

# Writing the Opinion Column

By **BOBBY HAWTHORNE**

Austin, Texas

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# **Do you have what it takes to become a successful columnist?**

A fair question. Points to consider:

- Can you read? Do you read? How much?
- Do you like people?
- Do you care about anything other than yourself?
- Are you willing to spill your guts to total strangers?

If you can answer yes to these questions, then you have a chance. Not a good one. But a chance.

**Rule 1: Spill your guts.**

## **Not so good**

Do you smoke? If so, the obvious question is "why?" Can't you read? Don't you know that smoking is the number one cause of cancer in the United States. Here are just a few facts:

Every year hundreds of thousands of people around the world die from diseases caused by smoking.

One in two lifetime smokers will die from their habit. Half of these deaths will occur in middle age.

Tobacco smoke also contributes to a number of cancers.

The mixture of nicotine and carbon monoxide in each cigarette you smoke temporarily increases your heart rate and blood pressure, straining your heart and blood vessels.

Bottom line: Smoking kills. Don't smoke.

## **This is great.**

I used to listen to Dad from my bedroom down the hall every morning, hacking in the bathroom, choking for a breath of air. Every morning of every day. Monday. Sunday. His face puffed out, his eyes teary and bloodshot. Coughing and choking and spitting and puffing on a Marlboro, deep, desperate drags that burned like a kitchen match. Every morning, before his shower, before his first cup of Folgers, the first thing every day. Tuesday. Saturday. Coughing and choking and dragging on a Marlboro, waking me and my brothers to the sound of his lungs exploding. Every frigging day.

*Until last week.*

## **This is great too.**

My mom loved games so much that, before she died, she asked us to place some of her ashes in the Boggle egg timer. As a mother of seven, she bonded with her children through games. She didn't dumb you down by letting you win. She also didn't whoop your ass and leave you feeling crushed. She offered tips if you wanted them and allowed you the glory of victory if you were paying attention. Winning or losing was less important to her than spending time together. During a good game, she was invested in the moment with you.

Later in life, she developed Alzheimer's. When I'd visit her in the nursing home, I often took along a deck of cards and played solitaire on her bed, hoping to spark a flash of recognition in her. One day, feeling overwhelmed, I missed playing an ace. Mom gently reached out, placed it where it belonged and pointed to the two of hearts. She then leaned back and returned to the world I could not reach.

— Ann Davis  
Stewartstown, Pennsylvania

# **Types of opinion columns**

## **Editorial Topic Comment**

Opinions or ideas on timely issues and events.



**Joe sat in his fourth** period class staring at the teacher, while his mind slipped further and further into oblivion. The droning voice over the P.A. had interrupted his classes so many times it only sent him deeper on his journey.

Suddenly the lunch bell rang, snapping him out of his trance. He collected his books and walked out into the hall. Though he didn't look like the type, Joe was the worst kind of criminal — he left the campus for lunch. Joe was a smart guy but he couldn't understand what the problem was. He was 18, old enough to be drafted and go to Iraq or Afghanistan, but he couldn't go to McDonalds for lunch.

On his way to the parking lot, he walked past the rest rooms. Since he didn't smoke cigarettes or take drugs, he had no reason to go in. As he walked past a row of lockers, several of them exploded and smoke filled the hallway. Joe continued, oblivious to the commotion. He was used to this kind of thing. After all, he had been going to public schools for 12 years.

He passed by a classroom where an English teacher attempted to read Shakespeare while students in the back of the class were dipping Skoal and misusing pharmaceutical products. This didn't phase him either.

Walking through the patio, he watched a group of kickers ramming a freshman against a tree.

Finally he reached his car, turned the key in the ignition and headed for the exit. Right before he got there, a white car with flashing red lights blocked his way. The security man got out and walked to Joe's car.

"I hate to do this," he said as a smile crossed his face, "but kid, you're busted." He paused for a moment, then added, "you know, it's students like you who give public education a bad name."

## **Personal reflection**

Sometimes humorous, sometimes sentimental, it reveals something — generally a mood — about the author.

## **Letter to a particular person**

It is my job to have something to say.

They pay me to provide words that help make sense of that which troubles the American soul. But in this moment of airless shock when hot tears sting disbelieving eyes, the only thing I can find to say, the only words that seem to fit, must be addressed to the unknown author of this suffering.

You monster. You beast. You unspeakable bastard.

What lesson did you hope to teach us by your coward's attack on our World Trade Center, our Pentagon, us? What was it you hoped we would learn? Whatever it was, please know that you failed.

Did you want us to respect your cause? You just damned your cause.

