

FEBRUARY MEETING

Using Storytelling Techniques in Nonfiction to Make your Writing Sparkle

BY DAVID EPSTEIN

Email, websites, cell phones, radio, podcasts, blogs, 24/7 TV news—yes, even print. Information comes at us today from all sides, in all media, in words and pictures and sound, and music-music-music. You start to read an article online, and a popup ad begins to play its script. Reading today feels like always being ten minutes late for a big meeting, rushing through a crowded bazaar where jabbering shop owners try to grab you to look at their wares.

How can we as writers make our writing stand out from all this print and broadcast and narrowcast and electronic babble? How can we grab the reader our clients want to reach? How can we attract the attention of the editor who will buy our work?

The ancient art of storytelling is an important strategy that is as necessary in nonfiction as in fiction. With the flood of free “information” over the Internet, a writer’s ability to recognize, research, and craft a compelling story becomes even more valuable to winning an audience.

In this program, Philip



Martin, series editor of *The New Writer's Handbook*, will explain three basic components of what makes a story work. His presentation will include a number of specific techniques you can apply to make your storytelling more engaging. He will show how you can craft effective stories out of the raw material of research and interviews. He will discuss how to find a story and then shape it so that it catches an audience's fancy and sticks in their minds.

Martin's annual anthology, *The New Writer's Handbook*, contains advice for writers on craft and career from a variety of published authors. It has received a Starred Review from *Library Journal* and the Gold medal in the careers category in the 2007 indie-press Book of the Year Award competition.

Martin has also been an

acquisitions editor for The Writer Books, an affiliate of *The Writer* magazine. He is now director of Great Lakes Literary (www.GreatLakesLit.com), where he offers editorial, marketing, and, on occasion, boutique publishing services for writers. He has edited and published fiction and nonfiction books for adults and young readers. He has also worked as a folklorist documenting midwestern folkways and has authored several books on regional culture based on oral interviews and field research. He lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His blog for writers can be found at www.writershandbook.wordpress.com.

Networking with snacks and beverages begins at 5 p.m. and the meeting at 6. Nonmembers are cordially invited. The meeting is free for IWOC members and \$15 for nonmembers. Plan to stay for a buy-your-own dinner at a nearby restaurant after the meeting. Remember: the location is National-Louis University, 122 South Michigan, Room 5008. This is now our permanent room. National-Louis U. is across the street from the Art Institute. See you there! 🍷

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN/ROGER RUEFF

Out with the Old!

So I'm remodeling my kitchen. I know. I could've picked a better time. But I've been living with things as they are for almost an entire cycle of the Chinese zodiac... and it was last remodeled in the Year of the Half-Assed Do-It-Yourselfer. Actually, I did repaint the walls when Clinton was still in office... and put up a wall-mounted pot rack. But other than that, the room has been neglected for over a decade, and the shame of my neglect has grown with each passing year. Not that I care what others think of my kitchen, but I love to cook and have long desired to do so in a place that didn't set my psychic teeth on edge. Demons may have been dwelling there, for all I know... but if so, they were small and grimy and feasted on really shoddy work.

Don't get me wrong—I keep the place clean and relatively tidy. But over the years, I've turned a blind eye to its slow deterioration and ignored the fact that I'm doing so... creating, in the process, a sort of infinity mirror of denial (which might come in handier, if I were a politician).

The guy who lived here before me—with his parents, wife, and toddler son—prided himself, or so I'm told, on doing things himself. I remember my first look-see of the place and the realtor pointing out an owner-painted picture of a tiger. I remember thinking its artistry fit somewhere between dogs playing poker on black velvet and the work of Ernie Bushmiller—the guy who used to draw the comic "Nancy."

That should have been my first clue.

Over the ensuing years, I've encountered a slew of examples of similar work—the sheet paneling in the garage popping away from the studs because it was not properly nailed; the wires to the fluorescent light fixture above the workbench dangerously spliced together near the plug; the door frame leading into my office inexpertly fitted at its corners; the valances he built to fit above the Roman shades on the patio doors sagging for lack of mid-span support... and bowing because he neglected to paint both sides (and painted the visible side with ceiling paint).

But the kitchen was his pièce de résistance, for it is there that he decided to go against code and condo rules and vent the stove fan into the common attic—a move that necessitated cutting a six-inch hole through the top, bottom, and middle shelf of the cupboard above the vent (breaking the shelf in the process) and into the ceiling itself, then installing clothes-dryer vent pipe and sealing it with caulk. For good measure, he also retiled the kitchen floor—probably just before he put the condo on the market—with the cheapest foot-square, self-adhesive flooring tiles he could find. And rather than pull out the appliances and tile all the way to the wall, he fit the tiles only where they could be seen—the result being that over the years, they've shifted... markedly... one of them right in front of the stove moving wall-ward like a rogue tectonic plate, as if it were slowly seeking refuge under the broiler. And who



could blame it—its brethren either faded, cracked, curled, or all of the above.

