correct. But the average reader is neither a lawyer nor a technician.

The attitude that promotes over-editing is inherent in the job of copyreading. The search for the extra comma and the slipshod grammar promotes an interest in the little things. This is good if it doesn't get out of hand. (One old copyreader once outlived his usefulness when his sole interest became the correct spelling of "weird," "seize," and "siege." He would work these words into every piece of copy, no matter what the story was about.)

When the attitude of pettiness does take over it is responsible for most of the things that make the customer wonder why newspapers say it that way when nobody else does. The circumspect "alleged" is typical of the petty-minded copyreader. "Alleged" and its relatives are supposed to have magic powers which will ward off libel, moral responsibility of the newspaper and generally put all things into their proper perspective. It is true that some writers are also addicted to "alleged," but if they are they probably caught it from a copyreader.

How Libelous

On the question of libel itself, a textbook attitude by the copy desk often stifles good writing. It is quite difficult to avoid being libelous in a daily newspaper, but it isn't difficult to avoid getting into a libel suit. A good copyreader knows when a story is safe. Then he usually goes ahead and makes it safer. This is particularly unnecessary when the facts are known. Fearless journalism is an American byword. It also makes for better writing.

The following story from the San Francisco *Chronicle* may not be fearless but it is a good example of what can be done:

> The man known as Lawrence Seton Ross disintegrated yesterday.
>
> He sat with some show of shame on the witness stand from which he recently proclaimed Harry Bridges and Henry Schmidt members of the Communist party, and while an embarrassed hush fell over the courtroom, he pulled himself apart. . .

That's libelous, but good writing. The question in this case is: Need you be afraid of technically libeling a man who has in effect called himself a liar? In many such cases, the desk decides that you need be afraid. This makes good writers very unhappy.

Pay Off For All

Another normal attack on that story by the over-zealous editor might have been from the direction of "purple prose." Some desks think about that expression so much that all colorful writing becomes suspect. It isn't unusual for an editor to chuckle over a well-turned piece of copy, perhaps even pass it around for the enjoyment of his colleagues, and then go to work on it with a cold, hard pencil. The reader gets nice, clear language with his breakfast, but is spared the chuckle.

An enumeration of the malpractices of editors could go on without end. Ask any reporter. Editors distort stories to create headlines. They plan their makeup without regard to the content of the copy. They chop stories in the wrong places. They develop feuds with certain writers. They arbitrarily ban certain words. They beat their wives and bite their children.

All these things happen, sometimes with good reason and sometimes without. What the good newspaperman—both editor and writer—should realize is that in striving for better newspaper writing the interests of the editor and writer are the same. In the minds of both the paying customer should be uppermost.

The difference is that on the copy desk the editors have a chance to multiply all the original sins of bad writing and unintelligent presentation. Thus the good editor must be doubly wary and doubly wise. The best advice the editor-in-charge can give his crew is to develop a conscience and then to carry out its dictates vigorously and competently. It should pay off for everybody—even the publisher. It could be that more people would buy his newspaper if they could understand and enjoy all of it.

THE SHAPE OF THE STORY

An Analysis of the Craft of Telling News

Perhaps reporters aren't as tied down as they think by the conventions of news writing. At least, there are plenty of ways of getting around the standard top-heavy form of the story.

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. "Where shall I begin, please Your Majesty?" he asked.

"Begin at the beginning," the King said, very gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

This passage from *Alice in Wonderland* has been turned into a rule of writing. It has been called the greatest rule of writing that was ever laid down. Newspapermen might agree with the rule if they could define the terms. To them, the beginning is whatever statement spills the beans in the most precipitate manner. The body of the story is an inventory of additional facts, usually listed in the diminishing order of their value. The end is that portion which can be rubbed out with the least regret. And the total result is a top-heavy composition that is shaped like nothing else in the literary world.

Now, there are good reasons for this method of organizing an important news story:

First, it enables editors to throw a newspaper together faster. If an edition is going to press—and one usually is—the editors cannot wait for all stories to be complete. Often they can get only the first part of a story in type, maybe only the first paragraph to use as a bulletin. So they demand that in writing important news the main facts be placed near the top. Besides, they are constantly forced to cut stories to fit certain holes or to make way for other stories. The easiest and quickest method is to lop from the end upward. So they demand that in writing important news *no* main facts be placed near the bottom.

Second, it enables people to read the paper in a hurry and still be fairly well informed. Hardly anyone has the time or the endurance to read the whole paper. So each reader acts as his own editor, glancing from story to story, cutting short the ones he cares little about, reading to the end those that interest him the most. No matter where he stops reading a top-heavy story, he still has learned the gist of what's in it.

Third, it is the natural method by which one person breaks important news to another. When telling news, as distinguished from anecdote, he comes straight to the point: "It's a boy." "The Dodgers lost." "A plane just crashed in Main Street." "President Roosevelt is dead." "The war's over."

So it is clear that the standard top-heavy form—sometimes called the "inverted pyramid"—is firmly imbedded in the habits and needs of writers, editors, and readers. It is a condition of the newspaper trade. We may as well consider that it is here to stay.

At the same time, this condition of the trade exerts a serious influence upon the quality of writing. The method of beginning a story with its climax, so admirably designed for fast news-telling, is not so well adapted to effective story-telling.

The Top-Heavy Method

The top-heavy method does not make good prose impossible. But how it limits the opportunities! It nearly kills any chance of structural unity, or any structure at all, because the writer cannot build toward a high point of interest or carry the action along toward any particular destination. It cuts down on his use of narrative. It goes far toward depriving him of suspense, as a means of holding the reader. Because of these deprivations he finds it very difficult to exercise what is usually called the "art of story-telling." True, he is skillful in the "art of news-telling." But the price he pays for his skill is the limiting of his opportunity to offer incentives for the readers to read on. The newspaper industry, by making it *unnecessary* for busy people to read an entire story, has also made it more *unlikely* that they will do so. The news writer, when using the standard form, is hardly ever able to "begin at the beginning" and go on to relate one happening after another until he reaches a natural stopping place.

This handicap is not the only effect of top-heaviness. The top-heavy form, by its very nature, focuses attention on the beginning of the story. Therefore news writers, by extra effort, often lead off with good prose; but sometimes they try so hard to be exciting that the first sentence is shrill with adjectives. Moreover the top-heavy method has caused many a story to begin with a monstrosity—a bulging, dangling sentence that summarizes all of the important and some of the trivial facts of the story. Happily, this extreme form of top-heaviness and bad writing is becoming obsolete, as we shall see later. But it is not yet entirely gone.

In the body of the story, the standard form reduces a writer's ability to be coherent. This is because facts, or groups of facts, are often recited as separate units, in the

order of their capacity to excite. They are rarely developed in a smooth, connected manner, as ideas might be arranged by an essayist who knew in advance that the whole essay would be printed and that all his readers would read till the last word. The news writer, who manifestly cannot have those comfortable assurances, must busy himself with packing all the essential facts as close to the top as possible. He is reluctant to allow anything to push an important piece of information downward toward the precarious tail-end. So he sometimes neglects to place high in the story the background material which the readers need in order to understand what the information means.

Further, his efforts to be smooth and coherent may be hindered by the need to return a second or even a third time to facts that he has already mentioned. Suppose him to be covering the coal labor case on a day like February 11, 1950. On that date came the following developments: a board of inquiry reported to President Truman; a judge issued a restraining order against John L. Lewis; Lewis ordered an end to the strike; Lewis informed the mine owners that he was ready to resume bargaining; and miners in Pennsylvania seemed ready to defy the government. Each of those developments needs elaborating. But good news-telling requires that all of them be told in the first few paragraphs. So the explanations and details must come below. With skill and a little time, the strands can be woven together in a neat manner. But it is absurdly easy to confuse the readers during the process of backing and filling. And the least skillful reporters fall victim to repetitions and paraphrases of their own previous statements.

So now the problem is squarely faced. We have shown that the standard form of the news story is here to stay. We have also shown that the standard form is to blame for much of the bad writing that appears in the daily papers. It remains to show—or at least to suggest—a few ways in which the problem can be attacked. For in spite of all that we have said, reporters can do much to reduce the bad effects of the "inverted pyramid."

The Natural Way

One progressive step that a reporter can take is to recognize that the standard form does not rule the whole newspaper. There are areas where the reporter may deviate from it or ditch it altogether without committing a crime.

Almost everyone would agree that in writing an editorial, or a book review, or a column, or a feature story, there is rarely a blazing need to sum up the whole piece in the first few sentences. Of course the writer tries to make a good beginning—to get the reader interested—and that is true even in a short story or a novel. But he has no compulsion to make a clean breast of things with indecent haste. Therefore he has more freedom to arrange his material in a clear and effective sequence.

Now this is also true of certain news stories. Especially is it true of news that has little "importance" but much "human interest." When there is less need for fast news-telling, there is more room for good story-telling. Many newspapermen have learned the trick of relating an episode from life in unorthodox narrative style. Here are the openings of three different stories found in the San Francisco *Chronicle:*

> Robert T. Grace is shy. Particularly when it comes to nudes.
>
> * * *
>
> "You're pretty nice for a cop," said James Hayes to Officer Edward Naughton as he puffed at Naughton's cigarette and waited for the patrol wagon. "I might as well confess and let you get the credit."
>
> * * *
>
> The Case of the Conscience-Stricken Car Thief was added to the files of the Oakland Police Department yesterday.

Sometimes, if the story is brief, the climax can be deferred until the very last line, with forceful effect. This practice has limitations: it requires the re-education of headline writers, who usually spoil the fun, when you delay the point, by putting the point in the headline; it also places an additional strain on makeup editors because of the difficulty of cutting such a story once it is in type. But it can be done, and is being done successfully on some papers. The practical difficulties only emphasize this valuable truth: that the improvement of writing is not a matter for writers alone; it is a cooperative enterprise.

On December 14, 1942, a story in the Chicago *Daily News* began as follows:

> SOMEWHERE IN AUSTRALIA—"They are giving him ether now," was what they said back in the aft torpedo rooms.
>
> "He's gone under, and they're ready to cut him open," the crew whispered, sitting on their pipe bunks cramped between torpedoes.
>
> One man went forward and put his arm quietly around the shoulder of another man who was handling the bow diving planes.
>
> "Keep her steady, Jake," he said. "They've just made the first cut. They're feeling around for it now."

This was the start of George Weller's story of how a 23-year-old pharmacist's mate and other crewmen performed an emergency appendectomy aboard a submerged submarine in enemy waters, with the nearest competent American surgeon thousands of miles away. Weller could have told all that in the beginning, and could have disclosed at once whether the patient lived or died. He

had a better way. Incidentally the story got a Pulitzer Prize.

A story does not have to be tragic, or terribly funny, or loaded with drama, to get unorthodox treatment. Many "routine" stories can be lifted out of their dullness by an imaginative approach. Suppose a railroad engineer retires. Some reporters would, by habit, begin by reporting the retirement—a news-telling approach—and only the engineer's family and friends would be much interested. A reporter on the New York *Times* had a better beginning:

> Ernest Evans pulled his motorman's cap down tight on his head and turned to the photographers.
>
> "If you want to take my picture," he said, "you'll have to do it with my cap on. Without it I look 100 years old, and I really won't be 70 until next November."
>
> The flash bulbs popped. Mr. Evans grinned, pulled the throttle, and train No. 75 pulled out of Pennsylvania Station yesterday for Philadelphia. It was Mr. Evans' last run after fifty years of service with the railroad system. . .

We skip now to the last paragraph of the story:

> "I've got only one hobby," he said. "That'll be playing with my little grandson when he starts running his electric trains around the house. I just love those electric trains."

On Valentine Day, 1950, a reporter in Washington sat down to write. He began by noting that it was the date when Cupid was supposed to be going around with his arrows. Then, in several paragraphs, he described the unhappy state of the world, as reflected in the headlines. The rest of the story follows:

> I got to thinking about this while riding in on the bus this morning.
>
> It was a gloomy, unvalentine-like morning, with a sullen rain drooling from a glowering sky.
>
> The bus stopped, and a little fellow who looked just big enough to be a first-grader clambered aboard. He had on a black slicker with helmet to match. The helmet was too large, and it fell down over his eyes, so that all you could see were two rosy cheeks.
>
> The boy started to hunt for his nickel—and promptly dropped the valentine he was carrying. Then he dropped the nickel. He stepped on the valentine and picked up the nickel. He picked up the valentine and dropped the nickel.
>
> Everyone was watching, by now, and everyone, I think, was relieved when he got the nickel in the box and sat down to wipe the smudges off the valentine.
>
> They didn't come off very well, but a first-grader is philosophical about these things. He looked up cheerfully and for the first time noticed that he was the center of attention.
>
> He smiled shyly and said, "It's for Mary," as if that explained everything. And I guess it did.
>
> That's all there is to it. But I thought that Cupid—and maybe you, too—might like to know that there's still a market in this world for the bow-and-arrow business.

The writer of the story was Arthur Edson of the Associated Press. The story moved on the Associated Press wires in the midst of a steady flow of important news. Papers all over the country made room for it.

So there are stories—more stories than some reporters realize—which need not be under the tyranny of the top-heavy form. We have no formula for determining precisely when the top-heavy form must be used and when it may be rejected. News is infinitely various, reporters are individuals with different capacities and tastes, and their editors are individuals with different demands. But we do believe that if a reporter understands the *reasons* for the standard form, and uses it only on stories where a good *reason* applies, he will find more freedom for good writing.

For Urgent News

On the other hand, when it comes to news of urgent interest, the top-heavy method can hardly ever be avoided. We have heard of no better way to tell such news than to tell it forthwith, and put all the most urgently interesting

To Save Readers

Excerpt from letters and instructions of William Randolph Hearst to executives of Hearst newspapers:

There is no question that papers are made more readable by short stories. . . . Please bear in mind that we are not making short stories to save money, we are making them to save readers. We are winnowing for our readers the interesting essentials, or rather the facts of essential interest, and discarding the chaff.

We are doing the work. Our readers are not paid to work; we are. Our readers will not continue to work. They want to be informed and entertained, and they want us to say whatever we have to say briefly and interestingly. Nobody likes a long article any more than they like a long speech.

Of course when a big story of vital interest comes along, I do not have to tell you that you can give that story some space; but not too much space. Otherwise you will make such a story dull, or at least hard to read.

Please have no time for long stories. Take the time to be brief.

Letter to the managing editor of the New York *American,* Jan. 21, 1936.

facts in a conspicuous position. When a passenger plane catches fire in mid-air and crashes in a city street, it may be effective for a news magazine, days later, to start its account with the takeoff of the plane and describe what happened as a connected narrative. But the daily paper's function is to report the news in a form that enables the reader to see immediately what happened. When the Senate votes on an important bill, there may be scores of afternoon papers that barely have time to rush one paragraph into the next edition. It would be inconvenient if that paragraph omitted to say whether the bill was approved. And even a morning paper, which does not go to press until several hours later, assumes that its readers still want a clear, quick picture of the event. The assumption is correct. Very few subscribers at their breakfast tables the next morning would wish to read a thousand words about the Senate debate, even though well written, before arriving at the outcome of the vote. Their reading habits are not geared to that sort of thing, and anyhow most of them lack the time. They would rather read first about the outcome and what it will mean to the country, and if possible to *them*. At that point they will decide whether to read the details.

So the question is this: when a reporter writes a story in which he *must* use the top-heavy form, how can he hold its bad effects to a minimum?

One way is to avoid being *too* top-heavy. There is no need to tell everything in one sentence.

Now the newspaper lead, or introduction, has been getting shorter in recent years. The term *lead* has several meanings: it can mean the first sentence, the first paragraph, or the first few paragraphs; or sometimes it means a complete story, like the "night leads" of the press associations. Here we shall use the term to mean the first sentence only. Leads have been getting shorter, as we said, and this shortening is one of the most noticeable changes in news writing that has taken place in the twentieth century.

We cannot supply a list of all the forces that have brought the change about. But there can be no question that the press associations have given the movement a great push. It is not the first time that these agencies have influenced the writing techniques of the press. Indeed, they had much to do with bringing the "inverted pyramid" into general use; for it was (and is) quite impracticable for a press association to send important news to a large number of papers in any other form. And then, in the 1940's, the United Press and the Associated Press embarked on readability campaigns to simplify all their language and particularly their leads. Many papers, too, hired experts to advise them to take pity on the readers. Other papers joined in, not wishing to be out-simplified by their rivals.

The result has been fairly obvious. But we wanted further evidence, to satisfy ourselves that the new custom of shorter leads has really penetrated deep. We resolved to make an investigation of the New York *Times*. We figured that if the *Times,* with its aversion to perceptible alterations, has shortened *its* leads, then the movement must be far more than a fad.

So we looked up the *Times* for January 1940, and counted the words in the leads of all the page one stories by *Times* staff writers, throughout the month. And we did the same for January 1950, ten years later. Sure enough, the leads got shorter. The average lead shrank from 39 to 32 words.

The *Times* had a more tolerant attitude toward gargantuan opening sentences in 1940. Three leads in January of that year exceeded 70 words. One of them:

> Registering "an acute sense of disgust" with the practices of the National Labor Relations Board as revealed in the current Congressional investigation, Judge Thomas D. Thacher, former Solicitor General of the United States, told the State Bar Association yesterday that most of the evils of administrative agencies performing judicial or quasi-judicial functions, Federal and State, have resulted from violation of "the most fundamental principle of common justice, that a man cannot be a judge in his own cause."

There was another sentence in the same paragraph, but we didn't count that.

In January 1940 there was a total of 10 leads that exceeded 60 words. All told, there were 52 leads which ran 50 words or longer.

In January 1950, by contrast, there were no leads over 70 words. There were no leads over 60 words. And there were only 11 leads of 50 words or longer. By 1950 you could find quite a few leads that were lean and bare and did not need to be read twice to be comprehended. For example:

> WASHINGTON, Jan. 20—The House, by a vote of 236 to 183, refused today to restore to the Rules Committee its old powers to pigeonhole legislation.
>
> * * *
>
> LONDON, Jan. 10—Britain's election was fixed today for Feb. 23.
>
> * * *
>
> The New York World-Telegram announced yesterday that it had purchased The Sun and would merge the two papers under the title The World-Telegram and The Sun, beginning today.
>
> * * *
>
> WASHINGTON, Jan. 31—President Truman announced today that he had ordered the Atomic Energy Commission to produce the hydrogen bomb.

