

11.

How To Write Quotable Columns

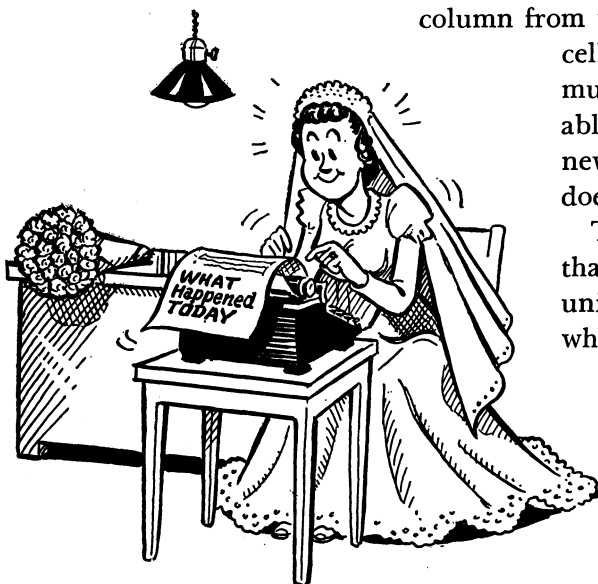
[This chapter is presented to help readers to write columns that will be quoted. Probably that can be done more easily if the reader draws his chair up closer, and we get chummy.]

THERE IS ALWAYS a possibility that quotable newspaper columns will be given more credit than is due them, as compared to less quotable ones.

This lies in the fact that when a person sees a quote from a column here and there in the newspapers of the country, and sees it often, he concludes that the column from which the item was taken must be ex-

cellent, or he wouldn't see the quote so much. Maybe it is excellent, but it probably is no better than the column in the newspaper in the next county seat, which doesn't get a quote in a decade.

The difference in the two could be that the quoted one has the advantage of universality of interest and timelessness which made it easily quotable, whereas the other did not. For instance, the first may have been something



about marriage, which is of interest almost anywhere at any time, while the second urged the city council to pave Third Street before winter sets in. The latter would hardly be quotable in any other town.

But so far as real benefit to the public was concerned the former may have been just another wise-crack about men and women wedding each other — which comes at a used dime a dozen in columns — while the latter resulted in a needed improvement.

Or length may have made the difference. Both may have been about that subject of universal and timeless interest, marriage. The quotable one of but a few lines may have made the complete comment, while the other ran to a full column, with the length necessary to make the comment complete. Few publications have space enough to quote a whole column. And possibly, in addition, the individual paragraphs of the latter column were tied into preceding and succeeding paragraphs in such a way that lifting one out for quotation would be difficult.

So, a reader should not assume that because a column earns many quotes it is superior to its less quotable fellow. As a matter of fact, it may be inferior in accomplishing the prime purpose of columns, which is to entertain and inform the reader.

Of course, a paragraph is lifted out of a column and reprinted in another publication because the editor doing the lifting thinks it will interest his readers, and is of interest at the time he publishes it, which is later than the appearance of the original item. It follows, then, that to earn quotation, a paragraph must be of widespread interest and somewhat timeless. And the greater the interest and timelessness, the more likely the extensive quotation.

Reverting again to marriage: A paragraph like "the greatest circus of all time is the two-ring, with Cupid as its manager," could be used at any place that

ETERNAL TRUTHS

Probably the ancients observed that often by the time a man is able to do something he is too old to enjoy it. Back in 1926, the old *Literary Digest* attributed to a St. Louis newspaper this paragraph: "About the time one learns how to make the most of life, most of it is gone." . . . In 1950 and 1951, many columnists used phrases saying that a man ". . . rich enough to take two hours for lunch is probably on a milk and crackers diet," and ". . . who can afford a rich sweetie, is too old to attract her."

has readers acquainted with circuses, and could be published at any time. But suppose the column cracked, "Mayor Bill Smith likes to live dangerously. He says he will wear his new red tie at the bull exhibit next Saturday." It would hardly be quoted widely, and certainly not later than the date of the exhibit.

