ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ways With Words is the result of unusual, perhaps unique, collaboration among a diverse group of people who care about newspapers and reading. It may well be a model for joint research and development by journalism scholars and practitioners into the future of newspaper journalism.

The concept for this project originated with the Literacy Committee, then was adopted by visionaries at different ends of the country.

The research team from the University of Wisconsin-Madison included Robert P. Hawkins and Jack M. McLeod, professors of mass communication, and Paul S. Voyles, a doctoral student. Albert E. Gollin, vice president and research director of the Newspaper Association of America, consulted, Steven A. Kirche, research manager of the St. Petersburg Times, led the gathering of data.

Development of the reporting and writing techniques was at The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, by Dan Fry, director of the writing programs, and Roy Peter Clark, dean of the faculty (on leave).

The St. Petersburg Times contributed the journalism. Kimberly D. Kleman, the city editor, directed the reporting and writing, and the reporters were Alicia Caldwell, Elijah Gosier, Jennifer L. Stevenson and Thomas C. Tobin. Anne Glover, assistant managing editor, coordinated production in the newspaper.

This report was designed and produced by Wendy McClure and Dan Ely of Madison Newspapers Inc., with cover illustration by Chris Garigan.

All worked together, tirelessly and selflessly, to produce Ways With Words.

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Newspaper journalists — and readers — everywhere are indebted to all of these people and institutions for their contributions to this important work on the future of newspapers.

Among the things we learned was the difficulty, the complexity of performing meaningful research and development on newspapers, given the myriad variables among communities, readers, reporters and editors, news and techniques of journalism. We learned there are no easy answers; neither are there alternatives to finding the tough ones.

Frank Denton
1992-93 Chair
Literacy Committee
American Society of Newspaper Editors

INTRODUCTION:
LITERACY, ALITERACY AND NEWSPAPERS

Every newspaper journalist knows of Thomas Jefferson's statement about the importance of the press to democracy: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Less well known is the rest of Mr. Jefferson's quotation: "But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them."

Newspapers today are better than anyone could have dreamed 200 years ago, and they are available almost everywhere. But still, they are falling short of the Jeffersonian ideal, as our journalism seems to be just beyond the grasp of far too many Americans.

Of the many reasons — modern lifestyle, the crush of time, cost, the lure of the entertainment media, apathy — the one most within our control may well be the most intimate: the connection between our words and the reader's understanding and interest.

Conventional wisdom, fed by some ideologies, would have a great percentage of Americans "illiterate" and therefore second-class citizens, inferior to, or even victims of, the "literate" upper class. In fact, only a few people are utterly illiterate — fewer than five percent of young people, according to the most comprehensive national study, by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Many of those are non-native speakers of English, and others have cognitive difficulties. "Based on the standard of "illiteracy" of a hundred years ago, the ability to sign one's name, virtually all young adults are "literate," the report said. "If the standard of the World War II era, some 50 years ago, is applied, almost 95 percent of young adults are estimated to meet or exceed the performance of fourth-grade students. Based on the standard of the War on Poverty, 25 years ago, 80 percent of young adults meet or exceed the performance of students in the eighth grade."

Carl F. Kaestle, co-author of a recent history of literacy, points to research showing that fewer than one percent of Americans in 1979 said they consider themselves illiterate, compared to 20 percent in 1870. More to the point, the Kaestle book says, "Readers can be divided into an underclass of functional illiterates, poorly educated and unformed; an anliterate group, who can read but don't . . . and a reading elite, well informed and, when in positions of power, capable of manipulating news and cultural symbols and slogans to their own ends."

Literacy therefore is not a dichotomy but rather a continuum, ranging from facile readers to struggling decoders. The National Assessment research (of 21-25-year-olds, now being repeated for all adults) found that, while the overwhelming majority were able to read simple material, many fewer were able to get through moderately difficult text, and only a few could handle the most complex tasks. The falloff was particularly severe for minorities, especially


African-Americans, and for those who stop their education early.

The NAEP concluded that illiteracy is not a major problem, but literacy is. While 96 percent of young people could retrieve a simple fact from a six paragraph news story, only about 21 percent (25 percent of whites, 3 percent of African-Americans, 12 percent of Hispanics) could summarize the main argument from a Tom Wicker column. The sharpest falloff was at the intermediate point between locating information in a news article (56 percent: 63 percent of whites, 24 percent of African-Americans) and orally interpreting a lengthy feature story (37 percent: 43 percent of whites and 11 percent of blacks).

Yes, any of these young people can read the kind of soup on a label, but very few of them can figure the unit price or comprehend the nutrition information.

And the important parts of newspapers are beyond too many of them.

Reading is more than just looking at some words and knowing their definitions; it requires an arsenal of skills and knowledge, including grammar but also writing techniques, background information, reasoning and understandings of how people and society function. Reading draws on many human faculties, which evolve over years and generations and among societies. If one is "literate" by the standards of the last century or even 50 years ago, what sense could she or he make of today's newspaper? And if one has to struggle to understand our awkward, expensive, stale, time-consuming newspapers, how long will they even try?

Neil Postman, the communications theorist, points out that reading and writing require the sensitive, painstaking transfer of meaning: "A written sentence calls upon its author to say something, upon its reader to know the import of what is said. And when an author and reader are struggling with semantic meaning, they are engaged in the most serious challenge to the intellect.... The reader must come armed, in a serious state of intellectual readiness. This is not easy because he comes to the text alone. In reading, one's responses are isolated, one's intellect thrown back on its own resources. To be confronted by the cold abstractions of printed sentences is to look upon language bare, without the assistance of either beauty or community."

When that fragile, volatile encounter involves reading the newspaper, so much more comes to bear. In addition to the external pressures — such as time, cost and family and electronic distractions — the reader too often is asked to work through pervasive journalism techniques and assumptions that seem to complicate the struggle.

There are, for example, such newswriting conventions as the inverted-pyramid style, block paragraphs, artificial transitions, choppy sentences and paragraphs, and organization for production convenience. Georgianna Green dissected an Associated Press news story from the perspective of a reading analyst, then rewrote the story in narratives that might be used by a sociologist, a participant in the news and the reporter telling the story at home. While the inverted-pyramid style may help newspaper skimming, Green said it also is a major contributor to the disorganization of newswriting and, therefore, a deterrent to reading. She evaluated other conventions of newswriting and concluded that "the script" for writing news stories ought to be overhauled, "de-emphasizing editors' convenience and traditional readability assumptions in favor of literary and language techniques that serve comprehensibility."

