

# The Writing and Syndicating of a Column

(Address made to journalism students at the University November 22, 1934.)

By Mrs. WALTER FERGUSON, '07

**S**TRICTLY speaking, I have no legitimate qualification which entitles me to talk to the students of a school of journalism since I sneaked over the fence in an off moment, as you might say, in order to get into the profession for which all of you are trying to fit yourselves. The only excuse I can offer is that there were newspapers long before there were schools of journalism.

What happened to me briefly was this. After I had spent a number of years studying to become a piano player—for which I had no aptitude and therefore in which I never succeeded, I married into the newspaper business. And marrying into any trade or profession is the one sure way to make it your own if you are a girl.

I served my apprenticeship in the country newspaper field and it's the next best place to a school of journalism to get real training in the work. Also there is not much chance for specialization because in the country office you are expected to be able to do anything in a pinch—society notes, political editorials, obituaries, crop reports as well as business management, which I may say is generally the most difficult job of all.

Now I suspect that each one of you, as well as hundreds of thousands of other young people all over the United States, have ambitions to go to some big paper in New York or Chicago. That is the secret goal of every student of journalism. And it's true that you have reached the top when you establish a permanent place for yourself there.

But without trying to discourage you let me warn you that it is probable that only a small number of those who graduate from schools of journalism next spring will ever do more than a bit of cub reporting in any metropolitan mecca. A large number will fail of the highest ambition—as is the doom and destiny of the majority of men and women. Keeping this fact in mind then, I have only one little piece of advice to offer you. I do not approve of the older generation giving advice to the younger—in my capacity as mother I have discovered that the caution which seemed pertinent and right ten years ago, does not help for the problems of today.

So speaking as an elder to a young generation I have but one thing to say—prepare to fit yourself into some minor groove, and to fit into it well. The world cannot get along without the second raters. They are as essential to progress as the expert and the genius.

But I do think one should make up one's mind to be a good second rater, to give the best of oneself to the task. All of which is my way of hinting that it seems to me wise for some of you at least to consider quite seriously the field of the country newspaper for your ambitions. Since you have already listened to country editors, I feel certain you may have heard this before—so I shall merely try to emphasize it in your minds.

It is unnecessary for us to go into detailed reasons for the suggestion. We know that in the past decades our cities have not been able to absorb the streams of humanity constantly pouring into them. Right now in the glamorous city of New York there are vast numbers on the permanent relief rolls. The picture is not a pretty one. And metropolitan chambers of commerce, which for a couple of decades have been ballyhooing for larger populations and holding out the lure of fortune to all, now find themselves in a tragic quandary. All are trying frantically to get rid of the surplus inhabitants who must be sustained on public charity.

Therefore it seems to me high time that a few of us decided definitely to stay at home, to live at home, to work at home.

Nor shall we miss the best by doing so. Of course men and women set their hearts on many different dreams of success. Business, professional, political success are some of them. But alas, too seldom do we think about how to live successfully. And there is a fine art in knowing how to plan one's life so as to cultivate those spiritual qualities and obtain those finer fortunes of the soul and heart without which no fame is satisfying and no wealth adequate.

I honestly believe the country newspaper field offers opportunity for important work to the coming generation of journalists. You may not find the glitter and nervous excitement, the thrills nor perhaps the money that you might, if you're lucky, wrest from a city career, but you can count

upon having a wholesome well-rounded existence, plenty of hard work, the chance of exercising great influence upon your community, and to form friendships which are more permanent and dear than the average city man ever knows.

There is right now a definite trend toward country journalism to be found in the city press. For the country newspaper editor has never forgotten one simple infallible rule of his profession which is that the most important news any man can read is his own name in print. You may listen to individuals deny this truth, but never believe them, because it is the one undying flattery which no human being can resist. I hope you will not have failed to notice how the Oklahoma City and Tulsa papers within the past six months have added departments intended to fulfil this want. For readers may be interested in the celebrity who is far away, but they are always held fascinated by news of the next door neighbor.

