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12-Week Course of Study:

*24 Ways to Write  
What You Think*

*Lesson 3*

**HUMOROUS COLUMNS  
ENTERTAINING ARTICLES  
REVEALING ARTICLES**

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# A HUMOROUS COLUMN WHEN YOU WANT TO SHARE SOMETHING FUNNY

**Domestic life is something we all have in common. We have been nourished and housed all the days of our life. We all have our own ideas on how something should be done.**

Some of us make a bed by tucking in a sheet on one side and then running to the other to tuck in its other half. Then we come back and toss the top sheet on, smooth it down and run to the other side to straighten that half. Then we come back to repeat the process with the first blanket—and so on. Others of us make the whole bed on one side and then go once to the other side to finish the job.

Who is to say which way is right? All of us!

**Everyone** has a right to say what he thinks. And those of us who do something more efficiently than others have every right in the world to speak up.

The late Erma Bombeck did—and

she did it with finesse and fun. She had remarkable powers of observation. She not only knew her house, but she really knew the people in it. She had wisdom and common sense that didn't stop. Part of her success as a writer-of-what-she-thinks is her ability to tell truth. She saw what was there.

**Remember** her hiding secret?

She asked, "How do you hide something from a teenager?"

Her answer: "Put it under a dish towel."

No teen in his right mind will pick one up. The keys to the car are safe under there. Fifty \$20 bills are safe under there.

**To write** her way, you need to know your environment and those who people it so well that you can tell readers what they've known all along—but never realized. We need to be such acute observers that we can see below and beyond surface appearances to the "why" and "how" of the way things work.

Close your eyes and say out loud what the numbers on your watch face are like. Are they roman numerals? Slashes? Arabic numbers? Are all the numbers there? Is number six missing?

We all wear watches and look at them every day. But few of us can recall without looking what those numbers look like.

We're like that in our houses, too. We see things, but we don't really.

**Erma did.**

She also had the power of comparison. She was good with similes ("like," "as") and metaphors. She would write about a ski cap and say it makes your hair go so flat it looks LIKE an unmade bed. She would write about her weight class leader who was AS warm a personality as Eva Braun (Hitler's mistress). She says her husband at a restaurant will wave away the waiter with the pepper AS if he were an unwashed relative.

**Turn** to your local bookstore or public library for a collection of her columns. Study how she wrote and then you take a turn. Be as willing as she to tell your faults and foolishnesses. Then turn them, as she did, into curious insights and logical deductions that help the reader you hope to have cope with his own domestic crises.

She also had second sight. She could see through people and issues and herself.

She thought. And she told what she thought.

**But notice.** She wrote about what she knew. She wrote as a matron—which she was. She did not assume a viewpoint that was not her own. She wrote as a married woman. She would tell her husband's faults and veritably strip him to his shorts, but she would not downgrade him—well, not usually. So many husbands and wives make public digs at one another, but you come away from Erma's columns knowing she loved and essentially respected her husband.

Even then, she wrote that her life's goal had been to make him a punctual man. She wrote he had never been to the first ten minutes of anything. She said curtains have gone up, races have started, overtures have begun—all without him. She said he never entered a bus that wasn't moving.

**Then she repeated** a phrase to show the intensity of her feelings—and frustration:

Just once she'd like to get to the buffet table before everyone else has eviscerated the tuna molds or plucked all of the tomatoes out of the salad.

Just once she'd like to get to a movie before they turn the lights down. She always had to grope through the darkness to find her seat.

Then she would make a flat-statement, and this was an essential part of her humor. She declared a fact and made you think it is God's truth.

**She would write,** "Being late is habit-forming" or she would tell you that the thing about people who are

always late is that there is no way to reach them.

She would use conversation as a technique that stopped time and brought you right into her dilemma. She took her husband to a football game on time.

When the band started playing, he asked, "What's that?"

She told him it was the national anthem and that it is usually played at the beginning of games.

"What for?"

She told him everyone sings it. It creates a nice mood.

"No one is singing, and for this I came without socks?"

**She told** young readers that mothers are no different from them, that mothers came naked and toothless into this world and mute and with sub-standard plumbing. "We spilled milk, wet our pants . . . and made our parents wish they had quit when they got the puppy."

We like Erma. She's our kind.

**Another thing** about Erma. She was willing to let herself be laughed at. She was willing for you to know that she was not a very good housekeeper. Her kids didn't necessarily have all their marbles under their cup. She hadn't always been the world's best mother. Sometimes she needed to wear her rubber stockings. She did need a girdle.

She told her readers what life was really like in the Bombeck household. And we're the better for it. We realize

we're not the only ones suffering "house-a-phobia." Ours is not the only three-ring circus on the block. Our drags and bags and sags are not the only ones showing.

**Now, you know** that on some things Erma exaggerated. Her varicose veins weren't all that bad. She did do the dishes sometimes. Surely, her hair kept a curl till she got out the beauty shop door.

But a style of humor in writing does exaggerate the blemishes so they are funnier than they would be straight. You the writer must practice exaggerating facts for effect.

Is it lying? I think it's more like straining at a gnat. No one's going to swallow a camel. People recognize exaggeration. They're not going to believe a lie.

Remember to paragraph well in your writing. Many paragraphs in feature stories for newspapers may be only one sentence long. Oh, you'll see up to three sentences in some—but try not to have more. Of course, if your sentences are unusually short—the "run, Dick, run" type—do put in more. But not all that many more.

Then, you've got to save up your best line for the last line. You want to build to a climax. Leave them laughing.

