



Nuts & Bolts

Edited by [Bob Baker](#)

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Writing long: Don't start typing until you can break it down

The longer you're going to write, the simpler and more refined your organizational plan has to be. If you're terrified of formal organization (those outlines they made us do in English class), take the easy way out: Break your story into an arbitrary number of chunks—say, six. It doesn't have to wind up that way, but it forces you to confront the course of your story from beginning to end, and it keeps you from trying to “discover” your story structure at the keyboard, which with longer pieces is suicidal or stupid or, on many occasions, both.

For fun, you can work backwards, taking a published story and trying to break it down into its most elemental sequence to give you a sense of the flow you want to create in your own pieces. J.R. Moehringer's 126-inch profile of a collector of lynching photos is an interesting target because it uses a straightforward structure to attack a complex story: the life and times of a collector of lynching photos.

In reading the story, which ran Aug. 27, you'll notice that while the issue is highly nuanced, the writer's language and transitions are intentionally plain, as if to compensate for the nature of the story. (Sort of the way a batter chokes up on the bat with two strikes to keep more control of his swing.) You could, if you wished, deconstruct J.R.'s story as a sequence of six big chunks:

Section I--The opening scene: This scene introduces the issue (the heated interest over lynching photos) and the protagonist, James

Allen. J.R. is known as a stylist but watch how deliberately he moves--short sentences, parallel structure, each new fact taking you just a bit further into the story. There's only a snatch of description of Allen. The point is to get you on board for the long haul, to make you willing to explore a notion that would make many of us turn away and quit reading:

NEW YORK--There isn't room for everyone who wants to see.

The gallery can't hold more than a dozen people at a time, so the crowds who come each day to see the exhibit must wait. Today, one of the coldest days of the year, the wait is three hours, and still the line stretches down the block.

The exhibit features 68 vivid photos of American lynchings. There is a photo of Frank Embree, a black man whipped across his legs and back and chest, then hanged. There is a photo of Lee Hall, a black man shot, then hanged, his ears cut off. There is a photo of Bennie Simmons, a black man hanged, then burned alive, then shot to pieces. There are photos of men and women, hanging from trees and bridges and telephone poles, most of them black--a small number of the 5,000 blacks killed by white mobs, mostly between 1880 and 1940, mostly in the South.

Most of the people waiting to see the photos are black too, though circulating among them is a man as white as the snowflakes wafting through the February air. He is James Allen, the 46-year-old owner of the photos, the well-known antique collector from Atlanta who set out to use his collecting skills to make people see, to find lynching photos that would "shock the country." Judging from the line outside this gallery on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, he did just that. Judging from the look in Allen's eyes--which are blue and big behind Harry Potter glasses--he shocked himself as well.

Section II--The confrontation: In those first four grafts the writer encircled the issue and the protagonist. Now, due to some luck—the unexpected appearance of a black celebrity—J.R. is able to introduce us to a powerful sub-theme: how blacks, in particular, are torn by this exhibit. Stevie Wonder is inside the gallery to ask Allen some questions. The scene takes 21 grafts but it ends with a powerful, engaging question that pulls the story along. It happens when Wonder asks Allen this simple question:

“What inspired you to do this?”

J.R. uses the question to foreshadow the essence of the story:

It's the first time a black person has asked this question, asked it pointedly, with an audience gathered to hear. But it won't be the last. As thousands of Americans, blacks in particular, confront Allen's horrifying collection of photos, they will often react by confronting Allen himself. Some will be angry. Others will be more like Wonder: They will shake Allen's hand warmly and thank him for what he's done--then ask in the next breath why he did it.

Was he motivated by compassion--or money? Is he a crusader--or a voyeur?

Faced with black anger and suspicion, Allen will tend to look wounded. He will pause and close his eyes and struggle to make his motives clear. After devoting years to the search for photos of lynchings, there will be days when it all feels secondary to this other search, for the best way to explain himself, for the right words to allay the fears of people he set out to help.

In the end, however, the two searches will seem the same--each an obsessive quest to make people see.

Section III--The beginning: We go back to the start of Allen's days as a collector, finding out when he bought his first photo. Then we move forward, discovering how he began his quest, how he learned the sordid history of lynching. (The reader gets the benefit of the same history lesson.) We learn gracefully--almost incidentally--that he is gay, and how that contributed to his motivation, and finally we witness an expanded chunk of African American ambivalence, ending with another excellent transition that will push us backwards yet again, into a more narrowly drawn biographical section about Allen, focusing on his personal development. The bio had to be split; we weren't ready, earlier, for this much information about Allen. We didn't understand his quest enough to care. We need to be shown, in more detail, how his work affects

black people. Here are the last two grafs of Section III, as J.R. recounts the experience of a black L.A. actress, Kymberly Newberry, who sees Allen's book in a bookstore:

Newberry spoke to the manager of the store. She beseeched the sales clerk. She asked, what's the point of this? What good can come from this?

