

MARCH MEETING

Just the Facts, Ma'am: Using Historical Research to Enrich Your Writing

BY DAVID EPSTEIN

Joe Friday could have saved some shoe leather if he'd had access to the Internet. But he'd still have had to get out on Sunset and Vine and talk to the bartenders and would-be starlets that inhabited his TV



Robert Loerzel

Hollywood. Our March speaker, author and freelance journalist Robert Loerzel, has a similar message about doing and using historical research to make your writing more lively.

Maybe you just need a good anecdote related to your subject or a fact for a magazine article. A quick search on Google books might be sufficient, or one trip to the library. Maybe you're researching a criminal trial for a book. That could take months or years, but if you're lucky, you'll find rich material in newspaper articles and court records—the sorts of details that can make a factual story read more like a novel.

Loerzel will describe several searchable archives of newspapers that have recently become available on the web. Barely a decade ago, searching for an old *Chicago*

Tribune story required tedious hours of looking through microfilm. Now, the entire run of the newspaper, including advertisements, is searchable on the ProQuest website. Various newspapers from around the country are searchable on the subscription service at www.newspaperarchive.com. And the Google news archive search engine makes it possible to search all of these databases simultaneously. Lengthy research tasks can now be accomplished in seconds—sometimes even if you're looking for an antique needle in a very moldy haystack.

However, finding an article in these databases may be just the beginning of your search. Many newspapers are still available only on microfilm, so finding an 1896 article in the *Chicago Tribune* may send you hunting through the microfilm archives of other newspapers at the library.

Looking for books that mention a particular person or topic used to be a painstaking chore, but with the Google books search engine and the www.archive.org website, you can now find the references you're looking for in the most obscure books. However, often you find a mention of the person you're researching but you

can't actually see the page, or there's only a reference to a periodical. So it's off to the library again.

Old-fashioned research at archives and libraries is still essential. Most personal letters and government documents are not in any searchable form, and many of them are barely indexed. Loerzel will offer tips for doing research at the Harold Washington Library, the Newberry Library, the Illinois State Archives, university libraries, and historical societies. He'll give examples of some breakthrough discoveries, as well as the frustrations of not finding what you've looked for long and hard.

A camera is now a valuable research tool, since many libraries and archives allow you to take pictures of documents. A good scanner and OCR software are also essential. And you need to come up with a system for organizing all your information—both on your computer's hard drive and in the old-fashioned filing cabinet.

Loerzel is the author of *Alchemy of Bones: Chicago's Luetgert Murder Case of 1897*, published by the University of Illinois Press. He attended the University

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN/ROGER RUEFF

On Dreams

I'm thinking about dreams this afternoon—probably because when I woke up this morning, my girlfriend asked me, "What were you dreaming about last night?"

"Why?" I asked.

"Because at one point, you shouted, 'No!'"

Man, I don't know. Unless I was dreaming that some evil genius had developed a time machine and was going back to change the results of last year's presidential election. Or I was reliving Kurt Warner's ill-advised, game-changing, goal-line pass with time running out before halftime in this year's Superbowl. But neither of those situations would have caused me to call out and puncture the fragile membrane that exists between dreams and the real world.

I do remember a dream I was having just before I woke up, where I was sifting through sand at the marshy end of a clear, shallow lake, looking for tiny flakes of gold and finding them where no one else could. I remember collecting them in the palm of my left hand and trying to figure out how much they weighed and what they'd be worth at the current price of gold. I also remember finding a small hex nut among the nearby reeds and trying to determine whether it was made of gold or just very shiny brass.

Interpret that one for me.

I don't remember my dreams these days like I did when I was young. I've read that forgetting your dreams is a consequence of aging—and, of course, that's a double-entendre. But certain dreams stick with me still, and the ones I do remember these days are doozies.

The other night, for example, I dreamed that I was on the phone with my brother in Dallas, whose successful architect stepson has (in the real world) been embroiled for years in custody issues surrounding his precocious now-preteen daughter, G. His ex-wife (G's mother) left him years ago for a male stripper, then began stripping herself, and has since been involved with four other men, one of whom she married and would still be living with nowadays if he weren't doing 25 years in prison for securities fraud—and whose now-toddler son she bore to him after the sentencing. She divorced him last fall and is dating someone new these days—a military man who likely knows of her past only through the highly skewed filter of her self-serving stories. And she's fighting the architect stepson for control of her daughter's education. He wants G to go to the school that helped launch his nephew into Harvard. She wants G to attend a public school near her home.

They went through mediation, then a civil trial where a court-appointed psychiatrist opined to the judge that G was in danger—that the environment of the mother's house was clearly toxic.

"Did you call the authorities to have her removed from the home?" the judge asked.

"No, Your Honor."