Did you want to make us fear? You just steeled our resolve.

Did you want to tear us apart? You just brought us together.

— Leonard Pitts  
Miami Herald, 9/11/2001

# **Lists**

**So now**, there's a book on How to Aggravate a Woman Every Time ... and send her screaming out the door. A book! On such a sensitive issue.

All of this makes me think: Haven't we heard enough about the battle of the sexes? Haven't we blamed each other too long? Haven't we reached a time for a truce?

No, of course we haven't. So, in the interest of fairness and equal time, I present:



## **How to Irritate a Man Every Time**

- Hide the remote control.
- Call him by a pet name in front of his friends.
- Criticize his driving.
- Change the radio station in his car.
- On Super Bowl Sunday, tell him the two of you need to have a long, important talk about your relationship. If he objects, ask which he cares more about — some stupid football game or YOU!

## Writing the Opinion Column

# Target a Specific Reader.

“When a child throws up and the dog messes on the rug, it’s a lousy day for most mothers, but for me, it’s a column.” — Erma Bombeck

# **Find a good role model.**

Pattern yourself after someone you like and think you can imitate. But don't kid yourself. And don't rip them off.

# **Create pace. How?**

- Keep it basically noun/verb/object.
- Emphasize specific nouns and verbs.
- Vary sentence length.
- Develop an ear for mild alliteration.

**The government** isn't going to guard you against AIDS. It can't. President Bush couldn't. President Clinton can't. The White House's AIDS coordinator can't either, no matter how urgently AIDS groups pushed for that post to be created.

Protecting yourself from getting AIDS is something you have to do for yourself.

Doctors can't cure you if you get AIDS. They can only postpone your death, treat some associated illnesses and keep you feeling a little better as you slowly die. All the politically correct attitudes, all the anti-discrimination laws, all the political activism, all the red AIDS ribbons, all the support groups, all the finger pointing can't change the basic facts about this epidemic.

Joan Beck  
*Chicago Tribune*

**Match tone to  
subject matter.**

**Be consistent  
with person.**

## **First Draft**

There's something wrong with me.

For a teenage girl, that's the only logical conclusion. It's the reason that cute guy who said he liked her didn't call. It's the reason he "didn't get her message." It's the reason he hooked up with some random girl two days later.

It doesn't matter who the guy is. He could be some skater from Hawaii who has "really nice eyes" but doesn't know the first thing about human interaction. None of that matters when you are the one hanging by a string, waiting by the phone, hoping for an e-mail, or something. Anything. Suddenly in her eyes he is the only guy who ever treated her right. And I blew it.



## **Third Draft**

He didn't call back. He said he would but he didn't. I assume he didn't get my message. Make that "messages." At any rate, he never called, and two days later, he hooked up with some other girl.

Or so I heard. This isn't the first time it's happened. There was that Hawaiian skater I met at the mall last summer. He had eyes like milk chocolate but was unwilling or unable to look at me straight on. Still, I really fell for him. Hard. And I thought he was falling for me.

It didn't happen. I saw him one other time, and then he was gone, a killer wave that crashed on the shore and retreated back out to sea. Of course, I blame myself.

**Open with a punch.**

## **My mother believed in miracles.**

She believed that faith could move mountains, that there is a divine plan for the universe, that Jesus never fails. My mother believed that if she was the best little girl in the world, nothing bad would ever happen to her. Most of all, my mother believed in creation — not just that God created the world, which went without saying, but that God's followers could create their own world in the midst of this one, like the one she created for herself and her family, a mighty fortress where "they" could never hurt us.

## **Lord?**

Please don't let me die in a funny way.

Like being beaten to death with a shoe. Especially not my own shoe. And if it absolutely has to be my own shoe, I'd rather not be wearing it at the time. Or like choking on my own fist during a bar fight. Perhaps I should clarify a little. I do know that I'm going to die someday. Maybe soon! That's your call. And I know there's nothing funny about death — at least that's the current thinking from this side. I'm just asking to not die in a way that leads people who don't know me to e-mail one another news items about my death.

For instance:

Please don't let me get so fat that paramedics have to come to my house and cut out a way to remove me but then bang my head against a load-bearing pillar in the process, thus killing me.

Please don't let me die on or near or — perhaps worst of all — because of a toilet. This includes a urinal or a baseball-stadium-style urine trough, in addition to the standard commode.

Please don't let my death in any way involve one of those giant inflatable rats that union protesters put up outside non-union jobs. Or a blimp of any kind.

