

Letter To A Young Journalist

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Ed's note: I got my hands on the following email from Lane DeGregory to a journalism student in response to a couple questions: "Is there anything you wish you could tell yourself when you were as inexperienced as us? What mistakes should we be making?" Enjoy.

I wish I hadn't thought I had to be so smart.

When I was starting out, I was afraid the politician I was profiling would realize I didn't understand property taxes; that the hockey coach I had to interview would out me for not knowing a hat trick from a helmet; that the commercial fisherman would think me unworthy of sharing his story because I had never been on a trawler. So I tried to study as much as I could beforehand and fake my way through difficult interviews, nodding and taking notes. Then I'd sit down to write and realize I really had no idea how to explain what was going on to my readers. That wasn't fair to them — or the subjects.

As I've gotten older, I've realized, it's okay to not know — it can even be endearing. When you ask people to explain, tell them you're far from an expert, offer that you have to be able to break this down so all the audience can understand, subjects appreciate that. They want to help you get what they're doing, see what's important to them. They don't want you to BS them, or get it wrong. So they won't see you as dumb but rather as smart for asking so many questions, for admitting your fallibility, for wanting to get it right.

Instead of trying to stay out of the story, I wish I had shared myself more.

I thought it was important for a reporter to remain on the sidelines, sort of sheltered from her subjects, and in the early years I think I used my notebook as a shield. I was asking people all these questions, sometimes really personal questions, but I never let them know that I was only 25, or was scared of sharks, or that my car had broken down on the way to the interview and that's why I was so flustered and late. I thought I should be sort of teflon-like, untouchable. But that only shut me down, and kept people at a distance.

Being pregnant, I think, helped me move into a new phase of reporting. There was no keeping that from my sources, and it gave them something to talk about that was personal, that I couldn't keep inside, that helped them connect to me as a person — not just a reporter. Plus, I couldn't hide that belly behind a notepad 😊

Now I tell everyone I talk to that I'm a writer — not a reporter, that sounds scary — that I'm 46 years old, married to my college sweetie, who is a drummer, that I have two teenage boys and two crazy dogs and a turtle the size of a dinner plate. That lets them think of me as a wife, a mom, an animal lover — not just someone who wants to dive in and ask them to open up without sharing herself. Dogs, kids and cars will get anyone talking. And it's important to talk to

people, not just interview them. I also let them lead and guide the story now: Where do you want to start? What do you want people to know? (I used to think I had to be in charge ...)

I wish I hadn't thought I knew what the story was about before I reported it.

When I was starting out, my editor often told me what the story was about before I ever went out to report it — so I tried to tailor my questions and observations and even the writing to what I thought the editor wanted. But the story you set out to get isn't always the story that's really there, or the best way to tell it, or even a true reflection of whatever reality you're trying to capture.

I wish my early editors had given me more leeway to say, okay, here's an idea, now go out there then come back and tell me what you think the story is.

I wish I had had more confidence to say, no, really, this is what I saw and think ... or maybe there isn't even really a story there at all. Being willing to go with your gut, to let the story morph and evolve, to see where it fits into the context of people's lives, makes the experience so much richer, the story so much better. And closer to the truth.

I wish my last three editors had been my first three editors, though I wouldn't trade the one I have now for anything! I just wish I had people that thoughtful and smart and experienced to guide me when I was starting out.

I wish I had pitched more stories I wanted to do, instead of tackling assignments I didn't want to do.

I wish I had done more stories I wanted to do in my own time, instead of making excuses like the editors won't give me time.

I wish I had taken more risks with my writing early on, let myself experiment with voice and dialog, different structures and chronology, trusted myself more to tell a story and not feel like my job was to share information.

I wish I had read more short stories and fewer newspaper articles.

I wish I had attached myself to more senior writers I admired, asked more questions, gotten more advice.

I wish I had done fewer phoners and gotten sunburned on more boats.

I wish I had known that it was okay to make mistakes, that no matter how brilliant — or bad — your story is, another paper will come out tomorrow, so it's okay to try something that might not work. But it's not okay not to try. Or to bore yourself by always doing what's safe. Or to think your readers will care if you don't.

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