

ABOVE THE FOLD

A monthly newsletter on writing

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"His advice was particularly helpful to me as a beat reporter who faces similar problems as beat sportswriters (mixing in numbers, making it interesting for outsiders). It's great to hear from someone . . . from the trenches, who bangs it out on deadline and feeds the beast daily like some of us do. I found the whole thing completely invigorating."

— Rochelle Olson, city hall reporter

SPECIAL Buster Olney ISSUE

Buster Olney, the New York Yankees beat writer for the *New York Times*, was here last month to talk about deadline writing and beat reporting. About 50 of you caught his talk, which was interesting, useful, inspiring *and* filled with cool stories about Derek Jeter.

While I can't reproduce Buster's anecdotes, video or pizzazz, I can give you a recap of some of his suggestions:

Writing on deadline

► **Write for Buster's mom.**

When Olney was a kid, he was the only one in his family who cared about sports. He loved baseball — read everything, collected ball cards, memorized stats. His mother finally said, "Buster, you have tremendous potential . . . for becoming extremely boring." He never forgot that and has always sought to write stories that would pull in people like his mother — people who have no particular interest in baseball but who do love a good yarn. This is why his game stories are vivid with action, drama, emotion and personality. This is why he folds in stats and other technical information carefully and judiciously. This can be done with beat coverage of any kind.



Buster Olney

analogy. Buster is not. So that's a goal for next year: Work on analogy. He picks out a weakness each year to strengthen.

► **Endings.**

Sometimes you come across a really good anecdote or slice of life, and you're tempted to use it for your lede. But if it requires a lot of set-up or explanation, you might be smarter to save it for your ending and build your story around it.

► **Use quotes sparingly.**

Olney thinks newspapers use quotes too liberally and often automatically. Clunky quotes can wreck the pacing or mood of the story. You want to control the flow of your story, so paraphrase unless the quotes are strong. (Or very newsy.)

► **Set writing goals.**

Selena Roberts, a former Strib sports-writer now at the *Times*, is excellent at

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Writing on deadline

➤ Drop stuff in slowly.

Don't dumb down your stories, but dole out the technical or hard information. Sprinkle it in around other stuff, and give it context. That way it's there for the hard-core sports (or politics, or school board) fans, but it's also readable and comprehensible for Buster's mom.

➤ Put the reader there.

Buster likes to put the reader right on the mound, or in the dugout, or wherever he's setting his story. If you're covering a meeting or an event, pay attention to what people are doing. How do they react when key questions are raised, when key votes are taken? What's their facial expression? And then go up and ask them later, "What were you thinking when you made that face?"

➤ Look for telling detail.

Hang onto it. File it away. Use it when appropriate. For instance, Roger Clemens likes the mound in Seattle

because of the dirt. So Buster found out the name of the dirt — Cajun Gumbo — and saved that detail for just the right story.

➤ Don't overattribute.

This question came up in his morning session: Are there different rules for sportswriters than for the rest of the newsroom? For instance, Olney can get away with a lede that starts out, "Joe Torre knew he needed to look David Cone in the eye . . ." but wouldn't most reporters be required to attribute? As in, "Joe Torre *said* he needed to look . . ."?

Olney thinks not. If you do the reporting, get *both* sides of the conversation from *both* people involved, you can re-create, especially if you quote both people farther down in the story to make it clear to the reader (and to your editor) that you did, indeed, get the stuff from them and didn't just assume.

Covering a beat

➤ Prepare.

Olney never goes into a game cold. Not only does he arrive at the ballpark hours in advance to scope out the teams, do interviews and gather background, but he also spends time thinking about the outcome and its repercussions. If this pitcher wins, what does it mean? And to whom? If this team loses, who will benefit? Who will suffer? Beat writers could prepare themselves for any meeting, vote, or election in the same way.

Buster jots out notes on the repercussions, so he has chunks of copy ready to go to plug into a story on deadline.

➤ Show up, and don't give up.

If you write a story that will make somebody's life hard, show up the next day and let the source have a crack at you. And keep trying. Keep making calls, keep talking to people. If they know you're working hard and trying, they'll want to help you out and eventually will.

➤ The most interesting people to talk to are not other journalists.

When you're doing pack journalism, the inclination is to follow the crowd, hang out and schmooze with the other writers. Bad idea, says Buster. Every minute you spend talking to another reporter is a minute you could spend making a phone call, talking to a source, asking another question, jotting down another detail.

Buster is well aware that if he goes up to a player to ask a question, he'll be followed by all of the other reporters. So he makes arrangements to meet Scott Brosius in the hall, or someone else outside, so that he can ask his questions quickly and in private.

➤ Learn from your competition.

Having a dream job at the country's best paper doesn't mean you can exhale. Olney gets up at 5 a.m. to read all of the other Yankees coverage from his seven print competitors. He *hates* getting scooped. Hates it more than anything, except making mistakes. At the same time, he's learned some things from the other reporters — for instance, he learned to be more dogged about tracking people down by phone by paying attention to the techniques of his competition at Newsday.

