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Creating Content Your Readers Can Trust AND Enjoy

A Primer

FIPP 2019
Curtis Gillespie

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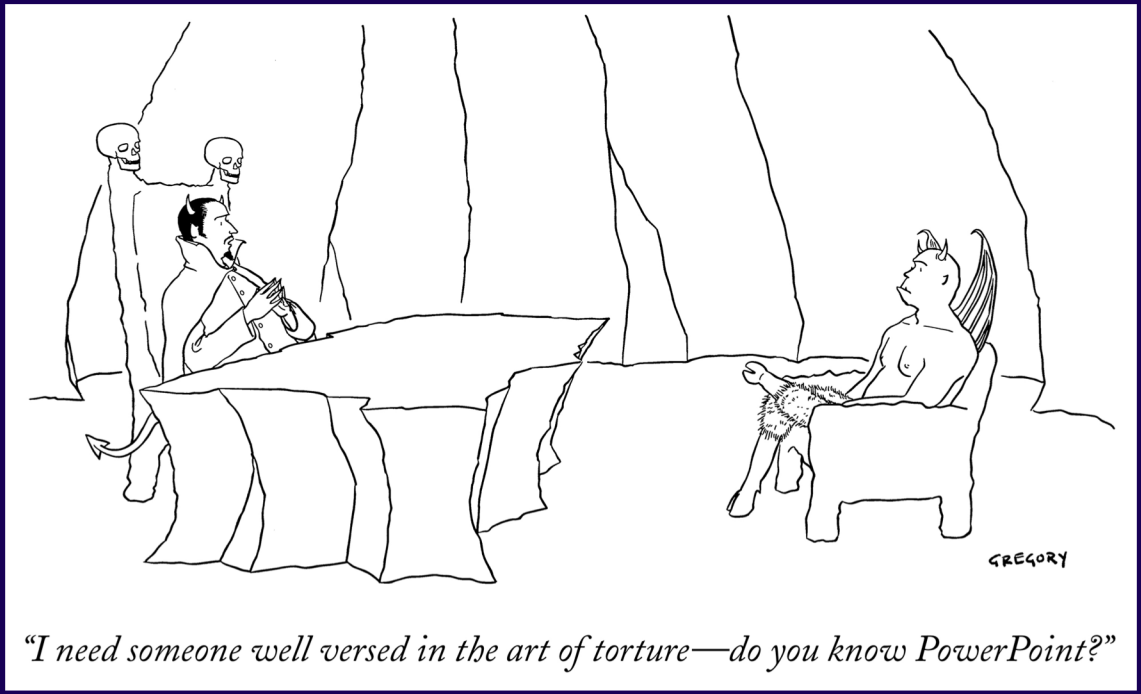

"I need someone well versed in the art of torture—do you know PowerPoint?"

Why This Talk and Why Now?

1. Conscientious Research

2. Disinterested Fact Checking

3. Employing Narrative Techniques Across Various Formats

1. Conscientious Research

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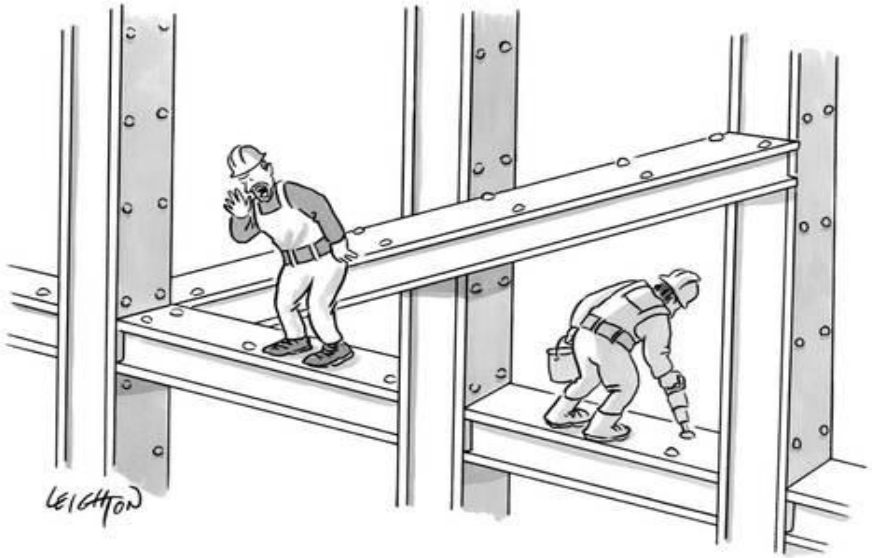
What Is Research and Why Does It Matter?

