

Why I Write: Q. and A. With Seven Times Journalists

How did you become a reporter? What's the strangest or most interesting thing you've ever written about? How would you describe your writing process?

These are some of the questions we posed to New York Times journalists as part of our ongoing celebration of this week's [National Day on Writing](#).

Seven Times reporters from a variety of beats told us what they write, how, and why — even if, for at least one of them, the storytelling is more often done through multimedia than words.

Jump to any individual reporter's answers, or scroll through to read them all:

Simone S. Oliver, Styles | Jeffery Delviscio, Foreign | Margalit Fox, Obituaries | Michael Luo, Investigative | Dennis Overbye, Science | Fernanda Santos, Education | Pete Thamel, Sports

If you like, [post a question](#) and indicate whom you'd like to have answer it. Reporters will respond to selected questions from students for the next two weeks, and we'll add their answers here.

Meanwhile, our collaborators on this initiative – [The National Writing Project](#), [Figment](#) and [Edutopia](#) – have asked the same questions of a variety of kinds of writers on their sites as well. See our list at the end of this post.

Simone S. Oliver, Senior Producer, Styles

How did you become a reporter?

I became a reporter (of sorts) accidentally. At the end of college I wanted to be a teacher and study child development. After I did an internship with The Times, I wanted to be a copy editor. But I realized over time that I love telling stories. I also learned that the medium doesn't matter. It could be a printed article, a blog post, an [audio slide show](#) or a [video](#); it's all storytelling. In order to tell a great story and to do it well, you have to get all the details. That, for me, is the fun part.

What are the things you're most proud of having written, from any time in your life?

I've always wanted to write a novel and when I was in college I wrote some short stories that were published in our school's online journal. Since then, it was [my first New York Times article](#) and a few articles I've written for the Styles section including, a piece about [Foursquare](#); a piece about [fashion and crowd-sourcing](#); a [beauty exhibit that addressed standards of beauty](#) in our society; and an upcoming article about an old beauty company that's getting revamped in a major way.



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

How would you describe your writing process?

I would describe the reporting part as invigorating and inspiring. The writing part is excruciating. I usually do all the reporting first, take notes as I go along, then I sit down and flush out a first draft. Writing that first draft usually involves a lot of procrastination. I often get overwhelmed by all the information I've gathered. I also get caught up in fantasizing about making every single sentence perfect.

After it's finally on paper, I start editing out extraneous information and massaging the language so it sounds interesting to read. I have a tendency to write much longer than I should, so when given a specific word count it's hard to cut parts of a story that I have some kind of emotional connection to. I keep editing and rewriting until I literally sit up straighter with pride after reading each paragraph. When I feel it's ready to be filed to an editor, I obsess over the story for a little while longer and eventually hit send. The time between when I hit send and when an editor picks up my story feels like some of the longest moments of my life.

What's the strangest or most interesting thing you've ever written about or researched for a writing project?

It's hard to say. I get entrenched in every story I pitch. I have the luxury of pitching 95% of the pieces I write, as opposed to being assigned stories. I think one of the most interesting stories I've written was the one about the [beauty exhibit that deconstructed our ideals](#) — what's considered pretty in our culture, and the cocktail of influences that help shape those ideals. I did a [blog post for the Lens blog](#) in addition to the Styles section article with the focus on the prints taken by over 170 photographers. The subject hit home and it was wonderful to tell readers about this educational and

exciting exhibit. It's the kinds of show you'd want to take young girls to, then have a discussion afterwards.

How do outside forces influence or shape your writing?

As much of a cliché as it is, I'm inspired by people and the world around me. I write mostly about fashion, beauty, lifestyle and social networking trends. When I walk down the street I look at what people are wearing, how they walk, their facial expressions, how they interact and so on. It's all connected. And since fashion or style is just another form of expression, observing how people wear their garments, color their hair or even do absolutely nothing often lead to story ideas.

Why do you write?