**Know the rules,  
but be willing to  
break them at  
times.**

**Jerry Quarry thumps** his hard belly with both fists. Smiles at the sound. Like a stone against a tree.

“Feel it,” he says proudly, punching himself again and again.

He pounds big, gnarled fists into meaty palms. Right, left. Right, left. Cocks his head. Stares. Vacant blue eyes. Punch drunk at 50. Medical name: Dementia pugilistica. Thousands of shots to the head by the best in boxing and, three years later, the worst.

Once one of the most popular fighters in the country, a top heavy-weight contender in the 1960s and '70s, he needs help shaving, showering, putting on shoes and socks. Soon, probably diapers. His older brother James cuts meat into little pieces for him so he won't choke, has to coax him to eat anything except the Apple Cinnamon Cheerios he loves in the morning. Jerry smiles like a kid. Shuffles like an old man.



Slow, slurred speech. Random thoughts snagged on branches in a dying brain. Time blurred. Memories twisted. Voices no one else hears.

“Jerry Quarry now has the brain of an 80-year-old,” says Dr. Peter Russell, a neuropsychologist who examined him recently. “Fighting aged him 30 years. He’s at third-stage dementia, very similar to Alzheimer’s. If he lives another 10 years, he’ll be lucky.”

Steve Wilstein  
*Associated Press*

**Use repetition  
for effect.**

**For the Fourth of July** in the Carolinas, we...

Waved a flag. Wore a flag T-shirt. Watched some baseball. Watched some people. Watched a kid waving a flag. Smiled.

We ate a hot dog. Ate another one. Drank a beer outside. Tended our garden. Watered our lawn between 4 and 9. Waited until we were supposed to water our lawn.

We turned on the news. Turned off the news. Spread a blanket. Coveted our neighbor's picnic basket. Stood for the anthem. Sat in silent protest.

We listened to patriotic tunes. Hummed to marches. Chased our children. Looked to the sky. Covered our ears. Dropped our jaw. We remembered our heritage on the Fourth of July. We forgot our troubles. We contemplated our freedom. We took it for granted.

We celebrated. Because we could.

**Hyperbole is the  
greatest literary  
device in the  
history of the  
written word.**

**Probably the greatest thing** about this country, aside from the fact that virtually any random bonehead can become president, is the American system of justice. We are fortunate to live in a country where every accused person, unless he has a name like Nicholas "Nicky the Squid" Calamari, is considered innocent until such time as his name appears in the newspaper.

But the most important right of all is that every criminal is entitled to a Day in Court. Although, in my particular case, it occurred at night.

Let me stress right out front that I was guilty as sin. I was driving in downtown Miami, which in itself shows very poor judgment because most Miami motorists graduated with honors from the Moammar Gadhafi School of Third-World-Style Driving (motto: "Death Before Yielding.")

So I probably should never have been there anyway, and it serves me right when the two alert police officers fired up their siren, pulled me over and pointed out that my car's registration had expired.

I had not realized this, and as you can imagine, I felt like quite the renegade outlaw as one of the officers painstakingly wrote out my ticket, standing well to the side of the road to avoid getting hit by the steady stream of passing unlicensed and uninsured motorists driving their stolen cars with their left hands so their right hands would be free to keep their pit bulls from spilling their cocaine all over their machine guns.

Not that I am bitter.

— Dave Barry  
Who else?

**Guaranteed  
ways to fail as  
a columnist.**



**Say nothing.**

## **Christmas is here!**

But what is the real meaning of Christmas? Is it buying and receiving gifts? Is it singing Christmas carols and sending holiday cards to friends and family? Is it visiting grandparents. Is it decorating a Christmas tree?

No.

True, Christmas is many things to many people. But the true meaning of Christmas is celebrating ...

**Whine.**

- The cafeteria food is terrible.
- The parking lot is too crowded.
- Teachers assign too much homework.
- Parents just don't understand.
- Global warming is so unfair.

**Ramble.**

**The teenage years** are supposed to be the best of our lives, and in many cases, they are. No adult responsibilities. No full-time job. No kids. No bills to pay, except perhaps for a car or clothes. Yes, being a teenager has its advantages.

Still, there are many pressures that teenagers face. Most adults think that teenagers have nothing to worry about. They think, "Oh, you're just a kid." But what do they know? The truth is, we have so many decisions to make such as "Should I have sex?" or "Should I do drugs?"

And then, there's the whole issue of belonging.

Not all young adults can play sports, be a cheerleader or be newspaper editor. So where do these teenagers turn to? All too often, they turn to gangs. Does beating up people make you feel good? Do you enjoy participating in drive-by shootings?