So, the initial requirements of a quotable column are:

1. Universality of interest.
2. Timelessness.
3. Brevity.

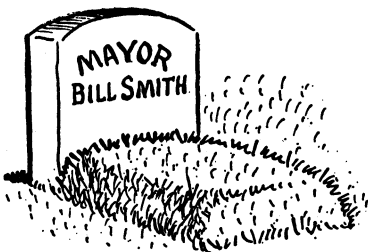
As to the actual writing, suppose we have universal interest in our topic, with a quick comment that we can get into two or three lines, one which could be as pertinent next year as now, how shall we word our little hopeful?

We've spent much of an enjoyable lifetime analyzing column quotations, and we think they can be summed up: *Unexpected comment on a familiar topic, made by implication.*

Of course, that's an over-simplification, so let's go along together and do some writing, aimed at getting our column quoted.

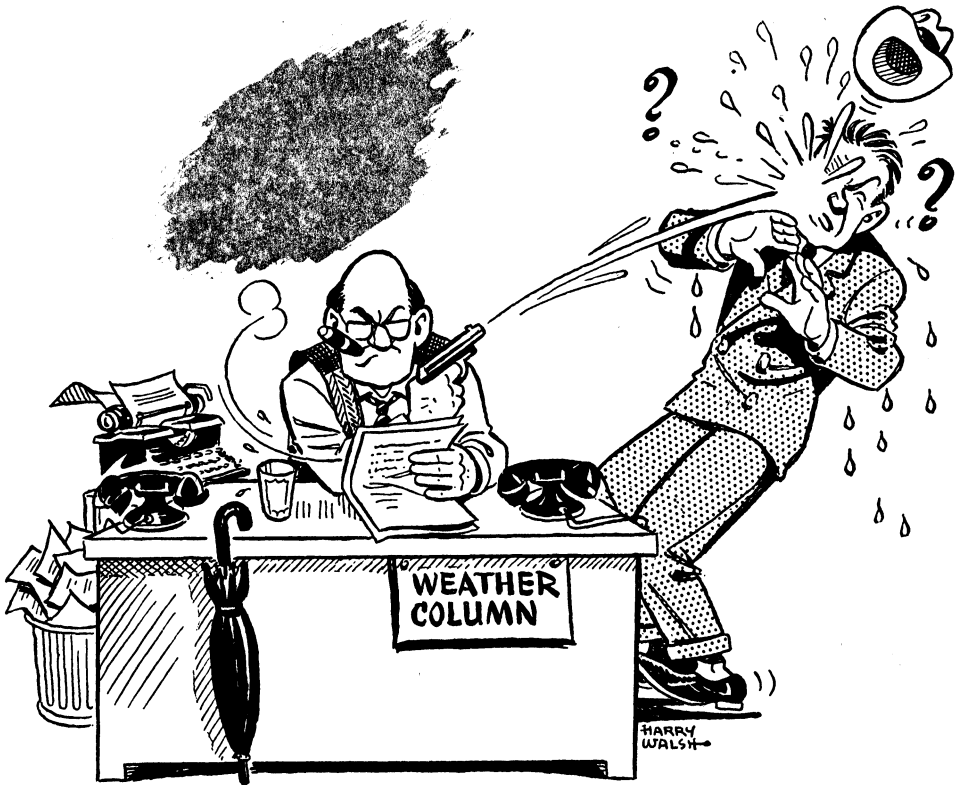
Generally speaking, it is the unexpected comment that piques interest. For instance, if you say, "There was a beautiful dawn this morning," and your companion replies, politely, "There was?" his comment doesn't arouse much interest. But suppose your companion quipped, "Who told you?" then you're alerted. That reply implies you didn't get up in time to see the dawn, and you are challenged to parry his sally. Maybe you don't do anything better than reply lamely, "Well, it certainly wasn't you!" But you are more interested.

