

On writing, reading, and always making your deadline

Writer and editor Alex Frank discusses how he got his start as a journalist, the value of reading other people's work, and the importance of making your work accessible.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 3005 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Culture](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Education](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Income](#).

When did you get into reading music criticism?

It was definitely college. I had a professor named Gayle Wald, who has written an incredible book of music criticism called [Shout Sister Shout](#), which is a book about Rosetta Tharpe. I think she has shaped how I see things. She was working to reinsert this woman into the history of rock and roll.

The thing that was really amazing about Gayle Wald was that she didn't write academically. That was really important to me, because when in college, you're reading a lot of academic texts, and many of them are not written well, even if the ideas are good. She wrote with a really accessible voice, which is what I've always tried to do. That's a huge goal of mine, always. I definitely started reading a lot of music criticism in her class. She's actually taught two other writers who are in my world, Andrew Nosnitsky, who's a rap writer, and Matthew Schnipper, who's my editor at Pitchfork and who ended up hiring me at *The Fader*. She's had an influence on other people too.

I don't think of myself as a music critic so much, because that's not where I started necessarily, and I also don't see it as different than or separate from any other aspect of culture. The terms that I would use more than "music criticism" are just "criticism," or "music and culture writing" in general.

There are some music writers... [Ellen Willis](#) I love. I read her in college. I just thought she was so savvy. She wrote this piece about Woodstock in which she said Woodstock sucked. I thought that was such a funny piece, because the cheesy narrative we always get about Woodstock is how fun it was or whatever, and she wrote a piece that's like, "Eh, it wasn't that cool." I like those kinds of people. [Janet Malcolm](#) is the most important magazine writer to me. She's not really a music critic, but she is a culture writer. She writes about art. Her distinct voice was really important for me. I always go back to her work and enjoy it.

When you first started reporting, how long did it take you to catch on to things like transcribing, keeping deadlines, and using journalistic shorthand?

The first thing I ever did as a job was transcribe [an interview between a writer named Peter Macia and Kanye West](#). I had just graduated from college. I was at *The Fader*. It was 2008, and he had done a cover story around *808s and Heartbreak*. It was a real privilege for me to overhear this conversation. I think transcription is seen as grunt work, but I did a lot of transcribing when I first started at *The Fader*. It wasn't always fun, but sometimes it was really interesting. That interview is seared into my brain because it's batshit crazy. It was the beginning of Kanye being so all over the place. His rants started in this period. This interview is him just lecturing about design and all this crazy stuff. It's hours long. I remember just going through the whole thing. I think that really helped me understand what an interview is supposed to be like.

I learned journalistic shorthand early because I was transcribing. I was really lucky, because the staff at *The Fader* when I started was a dream team. It was Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, Felipe Delerme, Chioma Nnadi, and Matthew Schnipper. It was all of these fantastic writers. I just watched them. That was all I had to do. I got to learn all that stuff from people who were really, really good at it. I was really lucky.

Deadlines were important to me very early on, because I have a crazy amount of insecurity about my writing. For me, hitting a deadline is something I can control. I like to dot my I's and cross my T's. I'm really big on that, because I don't know creatively that I can always do the best thing I want to do or do exactly what the editor is looking for. Some of that happens by chance—either you get lucky or you don't. But I do know I can hit a deadline. I still think I've never missed a deadline, and I think I'm the only person I know who's never missed a deadline.

The thing is, when I've been in an editor role, I can be kind of harsh. I expect a writer to hand something in on deadline, and that does not always happen. I just have that expectation. I'm not good with, "The dog ate my homework." That doesn't work for me. I don't do that, and so I don't like when other people do it.

How long did you write for free?

I never wrote for free. I don't think I would. I think of myself as a working journalist. I've always wanted to be a writer, but for me it is a job. I'm not saying that there's not creative expression in it, but for me, as a job, I don't have the luxury to do it for free as a freelancer. I really believe writers deserve to get paid. I want the job to continue to exist. I'm committed to it paying.

The only time I would say I did it for free was in school. Nobody was paying me, but I was getting paid with a grade of some kind, and I wanted to get good grades. There're some circumstances in which I can imagine myself writing something for free. If a really good friend asked me to write something for a project that they were working on, it's something that I would consider.