Some critics have said newswriting merely needs to be simplified. Katherine McAdams of the University of Maryland studied whether readership and comprehension of news stories depended on readability measures (Fog indexes), but found they did not. However, there was a relationship she called "startling... If readers judged a story topic 'interesting,' they also perceived the story to be of high quality overall, regardless of measured readability." That seems to support the complexity of reading: Readers will work harder to get through stories if they somehow maintain their interest, through style or subject matter.

Another dimension is the background knowledge and understanding that the reader brings to the story — what E.D. Hirsch called "cultural literacy." He argues that, increasingly, many people don't read because they don't have the "world knowledge" or cultural literacy or "network of information that all competent readers possess." That is not to say that readers are ignorant; in fact, they know a lot, young people especially. But increasingly, what they know is narrow, limited to their own generation or experience. And the shared knowledge — which newspapers assume of their readers — grows more and more complex and technical. When a reader picks up a newspaper and constantly collides with alien terms without which they have little meaning, it becomes even easier to turn on the television. Others have made similar points about the average American's knowledge of science and economics. Considering that many people don't know how Congress functions or what ozone is or what Brown vs. the Board of Education was or where Bosnia is or what the Dow Jones Industrial Average means, suddenly it is easy to understand why such a reader would find the newspaper incomprehensible, as if it were in another language.

Into the midst of all these obstacles and complications, to a readership that is losing interest and patience, we write our stories much as we always have. This research is to explore new ways with words.

FRANK DENTON

"Katherine C. McAdams, Readability Reconsidered: A Study of Reader Reactions to Differences in Fog Index. Presented to the 1991 meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications."


"Georgianna Green, Organization, Goals and Comprehensibility in Narratives: Newswriting, a Case Study. Technical Report No. 132, Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1978."
THE EXPERIMENT

Mitchell Stephens traces the inverted pyramid to the Civil War:

"Journalists rushing to transmit their most newsworthy information over often unreliable telegraph lines had begun to develop the habit of compressing the most crucial facts into short, paragraph-long dispatches, often destined for the top of a column of news... From here it was not a long distance to reserving the first paragraph of their stories, the "lead," for the most newsworthy facts and then organizing supporting material in descending order of newsworthiness... The inverted pyramid organizes stories not around ideas or chronologies but around facts. It weighs and shuffles the various pieces of information, focusing with remarkable single-mindedness on their relative news value."


The research team set out to test different reporting and writing techniques against prevailing practice. Others have tried more modest experiments with groups of readers, but we wanted to use real stories and real reporters working on deadline on a real newspaper, with real readers who didn't know they were in an experiment. From the start, we recognized that we had to test different story forms with the same story at the same time.

FOUR STORY TECHNIQUES

Most journalists know only one story form for hard news: the inverted pyramid. This form grew out of an intellectual climate that valued facts above all, and the restrictions of then new technology: the telegraph.

This form serves our rapid production needs beautifully. The reporter writes a catchy lead and then arranges materials in descending order of importance. The editor can shorten the story without even having to read it, simply by whacking off the requisite number of sentences from the bottom. Reporters tend to run out of interest, energy and time halfway down, so they write the second half casually at best, poorly at worst.

So journalists could represent the inverted pyramid like this:

WONDROUL LEAD TO HOOK THE READER
VERY VERY IMPORTANT NEW NEWS
IMPORTANT RELATED FACTS
OTHER IMPORTANT STUFF
LESS VITAL FACTS

NOT IMPORTANT
BACKGROUND
CONTEXTS
BORING
DULL
0

From the reader's point of view, the inverted pyramid arranges material in descending order of interest or, to coin a word, of "interestiness." The story gets more boring as the reader reads down. Journalists put background and context in the second half of the pyramid, so the reader who does not know that background cannot understand the top of the story. As a result, only journalists and sources can fully understand inverted-pyramid stories.

Journalists fear any appearance of bias, so they reduce people in their stories to names and titles, avoid description and hide the point of the story, or worse, write without a point.

Journalists also assume more knowledge than the average reader has. Business writers neglect to define terms because they assume their readers use them in daily speech. Court reporters leave the charge out of fourth-day stories on the assumption that the reader has read the previous three stories. Sports reporters don't bother to list the score "because everybody watched the game on TV last night."

This combination of the inverted pyramid, assumptions and flat characterization and description makes stories daunting and difficult to understand for readers.

Newswriters could draw on other story forms and modes of storytelling outside newspapers. But the basic conservatism and frantic pace of our profession keep us from enlarging our repertoire of forms. So year by year, we keep boring and confusing our readers, and driving them away.

For this experiment, we had to invent the whole process and three of the four forms from scratch. We decided to call the new forms "modes," to distinguish them from previous discussions of story structure.

The four modes we chose to test, based on the reading barriers above, differ in structure, showing-versus-telling, level of explanation and definition, narrative content, treatment of quotations, etc.

STRAIGHT TRADITIONAL mode uses various story shapes, but mostly the inverted pyramid, that is, a strong lead, followed by several paragraphs backing up that lead. Important material appears higher than less important material, especially background and context. The tone stays neutral, with more telling than showing.

NARRATIVE MODE tells a story, with actions performed by characters in time sequences, including some chronological telling. The story has a beginning, middle and end. Quotations retain characteristics of real speech. Actions and speeches reveal motives. This mode reveals mostly by showing, with a little telling for framing.

POINT OF VIEW mode tells a story with a viewpoint immediately clear to the reader. The story can use any shape except the inverted pyramid, because it must have an ending that centers the point in the reader's mind. This mode might use the second person, addressing the reader directly. These stories persuade by showing rather than telling.

RADICAL CLARITY mode arranges material in an order that maximizes reader understanding and explains everything the reader might need explained.
THINK OF THE MODES THIS WAY:

TRADITIONAL: AP pyramid

NARRATIVE: Real characters act

POINT OF VIEW: Visible point

RADICAL CLARITY: No assumptions

All of these modes may seem familiar. Traditional is journalism’s standard hard-news form, and we created the other three modes by turning techniques for storytelling and explanation into full story organizations.

These three story forms are hardly new to newspapers. They have been used, selectively and sparingly, for years. In this experiment, however, they are being used in competition with each other, to test their relative powers.

We must point out that they are not radical departures from current journalism practice. Further research should test more innovative techniques, for example, the mapping technique developed by David Hedley of the Calgary Herald to organize stories by information categories.

WHAT WE DID

On each of four days in January 1993, four St. Petersburg Times reporters wrote the same story in four different modes. We published the four different stories in four adjacent zones on the front page of the local section. We tried to make everything the same except the story techniques: All four were the same length and were accompanied by the same headline, subhed and photograph.