I was asked to talk about my particular kind of newspaper work and indeed it is the only kind I would be qualified to talk of because it is the only thing I know. Probably all your teachers have told you that the source of true writing must be found in the daily experience of the writer. Materials for columns, feature stories or anything else must of necessity come from restricted circles of individual existence. But wherever you have material about men, women and human nature, the irony and loveliness, the humor and tragedy of life will never be lacking.

The only necessity for newspaper writing, I believe, is a knowledge of simple English, a feeling for words, an observing eye and an understanding heart. I'm not saying you will be sure to succeed with all these but I'm certain you will never succeed without them.

All I know about column writing I learned in a country newspaper office, in a country town, among country people, and by continuous persistent study and effort every day of my life since. That's the most wonderful thing about newspaper work. It's never completed. You never get through. You never feel that your stuff is any good at all—because the more you labor at it the worse it sounds. After ten years at it, I never see anything I've written put down in cold print without having a dreadful feeling of embarrassment, the feeling that I have deluded myself into thinking I can do something for which I am not equipped by nature. Instantly I see scores of mistakes, scores of places where it could be improved. Hence, the current column always sounds terrible.

In the kind of work I do, one can read too much and, having a passion for reading, I believe I have harmed rather than improved myself by doing too much of it. Too much study of what other people think and say results in unoriginality and a messy style. Then too it's only human nature to think about what impression

you will create on your readers. That involves you in innumerable difficulties and is a mistaken motive for setting down ideas. Instead of putting your first frank opinion on a subject, your first reaction to an event, you will read a number of other opinions and reactions and as a consequence find you have none of your own left. On the other hand, if you should always be found on the unpopular side of a question you will be charged with trying to attract attention to yourself. Really honest writing is very hard to do.

Catering to popular appeal may seem to make for success, but in my opinion it never does in the long run. Our idea of success has become so perverted by the swift rise of movie and radio stars that we have lost sense of the true meaning of the term. We overlook the fact that some of these stars go into eclipse as suddenly as they rise. Real success, the kind that matters, is obtained only through long years of sincere hard work—by doing something you like to do and doing it well. What matters really is the fun you get out of your job, and you can't get fun out of anything you dislike.

"Where do you get material for columns?" is the regulation question. That's an easy one. You get material everywhere you go. I believe the first and most important necessity is to keep up one's contacts with all kinds of people. For this reason I try to widen the scope of my activities whenever possible. I work with the Y.W.C.A. partly because I like to feel I am making some contribution to the social welfare of my community, but partly I must also confess, to obtain material about the point of view of the unemployed girl, the business girl who doesn't get enough wages, the woman who is down and out. I visit as often as possible with the girls who clerk in the stores, with department buyers. I gossip with the yard man, the milk man, the grocer. I attend meetings of the Junior League, the D.A.R., the W.C.T.U., the League of Women Voters, the Business and Professional Women, and the American Association of University Women. I go to formal dinners and listen to the Tories talk. I play bridge with women who do nothing else, the circumference of whose world is bounded by a square table, whose chief interest is a deck of cards. I go to literary meetings, fraternity parties, and church socials. And sometimes to political teas and chamber of commerce sessions. I visit charitable institutions, FERA headquarters, make friends with the manicurist and the girl who does my hair, and gossip over the back fence with the neighbors.

Everything one sees, hears or experiences is grist for the column mill. Nobody is such an excellent source of material as taxi drivers. They've been all around and can report in detail upon the doings of the community. I find the business woman knows a great deal more about men as they are than the home woman who is

supposed to make them a career. The latter invariably overestimate their ability, their nobility and their intelligence. The spinster often knows far more about children than the mother of half a dozen, and the school teacher is a sort of class to herself and can give you all kinds of different points of view.

There's always the feeling of frustration; that there's nothing new under the sun. One can only bring to the trite old subjects a fresh point of view—and then you may discover it's as old as the pyramids.

How do you do your writing—is perhaps the most persistent question of all put to me, since so many people labor under the delusion that all scribblers must isolate themselves and woo some sort of muse.

I write on the hop, skip and jump. Under the compulsion of being interrupted a hundred times, by husband, children, friends, the exigencies of home life—an unexpected guest, illness, out of town visitors, those interruptions which are inevitable in the ordinary home. Nor would I have it otherwise.