The scary thing is... this guy is a surgeon.

So at long last I'm remodeling and, yes, doing some of it myself. And since it's put-up-or-shut-up time when it comes to the quality of the work, I'm planning every detail in... well, detail... and bringing in the pros where I see fit. My son and I dismantled the kitchen—with extreme prejudice—and broke down the cabinets and had them hauled away. I tried my hand at drywall patching, with acceptable results... which means that the ceiling hole is gone and the credits are rolling on the whole nasty story of the stove vent. I installed a new valve for the dishwasher (when it arrives) and plumbed a connection for the ice maker, finally making use of copper tubing put in for that purpose in the Reagan years but never used. I've purchased the floor tile, sink, faucet, countertop, and appliances. I've planned the kitchen layout and figured out which cabinets to buy. The ceiling is painted, and so are the walls and trim.

On paper, the rest of the process is pretty straightforward. The tile setter is coming on Monday. I'll buy the cabinets Wednesday and (fingers crossed) install them on Thursday—at which time, I'll need to wire two in-cabinet outlets... one for under-counter lighting on the sink side, the other for the microwave vent. Then I'll call the appliance store to schedule

Continued on page 4.

Listening is the Key to Effective Speechwriting

BY BYRON LEONARD

After a long and “windy” political season, we’ve heard speeches ranging from the laughable to the inspired. Independent writers are probably more aware than most people that those speakers had help from a writer or writers before they stepped up to the microphone. Many of us have sat through a boring after-dinner talk and thought, “I could write a better speech than that.” Some have even wondered about adding speechwriting to the creative services they offer.

A brave band of writers faced the bitter cold on January 13 to hear speechwriter Richard Greb share the wisdom of his many years of experience. IWOC Executive Vice President Catherine Rategan introduced Greb, who has been an independent writer since 1989 and is a past president of IWOC.

Greb began his talk by stressing that speechwriting is a process that ideally involves a close collaboration between the speaker and the writer. He also emphasized that the key to success is for the writer to listen. Listening well is “more important than your ability to craft the words.” This is the best way to ensure that the ideas in the speech come from the speaker and that the language fits the speaker. “If you do it well, the speaker can forget who wrote it,” Greb said.

As part of the listening process, the speechwriter asks questions to help focus the speaker’s ideas. The writer needs to understand the purpose or goals of the

speech. It’s also important to find out about the audience and their relationship to the speaker. Is the audience made up of company staff that knows the speaker well? Is the speaker a CEO giving a talk to stockholders? Is he or she speaking at a fundraising banquet? The language and ideas of the speech need to fit not only the speaker, but also the nature and interests of the audience.

By gaining an understanding of both speaker and audience, the writer will be better able to find ways of expressing ideas that the speaker will be comfortable with and that will be meaningful to the audience. For example, is the speaker more likely to use references to classical literature and mythology or to pop culture? Is he or she more comfortable using an analogy based on football or an illustration from Willa Cather’s fiction? Will these references communicate to the audience what is intended?

At times the process of developing a speech may involve working with the speaker’s staff. Greb said team collaborations can be “unwieldy.” He gave an example of intermediaries who gave him input for a speech. Once the CEO saw the first draft, it was apparent that the messages didn’t fit and the speech had to be revised. “The speaker should own the process and the speech,” Greb said.

A tape recorder is a valuable tool in developing a good speech. The writer should not only use it to record the interview with the speaker, but also personally transcribe it “to heighten

your listening.” Greb said, “You can learn unexpected things that way.” He recalled a case where he noticed that the speaker never used contractions. Such details are important in crafting a speech that fits the speaker’s way of speaking. He advised that there is no place for the writer’s ego in the process of speechwriting. “Keep yourself properly invisible,” he said.

Once a first draft of the speech has been submitted, the writer should ask the speaker to read it aloud to him or her. This is another stage in the listening process. If the writer notices that the speaker stumbles or seems uncomfortable with a word, a phrase or other aspects of the speech, offer to make the necessary revision. This helps ensure the best fit. Greb said that the writer needs to remember that these are “not your words, but those of the speaker.” If the speaker says, “I’m not comfortable with this,” adjust accordingly. By listening carefully at each stage of the process, the writer can also judge the speaker’s abilities and limits. Not everyone is capable of delivering an eloquent speech. It’s better to match the speaker’s natural style than to strive for one that is out of character.

Greb also addressed an ethical question in speechwriting. Is it right for a speaker to have a ghost? He said a busy and highly paid executive has too many other responsibilities for it make sense to spend hours writing a speech. It pays to have the speaker hire a writer to handle it, he said. The ideas and much of the language

will be the speaker’s if the writer does an effective job of listening. The writer needs to be a chameleon, adapting to the “background” of the speaker and matching his or her world.

