

TIMES INSIDER

How the Spoken Word Shapes the Written Word

Whether it's to themselves, their spouse or their dog, reading aloud is essential to the writing process for these Times reporters.



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Times Insider explains who we are and what we do and delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how our journalism comes together.

Julia Jacobs, a general assignment reporter for The New York Times's Culture desk, was working on a profile of Julie Benko, who temporarily took over the role of Fanny Brice in the Broadway musical "Funny Girl" earlier this year, and she wanted the introduction to sound, well, musical.

But simply quoting the lyrics from a line in Fanny's big number, "I'm the Greatest Star," was falling flat. She read it aloud and immediately realized what was missing: The instrumental riffs.

"Early on in the musical 'Funny Girl,' her published article reads, "a young and determined Fanny Brice sings a line that anyone even slightly acquainted with the show will be familiar with: 'I'm ... (*deedle-dee deedle-dee*) the greatest star ... (*deedle-dee deedle-dee*).'"

Ms. Jacobs is one of several New York Times journalists who read their drafts out loud as part of their writing process. Whether it's parsing tricky passages or checking for overall flow, they all agree: Hearing their words makes their writing stronger.

"I like that it forces me to slow down for a minute," said Ms. Jacobs, 26, who began reading aloud while working for her high school paper. "It's a way to focus my brain very quickly when I have a million people pinging, calling, emailing me." She said that reading aloud also helps her untangle a

sentence: She knows it's too long when she starts to run out of breath.

Ms. Jacobs often writes short breaking news articles, usually in an hour or less. But even on a tight deadline, she said, she makes time to read problematic lines out loud (often to her dog, Harley).

For Dan Barry, 64, a longtime Times reporter and columnist known for his narrative features, which are sometimes 2,000 words or more, reading aloud is a matter of practicality.

He'd long asked his wife, Mary Trinity, to read typewritten copies of his articles before he filed them to his editor. But when he began writing the About New York column in 2003, he had to file it each night by 6 — when she'd be in a parking lot waiting for their daughter to finish ballet class.

So he'd read his columns to her over the phone. "Even with the pressure of deadline, I needed my wife's OK that I wasn't going to embarrass myself or be unfair to anyone," he said.

Hearing his words, Mr. Barry says, allows him to immediately spot an overworked alliteration, dropped articles, gaps in logic — and to nail the rhythm of an article.

"When you're reading aloud to someone else and know the material, you will hear falseness," Mr. Barry said, "where you failed to properly reflect another side of the issue or described someone in a manner that might be perceived as demeaning or unkind that wasn't your intention when writing."

Alissa J. Rubin, 60, The Times's Baghdad bureau chief, said she began reading her writing aloud in college. She also found it helpful in her previous career as a fiction writer, when she needed to determine if her characters' dialogue sounded realistic.

Reading her articles aloud, Ms. Rubin said, helps her cut superfluous adverbs like "very" and "really" — or break up long paragraphs that provide context but can quickly become unwieldy. It also helps her reframe portions of a piece that might be confusing. Reading aloud, she said, "heightens your acuity as an editor."

Ms. Rubin, Ms. Jacobs and Mr. Barry like to read their drafts out loud when they are close to final, they said, as a last backstop to catching errors like missing first references or inconsistent spellings of people's names.

“It allows me to get out of my head and imagine how the reader takes in information,” Ms. Jacobs said. “A lot of times I get so caught up in the minutiae of a story that I forget how it sounds to a person who doesn’t know anything about what I’m talking about.”

Listening to their own voices can be uncomfortable, the reporters said. (“I don’t particularly enjoy the cacophony that is my Long Island accent,” Mr. Barry noted.) At times, it can also be awkward: Ms. Rubin said she has been in the New York Times newsroom, reading the same lines over and over again, when she has noticed other journalists staring at her in confusion.

Still, the reporters find the practice to be a key part of their writing processes. Ms. Jacobs notes that it’s important not to mumble, slur or race through an article: “Use your whole voice, at a normal pace,” she said. “You will cringe. And then you will fix what made you cringe.”