This change is illustrative, in a general way, of what has happened throughout the American press. We can also find in the *Times* (February 15, 1950) an illustration of the

fact that occasionally a lead of old-fashioned length still gets in the papers. Here it is:

> WASHINGTON, Feb. 14—In the age of atomic energy, transmuted into a weapon which can destroy great cities and the best works of civilization, and in the shadow of a hydrogen detonant which could multiply many times that agent of destruction, a serene President of the United States sits in the White House with undiminished confidence in the triumph of humanity's better nature and the progress of his own efforts to achieve abiding peace.

One of the foolish ideas of the past was that a lead was supposed to answer the questions who? what? where? when? why? and sometimes how? At least the textbooks of journalism said it was. And most newspapermen of fifteen or twenty years ago followed the general idea of the "five w's," though they may not have thought of it in those terms. Some of those wide-spreading leads could be aptly compared with a shotgun blast, peppering the whole target. The kind of lead that is considered fashionable nowadays is more like a rifle shot. It still is designed to make a big noise, but it seeks the bull's eye with a single bullet. Leads as short as this are not unusual in newspapers now:

> Traffic Judge J. E. Hutchins was fired today.
>
> * * *
>
> Alger Hiss was sentenced today to five years in a federal penitentiary.
>
> * * *
>
> The home front became the only front today.
>
> * * *
>
> The Reverend Francis J. Maddock went into brisk training today for a bout with a ghost.

Of course most leads remain longer than that, and most leads have to be, in order to make sense. We oppose rigid rules that limit the number of words to 14, or 30, or any other particular figure. We do not believe that good sentences are made by brevity alone. A given sentence of 50 words may be incomparably better than another of 20.

But in general it is vastly more difficult to compose a good long sentence than a good short one; and we think the present movement toward simpler leads is a healthy one and should continue.

The Momentum of the Story

The lead having been written, what about the rest of the story? How can it be well organized in spite of the fact that it tapers?

It seems to us that the central problem here is one of *connections*. The reporter, when he sits down to write, has certain items, or "angles," that he wants to get in the story. Let us suppose that he is reporting a fire, and that he has already written his lead, in which he has said that flames driven by a hard wind destroyed a row of seven tumbledown houses and a lumber yard in West End last night. Many other items are in his mind, jockeying for position. Among them, perhaps, are things like this: name of lumber company and exact location of fire; three firemen injured; estimates of property loss; the number of alarms and amount of fire equipment on the scene; thousands of spectators; theory as to origin of fire; investigation planned; 43 people forced to leave homes. Some items can be told in one sentence. Others require many paragraphs. How is he going to arrange the items? He will arrange them according to the value he places on them. Therefore, as we have seen, he is not likely to build an artistic unified structure. But at least he can furnish connections between the items, and connections within items. Better connections help make better writing, because they bring smoother reading.

Connections are sometimes visible. When you end a sentence with a colon, you connect it with what follows. When you line up a group of parallel ideas or happenings and number them 1, 2, 3, you connect them with one another. When you begin a sentence with "But," "And," "Then," "Next," "Later," "At the same time," "Meanwhile," "On the other hand," "Besides," "Therefore," or some such expression, you connect the sentence with what went before. When you write a sentence like "But not all Republicans opposed the President's policy," you are connecting it with what went before and also with what is coming next; thus you are bridging a gap from one item to another. When you write "This was important because . . . ," you are connecting a single item with the subject as a whole.

Such connections can be of the greatest value; yet they are often edited out on the ground of wordiness. We believe that such editing should be done with caution. It may sacrifice more in clearness than it gains in space. When a writer consistently omits—or an editor consistently knocks out—the words, phrases, and sentences that act as connecting links, he is likely to produce stories that look as if all the items have been written separately, then sorted and pasted in order. Unfortunately, that's the way many news stories *do* look.

But not all connections are visible. The most effective connections are created by the momentum of the story itself. In other words, by the use of narrative.

We have already suggested that the top-heavy form be discarded, on occasion, in favor of a simple narrative treatment. Now we suggest that even where the top-heavy form is unavoidable, there is usually room for narrative. Take our story of the fire in West End. The use of narrative is *limited* because all the events cannot be told in the order in which they occurred; the reporter cannot give one connected account moving in a line from beginning

to end like a short story. But narrative is not ruled out altogether. Many of the items in the fire story deserve narrative treatment. The story is not a mere bundle of accomplished facts—charred wreckage, lost wealth, firemen in the hospital. Things happened: flames advanced from house to house; the occupants fled; crowds gathered; firemen struggled. These happenings should be told in a way that makes the reader "see." They can be told this way regardless of what order the items are in.

Narrative not only makes the reader "see"; it also keeps him interested. Suppose a baseball game is broken up by a home run in the ninth inning. The writer reports that fact in his lead—the top-heavy treatment. But somewhere in the body of the story, he makes a detailed narrative out of the events in the ninth inning leading up to the climax. And if he handles it well, there is a certain suspense about it. It is not the "whodunit" kind of suspense which would exist if the reader were in the dark as to the outcome. It is the kind of suspense that has been aptly called "waiting for the expected." Here, truly, is a formidable weapon for resisting the domination of the "inverted pyramid."

Sometimes quite a sizable stretch of narrative can be used under a top-heavy beginning. When Alger Hiss was sentenced to prison in January 1950, the New York *Herald Tribune* organized its story as follows: The first few paragraphs told the essential facts such as the sentence, the appeal, some background on Hiss's conviction and on Hiss himself. The next 23 paragraphs told what happened in chronological order from the moment Mr. and Mrs. Hiss entered the courtroom until they got in a taxicab two hours later. It was easy for a reader to imagine himself on the scene. The story ended with a few paragraphs on future legal procedure.

Of course some stories do not lend themselves readily to narrative treatment, even in part. When you write a story based upon an executive order, an official statement, or the advance text of a speech, it is hard to make the reader "see" anything, visually, that is. The task there is to make him understand. Even so, opportunities for narrative touches bob up in unexpected places. But it is dangerous to strain too hard for them. For example, it is inexcusable to describe crowd reactions to a speech that you are reporting beforehand from an advance text. We believe that news writing can be improved by the use of more narrative, but we are talking about truthful narrative—not fiction. If we must choose between a dull but accurate story and a sparkling but inaccurate one, we'll take dullness.

The Tail-End

Now for a few words about the tail-end of the standard top-heavy news story. The end is usually the least interesting part. Ideally, it should not be. Granted, few readers ever get that far. But those few customers would come away better satisfied if the end were more interesting. Perhaps they would even begin reading to the end of more stories, if a small reward sometimes waited there.

We are not suggesting that the reporter can save one of his really important items for the conclusion. But we do suggest that if he has a less important item that would make an appropriate ending, he should not hesitate to use it. An "appropriate ending" might be one with a chuckle in it, or one that returns with a twist to the main theme of the story, or that leaves the reader with something to reflect upon. If this ending gets lost in the shuffle of sending the paper to press, no tragedy has occurred. If it rides through into print, the story is better organized. Such endings, however, are hard to find. If they give the appearance of being contrived, the copy desk should kill them. Here is an example of a good ending to a news story in the New York *Times* about the restoration of the White House:

> William H. Kelley, Government project manager, shares the admiration of many of the builders for the carpentry, masonry and plastering of 1817. However, he observed today that, for all the fine hand work, the building only lasted about 150 years, and he expects the new interior to be standing firm at the end of another 500.

The mere suggestion of an effective ending to a standard news story would surprise some makeup editors, who operate on the theory that a story in type may be cut blindly at any point at all. This theory has had weird results, and might at any time produce an ending like this:

> Then the district attorney asked:
> "Where were you on the night of November 3?"
> The witness hesitated. He coughed nervously.

But the better makeup editors of today do not practice blind cutting except in a real emergency. Ordinarily they examine the patient before operating. If they like an ending, they may find it just possible to preserve it by lifting out some paragraph higher up.

We have considered the organization of the news story from its rifle bullet beginning to its unsatisfying end. The standard top-heavy form is the best way to tell important news. Yet it causes many of our literary defects. Thus newspapermen who are interested in good writing are caught in a dilemma. Probably they can never completely reconcile the top-heavy form with story-telling excellence. But they can go far in that direction. They don't have to use the top-heavy form in all stories. And when they do have to use it, they can avoid some of its pitfalls. They can begin with a clean and solid statement; they can take care to provide connections so that the reader will move smoothly along; they can use narrative whenever it is consistent with accuracy and the news-telling function. And maybe, occasionally, they can hit upon a pleasant ending that will see the light of day in print.

REPORTING 'BACKGROUND'

You Can Interpret and Still Retain Objectivity

Just reporting the spot development won't do in all situations. The news has a meaning, and there is a way to explain it. Unless we do, important news always will run second to Li'l Abner.

The elderly man folded his newspaper, crossed his polished shoes and stared across the subway aisle. He had just finished reading an article about the ECA. It went like this:

> WASHINGTON, Jan. 24—This government has entered reservations to the European currency union plan now being developed between the Economic Cooperation Administration and the Marshall Plan governments in Paris.
>
> The reservations insisted upon by a majority membership of the National Advisory Council on international financial and monetary problems were these:
>
> 1. That any clearing agency established to carry out the currency union plan must be contrived so as not to conflict with the operations of the International Monetary Fund or the obligations of the Bretton Woods agreement establishing that agency.
>
> 2. That the United States may not be represented on the board of the clearing agency, as originally contemplated by the ECA. Direct participation in the decisions of the clearing agency would be inconsistent with the United States representation on the executive board of the International Monetary Fund. . ."

The article ran for a half column on page one and a column and a half on page two in this manner. The man had read it meticulously to the end. His total impression was a confused conglomeration of inter-global dollar signs. No wonder the readers prefer Li'l Abner.

The newspaper profession would call this story "strictly factual" and so it is. There is no slant, no bias, no prejudice. You just can't understand it.

It is an example of objectivity carried to the point of unintelligibility. That's the first obstacle to interpretive reporting—an unrealistic regard for objectivity. Objectivity becomes unrealistic whenever it prevents the use of explanatory material in an array of facts and assertions that is confusing without it.

Somewhere a city editor is always saying: "You can't write that unless you can quote somebody." Most of the time he doesn't even get a chance to say it. The writer just decides: "I can't write that unless I can quote somebody," and so he doesn't write it. Then objectivity becomes a mental block. Many times the reporter doesn't write things he could write—simply because he thinks he can't.

Let us make clear that this isn't a condemnation of objectivity as such. But if the newspaper is to do the job that it should do in a democracy, where things eventually are decided by the people, the reader is entitled to his objectivity served up in a form that he can understand. Not everybody is an expert on the ECA. Some readers can't tell a clearing agency from an international monetary fund without a scorecard. And it's up to the interpretive reporter to provide the scorecard, in the form of explanatory material, definitions and background. The writer should come down from the clouds of "international financial and monetary problems" and tell his readers, frankly and informally, "This means that . . ."

The rise of the columnist epitomized among other things, the need for interpretive reporting of great events. The late Raymond Clapper, according to his wife, undertook his first assignment as a columnist with great misgivings. Clapper doubted that he would be a success because he did not get up each morning white hot with anger over some person or event.

"Who would want to read me?" he asked.

He was a great success, not because his pieces made you grab a pen and write your congressman, but because he was a great interpretive reporter, who left you understanding, a little better than you did before, the nature of the news. Apparently that's what the readers—Clapper's readers, anyway—really wanted.

Since the time Clapper began his column, newspapers have shaken loose from many of their old false fears concerning interpretation. The Associated Press, whose bible is objectivity, and whose masters are all the member papers, is no longer reluctant to insert explanatory, interpretive material in otherwise straight news stories. As a sample, the following was the third paragraph in an Associated Press labor story concerning proposed amendments to the Taft-Hartley act:

> They would continue the present ban on closed shop contracts but permit the making of "preferential hiring" contracts. Both types are banned by the Taft-Hartley act. In a closed shop, only union men can be hired. "Preferential hiring" means the employer must hire union men if they are available.

Thus the writer didn't leave his reader wondering about the difference between two terms—"preferential hiring" and "closed shop"—which are common at the collective bargaining table, but which may not be readily understood by those with only a casual interest in labor matters.

Slavish Objectivity

Slavish objectivity defeats its own purpose when it results in a slanted story—because it gives the reader a slanted perspective. Politicians are among those who know this—and are happy to use the knowledge.

Tennessee newspapers during the 1947 campaign had the job of covering the campaign of B. Carroll Reece for the United States senate. Mr. Reece had just been deposed as chairman of the Republican National committee. President Truman's Civil Rights program was an issue in the south; a new party had arisen, calling itself the "States Rights Democrats"; politically, things were in turmoil.

Mr. Reece brought his campaign to the rich Mississippi flood plains section of Tennessee where cotton, if no longer king, has at least left its impress upon the culture of the people. There he made a play for the Dixiecrat votes.

"We of the Southland," he said in a speech at Memphis, "are facing issues as grave as any that ever confronted a people. Bluntly, it is for us to determine here and now whether we are to preserve the glorious heritage of our forefathers, or whether we are to permit ourselves to become engulfed by the alien-minded forces that have been dominating our government in Washington."

Warming to his subject, he declared:

"This motley crowd (dominating government) speaks with such a variety of accent, all of them un-American, that they sound like the tongues of Babel. These mixed tongues are chanting many themes that are utterly offensive to our American instincts. None is more offensive than their chant that 'States' Rights' must give way to human rights."

Since this is a direct quote, Mr. Reece is responsible for the grammar as well as the sentiments in the paragraph that follows:

"Under this sweet-sounding slogan is a snake in the grass as vicious as any reptile we have ever encountered. Herein lies the efforts of men who are either recent immigrants to our shores or whose ideas of government are immigrant to our shores—to move in on our system of States' Rights for the kill. . . . We of the South shall throw their pretty phrases back in their teeth. We say to them that the South has always preserved human rights . . ."

Straight-laced reporting of this speech, under some such headline as "ALIENS CONTROL U. S. GOVERNMENT, WARNS REECE" would have been the traditionally objective method of news handling. However, The Memphis Press-Scimitar in an interpretive article filled in the background information that Mr. Reece previously had made a speech at Buffalo, N. Y., in which he said:

"This element (the Southern Democrats) which of course stemmed from the slave-holding oligarchy which once plunged this nation into a bloody war to preserve the institution of slavery, is the group which still maintains itself in power in a large section of this country by the practice of outrageous racial discrimination, preventing millions of American citizens from exercising the right to vote.

"It is the element of the party which inaugurated Jim Crow laws; the element which had pushed discrimination into the North . . ."

The interpretive article was headed: "Reece versus Reece."

Thus, the interpretive writer merely filled in the background. He did not draw conclusions. He gave the reader the additional information he needed to draw his own conclusions. That is real objectivity. Any other handling of the story—just reporting what Reece said at Memphis, for example—would be false objectivity. It would not give a true picture of the candidate before the people.

Over on the editorial page, the paper said: "Reece is conducting a two-faced campaign," which illustrates the difference between the editorial writer's job and the interpretive writer's job. One sets forth conclusions, after a preamble of facts. The other provides the grist from which the citizen can inform himself and draw his own conclusions.

"But this may not be possible," you object. "The newspaper may not have had that Buffalo speech."

True. We can only say that the newspaper should have had the Buffalo speech, and that the interpretive and background reporters should not be afraid of morgue files and libraries. In addition, they should be ever ready to gamble a little time and effort on a hunch. They should have known that Memphis speech sounded hollow from a recently deposed chairman of the Republican National Committee.

The Most Important Quality

Energy, enterprise, urbanity, courage, ingenuity—all these qualities are desirable for newspapermen and are advertised as such. But the most important quality for newspapermen in the years ahead is far too little stressed. It is that basic scholarship from which a writer can derive understanding of what he is writing about; it is that scholarship which he must possess if he is to clarify, rather than further confuse, public thinking about the rapidly changing world on which newspapers claim to give reliable information.

Felix Morley, editor and educator, Mellett Memorial Lecture, Columbia University, May 13, 1940.

Laziness on the part of the reporter and a lack of imagination on the part of the editors frequently account for the absence of this kind of journalism. It's easier—and quicker—"just to write what the man says." Such sloppiness doesn't pay off over the years. The paper that does the background and interpretive job is the paper that gets and holds readers and their respect.

Matter of Judgment

This kind of treatment cannot—and should not—be over done. We don't mean to imply that reporters should go to every political speech with an armload of the candidate's prior utterances, anxious to quibble over a turn of phrase. There aren't any rules of thumb to dictate "now you do it, now you don't." It's a matter of judgment—and the judgment should be undertaken fairly and impartially. If we were going to manufacture a rule, we would say that the reporters and their editors should always keep in mind their first obligation—that of accurately and competely informing their readers. If a report of the candidate's speech, or statement, is sufficient to accomplish this end, then a simple report is all that is needed. If such a simple report, however, would misinform the reader as to the candidate and his position, then it's time for the newspaper to shoulder its responsibilities and supply the missing information.

Of course, interpretive reporting is subject to errors, since all interpretive reporters are human. The interpretive reporter must choose his words and facts with care. Sometimes, a word makes a lot of difference in meaning. Jack Bell, who was covering Gov. Dewey's presidential campaign train for the Associated Press, wrote: " 'That's the first time I ever had a lunatic engineer,' Mr. Dewey said sharply." The word was garbled in transmission and the AP desk in New York made it read "facetiously." The change—"sharply" to "facetiously"—gave the remark a different interpretation.

And Sen. Hubert Humphreys, faced with one of his own statements, stoutly proclaimed: "If I said that, I was misquoted." Sen. Humphreys was right in both instances. He did say it, and because it was lifted from context, he was misquoted in effect.

Interpretive Reporting

Interpretive reporting also is subject to abuse. Not all newspapers are virtuous and not all newspapermen are without their ax to grind. Yet the profession and the public have far more to gain than they have to lose from interpretive reporting. James B. Reston, diplomatic reporter for the New York *Times,* remarked recently:

"I think our future depends on our developing adequate and intelligent means of explaining what is going on in the world. The news is getting more complicated every year. Without an explanation, the mere fact that the President has proposed to send Vinson to Moscow would have no meaning . . . Straight news reporting of such stories leads them to uses for which they were never intended."

