

How to make your friends smile gratefully all day long...

If this were addressed to you, how would you feel if it arrived unexpectedly in your email box ?

This year (2016), I've decided to send one email each day thanking someone who has enriched my life.

It could be someone who is close to me, like a family member or a friend.

It could be someone I have only met once or perhaps admired from afar.

It could be someone I have known for a long time or only momentarily.

**TODAY YOU ARE THAT PERSON.
I APPRECIATE YOUR BEING IN MY LIFE.**

Allen

P.S. Please know that there is no hierarchy here. In the past few days, your name and who you are in the world came to mind. When that happened I realized that I wanted to honor and thank you for enriching my life.

My reaction was delight and total surprise. So rarely is unsought, free kindness sent our way! If you want to use this model or concept, just do it. Change the names, of course. There are no copyrights or restrictions at all.

If your curiosity is stirred, here's a pinch of background. Allen Klein and I are veteran writers/speakers who have met, mostly in passing at presentations, for years. He's very funny and has written many books that I have enjoyed and shared, so I was indeed honored—and quite surprised—when it arrived. The next day it occurred to me that others may want to say the same or something similar to those they know. So I emailed Allen, thanked him for the thoughtfulness, and asked if my sharing the idea with others would be okay. His reply, almost immediate, was “Yes, please *do* share it. Imagine if we all did this! What a great world this would be.”

So now it's in your hands to use as or if you wish!

(Allen Klein's most recent book is *You Can't Ruin My Day*. See more at humor@allenklein.com.)

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

www.gordonburgett.com

Name(required)
Email(required)
Website
Comment(required)

Emceeing: a Barbershop St. Patrick's Day script

Welcome!

Here is another Barbershop presentation script—for those eager to read Barbershop presentation scripts. Enjoy!

I'm Gordon Burgett, blogmaster of my own blog, which you are now reading. 90% of the posts here refer to writing, editing, publishing, speaking, and related commentary about selling one's ideas and information.

The other 10% discuss emceeing, which is an extension of my speaking activities, which are in turn linked to the 2000+ paid presentations I've offered in the past 30 years. Still, the scripts shared here are to a special group I have been part of for about 16 years: barbershopping, first in Santa Maria, CA; more recently in Marin County (north of San Francisco), CA. Through these blogs I have exchanged scripts written and techniques learned with other script writers for their barbershop groups. (You may see the other emceeing script info by writing in "emceeing" in the search box upper right on this page.)

So this is a short script when the Marin County Golden Gate group sang at a St. Patrick's day gathering which I found in a box of past (but shamefully unblogged) emceeing material. I think it took place in about 2013. Sadly, I don't recall anything more. I suspect it was in the middle of a speaking tour across CA when I came home that day to emcee and sing, and in the rush to get back out to complete the tour I forgot to leave any more details. That's it. You can see that I'm a real person at www.gordonburgett.com!

——-

Here, from the depths, is the script of this mysterious presentation:

Good evening, we are the Marin Golden Gate Barbershop Chorus, directed by Phil DeBar. I'm Gordon Burgett, and this dapper fellow is our Associate Director, Paul Wren, who Phil is about to ask to lead the group in "Danny Boy."

[I've lost the actual text here but I must have introduced Phil DeBar, our Director, and he gave a short, audience-involved demonstration of what barbershopping is about. He had the audience sing one of the four voices in a short song, to try their talents at harmonizing!

Then I asked Phil to lead the Chorus in "Amazing Grace."]

I continued:

"We've already heard some of our favorite Irish music and we're enjoying St. Patrick's Day festivities and food, so maybe a few Irish jokes would be in order.

Father Murphy, infused by religious fervor, swept into a bar in Donegal.

He grabbed the first man he saw and said, "Do you want to go to Heaven?"

"I do, father!" the man replied, so the priest told him to stand by the door.

Father Murphy turned to a lively lass and he asked her the same question.

"Oh yes, father, I do." So he pointed at the door and suggested she join the other man already there.

Then Father Murphy saw Billy O'Toole shrinking in a corner,

trying to be invisible.

"O'Toule," he said. "What about you? Do you want to go to heaven?"

"Oh no, thank you, Father. No I don't!" came a fast reply.

The priest looked bewildered and said "Are you telling me that when you die you don't want to go to heaven?"

O'Toole replied, "Oh yes, Father, I do—but when I die. I thought you were rounding up a group to go right now!"

—

Are you ready for some more music? But let me ask you first,

Does anybody have a birthday today? If so, would you raise your hand?

(If a hand went up, I'd ask them to stand up and tell us something about themselves because we had a gift for them.)

