

Writing to Deadline: The Journalist at Work

Donald Murray

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Writing the lede (sic) to a review of this book is a daunting task when one considers the expertise of its author, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, columnist for the Boston Globe, and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of New Hampshire. Murray is serious about the lede (“for the word lead so it would stand out on the telegraphic printout”), often drafting seventy-five different first lines before he finds the right one, but his tone in this book is relaxed and friendly.

Although enticing leads are crucial Murray spends a small chunk of this how-to asking his readers thirty key questions from “What one thing does the reader need to know more than any other?” to “Can we put a face on this story?” He also offers help finding the best opening—this Print Journalism 101 guide goes beyond leads, the five W’s, and the inverted pyramid style of writing the most important news at the top of the story.

Collected here are a seasoned reporter’s trade tips on exploring, focusing, rehearsing, drafting, developing, and clarifying each article. Murray covers voice, tension, context, and form in an easy-to-digest, informational style and advises readers on honing the skills and senses characteristic of good writers. Some of his best recommendations, however, are simple ones, such as keeping a journal or daybook of seed ideas and avoiding stereotypes and clichés in descriptions.

Peppering the text with quotables from writers of all genres, Murray always illustrates with anecdotes, examples from his “Over Sixty” column, or helpful graph-by-graph story analysis. Also featured are Q-and-A-style chats between Murray and other writing professionals, including David Mehegan, book editor of the Boston Globe, and Bob Ryan, sportswriter for the Boston Globe, in which they discuss interviewing, note-taking, and editing methods.

While Murray’s writing is sometimes repetitive, his slim book contains decades worth of newsroom experience that will prove most valuable to students and young journalists.

REBECCA REGO (July / August 2000)

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