

How To Write Columns



1.

Background of the Newspaper Column

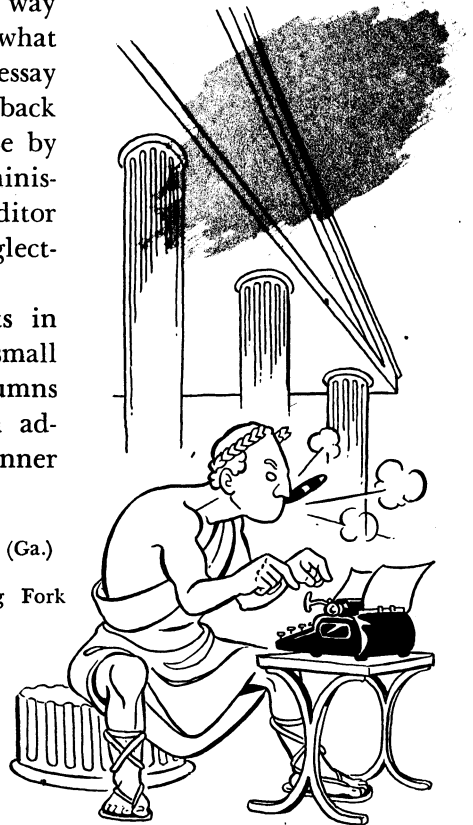
IN A SMALL TOWN in Georgia an editor remarks that "Good fences make good neighbors comfortable while they gossip."¹ In Mississippi, another writer says "To me, a child is the only way of looking at the world of tomorrow and seeing what it will be."² A Kansas paper writes an amusing essay on what it means to mothers to have the kids back in school. A California editor is moved to verse by early fall. A Texas editor is eloquent in reminiscences of old cattle drives. In the Midwest, an editor lashes an errant city commission accused of neglecting the people's business.

These writings are entertaining components in the personal columns of the weeklies and small dailies of America. Preparation of these columns involves reaching a certain state of mind; an adjusted approach to living in the small-town manner

¹ By Raymond Duncan in "Sunrise Paragraphs," Ellaville (Ga.) *Sun*, April 19, 1951.

² By Carolyn DeCell in "Trimmed in Lace," Rolling Fork (Miss.) *Pilot*, February 2, 1951.

Socrates might have been the Lippmann
of the Grecian press . . .



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IN THIS CORNER

The marginal notes which follow contain not only postscripts and matter of an editorial nature, but also brief excerpts from small-town newspapers. The illustrative material has been chosen as representative rather than the best. Its placement is intended to give a small-town flavor rather than to parallel the text at any given point.

Last week we discovered a very satisfactory juke-box. It was busted.—Revere (Mass.) Budget-News.

—friendly, responsible, and as refreshing as a glass of cool lemonade handed a neighbor cutting his lawn on a sultry afternoon. Readers appreciate localized philosophy at the grass roots.

And the readership of these unpredictable collections of this, and that, and the other is terrific; up to 95 per cent, say the surveys.

“Everyone is a paragrapher; that is to say, everybody likes to make concise and pointed comments on the news of the day,” wrote Professor L. N. Flint of the University of Kansas back in 1920.³

By the same reasoning, it may be demonstrated today that most persons are columnists, with or without benefit of printing presses. For columnists express subjective reactions to the news and circumstances of the day. People pick their targets as they will and use familiar column devices — humor, criticism, wisecracks, judgments, observations, philosophies, apologies. As a form of composition, the variety column is as natural as conversation, which it most resembles. Some one-subject columns are comparable to the declarations of a father, or teacher, or preacher.

A newspaper columnist has tenure; he supplies a certain amount of copy at agreed intervals. Before 1920, this material usually was humorous or semi-humorous. Today it includes anecdotes, short essays, reviews, editorials, reader contributions, comments on news, announcements, and promotions. Such a column may be general or specialized, staff written or contributed. It may express the policy of the paper or constitute an independent voice. It therefore takes rank as one of the newspaper's most flexible departments.

The scope of this book is largely limited to colum-

³ L. N. Flint, *The Paragrapher's Sprightly Art*, p. 5. Copyright 1920 by Department of Journalism Press, University of Kansas.

ning in non-metropolitan newspapers. Writers in towns and small cities are not full-time columnists. Usually they are busy editors, reporters, housewives, and other people who write columns for the love of it, rather than for money. Moreover, the column content and writing style are determined by local conditions and the inclinations of the writers. They do not attempt to match sensations and subject matter with syndicate columnists — and this is not said in disparagement of small-town writers. Many of them are sharp writers, with keen insight. As a class they are improving steadily as they realize the literary possibilities in twenty inches of twelve-pica type, or even less. And the best of the small-town paragraphers take rank with any now writing in this country.