I write because I believe in sharing information. I'm a journalist, so it's my responsibility to inform others. As a kid I enjoyed reading, whether it was novels, poetry or the newspaper. I respect the written word deeply. And so since I can paint or draw very well, writing and storytelling are my outlets and "share tools."

Jeffery Delviscio, Senior Producer, Foreign

How did you become a reporter?

First, I'd take issue with the title. I'm technically not a reporter. I'm what they call a "Web producer," though I also report and write occasional stories. Sounds like a TV title, doesn't it? The producer is an increasingly vital part of many kinds of news organizations, as the Web becomes the common language of the entire industry. But if the question is "how did I get into journalism," I have a bit of a circular story to tell.

I actually grew up inhaling the smell of newsprint every night. My father worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for 20 years. When I was young, I remember him coming home from work really late, smudged with ink and smelling like a printing press. It's a smell that you can only get if you open a paper wide, bury your face in it, and whiff big. Every hug was like being wrapped in the sports section. Developmental



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

psychologists are always talking about the importance of “nature vs. nurture” in how human personality develops. Newspapers were nurture at an early age for me.

But if news imprinted early on me, it took quite a while for the trait to be expressed. I took no journalism classes in grade school. Writing was a painful process. (My dad was a pretty harsh editor, in my defense.)

But I did adore science. I wanted to be a geologist like my rock-hound/chimney-sweep/earth sciences teacher, Mr. Flanagan. I loved gem shop crystals. I was fascinated by weather and its longer-term sum, climate.

I followed that love through undergraduate studies, onto ships dredging the Pacific Ocean bottom for clues to changes in past climate. I was even on track to become a scientist. But it was the writing that put a stop to that.

I found scholarly writing to be stifling. Scientific literature has such strict constraints—abstract, methods, results, discussion—it was writer’s paralysis in a scientific form letter.

I was much more interested in extracting scientific knowledge from a formidable mass of technical jargon, so that others could understand what it meant and why it was important. And I felt this way not just for climate, but all sciences. As a generalist writer, I could dabble as I pleased, following subjects that interested me, regardless of the branch of science to which they belonged.

I went back to graduate school for science and journalism and used that time to trade my scientific field kit for a reporter’s notebook, video camera and audio recorder. I got deep into new media back when papers were just starting to get serious about their Web sites. And I used those skills to grab a job at The New York Times straight out of school.

So today, when I come home, I don’t smell like newsprint like my dad did, but I certainly am smudged with news ink (digitally, of course).

What are the things you’re most proud of having written, from any time in your life?

My best writing always seems to come from the edges of the different eras of my life. My high school graduation speech (obvious); my undergraduate thesis (end of my sanity); my successful graduate school application (beginning of new insanity); my

[first page one story in The New York Times](#) (the “you’ve arrived” moment of any journalist); my brother’s wedding toast (I am a twin, so the end of the dynamic duo).

The commonality that ties all of this writing together is care and pressure. Care for the subject, and care for the result. Pressure to get it done, and pressure to move on with the next stage of life. If you care about writing for news, you will come to loathe that deadline pressure for the angst it brings — but you will also love the quality it wrings out of you.

How would you describe your writing process?

I have become a “meta-writer.” So this makes my process a little different. Let me explain.

In my job, words often come to me pre-written in need of a rewrite. The Web has a whole host of visual possibilities that many of our most seasoned correspondents have never considered. As a producer, I work with them to build their stories for the ear and the eye. Naturally, the teaching process can be bumpy at times. Many of them don’t understand, at first, how to do anything more than read their print piece verbatim for a radio or video script. I teach them to turn the material into something that sounds good for the ear while keeping it contextual to the images or video the viewer sees.

Here’s an example for you to compare: The print piece, [“Haitian Singer and His Guitar Fight Urge to Weep,”](#) and an interactive, [“Singing the Suffering of Haiti.”](#)

The two pieces make totally different inroads to the same character. Both are about a musician finding his way back from tragedy to some sort of “normal” through music. They are both powerfully written, but the interactive has to be powerfully mixed to really come across. You have to hear and see at the same time. And you can’t use all of the 1,000 words of the written piece in the interactive and still have impact. It takes a skilled writer to boil down the essence of the piece, while figuring out how to artfully write into and out of sound.