(If nobody responded, I'd ask, "If any of you had a birthday in the past year, would you raise your hand?" The moment the hands went up, the chorus broke into "Happy Birthday!")

HAPPY BIRTHDAY! I wished them all when the music ended, then I suggested they give themselves a hearty round of applause for having lived so long!

—

When the chorus sat I asked, "How about some grand quartet singing?"

Not only can our first group make great sounds, they are international imports brought here today for your merriment. They come from four places, all hot beds of melody: fellows, raise your hands when I tell where you are from: our bass, ____ from Uruguay; ____ , the lead from England; ____, the

baritone, from Texas, and _____, our tenor, from the Bronx.
Ladies and gentlemen, this is Opus IV!

Our second quartet has lesser pedigrees—they come from Fairfax, San Rafael, Mill Valley, and Point Reyes. Let's welcome _____, _____, _____, and _____ (they stepped forward when I gave their names). They are called the MarinTones...

You surely heard about Poor Paddy and his life of sorrow and pain. But things finally changed for Paddy—and it happened on St. Patrick's Day too. He had found the love of his life, and had promised to mend his ways, particularly about not forgetting about their dates and that he would never again be as much as one minute late.

So you can imagine his distress when he arrived at the restaurant to dine with his sweetheart and he couldn't find a parking spot!

Around the block he drove, then two blocks. He was in a panic when he pulled over and prayed: LORD, take pity on me! If you'll find me a parking place I'll go to MASS every Sunday of my life, I'll quit drinking Irish whiskey, I'll....

Just then the car parked in front of him pulled out.

He looked to heaven and shouted as loud as he could, "NEVER MIND! I've found one!"

How about two more songs from the Marin Golden Gate Barbershop Chorus, directed by Phil DeBar?

Get ready to "Turn Your Radio On...", then a favorite oldie, "I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl That Married Dear Old Dad."

It's surely unfair and unkind to mix an Irish holiday, an Irishman, and some of the best brewed Gallic grog in the same joke, but I've been given special permission from old Saint Patrick himself—because when I told it to him even he too couldn't stop laughing...

It's about Muldoon who had been out drinking into the wee hours, and one suspects it was not his first time either.

So he kicked off his shoes and crept into his house so he didn't awaken his true love, Kathleen.

He was heading up to the bedroom but only made it up two steps before he fell backward on his rump.

Unfortunately, he had a bottle of whiskey in each back pocket!

But he was so afraid he might have made too much noise for Kathleen, he fumbled back on his feet, found a light, turned around, and dropped his pants. There in the hallway mirror he saw his own rear end cut and bleeding. So he found a box of Band-Aids, and put one on each place where he saw blood.

Then he crawled up the stairs, fell into bed, and was barely asleep when he saw that the sun was up—and he felt his lovely Kathleen pulling on his big toe.

"Muldoon," she said, "you were out drunk again last night!"

"Oh," he groaned, "Have mercy. Why would you say such a mean thing?"

"Because when I went downstairs the front door was wide open, there was booze bottle glass all over the floor, and there was a trail of blood from the glass right into this very bed!"

"But mostly it was because of those Band-Aids stuck on the hallway mirror!"

I suppose there's been a Muldoon in every house. Let's sing two more songs to lift Muldoon's holiday spirit. There's no home on any holiday more forgiving than the HOME ON THE RANGE...or a promise more joyous than being "Once in Love With Amy..."

Finally, what day would be more appropriate for a miracle than a Saint's Day? And who would be better equipped to shake loose that miracle than a local Irish priest driving back to Marin County from San Francisco after perhaps over-enjoying just such a celebration?

Father Timothy had just crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and was creeping down the hill when a cop pulled him over. The policeman leaned in, smelled the sweet aroma of alcohol, and saw an empty wine bottle on the car floor...

"Have you been drinking, Father?"

"Ah yes, officer, but just water."

The trooper asked him, "Then why do I smell wine?"

The priest looked down, saw the bottle, and shouted "GOOD LORD! He's done it again!"

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of all of the chorus, we thank you for being such a welcoming audience. Let me once again acknowledge the MarinTones, Opus IV, and our director, Phil DeBar... [who asked Paul Wren to close the show with "America the Beautiful."]

You just have to read "Trees and Kids"

There is an unusual tree commonly known as the Chinese Bamboo Tree. It is real. Years ago I heard a speaker talk about it, using it to make a point. It stuck in my head. I even did some research to find out if the speaker was blowing smoke and made up the tree. He didn't.