Research is a philosophy

Research is about performing due diligence

Research turns opinion into reporting



"Escher! Get your ass up here."

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Creating the Conditions for a Strong Interview

1. Preparation
2. Timing
3. Negotiate limits
4. Sense of the story
5. The right setting
6. Understand who you are interviewing and why
7. Understand who you are as a writer and interviewer

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The Character of the Questions

Pitch
Pace
Silence
Follow Up Questions
Your Question Pattern
Excuse Me?!?
Why and How
Paraphrasing

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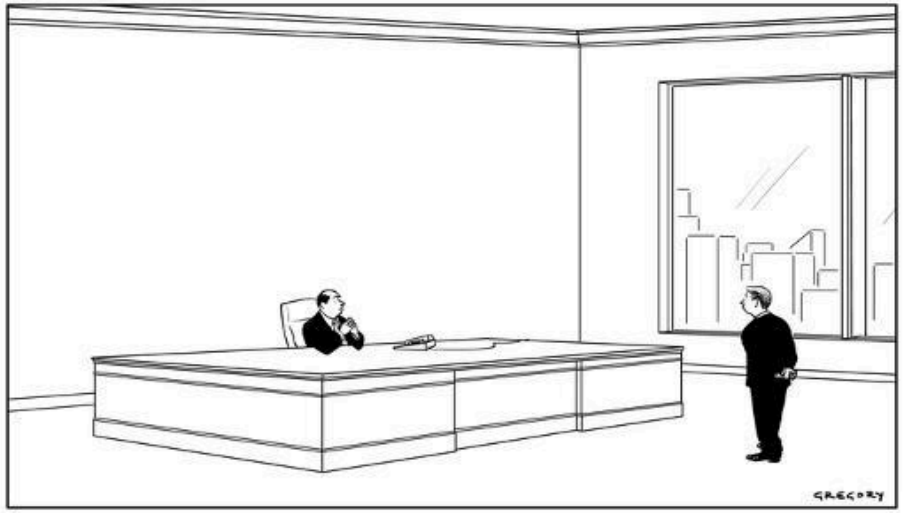
Major considerations in interviewing

A. Ethical and emotional landscape of the interview
B. Comfort level
C. Get a sense of your subject
D. Trust your gut
E. Observe everything, dress, manner, tone, smell, skin colour, noise
F. Taping vs. note-taking
G. Requests for questions in advance



"I'm not going to lie to you, Saunders—I'm going to lie to you."

2. Disinterested Fact Checking

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Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the lifeblood of real civilization

G. M. Trevelyan

Just the
facts,
ma'am.
AP

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The Three Essential Stages of Fact Checking

Verification
Investigation
Documentation

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The Three Roles in the Fact Checking Process

Writer
Fact Checker
Editor

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"If I didn't believe in a free press, would I be giving you this interview?"

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General Guidelines and Ethical Considerations

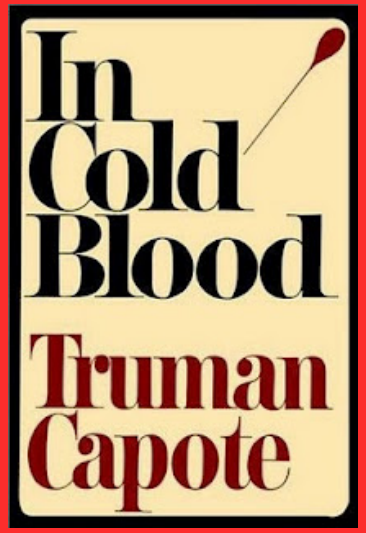
3. Employing Narrative Techniques Across Various Formats

storytelling
word
experience
share
communication
writing
message
author
memory
history
myth
writer
educational
concept
blog
literature
connectivity
identity
text
telling
answer
school
classical
honest
movie
paper
tale
digital
fiction
truth
legend
novel
thoughts
connect
true
read
idea
title
prose
connection
antique
personality
typography
dictionary
university
personal
information
time
document
type
web
suggestion
narration
exchange
news
nostalgia
wisdom
poetry
question
past
story
education
page
typewriter
gossip
feedback
magic

What is Narrative?