What’s really important to understand is that many of today’s writing jobs in journalism are ones of re-synthesis. Forget the lone writer hunched over a solitary screen. The multiple platforms of the Web mean that every piece of reporting now has multiple lives and multiple people to transform them.

And when you're not working on primary reporting, you're aggregating in print. With blogs, multimedia and status updates overrunning our digital lives, part of the challenge for any writer today is pull ideas and connections from all the noise.

So my advice would be to read widely — having expansive peripheral vision is hugely important. Edit often and incrementally. And try writing through mixed media like audio or video to maximize your flexibility.

What's the strangest or most interesting thing you've ever written about or researched for a writing project?

[“Bird Spit Fuels Housing Boom in a Remote Corner of Borneo.”](#)

How do outside forces influence or shape your writing?

The obvious answer is the news. Day-to-day, I sit inside a spinning vortex of it. On the Foreign desk, we have about 75 people reporting in from almost every time zone in the world. Add to that the three Twitter accounts that I manage and the multitude of blogs and news sites that I track and it's a wonder I have room for my own thoughts at all. In such an environment, it's hard not to be influenced simply by contacting the news cycle. The reporter a few feet to my right, for instance, is talking on the phone with [Nobel laureate Leymah Gbowee](#) as I write this. Each of these conversations—read, overheard or held directly—shapes how I write and think.

As for the other potential influences listed, they do factor in, but I would never start out a piece of writing thinking, “Well, I know our readership would like this,” or “My editor would want me to structure things like that.” The trick to finding your own voice in writing is to listen your own intuition and instantaneous perception. They inform what and how you write more than anything.

Why do you write?

Writing will always be the connective tissue of a story, no matter what format it ultimately takes. And that's what I've always wanted to be — a storyteller.

Margalit Fox, Reporter, Obituaries

How did you become a reporter?

I didn't become a reporter until fairly far into my career, and I kind of snuck in through the back door to get there. For my first 10 years at the paper, I was an editor at [The New York Times Book Review](#). It was a great job, but I really wanted to be writing my own stories, rather than cleaning up other people's. I began to worry that at the end of the day, a long, long time from now, the only thing they'd be able to put on my tombstone would be, "She changed 50,000 commas into semicolons." That really wasn't going to get it done for me.



Ivan Farkas

So while I was still in the Book Review, I started writing obituaries for The Times on a freelance basis, because there's always a need for them. That way, when there was finally an opening for a staff writer in Obits in 2004, I already had a track record as someone who could write obituaries. I applied for the job and got it, and have been there ever since.

What are the things you're most proud of having written, from any time in your life?

For obits, the [obituary of Leslie Buck](#), the man who created the Greek-themed cardboard cup that New Yorkers have been drinking their coffee out of for generations. That story made page one, which is relatively unusual for obits, particularly for obits of "unsung heroes" — people who aren't household names in the way that a politician or a movie star might be.

For feature stories, there's a long article I wrote for The Times's Arts & Leisure section about [the comeback of Rachel Barton](#) (now Rachel Barton Pine), a world-class violinist who lost a leg in a commuter-train accident when she was just 20 years old.

I'm also proud of my book, ["Talking Hands: What Sign Language Reveals About the Mind,"](#) published by Simon & Schuster in 2007. It follows a group of scientists working in a remote Bedouin village in the Middle East where, because of a high rate of hereditary deafness, almost everyone speaks a sign language that arose entirely on its own there. The book also discusses what the sign languages of the deaf reveal about how all human language, signed and spoken, works inside our heads.

How would you describe your writing process?

