

What do I do special as a writing coach?

I just woke up to a question/discussion on LinkedIn's Promocave:

Carrie Golden, Citizen Journalist/Poetry Consultant to filmmakers at Motionpoems, Inc., asked:

Writing coach...

Not sure if this group [Promocave] is the right place to post this question but...what exactly does a writing coach do to help writers?

I wear two hats (on one head): (1) **"court-of-last-resort" editor**, providing a last-chance no-nonsense review of what the writer is about to submit (the final final draft) for book publication and (2) a **first-step writing coach** (before much writing). So here was my contribution to the discussion that defines my view of what different do I offer as a writing coach—and why.

[As a writing coach] I think of myself as a nonfiction "what" coach. I prod the souls [rather deeply] through six or so what's (?), then the "how's" make sense (and cents). I'm there if they need me later, more as an action guide and (sometimes) a silent co-planner of their future empire.

Here's a longer explanation of (2), if you are interested and it helps you (*sans me*) do your own early nonfiction book planning, writing, and publishing.

There's not much mystery about the steps a nonfiction writer can and usually takes to prep and submit a book for

publication. See a hundred books in libraries worldwide that address that, and I have two books that address it too: [How to Get Your Book Published in Minutes and Marketed Worldwide in Days](#) and [How to Pick the Right Kind of Publisher](#).

What distresses me most is the number of smart, organized, diligent would-be book writers who wander about, with perfectly good words and spelling, looking for something to say and, mostly, a reason to say it. Bewildered souls with hundreds of pages (at least it reads that way) of “what’s that?” copy that has no clear (or any) purpose (or buyers) presented in sweet-reading, grammatically correct prose. Their command of English is strong. (It’s worse if it’s not.) What’s missing is their grasp of elementary common sense about what a book must do to become a book...

The saddest thing is how easily that could have been prevented if they hadn’t been in such a damn hurry to see themselves and their brilliance in print (everywhere), with assumedly a fat advance almost in hand and many years of fatter royalties following assuredly behind.

About six questions will create the structure and map, plus point the writer to the most likely reader, why they would read it, what they would do with it, and how they just saved themselves about 75% in misdirected (or undirected) research, “what’s that?” writing, and the one thing they can’t get back, wasted time. Of course each question leads to deeper, related sub-questions which, in turn, lead to a dozen related books written (or waiting for you to write) that, combined with speaking, consulting, focus book series, perhaps audiobooks, and so on, can rather quickly create an empire based on their acquired expertise (which began with book one and is further proven and strengthened in subsequent products.)

So I guess that really makes me a **pre-writing and empire-building coach** (if being an emperor or empress is your thing).

That's the longer overview of what my kind of writing coach does. (Most of the others start when the writing itself appears. Bless them.)

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

[A very new format for a seminar workbook...](#)

In a now very long past—decades—I must have literally copied and carted 40,000 seminar workbooks (sometimes a half mile, too often up stairs). Most of those workbooks were 12-20 pages long! Too late to complain: that was the way it was done. But yesterday technology finally removed my shackles—and perhaps my blinders!

Some fact-setting now, then a detailed explanation copy of the new format that you may be interested in modifying and using. Explaining the 40,000: I have given more than 2,000 four-hour seminars, most as college/university extended ed offerings, almost all in California. They rarely had less than 20 participants, which meant 24 or so workbooks in case last minute registrants were waiting at the door. Ugh.

But yesterday a different request opened my eyes. I spoke to the **NSNC** (National Society of Newspaper Columnists) in L.A. about "[Publishing for Profit](#)" and, even though I myself had been a columnist several times, I had no way of knowing what other writing experiences the veteran audience had nor which of the dozen or so suggestions I would offer and expand upon they might wish to pursue.

Nor did I want to schlep any workbooks nor published books to sell BOR. (The airlines made that impossible anyway by charging for baggage—and rubbing in more salt by starving me en route!) But I did slip a copy of eight different books into my suitcase to display on a side table so they could see that they actually existed!

I know, I could have run copies off of the workbooks once I reached L.A. But I'm doubly convinced now, the day after, that the new format is many times better and smarter for the future, it gives the audience more options, and it reduces or eliminates the burdensome task of hauling products for sale. That's why I'm sharing it now, while the fire burns, in case it would help you too. (If you have already discovered this "new" workbook process, congratulations! I'm sure you double agree! Why didn't you tell me?)