**If you don't** know your best joke when you see it, let a friend read your paper. Have him/her mark what he thinks is funny. If all else fails, try a relative. Do this as a last resort because some well-meaning relative will say,

“Aw, Mom, you’re not going to let anyone see this, are you?” Loved ones can be less than kind—on a moment’s notice. I’d rather risk mayhem at the hands of a stranger (a literate one who’ll read my stuff) than let one of my kin give my story his kiss of death.

**Here’s a technical note.** George C. Williams in his book, *Creative Writing*, urges writers to end the final sentence with what he calls a masculine word—a word that ends on the accent. It adds finality and authority to what you’ve said. The last word of the paragraph above is “death.” Thump! This is much better than if the last word had been “story.” Thump-a. Or “relative.” Thump-da-da.

Make your last word sing. Thump!

Bombeck got much of her humor from over-reacting. Read the following article and over-react. Reach into your own family history the way she would and write a humorous story of your own.

Exaggerate the situation.

Refer to the “statistics I read in the newspaper.”

**Go for the jugular**, but laugh while you pout.

Be excited about what you write. It will affect your style.

Remember, she made a flat statement and then supported it. Her bizarre, seemingly unrelated twists and turns provided surprises that kept the reader off balance and in stitches. We never knew what she would say next. It’s these twists and abrupt skips that

set the tone for her rakish humor. She piled cases-in-point one on top of the other and she did not use one transition word. Try it her way. (See the list at the end of the book if you don’t know what a transition word is.)

## Figures may underestimate family violence

**WASHINGTON (AP) – A Justice Department survey has found an average of 456,000 cases of family violence each year in this country, but an official said Sunday that this figure seriously understates the extent of the problem.**

**The department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics said its National Crime Survey estimated there were 4,108,000 instances of violence from 1973-1981 in which the offender was either the spouse, ex-spouse, parent, child, brother, sister or other relative of the victim.**

**The bureau said this total represented 7.2 percent of all the violent crimes uncovered in the nine-year survey and was by far the smallest source of violence measured.**

**By comparison, strangers were responsible for 58.2 percent of the violent crimes during the period, and acquaintances were blamed for 32.7 percent of them. The relationship between victim and offender could not be determined in 1.9 percent of the cases.**

**The National Crime survey is**

based on interviews every six months with about 132,000 Americans over age 12 who are asked whether they have been a victim of rape, robbery, assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft or larceny, regardless of whether the crime was reported to police.

Bureau Director Steven R. Schlesinger said the figures should shed light on “a serious problem about which little is known.” But, he said, the figures “cannot and should not be used to estimate directly the extent of family violence in the United States.”

“Undoubtedly, many more cases are not reported to either police or survey interviewers because (although) the victims do recognize the abuse as criminal, they feel too much shame to report it or they feel hopeless about the possibility of stopping abuse,” Schlesinger said.

The survey found that the most common family violence—57 percent of all crimes committed by relatives—occurred between spouses.

(NOTE: The sixth paragraph of this story illustrates a punctuation error. If a person’s quoted statement extends over several paragraphs, every paragraph begins with quotation marks, but only the last paragraph ends with closing quotes. Delete the closing quote after “United States” 13 lines up.)

Erma would complain about those out-dated statistics (1973-81), and then she would go about updating them with statistics she dredged up from her own family.

Did Erma like birds? Do you? She would go for one (or all) of several directions on this next one.

She might go after thieves and housebreaking. She might go after birds who speak. She might go after men named Robert. Or she might take on the people who repeat everything they hear—like parrots. “Everywhere you go, every word you say, somebody’s always listening in.” I can hear her now. (Notice the clever pun in the kicker below. Notice, too, it is underlined and the headline beneath it is indented. In print, the headline is one line below the kicker. On your manuscript, it’s two because you always double-space when typing manuscripts. But it is not two double spaces below the kicker.)

### CAGED

## Parrot’s Tale Trips Burglary Suspects

BAYTOWN, Tex., Jan. 21 (UPI) Baby, the parrot, sang like a canary to help police crack a burglary at her owners’ home, police said.

Mike Madison and his family were away the night of Jan. 3, and burglars broke in and stole nearly \$9,000 worth of property.

But the family’s 5-year-old, yellow-headed Amazon parrot, Baby, was there, and later she provided the family and police with the name of one of the burglars, Madison said.

**“Come here, Robert, come here,” Baby sang to her owners several days after the break-in.**

**Baby has a vocabulary of several hundred words, but she had not previously known any Roberts, Madison said.**

**Police later arrested two Baytown residents, one named Robert in another burglary.**

**Detective Reggie Harper said that during the Madison break-in “the bird said something and two of them ran out of the house. One of them stayed and called out, ‘Robert, come here. It’s only a bird.’”**

**The following news release is made-to-order Bombeck. It tells how archeologists have painstakingly scoured through the ruins of an old city, fully expecting to find a “massive pillar and statue of the Emperor Hadrian that stood there for more than 1,000 years.”**

**How often have you done the same thing?**

**They’ve burrowed three stories down, and they can’t find something 45 feet high. It sounds like a basement at our house, the attic, a kid’s bedroom. How often we search for something. We KNOW it’s there. We dig through three stories of ruins we’ve saved only to find the thing is gone.**

**Retell the story briefly so the reader knows where you’re coming from. Then veer off into your own nostalgia or into your own daily headache with**

**an identical problem. But search the original story for a unique angle rather than take the obvious tack.**

**You might key on the six years they’ve been looking—you’ve been looking for 12. You might play off “Bab al-Amud.” Or that you finally achieve something people will remember you by and then you find the minute you turn your back they’ve forgotten—or it’s gone.**