Then she opened the book. She couldn't stop herself, and when she saw what was inside, on page after page, she wanted to know just one more thing: Who the hell is James Allen, and why did he do this?

Section IV--The pre-collecting years: Bam, the next graf opens with the answer...

He was raised in Winter Park, Fla., a middle child in an Irish Catholic maelstrom of 11 brothers and sisters. He was the one who didn't quite fit in, who had an unusual fascination with rare objects. Instead of bikes and toys, he would ask his parents for Chinese vases.

...and keeps moving. This section shows us the tenacity and obsessiveness of Allen's collecting and ends with a scene in which a visiting cameraman asks Allen how he, a white man, explains this eerie brutality by other white men. Watch how J.R. suspends the dramatic moment and quickly shifts out of the scene, runs through an unanswerable litany of theories, and then comes back to let us hear Allen's answer:

When the interview ends, the cameraman, who is black, has one last question. Allen braces. Here it comes. But the cameraman, sifting through Allen's stacks of lynching photos, only wants to know if Allen has any explanations for why lynchings happened.

In fact, there are endless theories. Economic competition. Institutional racism. Sexual confusion. Some even blame a sharp rise in black crime. Allen can recite them all, and often does. At the moment, however, only one comes to mind. "There are just some sorry-ass white people in this world," he says.

The cameraman laughs bitterly.

We don't need the writer to explain or reconcile the answer or the laugh. The story has already built the foundation for each reader to make that interpretation—and to begin the journey home in two chunks.

Section V: The money motive--This gets its own slot because the allegation that Allen is doing this for money is so sensitive. Ambivalence among blacks is once again on display, and an earlier character, Kymberly Newberry, reemerges so that we can see her peculiar plight: She can't get her friends to talk about the book with her, so painful are its contents.

Section VI: The speech of a lifetime--The transition to the final section comes simply, as a contrast:

And yet, no matter where Allen goes, there isn't room for all the people who want to see.

On a sweltering night in mid-July, Allen is the featured speaker at Fisk University, the historic black college in Nashville. A crowd of nearly 200 is on hand, nearly all students and professors, nearly all black....

What happens here is unusual: Rather than building speed as it heads to its climax, the story slows down. The writer, as a director would, creates an almost slow-motion effect as Allen confronts a room full of largely suspicious people, and tries to explain his motives with a detailed story about one lynching in Waco, Texas. It goes on for 12 grafs, some of them long. For another dozen grafs, the last dozen grafs of the story, most of them quotes, Allen talks about

why he tried to put a face on hatred. Yet there is still ambivalence in the room and the writer must confront it. Allen stops, and the story ends this way:

He takes a step back, his glasses fogged with tears, a look of relief on his face. He's explained himself, at last. He's made them, and maybe himself, see.

For a moment, the room is perfectly still and quiet. Then most of the people in the audience--but not all--rise to their feet and applaud.

The biggest lesson of this story is control. For every increment your story grows, your organizational discipline ought to grow by twice that. Let's say you normally work in the 30- to 40-inch range, and are about to try to write a 60-inch story. If you are used to spending a half-hour plotting your stories, you ought to spend two hours evaluating your material on this one, testing the flow, visualizing the beginning, middle and end. That's not two hours making notes on the screen or trying out leads; it's turning off the computer and spending two hours with your notes and a notepad, plotting ways of bringing order out of chaos.

A writer's guide to Column One

Column One is evolving on two levels in an effort to distinguish itself from other A-1 news-features which often appear in bottom corners of the page.

Column One Editor Roger Smith says one focus is on topicality: Corner stories usually deal with policy, government or trends. By contrast, Roger is trying to increase the proportion of Column Ones that are human-interest-driven, telling distinctive stories about how and why people behave the way they do.

Consider, Roger suggests, Amy Wallace's pieces on the war for choice seating at Hollywood premieres and the high cost of Tinseltown divorce. Or John Thor-Dahlburg's feature about Paris' Friday night skating festival. Or P.J. Huffstutter's piece about the cult of Internet needlepoint design-sharing. Or Davan Maharaj's profile of a lawyer who's filed 82 lawsuits in two decades. Or Jonathan Peterson's profile of a conservative industrialist who has played a key role in the anti-globalization movement. Or Eric Bailey's day-in-the-life profile of a third-party presidential candidate. Each of those stories took you into small, special, usually unknown worlds.