I shall try to give you a close up of a very ordinary morning such as occurs at least once or twice a week. Sometimes everything goes swimmingly. You begin with a clear idea, and the sentences seem to write themselves. But there are days when things are at sixes and sevens and you can't think of a thing to say. The mind is a perfect blank and you want to toss the typewriter out of the window. If we could just leave white spaces when we have nothing to say it would relieve confusion. But the job has to be done somehow.

After breakfast I go immediately to the typewriter and sit down. That is the only way to begin, of course. On this particular morning, let us say, I am confronted by a void where the brain ought to be. I look blank for a while and feel exactly as blank as I look. Perhaps there is the nebulous fragment of thought back in the dim recesses of what I call my brain, so I remain perfectly quiet trying to capture it.

Then the telephone jangles at my elbow. At once the frail ghost of an idea vanishes like a blown out candle flame. Why, everybody asks me, do you answer the telephone. Because I can't help it. I'm just made that way. Nothing brings such a joyful feeling of anticipation as a buzz of the bell. It may be a hundred different kinds of good news. The fact that it seldom is, marks me as one of the world's optimists. I suppose it's nothing more than plain feminine curiosity which makes me jump to answer every telephone summons, no matter how many other persons there may be in the house to do it. Only when I'm up to my neck in work do I delegate the job to the maid, and then I'm all of a flutter wanting to know who has called and what is wanted.

This particular morning call may have been one from the scores of individuals

who are forever selling something over the phone. The Maytag man, let us say. For the fifth time he insists upon bringing down a new washing machine; he wants to do the next week's wash. "The bigger the better" he carols over the wire, vibrant with enthusiasm. I can smell the soap suds. In order to get rid of him and because I was born with no sales resistance, I consent, which probably means I shall be buying his machine when I don't want it and can't afford it.

Back to work again. I want to hit upon a subject truly startling—something unusual, and the way to do that is to get an arresting first sentence in order to challenge attention. Is Man a Reasonable Being? That sounds very well.

How bright the sun is. It's tiresome having to sit here on a glorious autumn day when the world outside is so lovely—I work in a room of glass, which is a temptation as well as an inspiration. The dog comes and presses his nose against the window, mutely asking to come inside. I am adamant for a time, while I consider that first sentence. Are men reasonable beings? What can one say on the subject. Perhaps I'd better do another of

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those silly pieces of advice to women about their husbands. I hesitate. The dog stands, his front paws scraping against the glass. His eyes plead. If he were a vocal being could I resist him? Can I resist him anyway. No. I get up and open the door to him.

Back to the typewriter. Man is not a reasonable being. I must have some argument. Would the fact that though he's always losing it, he never keeps but one collar button be a case in point?

The door bell. Unconsciously I halfrise. No, I'm busy—although so far only two lines have been produced. It's the trash man after his check. I write that. And while doing so I can see in my mind's eye the uncouth, very dirty man, his lips half open, his straggling beard and his slow apologetic smile as he stands at my back door. A dollar and a half. What a pittance for one who spends his days emptying trash cans. He needs this money. My conscience gives me several twinges because I know so little about this inarticulate soul who has come to my door every month for five years. How does he live; is he rebellious; does he suffer?

But I must get down to business and leave the trash man to his fate. Man is not a reasonable being. There are brilliant comments to be made on the subject, only I can't seem to think of them. A fly buzzes overhead, knocking itself frantically against the window pane. Immediately I begin to cogitate about flies. Where do they keep themselves. Why do they always appear at unexpected and most unwelcome moments? Is there some sort of fly code which informs the sleepers when a lady guest is arriving? And my mind runs on the many times when I have had women in the house and the cursed things flocked in from all corners, making merry over the luncheon table. That brings me to the consideration that men are much easier to entertain than women. No fly escapes the feminine eye, no spot goes undetected. Pondering this, my contention that man is not a reasonable being grows weaker. He has his points.

Sighing I look over the room again—when Heavens, my eye lights on an enormous cobweb in full view in the opposite corner. The sun has turned it into a fairy net. It sways delicate, gauzy, languid as a sigh. But I must destroy it and immediately. No housewife can permit a cobweb to go unmolested. I run out after the broom for if I don't get it at once I shall have forgotten it in five minutes and may not spy it again for days—or until another lady who has come calling, spies it at the same time.

