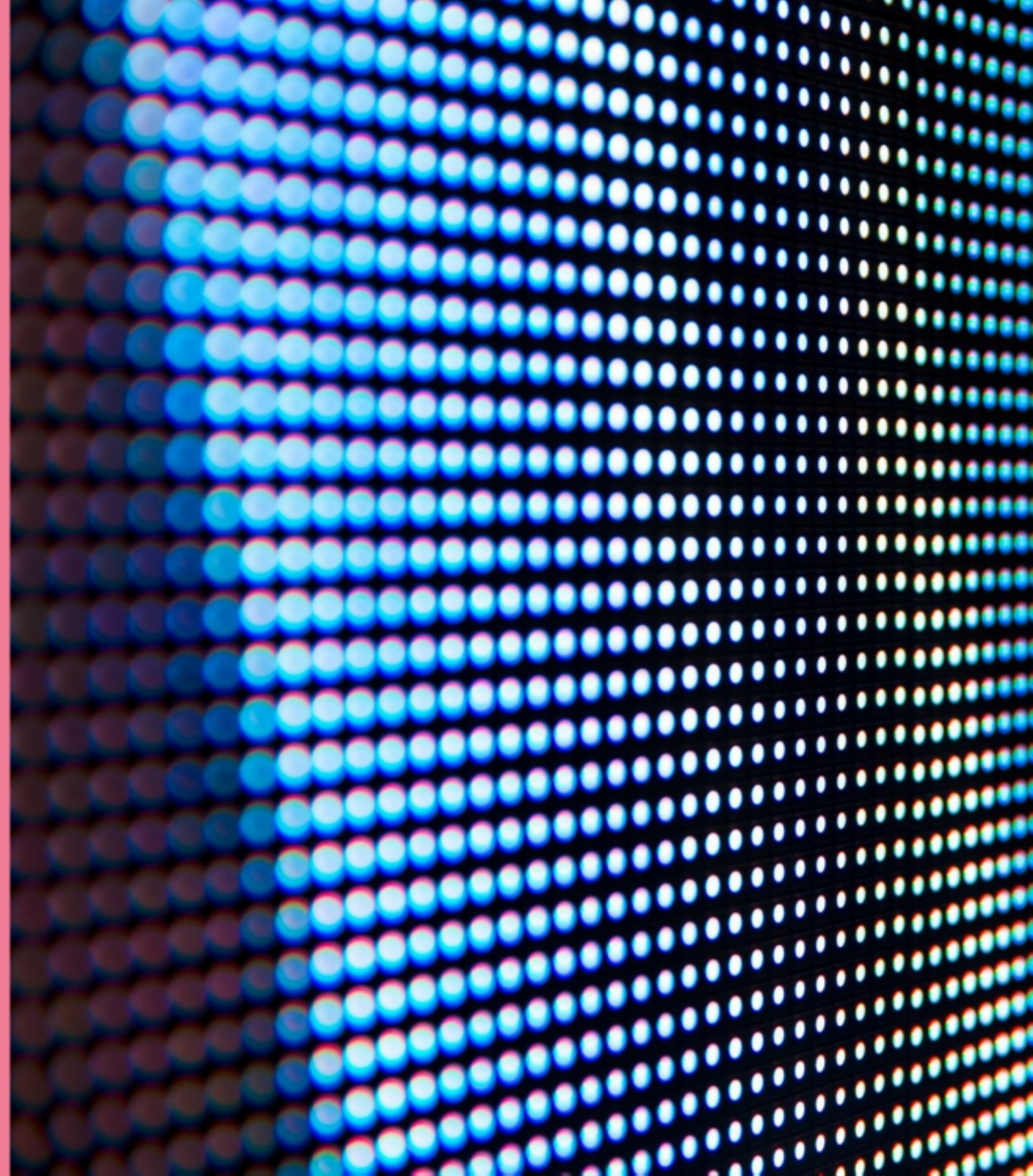


***Moving the
Needle through
Commentary:
Advanced
Opinion Writing***

*New Canadian Media
Workshop*

Feb. 29, 2020



- Unlike a news article, which authors write without injecting bias, in opinion pieces journalists discard all objectivity in commenting on relevant issues
- The Op-ed Page is where the newspaper states its position in its regular editorial
- The other editorial pages are open to carry the opinions of individual journalists and others in the community through columns and op-ed submissions
- Articles can be submitted by paid staff, freelancers and non-paid contributors

What are opinion pieces?