We rotated the modes so that each reporter wrote a story in each mode, and each zone received a different mode each day, ultimately receiving all four.

The team brainstormed story ideas, searching for subjects that would interest readers equally in all four zones. We wanted ordinary stories, not splashy ones, hard news rather than features. Because of early deadlines, we had to avoid breaking stories, though all the stories were typical one-day stories and one was the morning-after report of a county commission meeting.

We chose the first story, on people returning gift pets after Christmas, for its universality and immediate high interest. If you intend to call subscribers and ask them questions about one story in a large paper, you need something everyone might read. We also had a strong photo of an appealing dog, named “Jake.”

The second piece, on the extension of a recreation trail to reach St. Petersburg, seemed fairly simple until our African-American reporter pointed out that the projected route stopped just short of a large black community. The third idea, on a new sixth campus for the junior college, touched all four zones: Built in one zone, it would ease overcrowding in the other three. The final story, on the county commission disapproving a proposed marina, spanned all four zones because of environmental interest in a body of water that connected them.

The team pooled the reporting, requiring constant consultation. The

reporters shared quotes they might not have heard, and had to ask each other about contexts. The Modes Cops from Poynter kept reminding everyone of the differences among the modes because journalistic habits kept pulling everything toward the traditional form. For example, narrative requires fuller characterization, leaving less space for data, but the editor kept worrying about leaving things out of the narrative story when he knew the traditional story contained them. Radical clarity explained things better, so everyone tried to make their own modes clearer.

As the reporters filed their stories, Don Fry sat behind Kim Kleman and advised on the editing. Neither the coaches nor the researchers composed or changed a single word in the stories.

The copy desk took special pains. Each day, they had to come up with one headline and one subhed that fit all four modes, while meeting the high specificity standards of the St. Petersburg Times. After she had gone home on the first night, Assistant Managing Editor Anne Glover thought about the production staff pasting up the four stories side by side. Suddenly she realized they might mix up the jumps! So she drove out to the printing plant to check. They didn’t. Bless you, Anne, and all copy editors everywhere who save the newspaper every day.

DON FRY and ROY PETER CLARK
THE STORIES: DAY ONE

WHEN THE NOVELTY WEARS OFF

By Elijah Gloor

Pets remain a popular gift despite the advice of animal advocates to give an adult pet to those with a bad idea. This week, like past holidays, tens of thousands of pets are being returned or abandoned. But unlike ties and sweaters, cats and dogs don't hang on a rack waiting for another buyer, many of them linger in cages waiting to be killed. It's not like clothes. This is not something you can return and get a refund. It's a life. And it's a real life. "It's a life," said Mary Chabouda, an animal welfare advocate.

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals took in 14,000 pets last year. Of those, 54 percent of the dogs and 73 percent of the cats were killed. At the Humane Society of North Pinellas, only about half of the 12,700 animals are killed.

The county shelter gets about 15,000 animals each year, of which 6,500 are dogs and most of the rest are cats. Animal shelter director Ken Mitchell said, "After the holidays, there is a big influx of people who are injudicious in their animal adoption decision of a dramatic amount of barbiturates. Overall, 80 percent of the animals the shelter gets are killed.

The SPCA took in 4,500 pets last year and only about 15 percent of the cats had to be killed. About half of the Humane Society's 13,700 pets had to be killed. "It's a fact that all shelters have to deal with," Mitchell said.

Here's how to prevent a pet from this fate:

Don't give a pet for a holiday gift. If you feel absolutely compelled to give a pet as a present, do your homework. Make sure your foster really wants a pet. Then find out the breed, color, sex, and disposition of the pet the person would like. Best of all, have the recipient choose the pet.

"I know that from personal experience," said Harvey Pariseau, a St. Petersburg veterinarian. "My wife saw a little dog at the SPCA that was perfect for us. She brought it home, and it's been our best friend ever."

POINT OF VIEW

By Jennifer L. Stevenson

They are the little animals the holiday season purports to adore: the puppies with the big eyes and the fluffy ears. The kittens with the downy fur. They're babies in a new world. And they don't have a chance. They don't have a name, a collar, or a place to call the furniture. They're in a new world without a home, without the comfort of a hearty meal or a warm bed. And that's just the beginning of their problems.

"There are three kinds of people: those who want a pet, those who want to give a pet, and those who don't want a pet, regardless of how many times they've asked," said Chabouda.

"Toward the end of the year, pets are given away with abandon. This is because the novelty wears off. It's a very sad thing for the animals. Usually they're given away for the wrong reasons."

"This is a very tragic thing for them. Usually there's a lot of crying."

The county shelter gets about 15,000 animals a year, and the shelter director Ken Mitchell said, "After five days, most are killed by injection of a deadly amount of barbiturates. Overall, 80 percent of the animals the shelter gets are killed."

At the SPCA, and the Humane Society of North Pinellas, half or more of the animals are killed.

Animal workers say they expect another wave of unwanted pets in a few months after the new year. "This is what happens to holiday pets who are rehomed after the holidays," said an animal volunteer. "I don't think that a lot of them don't match your suit."

Just take a peek in the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals shelter in Largo for the next 15 to 20 pets have been rescued by Chabouda. By the end of January, up to 70 will be abandoned by owners who did not comprehend what adopting a pet really means. Despite warnings from animal advocates that pets do not make good Christmas presents, many animals are adopted this season. And once again, many are being returned to the shelter.

"There's a joke, a yellow lab confused about his new status. The dog with both hands of the dog to the shelter each year are killed, and 75 percent of the cats. At the Humane Society, about half of all animals are still stainless steel cages for the crime of playing with their adopted family too much. He has lots of company, including the other cats, the dog, the fence, and the Anglie, who chewed up the Christmas presents."

"These are things animals do, but people can't do. They can't grow up," said Gal Ranter, executive director of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, St. Petersburg, "These are the people who get a cat this year and then next year they want a dog. And if they don't find a dog, they get the cat again."

"They're still incomplete."

There's that something to think about when shopping for that special Christmas gift for Aunt Martha or Cousin Andrea. A sweater you can return goes back to the store.

Just ask Jake and Char. They're spending their new year in a cage.
THE STORIES: DAY TWO

NEARING THE END OF THE PINELLAS TRAIL

By Jennifer L. Stevenson

Two years after the project started, construction of the Pinellas Trail in St. Petersburg, ultimately giving city bikers and hikers a direct route to a popular park already used a million times a year.