**Search the article for ideas to get you started whenever you find something in the papers that would be fertile ground for your imagination.**

**Then write.**

### **Ancient square found; Hadrian missing**

**JERUSALEM (AP) -- Archeologists burrowing under Jerusalem’s old city have uncovered the main square of the Roman-era city, but they failed to find what they were looking for -- the massive pillar and statue of the Emperor Hadrian that stood there for more than 1,000 years.**

**“The pillar should have been here, but we didn’t find it,” said archeologist Menahem Magen, pointing to a spot on 2,000-year-old paving stones three stories under the current street level at the walled city’s Damascus Gate.**

**The Roman emperor ordered the column placed at the northern entrance to Jerusalem when he rebuilt the city gutted during the Jewish revolts in the first and second centuries.**



Hadrian, also known as Adian, was the Roman emperor from the year 117 until his death in 138. He traveled widely in his empire, ordering structures of various types built in his honor. These include Hadrian's Wall that runs 73 ½ miles across Britain from Wallsend to Bowness.

The pillar supporting a statue of Hadrian in Jerusalem was believed to be 45 feet high. Arabs still call Damascus Gate "Bab al-Amud or Gate of the Pillar, indicating that the structure was there at the time of the Moslem conquest in the seventh century and probably through the Crusader period in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Magen said.

The search for the Roman plaza and Hadrian's pillar capped a six-year effort to restore the Damascus Gate, the old city's most elaborate entrance, to the grandeur of earlier eras.

Now a \$2-million project is nearing completion to remove the buildings, uncover the Roman gates underneath and build a garden inside the wall built in 1537 by Suleiman the Magnificent.

The main road outside has already been moved away, exposing the walls and the gate.

Consider the following take on this news story, written by Joella Knight, a very clever girl, in one of my journalism classes when I served as professor at Liberty University.

## Ancient square found; Hadrian missing

by Joella Knight

The archaeologists looking for Jerusalem's ancient Hadrian pillar are looking too hard. No one can find anything by putting forth that much scientific, systematized effort.

The only time I ever find anything is once I stop looking for it—and then it's never in the logical place I would guess. The lost can opener is never in the back of the silverware drawer or even in the dishwasher; it's always someplace like on the TV or in the garage.

Whoever finds his shoes in the bedroom? If you look for them there, you'll never find them. They'll pop up once you happen to pick up a fallen towel behind the bathroom door or when you sit down at the breakfast table.

The trick is not to look at all. An all-out search is too direct. There's something about assuming you will find something that almost guarantees you will not. One must be clever about such things. If you are a true follower of Murphy's law, you won't be surprised to find your eye glasses in the typewriter.

You can't outsmart Murphy's law either. Just once: Try looking for your newspaper from the bottom of the stack; it will certainly be near the top. Don't try finding the pizza cutter in your dishwasher; it

will undoubtedly be in your car's glove compartment.

Give up a three-hour search for your contacts and you'll find them on your eyeballs. Quit frantically looking for your pencil and you'll find it behind your ear. Stop searching garbage cans for that re-tainer and it'll show up in its container in the bathroom cabinet.

Those archaeologists have it all wrong. Whether that pillar is right under their noses or 3,000 miles away—they'll never find it unless they stop looking.

Another of my students, equally as clever, wrote the following column on the same article.

## **Ancient square found; Hadrian missing**

By Deanna Pfau

I like to label some of my days "lessons in futility."

A newspaper article confirmed that for me recently. Jerusalem archeologists have searched six years looking for the statue of a Roman emperor named Hadrian.

After careful calculating and digging three stories underground to locate the statue, they came up with zilch.

These archeologists shouldn't get too frazzled over it. They probably can't even find a pair of matching socks in the morning, let alone

2,000-year-old Hadrian.

I'd like to invite the archeologists to my house to do some digging. They could start in the kitchen by helping me find the matching lid to one of my bowls.

After days of digging through every shape, size and color, I have the feeling it's been reincarnated as a frisbee.

They could have helped me the day I screamed, "Don't move! I've lost my contact!"

My husband and I crawled around the house on our knees for more than an hour. We even looked in the unlikely-places—in the oven, in all the drawers and in the doggy dish. We didn't find the contact.

I could also use their help in locating matches for the birthday candles, keys to the car and a needle for the darning.

When I'm on my deathbed, I'll probably look back over all my days and discover that I spent more of my life looking than finding.

Gravity is a law of nature. I think looking is, too.

Now, just because Joella and Deanna chose those angles to write about, doesn't mean that there is nothing else to find. They haven't said it all!

**Dig** for other angles.

Make these articles your own.

And learn the ultimate lesson that you can develop a career for writing

humorous columns by applying Erma's techniques to the news of your day as well as to the events that take place in your own life or in your family's life.

Keep your eyes and ears OPEN!

Also, look for coincidences. This one came by e-mail, no author indicated.

After being nearly snowbound for two weeks last winter, a Seattle man departed for his vacation in Miami Beach, where he was to meet his wife the next day at the conclusion of her business trip to Minneapolis.

**Unfortunately** there was some mix up at the boarding gate, and the man was told he would have to wait for a later flight. He tried to appeal to a supervisor but was told the airline was not responsible for the problem and it would do no good to complain.

Upon arrival at the hotel the next day, he discovered that Miami Beach was having a heat wave, and its weather was almost as uncomfortably hot as Seattle's was cold.

The desk clerk gave him a message that his wife would arrive as planned.

He could hardly wait to get to the

pool area to cool off, and quickly sent his wife an e-mail; but due to his haste, he made an error in the e-mail address.

