



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

This week we are doing the first webinar in this series. It's gonna be five webinars on journalistic detail. Now, the thing about journalistic detail is that you may have never ever heard this word before, but this term rather, and that's absolutely fine because I've made it up. And I made it up for a reason, which is that there are certain terms that editors and other folks in the editorial industry use to talk about what they want and what they're looking for or what they think that you aren't doing that often don't overlap with the same ways that writers, especially writers who maybe haven't gone to journalism school and gotten briefed in that setting on a lot of these terms.

These are terms that writers don't understand in the same way that editors do, and I don't know if any of you on the call are familiar with this book, but there's a book called "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" and it wasn't originally written in English, so I can't necessarily... And I don't speak the language it was written in, so I can't testify to how good the translation is.

But in the book, there's this concept of motifs that comes up throughout the relationships of the main characters. And the idea is that every word that a person hears has different meanings for each person. So as I was just discussing in Milan Kundera's book, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" different words have different meanings to each person and they make this very clear throughout the book by talking about motifs, that a word has certain motifs like in a song that repeat over and over again when they hear it, that repeat throughout their lives. So perhaps a ball might mean one thing to you as a child, then mean something else to you when you get a dog, it means something entirely different to you if your dog dies because they run out into the street to chase that ball. So that concept of the red ball will carry all these layers of meanings for you.

And a lot of the words the editors use when they talk to writers carry a lot of meaning for those editors. Maybe they use them a lot in their day to day work in their editorial office. Maybe they learn them in depth in journalism school. Maybe it's a word that they get harped on by their boss a lot, but those words don't mean so much to the person hearing them. And the vein in which a lot of this comes up is like I intimated earlier when editors aren't so happy with what you've done, they might give feedback that doesn't mean the same thing to you as it means to them. They might give feedback that even when you institute it, you aren't providing what they're looking for and then they either come back to you with more edits and feel frustrated or they just killed a piece.

And so one of the reasons that we're gonna spend five whole webinar weeks on looking at journalistic detail is that this is an area where there's a lot of these feelings, a lot of feelings from editors that they aren't getting it. A lot of feelings from writers that they don't understand what it is that editors want from them. They don't understand what editors mean



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

when they use words like “be more specific” or “I need more detail.” So I’ve come up with this idea of journalistic detail that we’re gonna explore today about what that is, but also we’re gonna explore in the next webinars in this series so that you understand not only what it is that editors are looking for, but also how exactly to implement it and how to implement it in a number of different situations.

So in this webinar, which I’m kind of thinking of is the intro to journalistic detail, we’re gonna look at what I mean exactly by journalistic detail and we’re gonna look at also some of the unexpected benefits besides just what I was saying about editors will like you more, that journalistic detail is gonna do for you. And then we’re gonna break down some real world examples so you can see how you can take something that doesn’t have journalistic detail right now and add it.

And I had a really interesting question yesterday in a coaching call, which was that, you know, okay, well if I add all of that, then it’s gonna take up more space and I need to hit this workout or I need to keep this short. And that’s a really great point. I think a lot of times writers, especially when you’re trying to write something short, whether it’s a news brief for a magazine or some other short piece or your pitch that you’re trying to keep to a certain length so that editors will be able to read it in one page on their screen while they’re on their phone or their computer.

The thing is though, that there’s often something else that can very easily go, which is not adding to what you’re writing, and in fact, probably detracting from it a bit that we can replace the journalistic detail. And so something that I hope that you’ll come to see, if not today, probably not today because this is gonna be new for a number of you. So I hope that you can come to see it. If not today, then by the end of the series to get a grasp of where you need to use journalistic detail, where it’s helpful, and then that will allow you to see those places where the sentences that you’re currently writing aren’t adding anything to your piece and you can remove those to allow space for this detail. So throughout the rest of the webinars in this series, we’re gonna be doing a lot of primary source examination, so that means we’re going to go right to the magazines. We’re gonna look at magazine articles and we’re going to look at how this journalistic detail is used in a number of different settings.