We want comment that is unexpected, to insure interest. We want unexpected comment that gets a chuckle. The sure-fire way to get a chuckle is use of



the incongruous, the comment that is ten thousand miles from being logical, although it is pertinent. For instance: "An Illinois man was found by police to be living in the same house with two wives. Imagine! Not a place to hang his clothing."

Or this one: "Scientists say a baby thinks three



. . . Unexpected comment on a familiar topic, made by implication.

Too, young man, if you run
real fast after one woman,
you may distance the other
women who are after you.—
Bells (Tenn.) Sentinel.

months before it is born. . . . From such thinking by the baby three months before its birth probably came that old alibi, 'Unaccustomed as I am to public appearance.' "

The incongruous is divided into exaggeration and understatement. As an example of the former we have, "Sizes often are deceiving. Sometimes a woman's thumb has a man under it."

Or, "Then there was the egotistical nurse, who always deducted two degrees from her men patients' temperatures to allow for the effect of her personality."

And then there is understatement in which the chuckle comes from a comment way down lower than expected. And it is here we find 99 per cent of the current column or paragraph humor. When we checked through files for examples of exaggeration and understatement to cite here, we had some difficulty finding exaggeration; none in finding understatement.

The explanation is easy. Exaggeration is the broader, plainer, less subtle humor. It is the kind used by children. They get a laugh by telling of the mouse that was as big as two and a half elephants; the fire engine that was "as tall as our house, and the Smiths' too."

The use of understatement comes along in later years. Here are a few examples of readily evident understatement:

"The college boy's contention is that today's best value is a nickel for a phone call — to the right girl."

"Some nudist colonies have suggested a new plan for world peace. . . . If none of the armies wore clothes, it would be impossible to recognize the enemy, and peace would be automatic."

Or, "You'd think there would be less murdering, the red tape a man has to go through."

Here's one that is a little longer, but perhaps more plainly emphasizes understatement:

"He may be in red at the bank. His crops may be blighted, his business headed for the rocks. He may be contemplating having his teeth extracted, or expecting his wife's relatives on the next train. But, wealth or power or fame have little to offer the man with a watermelon under his arm."

We have now developed the thought that the paragraph to be quotable should be pleasing or laughable, and to get this we should make unexpected comment on some fact, and that the comment should be incongruous; and being incongruous it should be exaggerated or understated — preferably the latter.

Now we consider the touch that makes the difference between an almost-quotable and a quotable paragraph, between the kind that has unexpected, understated comment and *doesn't* experience that wonderful feeling of the scissors snipping around its edges, and one that does.

The difference is exactly the difference between a joke in which the point is explained and one in which you are required to get the point by an instant's thought:

"High heels for girls probably are dangerous, but probably we'll always have them. At least so long as girls prefer to be kissed elsewhere than on the forehead."

We had to think just a split second to realize that the girls wanted the heels to lift their lips high enough for the business at hand.

But what a flat paragraph we'd have had it been written:

"High heels for girls probably are dangerous, but probably we will have them for a long time because they lift the girls up so their lips are higher for kissing."

A thesis on which we are doing some investigation is based on a belief that Will Rogers' statement that he'd never met a man he didn't like, should include women. — John Peterson, Walton (N. Y.) Reporter.

Note the difference? The latter paragraph was funny, perhaps, but certainly not very subtle.

Here is another:

"Have you heard about the mind reader who went to Washington? He couldn't find a thing to do."

Suppose you had written: :

"Have you heard about the mind reader who went to Washington? No one there was doing any thinking, so he came back home."

So, we can agree that the unexpected comment, to be really subtle and sophisticated, and to pique the maximum of interest, should not entirely reveal its point. That point should be given by implication. So the reader has to reflect just a split second to get the meaning; but, having got it, is very pleased with himself, and with the paragraph, and with the writer.

Here are four or five that, for want of a better term, we may call "complete" paragraphs. That is, very plainly, there is a statement of fact, then unexpected comment is made with the point not quite revealed.

"Life, in a community like our own, is a series of adventures in contentment. If company arrives unexpectedly you can borrow a bottle from the neighbor — and chances are you've seen the cow that filled it."