The rationale: I knew that all of my attendees were writers, they used computers daily, understood how to find websites, blogs, and could figure out the free-book code. Therefore all I had to do was explain the media or means needed, where the items could be found, the links or addresses for each, and what the resource references referred to. I gave them the instructions needed in the first two paragraphs, where the program was going in the next two, and the broadest of explanations of what the four sections to be covered in the text that followed.

That took a minute or two to re-explain at the beginning of the presentation, but then I could focus on the most important ways columnists might earn more and live happier. When appropriate, I could direct them to one or several of the references and, in some cases, tell them the best subtitles to the critical step-by-step details. There must be 600+ printed pages in the three free books and 200+ in the other items. Thus, by knowing where the information is at hand, almost immediately, they can pick, select, or reject it as they wish—or go back later, if they change their minds.

The workbook: The two-sided page *is* the workbook. In this case the program was designed to show U.S. columnists how else they can share, market, and expand their written gems (now or later) into other lucrative venues or ventures. That is what I talked about. If they need the application guidance, the resources would then send them to the “how-to” support material.

Enough explanation. What follows is the “workbook” they received.

Workbook as delivered to the NSNC presentation:

Welcome!

I’m Gordon Burgett. It’s 2016, we’re all experienced writers, and the airlines won’t let me schlep boxes of handouts as baggage anymore, so I’m going to use the Internet to let you pick what specific information you think will be useful to you later. At that point, you can download what you want or need, if anything. The most important material is free, there’s no shipping or tax, and it’ll be in your hands almost immediately!

Thus you have no workbook or piles of paper to lumber through. Just sit back for the first hour and let me explain a sort of strategy and ways that should help you considerably increase your writing income, then I’ll answer any questions you have during the remaining 15 minutes. If you have more questions later, please email me at glburgett@aol.com.

My task is to help you fill your coin bags and increase your second-life options by doing more of what you already do very well—and make even more money (heavens!) by doing it.

I think the more-mullah quest starts with you strategizing at

whatever point you are along your moneymaking-by-writing trail. I'll address that.

The rest of our oral trek today roughly follows the other four sections on these pages. I've posted lots of backup resources here that you can download if/when you want or need them. The most important material is free—three full core books, three helper reports, four website articles, and 400+ blogs to pluck from. To download most of that information, use our order page at www.gordonburgett.com/order3.htm

Here's how to download or see the resources: (1) find and separately order each **free book** on the order form—but *before* you submit each order write the coupon number [] in the coupon code box on that order form. Then submit the form, the price will drop to zero, and follow the download instructions that follow! (The freebies expire on 8/20/16.) Other items, unless noted, are from the order form and can be ordered separately or together at any time. They are also available from Amazon but if you want the three books free you must follow the instruction in (1). How to get the three **free reports** is explained below. See blog.gordonburgett.com for the blogs listed. Once there, find the SEARCH box, upper right corner under the Twitter logo. In that box enter either the topic you want to see more about (like query letters or niche) or the word I will give you. The **website articles** are from the direct website link location.

(I) **WRITING—[Travel Writer's Guide](#)** (free ebook)

Explains how to sell 75%+ of your freelance writing (mostly newspaper and magazine articles), how to triple your income by topic-spoking, how to earn more with sidebars, and how to organize profit-packed copy-, quote-, and anecdote-gathering trips...

Related resources:

“4 Proven Ways to Sell 75% of Your Freelance Writing” Go to **blog**, enter 4 proven ways

“How to Sell 75% of Your Travel Writing” (2 cassette program), \$20 + shipping

“25 Professional Query and Cover Letters” (ebook), \$4.99

“Reprints, Rewrites, Reprints of Rewrites, and Resales” (ebook), \$4.99

“The magic of topic spoking.” Go to **blog**, enter topic spoking

(II) [PUBLISHING–Niche Publishing: Publish Profitably Every Time](#) (free ebook)

A huge percentage of the risk-free, market-guaranteed book money is found here. We made \$2 million from dentists and are now following the same path from K-12 school administrators, supers, principals, and school boards. That process and business plan is explained in this book. If you write and publish, almost all the niche profits are yours. If you find experts in the field, you direct/edit, they write, and you publish, most of the profits are still yours but the fame is theirs.

Related resources:

“12-Step Pre-Test for Niche Publications” (ebook), \$4.99

“How to Test Your Niche Book before Writing or Publishing” (ebook), \$9.99

“How to Get Niche Articles in Print 75% of the Time” (ebook), \$2.99

(III) **PUBLISHING—How to Get Your Book Published in Minutes and Marketed Worldwide in Days** (free ebook). If you're not niching, use the "open press" revolution plus Create Space/Kindle [Amazon] and Lightning Source as your first or major paths to building your own empire. Publish here, then (perhaps) try the major publishers.