When one is a daily journalist, as I am, there is unfortunately never enough time for

research, let alone for research and writing! If I'm lucky, I'll get my assignment for the day as soon as come in to the newsroom, but, of course, people can die at any time, early or late. Ideally, I'll be able to take a couple of hours to speed-read articles about my subject from online databases and from our own "morgue" (from which we get the wonderful yellowing, crumbling old clippings that have been saved over the years); I'll also make time to do any additional reporting I need to to by phone. I try to hit the keyboard no later than 3:30, and file by 6. It's an adrenaline-fueled sprint, but that's what journalists train for.

What's the strangest or most interesting thing you've ever written about or researched for a writing project?

Other fun obits I've written include one for [the man who invented the Frisbee](#).

Right now, besides working at The Times, I'm trying to find time to finish writing my second book, "The Riddle of the Labyrinth," which is the true story of the race to decipher a mysterious Bronze Age writing system that was dug up on clay tablets on Crete in 1900 and not deciphered until 1952. The process of deciphering an ancient script is a lot like cracking a secret code, so it's a pretty cool story. I have to finish writing it by the end of this year, so the book will probably come out in late 2012 or early 2013.

How do outside forces influence or shape your writing?

As an obit writer, I am at the mercy of the Fates: We write about the important or interesting people who die each day, and since we have no crystal ball, we never know who those people are going to be. So in terms of our subject matter, it's always a new roll of the dice every day. As for my book writing, my major in college was linguistics, so I try to combine that with my journalistic training to write narrative nonfiction books about language. At least that's what I seem to be doing so far...

I'm also a cellist. (I played pretty seriously from the age of 12 through college and just started taking lessons again recently.) That helps me to think about the "musical" aspects of writing: tone, pacing, color, cadence and so on. Trying to write "musically" is one of the things I most enjoy about the writing process, whether it's for a deadline story at The Times or my book-writing life at home.

Why do you write?

It's a pleasure and a privilege to get to contribute to the public discourse and to be involved in the world of ideas. Also, it's frankly the only way I know how to earn my living. If I woke up tomorrow and found I'd lost the ability to write, I'm not sure what I'd do!

Michael Luo, Domestic Correspondent, Investigative

How did you become a reporter?

I wasn't one of those people who dreamed of going into journalism from childhood. I did love to read growing up and came to think of myself as a decent writer. So journalism was something I decided to try when I got to college. I worked for the school newspaper during my freshman year and started a campus magazine during my sophomore year. I was drifting, though, down the well-trodden path toward law school. I even took the LSATs. But I realized that I couldn't really see myself practicing law for the rest of my life. That's when I started to think about other possibilities, including journalism.



In the end, I figured I could simply give it a try for a few years. At minimum, I'd wind up with some neat adventures. Obviously, I wound up sticking with it.

I would say I gravitated towards becoming a reporter initially less for the love of writing and more for what writing could do. Over time, however, I've come to really embrace the writing part of it, the storytelling craft.

What are the things you're most proud of having written, from any time in your life?

I guess the most obvious answer to this question is to point out stories I've done that others have singled out for recognition. When I was a national writer at the Associated Press, I wrote a three-part series about three poor, black, mentally retarded inmates in Alabama who had been convicted of killing a baby that probably never existed. The series resulted in two out of the three people being freed from prison. (The third stayed in prison on another charge.) It won a [George Polk Award](#) and the [Livingston Award for Young Journalists](#). Here is the series: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#).

I'm also proud, however, of smaller, everyday stories I've done. I spent two years writing about the recession and the way it played out in regular people's lives. I took a lot of pride in being able to put a human face on the suffering going on in this country. A good example of that was a [story I did on how joblessness affects the children of the unemployed](#). I spent a lot of time with one family and tried to use their travails to tell the broader story of what was going on across the country, but I also wove in concrete data on what we know about how children are impacted when parents are out of work.

The saying for reporters, though, is you're only as good as your last story. In February, I joined the investigative unit at the Times, a big change for me because I now have the freedom to spend months at a time on stories.

