

## *Handling Specialized Columns*

THE PERSONAL COLUMNIST is versatile in method and resourceful in finding appeals to many reader interests. In many cases he carries the weight of highest authority and takes a Page One position. He may at the same time share space, however, with a few or several other columnists.

On small papers, most of these contributors are local; some may be syndicate writers, regional or national. Local columnists are not always staff members. Both in number and reader interest, these specialized columns have grown to a point meriting the close attention of publishers.

### READER COLUMNS

Diane Mecham of Santa Rosa, Calif., says the most popular column in the town's paper is one written by the readers themselves. They are invited to write such columns and are paid three dollars for each one accepted. — *The Press Woman*.

Specialized columns commonly found in the non-metropolitan press include:

Sports.	Labor.
Business.	Oil.
Organizations.	Religion.
Gardening.	Teen-agers.
Health.	Farming.
Hobbies.	
Agricultural extension services.	

Methods and devices of writing are so similar in all columns that these will not be discussed again here. Rather, brief mention will be made of factors peculiar to the fields from which subject matter is drawn.

A factor common to most one-interest columns is that they have ready-made audiences. These fans ask little more than that their enthusiasm be shared and that the column be up-to-date and accurate. They eagerly share their knowledge. They enjoy contests and exhibits. Their subscriptions are not likely to lapse.

#### **SPORTS APPEAL UNIVERSAL**

The most uniting single interest shared by the average reader family is sports. This is true despite the fact that sports is a collection of many diverse activities. Usually one or several local schools have teams in which fans are intensely interested. To the "home teams" must be added the participant sports, such as golf, tennis, and softball; the promotional sports, such as wrestling and boxing; and various minor sports such as playground activities, swimming meets, and community baseball.

Major reader interest in small towns and cities is found to rest on the teams in which community pride is felt. But the sports columnist's subjects come from a much wider field, perhaps including rodeos, weight-lifting, croquet, marbles, chess, and any other sports activity involving tests of skill. While his division of column space may roughly approximate presumed reader interest, he does not overlook intensive concentration by

*... fans eagerly share their knowledge.*



**HOMETOWN CRITICS**

High-voltage criticism is out of place in most towns and cities. Yet the small-town columnist is expected to voice his opinions—the conclusions of the people's "taster" of the lively arts and literature. As such, he writes as an average man or at least as a small-town man. He remembers to report local performances in terms of participants' ability, time, and intentions. But he does not spare visiting celebrities who do less than their best before the home folks.

small groups and participation by large groups. He seeks balance. And because the news columns bend under loads of words on major sports, he can afford to divide space with minor sports in his column. He avoids repetition of news story facts.

A sports writer often finds ability to conduct a column is a requirement in his job. Perhaps a two-column space must be filled daily or weekly. If there are two sports writers, there likely will be two sports columns. The senior columnist may not be a second edition of Grantland Rice or Bill Corum, but if he is loyal to the home teams, easy to know, and reasonably analytical and accurate, he will in time become a popular character. He will speak at year-end sports banquets and a playing field may be named for him. His responsibility to be honest, well-balanced, and fair is no small one. He sets the tone of fan thinking.

Sports columnists share the paper's obligation to speak for the community when its team wins or loses; to maintain sanity so rival towns won't suspend business relations; to be fair to coaches as educators and to players as readers' sons; to work for good sportsman ship; to combat bribery and gambling; to cooperate with the coaches by refraining from giving away strategy in advance and by resisting the temptation to overplay the ball carriers; and to help management keep sports control in proper hands. A sense of independence is demanded, lest sports writers become fawning publicists rather than reporters with discrimination and critical judgments.

The sports columnist speaks and writes English; that is, he strives for fresh style but avoids the jargon which is the mark of the hack. As a phrase-maker he has few equals. His literary freedom and the fact that he deals with colorful narrative combine to make him a stylist in prose. He may even write some verse. That he should know sports and write in the vocabu-

lary of each is axiomatic. But as a writing man he may develop the skills which lead him into humor, or fiction, or feature writing.

Only a writer conversant with his subject is likely to develop the verve and confidence needed in writing for fans. But some modesty is a necessity and a safety factor. A linotype operator may know more baseball history than the columnist. A bookkeeper may excel at chess. An ad man may have a superior knowledge of golf, or horse racing, or polo. A good sports library is the best recourse when the sports writer is asked to settle a wager or explain a rule.

The column is a flexible instrument in dealing with fans, explaining bonehead plays, stopping rumors, awarding compliments, promoting attendance, and editorializing on sports problems. But unhappy days come to columnists sensitive to crank letters and other fan outbursts. Usually these letters are written in the after-heat of a contest. Replies can be calmer recitals of rules, facts, and principles. It may be sobering, also, to divert attention to other worthwhile sports.