(And they didn't spend as much time taking you there as traditional Column Ones. Those five stories were between 43 and 56 inches. That means gutting stories of duplicative or secondary quotes, obligatory tangents and other issues that serve largely to prove to the audience that the reporter did a lot of work.)

The second focus is on the way these stories are told, and is an effort to preserve and extend the narrative form of the old "Saturday Journal." Roger characterizes it as a departure from the traditional anecdotal lead-nut graf-exposition structure, in favor of more vibrant, distinctive forms of storytelling.

Reporters and line editors are, on occasion, being asked to rethink their reporting and writing on traditional "survey" pieces that probe a phenomenon by presenting the experiences of several individuals. That is a perfectly good way to tell many stories. Now, however, if the

opportunity presents itself, reporters may be asked to develop the issue primarily through one character's life. They may also be asked to consider whether the story has narrative potential—a chance to take the reader on a chronological journey.

“This isn't going to happen overnight,” Roger says. “But we would like to gradually increase the number of Column Ones that focus on human interest and human behavior and do tell the story through narrative, or through the point of view of a central character. These types of stories can take some extra space if the tales demand it. We just want to be sure that each one is worth the candle.”

Since 95% of The Times' Column Ones bubble up through the ranks of reporters and line editors, rather than being assigned from above, it's crucial for writers to stretch themselves and take more risks, and for their editors to encourage it. It's equally crucial for writers and editors to follow their instincts and not try to anticipate what Roger wants. Stories can be twisted out of their natural shape by editors trying to mind-read. “Everybody, writers and editors, needs to write and edit stories the way they want them to appear in the paper,” Roger says. If you've got a possible Column One and are unsure whether it lends itself to pure narrative, feel free to call Roger (Ext. 77187) or, if you can't get him, Bob Baker (Ext. 76870) for a chat—and then make a decision that feels right in your gut. The long Times tradition of tea-leaf reading should end immediately.

You've noticed some Column One-quality features appearing in Southern California Living. It's an effort to make our feature section a showcase for first-class features. Acting Southern California Living Editor Bret Israel says he's trying to attract features about subjects and people from every corner of the newspaper. Bret particularly values stories where subjects intersect at unusual avenues: “I'm interested in getting into the paper stories with no natural constituency or beat.” If you've got a feature that doesn't seem to “fit” your section, consider approaching Bret (with your editor's approval).

Taking stock of your pressure points

Stress is often used as a synonym for pressure, but technically it is the response of the body to any demand made upon it. (Scientists refer to the cause of stress as the stressor.) Researchers have pinpointed the body's response technique, a mobilization of—

WAIT! Who has time to talk about this? The phone on your desk in the newsroom is ringing! C'mon, pick it up. On the other end you hear an angry voice preparing to tear into you for the story that appeared in today's paper.

Now, you broke your butt on that story and you're already a little peeved about not receiving as much praise as you expected. As the caller's attack continues, your brain launches a process as old as your cave-dwelling ancestors. It prepares you to fight back. You can feel your insides tense as you prepare your verbal comeback.

There will be a crucial difference between you and the caveman, however. As the caveman saw his attacker coming, his endocrine system began producing the arousal hormone adrenaline,

which alerted and aroused the body by mobilizing sugar into the blood and redistributing it to the body's potential "action centers." Later, as the physical conflict began, his nervous system released a larger amount of the chemical noradrenaline, which helped maintain blood pressure.

But in your telephone clash, there is no violence; there is merely the anticipation of it. As a result, your body releases mostly adrenaline. You are aroused, ready--needlessly. The visceral part of your brain has detected a physical threat, and has placed your body's defense mechanisms on alert, even though there is no physical danger.

And that can cause problems. Experts have found that the rush of chemicals in these repeated, unneeded stress reactions has disturbing physical effects. It can cause physical illness, such as ulcers and hypertension, and an unpredictable array of mental problems as well.

That rush is what you're getting on the phone this minute. You put down the receiver, having argued back successfully, but still feeling a peculiar sensation that most of us write off as anger. Subtly, however, the damage has been done.

No matter how much you enjoy pressure at work, you are continually confronted with the necessity of exceeding your tolerance. Gradually you adjust, and your tolerance level is raised a few more notches. Yet eventually you may reach that frightening cliff where you have to choose between your health and your responsibility for doing your job the "right" way, as defined by yourself and your bosses.