My first project for the unit was a [nearly 5,000 word story](#) that ran in July on people with a history of mental illness getting their gun rights restored. It is a subject that no one had ever examined in-depth. I waded through lots of documents and data, but it also required a lot of good old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting. Arguably the biggest breakthrough in the story came more than three months into the reporting process, a testament to the importance of giving reporters time to dig.

Finally, I'm working on another gun-related project right now. I can't talk much about it yet. But I'm pretty darn proud of it.

How would you describe your writing process?

This is a hard question to answer for me, because I've done a lot of different beats, requiring different kinds of writing. Obviously, when you're turning around a story on daily deadline, the process is dramatically different from, say, what I'm doing now, producing stories that are several thousand words long, after several months of reporting.

Generally, though, I do like to sketch out a kind of rough outline. When I was a national writer at the Associated Press and did a good bit of narrative-type stories, I would sometimes map out my stories in scenes. When I'm doing only a medium-length enterprise story that I'll turn around fairly quickly, often the outline will just be a bunch of notes jotted down on a piece of scrap paper. But I like to ruminate on it a bit and will sometimes sketch out a couple of different versions. Nowadays, since I'm doing longer pieces that require distilling several months of reporting, a more formal

outline is usually needed.

An important part of writing for me, I find, is simply mastering the material. By the time I start writing, I don't like to be constantly digging through my reams of notes, flipping back and forth. That's why a detailed crib sheet that is both outline and memo with my best quotes and other details I want to make sure I highlight is so important. Sometimes I'll also have all my notes printed out and have little color-coded tabs so I can quickly flip to my best stuff. Other times, that might even be too much. I might put together a condensed version of notes with just the best material.

When it comes to the actual writing, I find that it helps just to put it all out there on paper first. I call it "throwing up words on the page." I have my outline, so I generally know what the different sections of the story are. I just try to thrash through them, getting it all out there. Sometimes I have to force myself to just put it down. Afterward, I can go through and tighten and polish. Even if what I have down is way too long, I think it helps to just get it out there to see what it looks like.

I think I like the tightening and polishing phase the best. Once the material is down on paper, I do a lot of printouts and scribbling on printouts. I'm always going through and crossing out sections and drawing arrows to move them around and scribbling in better ways of saying things. Then I go back to the computer and write it again. And then I print it out and do it again.

What's the strangest or most interesting thing you've ever written about or researched for a writing project?

When I hear the descriptors "strange" and "interesting," I think "quirky." I love those quirky stories that often occupy the corner of the front page. I did a lot of them, particularly when I was a metro reporter. One memorable example that comes to mind came from when I was Metro's transportation reporter, early in my career at The Times.

One day my editor, who was always brainstorming quirky story ideas, said to me, "Hey, you know those buttons that are at intersections that say, 'Push button, wait for walk signal?' Those aren't for real, are they? They're just there to give us the illusion that we're in control, right? Isn't there a story in that?"

I was initially skeptical and told him so. But then he sent out some stringers to go and push some of these buttons and time whether there was any difference in the walk

signals. When they started calling in their results, I realized, whoa, maybe there is something to this. Of course, they confirmed what my editor had surmised all along. They didn't do anything! So I called the department of transportation and asked them this question, "Uh, what's up with the push buttons?" The people in the press office had to look into it, but soon they came back to me with confirmation that most of these push buttons in the city did not work. There was an interesting story behind them, though. They were basically relics of the 1970s, before traffic signals became tightly synchronized by computers. By the 1980s, most of them had been deactivated. The D.O.T. eventually came back to me with a statistic that 2,500 out of 3,500 of these scattered throughout the city did not work. Yet New Yorkers continued to push them, blissfully unaware. It was such a revelation! So I did a front page story on the push buttons. The headline: "[For Exercise in Futility, Push Button.](#)"

How do outside forces influence or shape your writing?