Related resources:

"Open Book Publishing: Almost a Miracle! (ebook), \$3.10

"When Would I Always (or Never) Self-Publish My Book?" Go to **blog**, enter self-publish

"12 More Ways to Turn Your Book into Many More..." Go to **blog**, enter more ways

"Focus books and Selling a Book by its Parts" Go to the **blog**, enter focus

"Sample Focus Book: Rights and Responsibilities of School Principals" (ebook), \$3.99

"Sample Focus Book: How to Create the Best Staff Possible" (ebook), \$3.99

(IV) **BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER—Empire Building** (O.P., no replacement book yet.) Ultimately, for big money, expand the perception of your expertise through related information dissemination means, like speaking, seminar, giving workshops or retreats, audiobooks, classes, consulting, social media venues, radio-TV, guest performances, and so on. Or create/sell little empires along the way. Or align your writing, researching, interviewing, and publishing skills with others' empires. Or do it all.

Related resources:

“How to Set Up and Market Your Own Seminar” (4-cassette seminar), \$40+shipping

“Six Special Tools That Get Speakers Booked First” (ebook), \$9.99

<p>MORE FREE REPORTS: <i>Lifelong Wealth by Being Indispensable</i> <i>Finding Indispensable Article Topics</i> <i>101 Niche Marketing Topics</i></p>	<p>Just subscribe to my newsletter (seldom sent) at http://www.gordonburgett.com/free-reports and all three reports are immediately downloaded. Nobody else ever sees your address. Then if you want to escape my elist, just email me to be removed. I'm not offended—I forget names instantaneously.</p>
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That's it. If it helps, go to it.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

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)

[Writers: how to find more people to interview...](#)

Sometimes you're writing an article or story and try as you may you can't think of or find another person to interview, other than your kids or some shlunk on the street corner. So what do you do?

Let's start with an expectation that few new writers know about or think they might be able to tiptoe around: that **almost every paying editor expects you to interview at least several (think three or four) people for your article**—and what the interviewee is asked or says is directly related to what the article is about.

After I say that in my seminar about interviewing a rather bizarre question usually pops up: **“Must the interviewee be living?”** I imagine they are really asking if they can use quotes from someone who has passed or, perhaps, can they include interviews with aliens or ghosts or the like? In the second case, no. But quotes from the defunct, yes. Still, the quotes must come from a source that did once live—and the words must have been “captured intact” at that time, preserved, and passed down. Also, they can’t be “helped” to directly pertain to the subject at hand.

An example where this worked. I sold several articles about Dom Pedro II and his visit to the U.S. to open the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. All of the quotes came from a detailed diary that the King of Brazil kept during the visit that was published a few years after his death. I sent the editor a copy of the relevant phrases from the diary that I had translated from Portuguese. No problem.

Thus historical comments from the living or dead might provide background information and, sometimes, direct quotes that apply as said.

The best way not to get caught without interviewees is to read many other articles or accounts about the topic and note all vital information you can about their speakers or authors. The challenge is finding those publications. Your librarian will show you the “trace” books, if needed. “Google” will too, as will the company or college they work for.

Another way, if the topic is being actively discussed in the media, is to find all of the related interplay in print: who is taking part, their position, the group or association they represent, anything else that gives a clue. And if you only have one side of the topic, ask the speaker defending that viewpoint the names of the three most frequent (or best) speakers on each side of the issue—plus for phone or mail contacts.

Or delve more deeply into the topic. Specifically: a cure for Parkinson's disease, how to get ahead (and stay ahead) of road deterioration, one-world currency, age-based income equity? Focus as much on the best brains and problem-solvers in each field. Mine their expertise. Ask who you should contact to get a solid exchange.

Said another way, **ask the best informed expert(s) on the topic** if they could (or would) identify the top minds in their field, the top three or so best informed people who would identify the most important questions that must be asked, then offer their thoughts about possible answers or solutions to each. Sometimes that works. Sometimes they laugh uncontrollably, step back, and stare at you like you've just overdosed on your own brew!

Another way is to simply ask the chosen person after you finish interviewing them, "Would you point me to another expert as well informed as you that I can interview so my editor will have two points of view for his/her pages?"