If so, maybe being in a gang is the best choice for you. We're not saying being in a gang is right or wrong. That's your decision to make. Just remember, there are safe and rewarding alternatives such as school clubs and community organizations. The point is, the choice is up to you. Beating up people may make you feel good. But do you really want to be the next victim of a drive-by shooting?

**Pile on the clichés.**



**Hawthorne was the strong**, silent type.

Cool as a cucumber. He had chiseled good looks, a square jaw, jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes.

When our fair maiden saw him, her heart skipped a beat and she fell for him, hook, line and sinker. But he nipped it in the bud, and alas, she saw the writing on the wall. But give the devil his due, she left no stone unturned in her attempts to woo his affection. But he wouldn't take the bait. Her pleas fell on deaf ears. She faced the bitter end.

"Don't cry over spilled milk," he said, trying to calm the storm in her heart. "There are many others in the same boat. Grin and bear it, sister."

**Wimp out.**

## **Why is the U.S. in Iraq?**

Some say this....

Others say this...

Hmmm. Maybe it's time you gave this some attention and let your elected officials know how you feel and perhaps our nation will find a way to solve this most vexing dilemma.

**Preach.**

## **Have you said “thank you” today?**

Most people haven't. They neglect to pay the courtesy that is due. The reason is probably because they forget what people do for them. People like to be thanked for the things they do for you. It makes them feel good inside. They learn to like you and respect you for the example you set for others. It really does pay to thank someone.

**Cheerlead.**

## **What is school spirit?**

Webster has several definitions of spirit, but none of them seem to apply to our school. School spirit is important for a school. If a school has spirit, it can back its team on to victory.

But such was not the case last week. The Tigers lost because of the lack of school spirit. And some students have the nerve to ask, "What's wrong with the team?" There's nothing wrong with the team that a little support couldn't cure. We have an explosive group of running backs, a punishing defense and a great coach.

So you may ask, why have we lost our first six games if they're so good? Before we can totally blame the team, the question must be asked: how many fans helped or hurt the team? How many games have you attended? Do you stay for the entire pep rally? How many times have you given a word of encouragement instead of a negative word after a loss?

Blaming the players doesn't help anything. If a team is to do well, it's going to need more than great athletes. It's time the student body pulled together to support the team. Maybe this way, we won't lose our last four games.

And maybe Webster will include another definition of spirit: Lincoln High School!



**Chit-chat.**

**Gather round** all you guys and chicks, I have some poop to lay on you.

**Write about why  
you didn't write  
a column.**

## **Well, it's that time again.**

Deadline time. Time to write my column. The only problem? I have nothing to say. Nada. I'm a blank slate. Not that I haven't thought about it. I have. Honestly. I've thought and thought and thought and nothing comes to mind.

So here I am, an hour away from deadline and staring at a blank computer screen, knowing my loyal fans will be crushed unless I bless them with my florid and lucid prose.

I had planned to write the column last week but I had two tests. And then I planned to write it last night, but I was exhausted after basketball practice. And my girlfriend has been nagging me about spending more quality time with her. And being a ladies man, I couldn't break her heart.

So as you can see, it's not really my fault that I don't have a column. I guess I'm just too talented to meet deadlines.

The horror. The horror.

**Drip sarcasm.**

**The girl is led** up the stairs to the guillotine. As a tear runs down her cheek, she says a prayer and faces her executioner.

“Kristi Smith is hereby condemned to death for the heinous crime of WEARING FLIP-FLOPS to school,” the red-robed assistant principal read.

“Executioner, do your duty.”

Just as the blade is released, Kristi awakens from the nightmare.

**Over-state a  
situation.**



**One year ago**, I witnessed an act that tore into my chest and shattered my heart. It has ripped at my guts ever since. Just the sight of it carved burning holes in my eyes.



It was the movie,  
**Spiceworld!**

**Use fancy words no  
one understands.**

**The rights of man**, being metamorphosized over the passage of time, vary inevitably between individuals. This can be attributed to the separate and differing acculturation of human beings in parallel environments. Therefore, the rights craved by a man, rights which can never be capitulated, are a result of the values inherited and adhered to in a culture. The present culture of western man is one based on liberty, freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

On the opposite of this issue is the want, nay, the incurable desire to perpetrate crimes and infringement on the rights of neighbors, simply on a whim. Alas, such is human nature.

**Trip over your  
own words.**

## **Say what you mean. Mean what you say.**

Our youth basketball team is back in action Wednesday at 8 PM in the Recreation hall. Come out and watch us kill Christ the King.