[The excerpt is from Jim Burgett's [Teachers Change Lives 24/7: 150 Ways to Do it Right.](#)]

The story goes like this. You prepare the soil, pick the right spot, then plant the Chinese Bamboo Tree. You water it and wait. But you wait an entire year and nothing appears. No bud, no twig, nothing. So you keep watering and protecting the area and taking care of the future plant, and you wait some more. You wait another year and nothing still happens. Okay, you are a persistent person not prone to giving up, so you keep on watering. You water, check the soil, start talking to the ground, maybe even click your heels in some kind of growing dance you read about in the *National Geographic*. Another year passes and still no sign of growth.

It has been three years. Should you give up? Someone told you that it might take a while to really see the fruits of your efforts, so you keep on keeping on. More water, more talk, more dancing. The neighbors are wondering. And another year passes. No tree.

You now make a decision. If there is no tree on this date one year from now you will stop watering. Period. So you begin year number five with the same passion as day number one. You water, you wait.

You keep watering and keep waiting. You water some more and then, could it be? Is it really? Yep, there it is, something sticking out of the dirt. You come back the next day and WOW it has really grown! In fact you come back each day for about six weeks and finally the Chinese Bamboo tree stops growing—but it is over 80 feet tall! Yes, 80 feet in six weeks! Well, not really. It is 80 feet in five years.

The point is simple. If you had given up for even the shortest period of time, there would be no tree. It took almost impossible persistence. The Chinese Bamboo tree is there for one reason and one reason only—because you never gave up on it.

When I talk to teachers at workshops or institutes I find one who teaches first grade and I ask that person to mentally think of a student who they wouldn't mind see moving to another district. You get the drift, a student who is a real challenge. Let's give the student a name. I'll use my own name to be politically correct. The kid is named Jim. I ask the teacher if they ever had a student like Jim that they really worked hard with, tried every trick in the book, searched for new ways to meet the child's learning needs, and so on, but still felt that at the end of the year that Jim had not learned. That Jim was still a challenge, and although he met the minimum standards to pass, he was not on the teacher's list of proudest achievements. Most teachers usually agree that they have, or had, a Jim in their class.

Now we move to a second grade teacher and we pretend that they get Jim in the fall, work with him all year, watch their hair turn from brunette to shades of stressful gray, and by the end of the year feel they did their best, but it wasn't good enough.

Now, for a minute, let's talk about little Jimmy. He's not in special ed. Jimmy is just a jerk. Don't fall off your chair and gasp, "Did he call that kid a jerk?" I did, but not the

jerk you are thinking of. My JERK is an acronym for Just Educationally Resistive Kid. He doesn't have ADD or any other alphabetized condition. He just doesn't like to learn and he resists it. He isn't a bad kid or a troublemaker. "Jimmys" exist in all sizes and shapes and even come in girl forms.

Let's jump to grade three. We have the same conversation all over again. Jim is passed on but he is a disappointment to every teacher so far, and they all worry that if things don't turn around Jim could become a troublemaker or an academic disgrace.

Jim holds his own in grade four. No big changes. He surely doesn't love school, but he isn't failing anything. He exhibits no passion for anything at the schoolhouse. And no signs of any real change either.

Grade five. Jim has a new teacher and all the other teachers try to warn her that Jim is, well, how do we say it? Jim is special, but not special ed. He exists, but barely. He will continue to be a challenge, but he's not a threat to safety. Jim is Jim. Try anything, but nothing will probably work. If you don't believe me, ask all of his previous teachers.

At semester break the new teacher makes a comment about Jim at a teachers meeting. With anticipated sadness, everyone listens. Here is what she says...

"Jim is quite a writer. He turned in a couple of stories and I told him he was very creative. He is now writing a mystery story and it is good! And he's also showing some talent in basketball. He's really growing too. I love his passion to play ball and write. He seems to thrive on the success of his hook shot and his imagination. I really enjoy that kid." Jim has arrived!

Was it the new teacher who pulled out Jim's hidden talents and secret love for learning? Was it some biological change that caused Jim to mature and become a better learner, a more

serious student? Was it his physical abilities that expanded his self-esteem and made it easier for him to write?

Maybe it was a little of all these things, but it was also what I call the Chinese Bamboo Factor. Every teacher Jim had since he entered school worked hard providing opportunities for Jim to learn, to grow, and to become. Every teacher watered, fertilized, and cared for Jim. Even when the year ended and they were sometimes glad to pass him on to another teacher, they still knew that they had done their best to give him the best.

Oh, by the way, my story could stop and start at any grade. And Jim could be Janet, and the teacher could be a he rather than a she. It doesn't matter. What does matter is the Chinese Bamboo Factor—never, ever quit on a student. Even when you see no progress, it doesn't mean that the kid isn't processing something somehow somewhere.

