

What they don't teach in J-school



Philip
Dine

Not that I'd actually know, never having studied journalism. But when I unexpectedly began reporting, I was grateful I'd studied other things. And when I later taught journalism, if students asked about an aspiring journalist's best major, my answer never varied:

"Anything *but* journalism."

I'd observed too many reporters who could recite communications theory but possessed scant knowledge of the topics they covered, leaving them overly reliant on what sources told them.

So, I urged students to learn the craft's practical side by working at the college radio station or newspaper, but to focus academically on subjects—history, economics, language—

es—they couldn't learn on the job.

In my case, while studying labor in grad school, finances led me to freelance at a Boston-area newspaper. It was all quite spontaneous, but perhaps pre-ordained. My father, after all, had worked at newspapers in Massachusetts and, after World War II, at NBC and CBS in New York in TV's early days.

Though the lack of any classroom background didn't hurt my reporting or editing, it produced drama early on. Preparing a feature about the rising number of sub shops in Boston suburbs engaging in warfare—not with submarines but rather with rare roast beef and provolone cheese—the tale turned serious when I discovered someone who'd buy a failing shop at a low cost, cut prices to lure customers, show someone the long lines—and convince him to buy the place. When the new owner displayed a menu with normal prices, customers vanished. Meanwhile, the shady fellow was seeking his next unsuspecting victim.

I interviewed a dozen people who'd fallen for this scheme, the story hit the newsstand—and the guy sued me, claiming I'd made it all up. A big, intimidating fellow, he got his victims to deny ever speaking with me.

First day in court, his attorney took aim at my novice status.

"Mr. Dine, where did you study journalism?"

"I never did."

"How many newspapers did you work at before this one?"

"None."

"So, no training, no experience," he smirked, confident that the trial was over.

Indeed, but not as he envisioned.

Because all the guy's victims had recently emigrated from Europe, as he had years earlier, the language barrier prompted me to ask each one to write his name after my notes, so I'd spell it right. In essence, they'd signed their interviews.

The newspaper's attorney posed just three questions, each

eliciting a "Yes."

"Mr. Dine, did you take notes?"

"Did you bring your notebooks today?"

"Would you please give them to the judge?"

His honor glanced at them, looked up—and calmly announced, "Case dismissed."

They surely don't teach *this* in J-school, but that's what makes it useful—because it catches reporters off guard, and gently puts them *on* guard. They call about a story, and I initially steer the conversation to a topic related to their background or location—perhaps country music, maybe sports.

Recently, a West Virginia TV reporter told me he hailed from Texas. Asked who his favorite country singer was, he mentioned a young country-pop singer. I said a Texan should know better. I told him I'd help him this time, but to research Waylon before calling again. Somewhat contrite, he did as instructed.

The dual mission is to form a bond that'll spur them to continue reaching out, while subtly putting them on notice that we're watching and evaluating—without trying to directly influence their stories, which could spark resentment.

Sometimes, just for fun (no mission), I do the same with letter carriers. And sometimes, I get schooled.

I spoke days ago with Joe Paden, just retired after a fabled 40-year stint as West Virginia State Association president—allowing him to attend his 10 great-grandchildren's sporting events.

Given his affinity for sports, I treated him to my story about Hal Greer, star guard decades ago on Philadelphia's NBA team with the legendary Wilt Chamberlain. One day, a little New Yorker trying to muster the confidence to try out for his high school team thanked his lucky stars—and his mailman—upon receiving an encouraging letter from Mr. Greer. I also informed Joe that Greer had made history as West Virginia's first African American college player.

Joe listened graciously, then recounted growing up near the Greer family; how his older brother roomed with Greer at Marshall University and would leave any business that refused to serve his friend; and how Greer later would send the brothers free tickets to Philly road games in nearby Cincinnati, enabling "wide-eyed young" Joe to talk to Wilt in the locker room.

I still like my story. But I love Joe's.

EDITORIAL STAFF:

Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine
Managing Editor Mike Shea
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner
Editorial Assistant Sarah Eccleston

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