The telephone again. I refuse to answer. It rings, twice, three times. I snatch the receiver.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ferguson," comes a lilting feminine voice over the wire. "This is Miss So and So of the Such and Company department store speaking. We

are having a marvelous offer of the *Delineator* this week. A year's subscription for only 90 cents. You pay a few cents a week and it's added to your monthly account. It's really getting it for nothing. Do you know the *Delineator*, Mrs. Ferguson? Such fine fashion hints, a wonderful beauty department, excellent fiction—"and so on and on and on.

"No," I say when I can get in a word. "No, I'm not interested. No, I don't care for the *Delineator*. I don't like it. I wouldn't have it as a gift." A sniff comes over the wire and I know I have made another enemy.

Why doesn't one have gumption to fib immediately under the circumstances. Simply say quite blandly, "Sorry, Mrs. Ferguson isn't in this morning." But that takes more moral quick wittedness than I possess, even though it is far kinder to lie than to tell the truth to magazine sales ladies.

Now I must get down to business. How fast the leaves fall. It's time for pensive thoughts about autumn. Perhaps an editorial—but, no, millions are done every

year. The subject is too trite. And while I sit that nice sweet sad feeling steals over me, the regular autumn feeling and so for a while I just sit, my mind a complete and utter void.

Man is not a reasonable being. The door bell again. Somebody to see the lady of the house, reports the maid. We whisper together. Is it a peddler, a beggar, a book agent or the Fuller Brush man? Looks like a beggar, she reports. Rather a nice looking young man—can't tell. I go to the door. He is a nice looking young man. Hunting work—says he's hitch hiking from Texas to Michigan where his folks live. There is something shy yet charming in his face, a wistful little-boy look which no woman can resist. I ask him questions. Presently we sit together on the front stoop and he tells me of his vagabond wanderings over the country, his observations on life in the United States in 1934. So in ten minutes I have my column. Just like that. Who cares whether man is a reasonable being—he's always an interesting one, which is all that matters to newspaper people.

## A Letter from Japan

By WINBURN T. THOMAS, '29

(Following are excerpts from a letter sent to Doctor J. O. Hassler, professor of applied mathematics and astronomy at the University, from Winburn T. Thomas, '29as, who has been in Japan a year.)

ONE year in Japan! And temporarily located.

These words meaning little to you are quite significant for me. Can you appreciate the feeling of a person just from America, who after facing responsibilities, meeting regular obligations, and performing the routine tasks of a pastor for a number of years suddenly finds himself in a new country, forced to adapt himself to an entirely different culture, unable to understand a word of the language, and without significance or responsibility?

It means moving from a world in which one has meaning—perhaps is the center of his own little world—into a place where one must begin all over again. The effect on the individual is comparable to the effect of the Copernican theory upon the Ptolemaic science of four centuries ago. . . .

Once again, however, life has begun to have the feeling of reality. Many factors have contributed to this change. Doubtless the growing acquaintance with the language has played its part for while I can

scarcely understand Japanese, I can express—sometimes—simple ideas which they seem to grasp. . . .

Another problem which arises when we try to take seriously the admonition of our General Assembly to "make unmistakably clear to the constituencies of the church and the world at large" the fact that followers of Christ must "break with the whole war system" and implement the gospel into social channels. By way of illustration, I was asked yesterday to write a sermonette for one of the local religious papers "but without any social implications. . . ."

An unusually large percentage of the Japanese are shop-keepers. Yet, few of them seem intent upon doing more than enough business to pay for their daily bowls of rice. A friend of mine recently entered a small stationery store to purchase a quantity of envelopes. After inquiring the price of a single bundle, he asked the owner what she would charge for the entire stock, some two thousand. Much to his surprise, she replied, "Oh, I wouldn't sell all of them. Then, I wouldn't have any left. . . . Personal avarice is reduced to a minimum among these people.

The ease with which they accept life is illustrated by their customs with reference to the theatre. While I personally find very little time to attend the shows here,