

Putting memories in your yearbook—instead of just plain old facts—is step one on the road to readable copy.



#### BACK TO THE BASICS

### Writing yearbook copy that your readers will love

We know you don't think it's possible, but we are going to do our best to give you some ways that you can write yearbook copy that isn't boring and that the people who buy your yearbook will actually read. Yes, it is possible.

How, you ask? As we mentioned on the front page, you have to learn to write memories—not facts. But how do you get those memories? That's easy—you play a game. That's right, a game. It's a game you have played with your friends many times. It's called, Can You Top This?

#### Playing the game

Now we know this isn't a real game, but it is something we all do all the time. Imagine you're with a group of friends and someone says, "Hey, do you remember that time that we were (you can add any event or activity here) dissecting frogs in Mr. Smith's biology class? And Suzie Jones fainted?"

And someone else

**Yes, your students will actually read the yearbook when it arrives if you write great copy. Great copy means getting the memories and not just the facts. It's easier than you think to do just that.**

will say something like, "Yeah, that was pretty funny, but what about the time we were cutting up fetal pigs in Bio 2 and John Turlo barfed? Now that was disgusting!" Pretty soon, everyone joins in with his or her favorite biology class story. And you know there are more.

So how do you get this started? It's easy. Most of you know what a press conference is. You've seen the president get up in front of a group of reporters, and they all ask him questions. This is a great way to get the facts. But it's not a great way to get memories. To get memories, you have to do it in reverse.

#### How a reverse press conference works

We call it a reverse press conference because to capture the memories of a particular event you only have to gather people who have that event in common. You might also call it brainstorming, except

the goal of brainstorming is to come up with ideas while our goal here is to bring back some great memories.

Get your group together at lunch or after school when they have a few minutes to spare. Then you ask the entire group some questions (we'll give you some great ones later in this article) and write down as much as you can of what they say. That will be the hard part. Writing it all down. Sometimes they get going so fast that you will wish you had brought a tape recorder to get all the great quotes.

#### Who should be there

One of the first things to decide is...who will be in the group you are going to interview for this copy?

Not your friends. One of the biggest problems I hear advisers complain about is that yearbook staffers take pictures of only their friends and that they interview only their friends. And that's true. But you need to keep in mind that this yearbook is for everyone in your school—not just your friends. You need to find others.

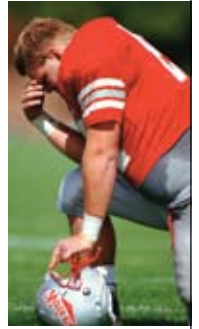
We suggest that if you are going to try this method you limit yourself to six or seven people at the most. Otherwise, you won't be able to keep track of everything that's being said. Less than that, and you won't get a good representation of memories. Also, try and get people involved that you normally would not consider interviewing about that topic.

Let's take a hypothetical situation. You are writing about the football season. Normally, wouldn't you interview just the coach and a few players? Probably. But that's not enough. How about getting together the following people to throw out questions to:

- Two or three players (one star—no more)
- Two student fans who saw most of the games
- The team statistician
- A band member who played at halftime
- A cheerleader or dance team member

This is a much more representative group of the average readers who will be reading your yearbook. That's because football at your school is not just about the players and the games. It's about everything that happened during football season.

It is also important to note that for GREAT coverage you might do more than one of these reverse press conferences (or brainstorming sessions) per event or activity. Maybe you get together this group to get ideas for general coverage and another to come up with info for a super sidebar that might only have information you could get from players. For instance, what was the craziest thing that happened on a football away game road trip?



## Don't cover yourself

Before we leave the subject of who is involved with this brainstorming, we want to make one final point. People who are involved with an event or activity should not cover that event or activity.

So if you play volleyball, you should not be covering volleyball. You are too close to it. You see things from only your point of view. Your coverage needs to be fair and balanced. This is one reason that the New York Times does not hire a candidate to cover the presidential campaign. How impartial do you think the coverage would be? How slanted towards the candidate's point of view? For the same reason, by good journalistic standards, a person does not cover a group he or she belongs to.