How important is reputation to you?

I don't really think about it in those terms. I think what's important to me is doing the best I can. I don't really care so much about my reputation, although I will say the thing that matters to me more than anything is not when an editor hires me for the first time, but when they hire me for the second time. If I have gotten a second commission from an editor, to me, that means I did well enough that this person who has taken a chance on me thinks, "Okay, it's worth taking another chance on him." So I guess my reputation with editors is really important to me. I try to be as easy to work with as I can. I try to work with editors in a way that is productive, and that's not ego-driven.

A lot of my career is writing for editors who I've been writing for for 10 years. That is the most gratifying thing to me. The fact that Matthew Schnipper and Chioma Nnadi and Naomi Zeichner and Deidre Dyer still commission me, still hire me for stuff after 10 years, is basically all I need. As I said, the thing that matters most to me is whether or not I did the best job I could do. I don't always kill it. It's just impossible. You try. You want to always kill it, but you can't. But you can do your best. Creating a life in which I can always do my best, whatever that is, is important.

What sort of details were you paying attention to when you first started writing about fashion?

People and culture. When writers write about fashion, of course they're often writing about clothes, but I never really did that so much. I'm writing about the designer or I'm writing about the community or culture or country from which those designs come. That was my training. When me and Deidre Dyer and Chioma Nnadi wrote about style at *The FADER*, we wrote about style from all over the world. I was writing a lot about Nigerian designers and Scandinavian designers.

The clothes matter, I do care about the clothes, but I'm more interested in the context from which the clothes are made. The designers that I'm interested in generally have a context. They have a real community that they come from. Designers who are just making something that exists within the fashion world—and that's it—are not super interesting to me. I'm not saying it's bad. I'm sure it's great, but it's not what I'm good at writing about.

The things that interest me about a designer are things like where they're from, who their friends are, who they're making clothes for, and what kind of music they're listening to when they make those clothes.

Do you read more for pleasure or more with an eye towards what will make you a stronger writer?

Sometimes you read books that are not well-written but they have information in them that you want. Even that is probably gonna end up somewhere. But I think I mostly only read good writing now. Reading is the most important aspect of writing. There's no question. It's the only training you need. You don't need to go to college. You don't need anything else really. You just need to read.

I think fiction can be really helpful sometimes, because I want my scenes and my stories to have a lot of life and fantasy and fun, and to take the reader somewhere. Sometimes you get that from fiction in a really amazing way, and you can incorporate some of those aspects.

I definitely do sometimes specifically obsess over a writer and try to figure out how they write. With Janet Malcolm, when I have a question about writing or I'm thinking about her and I'm wondering how she's so good at what she does, I will go read her with the express purpose of sitting there and trying to figure out the formula. I will look at her sentences and obsess over them. I always find something new.

I don't think there's ever a separation between the pleasure and the productive work of reading, because I just think that they're the same thing. If you're reading a lot, it's making you a better writer. It's just a guarantee, even if you're reading bad writing. It's really important to read bad writing and to know what bad writing is. That's something I work at knowing. I want to know whether or not it's just not for me, or whether it's not so great. Knowing that can be really helpful.

Who do you think of your work as being for?

It's for the editor. I know that's not a sexy answer. Maybe because I've been an editor, I know that they're just trying to go home and have dinner with their spouse or whatever, and I think I am really interested in making sure that they feel good and don't have to suffer while editing me. They're my audience.

One thing I try not to think about is Twitter. I'm on Twitter like everybody else, and I'm obsessed with it, but it's not the whole world. It is part of the world, but it's not the whole world. Sometimes I read writing that I can tell is for the conversation on Twitter. There's nothing wrong with that, because that conversation is a part of things and it matters. But I don't want to just write for that, and I don't want to have that in my head, because I think that can really affect your writing in a bad way. Or at least for me it's bad, because again, I just want everybody to be able to read it, not just the people in on the conversation on Twitter. I don't think writing should require expertise or being an insider to read.