“Humor is dangerous,” Greb cautioned, especially if the speaker is going for a big laugh. He said he usually avoids including jokes in speeches. If a speaker is unable to deliver a joke convincingly and it doesn’t get the desired reaction, it can throw off the rest of the speech. If a humorous story seems appropriate, be sure to listen carefully to how the speaker delivers it. If there is any awkwardness or discomfort, it’s best to eliminate the story. By contrast, it can be helpful to include the speaker’s personal experiences. This often doesn’t occur to speakers, but it can add depth to a speech.

Greb said a speech doesn’t have visual aids, but a memorable speech “paints a picture.” He gave an example of a speech that used a prism as a prop and a metaphor. By contrast, a presentation is typically illustrated with the now ubiquitous PowerPoint, which he said is often misused. He said that any bullet points in the visual aids should be concise. The presentation will expand on their meaning. It should also explain or highlight the meaning of any graphs or visuals.

During the question and answer period at the end of his talk, Greb said that

Continued on page 4.

delivery and give the high sign to the countertop guys that it's time to come out and measure. Two or three weeks after that, if all goes well and a life-ending meteor hasn't struck the Earth, I should have only one task remaining—installing a tile backsplash on my own. I attended a one-hour class last week at the tile store... and graduated (at least they let me out of the store). So I'm ready.

The truth is I enjoy this kind of work. Some tasks can be downright meditative if you let them. Plumbing is coming to terms with the tightness of a fitting... and being at peace with the leak as you defeat it. Electrical work is an exercise in respect and, sometimes, a lesson in the duality of Nature. Cutting the wall-color edge against the ceiling is a Zen exercise, requiring utmost presence.

Yesterday, while painting, I thought of Mortimer Adler, the late Aristotelian professor and educational theorist who espoused the idea that "philosophy is everybody's business." Years ago, I attended a weekly series of lectures in Chicago given by the man, himself. I remember that one night he held forth on the concepts of Leisure and Work and his belief that the two never meet. In the Q&A period afterwards, one fellow from the audience suggested that one person's Work might serve as another person's Leisure—and that the classification is not quite so hard and fast.

"No," said Adler, the two are entirely separate.

"But sometimes, for example," the fellow offered, "I enjoy even the tedious tasks in my garden. Doing them relaxes me and helps me to think."

"Then you're sick," said Adler. And that was the end of that.

So here I sit with my sickness intact, enjoying the entirety of the job. It will be nice to have everything back in its place again and to not have to tiptoe around pots and pans in the living room to reach the sofa. It will also be nice to not ache so much at night when I go to bed—from the kneeling, squatting, stretching, ladder-climbing, and reaching that goes into redoing a kitchen. In the meantime, though, I'm having a very good time.

And the thought of walking into a kitchen exorcised of the Shoddiness Demons... ahhhhhhhhhh. 🐾

opportunities for speechwriting aren't as plentiful as they once were. He advised aspiring speechwriters to volunteer with charitable organizations or politicians to gain experience. When he was first starting out as a freelance speechwriter, he did informational interviews with companies and organizations.

He said the once lively Chicago Speechwriters' Forum is now dormant but mentioned Ragan Communications <www.ragan.com> as a source of information about speechwriting. Greb was, of course, asked about the financial rewards. He said \$150 per hour is a typical rate for a speechwriter, but that he typically bills a flat rate that includes one rewrite. Listening to the speaker read the speech is part of the package. He said a ballpark fee for a 20-minute speech is \$5,000. He added that 150 words equal about one minute of a speech. He advised that a typical speech by a CEO should be limited to 15 to 20 minutes. 🐾

Calendar

February 10

IWOC Monthly Meeting. "The Power of Stories--for Your Clients and for You." As a writer, how can you get the attention of readers in today's flooded information marketplace? Philip Martin, series editor of *The New Writer's Handbook*, tells how to use storytelling techniques in nonfiction to make your writing stand out from the crowd. Tuesday, February 10th at National-Louis University, Room 5008, 122 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. Program 6 p.m. Networking 5 p.m. Nonmembers, \$15; IWOC members free. Buy-your-own dinner follows. Nonmembers welcome. For more information, call 847-855-6670 or visit www.iwoc.org.

The monthly food and networking get-togethers listed below meet at the same time and place each month unless otherwise noted, but call ahead in case of cancellation. The groups welcome nonmembers. If there's no group in your area, why not start one? Contact webmaster@iwoc.org.

March 5 (1st Thursday)

IWORP Monthly Breakfast. Join the Rogers Park IWOC contingent for breakfast at 9 AM at the A&T Grill, 7036 N. Clark St., Chicago. For more info, call Esther Manewith at 773/274-6215.

Next Lunch March 26 (4th Thursday)

IWOOP Monthly Lunch. Join near-west suburbanites for a noon lunch at Poor Phil's, 139 S. Marion St., Oak Park. For more info, call Barb Dillard at 312/642-3065. We'll meet in March if the weather warms up. Check before you come. This lunch is monthly only if there are enough people who can attend.

IWOC Welcomes New Members

Sylvia Alston

Laurel Johnson

Katherine Williams

And Returning Members

Karleen McAllester

Peg O'Brien