- Budget and staff reductions have dwindled newspapers' access to regular, solid op-ed content
- This has left many publications with a content vacuum that talented freelance writers can fill, either on a pay per article or unpaid basis

*Opinion writing
presents a ripe
opportunity for
freelancers*

- If you are a journalist passionate about spotlighting an issue
- A chance to hone and diversify your writing skills
- Build your resume of published work
- Build a professional relationship with publications and editors

Why would I ever consider unpaid freelance opinion writing?

- As a journalist, once you let that opinion out of the box you cannot put it back in
- You are probably not going to make a living from opinion writing, but it could be profitable in other ways that enhance your income

*Some things to
remember when
considering
freelance opinion
writing*

- There is an art to good opinion writing. But like good reporting, the more you do it the better you get
- Some people are better at it, but everyone has an opinion
- Read your favourite columnists with a critical eye
- Read news articles and practice developing a supportable opinion based on facts in the story or conduct your own research on the issue

Good opinion writing can be as much work as good reporting

QUESTIONS

- What was the last column that left a lasting impression on you?
- What types of columns do you find the most engaging?
- What is the most difficult part of writing a column for you?

Keys to focus on for freelance column writing

- Audience
- Issue
- Research
- Well-crafted lead
- Good journalism
- Call to action

Audience

- Know your audience
- Establish who you are writing for
- Must familiarize yourself with publication, the readership, and editor

Issue

- Seek out issues relevant to the community the publication serves
- What has been in the news lately?
- What hasn't been in the news lately, but you think should?
- Can you provide a perspective missing from the publication?

Research

- Do your research!
- You must know your readers, editor and subject matter to present informed opinion and content that engages intended audience
- Research is equally important in news and opinion writing
- Research includes knowing the counter argument so you can address those points to elevate your position

Lead

- State your opinion right off the top
- Capture and engage reader right away
- Leave no ambiguity about what you are going to say or where you are going
- Everything after the lead must support that opening statement

Good journalism

- Don't forget opinion writing must still be built on good, sound journalism
- Good writing is the backbone of any piece
- Tight writing that gets your point across (500-800 words)
- Passion and emotion are effective tools
- Self-edit and stick to the point
- Don't be afraid to use facts, figures, interviews

Call to action

- Spur readers/community to action
- Challenge politicians, institutions to take action
- But it doesn't always have to be about action, sometimes effective columns can be about shared experience or evoking emotion
- Demonstrate conviction in your position

Messenger: St. Charles County points the way as lawmakers seek to end debtors prisons in Missouri

By Tony Messenger

St.Louis Post-Dispatch Dec. 9, 2018

Judge Gary Oxenhandler shares an affinity with Missouri's early lawmakers.

The founders of the Show-Me state recognized that the courts shouldn't be used to exacerbate poverty. The sentiment shows up loud and clear in the [state's constitutional prohibition](#) against jailing a person because of debt. It even shows up in the early versions of a law that allows counties to charge defendants room and board for staying in jail.

The 1909 version of the law, for instance, said that "insolvent prisoners" could be discharged from their debts — and jail — if they had no property nor other means to satisfy their court costs. That year's version of the law also allowed prisoners to bring food and bedding from home to make them more comfortable and reduce costs.

Such provisions have been erased from Missouri law, and these days, it's not uncommon for poor people to be jailed in Missouri because they can't afford to pay their jail bill.

"It's horrible," says Oxenhandler, who two years ago retired as a circuit court judge in Boone County, one of the few places in the state that doesn't bill defendants for their jail stays.

In almost every rural county in Missouri, people who do time in jail, both before trial and after conviction, are charged "board bills" for room and board. The charges are generally around \$50 a day, and when people don't pay, they are often hauled before judges who try to collect. In many cases, [the Post-Dispatch has found](#), defendants are still dealing with their cases, even misdemeanors, years after they've served their time. They are scheduled to appear at payment review hearings every

*Tony Messenger
(2018 Pulitzer
Prize)*

A hostile verdict for Colten Boushie

By Niigaan Sinclair

Winnipeg Free Press, Oct. 2, 2018

Last week I watched the Hollywood film *Hostiles*.

The opening scene features a group of Indians quietly arriving on a farm, savagely killing a farmer and his children, and attempting to kidnap (to likely rape) the farmer's wife.

The Indians are later killed, with the widow emptying bullets into a corpse as a kind of retribution.

The reason why these men massacre this "innocent" family is never explained.