Predicting winners is an evidence of a columnist's proficiency in sports analysis — or the lack of it if he is unlucky. Few sports prophets have had better success than Herman Phelps, the "Demon Dopester" of the Lexington (Ky.) *Herald*. The "Dopester" began forecasting football results in 1927 and has an all-time winning prediction average of .800. Lacking this access to a crystal ball, a columnist can set up boards of predictions, interview a few fans each week, or engage in substitute promotions.

#### **BUSINESS**

Merchandising is much more of an adventure than one would surmise from reading the advertisements. Some merchants have begun to make column-like comment in their ads, and the practice probably will

We now have an expert taxi service running from Washington to all forty-eight states. — R. B. Lockhart, Pittsburg (Tex.) Gazette.

spread. Business men long have been inarticulate in the face of shortages, inflation, style changes, and other vexing conditions. And newspapers of the smaller communities have carried little news or comment on theories and practices in retailing, reports on trips to markets, success of advertising, etc. This field is open to columnists with a vision for what might be done to serve merchants and interest readers.

#### ORGANIZATIONS

Columns on 4-H clubs, Scouting, and veterans organizations are among the most numerous in small papers. School news columns, which sometimes grow into entire pages, also abound. Editors also sometimes grant space to persons who write columns on civic club happenings and personnel, country club activities, and Parent-Teacher programs. While not columns in the sense used here, collections of calendar announcements, church news, and club briefs are assembled in vertical form under standing heads. The test of any of these contributed columns is whether readers are served or entertained. Writers need periodical renewals of enthusiasm and guidance on column content and style.

#### GARDENING

Columns on gardening are available in syndicated form, with or without illustrations. Interest usually is higher when columnists are local. A column may grow into a page with other gardening features and considerable advertising. Garden clubs often cooperate, sometimes by holding flower shows, distributing bulbs, cuttings, etc., and furnishing testimony on the success of certain methods. Localization is essential to maximum reader interest, and timeliness is almost as essential.

Unusual columns have been written on local wild flowers and legends on them.

Dresses that make women look  
slim make men look 'round.—  
Charles A. Knouse, Perry (Kan.)  
*Mirror*.

Illustrations increase readership. These may be taken from cut services as line cuts, but local news-photos financed by garden clubs, advertisers, or the papers are common at the height of the flowering season. Some papers have given away thousands of roses and shrubs as subscription premiums or in co-operation with civic clubs and chambers of commerce.

#### HEALTH

More often than not these are syndicated columns. Professional men and nurses find it difficult to write about health without appearing to be advertising themselves unethically. State health associations and departments of public health issue much material through publicity departments, and the federal government presses turn out a steady flow of pamphlet material. Syndicates serving newspapers also have health columns.

Here, as always, localized health news would have more readership and influence than the impersonal articles so often seen.

#### HOBBIES

These have smaller but intense readership and are best written by a competent hobbyist. The heading should suggest the subject, and content should appeal to readers at whom the column is directed. While intrinsically interesting, column material should be given the usual tests of timeliness, accuracy and readable style. It is easy to offend with inaccuracy or failure to present latest developments.

#### LABOR

Large local groups, such as railroad or factory employes, may be given regular space. But because of the controversial nature of labor issues, column content is likely to be restricted to news and personal mention. Usually the column is written by a mem-

Charles Washburn said, "A short term on a newspaper is better than a long term in school." That statement, however, is subject to some modification. Much would depend upon what newspaper and what school. — Palo Alto (Calif.) Times.

A news item says the wife is the boss of the Esquimo family. So there's no use going north, either. — Jim Chism, Pelham (Ga.) Journal.

ber of the labor group who is well liked. The space is given in recognition of the importance of the group economically and because of similar interests and concentrated readership. If management-employee relations are good, the columns regularly carry items complimentary to each. If labor relations become strained, the columns may become more stiffly objective, leaving any comment to the editor's column or editorials.

#### OIL

Columnists in this field are not numerous but are important in areas fortunate enough to have deposits of oil and gas. Full-time oil writers usually write for week-end editions a column which might be called a hodge-podge of the oil world. Included in its content are personal mentions, editorials, analyses of trends, predictions, and reports on trips into the field. Also seen are thank-you's and apologies.

Other industries similarly covered also are productive of column material.

#### RELIGION

The growing number of radio broadcasts on human relations and "your life" problems appears to be one cause of renewed attention to religion in the news. The column angle is that there are trends and shifts of thought in religion. There are building plans and financial drives.

The number of columns on religion in small papers is not large. Retired ministers capable of avoiding denominational clashes are among the commentators. Some editors, especially the older ones, like to write about religion. A few write Sunday School lessons in a journalistic manner.

Column material includes local items, comment on news service releases, book reviews, and excerpts from magazine articles and sermons. A few papers carry a "Sermon of the Week."

#### TEEN-AGE COMMENT

Categorizing of the adolescent mind at 17 years of age is traceable in part to advertising promotion, but some newspapers see a relationship between reducing juvenile crime and giving adolescents a chance to be heard. Also, printing opinions of youth seems a logical follow-up of civic club and American Legion programs in which boys and girls become public officials for a day. Junior citizenship may be expressed in columns of surprising poise and commendable constructiveness.