Interpretive articles frequently result in fascinating, as well as instructive, reading. During the past few years, bills have been introduced in various state legislatures captioned in words similar to this example from Tennessee: "The Cigarette Unfair Sales Act." The Tennessee bill, which is typical, provided that the use of cigarettes by merchants as "loss leaders" (sold below cost) is "unfair trade competition." It then defined "below cost" sales as those which do not provide a specific percentage markup for the wholesaler and a specific markup for the retailer.

"That's My Baby"

It isn't always possible to give full interpretation with the first day's story. The first day's news handling of the cigarette bill on one Tennessee newspaper consisted of an account of the contents of the bill, a statement by legislative sponsors of their reasons for proposing it—"protecting the small merchants from the vicious, price-cutting chains"—and a calculation as to what the price of cigarettes would be to consumers should it become law.

The "institutional character" of this newspaper came into play here. An editorial conference was held. Some advocated: "Let's beat this thing to a pulp right now." Others took the view: "Now wait just a minute. There's a lot to this unfair trade stuff. Much can be said for it and much can be said against it. Let's not jump into things. This paper is a great institution."

And so a staff member was assigned to dig into the history of unfair trade legislation. The history made fascinating reading—and it was timely, too, because there, in the background, lurked that bill which, if passed, would increase the profit of every tobacco counter and the price of cigarettes to every smoker. Unfair trade laws already on the state's statute books were examined. A series of articles unfolded the story of the lobby which had successfully pushed through Congress and scores of state legislatures "fair trade acts" covering hundreds of articles in daily use, from razor blades up. Figures were obtained from the Consumers' Council showing what fair trade does to the consumer's budget—a story of the excesses to which unbridled competition leads, topped perhaps by the antics of a St. Petersburg, Fla., drug store which once sold $1 bills at 50 cents each and presumably made up the loss by markups on other products, the true value of which was not so well known to unwary customers.

For his concluding article, the writer interviewed a wholesale tobacco dealer who was said to be the "father" of the proposed "Cigarette Unfair Sales Act."

"Yes sir, that's my baby," the tobacco dealer said, and told how he had drawn the bill now in the legislative hoppers and how he had lined up the state's retailers and wholesalers behind it. He explained that he was interested in the "little fellow" who couldn't afford losses on cigarettes.

When the writer returned to the newspaper office after his interview, he found that one of those rare coincidences had occurred. Ticking out over the press association wires had just come a story from another city in another state, saying that this tobacco dealer, with others, had been indicted in the first case of its kind. It seems that he also was a partner in a wholesale tobacco firm in Missouri, a state which is unique in that cigarettes are tax-free there. The Missouri firm operated a mail order business of tax-free cigarettes into high tax states.

The Pay-Off

The paper that had done the interpretive and background job was on top of that story in a way that its competitors could never touch. Only those papers which seek the story behind the story are ready when such breaks occur.

The editorial problem was solved, too. The paper opposed the legislation. In this instance, as in many others, the "institution" bridles aggressiveness, but just as often it makes for thoroughness which in the end stimulates more intelligent aggressiveness.

We have been dealing with "interpretive reporters" as though they are a distinctive breed. They need not be. Most papers do have people who specialize in interpretive and background writing, but any man on the staff may be the best man to supply the interpretation for a particular story. If the mayor says that "this administration is the first in history to balance the budget," the reporter on the city hall beat would be the logical one to add that bonds, due next generation, were used to meet current expenses. If the district attorney, shortly due for election, announces that "we have obtained 99 per cent convictions during my term," the man on the criminal courts beat is the logical one to inform the reader that 35 per cent of those indicted for murder were sentenced by agreement on petty larceny pleas instead. This indicates another "mental block" to good interpretive reporting. Such stories don't help the beat reporters win popularity contests among some of their best news sources. If the paper is one which insists that the only important thing is to have every scrap of "news" first, then the beat reporter isn't likely to antagonize his sources by resorting to such interpretive reporting. Fortunately, there are papers which would rather miss a few of the "firsts" and give the readers a true picture, instead.

Good, interpretive writing isn't an easy assignment. It requires care and a lot of old fashioned spade work—you've got to dig for facts. You must be judicious in selection and emphasis. You must use good judgment.

Perhaps the newspaper profession itself has the most to gain from good, interpretive writing. Interpretive reporting may mean the difference between survival and oblivion for many of today's newspapers. James S. Pope, managing editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal,* says:

"After decades of just skimming the cream off the news and throwing away most of the substantial meat, we have learned that radio can outskim us every day in the week. So we are finding new ways of holding reader interest with pictures and maps and charts, with interpretations of what the spot news means."

We think Mr. Pope is right. If you get in the newspaper only what you hear over your radio, why buy the newspaper? It's cheaper—and easier—to listen to the radio.

THE WIRE SERVICES

How It Feels to Write in a Goldfish Bowl

Some customers like their news hot. Some like it cold. They all like it fast. Keeping them happy is a colossal job. Can the press associations do that job any better than they are doing it?

"Thank you, Mr. President!"

These four words end every White House news conference. They are spoken by the senior press association reporter. Through similar tradition, the press association newsmen stand in front of the President's desk. They are the first to leave the President's office. They fight to get through the ranks of other reporters and the columnists. They sprint like barefoot boys to get to their telephones. Bones have been broken in these headlong dashes.

Press association offices in the capital have been waiting for the news conference to end, almost from the moment it began. A dictation boy sits restlessly with a headset clamped over his ears. Deskmen, telephone operators, copy boys and wire operators are alerted for the first word. Many afternoon newspapers throughout the country are waiting in hope that at least one or two White House news bulletins can make the next edition. And what the President says may be important in Seoul and Shanghai as well as in Sheboygan.

Wire service reporters usually are dictating their stories within a minute after the White House press conference ends. They work with a fistful of scrawled notes in an ordinary telephone booth. Four, five or more bulletins may be sent before the reporters glance back through their notes to round out each story. The news is ripped from the typewriters at the other end of the line, given a flash of editing and sent out around the world. Newspapers are getting the first bulletins within three or four minutes after the President was hastily thanked.

Coverage of White House news conferences is a fair example of how wire agencies work to provide news for thousands of national and international outlets. This pressure of rapid reporting bears on press association personnel whenever and wherever the news is hot. It is a pressure felt in court rooms, Congress, state legislatures, foreign offices, international conferences, political pow wows, disasters, and at other news sources. The tempo seldom relaxes.

How does speed influence the news that is produced? What other elements affect wire service writing? Are these elements good or bad? Should they or can they be altered in the interest of better news presentation?

Any analysis of news writing must include the products of the wire services. The Associated Press, the United Press, and the International News Service today gather and distribute news to thousands of newspapers and radio stations. Most newspapers fill a large percentage of their news columns with news that is written and supplied by the wire services.

The conditions that make sustained speed important and influence press association writing are (1) competition for space in newspapers, and (2) deadlines.

Competition and speed are inseparable in the wire service business. Major newspapers contract with the United Press, Associated Press, or the International News Service for news. They also may buy more news from syndicates operated by other newspapers. Many papers have their own special writers working away from their home bases. Usually the story received first is the one that gets first attention—and often the first play. Even where only one service is used, news is still demanded in a hurry.

News is perishable. It expires quickly. Newspapers need it at specific times to meet their deadlines. Furthermore, the worldwide nature of the press associations means that the last afternoon newspaper hasn't gone to press in one region before morning newspapers are rolling at some other point. Despite this round-the-clock emphasis on speed and competition the press associations do manage to supply a surprisingly adequate news report.

But speed leaves its effect. From it stems stunted or superficial writing. The battle against time presents hazards such as omission of essential facts or background material which help readers understand news. Hasty treatment may result in emphasis on the exceptional rather than the representative; on the sensational rather than the significant. Speed opens writing to errors. Speed frequently makes news sketchy and flat.

There is a partial checkrein on these hazards. Wire service writers know that an incomplete story, shorn of pertinent facts and background support, probably will not be printed even if it is a blue ribbon winner in the race for the telegraph desk. The usual antidotes are new leads on stories after the first sketches have been dispatched, or development of better rounded news for later or next-day editions. But these efforts frequently don't catch up with

the first reports that hit the wires in a hurry. New news is being made.

Consideration of speed as the key factor in wire service operation and writing would suggest that often its importance is imaginary rather than real. More wire copy might be printed by newspapers if additional attention were paid at the source to finesse rather than breaking of speed records. Editors might appreciate a better story that comes to them a little later. The answer to this suggestion lies primarily in the hands of those who buy news from the wholesalers.

Straining for Headlines

Press associations have sometimes been accused of overwriting. This kind of writing makes news appear to be worth more than it is. The practice also can be traced to competition between wire services as well as to the competition between the customers.

A. J. Liebling, "The Wayward Press" man for *The New Yorker* magazine, has written that "journalists, and in particular those who write for the press associations, have a habit of using the strongest word they can think of in the lead of a story, even when the word means something else . . ." This recalls the time when the Associated Press and the United Press teletypes within seconds of each other told about the State Department sending a note to one of the satellite countries. To the AP, the protest was "sharp." To the UP, it was "blunt." This is a mild example of the search for strong words, but it demonstrates the point.

Straining for headlines is an inherent trait of wire service writing and the cause of forced stories. But leads loaded with manufactured headline material may be self-defeating. Such leads may poison any chance stories may have of being printed.

The question then arises: do newspapers favor strong words per se, or is the wire service writer sometimes operating under a false assumption? The answer should come from responsible newspapers. A large-scale rebellion against overwritten wire copy, whenever it appears, would stamp it out forthwith.

How, Please?

Assuming that speed and competition are the most important factors in wire service writing, what other elements help make for an indifferent product? Among them are generalized writing, dangers of overcautiousness, wordiness, and a false concept of readability.

Press associations have a special responsibility to portray news accurately, largely because of their millions of potential readers and listeners. Nevertheless, this responsibility is sometimes overlooked or forgotten by press association. The following examples of wire service writing show that stories sent by wire services can be misleading and conflicting.

On Jan. 20, 1950, the House defeated a bill that would have restored to the rules committee its former power to keep legislation from coming up for a vote. The UP and AP stories about the vote viewed its significance this way on the next day:

> WASHINGTON, Jan. 21—(UP)—Democratic leaders in the House today forecast smoother sailing for President Truman's program.

> WASHINGTON, Jan. 21—(AP)—Administration leaders saw little prospect today of smooth sailing for the Truman program despite the smarting defeat they handed the GOP-Democratic coalition trying to take control of the House."

(Some of the newspapers who take both wire services must have sent them the kind of messages which end—"How pls (please?)"

Probably few readers saw these opposing versions. Yet those who read the individual dispatches of the AP or the UP had the right to assume they were getting the

PAGE ONE FIXATION

"One of our national maladies might be described as a page 1 fixation," Theodore M. Bernstein, assistant night managing editor of the New York *Times,* said yesterday. He spoke to 500 teachers attending the in-service course for teachers, sponsored jointly by the Board of Education and the New York *Times.*

He suggested to the teachers that education must broaden its efforts to develop intelligent readers who will demand "more meat and less cake" on the newspaper's inside pages.

"The page 1 fixation," he declared, "is something that grips both newspapers and readers. From the angle of the reader it is the fallacious notion that all he need read to be well informed is the front page."

From the newspaper's point of view, he continued, the "evil effect" of such a belief is even more permeating because it leads "not only to overplaying and exaggeration by our less serious newspapers," but to "sensationalizing" in the writing of stories.

Mr. Bernstein maintained that potential readers in schools "must be conditioned to want something more than the sordid A B C's of Adultery, Banditry and Chiseling." They must be conditioned to the reading habits of the intelligent citizen. The newspapers can't do this job alone. They have to make money to stay alive. The schools don't."

—New York *Times,* Feb. 22, 1950

proper significance of the House vote. The trouble may lie primarily in faulty reporting. But the stories could have been pinned down to specific sources instead of being written in sweeping terms—pending a more thorough survey of Congressional opinion.

Overcaution

Complaints are made that press associations are especially timid in handling news that suggests of possible libel. Is this criticism justified? Certainly no generalization can be made.

One example of overcaution was the decision of one press association to qualify circumstances of the Pritchard-Funk vote fraud case when it broke in Kentucky last year. Every election official, the county judge, and the district attorney acknowledged that the ballot boxes had been stuffed. They also stated that the boxes had been impounded by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Authorities arriving at the polls before they were opened for voting found ballots in the boxes. Lexington, Cincinnati and Louisville newspapers referred frankly to the ballot box stuffing. But the wire service came dragging along for weeks and weeks with "alleged." Someone must have thought there was a danger of libel, and of course there would have been had names of suspects been included. The result was that wherever the stories were printed with "alleged" they cast doubt on the basic issue in the case.

Wordiness usually is the result of being too cautious, even when legal considerations are not involved. For example, a wire service dispatch datelined Columbus, O., reported on Jan. 28, 1950, that Senator Taft believed Secretary of State Acheson made "a great mistake" in defending Alger Hiss. The third paragraph of straight background material on Acheson's earlier comment said—"Acheson has been quoted as saying" he would not turn his back on Hiss. Why not just plain "Acheson said." No one questioned the accuracy of the statement when Acheson made it several days before in Washington. The wordy treatment suggests Acheson might have been misquoted.

Readability

Wordiness suggests the subject of readability— a field in which the research was pioneered by the press associations. But adherence to prescribed rules of readability can and has been overdone at times by a mistaken idea of what it is. Despite their pioneering research, wire service writers often appear not to have grasped the true significance of their conclusions.

Brevity rather than readability often is the result. Too much brevity in sentence structure, for example, can lead to a constriction of points that should be further developed.

Earl J. Johnson, Vice-President of the United Press, has pointed out that readability scores by the experts "do not indicate the intelligence level of the reader. . . ." They merely point to the vocabulary and background familiarity of readers with news subjects, he said.

True, long and involved sentences dotted with unfamiliar and Olympian words are out. But slavish devotion to brevity for brevity's sake plus unwavering homage to an unrealistic audience of grade school children complicate the search for clarity. Having started the movement toward readable writing, press associations might well monitor their current performance more closely.

Among the other special conditions pertinent to wire service writing are rewriting, editorializing, writing new leads on earlier stories, wire space, and trimming of wire service stories by newspapers.

Rewriting

Most wire service reporters are backstopped by one or more deskmen who put the finishing touches to their copy or overhaul it on occasions. Many good reporters are not expert writers. Reporters may have to engage in the mental contortions of dictating news from scrawled notes as do the White House correspondents. Because of the sense of desk security many reporters are satisfied with poorly constructed stories. They feel they carry only a part of the production responsibility. Constant rejiggering of news, however, by the same rewrite man, or a small group of them, produces stereotyped copy. The style of one may penetrate through a whole news report.

The ability of stringers or special wire service correspondents has its impact on rewriting problems of wire services. Stringers are an integral part of any effort to cover news developments over wide geographic areas. They frequently are not too familiar with press association writing style. This prompts revision of their stories by someone who may be hundreds of miles from the news scene.

Because of small staffs in many cities, wire services frequently rely on local newspapers for news tips or stories. Items picked up from these papers are rewritten by men who are removed from the news scene. This too often results in killing the life, sound and motion of good on-the-spot reporting that gives tone to news.

Rewriting often is a continuing process in the wire service operation. Copy may be rewritten by the originating bureau and rewritten or trimmed at various relay points where news of regional interest is stopped or sent on to other areas. Finally, it is compiled or trimmed in some cases by the buyers. Under this treatment news undergoes a steady process of change.

Rewriting cannot be avoided under existing wire service conditions, but too often rewriting is overdone. Where writing skill is at fault, perhaps better coordination could be established between those reporters who are lax and rewrite men who are overzealous. Open discussion of

rewriting problems would help wire service news retain more individual flavor.

Background

The fear of letting editorial opinion creep into wire service copy is another condition that affects writing. This is understandable, since the wire services must portray news objectively. But invalid editorial fears should not be allowed to curb legitimate interpretive or background writing. Many wire service reporters chafe at what they regard as the restriction of their news activities. This restriction, however, is gradually giving way to more flexible practice. Facts and more facts used to be the steady diet of press association typewriters. Background and interpretive writing were avoided, except in rare instances. These taboos, fortunately, have been relaxed. There is now a clearer distinction between editorializing and well-rounded news.

Lester Markel of the Sunday New York *Times* describes background as the "deeper sense of the news. It places a particular event in the larger flow of events. It is the color, the atmosphere, the human elements that give meaning to a fact. In short, it is setting and sequence and, above all, significance." The boundaries of that definition certainly include background writing of press associations. Mr. Markel was defining interpretive writing as well. It does not mean editorializing.

News agencies are chided at times for unloading mountains of new leads on telegraph desks. Complaints are heard that the leads destroy the easy flow of news, and that leads are not always justified by news developments.

In some cases, these new tops on stories are requested or expected by newspapers that want a new angle on important stories for later editions. Leads are designed to polish rapid writing or to tell of later news developments. Leads are a condition that makes wire service writing appear to be a pyramiding operation when it frequently has to be handled that way. A new lead is seldom concocted out of a desire to be up and writing.

The Today Angle

The competition of news with other news inside the wire service operation is also a factor in the way the news is written. Wire space is always an important consideration. The main news wires hum almost continuously, but news will pile up all along the network. It is not physically possible for the wire services to move all the news they collect. This is true, particularly, of the smaller bureaus located off the main news paths. Even in the large bureaus news is spiked and cut to fit the limitations of the wires. All this makes for more concise writing. Concise, yes. But isn't it also likely that the wire space problem occupies wire service writers to the point where many stories are underdeveloped?

Wire service writing is also influenced by the problem of getting a "today" angle on news that may have broken too late for proper news treatment in all of the previous day's editions. Comment is often heard that too many wire service stories strain for the "today" slant when it is unjustified and unwieldy. This kind of writing treatment is an overt attempt to present second-day stories as news although there have been no new developments. If proper reporting fails to uncover any new angles and if the stories have to be sent again, then the rewriters should resist the temptation to add any "today" flourishes. The device does not fool editors; the tendency is to kill the story in order not to mislead readers.