A pocket dictionary definition of a column was paraphrased by Leo Aikman of the Marietta (Ga.) *Cobb County Times* when he wrote in *Publishers' Auxiliary* that it was "any body pressing vertically upon a cut-off rule, with enough basic appeal to stand up." If printing had been invented earlier, he added, Socrates might have been the Lippmann of the Grecian press and Diogenes the Pegler of the Peloponnesus, on his search for an honest man.

If the beginnings of small-city columns could be traced in the literary forms which comprise them, a researcher would have to mention the sayings of wise men from earliest recorded times. He could not overlook the proverbs, parables, mottoes, and the poetic comments of every century. He would give close attention to the wits of the coffee houses and the anecdotes of wandering bards. As some have done, he would attach much importance in this regard to the works of Daniel Defoe, who was much quoted in the American Colonies and whose *Religious Courtship* is believed to have been the first

Someone has said that it is love that makes the world go round. Maybe that's so, but it is the little white lies that keep it in balance.—Eugene L'Hote, Milford (Ill.) *Herald-News*.

COLUMN GRIST

From colonial days to now, small-town readers have shown a lively interest in the unusual — the opposite of their quiet lives. Newspapers have obliged with news of oddities, freaks, unusual weather, strange people, and remarkable lands. For decades, small papers clipped and reprinted such material, with credit or without. If by-lines were used on the longer features, they often were pen-names.

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Snap judgment has a way of becoming unfastened.—Rock Hill (S. C.) *Johnsonian*.

If kids don't eat and get big while they are little, they will be little when they get big.—Cape May (N. J.) *Gazette*.

BEN FRANKLIN

Benjamin Franklin has been called the first American columnist of note. But first or not, or columnist or not, he had the style, the genius, the philosophy, and the productive capacity which the art requires. Interest in his writing has endured. He had a keen news sense and a flair for the unusual in subject and expression.

serial story in an American newspaper.⁴ He would note the paragraph humor and philosophizing of Benjamin Franklin and other editors and reader-contributors of his time.

Frank Luther Mott says the first syndicated column in this country probably was the "Journal of Occurrences" edited by Boston patriots and distributed in the Colonies and in England in 1768-69. Containing news events of Boston, it emphasized suffering under British military rule. It lasted about ten months.⁵

But there is little reason to examine times and writings so remote. In the Colonial period of pamphleteering, editors did not embrace comment and controversy as legitimate and desirable newspaper content. Later periods of political controversy were to develop the ideas that editors are intellectual leaders and that a newspaper is hardly worthy of the name without an editorial page. However, the editorial essay as a form was firmly established by 1800 and some papers had regular departments, but not pages. The rural and frontier press had little space, few advertisements, and no dependable source of news. Still to be conceived was the idea that a small paper should confine its news mainly to local affairs.

The nineteenth century established most of the patterns familiar to newspaper readers today. The War of 1812-14 and the Mexican War starting in 1846 built up tremendous demands for news. It was the period, too, of the sweeping westward movements, expansion of the rural press, beginning of railroads, extension of telegraph lines, rapid growth of cities and improvement of printing methods. Then the Civil War and its violent controversies, followed

⁴ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism*, rev. ed., p. 27. Used by permission of The Macmillan Company. Copyright 1950.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

by Reconstruction, made expression of opinion mandatory and profitable. Abundance of news whetted readers' curiosity and provided ample sources of subjects for comment. Upon this scene stepped the "great personal-editors" who were to profoundly influence public thinking for the rest of the century.

Meanwhile, weekly newspapers were increasing rapidly in numbers and in influence. But lacking news, they used much filler material, including ready-print sheets, serial articles, and shorts clipped from exchanges. Reprinting of filler material became so widespread that some names became known to millions. Of these, Mark Twain is best remembered. But in many cities newspaper men wrote popular satire, light essays, verse, and comments on the news. They created clownish characters, usually semi-illiterate, transparently hypocritical, and full of braggadocio. Among these were Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*), Petroleum V. Nasby (David Ross Locke of the *Toledo Blade*), Bill Arp (Charles Henry Smith of the *Rome (Ga.) Southern Confederacy*), and M. Quad (Charles B. Lewis of the *Detroit Free Press*).