Construction of a 7.75-mile section of the trail started last month and should be completed in the summer, project coordinator Frank Aiello said. The project is expected to be completed in 1990 and the southern segment will take place in 1991.

It gives me tremendous joy," said Scott Daniels, president of Pinellas Trail Inc., a non-profit group that has helped the trail since 1988. "We're very excited about the fact we're finally going to have a trail in south county. It definitely will revitalize the area and bring neighborhodly and tourism to the area." So far, 23.5 miles of trail have been built on abandoned railroad beds, stretching from Tarpon Springs to Seminole, giving joggers, bicyclists and pedestrians a safe and pleasant place to exercise in an increasingly urban area.

The new section in St. Petersburg will cost $1.5 million, coming from a special penny sales tax that provides $1 million overall, the project coordinator said. The new section will begin in Seminole at Boca Ciega Boulevard and will be about six months, said Ned Bailey, a planner with the Pinellas County Planning Department. The first phase will begin next month and will not be available to the public until late next year.

"It's been a wonderful project," said Daniels. "Everyone is excited about the extension." Daniels said the new section will be ready in March, and the area surrounding the trail will be used by the community for recreation and entertainment.

POINTE OF VIEW

By Elijah Gostin

Work began recently to stretch the pedestrian walking and biking path called the Pinellas Trail in St. Petersburg. And although it won't be completed before the 1990 census, the slender finger of safety already has been poked by an interview with the county's largest concentration of black residents.

County authorities such as planner Ned Bailey say it's more than a trail; it's a symbol of the community's growing awareness of the needs of its black residents and its desire to reach them.

"It's a little bit different," Bailey said. "This is a symbol of what we are trying to do. The goal is to change the mind of the black community and make them feel our trail is safe and replaces.

"It's a little bit different," Bailey said. "This is a symbol of what we are trying to do. The goal is to change the mind of the black community and make them feel our trail is safe and replaces.

While the trail is close to a community, county officials say it promotes new business opportunities for the neighborhood.

After 2 1/2 hours of pedaling, I'm doing the surprising thing and the soft breathing.

On a recent morning, I'm able to see the trail and the scenery, says McCullum. The trail is an unconstrained, beautiful area. Some have voiced fears about the trail being a Magnet for crime. Others have said the trail is a good example of what can be done with a little bit of planning and cooperation. But mostly, the trail is seen as a community resource. County officials say it promotes new business opportunities for the neighborhood.

That's why McCullum, a St. Petersburg resident and avid cyclist, is enthusiastic about the extension of the Pinellas Trail from Seminole to St. Petersburg. The 7.75-mile segment, set to be finished this winter, will connect to a section of the Pinellas Trail in Tarpon Springs.

It's a symbol of what we are trying to do. The goal is to change the mind of the black community and make them feel our trail is safe and replaces.

The trail stops just short of many of St. Petersburg's black neighborhoods. County officials say that because the railroad beds that go through those neighborhoods are still being used and were not available for purchase.

After 2 1/2 hours of pedaling, I'm doing the surprising thing and the soft breathing.

A recent day on the trail, a woman clad in a bathing suit and shorts pedaling by. Two middle-aged women wearing baseball caps stroll along, talking about their exercise regimens. It's smooth and flat and peaceful - great place to try riding your new bike with no hands.

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29, of Indies Rocks Beach. "It's smooth and safe. It's lease like being in the country."

The trail will rise short of one community - the county's largest concentration of black residents - and will be finished in Seminole. Bailey said it will meet up with another trail segment, a 3-mile stretch of the Pinellas Trail in St. Petersburg.

The Pinellas Trail, the north-south bicycle and pedestrian path that will stretch 47 miles through the county when completed, is coming to St. Petersburg. Construction of the 7.4-mile trail segment began in 1990.

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**The Stories: Day Three**

**SPC Seeks Funds to Expand**

By Thomas C. Tobin

Official are planning and seeking money for a major new campus in Seminole for St. Petersburg Junior College.

The school's board of trustees voted in August to approve the campus after a state report predicted more of the state's enrollment increases that already have led to overcrowding. Also, according to estimates from the state's board of trustees, the new campus would be in full operation by 1990.

The initial $645,000 would cover costs such as surveys and a master plan for a 300-acre site the college purchased in 1977. But with or without the money, the college intends to begin initial planning for the campus within 60 days, Kurtler said.

He also said the college is considering other sources of funding, including donations from corporations and a temporary county property tax.

The college is a part of a statewide system of junior and community colleges that allows anybody with a high school diploma or equivalent degree to go to school.

The proposed Seminole campus raises some questions:

- Some question building a new campus, when the state can't afford to hire new teachers and maintain the present one.

- They say they wouldn't build a new campus if they could only use the present one.

- The new campus may cause extra traffic in an already crowded area.

- College officials think the new campus will help to attract new students.

- But in fact, they say, the new campus will be a burden on the state budget.

The state Board of Community Colleges has requested $110,000 in additional funds to cover the costs of operating the new campus.

The college is considering other sources of funding, including donations from corporations and a temporary county property tax.
The STORIES: DAY FOUR

COUNTY OBJECTS CROSS BAYOU MARINA

By Aliza Caldwell

Pitkin County commissioners voted 5 to 0 Tuesday to deny a request for permits to build a 48-slip marina in Cross Bayou. In a 5 to 0 vote Tuesday to deny a request for permits to build a 48-slip marina in Cross Bayou.

The developer had proposed to dredge 6,133 yards of sediment from the bottom of Long Bayou and Cross Bay. That's enough sediment to cover three and a half football fields with a foot-deep layer.

The proposal would deepen a cut in an oyster bar and create two others in the bar to improve water circulation in the area.

The developer had proposed compensating the damage by placing 4,646 acres of oyster shell in the water to encourage the development of oyster habitat. The commission voted 5 to 0 against the proposal.

The problem was that the owners of state Department of Environmental Regulation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had not issued permits for the proposal. This is an immuno for the next step.

The county administrator and his environment

CRADLE OF RAPIDITY

By Elijah Gosier

The County Commission on Tuesday turned down a company's request to build a marina on Cross Bayou. But the 5-0 vote doesn't put the matter to rest. The owners said they likely will appeal.

On the surface, it seemed like a cut and dry case: A company named Gulf Coast Pilotties Development Corp. plans to build the project off the Bayou and the abandoned Seaboard Coast Terminal railroad track. They plan to use the property.

But what's the problem?

The problem is that the number of state and local agencies exist to limit the amount of damage

The company's proposal also included another about it contaminants from the marina contaminating the marina.