Today I’m gonna give you just some examples where we’re gonna walk through together, kind of taking something that doesn’t have journalistic detail and then adding it so we’re not gonna be using magazines as resources so much today as we will in the further or the later on calls in this series. And so when I say breakdown and real world examples, I have a couple that I’ve already prepared for you. I have a couple that I came up with, kind of the watered down version that we’re gonna then make tighter, is just another word that editors love to use. Right?



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

So we're gonna start with the more, the version that could use help and then I'm gonna walk you through some stages to make it even better. And if we have time or if people don't have examples that they want to choose to look at, we can look at some. I've got a Delta magazine pulled up in the back, but I'd really love to also get some examples from you guys where you can tell me something, a sentence, it can be maybe a sentence that you have in a pitch right now that you're working on or it can just be an idea that you have and we'll walk through how to beef that up. So that's what we're gonna go through today.

So as we get into talking about journalistic detail, obviously the first question is what on earth do I mean by this? I've given you kind of a little bit of an intimation in here about where I'm going that, you know, it has to do with detail, it has to do with the type of detail that editors think of as being specific enough, but the whole point of this webinar is that you don't know what that means, right? So I wanna explore this in more detail.

So I wanna start by giving you an example and I will actually even do this up here on the screen so that you guys can see what I'm talking about. So after the example, I'll talk about some different ways that you can beef something up with different types of language that will create journalistic detail, but I think it's better to start with an example first you can watch me do it.

So this example is an idea that I had. I was out walking today and I was just thinking of a couple different kind of essay-type ideas that we could look at as examples today. And so something that I walked by was this bookstore and it's a bookstore specifically for kids and I think it might even be all in French, which might make it not so useful for me personally. But there's an entire lovely bookstore just dedicated to kids books a couple blocks from my house. And I was walking by and thinking, you know, oh, well, this is great. I've never seen this bookstore before. This is great because we have so many kids that we always need presents for.

Now, if I had that sentence, we have so many kids, I'll make the text bigger in one second, that we always need presents for. That's not a super interesting sentence, okay? Now, not only is it not a super interesting sentence, but it doesn't have personality, it doesn't have tone, it doesn't have a lot of the things that make writing delightful to read. So one of the issues here with this sentence, let me get rid of the rest of this, is right here. We have so many kids, particularly so many, okay? And then also kids, you know, we could maybe make that more specific as well. But the point of this particular communication right now is that I found this bookstore and that it's great because we have so many kids that we need to get presents for. So the point is the multitude of the kids that I need a whole bookstore nearby that I know I can go to whenever I need a present for a kid because there's so many.



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

So the question really to me, the first thing with my editor hat on that jumps out of this is why. Like I don't understand why you need a whole bookstore. How many kids are we really talking about? So the first thing I could say is, you know, that we have a lot of nieces and nephews. That's slightly more specific, right? I've said what kind of kids. Because the important thing is that I can't spell, but the important thing is that they're not my kids, right? I'm not saying I have five kids, I don't have kids. So this is being more specific already. We have a lot of nieces and nephews.

Now, what's left here that could be fixed is a lot, okay? Now the way that I could pump this up even further is to say, you know, "Between my husband and myself and 'real' nieces and nephews versus the children of our best friends and the extended Indian family that makes everyone no matter how distantly related a niece or nephew. We have 47 kids to buy presents for on a regular basis." Now this gets into what I pointed out earlier, which is that these sentences get long. But if I was, say, to be writing a funny story about, you know, buying books in a bookstore when I don't have kids of my own, but I know way too much about kids books and it's kind of creepy, this sentence sets the scene so much better because not only am I explaining what I mean by a lot or so many kids who exactly these kids are, but I'm also injecting the tone that's gonna go into this story. I'm setting the scene by the choice of numbers, by the choice of nouns, even by the choice of adjectives here, right?

So you'll notice one other thing that's going on the sentence is that it's not really replete with adjectives. I do say kind of, you know, this real and I say extended Indian family, but I haven't said, for instance, you know, the exterior of the bookstore was shiny and bright like a freshly polished penny or something. I'm not going so far on what sometimes I've heard people call like the flowery detail or the flowery description or something like that. I have chosen a fact, and this is why we call it journalistic detail, okay? I have chosen a fact about what I'm talking about that elucidates and gives tone to the piece.