Narrative non-fiction is simple in theory. By using a novelist's technique and a reporter's research skills and doggedness, a great piece of narrative non-fiction creates for the reader a more penetrating view of reality

Narrative non-fiction has strong roots in western literary tradition, but it also has an immediacy and a power for telling today's stories


In Cold Blood
Truman Capote

ANNALS OF CRIME

IN COLD BLOOD

IV—THE CORNER

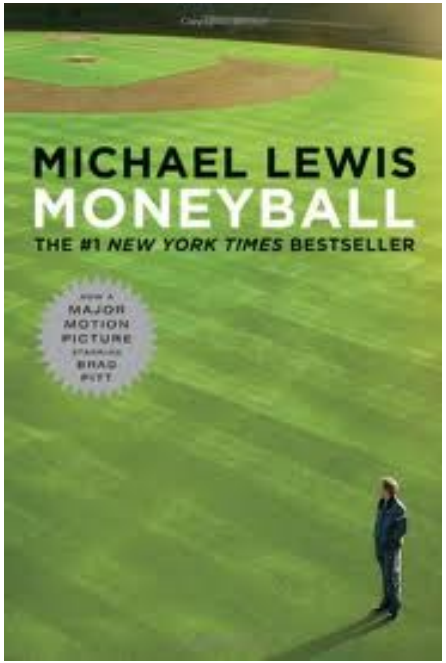
(EDITOR'S NOTE: ALL QUOTATIONS IN THIS ARTICLE ARE TAKEN EITHER FROM OFFICIAL RECORDS OR FROM CONVERSATIONS, TRANSCRIBED VERBATIM, BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THE PRINCIPALS.)

INSTITUTIONAL dourness and cheerful domesticity coexist on the fourth floor of the Finney County Courthouse, in Garden City, Kansas. The presence of the county jail supplies the first quality, and the so-called Sheriff's Residence, a pleasant apartment separated from the five cells that make up the jail proper by steel doors and a short corridor, accounts for the second. For the last three years, the Sheriff's Residence has in fact been occupied not by the sheriff, Earl Robinson, but by the under-sheriff and his wife, Wendle and Josephine—or Josie—Meier. The Meiers have been married more than twenty years. They are much alike—tall people with weight and strength to spare, with wide hands, with square and calm faces, and a kindly look, the last being especially true of Mrs. Meier, a direct and practical woman who nevertheless seems illuminated by a quite mystical serenity. As the under-sheriff's helpmate, she puts in long hours; between five in the morning, when she begins the day by reading a chapter in the Bible, and 10 P.M., her bedtime, she cooks for the prisoners, sews and darns for them, does their laundry, takes splendid care of her husband, and looks after the five-room Sheriff's Residence, with its *gemütlich* mélange of plump housecats and squashy chairs and cream-colored lace window curtains. The Meiers have one child, a daughter, who is married to a Kansas City policeman, so the couple live alone—or, as Mrs. Meier more correctly puts it, "alone except for whoever happens to be in the ladies' cell."

The jail actually contains six cells. The sixth, the one reserved for female prisoners, is actually an isolated unit situated inside the Sheriff's Residence; indeed, it adjoins the Meiers' kitchen. "But that don't worry me," says Josie Meier. "I enjoy the company. Having somebody to talk to while I'm doing my kitchen work. Most of those women, you got to feel sorry for them. Just met up with Old Man Trouble is all. Course, Smith and Hickock was a different matter. Far as I know, Perry Smith was the first man ever stayed in the ladies' cell. The reason was the sheriff wanted to keep him and Hickock separated from each other until after their trial." Perry Edward Smith and Richard Eugene Hickock were a young pair of ex-convicts who had confessed that in November of 1959 they murdered in his home a prominent Finney County farm rancher, Herbert W. Clutter, and three members of his family: his wife, Bonnie; their sixteen-year-old daughter, Nancy; and a son, Kenyon, fifteen. Smith and Hickock were arrested on December 30, 1959, in Las Vegas, Nevada; on January 6, 1960, they were returned to Garden City to await trial. Robbery and a desire to avoid the consequences of possible identification were the confessed motives for the crime.

"The afternoon they brought them in, I made six apple pies and baked some bread and all the while kept track of the goings on down there on Courthouse Square," Josie recalls.