At their worst, teen-age columns become frivolous with boy-girl gossip — usually in school pages. Unjournalistic and sometimes libelous, they seldom last long despite the fact that they have all the reader interest of a dog fight or family row.

#### FARMING

Considering how much small towns rest on agriculture and how much interest small-town papers profess in the subject, a surprisingly small amount of competent writing is done on farming as a business and a science. The explanation is, in part, that most newspaper men are not farmers and also do not have time to gather news afield. Also, farmers as a class are intolerant of error in matters which concern them.

However, some small papers put columnists on the road with conspicuous success. Or they free a reporter to give some time to getting up a farm page, assisted by farm agents, farm leaders, and agriculture teachers. A few dirt farmers write columns.

A folksy column with a touch of humor, many quotes, and rich in personal mention cannot be excelled in reader interest. Finding someone who can do it well is not easy. Serious column comment on farm problems involves as many problems as writing on the stock market or government. And both of

A small town is where the telephone operator gives you the right number when you ask for the wrong one. — Maumee (Ohio) News.



these are properly included in any study of farming today.

The best substitute for specialized knowledge usually is a good reporting job. The reactions of the columnist are sufficient to give personality to the column when combined with quotes and excerpts.

#### AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION

Farm extension agents appreciate the column as a bulletin board for announcements, requests, and brief reports. The certainty that it will appear with regularity makes possible reduction of other efforts to communicate with farm people.

However, such columns also reflect the personalities of the writers. Some include bits of philosophy and humor. But mostly they briefly review crop conditions and carry news of extension activities. Townspeople, especially merchants, are interested in crop conditions, farm sales, and marketing.

Here are some typical Farm Bureau column excerpts from Iowa farm agents:

I was over to Allison Township's resolution meeting Thursday evening and we had a rip-roaring discussion. I always like a person who comes right out and says what he thinks — as long as he agrees with me.

I wonder why people call money dough. Dough sticks to your fingers.

— Osceola County

As corn picking approaches, it's well to check over the machinery involved to make sure it is ready to go. Just got a new bulletin on "Corn Picker Adjustment" that may help you. Get yours.

— Sawyer Sez.

World understanding begins at mother's knee; so does prejudice.

— Boone County

I had a short but very interesting visit Wednesday at the test plots being carried on by the folks at the Central Popcorn Company at Schaller. In this test area more than a hundred popcorn inbreds together with

It's about time for some society to award a plaque to the citizen who hasn't got one. — J. E. Sterling, Hugo (Colo.) Plainsman.

many popcorn crosses are being compared. Some nice advances have been made in popcorn breeding in recent years and of course the only way to continue these gains is through additional research and plant breeding.

— Sac County

Next week we'll be at Ak-Sar-ben. Some of the best beef calves in the county will be shown there. Some other good ones won't make it. Dick and Sue Ann Clark are both heading off for college, Dick to Iowa State and Sue Ann to State Teachers, so they won't be showing their champion Hereford. The champion Angus and grand champion Shorthorn will be there, though.

— Shelby County

The outlook for dairying remains steady; no radical changes are seen and the typical high demand for dairy products should continue. Hogs look like good property and fall breedings can find justification for increases. Sheep are scarce and the increase in numbers will be most apparent in the form of farm flocks. In both the sheep and cattle picture the rancher is no longer in a position of having to sell she-stock but rather is making replacements.

— Clay County

Feeder cattle and lambs arriving from the West are heavier than usual. Lambs are running 80 pounds or more. Current prices seem to be 27-28 cents a pound, or 22-24 cents for lambs contracted earlier. I was told that one Nebraska farmer had his cattle contracted for October, yet they have changed hands seven times already before leaving the farm.

— Mills County

Limestone should be applied about six months before seeding legumes. This means it should be applied as soon as the corn has been harvested. Don't put it off — put it on! Finely ground limestone is best, but be sure of the needs. Have your soil tested.

— Page County

Putting by-lines and possibly telephone numbers or mail addresses on specialized columns channels reader responses to the writers and tends to place responsibility. Some publishers take the position, however, that they should know what responses, complaints, and bouquets are reaching staff members.

Old Dobbin may have had his faults, but he never scattered you all over the road just because he met a one-eyed horse at night. — Ronald Furse, Plattsmouth (Neb.) Journal.

Small papers must limit the number of columns carried. Furthermore, editors dislike to drop departments, once they are started. Every column, however poor, has a following. And columns are inflexible in that readers expect to find them every week, and in the same place.

As one publisher stated it, he almost had to beat off with hoe-handles the persons who wished to write columns of humor, poetry, health, and other specialized matter. He recognized the value of good columns but was mindful that poor ones use space needed for news.

But when the right person develops a good column idea, he may in time get a chance to see it in print. The doubt in the editor's mind usually concerns the writer, not the idea.



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