Chapter 20

Writing for Official and Unofficial Publication

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A distinguished astronaut came back from the moon and wrote a fine and lively volume about his experience on the ground and in space. His book could have been an overly technical hodgepodge of abstruse language, a dull history full of the nuts and bolts that made up his vehicle. The significant factor, for the person who wants to be published, can be found in the front matter of Michael Collins's book, one page after the dedication to his wife. On that page he thanks first his prep school English teacher, who taught him to write a sentence, then his editor, and then his typist. Now that is listing priorities right.

A number of years ago a historical manuscript full of interminable qualifying clauses, endless compartments of fuller amplification, and passive verbs that protected the doer of an unfortunate deed from exposure came to my desk. I asked the author, a gifted raconteur and a personable fellow, what he was trying to say. He told me, I took notes, gave them to him; he juggled them somewhat and produced something intelligible. His prose had become "muscular," as Samuel Eliot Morison counseled. Why, I asked him, didn't you do that in the first place? You catch your audience's interest immediately when you talk. You made your points clearly and strongly when you translated your prose for me. Why don't you write the way you talk?

His answer was simple. When I write, he said, I feel the hot breath of my fellow historians on my neck. When I talk, I feel freer to slide over the dull patches. This man had all the proper academic credentials, he had lived dangerously through World War II, he was by no means a dull pedant; but he feared the academic stilettos—and there are none sharper—of his fellow scholars.

You who read these words have been to the requisite military schools. You have had the courses in History and English

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considered necessary to attain your present state of grace. You may have had battlefield experience. Perhaps you wear a gold or silver bar. You might even sport twin bars or a gold oak leaf on your shoulder. Many of you have stars in your eyes. Having been exposed to appropriate education and training in how to study, and profit from, written military history, you have read the wise words purveyed in the preceding chapters of this book. Now you are presumably ready to advance your career to the point of producing fruits of your own that will nourish your colleagues and specialists in the broad acres of the field of military history.

How do you start producing? You start by using your own experience, your training, and your reading to give birth to ideas. As soon as the ideas mature enough, you start writing. Like truth and beauty, research can be its own excuse for being. But beauty, too blatant or contrived, is a drug on the market. Truth, told in unrestrained detail, can become tiresome. The most effective form of research consists of plucking the important verities of a situation from a confusing mass of items. This is the beginning of writing.

For purposes of this guide, research must be considered as a means to an end, and one of these ends is writing. There are those who find the act of writing so difficult and the fussy detail in research so fascinating that they put off the end and concentrate interminably on the means. This approach does not make for a high rate of production. The obvious answer, of course, is to get on with the writing as soon as possible. To do so will facilitate research as well as writing because the prose put down will undoubtedly expose holes. To fill in the holes more research is necessary, but this kind of research will be better directed and more meaningful as the inevitable gaps that must be filled become more readily apparent.

It is perhaps tarnishing the gilt on the lily to repeat what has been attributed to the late *New Yorker* editor, Harold Ross, that easy writing makes damn hard reading. The first thing to do to ease the burden of the reader is to establish a pattern. Is your material to be told chronologically? Is it to be told topically? Is it to emerge as a combination of the two, which is generally the case in anything more complex than a child's nursery rhyme?

Unless the end result is to amount to a gloworm without the glow, it must be given some sort of bone structure. The bone structure sets the pattern, and the pattern must be discernible under the fleshing or words, not too fat, not too lean, akin in many respects to the features of an attractive human being.

When the word *writing* comes up, it is inevitable that *style*

shoves its head in and must be dealt with. It is well known that most words in the English language have more than one definition—take the multiple meaning of the little word get for a sample. Style, in its most important definition, is impossible to teach. For it is the result of lifelong habits. It would be as rewarding to teach such a subject, and as fruitless, as to teach personality to an oaf or to stimulate a recognition of pitch in the ear of someone who is tone deaf. These components of the human character are built up from the time the baby rewards his mother and his deliverer by making his first outcry against the injustices of the world he is thrust into. His personality, his ear, his style are from that moment on the product of his genes, his conversations with his parents or whoever happens to have the job of rearing him, and his reading, his writing, and his ways of coping with or circumventing the traps that lie in wait for all creatures on earth. To teach style in this meaning would be as misleading and meretricious as to claim that ear training is a useful service in overcoming an inherent inability to distinguish sharp from flat. The claim is false. If one needs this kind of training, he might well consider a different outlet for his energies.