**His message** therefore arrived at the home of an elderly preacher's wife whose even older husband had died only the day before.

When the grieving widow opened her e-mail, she took one look at the monitor, let out an anguished scream, and fell to the floor dead.

Her family rushed to her room where they saw this message on the screen:

**Dearest wife,  
Departed yesterday as you know.  
Just now got checked in.  
Some confusion at the gate.  
Appeal was denied.  
Received confirmation of your  
arrival tomorrow.  
Your loving husband.  
P.S. Things are not as we thought.  
You're going to be surprised at  
how hot it is down here.**

# AN ARTICLE TO ENTERTAIN WHEN YOU WANT TO SHARE SOMETHING INTERESTING

**Actually, everybody finds pleasure in something.**

**Mathematicians** love logarithms. Medical men love find-the-missing-corpuscule games. Delivery men go ape over “Where is Latitia Lane?” questions. But these are not grist for the opinion writer. You must find subjects that appeal to all mankind. That may or may not include womankind if you consider the classic example from my files that follows.

This writer from the “Washington Times” put his finger on the city’s nerve. He had a subject all the city titillated over. The beloved Washington Redskins had just beaten San Francisco in professional football. What could be more supergobslopshus?

**He entertained** his readers by reliving what happened. And this is definitely a method of entertaining. Little kids love to have stories they’ve heard a hundred times read over and over again. They love reliving the excitement the hero goes through even though they know the outcome.

**Here again**, the writer retells what happened at a crucial moment in chronological order. He dawdles as he relives a certain kick.

Then he goes into a Dick-and-Jane routine with short simple sentences: “There’s the snap. The leg starts up. Be still, our hearts.”

And then he goes into word flashes where one word, then another one word, then another one word heighten the retelling: “Pandemonium—and relief—reign.”

Then comes the fiction writer's favorite technique:

**"But wait."**

Here comes one last try from the opposition. We just pulled the game out of the hat, now maybe they will.

Will they?

"See them fail." Ah! All is not lost. Then the writer takes his audience on to the next game where this hysteria will happen all over again.

Read this and see if you aren't entertained:

**Talk about football games. It was heart-attack city for Redskin fans who packed RFK Stadium and for the millions of TV viewers who munched fingernails and potato chips until the final whistle yesterday left truth and justice triumphant—and the Skins the winners, 24-21, over San Francisco.**

**Going into the fourth quarter, it looked like we would clinch the NFC title by a comfortable 21-0 margin.**

**But, my, how those 49ers struck back, shifting the momentum in a matter of minutes and giving the entire city visions of a hard-fought season going down the tubes.**

**The unthinkable was about to happen.**

**Then, with 7:08 left on the clock, our John you-know-who takes that Theismann hand-off at the Skins' 12 and barrels through for the loveliest 23 yards we've ever seen.**

**The effect is electric.**

**Feel RFK trembling from the continuous roar as Theismann pilots the Skins downfield to set up a Moseley field goal.**

**Moseley had missed the mark four times before.**

**Talk about do or die.**

**Hush.**

**Those are the hopes and dreams of every Redskin and every Redskins fan dancing on the tip of Moseley's shoe. There's the snap. The leg starts up.**

**Be still, our hearts.**

**With 40 seconds remaining and RFK as still as a church, he puts the ball through the uprights, three points on the scoreboard, and the Redskins into Super Bowl XVIII. Pandemonium—and relief—reign.**

**But wait. See those 49ers make one last valiant effort. See them fail. Our Redskins manage to dominate as they have so effectively in the final quarters throughout the year.**

**Now, on to Tampa Bay and one last battle—for the world championship of football. Mark your calendar: Sunday, Jan. 22. That'll be the day D.C. goes Hog Wild—again.**

**This sample demonstrates why every writer needs to learn to write fiction. There are techniques a short story writer or novelist masters that enhance the telling of fact. This sweeping to the climax and then stopping for a slow-motion examination of watching a leg start up has all the makings of melodrama.**

The opinion writer out to entertain the folks might want to adopt some of the methods the writers of humorous columns use.

**On the two** assignments that follow, it would be conceivable that an enterprising writer would take the “Novel idea” to an extreme not dreamed of by those who entered the contest. The exaggeration would provide the entertainment.

The article on mud wrestling’s being accepted now as an art form could suggest other activities that might well be accorded the same elevation.

Writer, let go and write a light-hearted piece.

Let’s not let going “Hog Wild” be limited to Washington, D.C.

**Novel idea:**

**‘Once upon a time,  
long, long ago . . .’**

N.Y. Times News Service

**SAN JOSE, Calif.** –The third annual competition to see who can write the worst possible opening sentence for a novel has produced entries even more deplorable than those last year, contest judges at San Jose State University say.

“There must be a lot of aspiring terrible writers out there,” said Scott Rice, a professor of English at San Jose State. “This year we have some wonderfully terrible sentences.”

The winning sentence was composed by Steve Garman, city manager of Pensacola, Fla., who wrote:

**“The lovely woman-child Kaa was mercilessly chained to the cruel post of the warrior-chief Beast, with his barbarian tribe now stacking wood at her nubile feet, when the strong clear voice of the poetic and heroic Handsomas roared, ‘Flick your Bic, crisp that chick, and you’ll feel my steel through your last meal.’”**

For that, Garman will be awarded a word processor.

The runner-up, Joan C. Gilliam of Houston, will be awarded a 30-volume set of the complete works of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, a minor Victorian novelist noted for the opening line of his novel “Paul Clifford,” which began, “It was a dark and stormy night.”