## Three great questions

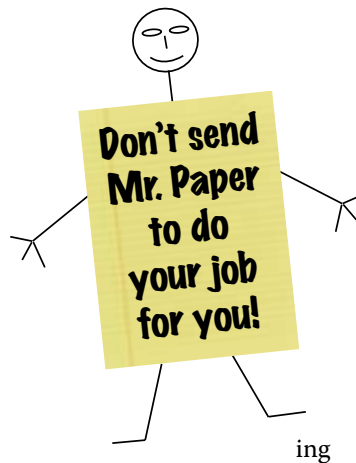
The first few times you assemble a brainstorming reverse press conference, you will find that the students may not jump right into the swing of things. For that reason, you will need some really thought-provoking questions to get things going. Here are three that are time tested and work most of the time. But make sure to read the warning that follows them.

1. What was the \_\_\_\_\_ thing that happened during \_\_\_\_\_? Fill in the first blank with almost any superlative. Like funniest, craziest, saddest, silliest, etc. Fill in the second blank with the activity or event you are covering.

2. What one thing do you think you will remember about \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 years? The blank here is just the name of the activity or event. When you ask this question, make sure to push the group if they get hung up on the obvious.
3. If you could do one thing over again regarding \_\_\_\_\_, what would it be? Fill in your event or activity here.

## Warning!!!

Here's the warning we promised before the questions. These three questions are not headlines. Your book should not feature one of them at the top of a copy block and then the answers below. That's cheating your readers. Good copy is the product of what you get when you grab the memories and then write them in a way that is interest-



ing and fun to read.

## Paper is not alive

It always amazes me when I hear about yearbook staffers who think that paper is alive. Seriously, the paper you are holding in your hands is an inanimate object. It's not

alive. Yet many yearbook staffers think that it is. How do I know they think that? Because they send it out to do their interviews for them.

Be honest. Either you or someone on your yearbook staff has tried to do an interview by typing up a bunch of questions and putting those in a teacher's faculty room mailbox with a note asking them to "fill out this sheet and return it to my adviser's mailbox, please."

To actually do an interview, you have to go someplace yourself and ask the questions out loud. And to do a memory brainstorming, you absolutely have to be there to keep the conversation moving along.

## Stop writing in English

Now that probably got your attention. And no, we are not advocating you write your copy in Spanish, French, Italian or any other foreign language. We want you to write in "Student."

Student is not slang. Let's get that out of the way right now. It does not have any profanity in it. It does not use terms that will be out of date by the time the yearbook arrives at the end of the year.

The best way I can define the language we call "Student" is to say that it is the way you talk when an adult is present. It isn't the way to write for your history teacher. It is how you would tell a story if you were telling it to friends while your Mom was in the room. It would be fun but suitable and understandable for everyone.

## Seeing our method work

Now that we have given you some ideas and guidelines about how a reverse press conference or memory brainstorming session might go, let's see what kind of answers you might get and how they differ from what you will get if you continue to interview the way you have been in the past.

On the next two pages (our centerfold spread), we will look at copy describing a hypothetical school's biggest fundraiser—a walkathon. We will look at it from the standpoint of getting the facts with traditional interviews and writing the traditional style of body copy and then contrast that with using our method of memory brainstorming at a reverse press conference and writing it up in "Student."

## Stop here

Stop reading this page now and check it out. We hope it will better explain what we've been trying to say.

## For more about writing great copy, get these books.



**The Radical Write**  
By Bobby Hawthorne  
Available from Jostens on your Yearbook Avenue website. Choose

Educate/Classroom Tools to order. It is an excellent reference and teaching tool.

## Writing to be Read

By Ken Macrorie  
Available from Amazon new and used. This is just a great book on writing so that people (read students) will read what you have written. All budding Shakespeares should have a copy.



## The Walkathon—Facts

1. 14th annual Walkathon
2. Held on Tuesday, October 8
3. Started at noon/last group finished at 3
4. Walked from school, down bike path to downtown and back again, a total of 10K
5. Raised money to buy new computers
6. More than \$36,000 was raised
7. John Smith was the chairperson
8. Mary Jones was in charge of refreshments for the walkers
9. More than 350 students participated
10. Most money raised in last five walkathons at our school.

