



Resource Review

Name of reviewer:	Millard Parkinson
Job title:	Head of Higher Education
Institution:	St Helens College

Name of reviewed item:	<i>Media Writing: A Practical Introduction</i>
Editors:	Craig Batty and Sandra Cain
Publisher:	Palgrave MacMillan
Publication / release date:	2010
ISBN number:	978-0-230-21876-5
Price:	£19.99

Review:

This book is intended as a general text for undergraduate media, journalism and media writing courses. Though written by senior lecturers at two universities and aimed at the undergraduate market, its structure, layout and general tone are similar to books used on Level 3 courses such as A-Level, National Diploma and Advanced Diploma programmes in media. It could also serve as a useful text for English graduates studying the media at post-graduate level who may be looking for employment in writing for various media.

This is the first edition of a new book. Its aims are stated in the first chapter, 'Introduction: What is Media Writing?' The first of these is to provide a text which addresses the needs of a perceived growing number of media writing courses in UK universities. However, some evidence suggests that there has been a reduction in students wishing to study general media courses and that media is not the hugely popular subject it once was. The other aim is to bring together all of the various specialist areas of media writing; print and broadcast journalism, fiction and non-fiction film, TV advertising, public relations and writing for the Web in one general text rather than concentrating on one specific discipline as most current books do. 'By bringing together a range of media writing forms in one book, the intention here is not merely to offer a broader scope than other books but to suggest that media writing can be understood as a discipline which boasts huge potential for crossover and the transferability of skills. In short, rather than a single-minded view of one or two forms of media writing, we are offering an exploration of a range of media writing practices which emanate from a set of flexible tools – tools of writing for any form of media.'

This would suggest that writing for the media requires an understanding of all forms of media, their disciplines and requirements and the acceptance that those working in professional media writing need the ability to write for many of these disciplines,

certainly at the beginning of their career before they develop the specific skills, experience and reputation to concentrate on one chosen discipline. The Introduction continues to identify the main concepts of media writing as being: communication; the use of narratives to tell a story with purpose; to create a shape and plot which is accessible to an audience; the need for persuasion and conviction; and the need to address an appropriate audience. The remainder of the Introduction examines these concepts in more detail. It does this by providing a description of these concepts and areas of study with references to more specific texts for further reading. The Introduction concludes with sections advising the reader about the processes of persuading and convincing, developing their writing skills and craft and of the importance of thorough and accurate research, not only into their subject but also into their target audience.

The Introduction and the other chapters in the book provide short tasks for students to undertake as exercises in raising awareness of areas of media writing, in researching and in starting to develop writing skills. It is this method of providing short tasks for students to perform which makes the book similar to those written for secondary school and further education students rather than undergraduates. Some students who have already studied at pre-degree level may feel that this approach is too reminiscent of their previous study and not sufficiently new and challenging. This does provide a useful ready-made element of curriculum and teaching methods for tutors. The tasks themselves do appear to be rather simple. They would be more appropriate for lower level study and, because students may have already done similar exercises, fail to provide sufficient motivation or challenge.

The remainder of the book is divided into chapters on each area of media writing: print journalism for newspapers and for magazines; broadcast journalism; public relations and media relations; copywriting and advertising; screenwriting for fiction and factual screenwriting.

Each chapter begins with an overview of the particular discipline followed by a list of what the reader should be able to do by the end of the chapter. This provides a very useful guide to what the student should learn and understand from reading the chapter and a direction for their enquiry. The chapter describes the different types of newspapers in the UK and refers to “quality” newspapers in other countries. It covers the role of the journalist and what qualities are necessary to become a good journalist. These include contributions from other writers on the subject such as Randall¹, Harris and Sparks², and Pape and Featherstone³ and from professional journalists such as Sarah Sands, Deputy Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. This chapter also provides concise information on important elements of newspaper journalism including; ethics, copyright, libel, news values, sourcing information, interview techniques, creating the right type of story, journalist language and writing for different elements of a newspaper such as headlines, reviews and feature articles. The chapter concludes with a section on career opportunities and a list of further reading most of which has been referenced in the main text.

The other chapters follow this structure with coverage of general topics in more detail. For example, the chapter on magazine journalism includes more detail about interview techniques and types of questioning. This chapter also includes a task around analysing a published magazine interview and a section on writing short stories for magazines. The chapter on broadcast journalism includes sections on writing for TV, radio and on-line journalism.