"Most of these men capitalized their newspaper popularity on the lecture platform and books," said Frank Luther Mott. "They were the forerunners of the later columnists."⁶

In his studies of newspapering in the South, Professor Thomas D. Clark of the University of Kentucky found in yellowing files "many intimate explanations of why southerners have always behaved like they do." He added:

There is almost no end to the stories of a purely personal and local nature which were printed in the southern country papers. Somewhat unconsciously editors were contemporary historians serving faithfully the

SYNDICATION

In 1900, reprinting of column material from other papers was a standard American newspaper practice. A quarter of a century later the city papers, with rapidly expanding circulations and a soaring volume of advertising, competed by arraying syndicated columnists against each other and getting exclusive rights in large circulation areas. . . . Such big-name columning confirmed the opinion of some small-town editors that the personal column had a strong and unique appeal to readers. But writing of editorials was considered a duty.

Progress is a great thing. Today if a boy's sister beats him doing something he brags about it.—Pampa (Tex.) News.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

BIG-NAME WRITING

In building full-page editorial layouts, many city papers depended mainly upon syndicated writers. These "name" writers stabilized big morning-paper circulations, particularly in the Southwest and West. For example, the Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram in 1926 carried these editorial page columns and features: "New York Day by Day," by O. O. McIntyre; "Punkinville Paragraphs," by George Bingham; "Uncommon Sense," by John Blake; "Your Folks and Mine," by Claude Callan; "My Favorite Stories," by Carolyn Wells; "Just Folks," by Edgar A. Guest; "Daily Editorial," by Glenn Frank; "Abe Martin," with sketch; "Little Benny's Notebook," by Lee Pape; "The Worst Story I have Heard Today," by Will Rogers; and "More Truth Than Poetry," by James J. Montague.

ends of posterity. . . . Through the magic door of their pages these editors made it possible to reveal the past in perhaps its most adequate form to a quizzical constituency of remote generations to come.

Concise the southern rural paper has lived up; historically at least, to Bill Nye's declaration that it is an encyclopedia, a timetable, a poem, a history, a guide to politics, and a grand plan to a newly civilized world. A low-priced *multum in parvo*, it is a sermon, a song, a circus, an obituary, a shipwreck, a symphony in solid measure, a medley of man's glory and his shame. It is, in short, a bird's-eye view of all the magnanimity and meanness, the joys and sorrows, the births and deaths, the pride and poverty of the world, all for a few cents.⁷

Professor Clark wrote that in the reconstruction period fantastic stories, column-like in form, were used as filler material while real news was in short supply.

The southerner was fond of the unusual, the jocular, and most of all the everyday wisdom expressed in a continuous stream of editorial observations. . . . Bored with a solitary existence, the rural patron welcomed accounts of the unusual. Living close to the soil, the country man had a ready appreciation of freaks of nature which made periodic appearances. . . . One of the easiest ways for a constituent to get his name into the news, aside from getting married or shooting someone, was to discover and deliver to a newspaper office a freak of nature.⁸

Comparable patterns of editorial comment and jocularity were also developing in other sections of this country. As news became more plentiful, humor and light comment were drawn into regular departments as continuing features.

Professor Clark noted that "many of the editorials, special-feature articles, and news stories were written in a friendly vein, couched in the simple semi-illiterate vernacular of the backwoods community, and highly flavored with dashes of folk humor." Concerning Bill Arp, he wrote:

⁷ *The Rural Press and the New South*, pp. 15-16. Used by permission of the Louisiana State University Press. Copyright 1948.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

Arp's columns were dialectic, humorous, opinionated, and extremely influential. He was a master at interpreting the prejudices of readers all over the South, and of expressing them with exactness in the language of the semi-illiterate so as to mold the reader's thinking into a definitely limited provincial thought pattern which precluded any other explanation of an issue. . . . To understand the philosophy and methodology of Bill Arp is to grasp a fundamental knowledge of the intellectual development of much of the New South.⁹