Quote from John Smith:

"The students who participated were great. They did a super job of getting pledges and returning their forms. Senior class participation was the best, followed by the sophomores, juniors and then freshmen. We hope to include more freshmen next year and cross the \$50,000 threshold."

This information was obtained by sending Mr. Smith a written request.

## 14th Annual Bulldog Walkathon helps computer lab grow

On Tuesday, October 8, 2007, more than 350 students from our high school participated in the annual Walkathon. It started at noon, and the last group of students finished at 3:15. This year's fundraiser raised more than \$36,000 that was used to replace outdated computers in the campus computer lab. This was more money than had been raised by the last five walkathons.

Students were released from class at noon on that day and walked a course that went 10 kilometers down the Hiram A. Chittendam Riverside bike path to downtown and back again. It was the first time that course had been used. In past years, students walked on the track around the football field.

Mr. John Smith (Senior Mike Smith's father) was the chairman of the Walkathon. He credited much of the success of the event to Mrs. Mary Jones (Junior Tracy Jones' mother), who was in charge of refreshments for the walkers.

When asked to tell us the best part of being Walkathon chairperson, Mr. Smith replied, "The students who participated were great. They did a super job of getting pledges and returning their forms. Senior class participation was the best, followed by the sophomores, juniors and then freshmen. We hope to include more freshmen next year and cross the \$50,000 threshold."

### Do you get it?

The copy above is from a paper Q&A interview and is nothing but facts. It is the typical yearbook copy we would find in a typical yearbook from Anyplace, USA.

The copy on the right is all about memories. You can only get this kind of stuff from memory brainstorming. But you also have to note that all the facts from the first story are also in the second story right along with the memories. Your yearbook is the history of your school, and those historical facts must be covered as well as those memories.



## The Walkathon—Memories

1. It was hot! Felt like 1000 degrees.
2. A school day—great excuse to miss class.
3. Had to walk until 3:00 or go back to class so most took their time.
4. Refreshments were cookies and lemonade. Lemonade was served in spit cups donated by local dentist. About 1/2 an ounce each.
5. Sara McCluskey had to go to work right after the walkathon so she wore her heels and skirt. Didn't realize how far 10K was.
6. Bunch of seniors jumped in the pool at the Travelodge next to the bike path and almost got caught by the manager.

## Heat, heels and hotel pool bring in the big bucks for tech

"It felt like it was 1000 degrees out there!" said Junior Casey Clevenger. That about summed up the feelings of the more than 350 students who participated in the 14th annual Walkathon.

Temperatures hovered in the low 90s all day, but no one wanted to miss out on the walkathon. "It's not that I really wanted to walk or raise the money that much, but it gets you out of class and outside for the whole afternoon. It's one of the reasons that no one walks very fast. If you get back to school before 3:00, you have to go back to class," explained sophomore Mike Linderhoff, "But the heat was oppressive!"

The heat wasn't helped by the lack of liquid refreshment on the 10-kilometer walking course. Sara

Hicks complained, "You know how we always get donations for everything at this school? Well, the cups they used to pass out lemonade during the 'thon were donated by a dentist. They were those little spit cups. You know, rinse and spit, please? Well, you could stand there and get your cup refilled 20 times and never really feel like you had anything to drink. It was more funny than sad though. And the cookies that Tracy Jones' mom made were really good."

Senior Mary McCluskey may have had the longest day ever. "I had to go to work at the mall right at 3:30. And I didn't realize how far 10K was. I came dressed for work in my skirt, hose and heels. I barely made it 5K before I had to quit because of my blisters. The people

who sponsored me understood and still gave me their full pledge, but we all had a good laugh over it," Mary recalled.

A group of seniors who asked not to be named were seen jumping into the Travelodge swimming pool that is next to the bike path. "We saw the cool water, and we just had to do it," one confessed.

Mr. John Smith, Walkathon chairperson, summed up the entire event by saying, "The students who participated were great. We raised more than \$36,000 that will be used to replace outdated computers. We are so glad this new course worked out. With the heat the way it was, the old course around the football field would have been even worse. At least this one had shade."