One more thing, a big thing: the Chinese Bamboo Tree did start to grow very shortly after the seed was planted. The roots grew deep and strong for many years before there was any sign of a plant above ground. Sometimes that same thing happens with kids. They develop a foundation of learning. They learn to learn. They creep along doing the minimum, building their strengths (or finding them), and sometimes they just wait for the right combination of factors before they bloom. It may be the motivation of a certain teacher or a new found confidence or skill. It may be that all of a sudden "they get it" and learning becomes exciting. If we knew exactly what the formula was and how it worked for everyone, we could probably cure the ills of the world.

So what do we learn from the Chinese Bamboo Tree? I'd suggest the following:

- * It takes patience to teach some, even most, kids.
- * When you give up on a kid, you give up on a human being.

- * Even when you don't see progress, if you do your best, it is probably happening.
 - * If something doesn't work with a kid, try something else—but never quit trying.
 - * Some of our best teaching doesn't “break soil” until all conditions are right.
 - * When you think you are growing a tree, you may be growing a root.
 - * Strong roots support strong trees.
 - * Sometimes it takes a lot of patience to change a life.
-

The author is Jim Burgett, and he came by my surname honorably—he's my famous kid brother, maybe the best known educator in the Midwest. Not only has he published six books for teachers and K-12 administrators, he also speaks at conventions and conferences just about everywhere. (Is my pride seeping through?)

Because I've been asked so often, Jim wrote (or co-authored) these books too:

- * What Every Superintendent and Principal Needs to Know (with Max MGee and Jim Rosborg)
- * The Perfect School (with Max MGee and Jim Rosborg)
- * Finding Middle Ground in K-12 Education (with Brian Schwartz),
- * The School Principal's Toolbook, and
- * The Art of School Boarding

More information about Jim is at BurgettGroup.com; specifics about the books [here](#).

I shared this story here several years back but I have been asked repeatedly to do it again. So here it is, if it helps explain the other little “Jimmys” you know, or that teaching friends lovingly endure, or if it took an extraordinarily long time for you (or, you suspect, your kids) to pop through your

own almost forgotten plot on your way to your own special gift.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

Some thoughts about interviewing...

*This is an excerpt (part of a chapter) from my coming book, **Interviewing**. I talk about tools and means used to interview:*

Interviewing is mostly you asking questions to a person or, rarely, a group, and receiving an intelligible response in return. When you record what you asked and what they replied, that is the thinnest skeleton of a completed interview.

That's a bit simplistic but most of the rest just adds bulk and hope to the process.

A huge percentage of my interviews have involved direct communication with my target person. **More than half were done eye to eye (really mouth to ear)**, and most of those were done when I was learning how, usually on the road last century gathering travel material. I asked and they responded, and I translated and wrote what they said into a notepad, in a kind of shorthand that spontaneously evolved (nouns mostly, other key words underlined.) It was give and take, staccato fashion, one question/a reply, segues... My goal was about five minutes, which was a long time for them and for me. It rarely lasted 30 minutes; an hour interview never happened.

Well, that sense of brevity may be somewhat misleading because

many “interviews” became conversations, and ended when it was comfortable or necessary to do so. If the other person wanted to keep talking I was usually game to do so (unless I absolutely had to be somewhere else right then—sometimes we resumed the exchange later over lunch or coffee.) Other times they just wanted someone to talk to, or were lonely, or were proud of what they had done or seen and wanted to share more of it. That was fine. Often it gave me more, better information and a deeper interview.

Occasionally I was drawn to an interviewee. I wanted to know them better, and (hard to believe) that seemed mutual. They were interesting, often passionate about some cause, and they almost always bubbled or bristled with humor. What they said was worth sharing; it was fun; they were worth knowing. A few of those contacts became lifelong friends, particularly those still living.

But mostly interviewing is fast and focused. It’s kind of a dancing duel: you extracting what you need (and hoping for more); them telling you what they want you (and your readers) to hear, hoping they didn’t say too much.

In my mind, first interviews should be courteous, painless, and fairly fast, leaving open the possibility of a later follow-up. But I don’t mention that before or during the first interview other than asking them how I might later contact them should I run into a fact or a phrase that needs clarification and asking for or verifying an address where I would send them a copy of the printed article. (If you offer, do send it.)

Most of my interviews not done eye-to-eye were done by **telephone**. Those weren’t as satisfactory because you couldn’t tell how much of what they were saying was true, a greased lie, or something in between. Nor did you ever know if the voice you were hearing belonged to the actual person you had called. (I don’t think I ever interviewed a stiff or a stand-

in, but surprisingly often they grilled me to make sure I was the journalist they were supposed to be talking to and that I was writing an article for such-and-such a publication. Everyday people took me at face (or voice) value, happy to be the one being interviewed. The higher ups were more likely to have their assistant or caretaker vet or check me out first).