¹ Randall, D. (2000) *The Universal Journalist*, London, Pluto

² Harris, G. And Sparks, D (1997) *Practical Newspaper Writing* Oxford, Focal Press

³ Pape, S. And Featherstone, S. (2005) *Newspaper Journalism: A Practical Introduction* London; Sage

The chapter on public relations and media relations includes a breakdown of the four models of public relations: press agency/publicity model, public information model, 2-way asymmetrical PR, and 2-way symmetrical PR. It also includes information on analysis, putting information with the most appropriate media and creating a press release and media pack.

The chapter on advertising and copywriting includes information on defining USBs, writing for specific audiences, the KISS principle and the specific requirements of writing for TV advertising including camera and sound instructions and a sample shooting script.

The chapter on fiction screenwriting includes information on producing a screenplay, developing characterisation, genre, visual style and on breaking the accepted rules of narrative structure; all of which are illustrated with examples of popular films.

The chapter on factual screenwriting includes definitions of documentary, the use of drama in documentary, creating documentary narratives and the different production techniques; again illustrated with sample scripts. The reading list for this chapter includes a number of textbooks concerned with documentary production such as Rabiger⁴, Kriwaczek⁵ and Kochberg⁶. The reason for this concentration on practical production techniques in this chapter rather than the previous one is, presumably, because documentaries are usually produced by much smaller teams than dramas and the writer is usually more closely involved in the production process and may even assume a production role.

The tasks included in each chapter reflect the nature of each media writing discipline and specialism and include a number of practical production-based exercises such as writing a voice-over for a documentary sequence and a shot-by-shot analysis of a TV drama.

Although each chapter concludes with a section on career opportunities in each of the specialisms, there is little mention of training that is recognised by professional bodies. The website of the National Council for the Training of Journalists is included in the list of web resources at the end of the chapters on print journalism. There is no mention of Skillset, the Sector Skills Council for audio-visual industries which covers screen writing.

The book does not include a separate chapter on writing for the internet but does include preparing written material for websites and internet delivery in some of the other chapters.

The final chapter is entitled 'Conclusion: Media Writing and Digital Technology'. This explains the ways in which the future of media writing evolves to embrace developments in technology; 'By 'future', then, what we really mean is 'digital': more specifically, the development of digital technology in order to change the way that media writing is both produced and consumed.' It goes on to explain that, while the previous chapters described writing for traditional forms of media, the fundamental skills, disciplines and expertise are equally relevant to newer media technologies. They must be learned, developed and applied regardless of the ways in which they may be experienced by their target audience. It explains the relationship between newspapers and their websites and the different functions that both serve; 'the

⁴ Rabiger, M. (2004) *Directing the Documentary*, 4th edn, Oxford, Focal Press

⁵ Kriwaczek, P. (1997) *Documentary for the Small Screen*, Oxford, Focal Press

⁶ Kochberg, S. (2002) *Introduction to Documentary Production: A Guide for Media Students*, London; Wallflower

medium of delivery may be very different, the message and its creation is not' and goes on to quote Hudson and Rowlands; 'journalism is gathering, writing and publishing factual information. How that information is published – in print or electronically – changes with the times. But there is no sign in the modern landscape that there will be any less demands for professional journalists'⁷

Overall, despite the initial impression of being aimed at a lower level of student and its similarity to texts intended for A-Level courses, a more detailed examination reveals it to be a very useful text. It does exactly what it says on the cover. It provides a thorough general introduction to the range of media writing and a series of practical exercises by which students can apply what has been learned from the book. The inclusion of familiar examples and advice from media professionals is very valuable. The book is rich in references to other more detailed and specialist texts. This element of the book is excellent and directs students well to approximately 150 books and 50 websites of which they may otherwise not be aware and may find inaccessible; although, as potential journalists, they should be able to discover most of this for themselves. The book not only serves as an excellent introduction for media students intent on a career in writing, it is very useful for those engaged in a broader study of media or anyone who simply has an interest in the media and wishes to know more about how it is created.

⁷ Hudson, G. and Rowlands, S. (2007) *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook*, Harlow, Pearson Longman