When you put the ideas behind that kind of barbed wire, I think it just turns a lot of people off and makes them think books are not for them. It makes them think that books are only for certain people. I really passionately disagree with that. There used to be a time in which the vast majority of the country was engaging with words in a fun, vibrant, vital way. I don't see why that can't exist anymore. You can't just blame the internet. The writers I like, they don't talk down to people, never, ever, ever, ever, ever. The writers that I like can be intimidatingly smart, and make you think in new ways, but they are never hard to read. It's really a worthwhile pursuit to write with accessibility in mind.

Do you think the type of career you've had is possible for someone starting out now?

It's hard for me to answer that, because I do know that it seems to be getting harder. I got in at a good time, maybe the end of the good times, but still a good time. I moved to New York right before the stock market crash, so the publishing industry was still healthy. Literally four months after I moved here the stock market crashed. It's arguable that I didn't get in at a good time, but the effects of the crash took a little bit of time to hit the magazine industry.

The luxury that I had—that I want everyone to be able to have—is that I got to work for print. I don't say that because print is better than digital, because I don't believe that. But I do think there are things that you learn in print that you will never learn online. Mostly word count and being concise, because you have a limit to the number of words you can put in print. This is incredible to have when you're a young writer, because the most important thing is saying the thing you want to say in the least amount of space. That doesn't change whether you're writing for online or print. That's the golden rule.

The caption on a photo really matters to me, because when you're an editor and you're looking at proofs of a real print magazine, you better be proofing those captions. It's terrifying to have a mistake, no matter where it is in a print magazine. You cannot just go in and change it. Every caption needs to be written with care, and it has to be read by many editors and theoretically debated by many editors. I remember when I first worked at *Vogue*, I worked for a woman named Sally Singer, and she would sometimes write captions for photo stories. Sally, who's this legend in the magazine industry, would often write captions, because, I think, she liked it. And they were so good! I don't even think she got a byline on them. It wasn't about that.

Print makes words seem like a totally different thing. You have to be economical with them. Every single one matters in its own way. It's like with poems. In poems, every word matters. No word doesn't matter. Every single one matters. Hopefully that's true in everybody's writing, but in poetry it's really fucking true. That's how a magazine is. Every word matters. I don't know if people are learning that from writing online. That doesn't mean that they can't learn it through digital. If you care, you care. If you're getting good training, you're getting good training. But I do think print is a cheat sheet to help you do that, because you don't have a choice.

Your print editors are always just lopping shit off, cutting shit out. You're always squeezing things out. It's a huge part of it. You can't be sentimental about it. You don't want to lose things you like, but sometimes you have to. It was just the luck of the timing that I got that education. I feel really lucky.

I've had a lot of head starts in my life, and I have had a lot of privileges in my life. I can't say that it's possible for everybody. But I do think there will always be writing and there will always be people who will read that writing. I don't believe in the end of things. I just think things change. There are so many writers younger than me who I absolutely love. *Doreen St. Félix* is a perfect example. She's younger than me, but I look up to her writing. I think things are gonna be fine.

Alex Frank recommends:

[Janet Malcolm's New Yorker profile of Eileen Fisher](#)

[Chioma Nnadi's Vogue profile of Rihanna](#)

[Christopher Lydon's Open Source podcast about the secret life of trees](#)

[The Death of a Once Great City](#)

[Mobolaji Dawodu's instagram from all around the world](#)

["Having My Say-So," James Schuyler](#)

Anything Vanessa Grigoriadis has ever written

[Cynthia Nixon's call to abolish ICE](#)

[Ian Frazier's On the Rez](#)

[All 41 minutes or so of Loren Mazzacane Connors' Airs](#)

[Schnipper's Slept on](#)

[Reggie Ugwu's work](#)

["Proud Corazon" from Coco](#)

[Gayle Wald's Shout Sister Shout](#)

[Really dramatic interviews with Wynonna Judd on Oprah](#)

[Andrew Aged playing guitar to a tree on the Big Island of Hawaii](#)

[Patti LaBelle on "Little Heifers Who Can't Sing"](#)

This video of Lana Del Rey crying while her fans sing "Video Games" [to her](#)

Buffy Sainte-Marie

The nature photography of [Jim Mangan](#)