Coast officials also had argued that existing boat slips in nearby marinas were not full. A coast survey of 12 marinas in the area revealed that of the 400 slips, 120 or 15 percent were vacant.

Many environmental officials also had argued that the project, which had received approval from a number of other state agencies, ran afoul of several of the goals in the county's comprehensive plan for development.

NARRATIVE

By Jennifer L. Stevanovic

Janet Reardon would just give up, but not yet, to this close. The developer faced a major change, a tiny window of opportunity, and the railroad is going to be there with a driving sense of urgency that makes it seem like she's fighting for two guys on the other side, not two guys who want to build a marina.

She's getting ready.

The applicants are not developing the site in a timely manner. Reardon, a member of the board, said in an interview.

"If there was an over project that should have been approved, it should have been this one," she said, balancing a thick report on her knees.

Developers say that the marina site, which is owned by Medley and Canova, has been used for docks for more than 40 years. A buoy is already in the water near the site.

They said the county's objections about wildlife.

"This is not a pristine waterway," says Reardon. 44, who has been fighting these regulations for the last five years, chairs the Pitkin County Commissioners. She said that the project could "drive the nature of the coastal area to maintain or improve the quality, plant and animal diversity and esthetic productivity."

"The plan says the county should be expanding marinas, but not new ones."

If the developers do not improve the project, they will be prohibited from building a new marina until the developers improve the project.

The proposed 48-slip Bay Pine Towers Marina on Cross Bayou was approved by the County Commission on Tuesday to be built on the site.

"We need to take up what we came to Florida for," said Munir Khaan, former president of the St. Petersburg (Farnese) Association. He said the project was "off the radar screen." He noted the commission the vote was 5-0 to deny the project.

The county's attorney and his environment
council said the dredging and marina construction actually would improve the natural diversity in the bay. They argued that the "nature" of the basis already had been altered by the construction of a bridge in the 1980s, and by cement dumped by trucks. The dredging project would move the basis to its normal depth by removing the cement and the sand and soil that the developer helped to form.

They said the bridge would improve the water, and the area would attract more wildlife, would stop the sand dumping that takes place there now, and would get rid of the transients who live there.

"I truly have not been persuaded," said County Commissioner Steve Seibert after the vote.

"But I'll be co-opted," she says in a whis.

The woman who just gave a 48-minute talk.

"No comment," she said.

"I am not a lawyer."
THE READERS &
THE RESULTS

Each night after the stories appeared, batteries of telephoners called random samples of Times home-delivery households and questioned adults about their reading habits and that day’s paper, ultimately focusing on the experimental story.

WE ASKED READERS:

- How much of the story they read and whether they followed the jump.
- What they learned, using true-false questions.
- How fair, balanced and well written the stories were.
- Whether they cared about the subject, whether the stories connected with their own experiences and whether the stories made them want to find out more and/or get involved.

Each night, we interviewed at least 220 people, for a total telephone sample of 964. Because this sample favored older and better educated people who were strong newspaper readers, we sought out another sample of younger, less educated people who read newspapers less often. A week later, we asked 210 adult students at a St. Petersburg vocational-technical school to read the same sections and answer the same questions. While this additional sample compromised our desire for natural newspaper reading, we felt it was essential to include less literate, less loyal readers.

Based on the total sample size, the statistical odds were no more than one in 20 that the findings discussed below could be due to chance.

WHAT WE FOUND

We found that writing matters to readers. We found that, rather than simple answers and one-size-fits-all solutions to the reading puzzle, the tools for connecting words and readers are as complex as the language and the people. We found a well equipped toolbox that offers many ways to communicate—depending on the type of reader, the nature of the information and the goal of the journalism.

We found that there is not merely good writing and bad writing, but rather various kinds of effective writing in a dynamic process that begins with the story conception and flows through writer-editor consultation, reporting and execution.

And we found out how little we know about writing and reading—how much more we must know if we are to rebuild the intimate relationship between readers and newspapers.

First, it must be acknowledged that the writing/reading relationship clearly is not the most important factor in newspaper readership. That primary consideration probably is more behavioral, related to modern lifestyle. Then, even after the reader picks up the newspaper, the writing is not paramount. There is the presentation (so effectively addressed in The Poynter Institute’s recent study, Eyes on the News?), and perhaps even more important, there is the subject matter. As other research has found, bad writing will not deter readers from a story about pets, and the best writing will not interest everyone in the zoning board.

After all that, however, our research found that the words make a difference.

Readers of different ages, education (or literacy level), reading habits and gender read stories differently and rated the reporting and writing techniques very differently. While many groups and modes were not very different from each other, what follows are the differences considered significant. In each case, the statistical analysis controlled for the other factors.

HERE ARE FIVE MAJOR CONCLUSIONS:

1. The traditional, inverted-pyramid style that dominates newspaper writing does not work very well with readers. It has some strengths, fulfilling some readers’ expectations of news stories, but more weaknesses—particularly with the people who are less likely to read newspapers today. By all measures, across the board, the traditional stories failed among readers with less than a high-school education.

2. Storytelling techniques offer great potential for newspapers. Averaging all kinds of readers and all four stories, the narrative versions tended to outscore the others. They simply were better read, and they communicated information better.

3. Older, loyal readers and women are less picky; that is, they were more willing to sort out different styles. Younger and less frequent readers—those whom we are trying hardest to reach—favored the narrative and radical-clarity techniques.

4. Perhaps because it is alien to the prevailing newspaper ethic, or because it can feel condescending, the point-of-view technique did not fare well among most readers and thus seems to offer the least potential. The only exception was the less-educated reader, who appeared to be reached most effectively by point-of-view.

5. Newspapers aiming at a less educated readership should reconsider their reliance on traditional writing and experiment with the other techniques, all of which worked better with such readers.

HERE ARE DETAILS:

AGE. In general, as expected, the older the reader, the more the stories were read and the more favorable the evaluation, regardless of technique. These older people are loyal newspaper readers who will accept any of the techniques. But older people were generally lowest on getting involved in the subject matter of the story; over and over, the researchers heard that, while older people enjoyed reading the newspaper, they kept the subject matter at arm’s length—they just didn’t want to get involved.

If an editor wants to reach young (under 30) readers, the narrative and radical-clarity stories are better read than the other techniques, and narrative remained strongest for the mid-aged (30-64 year-old) group. For both of those groups, that is, everyone under 65 years of age, the traditional stories were the least read.
The youngest group also learned best with narrative stories (and most with traditional versions).