Or just ask the shlunk on the street corner and take your chances. I did just that in a piece about the huge Schloss in Heidelberg. Seems there was a giant crack in a wall large enough to march an army through. So I asked a fellow just standing next to me if he knew anything about that crack and why the wall didn't just collapse or slide down? He smiled, then gave me an eloquent, point-by-point response! When finished, I applauded his knowledge (and clarity of expression). He smiled even more, then told me that he was a professor of architecture at the University of Heidelberg!

If in this somewhat rambling blog there is guidance that helps you, great.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. You can't just interview yourself, sadly. Such wit and erudite articulation untouchable! But if you have solid quotable comments in an article, book, or publication about the topic, you can say something like: "...in my 2016 book about ... I mentioned that ..." A bit awkward, alas, but better than just saying, "Somebody once said ..."

I will be writing a book about interviewing soon. If that interests you, please stay tuned.

Selling one article topic to 5-8 different publications!

"Could you sell the same text, unchanged, to both magazines and newspapers?" is the most often asked question at my writing seminars!

I suppose you could, but I wouldn't because I wouldn't know how to unravel the rights issues. Anyway, it'd be far more profitable with a lot less work just planning five to eight sales from the same fact (and photo) pool.

Here's how I might sell one topic (in this case, the Chicago River on St. Patrick's Day) **as widely as possible for the most yield and the least amount of additional research, composition, and jpg taking?**

1. I'd first query the idea to the **highest paying magazines** (in order, one at a time). Then I'd write my lead article for the first editor giving me a "go-ahead." This article might focus on a St. Patrick's Day special, a big deal in the Windy

City because at 9 a.m. that morning the Chicago River turns orange for a few minutes until (it's said) the leprechauns switch it to green so lush it puts tears in every O'Brien eye—and stupefies much of the rest of midland America as it flows in reverse to the Illinois River and the Mississippi to and past New Orleans! Some 400,000 visitors a year line the downtown Chicago bridges, then watch the St. Patrick's Day Parade march through the city that day at noon, rain or shine.

2. After that magazine article (sold first rights) appears in print, **I could sell it exactly as is to any other magazine as a reprint.** (If you sold the photos first rights too—or for one-time use—you could also sell them to the same [or other] reprint buyers!)

3. But since I've got a box full of facts and quotes, why not query, then write another main article about a similar happening that takes place the same weekend: the Flower and Garden Show at Navy Pier (nearby, on the same verdant river as it reaches Lake Michigan)? This is **a loose example of a rewrite** since you can slip in the key points about the concurrent St. Patrick's Day festivities. All you have to do is rewrite that used text, which you'd have to do anyway because it must be in a different layout for both publications. Or you could call this rewrite "Chicago's Greatest Gift: the St. Patrick's Day Parade and the Flower and Garden Show Side by Side!" (What a title!) Since this magazine piece is a first-rights sale, **why not sell this distinct offering to other magazines seeking reprints?**

4. **We've still not sold to the newspapers!** I would significantly rewrite either of the magazine articles (or mix and match) in newspaper fashion, give the result a different title, and maybe try for a national newspaper sale first. Since this is a major set-date activity (like Christmas or Easter), most major newspapers look for event-related special articles. So I would query here several months earlier so it can get scheduled, then work out the special submission

process with the travel editor.

5. Or if the national newspapers aren't enchanted by the Chicago Journeyman Plumbers' river magic, I'd **send it simultaneously to all of the Midwest newspapers** 100 miles away from each other to see if I can spin the special event one last time (this year), before the emerald is long gone.

6. And, of course, **I'd handle the photos myself so I could sell them as widely as possible** without messing up their rights!

By March 1, 2016 I will release a **brand new book** about this topic where each of the **resale means to magazines and newspapers** are explained in detail. Those are simultaneous submissions, reprints, rewrites, reprints of rewrites, rewrites of reprints, modified reprints, sidebars, overseas sales, and shorts. Check Amazon Books under Gordon Burgett for the still-undecided title and release date—or email glburgett@aol.com for specifics and cost.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

Article you're submitting need a sidebar? Here's an example...

Typically, as I write a “go-ahead” article, I encounter some additional facts that are so spectacular or unique I think they would make an interesting sidebar or box, in or near the printed article, to excite the readers and add much substance

to the article without changing its primary structure. So I write and send a sidebar cover note (see below) by email or snail mail to the editor, reminding him/her of the subject of the article of mine they are considering or just accepted. Here, I share some of the most exciting facts (for baseball fans) that apply to the first year that the Cubs (and the National League) were in existence: 1876. That's it. He/she will likely respond by email, a short yes or no, with a suggested content size.]

