

# A Reading List for Journalists

Wisdom and Inspiration · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

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Simon kept a shelf of books near his desk and used to say that most young journalists would do better to read those books once than to take any number of courses. This is that shelf, with the reasoning.

The list is a mix of craft books, long-form journalism collections, and books about the trade itself. It is not comprehensive. It is what Simon talked about and what the best Australian journalists still talk about.

## Craft and style

*On Writing Well*, William Zinsser. Not new. Still the best single book on non-fiction writing in English. Every chapter has something that will improve your prose.

*The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White. A hundred pages. Read it every year. Argue with it. The arguments will teach you as much as the rules.

*Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott. On writing anything under pressure. The chapter on "shitty first drafts" is worth the cover price.

*On Writing*, Stephen King. Half memoir, half craft book. The craft half is pure gold.

*Draft No. 4*, John McPhee. The New Yorker writer on structure, research, and the work of assembling a feature from field notes. Reveals more about the mechanics of long-form than a whole journalism degree will.

*The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard. Not journalism, but any journalist who writes long will recognise themselves in it.

## Reporting and investigation

*The Boys on the Bus*, Timothy Crouse. Reporting on reporters. Still the sharpest study of how a press pack works.

*All the President's Men*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. The original and still unmatched manual on investigative reporting. Read the middle chapters for source work.

*Hiroshima*, John Hersey. 1946. Still the reference text for long-form witness journalism.

*In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote. Ethically compromised but instructive. A masterclass in scene writing and interview technique, with a warning about where the line is.

*The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright. How to build a non-fiction book out of years of reporting.

## **Australian journalism**

*The Full Brownlow*, Les Carlyon. A collection of his columns and features. Australian sportswriting at its best. Applied journalism craft on a parochial subject treated seriously.

*Stalin's Nose*, Rory MacLean. Travel writing at a literary level. Not Australian, but sets a standard for how travel journalism can be built.

*Chris Masters, Inside Story*. On the 1987 Four Corners "Moonlight State" investigation into Queensland police corruption. Read to understand how a working newspaper and TV investigation actually runs.

*The Coming of the Bunyips*, Peter Luck. Sympathetic history of Australian current affairs TV, including This Day Tonight where Simon worked.

*David Marr's Patrick White biography and Power Trip*. Marr's non-fiction prose is the template for Australian long-form essay writing. Every journalism student should read at least one of his books in full.

*Kate Legge, Infidelity*. Example of how a working Australian features writer turns reporting into a book.

*Paul Barry, The Rise and Rise of Kerry Packer*. Still the best book about Australian media power.

## **Media history and theory**

*The Media Lens*, David Edwards and David Cromwell. Polemic, but useful as a corrective to establishment press assumptions.

*Bad News*, the Glasgow Media Group series. Academic, older, but taught a generation of reporters how framing and selection can shape supposedly neutral coverage.

*What Are Journalists For?* Jay Rosen. Short book, still relevant.

*News: The Politics of Illusion*, Lance Bennett. The standard US text on how news is manufactured. Applies in Australia as well.

## **On press freedom and ethics**

*Journalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Ian Hargreaves. What it says on the tin.

*The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. Published by the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Still the clearest summary of what journalism is for.

*A Dangerous Profession*, Peter Greste. Greste's memoir of his imprisonment in Egypt. Essential for any Australian journalist thinking about foreign reporting or press freedom.

## **Australian writing to read for the sentences**

Helen Garner's non-fiction: *The First Stone*, *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, *This House of Grief*. Each one is a masterclass in non-fiction craft.

Don Watson's *Death Sentence*. On the corruption of language in public life. Every journalist should read it.

Anna Funder's *Stasiland*. What deep reporting combined with clear prose can do.

Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man*. Court reporting, reconstruction, and moral investigation in one book.

## **Reference books worth owning**

*The Macquarie Dictionary*. The Australian reference.

A style guide from whichever publication you work for. Or build your own over time.

*Fowler's Modern English Usage*, still worth consulting on the occasional disputed point.

*Roget's Thesaurus* used with care. The writer's worst friend.

## **A working habit**

Read one good feature every day. Read it deliberately. Ask why the intro works. Ask how the transition between scene and context is handled. Ask what the kicker does. This is the work Simon did every day of his career, and it is why his writing never got stale.

If you cannot afford books, your local library can order most of the above. The State Library in each capital holds the full set and has free reader tickets. Use them.

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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.