Another telephone problem: the tenuous connection between you and the person you are interviewing—one wire—almost invites the other person to simply hang up or disconnect when they have said what they think you should (or need to) hear. It's a true test of your interviewing (and inventive) magnetism to be able to keep the other person focused and actively responding. Some of that is created before starting the actual interview by getting the respondent's buy-in to the importance of the exchange so what they say can reach their target listeners' or readers' ears.

My restraint to interviewing by phone was personal—and, in my dotage, still is. I grew up weaving waggish humor and pun-riddled, antic wordplay into my everyday conversation. It drove my few friends crazy. But all of that tomfoolery had to be excised when phone interviewing strangers for print, particularly when they envisioned sparks or bolts of radiated global fame emanating from the article (or even book) they would be in. It was their big moment and they didn't expect mirth or frivolity—any humor at all—then, particularly over the telephone where smiles are never seen and barely heard. So half of what I normally might have said, or how I might have said it, was verboten and probably dumbfounding. However funny, they never, ever would have laughed. They were expecting to be asked to share gems of wisdom, poignant observation, Christian guidance, and household tips. Out the telephonic window flew my witty high jinks, which left the interviewer, me (or you), nearly speechless, jocularly disarmed.

Alas, nothing is incurable when regular eating is at steak. I

immediately reverted to my telephone high school date-getting scheme of imploring (or interviewing) by script. My first 100 or so interviews (it may have been 500) were very, very tightly structured, almost every word written or typed. It looked something like this, although where you see ideas below I had complete sentences, short sentences to give them time to respond:

- * wee introduction

- * reminder of why I was calling and where their words would be shown to the world

- * a question

- * a second question—these were the most important answers in case something else interrupted the call—it happens often—and there would be no chance to finish... [more on this later]

- * [if something relevant in their reply to my questions was said or hinted at I would ask more, prodding queries about it, to provoke more facts or brilliance]

- * a third question

- * [if they verbally wandered off and what they said would also interest my imaginary readers I let them wander. I only reherded them back into my imaginary readers' corral of interest when they wore out or I still had a final question to ask]

- * fourth question (or more) if needed. See above.

- * anything else, Mr./Ms. _____, that I should have asked but didn't?"

- * "is there a phone number I could use to reach you if I find something I need to verify later?"

- * "I'll gladly send you a copy of the printed article as soon as it appears—remember, printing can sometimes take months"

- * "is _____ the address where I should send the article, in your name?"

- * "thank you again, Mr./Mrs. _____, for the information and your time"

- * "it sounds like a very interesting article. I appreciate your kindness and your sharing"

* (hang up softly, breathe deeply, wipe brow, hydrate rewardingly, and type out the whole interview then or before nightly repose)

Interviewing by **email**, or even by **social media**, is fast, sometimes too public too soon, and a whole lot less expansive. Combined with **Skype** or other computer-to-computer linking, it's fairly easy and much faster to talk with others now—if they agree to talk with you.

For example, ...

This is an unedited extraction of part of **an early chapter of a book called INTERVIEWING**. Check future blogs for more copy about the topic.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

[Little things not to say when you're emceeing ...](#)

There may be a million things not to say when you are in charge of a program or ceremony.

Let me share a half-dozen wee comments that, in themselves, aren't going to get you hooked off the podium, but, done right, they will easily distinguish you as a professional who is comfortable and smooth...

For example, do you know anybody who wants to be introduced

last (unless that spot is saved for the highlight of the show)? Even worse, “last but not least.” Why not say “final” or “concluding”? Or if you are using numbers, like “first speaker,” “second speaker,” and so on, just use the number for the last? Like “Many of you may have heard our fifth speaker, ...”

Along the same line, “We’ve saved the best for last...” Hmm, if I was speaker #3 of five what goes through my mind? I must have bombed, or whatever one does who isn’t the best...

Ever hear, “the one and only”? That does convey special esteem, but it also makes the listeners ask, “the one and only what?” Why not tell the audience why that person is held in such high regard, like “the fastest woman in the world, ...” Even there “the one and only” may be one race from being inaccurate. Consider something less transitory like “America’s most rewarded Olympic Gold swimmer, ... ”

How often have you heard that the speaker “needs no introduction,” then they are introduced (usually in great length)! Two points here: (1) surely there are folks in the crowd who have absolutely no idea who the person is, so you have to say something about them or their prominence, and (2) if you are certain that the coming speaker is beyond introduction, prove it. Save the introduction.

But you can’t just point at them and grunt or push the microphone into their hands. So a compromise. “_____ is well known to most of us...” and complete the introduction with a concise listing of their accomplishments or honors.