Its Tail Cut Short

This brings up a final problem in wire service writing. Wire service writers never know where their stories will be cut by the newspapers. They anticipate, and rightly so, that the trim job may come well above the last paragraph. The construction of their stories is influenced by this threat of the falling axe.

The Dec. 31, 1949, issue of the London *Economist,* in an article on America's press, observed—"As editions follow each other and new stories appear, with more importance, or at least more novelty, the original story can be shortened by cutting off its tail again and again until only the first paragraph is left. After each operation the story must still seem complete."

This is primarily a problem of space in newspapers. Stories can't be tailored at the source to fit free space in different papers. Telegraph and copy editors might use paragraphs near the end of some stories instead of arbitrarily lopping them off after the first few paragraphs.

To summarize, the wire services operate in a goldfish bowl. They serve thousands of masters. Yet few of these masters have the same ideas about news. One may want news written in gaudy style. Another may spike news written that way and print news that is portrayed without trimmings. The press associations have to try to satisfy everyone. Hence, the tastes of newspapers largely determine the way wire services present news. Within certain limits, however, the wire services do have the power to influence news writing. And there they should take the initiative.

If progress is to be made in the field of news writing, a part of the job should be undertaken cooperatively by wire services and newspapers. Better liaison would result in a better news product.

EVERY MAN AN EXPERT

The Good Reporter Must Learn to Translate

Some newspapermen don't know what they're talking about. Some know a whole lot, but they never bother to tell their readers. This problem of the specialist and his audience is one that concerns the whole trade, the small papers as well as their larger brothers.

The press today must supply more than information to satisfy curiosity. It must, as well, provide information to equip voters, facts to compete with propaganda, truths to dispel falsehoods. This information originates not only in day-to-day community life, but also in the obscure, forbidding areas of nuclear physics, international finance and economic theory.

These specialties have their own languages. They can't just be reported. They must be translated. And in translation a mastery of the language and a precise use of it are imperative. For all its versatility, the English language is hard-pressed to transfer the thoughts of Dr. Oppenheimer to the vernacular of the farmer, miner and housewife, who will, however indirectly, decide what to do with Oppenheimer's work. Such a transfer is possible, and then only imperfectly, through exact and skillful use of the language.

The attitude that the good newspaper has toward these specialized fields was behind the launching by E. W. Scripps in 1920 of his "Science Service." Gilson Gardner, in his biography of Scripps, describes it thus: "The purpose of this enterprise, as he (Scripps) had turned it over in his mind for years, is to bridge the chasm between actual scientific achievement and the public knowledge of such achievement. Always, as E. W. saw it, the facts about science were obscured by its specialized language. Truthful articles were printed in the specialized publications of limited circulation and in terms not within the comprehension of the average reader. Much fake science was published and much scientific news of real importance never reached the public. To translate scientific terms into popular ones, and to give them authoritative circulation among ordinary people was what E. W. aimed at."

What is said here about science applies as well to the other fields needing special interpretation. And what Scripps felt about science reporting in 1920 is obviously more important after these 30 years of playing with the atom.

The modern reporter's job is so complex that a final definition of specialized writing is impossible. All reporters, however general their assignments, are, at some time and in some areas, specialists. The term brings to mind immediately such fields as science, medicine, high finance and economics. But other fields, not so obviously specialized, also demand careful, special treatment if they are to be fully understood. Politics, taxation, labor and law are, at first glance, subjects with common vocabularies, attracting common interest.

Nearly everyone considers himself a political expert; everyone has his say about taxes. Yet behind the bare reporting of election results lies a web of intra-party and inter-party strife and alliance, as well as high principles and intricate manipulation. Without knowledge of these facts the voter continues to be led half blindly by campaign oratory to the square on the ballot where he will make his X.

This is a job for a specialist. Newspapers know this and some—the larger ones—have political reporters. But politics, on the overwhelming majority of papers, is still a general assignment. As a result the real meanings of political statements and actions are usually not explained. Newspapers just relay the slogans and cliches of the politicians. Complex political theories are given the labels the politicians dream up: "Fair Deal"; "Welfare State"; "Statism"; and are never fully explained. Complex political motivations are dismissed with such words as "bloc," or "conservative" or "leftist." This tyranny of terms necessarily dulls the political thinking of the American people.

Similarly taxation stories seldom go beyond the spot news. It is reported how much the local school district levy, or the federal budget has increased. But the lack of men with training or time precludes going behind the figures to get the real story of the use or the justification of the new tax, or, conversely, of a tax reduction.

Labor once meant work. Now it means "jurisdictional dispute," "secondary boycott," "Taft-Hartley." The newspaper reader gets prompt descriptions of picket-line fist fights. But what he needs are better explanations of why the picket lines are there. The civil liberties and the economic welfare of the people are being determined nearly every day in courtrooms which used to provide news only when there was a good murder or a spicy divorce case. Now it is vital that the structure of the courts be explained and that the jargon of the courts be translated so that the

ordinary man can learn what is happening to his own way of life.

This listing of specialized fields can be carried to absurdity. Every conceivable subject, it could be argued, should have its special interpreter. The list is governed by the times. Subjects that become more and more important to people demand more and better reporting. And the list varies according to area. The New York *Times* probably doesn't need a farm editor; the Des Moines *Register* couldn't get along without one.

The purpose here is not to recommend new specialties, nor to suggest basic changes in the press. It is rather to consider the existing practice of specialized writing and to determine why it is not more successful.

Specialized Writing

What are the native conditions in the newspaper business that affect good specialized writing?

There are probably few such conditions that are peculiar to specialized writing. The general newspaper habits that affect all writing apply here. After the specialist has mastered his subject and the technique of translation, he still faces all the problems the general reporter faces: the race with the deadline, the arbitrary allotment of space, the confinement within the traditional story structure and the demand that he produce in his story the makings of a headline.

But first, what about this mastering of the subject, and the technique of translating it?

For the reader there are two general classes of specialized writers: Those who obviously don't know what they are talking about and those who know their subject so well, and seem so smug about knowing it, that they never bother to tell the reader what they are talking about. However arbitrary this division may be, it provides a good take-off point for our analysis.

Considering the first class, we ask: Why are there so many reporters who seem not to know their subjects? Are they just dumb? And, if so, why are they hired in the first place? Or why are they given difficult assignments?

Before answering these questions, let us look at the structure of the American press. What we find there will help provide the answer.

There are 1,781 daily newspapers in the United States. Eighty per cent of these have less than 25,000 circulation. More than half the total number of newspapers have less than 10,000 circulation. Only six per cent—112 papers—are in the "big paper" category with more than 100,000 circulation. It is true that those papers claim 55 per cent of the total national circulation of over 52 million. But the importance of that smaller half of the American press still looms large.

The fact that 80 per cent of the newspapers in the country are relatively very small, suggests some limitations on specialized writing. A paper that sells 10,000 copies has a limited income. But there is no corresponding limitation on the scope of the news which it is expected to print. Ten thousand people are entitled to as careful coverage of the news as are a hundred thousand. Circulation does determine income, which in turn dictates the number of editorial room employees and the amount of work each must do. You make money by getting by with as small a staff as possible, with all hands doubling up on assignments to get out the paper. The extreme of this is the small paper editor who does the reporting and editing, then sets the type and runs the press. Although these hardy pioneers are rare today, the multiple assignment is still the rule on papers up to 25,000 circulation. The suggestion that a man spend all his time on medicine or politics, is ruled out by the bank balance. There are exceptions—small papers that make more money than their expenditures on staff would indicate. They hire green reporters and encourage them to move on before they become experienced—and thus more expensive.

This situation is not all bad. General reporting produces good and versatile writers, whose wide knowledge of local affairs results in good coverage sometimes. But often it means that reporters are sent to cover events for which they have no background.

The Local Application

The argument can be advanced that the small paper doesn't need a specialist; that the Science Service and the wire service coverage of economics, politics, labor and government, coming as they do from the sources of information, give the small town reader the news he needs. This may be true for events on the national or general science level. What about the local application?

The infant diarrhea epidemic in the home town demands a piece of specialized medical reporting, as much as does the story of a purported cancer cure in New York or the progress of the health insurance bill through Congress. In Kansas a couple of years ago, there was a blowup in the administration of a state mental hospital; it resulted in a complete overhaul of the state's social welfare department. Whenever a doctor resigned or the governor made a statement, the wire service in the state capital got the story. But the real story was out in the towns and villages of the state where mental patients were penned up in local jails because there was no room for them in the obsolete hospitals. The story wasn't covered. This was true partly, to be sure, because small town publishers thought it was too hot for them to handle. But it was true also because these small papers didn't have reporters equipped to handle the specialized subject of mental care.

To suggest that the press associations can take care of

the small paper's need for specialized writing, overlooks the fact that the wire services are basically the pooling of reporting from all news areas, small as well as large. Often a poor wire story on a specialized subject can be traced to the perhaps competent but unspecialized writer in the small town where the story originated.

The practice of putting unprepared reporters on complicated stories is not restricted to small papers. There it happens as a rule and there it is partly justified, or at least explained, by economic reasons. But it also happens on the largest papers. The specialist is sick, or goes on vacation, and someone has to take over. Or too many things break at once for the regular writer to handle them all, and unqualified people must help out.

It is also true from the inherent nature of the news that subject matter cannot be neatly departmentalized. Especially in recent years, there has been a complicated blending and overlapping of specialized subject matter. The political specialist finds nuclear physics in campaign speeches and legislative debate. The science writer discovers that a political theory has invaded the laboratory and operating room. The labor reporter may be in the federal court room or legislative gallery more than he is in the coal mines. So the specialties cannot be clearly defined. Neither can the work of the specialized writer. He cannot always be prepared.

Small Papers

Specialized writing is poor on many small papers because those papers can't afford to hire specialists. The general reporters have to do the best they can. What can be done about it?

Consolidation might be an answer, but who wants the remaining half of the national circulation controlled by a hundred papers as is the first half? The small papers can only continue doing the best they can. That "best" can be a little better. It may not be possible to relieve a reporter of all but a single assignment, or to give him time during the working day to master all the details of a complicated story. But better use can be made of what time there is. Once the publisher has defined the fields in which more complete, specialized reporting is needed, he can see to it that the reporter assigned to that field gets books on the subject, contact with experts and encouragement to spend some of his own time studying. Ambitious reporters do this on their own. But general improvement demands that the impetus come from the man at the top. The means of improvement for those papers that are not poor, but just niggardly, is obvious.

Papers that can afford specialists can improve further, without extra cost, by a conscious effort to prepare other staff members to act as substitutes and assistants for the specialists.

The problem of overlapping of special fields suggests the need for more coordination among specialists. The medical reporter should be assigned to collaborate with the political reporter when the question of socialized medicine comes up.

They Didn't Translate

Now, what of that other class of specialized writers: those who really are specialists, who know their subjects and have specific assignments? Why are they, sometimes, so hard to understand?

They don't translate. They are too close to their subject. They are so well acquainted with its language that they forget the whole object of reporting is to inform people who don't know—as Max Ascoli put it in a recent issue of *The Reporter,* "to satisfy the people's need for a vicarious presence." This is the peculiar sin of the specialist and all reporters, in so far as they are specialists, are apt to commit it. They fall into the use of jargon or of technical terms. They use words which they themselves, had they not put in long hours of study, would have to look up in the dictionary.

This is a writing problem—a fault in newspaper writing and particularly in specialized writing—of which there is warranted criticism. There is no tradition to support it, no mechancial or editorial difficulty to justify it. It is just sloppy work.

But we are concerned here with the reporter who is conscious of this danger but who still has difficulty handling a subject correctly because of traditions and requirements in the newspaper business.

Two of these requirements relate to news story structure, which is discussed thoroughly elsewhere in this symposium. One is the belief that the story must be written around a headline idea. If this requires the shuffling of facts in a story, out of their natural sequence, the result will be a hard-to-read story, particularly when the subject matter itself is complicated. The other is the tradition that the story must follow the inverted pyramid pattern in order that the less essential facts, from the news standpoint, may be cut off the end if space limitations require. This robs the writer of the freedom to build his story up, narratively, toward a main interest point and then gather up the conclusions after the reader has been given the background.

Whatever evil these traditions do in general writing is compounded in the case of specialized writing.

The third villain is that pride of the American press: objectivity. Of course it is important that the reporting of complicated political or scientific matter be objective. The reader has enough trouble understanding without being beset by the writer's personal prejudices. But objectivity, like money, while valuable and necessary, does harm

when worshiped. It has resulted, particularly in specialized writing, in making the writer aloof from his readers. He stands off at a distance and makes his report, afraid to come too close for fear of contaminating the reader. He refuses to stop, sit down and explain what he is talking about.

This Means That

In one of the early stories explaining the hydrogen bomb, W. L. Laurence of the New York *Times,* recounted in technical terms the relative power of the new bomb. Then he stopped, took the reader into his confidence and said: "This means that, theoretically at least, a hydrogen fusion bomb could be designed to be the equal in destructiveness to that of millions of uranium fission bombs." It is a happy reader, who, after struggling through well written but necessarily complicated paragraphs, comes to a sentence that begins: "This means that . . . ."

Fear often prevents the specialized writer from disclosing the meaning of his big words. It is the same fear that makes any reporter hesitate to let the reader behind the scenes: the fear that interpretation will perhaps be misjudged as editorializing.

There is no suggestion here of revolution. Many, perhaps most, stories of a specialized character can be written to conform to the traditional story structure, can point up the headline idea, and can meet every test of objectivity —and still be good, readable stories. But objectivity must not preclude thorough interpretation, nor produce aloofness or formality of tone. A man is made a specialist because it is conceded that the readers need special consideration on some subject. The specialist, more than any other reporter, needs to write for the reader, not the editors or the rule book. If story structure, headline, or any other traditions get between the writer and his reader the result is that question: "What is this guy talking about?"

A page-one head in the January 30 San Francisco *Chronicle* proclaimed: "H-BOMB: What is it? What Will it Do? Here Are The Public Facts." The *Chronicle's* science man, Milton Silverman, took over. He was not hampered by a traditional news lead. He started off with: "If the Wright brothers' first airplane should be taken out of mothballs and found to be able to out-speed the fastest jet plane, a lot of people would drop dead of surprise."

Drawing an analogy from this, he explained that the idea of the hydrogen bomb is not new. Disregarding usual story structure, he told of the first experiments with the hydrogen atom and then progressed chronologically to the present day discussion of the bomb. A scientist in his own right, Silverman is one specialist who might be expected to be aloof and obscure concerning his subject. But by making his story completely informal he succeeded in bringing the complicated discussion down to the level of park bench conversation. For those who might not know, he took the time to explain that a volt, "as in '110 volt current,' is the standard measure of electrical force."

When the going got rough, he stopped and said: "What actually happened was this: 1. When a hydrogen struck a lithium atom, it temporarily combined with it to form another element, a kind of beryllium. 2. In about a billion-billionth of a second, this rare kind of beryllium split in half to form a pair of helium atoms. 3. About two-thousandths of one per cent of the material apparently disappeared. Actually it turned into energy—about 17,000,000 electron volts."

To make still more sure that you knew what he was talking about, the writer fixed up a front page box insert that contained such definitions as: "Hydrogen—Element No. 1; lightest of all elements; a colorless gas; combines with oxygen to make water. Helium—Element No. 2; a colorless gas; used in balloons and dirigibles."

Never Enough Specialists

True, this was not a news story in the sense that Silverman was reporting a current statement by Senator Johnson, or a meeting of top ranking physicists. But such news could be inserted anywhere into this discussion; or such a discussion could well be the background for a news story. The fact that the violation of rules of structure and the use of informal narrative produce such a good result here, suggests the means of improvement in even those specialized pieces that do contain an element of spot news.

In summary we would say that specialized writing is often bad writing from the reader's point of view, either because the specialized writer does not know his subject well enough, or, knowing his subject, has not mastered the technique of translating its language to that of his readers. These faults cannot be remedied completely. As long as the structure of the press is as it is, largely made up of small papers operating on close margins, there will never be enough specialists for all subjects needing special treatment. Nor will there always be time for reporters to acquaint themselves fully with all the subjects they will have to report on. But some means for improvement are within reach.

Finally, specialized writing is often bad writing because certain traditions and requirements of the newspaper profession make it difficult to handle specialized subjects well. The solution here is relatively simple. Just scrap any obsolete notion that stands in the way of lucid, simple and honest information.

BACK SHOP AND NEWS ROOM

How Newspaper Operations Affect News Writing

Cumbersome mechanical processes often result in arbitrary make-up, warped news judgment and forced writing. How can modern newspapers defend a traditionally rigid pattern for presenting the most flexible of all commodities—news?

"Reckon I coulda thrown thet thing a heap farther," said the mountain country athlete, competing for the first time in a shot-put event. "But it was so daggone heavy."

This human protest against the irremediable is common and relatively harmless. Much more serious is the common practice of attributing inevitability to forces which can and should be changed. Such is the favorite sport of large segments of the newspaper business.

A sort of plague of complacency has settled upon the Fourth Estate. We accept well-nigh incomprehensible writing. We accept copy that is deadly dull. We distort news values. We destroy much of the small amount of good writing we get by economizing on our own energies, time, and the publisher's pennies. And we do all this, not because we have no standards or morals, not because our motives (for the most part) are not pure, but because we consciously and subconsciously believe mechanical conditions render a substantially better performance impossible.

And it just isn't so.

Good journalistic writing is hindered by the mechanical process of producing a newspaper. But we submit that there is much the newspaper business *could do,* but is *not* doing, to eliminate these impediments.

As newspapermen, we must take account of the fact that whenever we blame the peculiar mechanical conditions of the trade for a poor performance in the news columns, such an "out" is wasted on our readers. They do not comprehend the complexities of a newspaper operation. To them, a newspaper plant is an unfathomable curiosity. Readers may wonder just how a newspaper is produced, but they rarely learn enough about it to understand us when we bog down under the weight of lumbering mechanical operation. To their minds, a story is poorly written not because it had to be completed before the event it describes, not because it was subjected to three new leads and several hasty insertions which destroyed its continuity, not because the danger of trims made "hugger-mugger" sentences "necessary." The readers think the story is a poor one because whoever wrote it did not know how to write. Period.