Miss Gilliam wrote:

**“I had left the barbecue quite hurriedly with sketchy directions to the ladies room ‘out back,’ and now faced a black cow wearing one red earring standing beneath an ill windmill, bladeless and bent from years of prevailing winds; as she watched me with bovine detachment, my heels sank arch-deep into the mire. . . . I hate the country!”**

Garman, who was awarded dishonorable mention last year for an entry of what he termed “some astonishingly bad writing,” said he had entered four sentences in this year’s competition and that the winning sentence did not take too long to compose.

“It’s really rather a quick process,” he said. “The ones that I thought were the best didn’t take much time or effort.”

The bad writing competition for which the English Department at San Jose State has received national recognition, was organized by Rice to provide an outlet for writers who would not normally be able to get anything published.

The sentences were divided into 16 categories, including historical romance, plain brown wrapper, horror, murder mystery and modern romance.

“If you put writing in the same category with other interests like softball, golf, or chess, there are outlets available for amateurs,” said Rice, who has taught advanced writing at San Jose State for 15 years. “In writing, there’s only room for a handful of good or lucky people.”

Rice said that the competition had been named the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest because Bulwer-Lytton “really shows us something of the nature of true badness.”

His books are “hard to read, his characters are one-dimensional, they are not psychologically interesting and there is a lifeless formality to them,” the professor said.

“What is more,” he continued: “His plots are filled with all kinds of coincidences and improbabilities.”

The judges did not record the number of entries, but Rice said he

believed more than 4,000 amateurs had sent in sentences.

My student, Deanna Pfau, took this idea to the cleaners:

Novel idea:

**‘Once upon a time,  
long, long ago**

By Deanna Pfau

I thought I’d heard of every contest imaginable, but this one tops all previous brainstormers.

It’s called, “Writing the worst possible opening sentence for a novel,” a contest sponsored annually by San Jose State University in California.

The contest judges say that the competition challenges amateurs to produce “true badness.”

Upon reading the winning and runner-up entries, I thought surely I could do better than they. So I conjured up a few deplorable things of my own. Who knows? Maybe next year I might win a word processor.

Under the modern romance category, I wrote:

“She tripped along the seashore as dreamy thoughts of Hulk Hogan gripped her hypothalamus, while totally unaware of the crab trimming her toenails and the seagull residue falling effortlessly down her brow.”

Under the murder mystery category, I managed this:

**“I dialed the operator and asked for the “Pasta Patrol” after discovering Maria, the famous cook in our town, lying lifeless on the kitchen floor of her restaurant with a wet noodle strapped around her neck.”**

**I must admit that creating these openers really took some dumb thinking of which I’m not that accustomed to. Ahem.**

**Anyway, I’ve come to the conclusion that it takes a real smart person to write a real dumb opener in order to win a real dumb contest that gives away some real smart prizes. Got that? Maybe that should be the first sentence of something.**

**After taking your turn at an article on writing bad first sentences, do one on the following:**

## **Mud wrestling wins status as art form from delegates**

**RICHMOND (AP) - The House of Delegates decided mud wrestling was an art form and not a competitive sport Monday, and supporters vowed to go to the mat to protect their turf.**

**“This little bill may be the sleeper of the session we’ve all been waiting for,” said Delegate David Brickley, D-Prince William.**

**The Senate bill would put specific definitions of boxing and wrestling into the law that gives the Virginia Athletic Commission regulatory power over those sports.**

**But Brickley, Del. Warren Stambaugh, D-Arlington and Del. Vivian Watts, D-Fairfax, successfully offered an amendment that exempts mud wrestling from regulation.**

**Ms. Watts wanted to go even further and exempt jello wrestling, but they decided on the more conservative posture.**

**“Nothing is more American than going to the county fair and seeing mud wrestling,” Brickley said.**

**Del. Billy O’Brien, D-Virginia Beach, who has handled the bill in the House, insisted the amendment wasn’t germane because it was “muddying the waters,” but it quickly sopped up support.**

**“It’s more a form of entertainment or art than an athletic contest,” said Del. Ted Morrison, D-Newport News.**

**Now their only problem will be trying to pin down Senate approval.**

**Here is Joella’s version of that story. Realize that I am including these to show you how you can do the same to develop your own career in writing humorous columns.**

## **Mud wrestling wins status as art form from delegates**

**By Joella Knight**

**Along with classical music, Renaissance paintings and still-life photography, another art form has**



emerged: mud- wrestling.

The Virginia House of Delegates said so Monday. Don't look at me! Whoever he is, I didn't vote for him.

I always thought Congressmen and impressive people like that had more important things to do.

Here I've been worrying about the national debt, foreign relations and welfare subsidies when all this time I should've been concentrating on things like whether mud-wrestling is an art form or a competitive sport.

Personally, I think the House of Delegates should do away with voting altogether and base their decisions on the winners of government-sponsored mud-wrestling matches. The Delegates could be the wrestlers.

They could water down the Capitol lawn and the Congressmen could push up their pant legs and loosen their ties. Just think, C-span would be much more interesting to watch on TV. The ratings would skyrocket.

"See your Representative battle it out with Congressman Rick Flair over municipal highway funding, today at 3 p.m."

No one would have to bother with boring voting records. Instead, we could have a "Congressional Pins" record. They could hold special "Republican vs. Democrat" tournaments with all 435 Representa-

tives squirming in knee-deep sludge to determine the majority party.

This way, Congressmen could not only leave their mark on history, but they could also make a lasting impression on the art world.

I can hear the public service commercials now:

"Support the arts. Pay your taxes."

Now it's your turn. Whether you take the high road or the low road, include the mud.