So like I said, I've used numbers here, but I've mostly used a fact and I've used multiple facts actually here. So I said between us, I could have just said, you know, that my husband has through his extended family, this many, but then I'm also kind of bringing in that idea of the best friends. And I could even say rather than best friends, I could say, you know, between and the children of the brides, the seven bridesmaids in my wedding, right? We could even say that. That would be even more detailed and kind of also hilarious in setting the scene, right? I did have seven bridesmaids in my wedding and I'm happy to explain why it's Hudson's fault anyone who asks.

So now we've got quite a few numbers in here, but we've also got specifics, so it's not just the "nieces and nephews" and then I'm leaving the reader to wonder why are they "nieces and nephews?" Why aren't they real nieces or nephews, you know. Why can't they be, you



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

know, and the reader just kind of, they stop. They don't understand. Why is it "nieces and nephews?" So I have to, in there, clarify why I'm saying that we don't have a family of 12 brothers and sisters each that each have four kids or two kids. It's created the situation, okay?

So one of the ways that you run into the need for journalistic detail is when somebody other than yourself does not understand a piece of background that is necessary for the sentence to be comprehended that you have. So this is something interesting that I see a lot, which is that people will write something and I see this a lot in pitch letters because I look at pitch letters but I'm sure that it's also happening in pieces. People will write particularly in the intro for their pitch letter and they will talk about a place that clearly has significance for them, that they clearly think has significance for the readers of the magazine that they're pitching this place to, that they clearly think has significance in terms of it's new or it's very exciting or it's something that's caused them to wanna pitch this place.

But I as the reader and especially with my editor hat on, I don't understand what that enthusiasm is. I don't understand what that significance is. So, you know, sometimes I'm seeing pitches where you've said, I'll take an example that I'm actually gonna dive into a little bit more later on into the piece. So there is this island off, I wouldn't say off the coast of Japan, but there is an island in the South Pacific where it's used to belong to the US and now it belongs to Japan. They kind of "gave it back" a little while ago, and let's say that I want to pitch a story about that place.

So I could say 50 years ago, the Bonin Islands, which can only be reached by a 25-hour ferry ride from Tokyo, formally changed hands from the United States to Japan. The American heritage is all but gone, save the 8-foot long flag on 4th generation Nathaniel Taylor's truck permanently parked on the main street in proud protest. I'm using details there. I'm saying 50 years ago, the island changed hands. It's 25-hour ferry ride from Tokyo. There's an 8-foot long flag painted on the side of this American guy who still lives there struck. Those are all details that I'm including. But if the piece that I'm pitching is just about how this is a wonderful tropical island getaway, those details don't have anything to do with it.

So it's important that we don't only choose details that are, like I said, sort of flowery description or numbers that show something, that something is historic, that something is a trend. You know, we could say a number of how many visitors are visiting a certain place. We could say a number of the year that a certain thing is opened. We wanna use these numbers and we wanna use adjectives and we want to use facts, but we have to also have them wrapped into a larger theme. So again, this is a big concept and that's why we're spending five whole webinars on it. But this is what I want you to get across, that journalistic detail means that you are using specific facts that may or may not be descriptive or simply facts that incorporate clear nouns. So whether it's the nieces and nephews or the number of



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

nieces and nephews or how they aren't exactly our nieces and nephews and that all of those facts that you have chosen to include tie completely into the point of your piece.

And one of the best things about this, like I mentioned earlier, is that on the surface, journalistic detail will help you as a writer in your career and to make more money by writing better pitches. It will make your pitches more clear, but more importantly, editors get so many pitches. We hear this all the time. However, what we don't hear all the time is how exactly editors are going through and triaging those pitches. Now, there's a quote that I like to use a lot and now I've heard other people start using a lot. It comes from somebody who used to be at Sunset and he's actually, I believe, at Airbnb Magazine right now, I just heard from somebody. And at the book passage conference maybe four years ago, someone asked, "How long does it take you to get back to a pitch."