On the evaluations of quality, readers of all ages rated point-of-view the worst, probably because of the judgments, or bias, inherent in the mode. The youngest readers also ranked radical clarity low on quality, even though they read them.

**EDUCATION.** Again as would be expected, the least educated readers read less of each technique than better educated people.

But there are important and useful differences among the modes, some of them seemingly at cross purposes. The least educated (without a high-school diploma) not only read radical clarity the most (and traditional the least), they also rated it the highest quality (and, again, traditional the lowest). But they learned the most from point-of-view and narrative (and the least from traditional), and they said the point-of-view stories involved and connected them best.

The narrative stories were best read by both of the two better-educated groups, and the mid-educated people — those whose education stopped at high-school graduation — considered the narratives of highest quality. On the other hand, these high-school graduates learned best from traditional stories — and worst with narrative.

The best-educated group — whose education went beyond high school — considered traditional to be the highest quality, but they learned the least from that mode — and the most from narrative stories. To further confuse matters, this group of presumably good readers felt the radical- clarity and point-of-view modes connected and involved them more.

**GENDER.** In agreement with other research showing that women tend to be more thoughtful, thorough readers, they tended to show little differences among the techniques, indicating their readership problems may be more related to other issues, such as subject matter.

Among the reporting and writing techniques, men were more complicated and contradictory. They read the narrative stories the most. While they read the traditional and point-of-view stories the least and rated point-of-view lowest quality, they learned the most and got more involved from point-of-view.

**NEWSPAPER READING.** Naturally, people who normally read newspapers more days of the week tended to read more of all four techniques. In evaluating quality, frequent (at least four days a week) readers liked the traditional stories best and point-of-view least, perhaps because of what they are used to. They felt the narrative stories did not get them involved.

The infrequent (3 days a week or fewer) readers: learned most from narratives and least from point-of-view, became more involved through traditional stories and felt radical- clarity stories were of low quality.

For another perspective of the same findings, here is how each of the techniques fared:

**TRADITIONAL.** The traditional stories did not justify their predominance in today's newspapers. Women gave them the highest quality evaluations but did not learn as much from them as they did from the other stories. The best educated and most loyal readers seemed to believe the traditional stories were higher quality, perhaps because they are accustomed to them and best equipped to decipher them. The traditional mode was least effective at pulling readers across the jump.

**POINT-OF-VIEW.** For most readers, the least effective mode was point-of-view. Over all readers, that technique had the lowest quality ratings. While men rated that technique highest on learning and involvement, they said they did not read as much of those stories and rated them low in quality. Contrary to expectations, younger readers were not particularly attracted to read point-of-view, nor did those stories get them involved in the subject matter. The best educated readers rated point-of-view lowest on quality, presumably offended by the judgments made in that technique.

However, even point-of-view has its uses. Interestingly, the least educated readers learned most from that technique and became much more involved with, or connected to, the point-of-view stories.

**RADICAL CLARITY.** The youngest readers did not think this technique was high-quality journalism, but they said it connected with them, got them involved. The least educated readers read more of the radical- clarity stories and gave them the best quality ratings. But those same readers, as well as infrequent readers, said these stories did not get them involved.

**NARRATIVE.** Readers generally found a lot to like in the narrative stories. Men read more of these stories, including the jump, than they did other techniques, though they did not get very involved in the subject matter. Young and mid-aged readers read more of the narrative stories, and the youngest people learned best from them. High-school graduates (with no college) thought narrative stories the highest quality and got them most involved, though that disappeared with people educated beyond high school. While infrequent readers learned the best with narratives, frequent readers had trouble connecting with them. The narrative technique was most effective in pulling readers into the jumps.

None of the techniques was clearly superior at all times for everyone. Each of the techniques worked best for some people and some stories in some ways. In a number of areas, the results seem almost contradictory: While a reader might read more of one technique, he or she might learn better from another, consider another to be of higher quality and become more involved from still another technique. This reality complicates the job of the editor or reporter, who might select a particular technique based on the subject matter, but also on whether the story primarily seeks to induce readership, convey substantial information, entertain the reader or move the reader to action.

This finding also encourages editors to consider creative combinations. For example, one might use a storytelling technique to capture the reader's interest, then add a radically clear sidebar to communicate hard information on the subject. Or, to snag scanners, an editor might present a hard summary box, so the reader of a narrative story won't be frustrated in a search for an early "nut graph."

FRANK DENTON
The sets of boxes depict what statisticians call a “path analysis,” that is, a way of showing cause-and-effect relationships among factors. The arrows represent statistically significant relationships; the absence of an arrow indicates the lack of a significant relationship. The bold arrows indicate stronger relationships.

Here is how to decipher the diagram:
In all four modes, the reading of the stories led to positive evaluations of story quality, and with one exception — radical clarity — reading of the stories also led to personal involvement in the subject matter.

The more interesting relationships are how readers got from the reading of the stories to knowledge about the stories. With the traditional mode, readers had to believe a story was of high quality before they would learn from it. With the narrative technique, some readers learned through their evaluations of quality, but others learned the information simply by reading the story. Quality judgments had little to do with learning from the radical-clarity stories; simply reading or involvement — caring about the content — led to learning. With point-of-view, readers achieved knowledge only if they believed the story to be of high quality or if they became involved in the subject matter.

From this diagram, one might conclude that the narrative technique performed best in generating learning from the stories. That is because, with narrative, there are two paths to knowledge, and one of them is direct, from simply reading the story. With traditional and radical clarity, there is only one path, and with point-of-view, both paths are indirect, requiring positive evaluation of either quality or involvement before learning is achieved.

Another way of looking at the diagram is by the goal of the story. For example, if the reporter wants to make the reader care and do something about the subject, radical clarity is not the best technique. But if the reporter simply wants to communicate information and if the narrative mode is inappropriate, a radical-clarity approach would work best.
WHAT REAL-LIFE RESULTS MEAN FOR REAL JOURNALISTS

This experiment did not achieve the kind of polarized results editors might prefer, results that point to clear courses of action. As Poynter agitators for writing reform, we would have leapt with joy if narrative and radical clarity had trounced traditional in depth of reading, making the jumps, overall quality and comprehension with readers across the board.

Under laboratory conditions with readers essentially alike, writing all the stories ourselves and therefore pushing the modes further apart, we could achieve clear oppositions. But real life ain’t that simple. Real stories in real newspapers, written and edited by real journalists, and read by real readers, produce real results, that is, as complex as real life.

Furthermore, we invented three of the four modes. We took three techniques used in writing hard-news stories (narrative, radical clarity and point-of-view) and blew them up into full-fledged story structures. We can interpret the results to suggest some enhanced uses for these three techniques as storytelling tools.

