THE POLICE BEAT

CAUSE/EFFECT
CONTEXT CLUES
The Police Beat

by Wayne Dawkins

an excerpt from My First Year as a Journalist

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Young reporters often get assigned to cover the police beat because it requires a lot of energy. You definitely learn from it, but it’s a beat that doesn’t get the priority it deserves. It really deserves experienced people because it’s a sensitive beat.

A lot of things in journalism you learn by osmosis. Coworkers don’t tell you directly and textbooks can’t teach you, but in certain situations you have to make ethical calls by trusting your instincts. No one is there to tell you the right course of action to take. In interviews, for example, you can ask official sources really tough questions because they’re sophisticated about talking to the press. But it’s different when talking with ordinary people, and you need to know when you may be taking advantage of them or invading their privacy. I try to make it as clear as possible that I am from the newspaper, that my intent is to write stories, and not try to mislead them. Being so eager to get a story, some reporters may misrepresent themselves.

Five or six reporters and two editors were based at my office. There was a strong New England influence at Westchester-Rockland newspapers, which felt different from my first journalism experience as an intern in Brooklyn. With hard news and fast-breaking stories, the Argus editors were very detail-oriented, making sure you got all the essential elements. There was so much breaking news, but if you had holes in your stories, the editors still would ask, “What about this? What about that? Was a weapon found near a crime scene?” I wouldn’t be angry at the editors for asking. I’d be madder at myself for forgetting to ask in the first place. They wanted this information, so I’d pick up the phone and
call or find some other way to get it. Later on, I had a better idea of what questions to ask. You have to get those important details.

One of the biggest things I learned that first year is that you have to be accurate. The Argus is an afternoon paper, and covering the police beat, I was the only reporter who wrote on deadline. One of the editors, Nancy Keefe, would often yell at me, even when I was writing brief items for the police notebook, about minor style rules such as when to abbreviate “street” or “avenue.” It was a big thing to her. Aside from style, which is cosmetic, I also learned to make sure to get the facts right, the names right. Sometimes stories about events that had happened at six or seven that morning would get printed in the paper so quickly that the public could read them by eleven. When you’re writing with not that much time, you have to work hard to get it right, and when you get it wrong, you hear about it—that day.

There’s one mistake I always wince about. We ran a Monday feature called “Spotlight,” where each reporter on a rotating basis had to write a twenty-five-inch profile of a person in the community who had done something interesting in a job or hobby. I did one on a local woman, a schoolteacher, and I spelled her name wrong throughout the story. That was terrible. This was a profile, not just a story that I had to write fast. You don’t take things for granted, especially with names.

The paper also emphasized good writing. At newspapers you often have very strong writers, or very strong reporters, and some with a rare ability who are good at both gathering information and telling a story. I learned a lot about both, although I’m probably a stronger reporter. If I can go out and look at something, or interview someone face-to-face, I can craft a pretty good story. Some people can sit in their offices and turn out beautiful copy without seeing what they’re writing about. I have to see it.

My editor, Nancy Keefe, would take time working with me on writing. After I was there about seven months, she left and was replaced by Steve Burgard, who also came in early and read a lot of my copy. Steve, who is now at The Los Angeles Times, always asked a lot of questions about facts in the story. It wasn’t that he changed things. He just wanted to make sure he understood the story and that the details checked out. I knew why Steve was doing what he was doing. If something was wrong, he’d point it out and say, “Maybe you should do it this way.” Some editors annoy reporters because they make changes without asking and ruin the meaning of a story. The rare times when there was time, stories would kick back to us, and we’d get another chance at trying to improve them. I’m grateful for that. There are a lot of reporters who think they’re hotshots¹ and who don’t know how bad their copy is. I got rigorous training where I worked. When I moved on, my stories didn’t have to be heavily rewritten.
I had decided to be a journalist when I was fifteen. My favorite subjects in school were social studies and English. I liked to write and read, and had developed the newspaper reading habit. I was used to seeing my parents read the paper, and I had an uncle in Panama who was a newspaperman. I started as a sportswriter in high school, covered sports in college, then switched to news stories, and eventually was an associate editor. I now have bachelor’s and master’s degrees in journalism, and I’m glad I do. I have some designs to teach.

At the end of my first year in Mount Vernon, I joined the National Association of Black Journalists. Recently I wrote a book, Black Journalists, The NABJ Story, a history of modern-day African-American journalists who have broken into mainstream journalism since the 1960s. I felt there was nothing out there that told that story. I feel an obligation as an African-American journalist to increase our numbers in daily journalism and all parts of the craft.

1 hotshots: slang for people of impressive, often aggressive skill
QUESTIONS

1. How did Dawkins change after working with the Argus editors?
   A. He learned to ask the right questions for a story.
   B. He learned to meet deadlines in a timely manner.
   C. He began to check his own work for errors in grammar.
   D. He became familiar with the newspaper-making process.

2. Dawkins regrets having misspelled a person’s name in a profile he wrote. Why is this error more embarrassing to him than other errors he has made?
   F. His subject was a schoolteacher.
   G. He had a reputation to maintain.
   H. His editor failed to catch the error.
   I. He had no excuse for such an error.

3. Read these sentences from the article.

   . . . she left and was replaced by Steve Burgard, who also came in early and read a lot of my copy. Steve, who is now at The Los Angeles Times, always asked a lot of questions about facts in the story.

   What is the most likely meaning of the word copy?
   A. a printout of a newspaper
   B. editorial criticisms of writing
   C. grammatical concerns in writing
   D. text that reporters write for the paper
4. Using what you have learned from “The Police Beat,” explain why the duties of a newspaper editor are important. Use details and information from the article to support your answer.

5. “The Police Beat” was written in the same style as

   F. a news report.
   G. a formal speech.
   H. a persuasive paper.
   I. a personal narrative.

6. Why did the author write “The Police Beat”?
   A. to present the lessons learned by a first-year reporter
   B. to encourage the reader to take up a career in journalism
   C. to describe the process by which a report becomes a news story
   D. to relate the experiences of one reporter while covering crime stories
ANSWERS

1. A
2. I
3. D
4. EXAMPLE OF A TOP-SCORE RESPONSE:
Newspaper editors are responsible for making sure reporters have written the essential elements and details of a story. Editors must be certain there are no holes in the reporter’s story and may assist the reporter with the writing of their story to make sure it does not violate style rules. Most important, it is the job of editors to check the accuracy of information in a story before it goes to print in the newspaper.

5. I
6. A