In fact, the reasons don't matter. The message is one of paranoia: that savage Indians are always nearby, hidden, and ready to kill defenceless settlers and take their stuff.

Indians must be controlled is the message of *Hostiles*. Indians otherwise deserve to die.

In a Saskatchewan courtroom on Friday night a jury told almost the same story, finding farmer Gerald Stanley not guilty of the slaying of 22-year-old Cree man Colten Boushie.

The facts of the case are as black and white as a trial can get.

On August 9, 2016, Boushie and four friends arrived on Stanley's farm. The young men state they came for help with a flat tire. Stanley claims they were coming to steal stuff.

Regardless, there was a confrontation. A gun was brandished. The group tried to leave. Stanley says he fired his gun to "scare" them.

Stanley claims his gun then "accidentally" went off, shooting Boushie in the back of the head at point-blank range. The third bullet, he says, was a "hang fire accident" – when a bullet lodges and launches later.

An RCMP forensics expert testified that there was no mechanical dysfunction in the gun.

Stanley's defence, therefore, is that he aggressively fired, then approached Boushie, and the gun went off on its own.

Niigaan Sinclair
(2018 National
Newspaper Award
winner)

PTSD claims another life

Russell Wangersky

St. John's Telegram, June 4, 2018

I was sitting alone in a rainy parking lot, in the dark, thumbing through my phone when I saw the news about Andréanne Leblanc. There was a dog, barking metronomically, behind a tall fence next to my car. It was dreary and wet, St. John's in late May.

It was probably the worst kind of place to be.

Leblanc was one of the paramedics who responded to the Quebec City mosques shooting in January 2017. Leblanc, her mother told CBC last Thursday, committed suicide in March. The 31-year-old was found dressed in her paramedic uniform.

After the mosque attack, Leblanc went into a downward spiral. She left her Quebec City job, tried on-call paramedicine in Rimouski but found the sleep interruptions even worse, suffered a back injury, and finally couldn't work at all.

This is what her mother told the CBC: "Her behaviour was completely changed. You would say something to her, and she wouldn't remember. She was hyperactive, hyper-aware. Much more irritable. She didn't at all have the same personality. She would have mood swings for no apparent reason."

I think most first responders are familiar with aspects of that to some degree - I know I am, even years after I had to stop being a volunteer firefighter.

Hypervigilance is exhausting. You scan every circumstance for threats or risks and think constantly about how you will react and deal with them. You see accidents that haven't happened yet, plan to dealing with choking people in restaurants when they're talking loudly with their mouths full, see a child bump off a curb on their bike and calculate what sort of injuries you'll have to deal with when they are hit by a car. It sounds foolish, but it's unstoppable, the full-colour movie in your mind.

*Russell Wangersky
(2018 National
Newspaper Award
Finalist)*

Cars don't' kill people, drivers do

Mississauga News, Nov. 15, 2018

If bullets left the kind of carnage we are now seeing almost daily on our roads, public outcry in this community would likely be deafening.

Gun violence in this sprawling region is being described in many circles as rampant and was justifiably a fiery talking point for candidates in last month's municipal election.

But firearms have not killed and maimed near as many innocent bystanders in our community as motor vehicle collisions have this year.

To date in 2018, shootings have accounted for nine of the 22 homicides committed in Peel.

Comparatively, there have been 25 fatal collisions on local streets — resulting in 29 deaths and 30 injuries, according to data kept by Peel Regional Police.

The truth of the matter is the mounting motor vehicle casualty and death toll in this region is as much a crisis as the firearm violence also claiming our sons, daughters, mothers and fathers.

What is occurring on roads in Brampton and Mississauga is certainly as, if not more, indiscriminate in its devastation as any gunplay.

In separate incidents just over 24-hour-span two weeks ago, a 31-year-old mother and her two-year-old son were killed in a motor vehicle collision at a Mississauga intersection and a 71-year-old woman was struck and killed while crossing the road in a Brampton neighbourhood.

Mississauga News
Op-ed

General advice on writing

- Be provocative in your thinking
- Don't be afraid to reveal something about yourself
- Your lived experience can provide a unique perspective that allows you to speak with a degree of authority on a particular issue
- Always **be aware of libel law**



*What is your
process?*

Let's brainstorm a pitch

- Break into groups and come up with a relevant issue
- Use laptops, cellphones to gather research
- Write a short pitch (include a draft lead) as you would in an email to an editor
- Collaborate on crafting pitch, determine audience, your unique perspective



QUESTIONS?