When I was younger and just starting out in the business, I kept a "good writing" folder, where I'd keep articles I admired and wanted to emulate. I also read narrative non-fiction pretty voraciously. I think a lot of that influenced my writing style. Even today, every time I get done with a piece of good writing, whether it is a long-form magazine article or a novel, I have to believe some of that rubs off on me, even if it is just inspiration.

Earlier in my career, I was also heavily influenced by my editors. Inevitably, the way they approached writing shaped mine. So if they liked narrative stories, I moved in that direction; if they liked quirky stories, I did that; if they liked politics, so did I. As I've gotten older, I think my writing, particularly what I write about, is becoming more shaped by what I don't see in the newspaper. In other words, a lot of times I find myself gravitating toward doing what there is not enough of. I started writing really [people-focused stories on the recession](#), because I felt there was not enough of that in the paper.

When I covered the religion beat for a while, I tried to write about [the way faith played out in people's lives](#), because I thought too often coverage of religion has been conflict-oriented. These days, on the investigations desk, I take satisfaction in doing stories that no one else has ever done. Over time, I think I've also developed a better sense of what kinds of stories people are really interested in, what kinds of stories will generate reaction. And that shapes the stories I gravitate to writing as well.

Why do you write?

Something my twin brother actually said to me during a conversation early in my career as a reporter, when I was still trying to figure out whether journalism was for me, comes to mind with this question. We were talking about whether there was any overarching good that came from the stories I did. A lot of times people get into journalism to try and make a difference. That was definitely part of my motivation. But I quickly learned a lot of the stories I did made no concrete “difference” at all.

My brother said, though, that through my writing, I was giving dignity to people’s lives. I liked that and still do today. A lot of times that is what we are doing as journalists, capturing people’s lives and giving them dignity, whether they are people in some far off land, or here at home. That is why I write.

Dennis Overbye, Domestic Correspondent, Science

How did you become a reporter?

The short version of the story is that once upon a time, 35 years ago or so, I ran out of steam on the novel I was writing and wrote letters to every publisher listed in the Boston Yellow Pages. Out of it came a couple of job interviews and finally a part-time job at Sky and Telescope magazine as assistant typesetter and proofreader. I was making six dollars an hour, and behind my back my coworkers called me the six-dollar-an-hour man. I had to take an hourly wage cut when I got hired full-time.

What are the things you’re most proud of having written, from any time in your life?

If I had one thing to take to the grave with me it would be my first book, “[Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos](#),” a warts-and-all look at cosmology and the Big Bang. I’m also proud of an account of my adventures with Halley’s Comet and being a judge in the Miss Halley Comet contest in Australia in 1986 published in Discover, called “Once More With Feeling.” At the Times among the things I can think of are a [debunking of free will](#) and some essays, one about [love as the strongest force in nature](#) and one about the [Red Sox](#), and the [relationship of democracy to science](#). More recently, I’m



Lars Klove for The New York Times

especially proud of my [explanation of Erik Verlinde's idea that gravity is not a fundamental force of nature](#).

How would you describe your writing process?

The routine is just to keep working. I read a lot of e-mail, talk to a bunch of people, read blogs, get bombarded by press releases (the least useful part of it). My desk is a mess and there is always homework I didn't get around to. Some stories arise and are filed in a couple of hours, some take weeks, not counting the time they take to wend their way through to the front page. In the news business there is no such thing as an ordinary day. I just had half a week upended by rumors and then real [reports of faster-than-light neutrinos](#).

What's the strangest or most interesting thing you've ever written about or researched for a writing project?

I was going to answer [faster-than-light neutrinos](#) but everything I do, given my beat, has the air of science fiction. I get to write about [time travel](#).

How do outside forces influence or shape your writing?

I feel an obligation above all to my readers, to keep them informed about the universe, to keep them in touch with some of the more intangible mysteries of their lives.

Why do you write?

I never felt that I had much of a choice. This is the only job I've even been able to keep.

Fernanda Santos, Reporter, Education:

How did you become a reporter?