Aspiring writers buy good books. Which ones? Here are some suggestions. I've included their tables of contents so you can see what they book covers. I also recommend your joining the Writer's Digest Book Club. It sends monthly bulletins offering fine writing texts. I've bought many.

### Recommended Books

Vachon, Brian. *Writing for Regional Publications*. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writers Digest Books, 1979) 207 pp.

1. A Sense of Place: A roundup of regionals and how they differ
2. Freelancers Wanted: No experience necessary
3. Little Things Mean a Lot: How to turn an editor off
4. How to Turn an Editor On: Secrets of a salable regional article
5. Write Up Their Alley: Mastering

- regional magazine marketing
6. Providing the Decoration: Photos and art
  7. When in Vermont (Or Atlanta or Dallas): Strategies for freelance survival
  8. Sunny Side Up: Writing for positive publications
  9. Writing for the Roughnecks: Cashing in on the citymag explosion
  10. Ever on Sunday: Newspapers' weekly regionals
  11. How Green Is Your Pasture? Writing for environmental regionals
  12. Take 'em By the Hand: Writing city and country guidebooks
  13. That's No Article, That's a Book: How and where to sell it
  14. Expanding Your Markets: Regional refinements and recycling

Yudkin, Marcia. *Writing Articles About the World around You*. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writers Digest Books, 1998). 218 pp.

### **PART ONE: IDEAS FROM HOME**

1. Starting from Home
2. Your experiences as a resource
3. Using what you know
4. The people around you
5. Places near home
6. Local news worth spreading

### **PART TWO: IDEA TO ARTICLE**

7. Query letters, assignments and

- completed articles
8. Research and interviewing
9. Structuring your article
10. Writing for the reader
11. Rewriting and dealing with editors
12. Building your freelance writing career

### **PART THREE: RESOURCES**

Recommended books and other resources

Kelton,, Nancy Davidoff. *Writing from Personal Experience (How to turn your life into salable prose)*. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writers Digest Books, 1997). 211 pp.

This book has 39 chapters. The author, a writing professor, believes "writing is a deceptively difficult art. Time, patience, discipline, desire and perseverance are needed to reap its rewards. And even with all these things, the going can be tough. I never tell my students it's easy. Quite often it is anything but. Do it only if you really want to. There are easier ways to be miserable. . . . (However), the rewards you will reap from writing are the greatest you could possibly know."

The author presents a course in writing for students willing to work.

Raskin, Julie & Males, Carolyn. *How to Write & Sell a Column*. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1987). 136 pp.

1. The Lure of Column Writing

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: ENTERTAINING ARTICLES

- |  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 2. Deciding on the Column You<br>Want to Write | 5. Marketing Your Column            |
| 3. Writing the Column                          | 6. Promoting Your Column            |
| 4. The Ongoing Column                          | 7. Syndicating and Self-Syndication |

# AN ARTICLE THAT REVEALS WHAT ONLY YOU KNOW

**The Bible calls us “peculiar people.”**

Of course, its use of that word “peculiar” is a 16th century use and it means a special and a unique people. But to look at most of us now, you’d think that the Old English folk had it right.

This is where the opinion writer can have a hey-day. He can write what only he/she would know: **What people are really like!**

He can examine our foibles and failings and get us to laugh at ourselves—or cry.

He can show us what we are and promptly spank us for our foolishness.

Here’s an editorial from The New York Times (2-7-84) that shows (or purports to show) what really goes on behind the shutters of the health-food folk:

## **DILUTED VIRTUE**

**Score one for the junk-food junkies: according to new market research, many of the folks who boast**

**about their healthy or sophisticated eating habits aren’t to be believed.**

**NPD Group, a market research concern, recently asked consumers to record what they really eat. Among the delicious findings: People who say they eat only a healthy natural diet sit down to French toast with syrup every other day and are partial to chocolate chips, pretzels and Jell-O.**

**Sophisticated eaters are as likely to down prepackaged cakes, olives, doughnuts and frozen dinners as bread, bagels, cheese and pumpernickel.**

**Junk-food devotees might rightly inquire, as did Sir Toby Belch of the clown in *Twelfth Night*:**

**“Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?”**

The next day’s mail will undoubtedly be filled with letters to the editor.

Those who live on natural foods will cry that they’ve been tried with-

out jury. But the writer is essentially saying we all dip into the pickle barrel occasionally. He may be right.

The next piece from “The News and Daily Advance” out of Lynchburg, Va., calls on citizens to settle their problems by themselves without overloading the courts.

It shows what people are—or can be—like.

And it calls them to task over the matter.

Remember, columns of this kind are not merely rehearsals of peoples’ failings.

They flick the whip at the end and draw blood.

## Court order to neighbors: Use some common sense

Judges are human, too, although we – and sometimes, they – tend to overlook it. They get fed up with onerous, nit-picking complaints that should never find their way into court given any semblance of good will on the part of the people involved.

Recently Campbell County Circuit Judge J. Samuel Johnston Jr. had heard enough of a feud over a private road in the Evington area. He thought he had settled the dispute with an equitable order on Jan. 6. But here it was again, in his words, even more “unbelievable . . . asinine” than before.

Down came the gavel. “If you are

going to be unreasonable, I have no choice but to be unreasonable, too,” he told both sides.

“I don’t want you back here with more picky violations,” he told the owners of the private road.

At the same time he warned the residents of a trailer park who have been using the road in defiance of his Jan. 6 order: “If you come back, bring your toothbrush because you’re going to jail.”

