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Reporting and Writing: Basics for the 21st Century

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Christopher Scanlan
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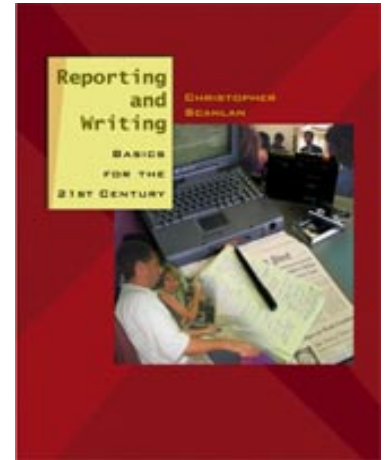
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This text aims at the practical, and it succeeds very well. Almost a get-started kit rather than a textbook, it takes a how-to approach to journalism from the novice's point of view. While, as the title suggests, it emphasizes the craft of writing, it also provides the novice with a handy supply of tips and techniques for breaking into the business.

Journalism is now a multimedia endeavor. Scanlan builds on the area of writing in layers that tackles this changing environment in a highly readable and user-friendly manner, while keeping the undercurrent of writing skills as the focus. It is filled with news samples, "day in the life" scenarios, career track advice from working reporters, and shows how articles and scripts are built from interview through finished product. Articles are dissected and discussed by Scanlan, and reporters tell how the stories came about and what caught their interest as newsworthy.

Scanlan also discusses the changing environment of the news, the tools of the trade, research techniques, and interviewing techniques. There is a very useful chapter on first assignments that fresh-faced reporters are likely to be handed – festivals, obituaries, accidents, council meetings and the like. Scanlan brings wit and insight even to these mundane tasks. He offers checklists for leads that work and don't work, provides editorial variations of stories, and reviews the development of story structure from the basics – the "five W's" and the inverted paragraph – to the layered relationships (e.g., hyperlinking) of online news. He even tackles the number-crunching skills that journalists must master, and provides a crash course in HTML coding skills. Glossaries at the end of each chapter cover the journalese that is likely to be encountered.

There is also a section on libel, privacy and ethics and the ways that the Internet has heightened both the opportunities and dangers that contemporary reporters face, and includes a brief history of important cases.

Delving into the arena of political correctness, the text devotes a chapter to covering minority issues with sensitivity and perspective, and provides rules for inclusiveness and fairness in reporting not only the issues that affect minorities, but day-to-day news items as well to ensure that all audiences are taken into consideration. The one glaring omission here is religion, a lesson to be learned from coverage of the last presidential election. The underlying religious ignorance of the media that is reinforced here is demonstrated in the "diversity glossary" at the end of the book. The entry for "religious zealots" states:

“Avoid this stereotype when referring to Arabs.”

All told, this is a superbly-written, expertly-organized text. The reader can open to any chapter and find a self-contained exposition of the type of journalism or the topic he or she wishes to bone up on. I would have loved to have this text on hand during my freelance days.

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