Dog for sale: eats anything and is fond of children.

The Associate Minister unveiled the church's new tithing campaign last Sunday: "I Upped My Pledge - Up Yours"

Our bikinis are exciting. They are simply the tops.

**Gross people out.**

Many a time I have sat during class minding my own business when all of the sudden a wif of something dead catches my nose. What could this possibly be? This foul odor is driving me mad! I now come to my senses and spot the problem. The young gentleman sitting next to me forgot to bathe and now reeks of natural odors. What disgust! How absolutely horrifying. To think that a human being would no better know how to tend to himself than a three-day-old pig.

What can be done about these hideous distractions? I have a few suggestions for them. I'd like to see them publicly embarrassed by calling over the public address system that they need to go home because they are distracting from the learning process. I just can't think with a dead animal sitting next to me. How about curing them by taking a can of deodorant and covering him with it. No warning, just walk up and cake him with a better scent than what he is wearing. It should be written in the school

hand book that any student imitating the smell of a skunk shall immediately be sent home. Isn't it already written that no animals can attend school? I don't think there's any difference between a cave student and a smelly dog.



# **Put it all together**

- Be Honest
- Find an Angle
- Show. Don't tell.
  - Be Brave.

By **Hanna Ricketson**

Bryant HS, Bryant, Arkansas

"Okay," the short, redheaded, freckled-all-over salesgirl smiles, "What size are you, honey?"

"I don't actually know," I mumble. "I keep getting bigger."

I stand there knowing that no bra will fit today.  
Because no bra has ever fit.

My mother intervenes.

"This is Hanna, and what she needs is a bra with some support. You can see she's pretty big in the chest area and she's getting a lot of neck and back pain. What she has now just isn't working."

“Well what are you wearing now?” Sherry asks.

“Forty-four double D,” I answer slowly, hoping no one else in the store is paying attention. Sherry lets out a belly laugh. “You are NOT a double D!”

No kidding. Why does she think I’m here?

We walk past crayon-colored bras made with lace and embroidery and polka dots. We end up in the back of the store near some wide shallow metal drawers labeled with letters deep into the alphabet.

Sherry pulls out ugly bra after ugly bra, and I begin to wonder if they store them in drawers to keep from scaring small-breasted women and little kids.

She leads me back to a dressing room stall while my mother finds a chair. The walls are lined with magazine pages from the '40s and '50s featuring tall, skinny women in knee-length slips.

"You try one on and then I'll come in, okay?"

It isn't really a question, so I can't help but agree.

For an hour, I try on boring beige bra after boring beige bra, and Sherry comes in to look at every one.

"I guess we'll have to go up a size," she keeps saying.

At one point she asks me if I'm in the bra.

"Huh?"

“Well, what you have to do is bend over and push the breast up into the cup. Don’t be afraid to jiggle it a little.”

Oh my God.

Sensing that I’m uncomfortable, she picks up a huge bra and holds it out in front of her eyes.

“I used to have this friend,” Sherry says, “and she would always put her bras over her eyes like this and stick out her tongue like a bug.”

Oh my God.

“Honey, I just can’t seem to figure out what size you are. Let me bring in some expertise.”

She walks off. I wait and wait, watching under the stall door for her black sandals to return.

Finally she opens the door and comes in with a short Hispanic woman in a pink sweater.

"This is Else," Sherry tells me. "She's been working here for 16 years, so she really knows her bras. Tell Else what size you came in in."

Reluctantly, I answer.

"Oh no Mamacita, no no," Else chuckles.

Am I missing the funny part?

We go through the trying on process again until we find a bra that both Sherry and Else are pleased with.

"Yes, this is going to leave her enough room so that she's not uncomfortable," Else explains to Sherry. On the job training. "You seem to be sagging a bit, Chica. Let's pull up the straps."

She and Sherry get one on each side of me and take to the straps. They're tugging rather aggressively and at this point I can't help but bust out laughing.

"Do you want me to bring your mom in?" Sherry asks.

"Oh sure," I answer. Let's all look at me in my new bra.

Mom enters with Sherry. Four people in this tiny stall.

“What size is this?” she asks.

“This is a 40 F,” Sherry informs her.

“Well! Okay, baby....” Mom seems at a loss for words at the moment. We all stand awkwardly until she remembers our purpose. “Now is this going to give her enough support?”

Sherry and Else take turns reassuring her, gesturing to the straps, the shape of the cups, the four snaps in the back.

Finally I leave, much embarrassed, carrying a new beige bra that could easily serve as a hat, and dreading the day I'll have to come back and go through the whole process again.