

# Humor writing

Have Some Fun · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

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## Humour writing in journalism

Writing humorous journalism is incredibly hard.

Have you read the journalism of Maureen Dowd, Imre Salusinszky, Dave Barry, Peter Ruehl or Bill Bryson?

Garrison Keillor is another humorist I like. His US radio broadcast transcripts can be found on the internet.

Have you checked out "humour columnists" on the internet?

Well let me warn you that few journalists can write humorously to the point where they are called a "humorist".

Dave Barry is the world's most successful humour columnist. If you don't read him, you should. No one comes near him though many have tried and failed (including me).

You can find out all about him and read his columns at [www.miami.com/herald/special/features/barry/](http://www.miami.com/herald/special/features/barry/)

There was a humorist at the back of now defunct Bulletin called Patrick Cook, who I didn't find funny although many did.

Peter Ruehl is an American humorist who lives in Australia and writes on page 2 of the weekend Financial Review.

But if you type "humour columnists" into your Google search engine, you'll come up with many humorous writers.

The questions are: Can you do better? Or even as well?

I'd like to see some of YOUR humorous writing.

Overleaf is a Dave Barry column. His columns are emailed free to me every week.

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Get me rewrite!

## By DAVE BARRY

On behalf of the newspaper industry (new, cost-cutting motto: "All the News That"), I am announcing some changes we're making to serve you better.

When I say "serve you better," I mean "increase our profits." We newspapers are very big on profits these days. We're a business, just like any other business, except that we employ English majors. To help you better understand our current situation, let's review the history of newspaper finances:

The earliest known newspaper, published in 59 B.C. in Rome, was called Acta Diurna (literally, the Portland Oregonian). The first issue offered coverage of Roman politics ("Strom Thurmond Elected to Senate"); science news ("Study Shows Thunder Is Actually Gods Burping"); and an early episode of the comic strip "Nancy," in which Sluggo tries to avoid paying admission to the Colosseum by peeking through a knothole, and gets a spear through the eyeball. Unfortunately, Acta Diurna was not profitable, because every copy had to be entirely handwritten by slaves (called "reporters"); if a big story broke, a huge, hairy man (the "editor") would

yell, "Stop the presses!" and whack them with a club.

The first important financial advance for newspapers came in 1451 when Johann Gutenberg (literally, "Joe Goodberg") invented the printing press, which made it possible for a newspaper to cheaply and accurately reproduce every single error thousands of times. But the real turning point came in 1609, when the publisher of the German newspaper Der Postentimesennewsenregisterentribune (literally, Grit) invented the "Presidents Day sale," which made modern newspaper advertising possible, and which is still in use today, though nobody has any idea who the "presidents" are.

The newspaper industry spread to America, where, by the 20th century, virtually every town had a locally owned newspaper with a name like The Chronic Prevaricator or The Register-Sphincter, which kept the community abreast of local politics ("City Council Attacked by Pig") as well as national issues ("Strom Thurmond Still Alive"). These were family operations run by people who were less concerned about making large profits than about keeping their body parts out of the presses.

But in the past few decades, all of these newspapers were purchased by large corporations, which were in turn purchased by larger corporations, and so on, so that today the entire American newspaper industry has been glommed together into one giant media conglomerate owned by Wall Street, which frankly does not care what your city council did. What Wall Street cares about is profits. Here at the newspaper, we get hourly phone calls from Wall Street.

"Send more profits!" Wall Street shouts, then slams down the receiver.

We must comply, because otherwise Wall Street would shut down the newspaper and we would starve to death, because, as English majors, we have no useful skills.

So the "bottom line" is that we've had to cut costs. Here are some of the ways we're doing this:

**RECYCLING STORIES:** To avoid the expense of writing a new story, we're rerunning earlier ones. For example, every day for the past five years, we've run the same story on fighting in the Middle East ("Middle East Fighting Again").

**STAFF CUTBACKS:** The typical newspaper staff has been reduced to one editor, one managing editor, 14 assistant managing editors, 39 deputy assistant managing editors, and one reporter. The editors spend their days holding meetings to think of new ways to cut costs, while the reporter (who, for budgetary reasons, is not allowed to leave the building) looks out the window, in case news occurs in the parking lot.

**PRODUCT PLACEMENT:** You're going to see more sentences like this one, from a recent front-page story in The Philadelphia Inquirer: "We are seriously considering the use of nuclear weapons against China,' stated President Bush, who then took a long sip from a refreshing, ice-cold Diet Pepsi."

**FEWER WORDS:** Not need adjectives, adverbs. Nouns, verbs can communicate story gist. ("Middle East fighting." )

**WEAKER ENDINGS TO COLUMNS.**

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Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit [simontownsendjournalist.com](http://simontownsendjournalist.com) for the full archive.