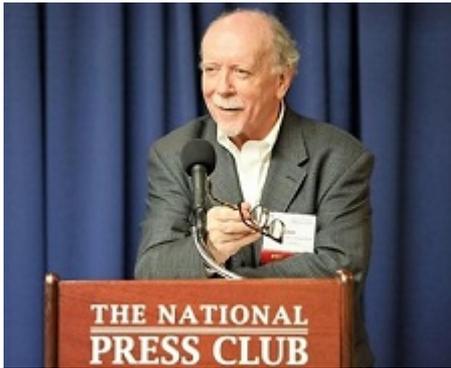


# Two of the Best Writing Stories You'll Ever Read: With Life-Long Lessons for PR/Journo Writers



*Don Bates, New York University*

Anecdotes and stories are especially revealing because they're based on the truth of experience. Here are two of the best regarding essential writing lessons.



## 1. **What Humorist Nora Ephron Learned Early About Getting to the Point**

In one of her funniest, most revealing books, "I Feel Bad About My Neck," Nora Ephron recalls a lesson from her high school journalism class on how to write a story lead, in this case for the school newspaper:

“The best teacher I ever had was named Charles Simms, and he taught journalism at Beverly Hills High School in 1956 and 1957. The first day of journalism class, Mr. Simms did what just about every journalism teacher does in the beginning – he began to teach us how to write a lead. The way this is normally done is that the teacher dictates a set of facts and the class attempts to write the first paragraph of a news story about them. Who, what, where, when, how and why. So, he read us a set of facts. It went something like this:

*‘Kenneth L. Peters, principal of Beverly Hills High School, announced today that the faculty of the high school will travel to Sacramento on Thursday for a colloquium on new teaching methods. Speaking there will be anthropologist Margaret Mead, educator Robert Maynard Hutchins, and several others.’*

“We all began typing, and after a few minutes we turned in our leads. All of them said approximately what Mr. Simms had dictated, but in the opposite order (“Margaret Mead and Robert Maynard Hutchins will address the faculty,” etc.). Mr. Simms riffled through what we had turned in, smiled, looked up and said: ‘The lead to the story is, “There will be no school Thursday.”’

“It was an electrifying moment. So that’s it, I realized. It’s about the point. The classic newspaper lead of who-what-where-when-how-and-why is utterly meaningless if you haven’t figured out what the significance of the facts is. What is the point? What does it mean? He planted those questions in my head.

“And for the year he taught me journalism, every day was like the first; every assignment, every story, every set of facts he provided us had a point buried in it somewhere if you looked hard enough.”



2. **How David Poulson  
Helps Academics Write Smarter for the Public**

Professor David Poulson teaches environmental journalism and advises academics how to write more effectively for the public about environmental matters. One scientific paper he came across was titled, “Grasshopper and Locust Farming as a Sustainable Source of Protein for Non-Ruminant Livestock and Humans in Kenya.” He quickly suggested a far better, two-word alternative: “Eating Bugs.” Which headline would you want to read?

**The Abiding Questions these Stories Tell**

These stories illustrate two key questions I ask over and over in my writing courses and writing workshops about the content of headlines, leads, quotes and other essential [PR/Journo](#) writing ingredients. To wit:

What’s the “big picture” message you need or want to impart to your target audience, not to yourself or your company or client? And how can you say it clearly in the fewest possible words?

Master the inherent dynamic in these and related questions and I guarantee you’ll become a better PR/Journo writer regardless

of how skilled you are at the moment because you'll have a lot more to write about that's on target for what you're paid to accomplish.

***About the Author:** Don Bates, APR, Fellow PRSA, conducts public and private PR-writing workshops in the United States and abroad. He also teaches writing at New York University, and is a senior counselor on PR-agency management and M&A for Gould Partners. Email: [db155@nyu.edu](mailto:db155@nyu.edu). #writingstories*