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The methods to my madness

by Tracey Timpanaro, Print Matters Editor

As a journalist, I have often wondered about how other writers approach the craft. Do they take notes by hand or on the computer when conducting interviews? How do they approach the mountain of research they have gathered when it comes time to write?

As a way of starting this conversation, I'm going to tell you about the methods I have developed over 30 years of working in this field. I am hopeful they will be helpful to you, and if there is enough interest, maybe we can all get together on a Zoom call for a more in-depth discussion.

Old school baby!

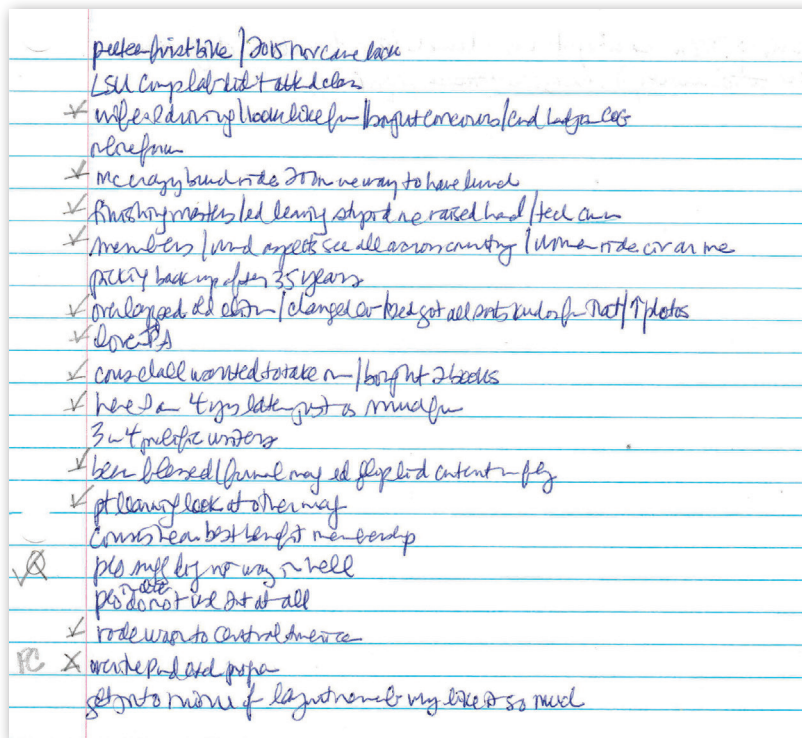
I must start by confessing that I am old school ALL the way. I am currently typing this on a computer that is 11 years old. My bff works at Apple and is positively horrified that I refuse to upgrade. Oh and I'm also on Word 2007. Call me naïve if you like, but everything works just fine, so I see no reason to buy anything new. I do back up, but not as often as I should, knock wood.

That said, I'm sure it won't surprise you that I take notes by hand. I have developed my own shorthand over the years and I can write almost as fast as people talk (although the Northerners do challenge me). I buy college-ruled spiral notebooks with 100 pages; any thicker and my hand isn't in a comfortable position. Since the lines are thinner on the college-ruled sheets, there are fewer pages of notes to juggle when I sit down to write.

Obviously, I do my research before an interview and I have a list of questions ready before the call. Immediately after the call, I go through my notes to fill in my shorthand. I also use a pencil and draw a short horizontal line in the lefthand margin near any information that I most likely want to use.

After I do that, I go through the notes again and make what I call a master sheet from the interview. Anything that I've marked with a pencil is written down on the master sheet (sample above). I even go one step further and mark key items on the master sheet with a pencil. I know it sounds like a lot of work, but it's really a great way to cull the most important details from the interview. Space is always tight, so you want to include only the best information you have.

I'm lucky in that leads start flooding into my head when I'm going through this process. I usually write them all down on the back of the master sheet. When I'm ready to write, I decide



This "master sheet" is from the customer spotlight interview for this issue.

which one is the most catchy and which one provides the best jumping off place for the rest of the story.

Ready to go

By that point, I'm ready to write on the computer. I have the master sheet in front of me, the interview notes on one side and the research on the other. I never EVER put the byline on before starting to write; in my view, that's entirely too much pressure,

especially when words aren't coming easily. It's a little like having someone standing right over you as you're trying to write. No thanks! I add it when I'm finished — and delighted — with my story.

As I use items from the master sheet, I check them off so that I know what I've used. I am always sad that I can't use everything, but pulling the most pertinent information is a huge part of creating a story that is inviting to the reader.

I would like to add that there is definitely some downtime during this whole process, and that's OK. You have to be sure the writing muses are ready to work with you. They can be a temperamental bunch.

Speaking of crazy, I can't close without a shoutout to the writers who are also parents. Ideally, you would have peace and quiet when you're trying to piece together a story. It does involve a good amount of creativity and concentration. If you have children, however, they do not respect this process at all. Most of us have learned to adapt, although not without a good bit of grumbling.

And now that I've reached my concluding paragraph, it's a good time to confess that I likely will always struggle here. Leads are a breeze for me, but I constantly seem to tie myself up in knots when it comes to conclusions. Today is no different. I hope this article has been useful for you, and feel free to email me if you have any tips or ideas that you would like to share (tat25@comcast.net). We undertake our craft as solitary creatures, but we most definitely share a kindred spirit as people who help the world connect in beautiful ways.