"If you can't find it in the dictionary, don't give up. Ask for it at the drug store."

"Sports authorities say a triple somersault is not recognized in the books. So what you did carrying an armload of canned fruit down the basement steps was unofficial and doesn't count."

"Six feet of moist earth is said to be effective protection against atomic bombs. So all you have to do to be safe after death is to keep the earth moist."

"One of the reasons we have divorce courts is because many husbands who promised they would die for their wives haven't made good."

Pollsters say 8 percent of the people have no opinion. So you see you have about a 1 to 12 chance of meeting a genuinely charming person. — Grove Hill (Ala.) Democrat.

"Doctors say that thin people usually live longer, being harder to hit by automobile drivers."

As you read these you may recall this or that paragraph quoted in a newspaper that doesn't fit this formula. Perhaps there was no preliminary statement of fact, or maybe the comment was not implied.

Perhaps half of the paragraphs quoted today are like that. A little different. Not exactly the complete paragraph of unexpected comment with an implied point. But, if you will analyze them closely, you'll note that they are complete in effect. Maybe it was not necessary to state the fact because it already was so well known. For instance, if we were going to comment on a chap named Lincoln, we could make a quip about the presidency without having to say Lincoln was president.

Actually, there are many variations or adaptations of the complete paragraph. The complete paragraph is like the 1, 2, 3, 4 of the waltz. As long as we stick to that 1, 2, 3, 4 we shall be waltzing. But there are many variations of the 1, 2, 3, 4 that also are enjoyable. Here are some of the classifications of paragraphs, all of which are based on the unexpected comment, with implied point, formula:

1. The *pun*, or play on a word, or words:

"Of course, the really big Orange Bowl contest is in China, where the Yellow Peril and the Red Menace are mixing it."

And the one we have cited as causing mild embarrassment:

"The meanest man in the world is the restaurant proprietor who goes around pinching the waitresses' tips."

2. The *metaphor*, which satisfies the reader's desire for pictures:

"A good many men who talk bass downtown are tenors at home."

The world weighs only 36,000,000 sextillion tons, but seems heavier than that to newspaper columnists carrying it around. — Roosevelt (Utah) Standard.

I wonder if the people in other professions and trades are as stage-struck with the supposed glamor of their jobs as we who toil over a lukewarm typewriter all day. Does an engineer climb down out of the cab of a passenger local and then run over to get the autograph of the railroadman that just brought in the Ponce de Leon? Does the construction foreman who's just knocked together a two-story frame house wonder if the man who built the Empire State Building will ever condescend to nod to him on the street? — Joe Parham, *Macon (Ga.) Telegraph*.

"Many couples say that children brighten up a home. That's right — they never turn out a light."

3. The *aphorism*, or precept:

"Some people are like blotters; they soak it all up, but get it backwards."

4. The modified quotation:

"To the victors belong the broils."

5. The *homily*, or moral truth:

"With chilly weather here, it is time for some motorist to warm up his car in a garage with the doors shut — and fly off on a pair of wings."

6. The *distorted proverb*:

"Of course a cat still may look at a king, but it will have to hurry."

7. *Ironical explanation*:

"Speechless banquets are becoming quite the thing these days. Maybe it's the price of food that makes them speechless."

8. *Paradox*, or Irish bull:

"If there's anything that hurts more than paying income tax, it is not having to pay income tax."

"All Gaul is quartered into three halves."

"The trouble with the Irish is that too many Irish want what too many Irish don't want."

9. *Innuendo*, producing an effect by a hint:

"A wife can stand almost anything about a husband, until he begins to weigh less than she does."

10. *Human nature*: — a broad term, but by it we mean comment on human foibles:

"If human nature would only work as hard for pay as for more pay."

"The owner of the back lot that is filled with old cans, rubbish, and broken crockery can usually be found somewhere discussing the orderly adjustment of international affairs."

11. *Satire*, especially on institutions:

"The next president is rapidly increasing in numbers."

Now, let's consider a few examples of the right and wrong ways of writing paragraphs.