The squabble broke out last summer when the two owners of the private road filed a lawsuit to keep eight families living in the trailer park from using their road as an access to Virginia 696. There is another exit from the trailer park, a winding dirt road.

The suit was settled out of court last November, with the trailer park residents given until Jan. 1 to build a new road to which the private road owners agreed to contribute \$1,000.

The trailer park owner started work on a new road, but he says he was forced to stop because of bad weather.

When Jan. 1 rolled around, the property owners put up a barricade.

On Jan. 6, Judge Johnston stepped in. He ordered the private road opened to emergency vehicles—and for the trailer park to use as long as the dirt road was impassable. At the same time, he ordered a

**\$100 fine for each unauthorized use of the road.**

**One would have thought that was clear enough. It wasn't. Two weeks ago the case was back before the judge. The private road owners cited numerous violations of his orders. The residents showed up to defend their use of the private road.**

**The judge heard them out for about 40 minutes before calling an end to the conflicting testimony and warning them of the consequences if they came back before him again.**

**Court dockets are overloaded, and one of the reasons they are overloaded is cases such as this one.**

**These cases should never come to court, and wouldn't, if the people involved showed a little common sense and upheld each other's rights.**

**A private road is a private road. One should not expect to use it without permission.**

**At the same time, permission should be given in cases of extreme emergency.**

**On Jan. 6, Judge Johnston settled that issue in a most reasonable fashion, with regard to the rights and realities involved.**

**A few more such decisions just might send a signal to the people within his court's jurisdiction to try to work out their disputes instead of dumping them in his lap. It could save them money in legal expenses and it could save them time – time in court, and possibly, time in jail.**

Use this next story to point up what people are really like—at least, some people.

Retell the story, letting what you really think color the tone of the column. Then, near the end, pull out your whip and flail away.

Now, you may not think the people who buy \$7 ice deserve chastising.

Then don't.

Praise them.

But the point of this kind of piece is to reveal what people are really like.

## **Imported ice selling for \$7**

**NEW YORK (AP) - The latest status symbol from one of Manhattan's trendiest department stores comes in an elegant silver package, costs a mere \$7, is 100,000 years old – and can be used to cool 12-year-old scotch.**

**It is ice.**

**Bloomington's this week introduced 35-ounce bags of imported ice chips culled from a 100,000-year-old glacier in Greenland. The store claims its "Glazonice" is the oldest and purest ice on earth.**

**"They're selling like hotcakes," said Sellers Washington, who stood behind a freezer containing bags of ice in the store's gourmet food section.**

**"It's trendy too," said Phil Festa, the assistant manager of the food section. "Remember the pet rock?"**

Donna Goodman, of New Haven, Conn., bought a bag on Thursday because “I have a crazy boyfriend who will get a kick out of it. I don’t see any other reason to spend \$7 on a bag of ice.”

She said she wasn’t worried about the ice melting during rush hour on the road to New Haven, 75 miles northeast of New York City. Festa told her the glacial ice had been compacted by pressure and was incredibly dense. “We tested it,” he said. “We left it in the sun for five hours, and only half of it melted.”

“It doesn’t dilute your drink,” said Washington.

Bill Lane, the buyer for Bloomington’s food section, said the store was selling romance in the silver mylar bags.

“The way people think about it is important,” he said. “When you think of something that old, and the purity of it, it can be valuable to you.”

He conceded that some people “are going to laugh a little. That’s fine. People sometimes buy what they laugh at because it’s personal, different.”

Lane bought 4,000 pounds of the ice from a company headed by William Baker, a polar explorer who is also president of the Group W Communications television group. He brought glacial ice back from Greenland to give as Christmas gifts.

More than 60 bags were sold in the first two days.

Dawn Smoot, another clever Liberty student, turned in the following take on the Glazonice phenomena.

## **Imported ice selling for \$7 is latest rage**

By Dawn Smoot

**Why do people buy the elements at such outrageous prices?**

**The very fact that water costs anything seems absurd—unless you’re considering your last water bill.**

**They say the going rate for a rock hanging by a twine that’s tied to a twig standing on a wooden block is a whole \$2.25.**

**Now ice comes at \$7 a pound—that’s a cold, hard fact.**

**In New York City, it’s a fad. Sixty pounds sold in two days. Of course, to mention that the ice is 100,000 years old may be a good selling point. Who wouldn’t want to serve a piece of ancient geology and history in a glass of Coke?**

**This ice is some of the purest in the world and comes from a gigantic glacier somewhere “up there” in the Northern Hemisphere—so they say. Talk about a designer label!**

**People who spend \$7 on a bag of ice must be bored or at least desperate for a little attention. Seven dollars buys a nice bottle of perfume, a K-Mart blue-light special**

record album, a dinner-for-two at Hardees or a couple of gallons of gas. Why ice?

The same people who buy \$7 bags of ice will also buy only Calvin Klein or Pierre Cardin. These “keep-up-with-the-Jonesies” aren’t necessarily rich. But image takes up most of their priority list.

They climb out of their rusted-out cars in a crowded parking lot and stay low until they find a nice Trans Am or Cadillac. Then they stand up and look to see who’s watching.

They spend five hours deciding what to wear, leaving mounds of clothes behind them. When they decide what pleases them, they realize that the shirt they want is crumpled somewhere in the pile. So they’re five minutes late having to iron their latest style.

They always want people to notice that they are “in.”

Even if the ice melts eventually.

To most of us it seems strange to marry in a supermarket. But if you have worked there and all your best friends work there and if you are given the items—the flowers, the refreshments—that are normally so expensive, it may all seem reasonable.