I never thought of becoming a reporter, but journalism just kind of pulled me in. I studied sociology in Brazil, which is where I'm from, but quickly figured out that the type of writing I wanted to do, and that I enjoyed doing, was very different than the writing done by sociologists. I enjoyed finding out about people, learning about their communities, exploring the differences and inequalities that divide them, but I didn't want to put all that I found out into some academic paper or research. I did, however,

want to use these papers and research to help tell stories about these peoples and communities and differences to others who may have otherwise never heard about them.

So, when I graduated, I applied for a job at a corporate magazine and on the side, I worked as a contract writer for a newspaper in Rio de Janeiro. I remember traveling to the Brazilian countryside for a story about an irrigation project that had transformed a very dry region into a prolific producer of mango and papaya — a place I had never heard about, would have never gone to. Once I got back, I realized I was hooked. I've been a journalist since.



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

What are the things you're most proud of having written, from any time in your life?

The [story about the first year of freedom for a man who had been wrongfully convicted](#) of rape and murder at the age of 17 and was exonerated by DNA evidence 16 years later. It showed me how meaningful the simplest things in life can be and how making assumptions about people – in this case, the assumption that others made was that being a weirdo makes one capable of murder – can have very serious consequences.

I like stories that defy convention and stereotypes, so I enjoyed the piece I wrote about [a group of inmates at Rikers Island who joined a program to learn how to read books to their children](#).

I'm also proud of my first bylined story in English. It was published in The Daily Free Press, the student newspaper at Boston University, where I was a graduate student. It was about a rash of student suicides at M.I.T., but it isn't the topic that makes me proud of it. It is the fact that it proved to me that I could do this journalism thing, even in a language that isn't mine.

How would you describe your writing process?

Unless I'm writing on deadline, I can't start writing until I feel that I can hold my own on a topic. To me, understanding is a requirement of writing. Can I sound authoritative without really knowing much about something? Yes. But the best stories are those where both the writer and the reader learn from. So I read. I search Google a lot and that's usually my starting point.

Then I branch out: I click on, say, a report indexed there and then I look at the report's footnotes and then I set out to read some of the documents listed there. I call people who know about the stuff I'm supposed to be writing about – from community leaders, who have a very unique perspective on local issues or on the way issues affect regular people, to professors, politicians and other officials. I try to hear from every side and I really do strive to write stories that, whether they earn me praise or stir complaints, they do it from all different sides represented.

I tend to type my notes on one document and open a fresh document for my story, pulling information from one onto the other. At some point in my story, when I feel I have the core there and know what else it is that I need to make it complete, I cut portions from the notes document and paste them onto the body of my story so I don't forget to mention any of it. I might also do a rough, simple outline, with quick sentences telling me the things I need to include, in the order I think they should be included. I may not respect that order in the end, but it helps me organize my thoughts.

I tend to print my stories and read them on paper. I highlight stuff I feel I could have gotten wrong: names – so that I check their spellings; locations, so I make sure they're spelled right and rightly described, especially if I place them in relation to other locations, like the club southeast of the intersection of Seventh Avenue and E. 18th Street (is it really southeast?); dates, titles, attributions, etc.

The greatest challenge to me is to come up with the right words to say what I want to say. So I read a lot, from classics to comics, to learn about, say, the many different words one can use to describe all manners of walking.

What's the strangest or most interesting thing you've ever written about or researched for a writing project?

The DNA project I mentioned above, where I learned a lot about wrongful convictions, what causes them and the emotional toll they take on the person convicted, their families and then the families of the victims once it's found that the convict was, in fact, innocent.

I'm just getting started on an interesting project right now that's going to deal with the diversity and segregation that exists in New York City public schools.

How do outside forces influence or shape your writing?

My audience greatly influences my writing because they make me want to write every story well, no matter how short or simple the story might be. Editors tweak my writing, but they don't influence it in the sense of guiding what I write. I've been fortunate to have had editors who have helped me improve my writing by telling me how to write tighter ledes, for example. I tend to ramble sometimes. (I hope I'm not rambling here!)