➤ Give something back to your sources.

You can't just call them up and demand information; you have to tell them stuff, too, to make a conversation with you worth their while. And respect their time; if they know you're going to keep them on the phone forever, they're going to be much less likely to return your calls.



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Covering a beat

➤ Break down your questions to get key information.

Some people just don't give good quotes; some people don't think in terms of detail. You won't get what you need by asking them a broad question such as "What were you thinking?" or, "What were you feeling?" You'll only get a vague answer.

So push them; take apart the question, piece by piece, or take apart the incident moment by moment. Ask them to describe every step of the way, and push them to do so. You probably still won't end up with great quotes, but you will end up with the detail you need to tell the story vividly.

➤ Save string, keep files.

As you cover a beat, you'll encounter information and

anecdotes about your sources. Don't just cram that stuff into a story — hang onto it and wait for the right opportunity. Olney keeps computer files on all of the Yankees players and staff and jots down interesting tidbits and anecdotes as he gathers them. Then, when it's time to write about one of them, he pulls up the file and mines it.

➤ Own up to your mistakes.

Don't talk yourself out of corrections by saying the error wasn't that big of a deal. Don't wait for your sources to call you and point them out. If you know you made a mistake, own up to it immediately, write a correction, and call your source and let them know you screwed up. You'll have it off your conscience and, more importantly, your source will respect you all the more.

Staying fresh

➤ Repeated profiles.

Often, whether its a World Series or a municipal election, you find yourself writing about the same person over and over. How do you approach the second or third profile of someone?

View them through someone else's eyes, Olney says. Often the source himself won't tell you anything new or interesting, but there are always other people who are willing to talk and tell stories.

In one of several profiles he wrote of Derek Jeter, Olney found a Houston Astros scout who had discovered Jeter years ago and had tried to get the Astros to sign him. The scout gave details about Jeter's early talent, promise and demeanor.

➤ Constantly improve.

When Buster was 29 and covering high school sports in San Diego, his editor took him aside one day and said, "Face it. You're mediocre. You'll never get any better, and you'll be covering high school sports forever."

Not surprisingly, this made Buster mad. Writing, he figured, is something you can improve at your entire life. Within four years, he was at the *Times*, covering the Mets. "When I'm 60," Buster said, "I want to look back on stories I wrote back when I was 58 and say, 'Man, I'm *much* better than that now.'"



One way to do this: Bug your editor. Buster calls his editor at 10 a.m., when he knows the editor has read his stuff but hasn't yet gotten bogged down in the news of tomorrow. What did you like? Buster asks. What didn't you like? What ruts am I falling into? What should I be watching out for — am I using too many anecdotal ledes?

Editors, he says, usually are happy to get the story on deadline, slap on a headline and move it along. If you do OK, they tend to leave you alone. This is a compliment, of sorts — it means your stuff isn't terrible. But it's not going to help you improve.

Only you can make yourself better — by pushing yourself, by paying attention, by asking other people's feedback, by refusing to rest on your laurels.


➤ Maintain your sense of wonder.


As a baseball beat writer, Olney writes upward of 100 deadline game stories a year, and he's been doing this for 17 years. Yet his passion for the game — and for reporting — is evident in this comment: "Every day, I write a story I've never written before." He looks at baseball as a soap opera, or a serial drama — every day something new unfolds. Most beat coverage could be viewed the same way.




Phrases that are one word short . . .


By John Addington
Star Tribune Voice of Reason


 **The laid-off worker collects unemployment.** No, he is a victim of unemployment, so he collects unemployment compensation or unemployment payments.


 **The suspicious clerk called security.** No, she fears for her security, so she calls security people or security officers.

 **The injured worker collects disability.** No, he has a disability, so he collects disability payments.

. . . and single words that require a second one

 **faculty** It's singular, not plural, so the college doesn't have 200 faculty, it has 200 faculty members.

 **staff** It's also singular, and needs members.

 **clergy** A third singular, also requiring members.

Recommended reading

"Best American Sportswriting 2000." Last year's annual collection was particularly outstanding, with guest editor Dick Schaap using the broad definition of "sportswriting" to include just about any tale that involved competition. And so he chose fast-paced, dramatic stories on such unconventional sports as



gambling, cockfighting, rock climbing, extreme running, and, yes, pro wrestling (by Garrison Keillor). Also included is the profile with the intriguing headline, "Joe DiMaggio Would Appreciate it Very Much if You'd Leave Him the Hell Alone."



"Above the Fold" is a monthly newsletter produced for the employees of the Star Tribune. Unless otherwise indicated, its contents are the work of Laurie Hertzell, team leader and writing coach. Copy editing is by Paul Walsh and Kyra Cross Jaavaid.