Finally, you must remember which is the podium and which is the lectern. You are standing on the podium, your notes are sitting on the lectern.

A very good emceeing guidebook full of solid advice is Dana LaMon’s *Master the Ceremonies* (see www.danalamon.com).

Emceeing is lots of fun—it's also alarming the first times out. The most important thing to remember is that the audience isn't there to see or hear you.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. Want to be an emcee for three or four hours, probably alone and usually non-stop? Give full seminars! Details at ["How to Set Up and Market Your Own Seminar."](#)

Using humor to sell your magazine articles

Funny you should ask!

One rule always: some editors/publications don't use humor, so don't even try. At best the editor may open her lips to chuckle (or groan), then reconsider and toss the query. I can't tell you which such publications to avoid because I don't read them. But it used to be that the AARP magazines were humor dry. That getting old must be grim stuff. (So when I did write for them I kept surefire rip-roarers, even tepid jests, out of my mind lest one slide down to my pecking finger and be read by the paymaster.)

I can't remember any editor who wanted truckloads of comedy dumped on their desk. They bought humor in measured bits deftly worked into actual (or near-) truths. Except the **fillers editors** who seemed to weigh jokes by the word so they could be squeezed into advertising holes. They actually did pay a pittance, when they stopped laughing—but I don't ever

recall them buying two jokes at the same time. I had a colleague who sold a joke to *Reader's Digest* and included the sale in his credits in every query. One editor wrote back, rejecting his idea, and added, "I bet that *RD* joke was the only thing you ever sold." Mean editors are rare, but they can be perceptive. It was about a third of his freelance bounty.

Puns sometimes worked, but if I used one I used two so they knew it was intentional. I've sold 1,700+ freelance articles but only once did I use a full-out joke in an article, and that was about 10 or 15 words long and the joke was the article's lead! (Alas, it must have been far below my personal humor standard because I can't remember a word of it!) On the other hand I wrote a travel short about 800 words long about eating guinea pig sandwiches that were cooked on the street in Quito, Ecuador. (At least they looked like guinea pigs.) I found out years later, through a Peace Corps kid stationed near Cuenca, that one of his projects was to help multiply the stock of domesticated guinea pigs to increase the meat available on the local table. (Whatever it was, it sure tasted good.)

Here was my system of weaving humor into an article's otherwise deadly prose.

(1) Mostly I lifted deadly prose appreciably heavenward by keeping the tone light and the descriptions spry (good synonyms adorned with festive adjectives helped).

(2) I relied a lot on word play, but you have to spread it out and only do that now and then. For example, I might refer to Buffy, a wee, yapping dog, as a furry feral killer-companion or a drooling pet growler. Or a woman's date as her knight of the night. That's enough wit: the blog censors just told me to stop—they are thinking of your humor health.

(3) A funny, related thought to what is being said in a paragraph almost always ended that paragraph.

(4) It's hard to give isolated examples. Find an article that intentionally makes you laugh and highlight every funny item in it with yellow underliner. You'll see that the humor is discretely bundled in 93% topic-related facts.

(5) Just as the writer did in (5) above, if the subject had humor wanting to get out, I made the content worth reading, and let some of that humor escape.

(6) I always put some humor in the query letter, in the actual selling message, so the editor knew there would be humor in the copy that followed. I'm convinced that the humor helped sell the query. But you can't overdue it.

(7) As a friend who teaches journalism tells his wards: if you can't keep your humor in control, get a talk show!

Some loose how-to's but I hope it helps. Life's a whole lot more fun when you're part of the wit and mirth. It's even better when you get paid to share it.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

How can I make my self-published memoir a big seller?

It's doable but very hard. It takes a combination of good things, some not much in your control.

A starting definition is required: what is a "big seller"? Almost everybody will agree that if your book has "many, many thousands of sales; royalties in six-plus figures; a book-based movie, and spin-offs of book fame like Charlie Rose, the morning shows, and widespread name recognition, that's a big seller.

All of that can happen, despite the self-publishing (which too often is linked to poor production and artwork, weak marketing, little or no selling pre-prep, and reluctance by book distributors to keep the book in stock and sight).

Your book is most likely to break out big if you are well known or you say things that lots of book buyers want to read—and repeat to their friends. Those sales can be quickly magnified if the timing is right—the topic excites readers eager to know more about what you are saying. (I'm presuming your prose is tight, true, and flawlessly professional.)

I think I heard you say, "Fat chance! No way my message will hit the headlines—and what would Charlie Rose, or even Tokyo Rose, ask me even if they could find me?"