And you know, all the editors started looking around like with crazy deer eyes and this guy bravely got up to answer this question and he said, "If it's a yes, 15 minutes, if it's a no, 30 minutes. But if it's a maybe, indefinitely." And the thing about that is that so many of you, and I hear this all the time, are getting in that maybe category and it's not just so many of you, it's so many of everybody, you know, like this quote shows that maybe category is this black hole. And part of the reason that the maybe category is a bit of a black hole is that there are many different reasons that you fall into the maybe category.

The first and foremost that is a positive one is that the editor likes your idea and wants to figure out if they have space for it before they get back to you and say a yes. So that's a great maybe. What else can happen though is that the editor likes your idea, but is not sure about your ability to carry it off. Now what happens is sometimes that has to do with the idea. Sometimes they're not sure if the thing that you wanna pitch them is important enough for their readers. Sometimes they are not sure if the thing that you wanna pitch them is feasible to report on if you can actually get the information you or another person.

And sometimes they're not sure if you have enough clarity around what the idea is that you can effectively put that piece into words. Now this is the area where journalistic detail really comes in and the fourth reason is that they might think that the idea is great, but that they aren't so confident in your writing. In that even more is where this concept of journalistic detail comes in in terms of how your pitches and how the responses to your pitches can change once you start incorporating it.

So what happens is that as editors are doing this triage process and they get to some pitch that they are not sure about, a variety of things happen. And the first one really is those first two reasons I said, is this idea even feasible? Do I really think that this person can physically



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

report this idea? That's usually the first thing they go through because as any editor who is a wonderful human being, which most of them are because they get paid less than freelance writers and they choose to spend all of their days making people's writing better. So any editor who's a good human being will tell you they can help with the writing. They can edit it, they can give you guidance, but what it's hard for them to help with is the quality of the idea. So they will check that first.

So using journalistic detail will also help you here because if you are able to give that editor more understanding of what is so special to you about this place, about this idea, about this person that you wanna profile, about this trend that you're sure is the next big thing. If you are able to give them details that really show them that, then they will be more confident in the idea.

Now, the second part is that if you are in a position where for some reason or another they are not sure if you can carry the piece off because of your abilities, showing that you can incorporate details, showing that you can incorporate details in a journalistic way, as in the way that editors would like to see them, will show you that even will show them rather that even if they are not 100% sure about you, about this idea, about whatever it is, that you have some basic chops, they call it, some basic skill set to report the information that is gonna be the most interesting. Even if they might have to put in a hand to help you organize it or help you select the details.

So what this means is that showing that you can spot, that you can physically observe important, interesting details in and of itself, even if the editor wants to take the story in a completely different direction and you have to go out and do some more reporting, even if the editor doesn't love this exact idea or they can't use it, for instance, because they've covered this destination too recently. Showing them that you have an eye for details goes a very long way in terms of the editor thinking about this as a maybe and putting on the back burner and being receptive to the next pitch that you put out versus wanting to reply to this pitch, which is a maybe as a no, just so that you don't send them more pitches, okay?

So this isn't...I've mentioned this in a couple of other webinars and I've talked to some folks about this on the phone and when I speak as well. But there's an unfortunate nefarious thing out there right now where some, I see this predominantly among very, very young editors, but some editors are sending sort of snarky but covertly snarky, so it's not always clear responses to people saying that they aren't working with freelance writers or they aren't taking new freelance writers or something like this in order to get a writer that they don't wanna work with off their back.



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

So if you get one of those responses, it's a clear sign that something in your pitch hit a motif for this editor. You said something, maybe you called the Mrs. and they're 22 and that felt weird. You said something that struck them the wrong way. So if you get a response like that, you should absolutely go back to your pitch and see what's going on because if we list in the database that they take freelancers, they absolutely take freelancers. We check those bylines really clearly and closely and regularly as well.

So having journalistic detail on the surface, we'll do this great thing for you. It will make editors notice your pitches more, it will put them in a... puts you in a different category in their mind. It will put you in the category of a professional writer rather than somebody who maybe hasn't been writing and is sending them a pitch, maybe somebody who's a blogger, who has a very different approach to what detail and reporting and journalism really mean.