But, in the profession itself, what are these scapegoats? What are these extenuating circumstances which enable us, with little compunction, to shrug off the blame for frequently pitiful performances? What is this mechanical monster against whom no effective forces can be brought to bear?

The Strait Jacket of Makeup

The monster is many-headed, and one of the foremost of his heads we call makeup. About it, many peculiar notions prevail. For example, many publishers adhere to the belief that large, black banner headlines *per se* sell newspapers. Recent surveys contradict this view, but it persists. Thus, many newspapers resort to a standard, inflexible pattern for presenting the news, with a banner line day in and day out. Makeup becomes something to which the news must be tailored. It used to be (and for many papers still is) the rule that the makeup should be tailored to fit the news.

But somewhere along the way, too many newspapers got the cart before the horse. And both the writer and reader suffered. When the eight-column banner becomes as much a part of the paper as the daily comic page, days will arrive when a story to go under the banner just isn't to be had, by any natural means. But the predetermination that some story would merit such display brings, on the "thin" news day, the "smoke it up" order. And so a writer must create controversy where there is none, must speculate where there is neither need nor basis for speculation, must worm a probe promise out of a politician, not so much because a probe is needed as because a banner story is needed. So "forced" writing enters the picture, escorted by an inflexible pattern for presenting news, the most flexible of all commodities.

No paper can justify, on any score, the use of a mechanical device which prevents a demonstration of the comparative values of the news. From such a paper, the reader cannot get much of an idea of what news is important and what news is less important. For in that newspaper, an unfounded allegation made by a headline-hunting politician gets the same treatment as if the charges had been made by the F.B.I. The reader's sense of values is upset because the paper he reads makes no distinction in its manner of presenting the news. When the maximum

The Writing Isn't Good Enough

The major fault of the press in handling much of the important news of the day is that the writing is not good enough. Newspapers rarely fail to print news of significance but they often fail to print it in a form that . . . (wins) interest.

Enough studies of writing for mass audiences have been made so that we should know what the newspaper reader can take and what he can't take. Even without use of such studies we can learn much by studying the work of almost any great writer who has ever won popularity. We should avoid long and complex sentences. We want a variety in the length of sentences—but we want the average length to be fairly short. We want to avoid complex words—except when they are essential for precision—and to use words of Anglo-Saxon derivation instead of involved words with Latin roots.

Floyd Taylor, director of the American Press Institute

treatment is given every day to news which varies in significance from day to day, the reader is left to his own devices in weighing its relative importance. *We, however, are news specialists, and we should do some of that job for him.*

If the average newspaper reader knew journalistic writing as those within the profession know it, he would readily detect the hollow-sounding stories smoked up to take care of the eight-column banner. But he isn't—and can't be—that observant.

Makeup also is among the factors contributing to the thoroughly-detested "hugger-mugger" sentences. Coming in from an assignment, the reporter subconsciously adapts his writing to uncompromising forces—limited space, and the competition of other news. In the hurly-burly of the composing room, his story may shrink from ten paragraphs to five. Therefore, he packs enough at the top of his article to render the bottom of it expendable. The unfortunate consequence. in a great many cases, is to render the entire story expendable. It has become so unintelligible that it is a waste of space.

The day when trimming a news story is not necessary will never come. But what is to be hoped for is the day when trims can be done carefully and intelligently; when the writer can compose his story free from the feverish feeling that seven or eight important points must be packed into the introduction, then developed and explained only if space permits. It is wrong to shrug and say that not even this day will come. It will come because it must come. Newspapers will reach—or perhaps already have reached —a point where they must stop yielding to mere mechanical convenience, and accept a compromise in favor of comprehensible news copy.

The spectre of trims results in more than unwieldy sentences. It leads to the total omission of background. Spot developments are set forth with no explanations of their significance. They are not related to the broader picture, to what has gone before, and to what inevitably must follow.

It all boils down to a choice: Shall we continue a blind devotion to getting all the *happenings* and none of the *meanings* into our newspapers, or shall we concentrate on getting the news we do print in a lucid, understandable, related form? No doubt we'll choose the latter course, and stop bowing to such mechanical annoyances as trims made with little or no thought for the reader. Our readers, and the competition of national news magazines, and our own sense of what our purpose in human society is, leave us no alternative.

The Jump Story

Before abandoning this analysis of the evil influences of makeup (which has become a tail wagging the dog), we might consider briefly the effects of jump stories. It is often necessary, of course, in the interest of an attractive, newsy page one, to continue lengthy articles inside, before they consume all the premium outside space. But too often the policy is carried to ridiculous extremes.

The Boston papers are perhaps the worst offenders. Too many leads in the Boston press seem to be written with the following underlying philosophy: "This story will start on page one, that's a cinch. The jump may go 30 or 40 pages deep in the paper. Not many readers will follow it. And it may jump right after the first paragraph. So we'd better get all the essentials to them fast." Conceivably, both editor and reporter follow that line of reasoning. And from this semi-frenzy emerge such leads as:

> Closing of certain downtown streets, particularly Washington between Stuart and School streets, to motor traffic, and providing a vast window-shopping area for pedestrians in the heart of the retail district, should be studied, a survey report under the auspices of the Boston finance commission set forth last night.

Why newspapers jump so many stories just to accommodate all manner of trivia on page one is a question we are not qualified to answer. We can only say that if it is the reason most commonly offered—to attract readers back to the advertising, then both the paper and the advertiser are laboring under a delusion. It is as much to the interest of the advertiser as to the editor if the paper is readable. Yet the one yields to the untenable views of the other, and both lose in the process.

And in addition to rendering the paper more awkward

to read from a strictly physical standpoint, such a practice adds one more cause for disjointed, overloaded leads. And many reporters, in the way they write, already are like the small boy at the cookie jar, stuffing himself beyond his capacity before someone comes to deprive him of his prize.

Other makeup policies of equally dubious value also have adverse effects on news writing. Common among them is insistence upon sidebars to important stories even when facts are neither plentiful nor important nor interesting enough to merit a separate story. So again we add to the store of forced writing. On the other hand, there are papers which insist that regardless of the number of sidebars, one major overall story must contain at least a reference to every remote angle in the situation. So we get lengthy, cumbersome, unmanageable articles, too long and too repetitious to be readable. These are not to be blamed solely on the general makeup of the paper but too frequently makeup is the prime factor in determining the number of sidebars. The news situation alone should be the basis of judgment.

Fewer Rules

We need only follow the path of fewer rules, less standardized procedure, less of the doctrine that there is only one right way to handle news. In everyday life, it is not generally practical to have a different dress for every occasion, tailored to that occasion. In the newspaper business, it is practical. We must cease worshipping sameness.

In various parts of the country, there are newspapers which carry a fetish for classification of news right out the window. A news editor has been heard to complain that he finds it "safer" sometimes to pass up a fairly good story because he cannot place it in classification. So an inferior story which does not clash with the dominant "theme" on the page is used instead. Up to a certain point, grouping stories on related subjects is a commendable service to the reader. But when papers carry this program to ridiculous extremes, they turn it into a disservice. One of the nation's largest newspapers confesses it sometimes jumps stories into a different section, in the name of "classification." It is a safe bet that most of its readers are not grateful for this consideration.

Typographical errors, for which there perhaps is no certain cure, have left their mark on journalistic writing. Rather than risk the vagaries of proof-reading, many writers have eliminated the "not" construction from their written vocabulary. "Not guilty," a phrase common in everyday parlance, is ostracized by several newspapers. Some papers ban many other words perfectly acceptable in the spoken language, but which are susceptible to becoming vulgarities from such frequent mishaps as letter omissions, hitting one wrong key, or failing to use the space bar on the linotype machine. This is a minor annoyance, of course, but it does "stiffen" and formalize news copy by introducing uncommon words to the exclusion of generally-used terms. And it represents a peculiar manner of meeting the problem of insufficient or inferior proofreading.

The Late Break

The mechanics of newspaper production is particularly unwieldy at the time of the late break. In many respects, the story which breaks on deadline is a revered newspaper institution. It calls forth latent enthusiasm, and, when well-handled, is a deep source of satisfaction to all who had their share in it. But the unpleasant fact to be faced is that few newspapers are sufficiently prepared—or endowed—to make over competently. Once the paper is full, the problem of expensive overset and kill type is weighed against the merits of every piece of copy which turns up later. And many a news editor puts his thumb on the scale.

How serious a problem this is varies to a good extent with the relative financial stability of newspapers. But it is safe to say that a sizable number of news executives—more than will admit it—permit this consideration to warp their news judgment. If the late break is big enough, it will be taken care of to the maximum possible extent. But if it is just a late break, significant but not earth-shaking, chances are fair that it will get neither the space nor the display it deserves. "Why rewrite and reset several leads and heads, and make over three pages, when we can whittle this thing down and squeeze it in somewhere" is logic to many newsroom "accountants."

Obviously the writer (our primary concern in this analysis) develops some of his annoying habits—windy, overloaded sentences, inadequate background, failure to relate spot events to the large situations of which they are a part—from the limitations of newpaper technology. It is not cheap to revise and revamp. And it isn't getting any cheaper. An added difficulty in dealing with the late break is the compulsion to handle it in "takes" of perhaps a paragraph at a time, written by different persons. Whatever resemblance to organization results from such handling is a monumental tribute to journalistic skill.

But what is the answer to all this? There is no panacea, and we shall not be so naive as to suggest one. But here is a point worth mulling over:

Many of the irritations, large and small, imposed by the mechanical operation, emit from a central festering sore, to cure which there is no wonder drug. But a few years back, there was no wonder drug for any ailment. And what is alarming many in the newspaper business is the lack of large-scale effort to find an effective cure for its serious, though perhaps not yet critical, illness.

It Takes Too Long to Print

The "sore" is an archaic technology. It costs too much to produce a newspaper. It takes too long. It is too hard to adapt to changing news situations. It consumes too much energy and too many brains at a time they should be concentrating on getting and processing the news.

This is a plea for a mechanical process superior to the timeworn system of transforming copy into type (ever so slowly), placing type in forms, casting mats from the forms, making plates from the mats, putting the plates on a press, and, finally, producing the finished product. It is a plea for a program of research and study within the newspaper industry to discover a system which would consume less time, energy, and money.

It is a fact that when the maximum amount of news is developing during the day, most afternoon newspapers have passed their deadlines, because it takes so long to print them. At night, as evening meetings, athletic contests, plays, and other newsworthy events *near* their windups, many a morning newspaper *has* wound up.

Under present technology, the span between editorial deadlines and press time is too great. *And the hours of the span generally constitute the peak period of the day or night, for formal news to break.* Newspaper operations are out of tune with the governmental, industrial, and social life of the communities in which they function. At the hours when life and news all about them are widest awake, newspapers are being put to bed.

Take for example the following story. It is a sports article, but its defects are as commonly found in the regular news columns.

> As a scant 600 of the faithful watched, the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard's in-and-out cagers tangled last night in the Boston arena, with the favored Keystone quintet fashioning a 14-3 lead in the first few minutes of play.
>
> By halftime, Penn was leading, 45-36.
>
> The final score was Penn 93, Harvard 77.
>
> Harvard's Rockwell took the opening tipoff and . . .

Any newspaperman knows why this story was written this way. He knows how simple, fast, and cheap it is to set one line of type at the last minute. Perhaps, if the reader knew why we did all this, he would excuse us. As it is, he merely feels dissatisfied, and perhaps it's good for us that he does, for we can get around such a situation. And if the reader scowls at us enough, or if we worry about him enough, we'll wind up with a better way of doing things.

Not that we shall ever cease trying to squeeze in all the latest news developments. But we shall—perhaps soon—recognize that by adopting an electrical process of producing a newspaper, we can reduce the time span between editorial closeout and press start, thus ending our coverage more nearly when the normal news day ends.

Most afternoon newspapers produce their main edition between 3 and 4 p.m. Yet, they choke off the bulk of their copy flow between noon and 1 p.m., and anything that gets in after that has to be good. This span of time sees the activity of the community reaching its peak as the capacity of the newspapers to absorb copy diminishes.

To elaborate, most regular court sessions wind up in the early or middle afternoon. A great many city councils and other news-producing groups end regular meetings about the same time. "Noon" luncheon meetings generally wind up by 2:30 p.m. In the evening, it is just as regular for the newsworthy activities to be completed by 11 p.m., or midnight at the latest. Spot news and violence come anytime, day or night, of course. No mechanical operation could possibly free newspapers from the rush attached to covering such events when they happen near deadline. But a great deal of the daily flow of news follows a time pattern to which we could adjust our own operation, under a faster mechanical system. And we would still roll papers from the presses on the current schedules. Editions are timed to the maximum availability of the market, and would remain the same under any production system.

This plea for a better technology is not so esoteric as it may sound. With very little backing, new methods of producing newspapers are being developed. With wholehearted support, they might arrive at the practical stage a lot sooner.

The Morgue

There is much to be done to improve all phases of the production system, not merely the back shop operation. One example is the newspaper library, or morgue, which could be made into a valuable adjunct to the editorial department. With the desirability of interpretive writing quite generally acknowledged, researching will become an ever more important phase of the news writing job. Data, clippings, reference books, pamphlets, biographical information should be readily available in all newspaper plants, not just in the few largest ones. It is easy to cover the spot developments, but to enlarge the scope of reporting, as it is agreed we must do, won't be so easy.

Newspaperdom has limped along with libraries just a step removed from junk repositories. Inevitably, the finished product has been a bit lame, too.

And we cannot wait for better technology to improve our methods of making changes. No matter how well-written a news story may be originally, it suffers from frequent inserts, changes, new leads, corrections, and trims. These are necessary, and always will be. But the trade

is guilty of taking the easy way out. To reset a few inches of type for the sake of salvaging the continuity of a story is virtually unheard of. If our purpose can be served by pencilling in a line on the proof, regardless of the effect on a logically organized story, we'll generally pursue such a course in preference to setting four or five inches of new type.

We recognize there is a financial limit to the amount of revising and resetting a paper can do. But the pains newspapers take to make more coherent changes vary less in proportion to financial stability than to sense of responsibility to readers.

A lot of the poor work done in newspaper offices has less relation to mechanical factors than to human frailties, of course. This discussion has not attempted to hoist all the blame for poor news writing onto inanimate mechanical conditions. There are plenty of contributing factors. No single facet of the business can claim a clean bill of health. At the same time, there are plenty of bright spots, which are left unmentioned. A pat on the back, if you give it to yourself, won't push you very far ahead.

An analogy we should like the newspaper business to escape lurks in the following anecdote:

A radio-television industry executive, weary of what he considered unwarranted criticisms of the infant television industry, exclaimed:

"Why, do you realize that television is right where radio was twenty-five years ago?"

"Sure," said one of the more irreverent critics. "And so is radio."

We fear that newspaper technology, at best, has only inched ahead in the last quarter century. And a snail's pace won't do. The world about us is moving and changing too rapidly.

That is why this article has attempted to establish one central guidepost:

The newspaper business has been taking forward steps, but in this age and era, steps are not enough. From now on, we must take strides.

And those first few strides might well be in the direction of a more practical technology, an elimination of the mechanical impediments to good writing, and an end to the meek acceptance of any barrier to good performance as inevitable.

Publisher Predicts Rapid Changes

I am firmly convinced that in the next five or 10 years the methods of reproducing newspapers will undergo very great alterations, and perhaps very great economies. I also believe all forms of graphic arts reproduction will be very much improved.

I believe that from a standard typewriter it will be possible to set all sizes and families of type on film with automatic justification, and I believe we will have streamlined, assembly line, fast engraving. And when I say fast engraving, I don't mean that we will be able to cut the time of putting a flat through our engraving room from 40 minutes to 35. I think that we will be able to make a flat and as many as we want with the same speed that we now cast stereotype. The American Newspaper Publishers Association has a research budget of between $250,000 and $300,000 a year. This is pitifully small when you consider the wealth and strength and vigor of our industry. But at least it is a beginning, and for the first time ever, perhaps, the whole graphic arts industry is swapping information on research, and we are sitting down with commercial printers and book publishers and magazine publishers and seeing what we can do to develop better, faster and more economical means of production.

Newspaper publishers or newspaper accountants, by the very nature of their business, have not had much contact with research work. Research entails a lot of time, a lot of money and a lot of patience. Research can produce a lot of wonderful things and it can produce machines and methods that will cut our costs, but before it can do any of those things there must be the disposition on the part of the publisher to use the processes. I believe new processes can be used and within the field of amicable relations, which most of us have enjoyed with most all of our unions.

—Robert B. Choate, publisher of the Boston *Herald* and *Traveler*,
Editor & Publisher, March 4, 1950

READABILITY ISN'T ENOUGH

News Stories Can Be More Meaningful

This plea is not for hair-splitting, but for a considered and intelligent use of the English language. In the drive towards simplicity of expression, newspapermen can ill afford to neglect the basic tools of writing.

When central Kentucky buried Man o' War, four newspapers staffed the funeral, three radio stations broadcast it, photographers covered it from all angles and an estimated 2,000 persons attended.

The next morning, the first piece of copy on the Lexington *Leader* city desk began:

"In simple services Tuesday afternoon . . . ."

That's an exaggerated example both of bad writing and of bad reporting (from a man who has proved himself of real value to the paper). It's also an excellent example of the psychology behind a lot of bad newspaper writing.

Several nights ago, one of the Nieman juniors, a lad of four, provided another. In the middle of one of his father's disciplinary lectures, the boy spun, wagged a finger under daddy's nose, and falsettoed:

"If you talk to me like that any more, you're going to get a *severely* spanking."

His father turned off the hell, rewarded him with a big yak—and spent the next half hour convincing him it was only funny once.

In such trivia are two important truths: first, you can do great violence to the English language and still be communicative; second, once you have gained an effect with a given device, no matter how illegitimate, the temptation to seek the same effect by the same device can be almost irresistible.

A case in point is the cheerful little panacea "Write Like You Talk." It's grammatically questionable and bum advice, as anyone who has read a few transcripts of court testimony knows; but the device has paid dividends, and a lot of writing instructors still find the temptation to continue with it irresistible.