"My kitchen window overlooks the square; you couldn't want a better view. I'm no judge of crowds, but I'd guess there were several hundred people waiting to see the boys that killed the Clutter family. I never met any of the Clutters myself, but from everything I've ever heard about them they must have been a very fine people. What happened to them is hard to forgive, and I know Wendle was worried how the crowd might act when they caught sight of Smith and Hickock. He was afraid somebody might try to get at them. So I kind of had my heart in my mouth when I saw the cars arrive, saw the reporters—all the newspaper fellows running and pushing. But by then it was dark, after six, and bitter cold, and more than half the crowd had given up and gone home. The ones that stayed, they didn't say boo. Only stared. Later, when they brought the boys upstairs, the first one I saw was Hickock. He had on light summer pants and just an old cloth shirt. Surprised he didn't catch pneumonia, considering how cold it was. But he looked sick, all right. White as a ghost. Well, it must be a terrible experience—to be stared at by a horde of strangers, to have to walk among them, and them knowing who you are and what you did. Then they brought up Smith. I had some supper ready to serve them in their cells—hot soup and coffee and some sandwiches and pie. Ordinarily, we feed just twice a day—breakfast at seven-thirty, and at four-thirty we serve the main meal—but I didn't want those fellows going to bed on an empty stomach; seemed to me they must be feeling bad enough without that. But when I took Smith his supper—carried it in on a tray—he said he wasn't hungry. He was looking out the window of the ladies' cell. Standing with his back to me. That window has the same view as my kitchen window—trees and the square and the tops of houses, I told him, 'Just taste the soup—it's vegetable, and not out of a can. I made it myself. The pie, too.' In about an hour, I went back for the tray, and he hadn't touched a crumb. He was still at the window. Like he hadn't moved. It was snowing, and I remember saying it was the first snow of the year, and how we'd had such a beautiful long autumn right till then. And now the snow had come. And then I asked him if he had any special dish he liked—if he did, I'd try and fix it for him the next day. He turned round and looked at me. Suspicious. Like I might be mocking him. Then he said something about a movie; he had such a quiet way of speaking—almost a whisper. Wanted to know if I had seen a movie—I forget the name. Anyway, I hadn't seen it, never have been much for picture shows. He said this show took place in Biblical times, and there was a scene where a man was flung off a balcony, thrown to a mob of men and women, who tore him to pieces. And he said that was what came to mind when he saw the crowd on the square. The man being torn apart. And the idea that maybe that was what they might do to him. Said it scared him so bad his stomach still hurt. Which was why he couldn't eat. Course, he was wrong, and I told him so—nobody was going to harm him, regardless of what he'd done; folks around here aren't like that. We talked some—he was very shy—but


MICHAEL LEWIS
MONEYBALL
THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE STARRING BRAD PITT

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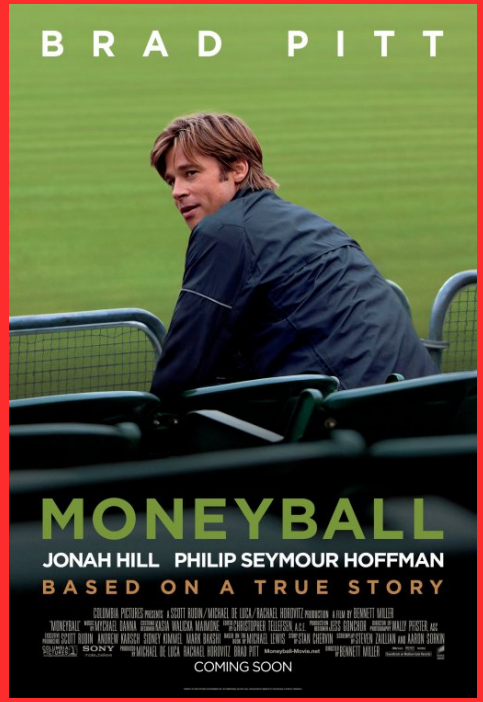
BRAD PITT
MONEYBALL
JONAH HILL PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN
BASED ON A TRUE STORY
COMING SOON

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ACADEMY AWARD® WINNER
TOMMY LEE JONES
ACADEMY AWARD® WINNER
CHARLIZE THERON
ACADEMY AWARD® WINNER
AND SUSAN SARANDON
Sometimes finding the truth is easier than facing it.
IN THE VALLEY OF ELAH

ZERO
DARK
THIRTY

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The Technical Elements of Narrative non-fiction

1. A dramatic arc (ordering of elements, withholding of information, elevation of mystery, proper use of section breaks).