The paintings of [Daniel Heidkamp](#)

The clothing brand [NOAH](#)

Peter Doig, ["Milky Way"](#)

Gore Vidal

[Name](#)

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[Vocation](#)

Editor, Writer

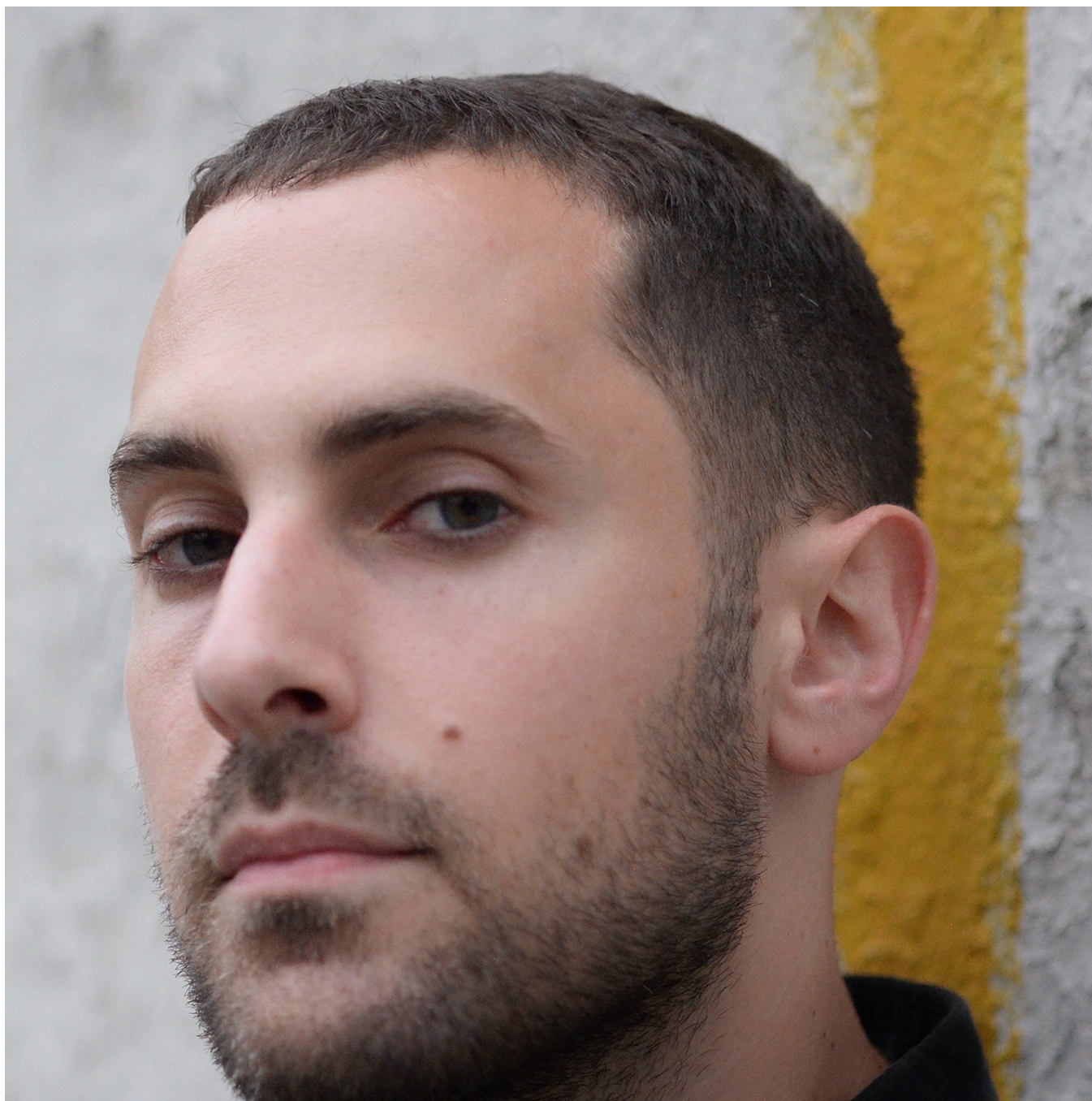




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