Yet there are self-publishers who define being a "big seller" differently, though they'd be happy to be "found" if the world started spinning in reverse. They have already sold a few thousand copies, pushed through Kindle and CreateSpace. One suspects they are about as happy as they'd be if they'd won a Noble and Pulitzer Prize and Miss Spenser, the senior

literature class teacher, had given them a posthumous "A." Their books are well written, to the point, and spotlessly proofed. But the covers aren't bookstore stuff: free artwork, Arial type, more cartoonish than befitting a true big-house tome.

They all did pretty much the same thing. They told stories, about themselves, their families, some friends. One book was sad. It was a true story. It was patched together with such gentleness and determination that it was hard to put down. A book you gave your spouse or your aunt even though none of you know the author. Or like your friend who told you to buy it—"you've got to read this."

The other two popped with humor. Both worked because the dialog sounded true—and was funny; it was how men, the key protagonists, talk—one book, three brothers and an older sister in a tense, disintegrating family all sliding apart on strings of love; the other, a loose tale of a not-so-good magician working the subway, the bus station, and a bewildering corporate bachelor party, realizing that the weaker his magic was, the funnier was his patter.

Those are also paths to "best sellerdom" for the unchosen. There are as many, or more, winning paths in non-fiction too. I suspect there are thousands of writers of wee books who are puffing with pride just having the best they can do available digitally or in paperback. They'd take the fame and chat with Charlie but in the meantime they can scarcely hide their smile when somebody whispers, "I read your book. It was great."

And what happens if only a handful of people buy or read your book. Don't brag too loudly about your fan club. There's no reason to say anything. Keep that book in your goods box to give your grandkids. You wrote and published a book. How many others in your family are in print? Or your friends? You count.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

Can you use a pseudonym for publishable articles?

Sure, I suppose in print you could call yourself Superperson or Cicero or anybody you want to. And if you own the publication, it might be fine.

In fact, there are times when I would indeed use a pseudonym. Like if I was a deacon writing porno, rest assured I'd change my name. Or if a fanged maniac was loose on the nearby streets and he was overdue on his serial schedule, I'd at least change a few letters in my surname—and apologize later.

But at least 99% of the time, or more, the question would be “Why?” The first person to ask you that would be the editor—“Why do you want to do that?” (A couple of the editors I wrote for would probably have suggested, rather than a pen name, I might disguise myself by dressing up like a decent citizen—or be inconspicuous by wearing just one sideburn.)

I know that when you write novels they want you to use the same name for the whole series. Folks buy as often as not for the author's name—they expect the same high (or low) quality for all the books in that category. However, if you use your own name to write the “Manly Man Murder Mysteries,” they will surely want an entirely different name for, say, a group of knitting manuals.

There's a financial issue too. If you're Betty Smith and your

by-line is Jennie Jones, unless the editor knows about the name replacement, your check will be made out to Jennie Jones—and that check can be a hassle to cash!

Two more considerations: (1) the editor may question your sanity if there's no reason for the writer not to be you, and (2) he/she may wonder what you are trying to hide by not taking responsibility for the copy you want released, like is it unprovable, a flat-out lie, an exaggeration beyond the pale, out-and-out libel, or too badly written to want your own name attached.

Finally, if you are trying to build up your writing reputation by increasing your volume in print, switching from Ed to Ted to Red to Betty sounds counterproductive.

So, if you want to use a pseudonym, at least clear it with the editor. They need a good laugh now and then. Tell them you saw it done on a television show.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

What do you do if a promised article interviewee finks out?

If you are writing a one-interview piece, a sort of bio plus, and the fink is the purpose of the article, apologize to the editor as soon as possible. You needn't make excuses for the person but do try to reschedule it right away...

Since queries very often suggest interviewing three people to

get differing viewpoints, if one backs out at interview time, find another person to substitute who is equally as well informed. Tell the editor what you did and why, and try to maintain the same pro-con-middle balance if that's what's expected... Do you tell #2 that he/she is second choice and the first choice ratted out? If it's well known that there was a #1 choice, of course. They will find out anyway and wonder why you weren't more straightforward. But if it's still early in the planning stages, probably not. As usual, it depends...

You might ask the editor if they have a suggested replacement for the absentee if the piece is due far enough in the future—or if travel is involved. Or offer to find a substitute and check it with the editor—preferably before.

Don't promise the editor that you will interview the Queen for your piece unless the Queen has agreed...any queen! Then don't dawdle. But don't panic unless the person is that caliber or is super reclusive. The world (1) will not stop spinning, and (2) is full of well-informed folk who love to talk and will be delighted to see their words and wisdom in print, even if that wisdom is questionable.