Another temptation, now sweeping the newsrooms, is to flay the "readability" experts and assume that the systems are only as strong as their weakest links. But Robert Gunning and, to a far greater extent, Dr. Rudolph Flesch shouldn't be written off lightly; they have served a real need in the last few years. As valuable gadflies, they have stung many papers into an awareness of readability. But in this business of unsatisfied passions—for facts, for completeness, for speed, for new angles, for both sides—readability should be a minimum goal. Newspapermen would do themselves and their readers a service if they developed one more passion, a passion for good writing over and above readable writing.

The readability experts make a strong point that good writing *is* readable. The formulae prove it. But readable writing isn't *necessarily* good. If it were, children's books would be the greatest literature, and any high school freshman could write well by rule of thumb.

The rules of thumb set forth in the Flesch and Gunning systems are, by and large, good. For the most part, they are articulations of what experienced editors already knew: use proper names and pronouns, use strong verbs, use words that appeal to the senses, avoid polysyllabic words when possible, avoid long and tortured sentences. All that has its value, if you remember there's something essentially meretricious about any short cut to excellence.

It must be said, in justice to the readability experts, that they do not claim their methods will produce good writing in the sense used here; they do claim justifiably that their methods will produce more readable writing. But because they make such a point of proving that good writing *is* readable, many writers casually familiar with the systems conclude that readable writing is of itself good.

Two words from the opening paragraphs of this article can be used to illustrate the pitfalls of accepting any rule of thumb without question. When the four-year-old spun on his father, he did not speak in his normal, soprano voice. He was excited, and his voice was above its usual range. He didn't "shriek" or "scream" or "screech" (all monosyllables); he "piped" but "pipe" doesn't carry the sense of "above normal range"; he said his piece in a falsetto voice. Of all the ways to describe his manner of speaking, the most economical and exact seemed to be by the legitimate device of turning the adjective "falsetto" into a verb. It's a three-syllable word, it's of foreign origin and not common in everyday speech, and any number of monosyllables "would do." Dr. Flesch and Mr. Gunning probably would have let it pass the copy desk, reasoning that any reader would know from the context that it was a verb denoting speech and that some might find a special pleasure in "falsetto" they wouldn't find in any other verb. A slavish following of the rule about not using a

Some Examples of Bad Usage

These examples of incorrect grammar and poor usage were selected at random from the papers and wire services represented by this year's Nieman Fellows. More often than not, they were in stories otherwise well written.

. . . Patrolman Jeremiah F. Martin, who lost an eye *after* being shot by a *thief while investigating* . . . a break . . .
Page One, Providence *Journal,* Jan. 6

. . . this younger group of designers *is* thinking of pulling out of the association and going ahead with *their* own earlier presentations.
Society Page, Milwaukee *Journal,* Jan. 5

The resolution further *demanded that the committee do* not *hamstring* its counsel, Eugene Williams, *in developing* . . .
Page One, S. F. *Chronicle,* Oct. 10

But it is dependent on *using a higher proportion* of our available sources—factories and labor force—*than is now the case.*
Page One, Washington *Post,* Jan. 7

The suggestion has much merit and should be studied by *makers* of automobiles with a view to equipping the new cars with them *and the accessory manufacturers* who turn out gadgets for old models.
Editorial Page, Salt Lake *Tribune,* Jan. 16

Seated in what Mayor Litty used to call his study, a large book-lined room on the second floor of the handsome Litty home, which is more than a century old, *surrounded* by heads and skins—hunting trophies of Mayor Litty, the widow and daughters told their story.
Page One, Memphis *Press-Scimitar,* Jan. 11

Space was at a premium and the bleachers provided for the program before the dance were *completely filled with many people lining* the walls *inside* the door.
Page One, Rutland (Vt.) *Herald,* Jan. 17

The state rested its case in the murder trial of Sandra Peterson, eighteen, today after an appearance by the widow of the man *she* is accused of slaying *when he* gave *her* a lift *when she* was hitch-hiking.
UP (in N. Y. *Herald Tribune*), Jan. 20

Had there been one wisp of truth in this Communist-inspired character assassination campaign, it surely would have turned up in the trial, *which* conspicuously it failed to do.
Editorial Page, Emporia (Kan.) *Gazette,* Jan. 23

William H. Wills, 62, of the Nicholasville pike, executive vice *president* of the Bank of Commerce *and connected* with that banking house . . .
Page One, Lexington (Ky.) *Leader,* Jan. 9

It was the swinging north of that center *that* spared Iowa from the predicted blizzard *and which* brought . . .
Page One, Des Moines *Register,* Jan. 16

While he said the upper Mississippi and Ohio were primarily suited for navigation and flood control development, *he wants* to see . . .
AP (in Milwaukee *Journal*), Jan. 5

long word when a shorter one "will do" wouldn't permit it.

The other word is "yak." Assume that "Write Like You Talk" means use the vocabulary of everyday speech. "Yak," God knows, is in the working vocabulary of an appalling number of people, particularly the comic strip addicts of all ages. It has the added virtue of being a monosyllable. But in this case it probably was not the best word if for no other reason than that a "yak" to a lot of people is still an animal. The "falsetto" was in the direction of good writing, the "yak" at least 90 degrees off course.

The Tools of the Craft

There is no point in trying to define "good writing." It defies definition. But good writing has certain attributes that distinguish it from simple, readable prose, and any serious newspaperman can master the means of bringing some of those attributes to his own writing.

The one thing that shows through all good writing is the writer's profound respect for the tools of his craft. He is not satisfied with communicating approximations. (He does not write like you talk.) He wants to convey his exact meaning, with all its tones and flavors, and with no limitations except those of the language itself.

A lot of reporters wince at a statement of such high purpose. It's so easy to excuse a lack of respect for the tools of writing by pointing to the indisputable fact that some of the country's best reporters (in the sense of news gatherers) are the worst writers, or by castigating those who propose such respect as ivy-bound dreamers who have been at Harvard too long to remember what a newsroom is like.

It's too easy. The excuse comes to mind as quickly as a cliché. It may have a surface validity. But if a reporter or a desk man will consciously cultivate a real respect for the tools of writing he will write better—often automatically when under pressure—than he will if he assumes that he knows the language and to hell with the finer points. Only by making intelligent use of the finer points can a writer obtain the clarity, exactitude and complete communication that will make his writing not only readable, but good.

Products of the Tools

There are only two tools: grammar, in its broad sense, and words. You obtain clarity from proper grammar, exactitude from words used in their correct denotative sense, and complete communication (of overtones, undertones, mood and attitude) from words used in their connotative sense and arranged in the best possible order. That may be elementary, but not as elementary as it sounds; all the examples of poor usage in the accompanying box result from lack of respect for grammar or words.

Now any reader knows, any writer knows, and God knows you can carry a fastidiousness for grammar and words to the point where you're guilty at best of preciosity and at worst at that sort of arrant pedantry up with which Winston Churchill will not put. On the other hand, you can let your lack of respect for them trip you into errors similar to and worse than those cited. Nothing would be more unhealthy than to turn good newspapermen into hair-splitting academicians; but it might be healthy to have all reporters and desk men break the rules only intentionally, and then because there was no more effective way to say what they wanted to say.

The objection can be raised that correct grammar doesn't necessarily result in clarity. The hugger-mugger sentences that appear all too frequently in newspapers are examples; even when they are grammatically correct, they are confusing conglomerations of more or less distantly related ideas. Consider, for instance:

"Born in Milwaukee in 1896, he attended the public schools there until the outbreak of World War I which he entered as a private and emerged from as a captain of artillery, after he had seen two years service overseas and been decorated four times."

Sentences like that, and far worse, result from the mental make-up of a writer. In the broad sense, they are violations of grammar, for grammar includes directness and logical connection of ideas. The Gunning-Flesch rules treat the symptoms well. The problem of getting at the causes belongs to the individual.

But any individual can master the fundamental rules of grammar. Even its fine points have a logical basis. Mastery of the denotative meanings of words is more difficult. The English language, in its absence of genders, cases and many appurtenances other languages have, is a developed language like Chinese; yet, unlike Chinese, the bulk of English words, interchangeable as many of them often seem, have exact meanings. This study doesn't presume to deal with semantics and certainly doesn't want to imply that words should have a permanent, immutable meaning. The argument is that at any given time the conscientious writer should try to use words in the exact sense they have at that time. If newspapermen can justify their passions for the unattainable in news gathering and reporting, they can justify a passion for exactitude in the use of words.

Editor-Teacher

A. B. Guthrie Jr., who wrote and edited newspaper copy for twenty years before he turned novelist, was known among his colleagues as one of the best teachers in the business. The story is told of one young reporter who, although he was confident his education had taught him to write well, took particular pains with the first story he wrote for Guthrie. Guthrie hadn't finished the lead before his forefinger went up and crooked. The cub had said that some occurrence of the day "lent credence" to a report. Webster and Fowler convinced him he meant "credibility."

Carr A. Van Anda, for many years managing editor of The New York Times, is another case in point. His informal biographers recall the day the Times' Washington bureau had filed an unbelievable amount of copy, more than any wire service and more than would have been thought possible under the circumstances. At the end of this weary day, confident of a blessing from the boss, the bureau received this telegram: "The Times cannot tolerate the use of 'probe' as a noun."

Good teachers, both in the school and in the newsrooms, insist on that kind of exact writing. Drilling a respect for it into newspapermen should be the job of city and copy desks. Unfortunately, too few papers have desk men who are both good newspapermen and good teachers, and the reporter often must teach himself.

Teaching one's self has one advantage: you usually learn not only what is right, but why it's right. One of this year's Niemans tells of an early brush he had with his copy desk. He had written something to the effect that a man "died following an accident." The man on the desk objected, the reporter objected to the objection, and the desk man yielded when the newsroom dictionary (often a chronicler of poor usage) bore out the reporter that "following" meant "after." He learned later that the objection was valid and twofold: first, because of the possible ambiuity (did he catch up with the accident before he died?) and, second, because of the pomposity of using a three-

syllable participle when a perfectly good, two-syllable preposition would have served the same purpose better.

The teacher had learned by rote, and the pupil had convictions without reason: a more inquiring mind would have served each better.

That last example is the sort of thing that strikes many newspapermen as just the kind of arrant pedantry Churchill objects to. So also does an insistence on the proper distinctions between "above" and "over" and "more than"; "under" and "beneath" and "below"; "which" and "that" and "who," and countless other words used as though they were interchangeable. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* are excellent arbiters on such questions; the newspaperman who is seriously interested in improving his writing (and who has to teach himself) could put each of them to good use.

Debasing the Language

When a writer either consciously or unconsciously ignores the differences between words with similar meanings, the product is a less rich language. Thus "beneath," within a short time, could become an archaism, and "below" could follow it, leaving us with "under" to serve the purpose of three prepositions, each with a distinct and useful meaning. Graves and Hodges, in *The Reader Over Your Shoulder,* make an implicit plea for preserving these distinctions: "There is a greater richness of prepositions in English than in any other language of Western Europe: for instance, the French 'de' has to bear the whole burden of the English prepositions 'of,' 'from,' 'out,' and 'à' of 'at,' 'to,' 'till,' while German has no separation between 'of' and 'from'; 'into' and 'out of' are double prepositions with no equivalent in either French or German."

This is not an argument against a changing language; but distinctions with differences ought to be worth preserving in the absence of equally specific substitutes. It would be nice nowadays to have a short world like "awful" to mean "full of awe." It meant that until it was bastardized. "Fabulous" and "fantastic" and scores of others are going the same way. It's a question whether they will wear out before such headline favorites as "ban," "gut," "probe," "score" and many like them.

There are lots of explanations, but precious little justification, for the misuse of many such closely related words as those cited above. It's difficult, however, to understand how any such confusion could exist between "infer" and "imply," "presume" and "assume," "affect" and "effect," "partly" and "partially," "comprise" and "compose," "surprise" and "astonish," "bewilder" and "perplex" and "adverse" and "averse." (Webster's *Dictionary of Synonyms* and John Opdyke's *Mark My Words* list hundreds more.) A cub on a southern paper several years ago carried this sort of confusion to the extreme of having a man survived by his "fraternal grandparents." The necessity for teaching English in the newsroom is emphasized by the fact that he was the outstanding man in his journalism class.

A corollary to this kind of confusion is so common in newspapers that it should be mentioned in passing. It is the grand passion some reporters have for what Fowler calls "elegant variation." In a commendable but misdirected effort to avoid repetitions, for example of some form of the verb "to say," they will lard a story, with no respect for differences in meaning, with "stated," "averred," "exclaimed," "avowed," and other such emetics.

Fowler and, more particularly, Partridge, comment so ably on newspapers' fondness for journalese and clichés, for seeking the same effect by the same device over and over again (most funeral services *are* simple), that there would be no point in listing examples here. Every good copy reader has his pets, and a good 99 per cent of them result from something closer to contempt than to respect for the tools of the craft.

Certainly, all that is fundamental. But, other things being equal, football games and wars are won by the side best grounded in fundamentals.

An insistence on correct and precise writing is important for another reason: whether newspapers like it or not, they are the great mass educators of this century. Their influence on the speaking and writing habits of all age groups is tremendous. If they take no pains to keep their writing from being fuzzy and approximate, they inevitably will weaken the language.

The Indefinable Something

Grant, then, that a reporter should master grammar and keep constantly aware of the denotative meaning of words. What about that last, indefinable something that distinguishes good writing from mere lean, readable writing? No brief consideration of so big a question can prove much: but a few observations may serve some purpose.

The metaphor of "tools," on which most of this article hangs, has to be extended when you try to discover what makes writing good. The good writer, by a process partly learned and partly absorbed, gets a finer product from the same tools. He is the artist as well as the craftsman, not content merely with correctness and clarity, but insistent upon the rightness both of his words and of their arrangement.

No Style

There are many complaints about Time's style—but it has a style. No daily paper, except the Christian Science Monitor, which is in a class by itself, can say as much.

—*The Economist,* Dec. 31, 1949

When you start talking about the rightness of words and of word order, you're talking about intangibles. Rightness depends to a great extent on connotative meanings that give tone and mood, and on a keen feeling for the small suspenses and climaxes within sentences. But the quality of rightness results not only from an absolute pitch for words and a sharp ear for arrangement but also from a skillful blending of the writer's observation, imagination, sensitivity and emotional awareness. The good writer hears the "faint heart echo" on the pillow: the craftsman hears the bed creak.

Another example, less "literary" than that one, may serve in some small way to illustrate the rightness both of words and their order. It's from *The New Yorker's* account of the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"We'd heard talk of the guilt [scientists] are supposed to feel over having opened the atomic Pandora's box, and had expected to find them rather down in the mouth, but they weren't."

That may not be the best way that sentence could be written, but it's a good way. There is nothing "literary," in the sense of "formal" or "artificial," about it, and yet it makes its point neatly with the pleasantly abrupt "but they weren't." In less skilled hands "heard talk" might have been simply "heard" and "down in the mouth" the more formal "downcast." Make those changes and reverse the order of the sentence (after all the important *fact* is that they were cheerful) and you get a good idea of the difference between good and readable writing:

"They were cheerful, although we had heard of the guilt they are supposed to feel over having opened the atomic Pandora's box and had expected to find them rather downcast."

Or, without reversing the order at all, rewrite it as many writers would have felt obliged to:

"We'd heard of the guilt they are supposed to feel over having opened the atomic Pandora's box and had expected to find them rather downcast, but instead they were cheerful."

Or, since Pandora's box is an allusion to mythology not likely to be grasped by the ninth grade level, simplify it further:

"We'd heard of the guilt they were supposed to feel over having unleashed the power of the atom, and had expected to find them rather sad, but instead they were cheerful."

You could do all sorts of other things with it. The point is it's a good sentence that says what it means, and, by good word choice and arrangement, gets across more than just the fact that the scientists were not down in the mouth.

The immediate objection is that newspapermen aren't at liberty to write news stories that way. It's true. Newspapermen complain that the "nature of the story" prevents them from writing it with any mood or flavor. Actually, though, the conditioner is the body of convention, much of it for the general good, that dictates the selection and treatment of material. A reporter covering the A.A.A.S. meeting for a daily paper might try to comment on the mood of the scientists in a feature; but seldom in a straight news story. Such a comment, curiously, would often be considered "editorial," although it might give a lot more meaning to the story than a straightforward account of everything that took place.

A 'Cloud of Mink'

Contrast, too, the manner in which the daily press and *The New Yorker* (which is carrying interpretive writing to its logical extremes) covered the recent sailing of the R.M.S. Caronia. You might get more names, more statistical information and a more "objective" (whatever that is) account of the sailing from the daily press; but it's a rare paper that would give you the feeling caught by *The New Yorker* reporter who made his way along the pier "through a cloud of mink so soft we could have divided it with a feather."

All this is not to argue that newspapermen should try to get such flavor into every story. In many stories the minimum goal of lean, readable writing is also the maximum goal. But there are innumerable stories that could be enlivened, made far more enjoyable, and given more real meaning if the writer did not feel hidebound by the conventions that govern much straight news reporting.

Those conventions *are* an inhibiting force. They also operate on the copy desk, which too often will take a story that is good and right and shred it down to the minimum standards. It shouldn't be so, but there is a predisposition to judge a story in terms of the conventions, mistrust good judgment and conclude that any writing not of the pattern is "arty." That is essentially the mucker pose, but it's a rare desk man who doesn't fall into it at one time or another.

By and large, though, the presence of that quality that makes for good writing is gratifying and unmistakable. Most newspapermen don't have it and probably never will have: that's as it must be: Menckens and Pyles and others of their breed are rare men. But if every reporter and every desk man would continue to shoot for it, some might occasionally give their readers a product a good deal more satisfying and meaningful than just clear and precise writing.

The newspaper business is like any other business in that lots of things inherent in it prevent a man from doing the best he's capable of at all times.

The danger for a newspaperman is that all these inherent things that militate against good writing may become excuses instead of challenges.

NEWS ROOM ATTITUDE

Good Reporting Requires Good Staff Morale

The adequacy of reporters to turn in a good job depends in part on their own knowledge, standards and independence, and in part on morale within the newspaper. The city editor holds the key to staff morale if he is supported by sound publishing standards.

Consistently well-written news stories are no accident. They stem from a combination of native ability, hard work and a good mental attitude. A special flare for writing is a great asset, but it is never a substitute for hard work—and the amount of work done by a reporter is in the main dependent upon his feeling toward his job.