It will put you in a different category in their head. But even if this pitch doesn't work, they will look more favorably on your future pitches. But my absolute most favorite thing about journalistic detail is actually what it does for you mentally when you are writing. And this is when you are writing a pitch or when you're writing a full piece. This extends to any amount of writing that you might do. And that is that it makes you never have to wonder what you need to include in your pitch or on your piece.

Now, some of you may have heard this before, perhaps not. It depends how much you hang out with kind of, you know, on deadline newsroom journalists or people who are often interviewed by on deadline newsroom journalists. So somebody that I know, for instance, who recently happened to get tangled up in the issue of cleaning up the water in Flint, Michigan. He is a professor and he and some of student's kind of volunteered to help the government create a way to figure out most effectively where they needed to go to identify which houses needed help with getting their water back on track. And then suddenly he starts getting calls from all these journalists to interview him for their pieces.

So we were sitting at dinner and he just got up and left quickly. And then he came back and apologized because "The New York Times" had called him. And he said though that he felt kind of weird on these phone calls because they clearly had a specific thing that they were looking for from him. They were looking for a specific quote people often say. And he felt like there were more things that he wanted to tell them, but they were just looking for that one quote.

Now what's happening here and what happens with a lot of these journalists who have daily deadlines, whether it's travel or hard news or whatever, is that they know exactly what they want to put in their piece and they go out and gather information accordingly. So rather than



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

really diving deep into a whole subject, they have a very thin slice of the angle, if you will, or the focus of the article that they're going to be writing. And they know they need somebody who has a contrary opinion. They need somebody who was there just when it happened. They need somebody authoritative to speak on the greater significance of this thing. They know exactly what they need to fill in. And so they go out quite, you know, as this professor put it, narrow-mindedly seeming to get these pieces of information.

Now it can feel, especially in travel writing like this practice is very antagonistic to your goal. If your goal is to go out there and experience a destination and see what there is to cover and then put together pieces accordingly, but when you wrap in this idea that with each destination we can write dozens of stories in so many different formats. And for so many different magazines, you see that each story is a very thin slice.

So if you have already gotten to that point where you have the story which is a thin slice, then you've gotten to the point where this comes up that you need specific types of information. So I'm not saying that in general as you're out there in the world as a travel writer, you are only looking for these very specific types of information, but rather once you have a single specific story that you're writing, that's where this comes up.

And journalistic detail, choosing the facts that are specific in their nouns and adjectives that illustrate the point of focus of your article, that is the type of questions that these news reminders are out there asking. They're asking for those details. They are asking questions in order to get the person to say a quote, the touches on what they wanna touch on in their piece. They are gathering these journalistic details very specifically like they have, you know, like a top 10 places to visit in New York lists that they're on hunting for. So what happens is that once you come around to this concept of using only journalistic details to fill the sentences of your pieces mixed in, of course, with quotes, then you start to become more of this hunter when you're writing the piece or when you're writing the pitch. This is after you figured out what the idea is that you're gonna write in the first place, okay?

And so what this means is that we talked already. We've got, I think, 10 or 12, 13 maybe webinars on article, nuts and bolts that will show you the structure and help you see what you need to hunt for in the different types of pieces. But the types of details, the types of facts that you're choosing to include, that comes into the purview of journalistic detail and learning what counts, what facts are the right ones to include? So what happens is that once you begin to really practice writing journalistic detail, looking for journalistic detail, letting all of the other words in your piece slough off until this is what remains, it's very clear what you need to write. It's very clear what sentences need to go into that pitch.



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

And this is a question that I get a lot when we're doing live workshops, whether it's like our full week boot camp or the weekend idea fest or Pitchapalooza. And somebody has an idea and we're kind of working it back and forth and then I just say the pitch back to them. Like I say, "Well, we could do it like this." And then I just say the pitch. People always say, "Well, I can't do it in just 20 seconds like you do." But the point is that when you're looking only for journalistic details and when you realize that you don't need very many because they are so powerful, because they show what you're trying to explain and all the rest of the sentences that were replacing, you see the same thing. You see that you only need a couple details and then you can throw together that pitch or that short news brief very quickly and very easily. And that's what I want for you guys.