Too many tyros in the business of writing believe that a one-shot course in how to write is the answer to questionable evils. This is the approach of an overoptimistic dilettante who would survive neither a battlefield nor a skirmish with a publisher. It encourages people who should never have unslung their pencils from their hosters to use their weapons indiscriminately, indefinitely, ambiguously, and, more to the point, inaccurately.

Another kind of style, however, is teachable. It consists of what might be called the mechanics of writing. A good editor can be of immense service. But it would be helpful to him and to you to get a few things squared away before you embark on your literary endeavors. Not until you begin to write do you come up against the gadfly dilemmas of whether a number should be written out or not, an organization should begin with a capital letter or not, a last name should appear first in a footnote or not, a page of manuscript should be double-spaced or not, a simple comma should be inserted or not. These little problems are only the beginning. When, for example, does one use a plural verb with a collective noun? Most of the time in England, but only sometimes in the United States. When is the antecedent of a noun of doubtful parentage? When do you use the third edition of Merriam-Webster or the second edition? These are all fleabite questions, but readers scratch what they consider to be the

wrong answer raw. The world is full of a number of things, but to the writer it sometimes seems to be populated by nitpickers. It should be remembered that nits are young lice, and manuscripts afflicted with them can justifiably be called lousy.

It would give the writer and his critics comfort to include here a style manual. But to do so could lull the reader of this guide into a false sense of security. Different publishers have different rules. If you are to appear under the aegis of Prentice-Hall and you wish to quote fifty or more words of copyrighted material from a single publication, you must secure written permission from the copyright owner. The same rule applies at the Army's Center of Military History. But if you are to be published by Harper and Row the magic number is five hundred words. Commas and other pieces of punctuation tend to be used or not used according to the house style. The strict (some might say old-fashioned) approach is to use a comma after even the shortest of dependent phrases, if these phrases open a sentence. Other firms disdain this grammatical nicety.

The Center of Military History has a style manual of its own. The one used by most commercial publishers in this country is the latest edition of *A Manual of Style*, published by The University of Chicago Press. If the Government Printing Office is to be your publisher, the latest edition of its *Style Manual* is required. If other publishers are involved, they should be queried as to whether they have a style manual or what their predilections are. If you are fortunate enough to have an understanding editor, he can supply much help.

The first thing a historian who intends to get into print should do is to look at the marketplace. The *Literary Market Place* (LMP) (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, published annually) is an obvious first choice. It can be obtained at virtually any library. Any good librarian of your choice can give you the names and addresses of other reference works that will help in determining possible publishers of your material. If you are near a large library, check the magazines in its current periodicals room. What kind of articles do they use? How long are they? Does a journal publish popular or serious material? Unlike books, articles usually have to be written with a particular publisher in mind. It goes without saying that if you have written *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) such help that is advised in these paragraphs is unnecessary. But the Bachs, both the best-selling literary type and the incomparable musician, both Richard and Johann Sebastian, are few and far between. This section is directed at those who do not possess extraordinary gifts.

The bibliography that follows may seem a bit slight. But not because of the canard that blossoming officers can digest only specially prepared portions. This assessment smacks of a slur on the brain cells and the intellectual digestive system of young people who wear a uniform. They can eat and drink of literature as well as their brothers and sisters who study and work in jeans.

Anyone who wants to write should read, in addition to the following, anything he can lay hands and eyes on: good and bad history, good and bad magazines, cookbooks, obesity cures, telephone books (mainly the yellow pages), even ungrammatical advertisements. He should live it up in words. Follett's *Modern American Usage* should be in his regimen as well as Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, which is on the list. The Bible and Shakespeare are omitted from it because they are staples of literary life. Like well-taught English courses, they are prerequisites for writing of readable prose, whether history or not.

It would be remiss for a chapter on research and writing to omit the title of probably the most helpful and therapeutic book on the subject: *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. It is full of common sense, which is a commodity that writers can always use. The most indispensable tool of all, however, is the ability to read voluminously, to digest what is read, and to translate the acquired knowledge into articulate meaning for others. This is the tool that cuts to the heart of what research and writing are all about.

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