Sometimes editors get excited about a highlight series of interviews. Some years back I wrote about 15 articles related to animal orientation—dogs, cats, goats, and so on finding their way home over long distances. It was a new discipline and almost all of the top human experts in the field were alive and active. The author of a key magazine was enthusiastic too, and suggested that we pose about five central questions and ask each to reply, separately, in different articles. Unfortunately, once the schedule was ready, the questions were defined, and press drum rolls were an issue away from stirring up excitement in the readers about the coming special features, reality set in. They each wanted to know what the others were going to say first! Then Z wanted B (nobody knew who he was) included—if Z was going to participate. And C would only do it, with reluctance it seemed, if the pay was enough. At which point the editor shook her head (or so I imagine; we never met) and within months the leaders started getting too old, too forgetful, or too dead—and the editor and I were off somewhere else.

There's another point worth sharing here. Figure out the best way to conduct the interview, for you and them. During most of my article days it was either by phone or in person, though now it can also be done by Skype or other visual means. I found that the more famous the person was, the more they didn't want a one-on-one talk—unless TV or video were involved. So phone was it. Politicians were the reverse: true

flesh-pressers. The wariest and prissiest were the academics, and the weariest were the athletes, often exhausted trying to find different, intelligible, clean answers to the two or three worthwhile questions you might ask them. And a personal bias, since I interviewed in Spanish and Portuguese too: in person, please. That was a double win, though, because I got to meet and see them laugh as well.

Just some scattered thoughts. Hope they help.

Gordon Burgett

P.S. I have several other “interviewing” blogs here. To read them, just write “interview” in the search box at the top of any blog—and all will probably appear. (In fact, you can do that with other themes or words too. A great time-saver for all.)

[Why was your article query rejected again?](#)

Who writes **articles** in 2015?

At least **1,486,000** writers had a journal article published in 2010. Some were written by two or three authors. And that’s just journals. And that was five years ago.

2,000,000 blog posts will be written today. **Today**. Another 2,000,000 tomorrow, and so on...

The difference is that articles must be accepted by someone to see light, while blogs can be your own and there’s no stopping them. But if it’s somebody else’s blog you want to be a guest in, ugly acceptance (the kind side of rejection) rises again.

I’ve had about a zillion articles in print (I tell my grandkids) and I’ve been rejected .5 zillion times (I don’t tell them). Mostly, from 40+ years, much as an editor, let me

tell you why the editor wants you to go away.

1. 85 people contacted the editor wanting to be in the next issue of their publication. Only **one** will make it that day, or **8** in a magazine that month. For starters, the editor really wishes you'd just disappear.

2. But you probably won't. You think you're useless if you're not on those pages, and damnit... At least **contact the editor the way she/he wants to be approached**. If they want an old-fashioned query letter ("would you be interested in an article about...") sent by snail mail, half the war may be won by finding a stamp and a mailbox.

3. **Don't think the editor will make an exception for you** if you send a query by email. You have to get his email address for starters (you can't just send it to info@publication), and if he/she doesn't want emails from the unwashed, getting that address will be harder to find than Harry Truman's middle name.

4. **Have you even read the publication** you are hounding? Did you wonder why the editor says (Read our publication first to see...) Read it to see what they use, how many words they want, do they use humor (if not, the joke's on you)...

5. **When was the last time the editor ran an article about the very topic you want to hawk?** See if there's an index you can find through Google telling what they've published. (Whenever I used a travel piece about Montana I got 10 queries in 10 days about Montana. We included Montana once a year because we had six subscribers from there. Did you wonder why there were almost no Montana articles in the index?)

6. If you **did read the last three issues**, did you get a sense of what the editor probably needed and wasn't in the index? Make that topic leap off the query letter for two paragraphs like an O'Henry short story (but give the ending). Just don't tell the editor that you know he/she needs that topic.

7. Rejections come from these things: no query, a query longer than one tight page, the editor has no idea what you will write about...or how you know that...or which three “experts” you will interview...if you’ve ever been in print anywhere...profanity and bad sex on their pages upset the advertisers...you forgot periods and commas...you signed, from your buddy!...there is clear evidence that you are insane...there is not a *got a* of appreciation for the editor giving your rantings full consideration...threats don’t work before (or after) lunch...and the editor doesn’t care (in fact, quietly applauds) that you will quit journalism forever if he/she doesn’t give you a go-ahead.

Just in case you were wondering.

But don’t give up—where will journalism be? There are still 1,485,999 article slots to be filled. (Also, spell the editor’s name right and if you don’t know about their gender, call them by their last name preceded by Editor... Editors need at least one laugh a day.)

Keep at it,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. You wonder what a legitimate professional query letter looks like? For \$5 we’ll let you [download](#) 20+5 of them. Please at least rewrite these queries before you try to reuse them again!