"Then she can't be that dangerous. Case dismissed."

Now, they're in criminal court, and a thousand outcomes hang in the balance, including a possible perjury charge if the mother decides to get creative under oath.

G lives in a world with few



constants. She has a step-brother from her father's remarriage and half-brothers from both sides of the trial. And her mother's parade of paramours has left her without the sense of a stable male figure in one of her homes. (One of the paramours, it turns out, even helped G create a MySpace page in which he encouraged her to list herself as 20 years old and looking.)

In short, my brother and his wife are among the few stable elements in G's life. They worry about her constantly and spend as much time with her as they can.

I don't think about the situation all that much—I'm too far removed to fret about it and have met G only twice—but something inside me must care, because last Monday morning, I woke with a start from the dream in which I was talking to my brother on the phone. I remember quite clearly even now what he said. "Well, we don't have to worry about G, anymore. She committed suicide last night."

The dark cloud of that notion hung over me all day. I felt like calling him to make sure that G was all right. But that would have just caused him to worry, and there's too much of that going on these days as it is.

Not all of my dreams are quite so disturbing, of course. The flying dreams of my 20s and 30s, those were fun—as is the occasional lucid dream... the one just shy of an out-of-body experience where you wake up inside the dream, aware that

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Want to Really Engage Your Audience? Feed Them a Good Story

BY JENIFER ESTABROOK BYSTRY

Studs Terkel said, “People are hungry for stories.” Philip Martin asks, “Are they hungry for yours?”

Martin is the series editor of the award-winning *The New Writer’s Handbook*, director of the consulting and publishing entity Great Lakes Literary (www.GreatLakesLit.com), a folklorist, author and blogger. Consistent with his philosophy that writers learn in many small bits, his presentation to a full house at IWOC’s February meeting was dense with rich insights, useful tips and, of course, engaging stories. We heard about atheist bus campaigns, intruders surprised by Thor, and babies going home with the wrong families, along with many other tales.

But why is the art of storytelling relevant to business writers? Because, according to Martin, no matter what we’re writing, we want our readers to connect and remember. Studies show people best retain information delivered in narrative form. And advertisers know that facts revealed in a fictional format generate less skeptical and therefore more receptive viewers. It’s that human element in a story that can engage our audience’s imagination rather than their critical thinking.

How can you succeed at storytelling where others may fail? Martin says to make sure you hit these three marks:

Grab your readers’ attention. Verbal clues like “Something really interesting happened to me today...”

can open the door for readers and invite them in by signaling the start of something worthwhile. But to truly elevate the art of your storytelling, think eccentricity. Odd is good, said Martin, who encouraged us to test the norm by opening our stories with something quirky or unexpected.

Make the story stick in their minds. Of course, a well-executed plot is key to good storytelling. But Martin said the traditional beginning-middle-end analysis doesn’t do much for him—and plot isn’t as easily applied to business writing. Instead, he encouraged us to focus on pattern. Pattern, he explained, is the organization of carefully selected detail.

To become a “detail master,” first and foremost, master detail selection. Details are not description for description’s sake, Martin argued. They offer the opportunity to impart poignant and essential information. Be intentional and leave room for your readers to insert their imaginations.

A detail deserving special attention is sense of place. It’s what gives a story roots, yet Martin finds that sense of place is often overlooked. For instance, he advises writers to tell people where they live. Where you’re from (or where your client is based) gives people a point of attachment. What values does being a Midwesterner connote? What corporate culture does being a California company imply? What style of personal interaction does being from the South suggest?

The second aspect to mas-

tering details is to place them in pleasing patterns using techniques such as the Rule of Three: alliteration, parallel sentence structure, and the power of the five senses. For a compelling example of detail mastery, Martin read the opening paragraph of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*.

Get them to care. Your readers don’t have to agree with your story, but they do need to care enough to have an opinion about it. To get them to care, connect with them on a human level and make sure they understand what happened and feel satisfied with it.

Martin said he frequently is disappointed by stories with no payoff at the end. He said a story is not just a string of events. Instead, as Mark Twain counseled, “A story goes somewhere and arrives somewhere.” To satisfy readers, fulfill your theme, answer the question, and deliver what you promised. In short, give them the payoff they’re expecting.

When working with a theme, Martin suggests doing what author Jack Hart does. He writes the theme at the top of the first page as a compass to keep him going in the right direction. Martin strongly recommends Hart’s book, *A Writer’s Coach*.

Where might you incorporate all this good advice into business writing? Martin gave many examples, including:

Case Studies. To illustrate the power of case studies, Martin cited the example of Intuit’s QuickBooks Case Studies on the Internet. The site features over a dozen

customers recounting how QuickBooks products make their lives easier by making their businesses more manageable. The inherent credibility of a third-party testimonial can be far superior to anything an organization has to say about itself. Even one good customer story on a website or brochure can have great sway, said Martin.