Generally, reporters should incorporate narrative techniques into stories to lead readers through the whole story. Those techniques include actually telling stories, focusing on action, characters and chronology. Narrative techniques reveal mostly by showing, with a little telling for framing.

Furthermore, reporters should spell out assumptions and explain things, but not to the point of boring readers. More importantly, as one of the reporters, Jennifer Stevenson, says: “Radical clarity is a terrible way to write a story. . . It reads like the back of a cereal box. But radical clarity is a great way to report all stories.” The relatively high comprehension scores in this experiment resulted from the writers practicing radical clarity in their reporting, and from the editor asking radical clarity questions.

This study has taught us a lot, and we can suggest some actions that real editors might take in their real newsrooms:

- We should encourage more of this kind of reading experimentation, using real reporters and real readers in real time.

- We should continue to explore the relationships between certain groups of readers and certain story forms. How do we meet the needs of many different kinds of readers if, as this research suggests, they connect with varied ways of telling stories?

- We should insist on the separation of newstelling from opinion. Readers can tell the difference and want them kept apart.

- We should encourage storytelling in news stories. Narrative techniques encourage readers to make jumps and read more deeply into stories.

- We should think of our traditional form (Inverted pyramid and AP style) as A form, rather than THE form. Reporters should keep traditional stories short, because readers seem less willing to make the jump in this mode.

- We should use radical clarity not as a story form, but as a test of reporting depth. Can reporters explain everything to themselves and their editors without assumptions?

- We should use radical clarity for parts of stories, not the whole. We might think of radical clarity as a sidebar form.

- We should stop talking about "the reader," and start talking about "readers."

- We should remember the highly interactive nature of reading, a process in which different kinds of readers bring a rich variety of needs and interests to their encounters with news stories.

- We should remember that reporting, writing and editing work best as collaborative processes.

- We should train our reporters and editors to accept and use new forms and techniques. Even experienced and talented journalists needed retraining and coaching for this experiment.

- We should take chances, experimenting to find the forms that serve our readers rather than ourselves.

DON FRY and ROY PETER CLARK
WHAT OUR REAL JOURNALISTS LEARNED

KIM KLEMAN, City Editor

It's a typical day in your newsroom: too many stories, too few reporters and a deadline that comes too damn early. So you, City Editor, dole out the work the best you can, with each reporter getting one, two (our record is six) stories to write. Your staff is talented; they work the phones well. Then the copy is off to you for a quick fact and spell check, a little tinkering with the lead, and then DEADLINE!

And we wonder why no one wants to report local news anymore, why experienced reporters deem it dull, trivial and beneath their talents. The problem is doubly troubling because good local news is what our readers want most, and is generally regarded as the future of newspapers.

The ASNE project involved a week in which we covered local news differently, and better. Of course, I'll never again have the luxury of assigning four reporters to the same meeting, although my application is already in for the next ASNE project. But "over-covering" four news stories showed me the possibilities that exist for local news when we spend more time thinking about our coverage. They are possibilities regardless of what this project discovers about writing styles and readers.

The project also forced me to come to terms with some common but generally undesirable practices that newsroom culture helps create and sustain. I offer these tips:

1. Make your reporters get out of the office. You go too.

Unfortunately, the face-to-face interview is the first thing to go when deadline approaches and there's a phone handy. At other times, staying in the newsroom all day is a matter of laziness. For each of the four experimental stories, even the government-meeting story, at least one reporter was charged with going into the field and finding some "real people" to talk to.

What a difference it made in the liveliness of the copy and the reporters. They were having fun and became interested in their stories. Another boost is that the public saw we cared enough about the news to spend time reporting it. Of course, this edict involves a trade-off: time. But it's often worth postponing a story so that another can be reported and written to its fullest.

2. Make a big deal about local news. Get a group of reporters together to discuss future coverage of a local issue, as you might assemble a team to discuss a project. That's not to say all of them will be assigned to report or write the local news story, but new ideas and interesting approaches will flourish. And they'll feel flattered you thought enough about their opinions to include them.

One of the stories in our project, a new recreation trail for our city, was seemingly cut-and-dried until the four reporters and I were sitting around and one of them asked to see a map of the trail route. It stopped just short of the city's black neighborhoods. Bingo! A good story. The more diverse the group you assemble, the better your ideas will likely be.

3. Give yourself time to edit for style. I talk to reporters throughout the day about their stories, so I don't get too many surprises on deadline. Still, I rarely have time to edit a daily story for style. The ASNE project was refreshing because we built in the time to really edit, making sure the different writing styles were sustained throughout the stories. The reporters were pleased that we had time to pay attention to their writing.

4. Challenge reporters to take risks writing. The project limited our reporters to four writing styles, but it was really more liberating than restrictive. Most reporters, it seems, use a traditional news approach with an occasional narrative lead. This project forced them to try something different and challenged them as writers.

5. Take time to evaluate coverage after deadline. Typically, we get out of the newsroom after the stories are written and edited. But the project reinforced what a good idea it is to review our coverage after deadline. We decided what worked and what didn't, and how to go about reporting the next day. Again, the approach helps reporters to grow and gives them a clear focus for tomorrow's coverage.

6. Read this and don't laugh. Even as the University of Wisconsin researchers were computing the statistical significance of the project's findings, one fact was certain: Readers love pet stories. Two local TV stations picked up one of our project stories, a throw-away piece on giving pets as holiday gifts. One station even led with the story. So while you're changing your newsroom to help local news reporters deliver better copy and feel more stimulated, remember your readers. Find them some puppies.

ALICIA CALDWELL, City Government Reporter

Wrestling my bicycle from my car's hatchback, I whacked my chin against the handlebar. I passed to think for a moment. Here I was in the middle of a work day in a park about to go for a bike ride. For a simple government story. Not bad. Maybe even worth the unmitigated grief from fellow reporters at the Times. They'd say, "How many reporters DOES it take to write a 10-inch County Commission story?" Laughter followed.

Then they'd say, "How many EDITORS does it take to read it?" Belly laughs this time.

And then I'd explain what we were doing and what I was learning. Simply put, I found it an interesting exercise in journalistic calisthenics.

ALICIA CALDWELL
Some obvious, and not-so-obvious tenets of the craft became more distinct to me. And I certainly enjoyed working with the people from The Poynter Institute, who have got this coaching business down to an art.

In running through our paces, it became clear that to make these story forms really distinct, we had to report them very differently.