So what I wanna do is to talk a little bit about the real linchpin here, which is that in order to be able to select the super clear details, those super clear facts that show, rather than tell what you want your readers to understand, you have to be very clear on what you want to show them, what you want them to understand. And so I'd like to do a little bit of an exercise here if you guys will follow along with me for this. So I have an example that I can kind of do an exercise on with myself, but I'd really love to work with some of you guys who are here live dropping some things in the chat box for me to use as well.

So the idea here is that I'd love to take a story idea that you may have, that you may be working on. You may have already pitched it. Maybe you haven't pitched it yet. I know some of you on the call have a number of these that you've kind of been carrying around that are ideas that you really, really love, that you wanna find a home for. And what I wanna work through with these examples is how to take something which is a topic or a concept and turn it into a story because I think where the ball often drops in terms of being able to spot what is the journalistic detail that you have to include because you have a very rigid story concept is that you have a topic idea that you wanna pitch and you don't have the specific story as in beginning, middle, end story.

So I'm gonna show an example of this because it really... the example that I have I think is gonna be a really helpful one for a lot of you because it's a situation that even I found myself in. I went to this place. This place was great. I was there for maybe 10, 12 days. A lot of things happened. You know, it was a very new place for me and I'm trying to figure out for one specific market, how do I make that into one story and how do I not just tell her, "You should do a story about this place because it's really cool and people don't really go there."

Okay. So that's what we're... the example that I'm gonna use for you guys. So what I love is as I'm going through that or if you guys are already thinking about it, to drop in the chat box something that you might have yourself and McKenzie, I think that you must have some Alaska ones or some other ones that we were working on, early on we were working on your



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

story ideas, that might be a good one for this. Like a couple ideas that you were feeling stuck on that we've maybe had to rework or something like this.

So I'm gonna start with the example that I have, and like I said, you guys who are on the call live, if you have some that we can workshop together that you'd be willing to share, I'd love to talk through those as well. All right, so here's the example that I have. So when I was at the book passage conference, you have this opportunity to do nine hours of workshops, which is pretty much the same as like an intensive weekend long workshop, the ones that we do at our house. You have nine hours of workshops that you can do with several different kind of editors or...and then one of them is a blogger, another one is a book author. And one of the ones that I went to is led by Katharine Hamm and Chris Reynolds from the "LA Times," who are really lovely, wonderful people. And Chris is an actual full-time travel writer for a newspaper. He must be like the last of his species. And Catherine is the travel editor for the "LA Times."

And so in their workshop they, as homework at the end of the first day, having told people nothing about what a pitch is, what a pitch includes, how they prefer to receive pitches, none of this, they had talked all day about, you know, what it is to be a travel writer, about reporting these kinds of different things, but for homework, they sent everybody out to write a pitch. And I am, as I know many of you are, somebody who loves to follow a brief and a format and so I was like, "Well, I don't know how you want the pitch to be. I know how I write pitches." And a lot of other people were just thinking, "I don't even know what a pitch is supposed to be. What am I supposed to do?"

So we were all unleashed with this idea of go write a pitch. And what happened was that I completely froze. And I'm sure that this will sound funny to some of you who've taken workshops with me, but I completely froze about how to come up with a pitch for them. And so I spent a lot of time thinking about what it was that I was stuck on. And I was really attached to this trip.

And I know this will ring true for a lot of you because I see this come up a lot. I was really attached to this trip and this place Ogasawara, which is this island, like I mentioned, that it's a 25-hour ferry ride from Tokyo. I was attached to it because I thought, okay, "Well, since the workshop is run by the 'LA Times' people, I'm gonna come up with a pitch for the 'LA Times' people." So I looked at what the 'LA Times' covers, you know, they had already talked about it and a bit as well in terms of what their geographic areas are and what areas they like to cover. I've known Katherine for a couple of years, so I know kind of what story she does or doesn't like and I knew that this destination was great for her. But what I kept running into problems with, and you can tell even from that part that I read you earlier of this like protopitch that I worked on, was that I kept running into problems with just focusing on



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

why people should go there. Why Ogasawara, why this place is interesting and, you know, the pitch that I was working on just kind of was like a list of all this stuff.