FAQs. Like a story, FAQs show two “characters”—the questioner and the answerer—solving a problem. Martin encouraged us to keep that story nature in mind when crafting FAQs.

Brand Story. Martin says the brand story is the big story. Why do your clients do what they do? An organization’s history, values, and unique character are just some of the many elements that can be imbedded in its brand story. He gave the example of Nike, which trains all its employees not only to know in detail their brand story, but also to pass it on to customers. Similarly, you can use your own brand story to differentiate your services from those of other writers.

Anecdotes. Martin urged us to take our anecdotes to a higher level by using his suggested storytelling techniques—especially details with punch, an entry point that’s most effective, and eccentricity to keep examples fresh and memorable.

Blogs. Martin is a big fan of blogs and sees many benefits of them, including generating customer loyalty, word-of-mouth advertising, and personalized customer

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President's Column *Continued from page 2.*

you're dreaming.

Which brings me to the nature of dreams—what they are—and leads me to conclude that I don't know. My rational side says they're nothing more than an electrochemical hodgepodge—the brain making sense in phantom flashes of the world it experienced during the day, sorting through memories to compose a rational picture of the world.

My non-rational side is not so sure.

Years ago, when I worked as a research engineer, I attended an afternoon meeting with three of my older peers—men who had worked for the company far longer than I... rational, by-the-book, engineering types all. I don't remember the subject of the meeting, but I do remember that while we were waiting for one last attendee to show up, the subject of the pre-meeting banter turned to dreams. And that one of the men, who hailed from Australia, mentioned something that had happened just a few nights before... when he'd woken suddenly in the middle of the night to find his brother, who still lived in Australia, standing at the foot of his bed.

The image of his brother, he said, was as solid as any of us—and just as real. The brother, he said, was calling to him silently, beckoning him to come home because there was trouble.

In moments, the dream-like vision disappeared, and my Australian peer was left with the sense that something was amiss.

He picked up the phone and dialed his father in Australia.

"Is everything all right with (his brother)?" he asked.

The father was startled and more than a little surprised.

"Yes," he said. "He's perfectly fine. But your mother's been in an accident and is in the hospital."

At the end of the recounting, we were speechless—all of our pre-meeting icebreakers dulled and sheathed by a tale told outside its appropriate context. Like the dream itself, the retelling had crossed the boundary into a world where it didn't belong, which is part of the reason that, all these years later, I can recall the moment so vividly and picture the room and the four of us sitting in silence.

Such is the power of dreams. 🐾

February Recap *Continued from page 3.*

service. For a best-practices example, Martin pointed to the Lincoln Sign Company's blog at signsneversleep.typepad.com. Lincoln's motto is Every Sign has a Unique Story, and on their blog they tell each one of those stories, which includes a link to the customer's website. Likewise, some of their customer's websites include their sign story and a link to Lincoln's blog. Explained Martin, the best marketing is for customers to want to tell your story to someone else, but you need to give them a vehicle to do it. A link to your blog can be that vehicle.

Martin was surprised at the low number of hands indicating those of us with blogs. He encouraged all IWOCers to initiate a blog, even if we already have a website. Websites, he said, are static and updating them can be problematic as compared with blogs, which are dynamic, readily accessible and provide a feedback mechanism. For more encouragement and how-to information, see recent posts on Martin's own blog: <http://www.writershandbook.wordpress.com>.

Cultivating our storytelling skills may not just improve your writing; it may enhance our life. Martin says we pass 20 to 40 potential stories every day. By opening our storytelling eyes and ears, who knows where inspiration will take us... 🐾

Calendar

March 10

IWOC Monthly Meeting. Author Robert Loerzel will tell us how to use historical research to enrich our writing, and we'll learn where and how to find those elusive facts from long ago. Tuesday, March 10th at National-Louis University, Room 5008, 122 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. Program 6 p.m. Networking 5 p.m. Nonmembers, \$15; IWOC members free. Buy-your-own dinner follows. Nonmembers welcome. For more information, call 847-855-6670 or visit www.iwoc.org.

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

March 26 (4th Thursday)

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

April 2 (1st Thursday)

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

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of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, earning a bachelor's degree in journalism. He worked for Pioneer Press Newspapers and has received numerous awards from the Illinois Press Association, the Chicago Headline Club, and other press organizations for investigative reporting, feature stories, and his editing work. He has a website at www.robertloerzel.com. His articles have appeared in *Chicago* magazine, *Playbill*, *Crain's Chicago Business*, the *Chicago Reader*, the Huffington Post and other publications. He is currently writing a book about Chicago in the early 1900s.

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