Sidebar Cover Note

Dear Ms So-and-So:

I doubly appreciate your giving me the go-ahead on the article "Wrigley Wouldn't Recognize His Field." I'm shooting to have it there within a week. But as I'm gathering current facts amid the cranes and disappearing bleachers, I wondered if you'd also want a Chicago-based sidebar (or box) about the earliest Cubs, long before P.K. Wrigley was in baby britches.

Here are some of the items it might contain:

1. The Cubs are the oldest team in the National League. They played from day one, in 1876—and won the first pennant by beating the Louisville Dark Blues in six games. Called the White Stockings then, they finished the year with a 52-14 record. (They didn't use the name "Cubs" until 1907.)
2. Chicagoans also gave birth to the term "out of left field" in their early years. The left field in the pre-Wrigley playing grounds butted up to a many-storied insane asylum, and when the crowds made too much noise the lunatics screamed out the windows and banged on pans. Their comments truly were "out of left field."
3. Al Spalding (of later sports equipment fame) managed that team, plus he helped write the first set of official baseball rules. He also pitched in 60 of the 66 games they played in

1876, winning 47. (Spalding was also the only pitcher on the team wherever he played, winning more games in his six professional baseball seasons than any other player in the league.) Al was the first major league player to use a fielding glove. His total pitching record was 252-65 with a 2.15 ERA and a .313 batting average! He also owned the team for a decade.

4. Players had no numbers or names on their uniforms then so crowds only vaguely knew who they were or what they did. Spaulding's solution one year was to assign each position a different color, and the player there wore a hat that was colored to match the position's hue. The fans called the team the "Tulips." Hats (and baseball gloves) were sold, of course, by Spaulding.

5. Ross Barnes took most of the rest of the honors that year, batting .429 in 1876, hitting the Cub's first home run, and winning nine of the other 10 major categories that inaugural season (hits, RBIs, runs, and so on...) But he got the ague (a fever) in the Windy City after 22 games in 1877 and never fully recovered. Fortunately, "Cap" Anson was there to pick up the slack, and, later, Tinkers, Evers, Chance, Hornsby, Dizzy Dean, and Grover Cleveland Alexander.

That may seem like a lot of numbers for a sidebar, but what numbers! And those reading about Wrigley Field will be Cub fans eager to relive those golden days. They are also hoping that the new playing grounds will bring the glory back.

If that interests you, on speculation of course, please let me know. It would help if you would indicate an approximate number of words you'd like in the sidebar.

Many thanks,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. This is an excerpt from my book **Profitably Resell Your Copy Again and Again (and Again)...**, with the subtitle *Magazines, Newspapers, Reprints, Rewrites, Modified Reprints, Sidebars, Sales Abroad, and Other Copy Resales*. Available from Create Space and Kindle after March 10. Or contact [us](#) for details.

Stretch one skinny article into five with minimal effort

How would you like to design one article to appear in five different magazines or newsletters that explains the benefits, through example, of **your firm's specialization** and why they may want to know more about your services? The best thing: it's pretty much the same article with a similar message, and the five articles will probably take far less than 40% of the time and effort!

Let's say you consult in the first-contact field, to help improve relations and create more business follow-through between receptionists and front-desk employees in small to medium-sized businesses. You can outwit your competitors by using the same basic idea five times through a popular **reprint and rewrite concept** familiar to journalists.

Perhaps your consulting would work well for offices that deal in insurance, real estate, loan processing, titles, and interior designing. What you must do is **create a master article** that will work well in publications to each of those five fields. Let's say the creation of a telephone answering approach and basic script that would make all who phone (1) feel welcome and reassured by the professional message content

and tone, (2) would be promptly directed to the person best prepared to answer their question or give advice, (3) or would be sent to the department or desk that handles their needs, and (4) would experience the properly directed pass-off smoothly and courteously.

That master article (probably about 650-900 words long) would give an example of how the greeting program you would design would function, with now-and-then examples and benefits clearly visible. But it would be niche-tailored to meet the needs in the five fields just mentioned. To do that you might **interview a first-contact person** or two in firms in each field, so the article has the right tone and vocabulary, and meets the unique needs in the different niches.

For example, you might call the office manager in, say, a loan office nearby and tell that person that you are ___ and you are writing an article about greeting solutions in the loan field and could you interview her/him for 15 minutes in person or by phone to have a better understanding of how greeting is handled in the loan office field. **It's surprising how eager others are to be interviewed.** You could do the same to the other four fields too. What you need for all or most of the niche articles is inside, hands-on, how-to information from an experienced practitioner.