Why do you write?

I write because I love to tell stories that make people see things they never saw. I like to put words together that paint pictures in the readers' minds, that stir emotions, that make them laugh/cry/get angry. I write because I love to read and because nothing makes me happier than to know that others are reading what I wrote. That's a special thing.

Pete Thamel, Reporter, Sports

How did you become a reporter?

Growing up, I'd always wanted to be a reporter. My dad would leave copies of the sports section of The Boston Globe on my bed every morning and I'd voraciously read the box scores and articles. I was far too limited in my own athletic abilities to become an athlete of any note, and I loved to read and write. So becoming a sports reporter seemed to be a good option.

What are the things you're most proud of having written, from any time in your life?

There are a few things that I'm proud of. My three years that I served as the sports editor of the Daily Orange, the student newspaper at Syracuse, are some of the fondest memories of my career. As for specific stories, probably the series that I'm most proud of are the stories I wrote a few years ago that exposed a series of diploma mills – that is, fake schools – that were laundering athletes grades in order to get them college scholarships. The story prompted immediate change in NCAA rules and closed many of the schools. (Two of those stories are [“Poor Grades Aside, Athletes Get Into College on a \\$399 Diploma”](#))



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

and “Schools Where the Only Real Test Is Basketball.”

I’ve also generally enjoyed covering the careers of many of the top college football players, from [Tim Tebow](#) to [Andrew Luck](#), as it has been enjoyable to profile them and get to know their back stories and families.

How would you describe your writing process?

The writing process is varied by the story, which is what makes it so much fun. As a reporter, most of my stories are based on researching and phone conversations. I find a direct parallel between the amount of research I do and the quality of my stories. When I’m ready to actually write a story, I find that shutting off my cell phone and logging off the Internet helps me focus. I face challenges all the time, mainly my own short attention span. So I usually try to find a quiet place and write my story there with minimal distractions.

What’s the strangest or most interesting thing you’ve ever written about or researched for a writing project?

I would say the two most interesting assignments I’ve had were traveling to Beijing and Istanbul for events. I covered the [Olympics in Beijing in 2008](#), and it was a fascinating experience. The Chinese culture was boundlessly intriguing and I really enjoyed the spectacle of the Olympic games. Istanbul is one of the most beautiful cities that I’ve ever seen. It covers both Europe and Asia and is the cradle of civilization. I really enjoyed exploring all the history of Istanbul.

How do outside forces influence or shape your writing?

I try to limit outside forces as much as possible in writing and let the stories themselves tell the way they were meant to be. I try not to enter stories with angles or agendas. I much prefer letting the people and events dictate what I write. I try to block out public relations people and all outside forces and get things as cleanly and directly from the people themselves.

Why do you write?

I write because I think it’s a fascinating window into the world. I really and truly believe that sports writing is a prism that reflects every race, class and background of people from around the world. So much of a city, state and country’s identity is

wrapped in sports. And I think it's a privilege to be able to chronicle that.

More “Why I Write”

For the National Day on Writing, we've teamed up with the [National Writing Project](#), [Figment](#) and [Edutopia](#), and each of these organizations is running its own “Why I Write” interviews:

- The [National Writing Project's](#) series of “Why I Write” interviews and essays includes thoughts from poets, novelists, scientists, teachers, a jazz musician and a mathematician and others, plus links to other “Why I Write” series around the Web.
- [Figment's](#) “Why I Write” page features answers to the same six questions we ask above, from a YA author, teen poet, journalist and Figment staff writer. More to come!
- Figment's [companion page for students](#) invites essays on “Why I Write.”
- [Edutopia](#) will be running a series of blog posts by National Writing Project writers. Each post will invite readers to share why they write with others in the Edutopia community.

Do you want to tell the world why *you* write?

Please post a thought to Twitter on Thursday, using the hashtag #whyIwrite, so you can become part of the [stream of answers](#) we hope to get from people around the world that day.