When a reporter loses interest it becomes readily apparent in his copy. His writing turns out vague and only half-informed. Not that all the blame for a poor attitude is necessarily the reporter's. Editors and publishers share the responsibility to varying degrees.

The characteristics of a good newsroom attitude are a reporter's independence, his special knowledge and his general interest in his job. In this study we propose to demonstrate how each of these elements affects the final newspaper product.

The Value of Independence

When Arthur Krock, New York *Times* Washington bureau chief, obtained an exclusive interview from President Truman, the incident emphasized the value of independence. Krock had criticized the President's Fair Deal program for months, and yet he was able to maintain the friendship and respect of the President and win the high favor of an exclusive interview. Many reporters would find themselves too close to the President to be critical, or too bitterly critical to receive anything exclusive.

What were the reasons for Krock's success? Part of the answer must lie in Krock's independence and in the policies and prestige of the New York *Times*. These factors cannot be separated. The *Times* must depend on Krock to maintain his independence of action, and he must be able to depend on the *Times* to keep the respect of its "opponents." What makes for independence in a Washington correspondent also produces independent reporters on lower levels. Similarly, what makes handout collectors in Washington also produces handout collectors on the local scene.

Too many reporters have sold their independence, sometimes for as little as a gift bottle of Scotch, sometimes for mere insurance against missing routine news stories. Either practice can destroy a reporter's value. The effects of such sell-outs bind together as the years go by and become more and more apparent in news stories that do not get below the surface. The stories reporters don't write would tell even a sorrier tale of newspaper prostitution.

Perhaps we should be as concerned about these stories that aren't written as about those that are poorly written. These stories that never come to light include not only those that are passed up but also those written pieces that never pierce the surface of their true significance.

Look around the courthouses, city halls and the police stations of the nation and you will see some of the classic examples of reporters who have sold their independence. There are reporters in every stage of decay—reporters who will write stories only when prodded from the office, reporters who can write on only one side of the political fence, and reporters who notify the rival reporter every time a story breaks.

The reporter who consistently accepts gifts or favors from the police is hardly in a position to write a tough story about police malpractice. Such a reporter will more often try to cover up for the police and sometimes even go so far as to ask other reporters not to touch a story.

The reporter who accepts cash Christmas presents from office holders isn't likely to be aggressive in digging out fraudulent governmental practices. If the reporter thinks he is receiving presents because he is a nice guy, he had better take inventory. Perhaps he is being too nice a guy. The price is paid either for past or for future service. The office holder looks at the gift as insurance against stories that might interfere with his political future. If a reporter accepts the premium he will certainly be asked later to come through with the insurance.

It is essential to have numerous news sources, but they become a hindrance when the reporter becomes the ruled instead of the ruler. Good sources make the whole job of reporting easier but they should always be kept at arm's length. A reporter should be willing to protect a source on material he receives from that source, but he should make sure he has not put himself under further obligation. Most tipsters want something in return. The mayor, the

sheriff or the governor who gets "too close" to a reporter will naturally expect some special breaks in the campaign unless the reporter makes his position clear in advance.

Maintaining complete independence is a difficult task under normal circumstances, but some reporters make it even more difficult by becoming personally involved with their sources. The courthouse reporter who is an active worker for a political party cannot do an impersonal job of news writing.

Conditions that lead to a sell-out by reporters exist in monopoly towns as well as where there is competition between rival newspapers. In a monopoly situation it may be easier for a single reporter to suppress the news, but "combine" agreements between reporters for rival papers can be even more vicious.

A combine is usually formed to make sure all reporters get all of the news. As it often works out, the interest is more in suppressing news than in producing it. Success is not measured by thorough beat coverage and well-written stories. The successful reporter is the man who can produce all the stories that will appear in the rival paper. The big stories and the routine stories are all handled but there is little incentive for delving below the surface.

A new man may unearth some good stories by refusing to join the combine, but he will be bucking strong odds. An enthusiastic younger reporter is no match for the clever conspiracies of combine veterans. The glory of his first successes may be short if he has stepped on official toes or embarrassed the combine. Being completely shut out of a few major stories will bring the less courageous into line. An editor can push a young reporter into a combine by failing to appreciate the new story material and by becoming irritated if the reporter is shut out of a combine story.

Knowledge Is Strength

It is virtually impossible for a reporter to be independent of other reporters or news sources if he doesn't have the knowledge to stand on his own feet. Knowledge of a particular news subject can be interpreted in a number of ways. Unfortunately, many reporters feel it means being familiar enough with a subject to ask questions and parrot the answers in print. In some cases this may be enough to produce a good story, but in most cases it is not enough to produce the best story.

On beats where it is possible—and it is possible on many beats—the reporter should be as well informed as the officials who make the statements for print. Full knowledge is protection against being misled by a one-sided handout. The most newsworthy elements of a story often are not pointed out by news sources.

Even with a full understanding of where the real news lies, a reporter often must break down the barriers of tradition in order to tell his story properly.

Breaking with tradition is not easy, for changes generally meet with opposition. Even when those changes would result in better reporting and better writing there will be opposition—opposition from those who find it easier to do things as they have always been done. Usually this opposition can be convinced, but it is essential to present sound arguments and a continuing good performance.

An editor's opposition to change should never be an insurmountable barrier to a good reporter. A reporter who lacks the courage to disagree with his superiors probably also lacks the courage to disagree with his news sources. If it is necessary to fight for a story, the reporter should fight for it in the news room as well as on the beat. If the reporter isn't interested, no one else is going to take the trouble to see that it gets the best treatment and the

The Vital Thing is News

We must make a new approach to getting out newspapers: an approach that would contemplate that the focal point for the brains of the establishment would be the news and editorial rooms and not the counting office. It is important to have good men run the business office and the production departments, but it is the sheerest waste of money to spend munificently in those departments and starve the most vital part of the newspaper.

I can testify out of my experience that the most effective work a publisher can do is to give most of his time and effort to the news and editorial content. I can testify, moreover, that the easiest way to get and hold circulation, to obtain advertising and make money, and moreover, much the cheapest way to do all of them is to spend money on news content. I find that a good many business problems take care of themselves if people want to read your paper and other people want to advertise in it because people like to read it. It sounds simple; it really is; too simple for most publishers to try . . .

If the publishers are guilty of almost indictable stupidity, it is that in their distorted penny pinching they have let most of their talent get away from them after investing heavy sums in training, to run advertising agencies, magazines and radio . . .

I hold it to be not only bad business, but almost a betrayal of our Constitutional guarantee and obligation for newspapers of this country to cling to the idea that they can go on being as half-baked and as superficial as most of them have been in the past.

Mark Ethridge, publisher of Louisville *Courier-Journal* and *Times;* Mellett Memorial lecture, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, Dec. 7, 1944.

necessary space. The fight shouldn't be carried to obnoxious extremes, but neither should the reporter feel his responsibility ends with a half explanation and a futile shrug of the shoulders. A reporter's oral presentation is usually interpreted by editors as an indication of the reporter's feeling about a story. City editors, news editors and managing editors want better stories, but they can't be completely informed unless the reporter tells them.

A reporter with independence and knowledge can be inadequate if he does not have a continuing keen interest in his job. This interest must be more than an interest in a specific story, it must be an interest in the purposes of newspapers and the responsibility of reporters to the community.

The only responsibility many reporters feel is to do their daily office stint. Then they try to shut their job out of their minds. To this unenthusiastic group, the reporter who reads specialized books at home, or visits a governmental institution on a weekend is a sucker and an eager beaver.

Cynicism is much too fashionable in newsrooms. Its brambles reach out to strangle idealism. Its adherents whisper in derogatory terms of reporters who display enthusiasm for their work. A story assignment is no longer an interesting and informative adventure for the cynical veteran, and young reporters follow this leadership unless editors or publisher furnish a positive leadership in the right direction.

Responsibility of the Boss

There are many editors and publishers who will look down from their Ivory Tower and nod agreement with all charges leveled at reporters. Some would even put the whole blame for newspaper sins on reporters they would classify as unimaginative, stupid, unenthusiastic or corrupt. The presence of reporters who are inherently lazy would support that stand, but before the executives point the finger of guilt they should examine the entire picture. The fact that a few hard working and incorruptible reporters have grown up on the staff doesn't prove that either the editors or the publisher have fulfilled all of their duties. Some reporters continue to do an enthusiastic job under the most adverse conditions. The important thing is what is happening to the morale of the vast middle group.

How do editors and publishers contribute to conditions that result in a promising reporter's gradually losing interest and going to sleep at his typewriter? It could be that they do it with their own attitude toward the news. By poor example, superiors can kill independence if they sell out politically, insist on slanted stories, or accept favors. They can destroy the incentive to do a better job if they operate on a pay scale that gives the drone and the worker the same compensation. They can kill the desire for study by quibbling over a few dollars for a research book while lavishly throwing money to sports departments or on fancy promotion projects.

The personal pride in doing a better job than a competitor can be the spark that stimulates the interests of the reporter. The ever-increasing number of monopoly papers, however, is eliminating much of this competition. On those papers the reporters must be their own spark or have that spark supplied by the newspaper executives.

Unless he is blessed with a staff of self-starters, the editor must take positive leadership. A good editor should want to remake the world and should, by word and action, spur reporters to help in the job. Too often the editor is a man who decided years ago that it is impossible not only to remake the world but even the front page of the newspaper. He is satisfied with routine writing and reporters who abide by convention. Such a lack of interest on the part of an executive is highly contagious.

No less detrimental to the attitudes of younger reporters is the presence of the veteran who has gone to seed. He not only writes dull copy but also sets a bad example as to how the job should be done.

How does he go to seed? He may have been born lazy. He may have been the result of disregard for the morale problem. He may be the reporter who was shifted from assignment to assignment with no regard for his likes or dislikes, or he may be the reporter who has been assigned to the same beat for 20 years.

Reporters who are chained to a beat get the feeling, and justifiably so, that there is no future for them. They know they are going to rot and die in the city hall, courthouse, police station or state house. They will probably become closer to the office holder than they are to the newspaper office. Their sole interest is in doing a job that will "get by" until they go on pension. Many of them have already decayed to the point where they have no salvage value.

The Morale Problem

Why do editors allow morale to become depressed? Usually because they are too busy with other problems to know that this depression exists. Coupled with their failure to recognize the problem is the fact that editors also take the easy way of getting work done. In the interests of specialization (or maybe because it is easier) they assign reporters to the same beat year after year. Even with its many advantages, specialization can be carried too far. Reporters with specialties can get in a rut mentally, or they can become so specialized that they forget to write in terms that are easily understood.

When a morale problem exists, the city editor is frequently powerless to make necessary adjustments by eliminating some staff members.

Some editors, realizing the danger that rigid assignments will produce deadwood, suggest a periodic shifting of the entire staff. Some switching of assignments will be beneficial in producing better morale, but this shifting should not be done indiscriminately.

Even brief relief from the same assignment can work wonders with morale and also build a more competent staff. Younger reporters, who get tired of a continuous round of conventions, light features and obituaries, are usually eager for the experience of a few days or weeks on a governmental beat. During slack seasons such assignments are usually feasible. At the same time, most beat reporters would like a few days of light feature work where there is greater opportunity for original writing. Shifting beats would serve the double purpose of taking the beat reporter out of the rut and at the same time giving the younger reporter a chance to become acquainted with new, more specialized subjects.

City Editor the Key

On many newspapers the city editor doesn't have a big enough staff or the time to do the right kind of planning job. In addition to making out assignments for the staff, he must suffer under a stream of telephone calls and visits from tipsters and publicity agents. It is little wonder that some city editors cannot become enthusiastic leaders of an enthusiastic staff.

An undue amount of useless custom, or pettiness and misapplication of reasonable customs, can create weary and warped minds. Poor news stories are written by some reporters who have decided that bucking tradition isn't worth the effort.

"Keep your leads less that 30 words" may be based on a sound principle, but it becomes a strait jacket when applied by a petty mind that counts words before reading the sentence.

Many times, without realizing what he is doing, a top executive juggles careless conversation that finds its way into editorial policy. In every newspaper office, there are people who try to interpret every publisher's sneeze as a rigid rule. It is this, even when the executive is a rational person, that creates an unintelligible maze of policy, or what is passed down as policy. Mental confusion and poor writing result when the reporter is cramped by rigid rules, editorial interpretation of publisher's cocktail conversations and the personal tastes of editors.

Telling a story the best way he can may seem secondary as a writer dodges such rules as:

"Don't start the lead with 'the' . . . Never start the lead with a person's name . . . Remember the readability survey and keep those sentences short. The lead must not exceed 30 words but the shorter the better . . . Ditch that four syllable word . . . Never start a story with a quotation . . . Get all the new stuff up high . . . Keep the background in one paragraph . . . No more than 12 inches of type. Write it so we can trim . . . You're not writing poetry . . . keep it straight . . . Back into that story; we don't want to make it too strong . . . We can't have this paragraph. I know it explains the situation but people will think we're editorializing . . . Don't bring that angle into your story, remember we don't crusade. We know it's true but we can't write it unless someone will say it."

Even when the newspaper discards one of the rigid style rules for news writing, tradition or necessity often makes the paper stick close to the principle of the discarded rule. Many newspapers have gotten away from requiring the first paragraph to contain the traditional "Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?" It isn't possible to cram all of these factors in the brief leads dictated by the currently fashionable readability surveys. Now the news policy sometimes provides that all of the traditional questions must be answered by the end of the second paragraph.

The city editor is the key to all-around writing on the newspaper. Given time to do proper planning, he can get the maximum from his men. His enthusiasm will stimulate staff members, his suggestions can create better informed reporters, his understanding can boost morale and his enlightening direction can brush away some of the barriers created by rigid news policy.

This does not mean that a city editor is responsible if he is burdened with a few reporters who are insulated against the fire of enthusiasm. The blame may be solely the reporter's. Or then again it might even be the publisher's. Chances are, though, that where there is a chronic case of lethargy, you'll find it all along the line.

NOT LIKE GREELEY

A Strange New Quiet on the Editorial Page

Maybe the trouble lies with the issues. Most of them have become gray instead of black and white. Maybe the trouble lies with the writers. Some of them are too steeped in tradition. Or maybe the blame is the newspapers'. They try to be nice to so many people.

There is one charge on which nearly all critics of the press—layman and professional alike—are ready to agree: never before in the history of American journalism has the editorial page exerted so slight a demonstrable influence on the thinking of newspaper readers as it does today.

The critics have an impressive array of supporting evidence. They can point to the record of the last four presidential elections, when the nation's newspapers ranged themselves in overwhelming numbers on the losing side. They can point to the recurring campaigns against gambling, slum conditions, graft and race prejudice—campaigns that reveal their failure by their repetition. And they can cite readership surveys that show the editorial page consistently way down on everybody's fireside agenda.

Gone are the days, we are told, of the Greeleys and the Pulitzers who stirred cities and swayed elections with their editorial thunder. Nowadays hardly anyone turns to the editorial page, and the few who do pay little attention to what they read.

Of course the editors and editorial writers do not sit back to be thus written off so decisively. They can point to local campaigns that *have* paid off in terms of cleaner milk, better sanitation or grafters jailed. They can describe the volume of mail they receive in response to individual editorials. And they can persuasively claim that editorial page influence multiplies through its impact on leaders in the community, who are generally among the thin ranks of editorial page readers.

Yet in the end the editors, too, will admit that the readership survey with its bald verdict is not far wrong. The editorial page as an institution has lost a great share of its once-vast audience and with it much of the power to enlighten and influence that it once possessed.

More than a few influences have been responsible for this decline. From one-man enterprises infused with the fighting spirit of great editors, our largest newspapers have become impersonal corporations. The issues upon which editorial columns can take forceful stands have become more complex than they were in Greeley's day, when the black and the white of any controversy seemed readily identifiable. The syndicated columnists, with their freedom from institutional responsibility, have appeared on the scene to provide newspaper readers with the free-swinging and sometimes sensationalized opinion they naturally find more enjoyable reading than the more cautious judgments of the editorial page.

But there are also a number of internal factors that have contributed to the falling off of editorial page following. And it is with those that this survey concerns itself—those pressures or conditions peculiar to newspaper work and newspaper offices that have somehow drained away the vitality of much editorial page writing and caused it to lose its hold on the majority of newspaper readers.

Looking at All Sides

We well realize that there still are great and influential American editorial pages, in large cities and small ones, free of the faults we seek to catalog here. Our object in this particular survey, however, is not to praise the distinguished and successful editorial pages, but to attempt an analysis of the influences that have made others less distinguished and less successful.

These influences begin working as soon as the editorial writer opens his morning paper over his breakfast coffee, or folds its pages small on the commuter train en route to his office. He begins casting about for a topic for the day long before he reaches his desk, and in the process he is subject to several "conditions of the trade" which may act to hobble his writing and weaken the finished product.

Many papers, chiefly smaller ones, follow a firm policy of "Afghanistanism" on their editorial pages. Their editorial writers are free to take firm, resounding stands on King Farouk's impetuous love life, the communist threat to Tibet, or the anti-social status of man-eating sharks. But it is a rare day when they are permitted to turn loose on any controversial issue as close as Washington or the state capital. And if they have something to say about a local malfeasance or political squabble they can write to the wastebasket, no farther.

Obviously, such restriction to space-filler topics is likely to enfeeble anybody's style. Good writing isn't impossible under such circumstances but it is mighty hard to produce. Probably such extremes are rare, but few editorial pages, from New York to Sauk Center, are free from Afghanistanism in some degree or other. The fault there is with the

high brass who are unwilling, or feel themselves unable, to afford an energetic, hard-hitting editorial page with something useful to say.

Some papers not afflicted with Afghanistanism may work under an equally restrictive though directly opposite policy. This may dictate that certain news stories or the public comments of certain prominent figures are always "must" topics for editorial comment, no matter what their factual content. Thus whenever Secretary Acheson holds a press conference the editorial writers have to come up with some sort of weighty verdict, even if the good Dean did nothing more than clear his throat. This leads to artificial writing and insincerity—and probably to the loss of still another couple of discouraged editorial page readers.

Akin to this last is a third type of shop rule that keeps editorial writers on the spot. A large-city newspaper in this era is big business in the million-dollar brackets. Most of the bigger ones are also fixtures of their local scene, with long histories of service. Quite understandably, these factors may encourage (a) a cautious, corporate point of view and (b) a ponderous sense of institutional responsibility for any policy stand once publicly enunciated.