Later, you might call the same person again, thank them once more, and ask if they could suggest the three niche magazines in their field they think might be interested in sharing the short article—that you will handle the placement but thought it prudent to see what is most read right now.

Since you already know how positive greeting programs can be designed, you can then take the problems mentioned in the interview and design a program that would **provide significant benefit.** (And do the same in the other fields too. The second article will be much faster; the fifth, about as fast as you can type.)

Then you use the usual submission procedures to the target magazines, in this case a **query letter** suggesting the article or a **direct submission** of the finished article with a cover letter. When accepted and submitted remember to include a "**bio slug**," a 20-35-word short that tells about you, the author, or the firm, plus the address/phones/email info so the readers can contact you for business!

Why would you do this? To make local contacts through the interviewees, get your firm's beneficial suggestions in front of readers nationwide in five different fields, and to have copies of in-print articles to use for your p.r. or direct promotions. **What I like best is doing five while you do one.** As long as you are thinking this way, why not think a bit deeper and get a much better return?

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. To see other blogs about **reprints, rewrites, query letters, and selling freelance writing**, just type those words in the **search box**, upper right, and the other blogs will appear after this article.

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,

Writers: How to Write in Financial Comfort Even in Old Age!

There are ways to do what the title says—and about 1000 other ways that guarantee writing penury, most about as lucrative as begging for or selling writing pencils on the street! I'll not foul this blog by describing how you can find cliché distress or dangling destitution—poverty you can find on your own. Or it will find you, particularly if you're lazy or wreyete horribly!

For the rest of you wordsmiths overflowing with words, wit, proper punctuation, vivid imaginations, and computers that spell well, here's what an old writer thinks are the most likely paths to help you at least end up paying your own bills—and comfortably at ease between now and then.

We can **eliminate some kinds of writing** at the outset, like **essays** and **poetry**. Verse may be the showcase of a mastermind, but 99%+ of the poets, bless them, even when in rhyme don't have a dime.

Let's focus on the **four paths** that make the most cents.

Geniuses could secure comfort if they could express their wizardry in lucid, sought prose, then link themselves to vendors who could harness, package, and sell their brilliance. (So much for geniuses.)

A harder path would be from the bottom up, **from stringer to**

city editor to editor-of-editors. Theirs might be the bobbing path of nervous comfort while publishing mastheads sink into the sea. Editing excellence may have to be mixed with the deft art of vessel leaping, derring-do in life preservers, afloat, preserving words and news while awaiting the calm. Still, in business and government there may be a million jobs that have a writing core. They pay well and keep the faithful comfortable during retirement. Some of the greatest writers had their day jobs there, and bloomed into fame from the product of their nighttime/weekend passions.

Fiction writers have the privilege of inventing comfort when needed, of living where their imagination takes them to find solace. But to have enough coin to eat and stay warm as needed requires that they cook up a tasty singular plotstew of people, purpose, and place that readers want, then keep that blend boiling until their culinary/literary fame makes them well rewarded. For most this is surely the hardest way to spend a life fed solely by writing.

The fourth path is obvious but its luster is so unseen by the everyday public that most miss its truly gilded glow. These are the folks who **write for close-knit bonds of workers.** They define their niches—surveyors, goat breeders, school principals—and write books or create how-to guides or give workshops transformed into BOR tomes about what every member of the group needs to know to do what they do better. Most also speak professionally about what they write. And if their primary field folds or changes form they reform their knowledge to match the new configuration, get the groups' email addresses and sell their solutions to their associations and their members. They have ready-made followers eager for every applicable word that they write or speak. When they write articles, they know specifically who will read them and what they need or want to read. Their blogs are avidly awaited, they use social media to enhance their expertise, and as they get known and grow older their demand grows

proportionately. They're probably too busy to be too comfortable in their prime years, but they could have a self-generating empire that would keep them very comfortable as they age. The downside? Who knows they exist (comfortably or at all) and who reads their chosen words, other than the tight circle of their followers.

That's it. Musing about how those fed by the flames of imagination and word-molding are most likely to be able to be comfortably closer to their preferred mode of creation longer and freer from debilitating or impoverishing distractions.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. I write books and speak their messages, mostly. Some are published by others, while I also publish niche books, all of which I edit but are written by others. Here is a [list](#) of those books that are currently available. (Oh yes, I'm also old.)

[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