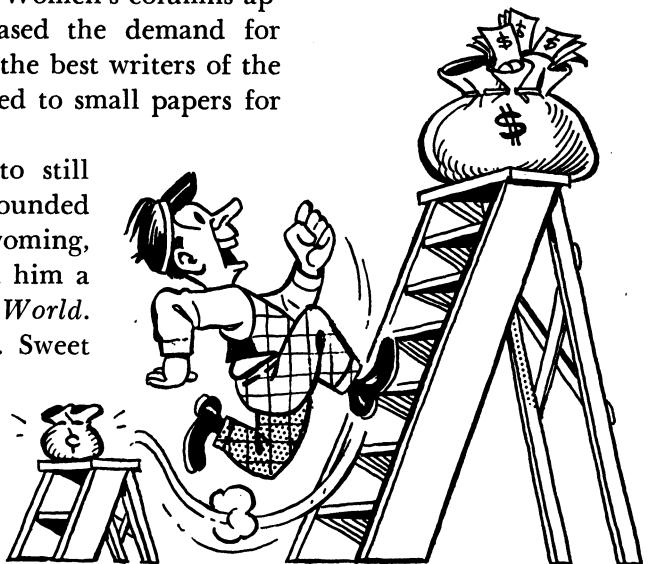
Writing of column-like material developed gradually in the smaller papers but the larger, with their higher salaries and potentialities of fame, attracted the most outstanding humorists. A standout among these was Eugene Field, whose "Sharps and Flats" column was printed in the Chicago *Daily News* in the 1880's. Field had worked on St. Louis, St. Joseph, Kansas City, and Denver papers before Melville E. Stone hired him for the *News* in 1883. For twelve years, Field set a pace for wit, satire, and light verse which has never been excelled. He established a vogue and gave it weight because of his standing as a literary personality. Imitators were not long delayed.

The discovery that feature and filler material might be as saleable as news led to increasing syndication. Magazines sold material to small papers. Large papers syndicated their name-writers. Women's columns appeared. Sunday papers increased the demand for continuing features. Many of the best writers of the day saw their output distributed to small papers for a few dollars a week.

Syndication brought fame to still other columnists. Bill Nye founded the *Boomerang* in Laramie, Wyoming, and his humorous column got him a job with the New York *Sunday World*. J. Armory Knox and Alex E. Sweet

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

It's not how much you know
but how little of it you tell
that is important.—Kavanaugh
(Wyo.) Gazette.



. . . higher salaries attracted outstanding humorists . . .

What this country needs is a stork with a housing bill.—R. B. Lockhart, Pittsburg (Tex.) *Gazette*.

went to the New York scene after running a humorous sheet in Austin, Texas. In Burlington, Iowa, the *Hawk-Eye* was made prominent by the humorous sketches and essays of Robert J. Burdette. A book of his essays, *The Rise and Fall of the Mustache*, was printed in 1878. Opie Read wrote homespun articles in the Little Rock (Ark.) *Traveler*. Joel Chandler Harris wrote his features, editorials, and Uncle Remus stories for the *Atlanta Constitution*. Soon came the period, too, of George Ade of the *Chicago Record* and *Daily News*. Finley Peter Dunne of the *Chicago Times*, and *Peck's Bad Boy*. Regular contributors were given special positions by many papers to facilitate make-up and to let readers know where the features would be found. Called "colyums," they were firmly established by 1890 and new departments were appearing every year.

Bert Leston Taylor of the Duluth (Mich.) *News-Tribune* became so well known for his wit that the *Chicago Journal* hired him, only to lose him to the *Chicago Tribune*. His "A Line o' Type or Two," signed B. L. T., made him one of the best known column conductors of his day. Taylor was followed on the *Journal* by Franklin P. Adams, who went on to great fame in New York with his "The Corning Tower" on the *Tribune*. Don Marquis established the "Sun Dial" in the *New York Sun*. Verse poured from the typewriters of Wilbur D. Nesbit, Walt Mason, and Edgar A. Guest. New York flowered as a center of columning.

Meanwhile, part-time contemporaries and predecessors of these professional columnists had strong followings in the smaller cities. Notable among these was E. W. Howe, publisher of the *Atchison (Kans.) Globe*, Ambrose Bierce of the *San Francisco News-Letter*, Louis T. Stone of the *Winsted (Conn.) Evening Citizen*, and James M. Bailey of the *Danbury (Conn.) News*.

Many people think it unlucky to postpone a wedding. The superstition has no foundation as long as you keep on postponing it.—Cumberland (Wis.) *Advocate*.