Study this article and come to a conclusion. Look for an interesting angle you might use as you approach your own last sentence. Remember, you must make the last sentence worth the price of admission.

## **Bride, groom get married beside shampoo, razors**

**VIRGINIA BEACH (AP) - The bride strolled slowly down the aisle – Aisle 14.**

Past the neat rows of hair color, dandruff rinses and decongestants, toothpaste, shampoo and disposable razors, she stepped to the tune of “The Wedding March” piped over the public address system.

At a display of specially marked-down mouthwash, she paused a moment to let a woman shopper with an overflowing grocery cart pass. Her groom waited nervously at a counter in the floral department, next to spools of ribbon and sprays of greenery.

And so it was that Carol LeMay and Robert Irving were married Tuesday in a Farm Fresh supermarket while dozens of bemused shoppers looked on.

Mrs. Irving is employed as a stock clerk at the store. Her new husband is an enlisted man in the Navy. When they decided to get married, one of her friends at work suggested that they have the ceremony in the store.

“It started out as a joke,” Mrs. Irving said. “But then they took it seriously.”

Soon the whole store became involved.

**Junior Johnson, the store’s meat-**



cutter, sang the theme from “Love Story.” Cecil Petty, the store manager, gave the bride away. Joan King, Mrs. Irving’s supervisor, was maid of honor.

It was a family affair. Mrs. Irving’s first husband, Chuck LeMay took the wedding photographs. Their three sons – ages 9, 7 and 4 – were there. The oldest boy was the ring bearer.

Earlier, the bride, following the tradition of not letting the groom see her until the ceremony, waited in her “dressing room”—a cubby hole of an office at the back of the stockroom.

Farm Fresh donated the flowers, the cake, the punch, the house plants and the wine.

Fellow employees pushed aside displays of baskets labeled “special purchase” and placed candelabra on each side of the counter in the floral section to create a kind of altar where Melvin Cooper, Virginia Beach marriage commissioner, could pronounce the couple husband and wife.

Cooper, who has married couples in bars and on boats over the years, said it was his first supermarket wedding.

As the happy couple were pronounced husband and wife, a wheel on a shopping cart squeaked, a cash register chattered and a disembodied voice called “Price check, teller line one.”

Forgive my parade of students who caught the torches I threw to them. One after another, they handed in great papers. This one by Ron Starner, who has moved on to assume editorships in his post-graduate life, takes an opposite tack on what he thinks is at stake with a supermarket wedding.

## **Bride, groom get married beside shampoo, razors**

**By Ron Starner**

As if supermarkets were not too crowded and cluttered already, the Farm Fresh store in Virginia Beach decided to stage a wedding right in the middle of a busy shopping day.

While the happy bride and groom were vowing to love each other for the rest of their lives, many irate shoppers (not knowing the wedding was the real thing) were undoubtedly vowing to “kill the birdbrain that staged this farce.”

If this kind of callous indifference toward shoppers does not stir a revolt, pray tell what will. Think of it. Just when you’ve out-manuevered 372 other shoppers, wrecked 15 food displays and smashed your cart for the umpteenth time, you find yourself caught in the middle of a wedding.

Sure, the bride and groom will have a unique story to tell for years to come, but what about the frazzled housewife who has 15 minutes

left to fix supper? Just what is she supposed to tell hungry hubby and the kids?

“Well, Dear, I sort of got held up by this wedding at the grocery store.”

To which her husband will reply, “Oh, of course, and I suppose they’re honeymooning at Eckerds Drug Store?”

Needless to say, no one is surprised by this sort of hoopla and fanfare. After all, supermarkets have been staging all kinds of promotional gimmicks for years.

But whoever speaks up for the average Joe or Jane shopper who simply wants to get out of the store before the express lane closes? And how many times have you stood in the express checkout line, only to find that every person in front of you needs a “price check”?

Then, of course, there’s the new bag boy with an IQ of 15 who chunks the Butterball turkey on top of the dozen large eggs.

Well, this time, the grocers have gone too far. Perhaps a new coalition against supermarket weddings is needed. They could call themselves SAWS (Shoppers Against Weddings in Supermarkets).

Until then, all shoppers should beware of flying garters in the produce section.

Don’t overlook one very significant factor. Your reader may not

know basic things you think everyone knows.

Young adults of today were in grade school and more interested in playing dolls and back-lot sports than the fact we were at war in the Persian Gulf. What they know of the Reagan presidency they learned from books. They don’t know why we talk about “dialing” a telephone. They’ve always had a remote, a microwave, color TV.

They don’t know that Americans were held hostage in Iran or about our sending troupes to Grenada or what the Iran-Contra affair involved. Because we can’t assume our readers know what we know so well, we have a problem.

**How do you explain** well-known facts to adult readers without sounding as if you are talking down to them?

For an answer, assume your readers know more than you think they do. Keep explanations brief.

But details become essential when your article or book happened in time gone by. Your article on the summer your family spent on the New Jersey coast in 1936 must contain details that make the reader feel he is there—obviously.

**Details involve** all five senses. Cottages then had ice boxes (not refrigerators), cooling closets, out houses. Make us remember the smells.

Folks listened to black wax phonograph records of tenors whining through popular songs and arias.

Kids had nickel ice cream cones and chocolate bars. They had penny candy and penny post cards.

**As a writer**, your goal, no matter what your topic or when and where the scene is set, demands you scour your memory, search your book sources and plumb what your friends remember.

Movie makers pay millions to set an

authentic scene and people it with characters dressed and behaving appropriately.

If you're going to reveal what others don't know about people, you'll do your homework and write well.

Next lesson, we study humorous political and analysis and critique.