No one can work in news without at least occasion-ally approaching that precipice. But you can control the frequency of such encounters by taking a hard look at your relationship to the job—by doing a better job of analyzing where your job pressures come from and how often you needlessly encourage them. As famed stress researcher Hans Selye once suggested to his audiences: "You cannot control your mother-in-law, but you can control the way you respond to her."

Categorize the stress that you can control. Then start looking at the other kinds of situations - those in which you don't feel able to control your response to pressure. Gradually you will find that you--not just the news circumstances, not just your boss--are responsible for some of your responses: the intensity you exhibit at work; the amount of time you spend rethinking a story you wrote the other day; the amount of anxiety you unleash worrying about career advancement. When is it helpful to push yourself, and when is it counterproductive? How have you built up unwarranted tension? How can you change your work routine without diminishing your effectiveness?

When job pressure plagues you, try making a rough mental list of the pressure points, the factors that seem the most stressful. A sample might include, in no order of importance:

Unpredictable overtime

Deadlines

Night work

Frequent fear of being unable to obtain vital information

Frequent letdowns when anticipated information does not surface

Fear of looking foolish in print

Distrust of editors, anxiety over lack of control once copy is in their hands

Anger, provoked by criticism
Prejudice, suspicion and hostility from uncooperative sources or readers
Lack of leadership or direction from editors
Inability to meet or understand editor's expectations
Facing the unknown
Constant awareness of what work is due "tomorrow"
Pressure for productivity at expense of quality
Boredom from insufficient assignments, lack of challenge
Need to play office politics in order to advance

How often does each situation surface? Is it more likely to be caused by circumstances of the news flow or by individuals? How often are you the individual responsible for heightening the pressure? How often does your performance improve as a result of your willingness to put more pressure on yourself? How often does your performance falter? When you put more pressure on yourself, how often is it done with a precise goal in mind? How often is it done out of a general, obligatory feeling that you should be working harder? Which of those two attitudes produces the best results?

Separate the pressures that are uncontrollable and/or beneficial from the ones that are controllable and/or unhelpful. Once you've made that distinction, there are tougher decisions to be made: Of the uncontrollable /beneficial group--the inevitable pressures--which, if any, are taking too great a toll on your emotions or your body? Is there room to change the way you work? Is a more drastic change needed?

Advocates of "holistic" health, who claim that physical and mental well-being are completely dependent upon each other, try to persuade people to take a closer look at the connection between their work and their bodies, between their professional and emotional sides. They might tell you, for example, that introverts tend to make better use of information stored in their memory (in-depth reporting) than extroverts, and that introverts make the best use of their powers if not driven hard (vulnerability to deadlines). Extroverts, on the other hand, tend to enjoy noise and bright colors, seem to actively seek stimulation and tend to remain stable under pressure.

The implications of such studies are obvious for an editor making story or beat assignments. For reporters, they demand an answer: Are you working in the right kind of job? If the pressure load seems unbearable, is it possible you are having to fight too hard against your inadequacies?

In our business, there is precious little time or encouragement for you to pursue the search for the right level of pressure to govern your life. Yet unless you can construct such a state of grace, you will not fulfill your potential as a writer.

Cliche of the month

The winner is "to be sure," an affectation that often can be stripped out. "To be sure" is a reminder we ceaselessly use for emphasis. But if you're writing with decent transitional logic, the reader is in synch and doesn't need this pretentious help. Watch as we line-out the phrase in five examples culled from three recent days:

To be sure, Compton, population 100,000, is not the first city to outsource a major department. Forty of the county's cities already rely on the county Sheriff's Department for police services, and 54 municipalities are... (Metro, Sept. 7)

To be sure, recent turmoil in the stock market has not discriminated, taking a toll on Latino dot-coms with poor revenue-generating capacities. For example, Phoenix-based QuePasa.com, a bilingual portal targeting U.S. Hispanics, laid off a third of its staff in... (Business, Sept. 6)

Toyota's 2000 MR2 Spyder is a car of possibilities, some realized and some not.

To be sure, it's an easy car to like: light, quick, nimble and quite well-mannered, which is the rule with modern sports cars.

But this obvious competitor with Mazda's venerable Miata... (Highway One, Sept. 6)

"Turn It Up" boasts strong musical selections and an effective score by Frank Fitzpatrick. It has action and violence, to be sure, but it may prove considerably more serious and uncompromising than its audience expected. (Calendar, Sept. 6)

To be sure, most workplace dealing would hardly resemble a full-fledged drug-running operation. Workday transactions typically involve small amounts of contraband and... (Valley Business, Sept. 5)

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