2. Set or create a mood, usually through intense observation of the surrounding physical environment.
3. Deep characterization, through observation and interpretation.
4. Create new and vibrant structures that fit the subject matter.
5. Create a sense of tension, foreboding, mystery.
6. Psychological and emotional investigation.
7. Allow for more stylistic language...up to a point.
8. Allow the author to be visible...up to a point.
9. Use dialogue liberally but organically. (Don't get hung up on verbatim accuracy, but on the truth and meaning of what people are telling you.)
10. Write in scenes.
11. Create swift transitional section endings that add to the drama or heighten tension.
12. Provide the reader with 2+2 and let them add it up to 4. Do NOT explain! Trust your reader.
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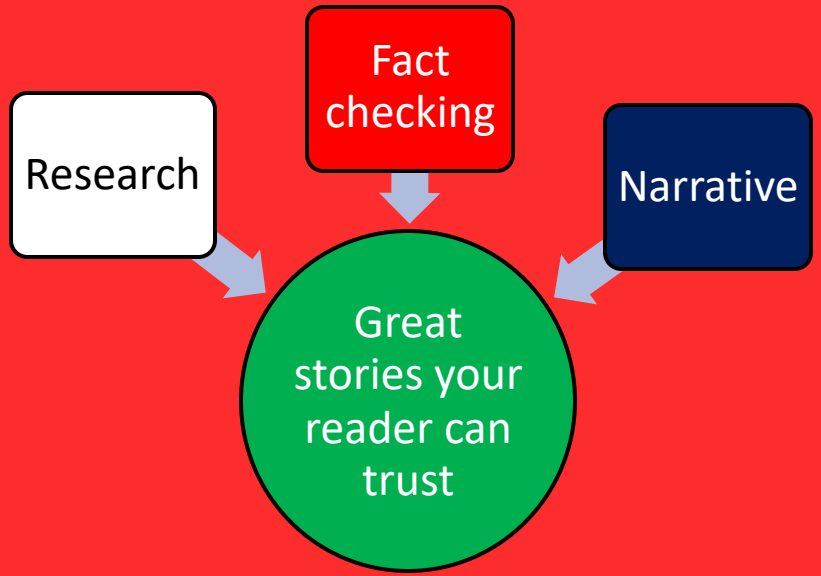
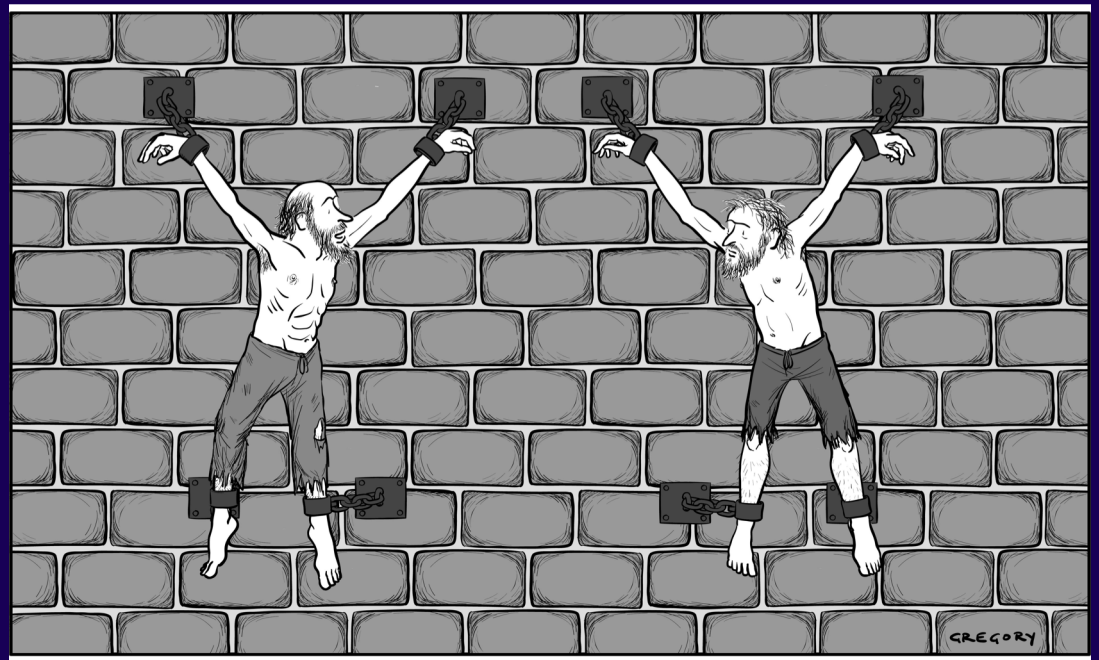

Research
Fact checking
Narrative
Great stories your reader can trust



"I'm starting to see some real definition in my abs."

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