You know, I talked about visitors take all of their meals in the ends, leaving the restaurants for the locals. Menus handwritten each day or simply announced on arrival may highlight anything from shark liver sashimi to kimchi udon, Ogasawara's version of Hawaii's cultural mash-ups, spam musubi. One of the favorite local bars blends the faded decadent emerald wallpaper of an absinthe bar in Paris' Left Bank with the musical paraphernalia of an Austin dive bar. I had all this detail, but I didn't know what I was pitching.

And so even as I got to that paragraph where I say, "What I'm gonna tell the readers," I just said, "I'll walk readers through my journey, beginning with the bureaucracy around even getting a birth on the ferry to discovering that the Bonin islands aren't just for whale watching, Galapagos-level biodiversity and hikes through vivid Pacific Theater World War II history. The Ogasawarans themselves are often fugitives from the constraints of Japanese society come for the opportunity to finally express themselves."

So this is this pitch that I hated that I wrote that I didn't share at the workshop because I knew that I didn't have a story. And I knew that I just had a bunch of things in here that were description, award details, but there was nothing tying them together. And then I was walking. I was driving. I think I was in the car the other day, stuck in traffic and suddenly it came to me that the story here is not about just why a person should go to this place. The story has the place as the protagonist, it has these Bonin islands which are also called Ogasawara as the protagonist in terms of having found, in a very Japanese way, a balance between tourism and a lack of over tourism or whatever it is that you wanna call it. You can tell I haven't written the pitch because these words are very raw.

But what I, as my brain was just percolating around being really frustrated that I couldn't come up with an idea that would be great for Katherine about this place that I'm sure she would love to cover, it came to me that what's special about this place is not, you know, that you can have the beach all to yourself or the crazy food or any of these things. What's special about this place really, the real point is that this place has this amazing balance. And some of it is because the people there are, like I said, fugitives from the constraints of Japanese society, so they are a little bit different. It's not the rest of Japan. Some of it is because the ferry only comes once every three days and it takes 25 hours to get there, so only that many people can even get on the islands. But a lot of it is just because of the way that the place has shaped these people.



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

So for instance, they come out every single time the ferry leaves, any local that has time jumps in their boat or they go to the dock and they send the boat off, every two or three days, every single person on the island who can do this. And the folks on the boat will actually drive their own boats along next to the ferry boat, out to the end of the harbor, waving all the while and even jumping off the boats in these like beautiful displays for the visitors. So the real point that I need to change the story to be around is how the people of Ogasawara have this balance between being a primary visitor destination and still enjoying and loving the visitors. And that's what the story needs to be about.

So I've sloughed off all of that other stuff for the pitch of needing to say that it's the 50 anniversary of it becoming Japanese rather than American, how long you need to go to get there from Tokyo. All I need to talk about is that send off and then say, you know, and in this piece I will include information for visitors that explains how to get there, this is and then the other thing. But I will focus on showcasing the personality of the island that create this atmosphere. And that's the pitch. That would be the whole pitch. I would start by talking about that send off. I would say in a 1300-word piece, you know, I will highlight the personalities on the island, showing how they've achieved a sense of balance and I'll also include this detail for visitors on how to get there, where to stay, where to take their meals, etc.

The pitch that I have sitting that I wrote before is like more than 200 words and the reason that I didn't wanna read it for them or obviously like I said, it was because they didn't like it, but also it was too long. Her brief was to write a 100-word pitch. And now that I know what my story would be, I could sit here and I could write that in 100 words. Once you know, once you're very clear on the one line version of what your story is, it allows you to sit down and put that together in as few or as many words as you need it to be. So I hope that that is helpful, and let me know also in the chat box. I can pace my crappy pitch that I don't want to send into the chat box or put it on one of the slides if it would be useful for you guys. I'll just pop it in here below so that people can see it later in the video.

And like I said, I'm calling this a crappy pitch. It has a lot of details, but like I said, they are not journalistic details because they don't tie in, so they might seem like they are specifics or like they are focused, but the problem is that they're not focused into the topic of what the story will become and that's what makes them not be journalistic details, you guys. So I hope that that makes it clear. And I'll even as I put this on the slide here so that you guys can see in the video later, I'll even highlight kind of some of the things that don't count. Some of the things that are bad detail that weren't helpful for me to include because they don't actually really count as journalistic detail. There we go. We've moved this down.



