

Introduction:

How did he get so cranky?

From the time I was 15 years-old I was groomed to be a newspaper journalist. Like so many neophytes in the business with an aptitude for writing, I began in the sports department. At times this was a blatant conflict of interest, like when I was assigned to write articles about games I played in. In hindsight, I was lucky when I was one of the last players cut during tryouts for my high school basketball team. At just 5'10", a spring-loaded leaper but with only an average outside shot, I played basketball in the same hyper-aggressive way I played football, as a full-contact sport. When I elbowed the 6'5" assistant coach in the jaw in my attempt to wrench away a rebound, apparently it was the last straw. Now I could sit on press row, report on the game with at least some semblance of objectivity, and be elbow-to-elbow with grizzled veteran sportswriters from whom I could learn the ropes.

I soaked up everything, eventually working during my high school years for a half-dozen daily newspapers and advertising weeklies in the packed cluster of cities just north of Boston, Mass. In most cases I was paid by the column-inch, as was the custom for sports "stringers" in those days. After the games I would go back to the office and work into the night, pounding out my game coverage on an industrial-grade Remington Standard typewriter. I felt like such a big shot when I was presented with my own key to the downtown office.

Although I was a confirmed sports nut and a serious athlete, my experience and city room observations of journalism-in-action convinced me that sportswriting, even at a major-league level, was really just kids' stuff. I observed that those grizzled

veteran sportswriters were just part of a broadly talented team led by editors who were even grumpier than they were. I was bold enough to pick the brains of the more approachable reporters and editors, and a couple of them took me under their wing and shared insights about “hard news” coverage and a career in journalism. I was given some feature-writing assignments outside the confines of sports coverage, and I was on my way.

In my senior year at high school, I was accepted at a handful of first-rate journalism schools, and chose to attend the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse (N.Y.) University. The program was rigorous, fellow students were motivated, and the professors – old news pros with plenty of experience on the front lines of journalism – were demanding. The internships for the daily *Syracuse Post-Standard* newspaper provided a total-immersion reportorial experience in all the social and political inner-city issues of the 1960s. In summers during the college years I worked as a reporter and editor for Essex County Newspapers, a chain of four daily newspapers on Boston’s North Shore. Ensuing years in the profession included covering everything from cows on the highway to con-men in public office. There were countless Vietnam-era obituaries. The long hours in courtrooms reporting on all manner of ghetto crime in a struggling Rust Belt city were leavened with feature assignments on the performing arts. National assignments included the 1968 presidential campaign (I was assigned to cover George C. Wallace), and the 1969 anti-war demonstrations in Washington, D.C. (I was tear-gassed – an occupational hazard).

Incidentally, this was a time when daily newspaper journalism ruled as the most reliable source of news. Journalism ethics had not yet become an oxymoron. Television news that merely skimmed surface facts was looked down upon by real journalists. The Internet, online publications, and semi-literate Joe Blow bloggers were unheard of.

Constant through this early journalism experience were the firm direction and stern guidance of veteran hard-boiled

editors. Their news judgement and perspective gained from years of experience were important, of course, but they were also the arbiters of proper use of the language. These editors who became my role models not only knew the *Associated Press Stylebook*, Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*, and the *Chicago Manual of Style* backwards and forwards, but they also had filtered this knowledge through their decades of practical experience. When it came to usage, punctuation, spelling, and style, the buck stopped with these guys. It was their job to be the gatekeepers of proper usage and grammar, and they did their job as if it was a public trust upon which the future of civilization depended.

So, if sloppy copy from some rushed reporter crossed their desk, these editors tended to get mighty grumpy about it. What followed could range from a brief-but-stern correction, to a withering lecture, to a full-scale tirade about mastery of the language. Perhaps I did not realize it at the time, but they were shaping me in their image to be an equally hard-nosed gatekeeper.

In my years as a journalist I was fortunate to research, report, and write on the gamut of subjects from local police, fire, and government to national politics, social issues, and cultural trends. When my time came to move into the editor's slot, it became my job to "lay down the law" on grammar and usage to a staff of writers. It became my job to wave the *AP Stylebook* and be the new Mr. Cranky. Unfortunately, in the decades since, I have observed, as have so many exasperated fellow editors, a general decline in writing skills. Apart from journalism, I have spent some of those decades wielding the editor's red pencil (or cursor) on the pathetic copy of self-inflated corporate windbags, so-called marketing professionals, seat-of-the-pants entrepreneurs, wanna-be authors, and newly-minted "desktop publishers" – and, sorry to say, the experience has made me more cranky than ever.

But while I do bemoan existing conditions, I remain optimistic about the future, with faith that the democratization of information facilitated by personal computers, the Internet,

and unprecedented access to publishing tools will have a positive – if not revolutionary – outcome for humanity in the long run. But in the short run, to keep the crankiness under control and maintain sanity, I simply laugh heartily at all the “fox paws” I see every day, then at night do something constructive about it, like work on this book. The aim of the book is to provide useful, easy-to-digest, real-world advice on how to write clearly and avoid looking stoopid.

I present the handy writing tips in this book – the Fox Paw Remedies – with full awareness that there may come a time, perhaps sooner than later, when all these tips will be utterly irrelevant, either crushed by the avalanche of so-called progress, or superseded by communications systems as yet unfathomable. When that time comes, I will likely be dust, and the direction of civilization will be beyond my puny mortal influence. But for today and the immediate future, the tips offered herein are still current.

My hope is that *you*, dear readers, who truly care about the quality of your written communication, will be the ultimate beneficiaries of my half-century as an editorial disciplinarian. Happy reading.

– **R.W. Bacon**
Newburyport, Mass.
January 2014