I guess I had never looked through that end of the telescope before. What I do, and I think what many reporters do, is report the story thoroughly and then let the form spring naturally from that harvest of facts. Most times, the form is a hybrid. Maybe a narrative top, a traditional midsection, and a narrative kicker. It’s no secret that reporters tend to fall back on tried and true story recipes that have their roots in reporting techniques.

It occurred to me that the decision to take a particular story approach has to be made very early on. When you’ve returned to the office with a notebook bulging with facts, it’s almost always too late to change the approach, unless you have time to do some more reporting.

This project gave me the opportunity to examine more closely how the string you gather while reporting is fundamental to the story you knit.

And it gave me a chance to hang around in a park on a beautiful winter day in Florida. Not bad at all for a government story.

ELIJAH GOSIER, City Desk Reporter and Columnist

I have always been uncomfortable with the notion that journalists dissect their job into two separate functions, reporting and writing.

My discomfort, I think, hinges on the fact that too often the reporter gathers bland facts, most of them by phone, and then the writer, more by turn of phrase than by understanding (or feel) for the material, sits down to make of them something worth reading.

We rarely bring personalities back in our notebooks. We bring “talking heads” and the quotes that will fit in here or there, often as much for typographic aesthetics as for understanding.

That tendency assures that news will continue to be a throwaway item, and that readers will keep looking to media that give them more than just the bland facts.

We tell our readers what happened and who did it, but we don’t give them the reasons it happened. And for good reason: We often don’t have enough understanding ourselves. We don’t know the people well enough.

If this experiment, as I suspect it will, shows the need to inject more people, not just their names, titles, vital statistics and disjointed words, into our stories, then I will consider the time well spent.

During the experiment, my colleagues on the project seemed to agree that it was important to know beforehand the form in which the story would be written so the reporting could be done accordingly. I think what we have discovered is just the opposite: A thoroughly reported story can be written in different formats.

That means that the feelings surrounding an issue should be observed as surely as the brass tacks of it. That means the reporter should have as good an understanding of why something is happening as he or she does of when and where it’s happening.

The reporter should know who is being affected and to what extent.

The argument I can hear even now is that we don’t have the time to do that in the course of our daily deadlines. And besides, some stories don’t deserve that much time or attention.

The response seems obvious, but calls for a major rethinking of the way we decide what the news of the day is. If we judge a story underserving of the thorough reporting necessary for multiple formats of presentation, haven’t we then also judged the story underserving of space in the paper, where it just gets in the readers’ way?

The lesson the experiment reinforced for me was this: Reporters look for information; writers need understanding. It helps to wear both those hats from the start.

JENNIFER L. STEVENSON, Feature Writer

How shall I begin this report?

With a pithy anecdote featuring a character showing action? (Narrative)
A question clearly presenting a problem, then offering an immediate answer? (Radical Clarity)
A strong statement? (Point of View)
Or just maybe a straight sentence. (Traditional)

No doubt about it, the four forms of writing we experimented with during the 10-day project presented a great challenge. One day, we had an opinion; the next day, we were explaining in excruciating detail what a junior college is.

It was a great experience for me. As frustrating as it sometimes was, I loved every minute.

As a writer who concentrates on the narrative form, flipping in and out of the different modes invigorated my writing and forced me to consider the many ways to write a story.

It also forced me and the other writers to consider the different ways to report a story. Perhaps, this is one of the more important and probably less noted benefits of this project.

We all learned, I think it is fair to say, that radical clarity is a terrible way to write a story. Just terrible. It’s dull, it’s dry, it reads like the back of a cereal box.

But radical clarity is a great way to report all stories. No matter which story form “wins” with readers, we journalists can relearn the lessons we first undertook as cub reporters when we didn’t know a damn thing.

Ask every question you can think of. No question is too dumb or difficult.

Make sources explain everything. In detail. Don’t know what a junior college really is, or why it was set up? Ask.

Complex road projects need to be explained. The way money is allocated must be analyzed.

Why?

The more you master a subject, the fewer mistakes you will make.
That’s obvious, of course, but experienced writers learn real fast how much they need to “fill” a certain number of inches. By reporting with radical clarity,
you may stumble onto new facts that lead the story into different and more exciting ways.

It keeps sources on their toes. By asking specific questions, often repeatedly, you also may catch your source in a lie. Or in our case, you may learn that your sources don’t really know the answers themselves. We got four answers on one question. Finally, the guy hauled down the big book, looked it up, got the answer right, and our readers finally learned the Pinellas Trail was 23.5 miles long.

Important? Not always. But it could be. When I was covering the Super Bowl in 1989, I casually asked if an all-white parade planned to celebrate the game would upset the NFL.

It did.

Eighty-nine stories later, the parade was changed, the segregated club that sponsored the parade was integrated, and Tampa started to think differently about its black and white residents.

You just never know.

That’s why you ask.

**TOM TOBIN, Clearwater Bureau Reporter**

In Florida, you get your lottery numbers on Saturday night after the late news. A model stands behind a see-through tank filled with numbered ping-pong balls propelled by forced air, darting around like atoms. Each time she presses a lever, a ball shoots up a tube.

Watching this, it occurred to me: Isn’t this the way we write?

When a reporter has finished reporting, information and ideas swirl in the imagination like the balls in the lottery tank. At some point, an impulse will act as the lever, sending one of them up the tube.

THWOOP. It suddenly comes to you that a story should be written a certain way.

THWOOP. Up comes your lead, followed by transitions and phrasing. Style and tone evolve as you go.

Writing is often such a random process. So it felt strange during our recent exercise to be told before the writing began exactly how a story should look and feel.

We hope this experiment will teach us more about what makes readers read. The results will give us one more factor to consider before we embark on stories.

But I’m hoping the results don’t lead to newsroom edicts that all stories closely follow the form or forms found to be most readable in this particular survey.

To do so would be to strip away the spontaneity and diversity that gives life to each day’s newspaper. Who’s to say exactly what propels a reader through a story?

For me, it’s often the mood I’m in before I start reading, and no newspaper can alter that. There are days when I want the facts straight and fast, when a narrative lead would be irritating. And there are days when I want to be coaxed into a story with an anecdote or a sweet turn of phrase.

The variables abound. And no one knows this better than Frank Denton and his team of researchers. They took extraordinary pains to account for as many factors as possible.

We should learn from them by using their study with the same thoughtfulness and care they took in putting it together. We should use it as a guide, as a starting point for even more interaction with our readership. Perhaps other newspapers will want to take up similar projects with their audiences.

And, after some effort, maybe more people will start reading again. If that happens, it will feel like winning the lottery.
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