Right: "The truly contented husband isn't afraid to come home unexpectedly."

Wrong: "The truly contented husband isn't afraid to come home unexpectedly, because he knows he won't find another man there; that's why he's contented."

The last part of the sentence is unnecessary. It spoils the paragraph because the reader resents the explanation.

Here are more examples. Parentheses indicate the parts to be supplied by the reader, not the paragrapher.

"The curfew law is being revived in some towns where the parents want someone in the house during the second show." (The curfew bell will bring in the kids so they can stay in the house while the old folks go to the second show.)

"The Michigan woman sentenced to prison for life at hard work isn't worrying. She's reared ten children." (And, therefore, is used to hard work, and doesn't fear the sentence.)

"Insurance statistics show most accidents happen over the week end. Bathtub bottoms are as slippery as ever." (It is laughingly said that we bathe only on Saturday nights, and while we are bathing we slip and get hurt. But I'm clever enough to see that automobile accidents and such are meant.)

"The reproduction of Sir Joshua Reynolds' 'Age of Innocence' is being done from a pose." (The artist can find no girl today who is innocent, so he has to get one to pose as innocent.)

"Municipal officials say the practice of dumping hooch into sewers has almost eliminated sewer clogging. But, they say, they have to repair the pipes more often." (The hooch not only eats away the clogged places, but eats the pipes, too.)

If the dog is the best friend of man, why doesn't he come home sometime with a bone with some meat on it? — Charles A. Knouse, Perry (Kan.) *Mirror*.

Be patient with the girl who walks to the front seat late to church, in order to show a new hat. In a few years she will drop into a back seat, to get out quickly if the baby cries. — Atchison (Kan.) Globe.

Now, let us consider some "ideas" and their expression in paragraphs:

Idea — Joan of Arc failed because she couldn't get help for her king. King. Modern women play cards, and use kings; try to get help or support for them.

Paragraph — "Modern card-playing women aren't so new. The Maid of Orleans was forced out because she couldn't draw support for her king."

* * *

Idea — It often is said that "Life is just one damned thing after another." People in love follow each other around. How about modifying *life* to *love*?

Paragraph — "Life is just one damned thing after another. Love is just two damned things after each other."

* * *

Idea — In most homes guest towels are for looks, not use. So much so, it often is said a wife should kill her husband if he uses one of them.

Paragraph — "In an eastern husband murder, they couldn't find a motive, until someone discovered a used guest towel."

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Idea — About everywhere you see girls nowadays, they are smoking.

Paragraph — "Nowadays, where there's smoke, there're girls."

* * *

Idea — Even the smaller towns are having their murders.

Paragraph — "It's a pretty small town nowadays that hasn't one street pointed out as that on which the body was found."

* * *

Idea — Half the prisoners in a certain penitentiary are studying law. Since so many of them are doing it, let's pretend that is the natural thing for them to do.

Paragraph — “Half the prisoners in an eastern penitentiary are studying law. You just can’t get the criminal tendencies out of some prisoners.”

* * *

Idea — This thing of divorces isn’t so new. Often, a present day divorcee is the son or daughter of divorced parents.

Paragraph — “Often the bride of today can’t run home to mother, because mother has already run home to grandmother.”

* * *

Are paragraphs hard to write? We think they are not. Let’s see if they are. We’ll give you a rather interesting statement of fact that almost invites some paragraph comment:

“At a recent huddle of college professors, it was agreed that 16 new letters should be added to the alphabet.”

There are all sorts of possibilities to that one. Bowls should have to be bigger for alphabet soup, wives could say more, the unsaid things would be all the more unsaid, the letter “I” would get needed help. Write your own.

So, we conclude agreeing, we hope, that the quotable column is one that has its brief comment on a topic of timeless and widespread interest, the comment being of an unexpected nature and made by implication, rather than directly. If we want to write a quotable paragraph on quotable paragraphs we can say:

“The world is listening, expectantly, for the man who doesn’t quite say what it doesn’t expect him to say.”

... the world is listening.