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

So you know, I've got this 8-foot flag and I've got fourth generation Nathaniel Taylor's truck and I've got 50 years ago, I've got 25-hour ferry ride, and then I've got a ton in here, right? I've got the, you know, the different things that you eat. I've got this description and this kind of metaphor here of this meets that. But none of these details which in the right piece would work in the right pitch or the right piece, none of these would work as journalistic details, but they aren't really journalistic details in this setting because they don't tie into the story that I'm telling. They don't tie into it because I didn't have one when I sat down to write this, right.

So I could go different ways. I could make a piece about why you have to visit Ogasawara this year because it's the 50th anniversary of the handover and they're doing all these special things. Then some of this here at the beginning might matter. I could do a piece about how the American heritage lived on and focus on, you know, how you can still find these interesting cultural mashups between America and Japan and maybe even highlight the World War II history. George Bush, I think the first George Bush, his plane went down just off of these islands. There's all sorts of interesting there. I could do a piece that's just about that, and then this sentence would matter. I could do a piece about the food that's popped up in these islands because of their scarce access to resources because the ferry comes not very often. And then this sentence would make sense. Or I could talk about just the completely crazy design and ambiance that's sprung up on this island because of those refugees, not refugees, but kind of fugitives from the constraints of Japanese society who have come to Ogasawara to create what they would like to see. But that's four different pieces that these four different details in here are all touching on. So when I look at this with my editor hat on, I just say, I don't know where this person is going with this because there's so many details that are trying to be poignant, but they're not unified.

So I hope that this example, and especially me putting it up here and highlighting it can help you see how some of these things are popping up in your own writing. That you do have these details that are great, but there are details that serve a different story, that don't serve the story that you're telling right now.

So Donna has asked about the Colonia Guadalupe neighborhood and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, is the city's official art district because of Muros en Blanco, a program that has put more than 100 murals on the areas, blank walls in recent years.

Now my first question would be, Donna, what exactly is this piece? What do you hope this piece is about? Because I think that here, you know, if you are writing a piece where you're gonna talk about perhaps the maybe interviewing the person who has started this program or if you want to set up the neighborhood as in our district to do kind of like a tour of it, this could potentially work, but what I would wanna see here is if we were making a piece that



Dream of Travel Writing

Journalistic Detail and Why You Need It

was more about how this city had become, you know, an art capital or why if, for instance, these are two different things. If we're writing about like almost a trend piece about San Miguel de Allende becoming an art capital, that's different than saying if you're going to San Miguel de Allende, you wanna stay in the art district. So those are two different things.

So what I want to say here is that if we're talking about how San Miguel de Allende became an art capital, I think we could lead with this sentiment, but if we're talking about if you're going to San Miguel de Allende, the art district is where you want to stay. This particular detail doesn't work quite so well.

And let me give you some totally made up examples of what you could do instead that would make that tighter. So if we want to say that you should stay in this neighborhood because it's the art district, then we need to pick a detail that show, okay, cool, I'll come back to the Donna, but let me just finish this example. So if we're gonna show why you should stay in the art district, then we need to pick a detail that shows that the art district of San Miguel de Allende has X, but the other areas don't. And that if you're coming to San Miguel de Allende for X, you will only get it if you stay in the art district. So that would be how we could change it, if that was the topic.

Now, Donna said she thinks the story is how it happened, including an interview with the woman who launched the program. So if that's the case, then I would actually think if the point of the story of the pitch that we're writing is that we want to talk about how it became such. I might even wanna go to show a detail that shows the impact, so we could say that there is this Muros en Blanco program, but how can we show that the Muros en Blanco program has made it the artistic. Can we show that the other artists claim that they have been inspired by this program to be based there? Can we show that people have created art that's based on it? How can we kind of show that not just at the Muros en Blanco program happened, but that it has led to this resurgence? So those are some ways that I might tweak that to make it even better.

So that's what I've got for you guys today and I'm really excited to continue the series.

So thank you guys so much for joining me today and I look forward to chatting with you guys and seeing your accountability emails come in. Thanks, guys.