The editorial page is the point at which these forces logically concentrate. The result in the one case is a studied reluctance to take any sort of decisive stand in an issue without "weighing the grave risks" and "looking at all sides," to use a couple of favorite phrases. And in the second case, there may be so deep a reverence for consistency that yellowed pronouncements of six months or six years ago may still be hobbling the expression of fresher opinion.

A continuing awareness of these policy guides will force the editorial writer more and more into habits of evasive verbosity, rambling style and "on-the-other-hand" reasoning. Even editorial writers on such respected journals as the New York *Times* will sometimes pick their way cautiously through 700 words of either-or reasoning to wind up with the resounding conclusion that "the Nation will have to decide," or that "this latest pronouncement has a decided ring."

These last influences on the quality of editorial page writing may be charged up to editor or owner in most cases. They stem from policy planks laid down from above, and the only way we can hope for a lessening of such pressures is through a shift in the willingness of ownership to permit forceful stand-taking and at least a partial retreat from a top-heavy sense of institutional importance.

There are some editors who lean over backward to avoid these faults, and sometimes they even lean a bit too far. In some shops a flat rule holds that every piece written on whatever subject must take a firm stand. Some days there simply aren't enough topics that will lend themselves to stand-taking. The writer must then twist issues and events around until he can set them up as policy targets, often at the sacrifice of accuracy and almost always to the detriment of the writing.

This doesn't have to be. Quite a few editorial staffs make a practice of keeping a little ahead of the game, with two or three pieces prepared in advance on sound but nonperishable topics. Then when the news is very thin they can fill in with one of the stand-by editorials and maintain the standard of the page without torturing some fresher but unsuitable subject.

Timing is a matter which finds editorial writers divided: some insist that editorial comment should follow close on the heels of the news; others contend that pieces can be better thought out and more valuable to the reader if they appear a day or two after the first news breaks. But all will agree that there are some perfectly good editorial ideas that won't be hurt a bit by a slight delay, and some of these could easily be kept on tap for lean news days.

Other editorial staffs get around a temporary shortage of pro-con topics by skilled use of the expository editorial. There is a proper place for editorials that do not insist on taking a stand, but rather probe informatively behind or ahead of the news in a way background reporters could not safely do without dealing dangerously in opinion. There is

On Taking Sides — All Sides

The following resounding pronouncement appeared as an editorial in one of the country's leading papers, under the head:

"Outdoor Theater"

"A plan to rezone a portion of Center Park to permit construction of a drive-in theater has resulted in considerable protest from residents of the district, and it is reasonable to suggest that the City Planning Commission not act precipitantly in the matter.

"There is much to be said on both sides usually when a controversy arises over plans to change a first-residential district to a commercial. Opponents put forth in this instance that the area is one of the last in the city suited to high-class residence building and that the theater would result in unnecessary traffic congestion.

"On the other hand, the drive-in theaters are legitimate business, catering to, besides the usual theatergoer, invalids and parents who like to bring the entire family without need of a baby sitter.

"The matter of placing an outdoor theater in such a territory as Center Park should therefore be considered at great length by the commission before a decision is rendered."

nothing immoral about an expository editorial once in a while, and it can often be a highly useful addition to the editorial page.

Conflict With Policy

The conflict of official policy lines with a writer's personal convictions is often regarded as one of the biggest bars to effective editorial writing. Sacred cows plod through editorial departments as well as newsrooms, and sometimes they get even more in the way.

Ideally, of course, all editorial writers should personally share all of the official views of the papers for which they write. Then all would be harmonious and each piece would glow with genuine fervor. Since any two individuals are not likely to agree on every debatable point that comes up, this is not always the case. A staunch Wallaceite and a left-wing Democrat wrote policy copy for a prominent Eastern paper in the Dewey camp. Conservatives have pounded away faithfully at their jobs on pink-tinged journals. And the number of editorial writers who at least occasionally disagree with one policy plank or another set forth by the papers that pay them is not far short of the total census of such staffers.

This conflict seldom develops to the point of professional revolt. Of course there have been writers who have found it necessary to resign—even one present-day New York publisher reportedly split with his owners and walked out on such grounds. But the more typical reaction is less violent. One of the most effective editorial writers on the New York *Daily News* staff solves his personal problem by simultaneously turning out editorials along a quite different policy line for the weekly magazine *Collier's*. Others less flexible simply shrug off their consciences and start pounding the keys.

It is true that most occasions for disagreement between the editorial writer and the paper's official line may not be major ones. A writer with liberal convictions on race relations is not likely to be assigned a piece advocating extension of Jim Crow laws. But he may quite conceivably be asked to support an approach to the achievement of race equality that he believes to be too gradual to be truly effective. And even when the conflict is not a deep one, his dilemma may well result in a less convincing literary effort than he might otherwise produce.

A man writes most convincingly in line with his own convictions. The editors who recognize and are guided by this fact are wise indeed. On many staffs no writer is expected to deal with a topic on which he differs with the paper's policy: somebody else gets that particular assignment.

Of course the editorial writer also must do his part to minimize this drag on effective editorial writing. He must, as an individual, recognize the problem of conscience. Yet he must face with equal honesty the fact that the editorial page is the policy organ of the paper's owners and editors and is recognized as such. It is not the editorial writer's personal platform. His job is to set down the paper's policy with as much skill and conviction as he can. If he can't achieve a practical, working resolution of his conflicts he would do better to look for another paper or another writing job.

The Basic Rule

The accepted basic rule, the only workable one I know on which to build a paper, that the news columns belong to our readers and the editorial page to ourselves, is becoming more and more accepted as the recognized formula. There are notorious exceptions, of course, where the selfish interest of ownership dictates absolute perversion of the news columns. But it does not take the public long to recognize such practices. In the end, such a press defeats itself and its own selfish purposes.

Roy Roberts, managing editor, Kansas City *Star;* Mellett Memorial lecture, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kans., May 4, 1934

The Olympian Complex

When the editorial writer has his topic picked out and his stand determined, he reaches the problem of researching the subject, and a few more of those built-in pressures come into play.

The problem of time enters into the picture for the editorial writer as it does for the reporter, though without quite the same emphasis. An editorial room deadline is usually based on hours instead of the minutes a city desk counts. But it is also true that editorials need more research than most news stories—though they don't always get it—and ought to be written with more attention to phrasing since they are expected to represent some of the best writing that appears in the paper. These factors put the hours-minutes relationship in a different light and bring the time element into the editorial department as well as the newsroom. After all, a deadline is a matter of psychology, whether you measure by minutes, hours or days.

The deadline complex could be licked in part by more effective research techniques and less aimless browsing. There ought to be a margin left for those necessary interludes of brooding over the keyboard. If the deadline still makes the pressure mount, maybe it isn't altogether a bad thing—a good many editorial writers could use some of

the swift edge that working against the clock's tick often brings.

Another research practice in editorial production is not so easily dismissed. A good many editorial writers—probably most of them—sooner or later acquire an Olympian complex about their own fund of knowledge. They keep up with three or four papers daily, skim through a foot-high stack of periodicals each week and begin to believe that they are better informed on the flow of the news than anyone else in the shop possibly could be. Thus when they prepare to comment on a local or national topic, they feel it would be an admission of weakness to consult a local reporter or Washington correspondent for his views or inside information.

This is a sadly misguided view, of course. An editorial writer's grasp of the news, good as it admittedly may be, is necessarily spread very thin. The beat man or Washington staffer has a narrower field on which to concentrate and in almost every case could be of real and immediate help to the editorial writer. Because editorial writers fail to take advantage of this help, they needlessly write themselves into corners and out onto shaky limbs.

Sometimes this attitude on the part of the editorial room can lead to absurd situations. On one large midwestern daily a reporter was assigned to cover contract negotiations at a local plant threatened with a strike. He did a series of pieces, outlining the union and management positions. His were the only articles published on the situation by his or any other local paper. Then the editorial page came out with its comment on the negotiations, based largely on the reporter's series. Not only did the editorial writer fail to consult the reporter, but he began his editorial with the words: "If newspaper reports can be believed. . .!"

Reportorial Outlook

In still another way this Olympian complex makes for less effective writing on the editorial page. Few editorial writers ever emerge from their offices to shake off their ivory-tower detachment and renew personal contact with the news. Two few papers give their editorial writers any opportunity to do on-the-spot researching and to familarize themselves with some of the sources of the news on which they comment so knowingly.

Many other papers could profit by the example of the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*. The *Post-Dispatch* editorial writers are regularly sent out to dig up background material for their pieces, and sometimes to put together a series of feature articles to be used either on the editorial page or elsewhere in the paper. They thus keep the reportorial outlook that no newspaperman, in whatever capacity, should ever lose.

Such getting about might also help to correct what is perhaps the greatest single factor adversly affecting the quality of editorial page writing—a warped and overstimulated audience consciousness.

This can crop out in two ways—writing down or writing up—but it most often takes the latter form.

Big Words

Many editorial staffs work on the assumption that they must aim their output at the top ten per cent of the paper's circulation, since that group, they are told, is the only one that reads the editorial page. When such aiming is intelligently done and results in thoughtful,skillfully-written pieces, we can't quarrel with the product. But the philosophy behind the practice is simply an admission that the newspaper survey figures are right and that there is no point in trying to do much about it.

It isn't always true, moreover, that such writing-up to the quality audience is well done. It often takes the form of a tendency to comment on only the most ponderous topics in the day's news. And this comment is phrased as polysyllabically as possible, with frequent reference to Webster's International. The pompous hash that is dished up under that formula has only a veneer of snob appeal to the upper ten per cent of the readership and is worthless to the other 90. What justification, other than an effort to impress, can be offered for the use of such words as "defenestration," "aelurophiles," or "supererogation," all of which appeared in the editorial columns of two of the nations most highly regarded papers.

The most frequently-heard reader complaint about editorial pages, and probably the most justifiable one, is that "I just can't understand their editorials."

There *is* a problem of aiming editorials on any paper, competitor or monopolist. The high brass should have a clear idea of the readership it wishes to reach with its editorial page, or with the different categories of editorials, and the writers should also understand that point. But clear, simple writing is automatically aimed at everyone. It is the style to be sought on the editorial page as well as on every other page of the paper. That is the safest aim to take. Big words don't guarantee big thoughts, and simple ones can hit harder and more tellingly than the most elaborately-contrived phrases.

Some editorial page staffs have experimented with the device of a brief, italicized sentence at the head of each editorial, summarizing the main argument. This is both a convenience to the reader and a useful exercise for the editorial writer. In boiling down his thesis to one simple sentence he may clarify his own approach and prepare himself for a more concise and pointed treatment of his whole piece.

Most editorial pages try to include a light editorial in each day's array, a humorous or whimsical piece on nature or human foibles. Often these short editorials are superbly

written, clear, brisk and lively. Mail returns frequently show that they are more widely read than the heftier pieces alongside. If editorial writers could break away from the conscious effort to impress, and bring to their heavier articles some of the skill that goes into the light ones, editorial pages would have a much more numerous following.

The Editorial "We"

Related to the writing-up complex is the historic preoccupation with the editorial "we." Since the era of the early giants of the highly personalized, signed editorials, editorial pages have more and more sought to be impersonal. It may well be that it is necessary to keep this impersonality of tone, inasmuch as the page speaks for the paper as a whole. But the editorial "we" and all that goes with it clearly hinder the editorial writer in achieving reader interest. One midwest writer, trying to perk up his editorial, started off with "We did a double-take the other day. . ." and was told off in shocked tones. "How can 'we' do a double-take—'we' means the newspaper. Can the *Herald* tower do a double-take?"

Editorial writers as a breed often have an unfortunate reverence for the rhetorical question. Some of the older hands particularly love to fall back on this device, winding up a piece in a furious welter of rhetorical queries and leaving the reader bewildered and backed against the wall.

A few other miscellaneous conditions have particular application to the editorial department. The space problem here is a two-way one. The average editorial page has a standard space to fill each day, usually two or three columns. Sometimes this leads to a very restricting standard of length. One West Coast paper publishes four editorials each day, every one of them exactly the same length as each of the others, down to the line. The editorial writers are supplied with copy paper cut to a special size so they will know when they have exactly met their space quota for the day. Such strait-jacketing injures editorial page writing as much as similar rules warp reporters' copy.

Many-Jointed Piece

The other side of that coin can be just as bad. Some editorial staffs strain much too obviously to fill up that gaping, two-column hole each morning. The New York *Herald Tribune* editorial page, one of the country's best, appears to prefer seven or eight editorial topics each day. When the news is thin, so are many of the editorials—innocuous pats on the back for a local service group or a brief memoriam to a recently-departed English novelist.

Another technical problem sometimes arises on editorial staffs that follow the conference system of policy making. One writer, perhaps a specialist, will outline his views on a given topic and propose to deal with it editorially. The other conferees put in their contributions and the matter is hashed out and shaken down to final form. But the writer assigned to the piece may then return to his desk and attempt to put together an editorial that will reflect everybody's individual contribution. The many-jointed result will be as unconvincing as he was unconvinced. To avoid this, the editorial writer ought to come out of conference with a broad policy line and forget the specific threads. Then he can start from there on his own. He may miss a few golden quotes for his piece, but it will probably turn out to be a good deal smoother and more convincing as a one-man product.

* * *

These, as we see them, are the conditions and traditions associated with the newspaper business that limit both the effectiveness of much present-day editorial page writing and the number of readers who follow it. We have tried to approach this survey with a proper awareness of our own limited outlook and without a superiority complex about Jovian judgments from a temporary ivory-tower retreat. We can't guarantee that if all of these adverse influences were corrected on any one paper that journal's editorial page would begin to run neck and neck with "Li'l Abner" in reader popularity. But it might give Emily Post a run for her money, and on many papers that would be a big jump indeed.

The responsibility for many of these influences can be charged to the publishers and the editors. Some of the others are traditions that have grown up through the years, nurtured by no one group. Others can be corrected only through the efforts of individual editorial writers. Each reduces the interest of readers in the one page where interest is most lacking. Unless we can do something to restore a sizeable share of that lost reader interest, we are likely to hear more and more from those critics who have begun to ask—still half-idly, only half-seriously—"Why not just do away with the editorial page altogether?"

How Many

of these words and phrases do you think would be immediately meaningful to a non-professional newspaper reader? All were culled from editorials in random issues of a half a dozen top-drawer American dailies.

> "Circumambient — de gustibus — moiling — piling Pelion on Ossa — satrapies — antithetical — magisterial admonitions — nexus — winching — apocryphal — cachet — theocratic feudalism — fustian — intransigence — exacerbation."

Reading, Writing and Newspapers

(*Continued from page two.*)

dent Charles W. Eliot of Harvard once told a young newspaperman: "You are in the worst business in the world." He explained that the necessity of haste prevented painstaking work. The public widely accepts this excuse, and indeed it legitimately accounts for a great deal. But it is a fair question whether its effect could not be minimized and largely overcome (as it is overcome by the most skilled practitioners in the newspaper craft) were it not for certain practices on newspapers. These are discussed in the very practical symposium that fills this issue, by the dozen newspapermen who make up the current group of Nieman Fellows at Harvard.

When newspapermen began coming to Harvard on Nieman Fellowships a dozen years ago, the University paid no attention to their writing. As qualified newspapermen it was assumed that they were qualified writers. They seem to have shared the assumption, for it was a number of years before any enrolled in any writing course at Harvard. The studies they pursued in the free choice of the Fellowships were in the background of their writing, largely, as would be expected of journalists, in the field of public affairs—history, economics and government. It remained for one of the finest writers of his generation, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., to persuade his colleagues in the 1944 group of Fellows that the one subject above all that newspapermen should pursue is writing. This group asked their friend, Mr. Theodore Morrison, in charge of English A at Harvard, to devote a weekly seminar to criticizing their writing. By this they discovered, as Guthrie has acknowledged with each of his own books, one of the greatest coaches of writing. Since then, more often than not, the Fellows, or a majority of them, have submitted their writing to Morrison's criticism. He describes in his article the impact on himself of this intimate contact with journalistic writing. With perennial regularity he found the same stock answers to his criticism of a piece of writing: "but you can't do it that way on a newspaper because . . ." After taking this alibi for some years he challenged the present group of Fellows to analyze the "because" in their excuses. They have undertaken to do so in the dozen articles that follow his provocative introduction. It will be noted that their own writing is uneven. It would be remarkable if any group of a dozen newspapermen were uniformly competent writers.

Nobody among these writers thinks that this symposium is the last word on any of the topics they have assigned themselves and each other. Rather they hope it may open useful discussion of the factors that govern newspaper writing. A good deal can be said in criticism of some of the criticisms, and the authors will welcome it as a clarification of their own thinking. They are, by and large, young newspapermen (average age 31, range 26 to 39), and though their experience ranges pretty well over the newspaper shop, they doubtless have much to learn. Indeed they are all busy learning. But they also know many things in freshly remembered experience that more hardened veterans may have forgotten. One thing they know is that times are changing and conditions in newspapering need changing, and they want to meet the more complex needs of the times.

The editors of *Nieman Reports* believe the total symposium is a useful contribution and are glad to be able to publish it for all interested in the problems of newspaper writing. As an old news hand who has been only a kibitzer on this project, I am grateful to the authors for taking time out from their individual studies of background for their jobs to take stock of the chief tool of their craft.

Louis M. Lyons
Curator, Nieman Fellowships,
Harvard University.

The Writers

ROBERT H. FLEMING, political reporter, Milwaukee Journal

WILLIAM GERMAN, head of the copy desk, San Francisco Chronicle

DONALD J. GONZALES, diplomatic reporter for the United Press (Washington, D. C.)

HAYS GOREY, city editor of the Salt Lake Tribune

MAX R. HALL, labor reporter for the Associated Press (Washington, D. C.)

JOHN L. HULTENG, editorial writer on the Providence Journal

JOHN P. McCORMALLY, reporter and editorial writer on the Emporia Gazette

MURREY MARDER, reporter on the Washington Post

CLARK R. MOLLENHOFF, reporter on the Des Moines Register

WILLIAM M. STUCKY, city editor of the Lexington (Ky.) Leader

RICHARD J. WALLACE, political and editorial writer on the Memphis Press-Scimitar

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