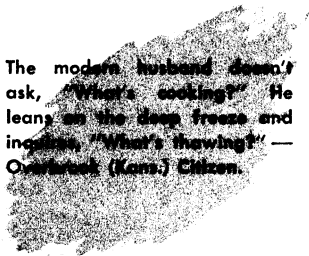
The 1920's brought some changes in columns but no lessening of the popularity of established forms. In Chicago, B.L.T. died and Richard Henry Little took over "A Line o' Type or Two." H. I. Phillips shone on the New York *Herald Tribune* and Keith Preston won distinction on the Chicago *Daily News*. Richard Atwater was an outstanding by-line in the Chicago *Post*. Will Rogers was idolized by millions until his death in an airplane accident in 1935. Arthur Brisbane, who introduced his page one column "Today," in 1917, climaxed his long experience in building Hearst editorial pages by gaining even greater influence and earning more money than presidents.

Columns also took a sharper turn toward politics and other specialization, such as life in Washington, New York, and Hollywood, in the writings of Heywood Broun, Raymond Clapper, Walter Winchell, Dorothy Thompson, Westbrook Pegler, O. O. McIntyre, and others. Sports, music, drama, and literature were written up by other circles of columnists. Finally, columning became a popular avocation for the famous, including General Hugh S. Johnson, Dr. Frank Crane, and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. Top-flight writers also took to the radio, becoming commentators. Humor in newspapers declined, comics tended to become adventure strips, and cleverness in phrase-making became a commodity saleable to movies and radio. Columnists found it easier to ride the crest of the news, hire assistants, talk and write as if specially endowed, and predict the future. Big-name writers thundered in every metropolitan paper, echoed in syndicate form in smaller dailies, and re-echoed in the "patent insides" of very small weeklies.

After 1920, column writing as an added duty became common on small dailies as well as large, and some weeklies date columns from that year, or before. The small-town press had long preferred the

To keep young, associate with young people. To get old in a hurry, try keeping up with them.—Moose Lake (Minn.) *Star-Gazette*.

A chrysanthemum by any other name would be a helluva lot easier spelled.—Wade Guenther, Sabula (Iowa) *Gazette*.



The modern husband doesn't ask, "What's cooking?" He leans on the deep freeze and inquires, "What's thawing?" — *Olathe (Kans.) Citizen*.

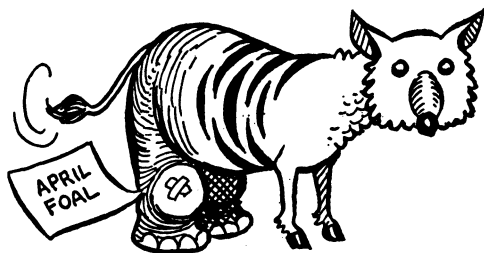
The modern woman's place is in the home, working out a slogan for soap, soup, or baking powder.—Fairfield (Ohio) *Courier*.

barbed paragraph and the humorous editorial or sketch. Paragraphing reached an all-time popularity while the old *Literary Digest* was running a page of the briefs in every issue. Editors got a thrill out of seeing a paragraph in the *Digest*, and won local distinction and some national reputation by having many reproduced.

Jay E. House wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1925 that "the present day columnist is at once an evolution and a response to a simple human need. Biologically speaking, he is the get of the old-school humorist and the oldtime paragrapher. Curiously enough, the foal has few of the characteristics of either sire or dam."

Few of the paragraphers were given by-lines. The paragraphs were as impersonal as they were universal in application of their truths. And when the "great" editors disappeared from the American scene a pall of anonymity settled over the big-city press — now so big, so rich, so institutionalized. Still, people liked the human touch. Columnists of a new school stepped in gaily to fill the void, first with fun and then with "inside" information, gossip, and a great show of infallibility.

The personal column caught on slowly outside the big cities in the 1920's and 1930's. Busy newspaper executives did not think of themselves as humorists, nor did they relish the thought of baring their souls and philosophies to readers. Small-town printer-editors were conservative and while there were notable exceptions, many found ample outlets in short, biting editorials and paragraphs. News writing forms had jelled on big newspapers and in wires services and journalism classes. The idea prevailed that a newspaper worthy of the name should have formal editorials, some paragraphs, perhaps a political



"... few characteristics of either sire or dam."

cartoon, possibly a serial story and several syndicate features. The World War I impact was not as great as it would have been had not people thought victory meant a permanent return to peace and normalcy.

A depression and World War II brought significant evolution of the column, as will be described in the next chapter. Today newspaper men debate whether local columns, with their high readership and popularity, are detracting from effectiveness of editorials and institutional policy. At a time when significant changes are coming rapidly in communications, a closer examination of the column form of the printed word seems appropriate.

If the world laughs at you,
laugh right back at it. It's as
funny as you are.—Leonard
Sekavec, Holyrood (Kans.)
Gazette.



... a closer examination seems appropriate.