

On learning to write professionally



Writer and editor Jazmine Hughes shares how mentorship, deadlines, and a job at The New York Times have helped develop her practice.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 2338 words.

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I know Nora Ephron is your favorite writer. When asked in an interview about feeling cold or blocked on a story, she said: "As a newspaper reporter you learn that no one tolerates you if you are cold. It's not professional. You have to turn the story in. There is no room for the artist [in the newsroom process]."

When I do think about deadlines, or when I do think about putting a story out, I think about Lorne Michaels, who has said about SNL, "The show doesn't go on because it's ready; it goes on because it's 11:30." In days or hours before a story comes out, you can be tweaking and rethinking and reshaping obsessively. It's very easy to get lost in that, especially when it's your story. But there's also a time that the story needs to go out. Being part of an office, I know that people have to go home. It's six o'clock. People have families, people have lives outside of the office. They put in the time for you during work hours. You should do the same thing for them.

Writing is only part of my job. Editing is primarily my job. I don't allow myself—nor do I want—a lot of room to be precious. I think what's been most beneficial, most formative for me, with regard to writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, is that I was an editor there for the first for two years. I know the editing process tremendously well. I'm never dealing with a faceless copy editor or a fact-checker who I don't know. I know how everything comes together. I think that has made me realize that a story is put together by a team of people.

With regard to the fact of actually going about the story: your subject is never indebted to you. You—hopefully, ostensibly—are not doing your subject any favors by doing a story. You are the person who sees that there is a story to tell. My friend Taffy Akner always tells me that it is not the subject's job to make your story interesting, it is your job.

Where do you find room for the artist?

When you are the only person in the room. Room for the artist comes when you are drafting, when you are writing on a solo basis. When you are sketching out what you want the idea to be. When you are coming up with questions to do your interview. I have a very black-and-white approach to this, that artistry—the preciousness, the slowness—is to be done on my own time. It's only art when I'm at home.

Do you have screenplay ambitions?

Yes. But right now, I am wholly consumed with the project of learning how a magazine works. It feels like going to school in some way, where this is my area of study, and at some point I'll reach a sense of completion, whether it's five years from now or 30 years from now. It's very possible that I could change careers, as anyone could, and that working at *The New York Times* will be a weird thing I did in my 20s. But right now, I'm laser focused. I just want to know how a magazine comes together. I am interested in book stuff, and writing screenplays and so on. But I have this project before me, and it's all I can see.

You recently interviewed Cynthia Nixon. How do the stakes feel when you're interviewing a candidate for public office?

I interviewed Cynthia for this column called "Talk," which I edited for two years. When I have done or edited interviews, often I start to see conversations as a transcript. I went into the interview with a general sense of the questions. I had done a lot of research. I kind of knew where the conversation was going to go. But as I was speaking to her, I kept seeing the transcript. I kept thinking, "Is this the correct arc of this question?" Instead of just letting the conversation go. So I kind of fucked up in that regard.

With regard to her being in public office, I felt more emboldened to ask the questions that I wanted to get answered. I knew she had to be used to it. It felt more like a duty, in a way that a lot of my work hasn't yet felt. To think about the people who needed information from that interview, not just people who would find it interesting.

Which story of yours has felt like the highest stakes to you?

The highest-stakes story is a very, very small story that I wrote about [Afeni Shakur](#) after she died in 2016. Because it was the first story that I had ever written that had nothing to do with me, that wasn't supposed to be funny. It was hard in ways that sort of surprised me, and ways that really humbled me. I turned in a draft, and it was bad! Like, *bad*. It brought me down from Mars. Just because I was good at writing this one type of thing—about myself—didn't mean that I was a good writer. That really forced me to confront ways in which I was using myself as a crutch in writing. Because I can be a stand-in for so many people. I am black, and I'm a woman, and I live in New York but also I have little capacity for embarrassment. It was easy to rely on myself as a vehicle through which the reader would care, because I was willing to sacrifice myself. But once I didn't have myself to do that, I had to be the one to construct the world in which the reader would care.

This beautiful woman had died, and I wanted to pay homage to her in a really respectful way. I had to do a little bit of reporting for the first time. I called Trayvon Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton; she and Afeni had grown close in the past couple or so years, over the premature deaths of their black sons. I had interviewed her, and was trying to figure out how it was going to fit into my idea. If you write about yourself, if you make yourself look stupid, it's sort of your own cross to bear, but I didn't want to make Afeni look stupid. I didn't want to make Sybrina look stupid. All these people had given their time to me.

It was the first time that I had felt significantly challenged by a piece of writing. I did it and it was fine. I wouldn't look back and call it good at all, but it was sort of like the first time you go for a run. I walk every day. But it's a totally different action to run, you know? The Afeni story really sort of kicked my ass into gear about figuring out what I could and could not do.

How did you find your mentors?

I have a lot of mentors. I need a lot of help. I do it in a very bald-faced manner. I go up to people and I lift up their wing like, "I'm gonna hang out here for a little while, okay?" The magazine, in particular, is a weird place to be a young person. I started working there when I was 23. I have mentors because there are plenty of times where I'd have an issue with editing and I'd holler, "I NEED AN ADULT. I NEED AN ADULT." Thinking about my friends who work in places where a lot of people are their age, and seeing how their social circles come out of that—these are the people with whom they're with at noon but also at midnight at the bars. My friends at work go home and hang out with their kids after work. Luckily, I like babies.

As an obsessively curious person who wants nothing more than to know how to be a grown-up, having this hodgepodge of grownups available for me, I can sort of poke at them like, "I have a rent-stabilized apartment that I don't really like. Should I stay in it? What does the world look like when you're 29, because I have no idea. What does the world look like at 35? How should I prepare myself?"

They're also, I will say, relatively untraditional mentorships. My mentors are some of my closest friends, which is a sort of relationship I need. The trick to being mentored is repetition. I have the editor I have now because I just kept bugging her, and she took an interest in me, and we worked together to set some goals for myself. But the thing about mentorships is that you have to genuinely be receptive. I want to know everybody's opinion. I want to know what people think I should do.

What was your relationship to the newspaper growing up?

My mother read the *New Haven Register* regularly, which was available in my high school and I would read it, too. *The New York Times* wasn't in my house. It wasn't in my schools. I would read it now and again in the library. In college, because I was a government major, it was mandated for me to read the International section every day for many of my classes. That's when I developed a relationship with it.

I was the editor-in-chief of my college newspaper, and for a while at my college there was a mandate that there would be 200 issues of *The New York Times* every day available to students. And for a period of time we lost that funding, so then everyone started reading the college newspaper, which I was thrilled by, but as soon as the Times came back, everyone sort of tossed the school paper aside. I've always felt very competitive with *The New York Times*, as a college newspaper editor [laughs].

I know you moved to New York several times. What would you want your younger self to know about readiness?

My dad always told me, if you're going to make a major financial decision, make sure you'll still have \$1,000 left at the end of it. I would amend that to say \$2,000. I ate a lot of boxes of pasta from Target for a year. If you can get another job in addition to writing, you should do it. While I can see the benefits of learning how to write, or improving your skill by writing all the time, I also think there's something to be said about writing what you want when you want to write it. And not feeling like, "I've got to write this thing that this editor came up with and they thought of me because of my identity politics, or because I'm from this small town." That can be too limiting, especially for marginalized writers. I think it dulls the shine of what we do.

I read this short story once in which a grandfather was trying to teach a boy how to pick up marbles. And once it became evident that the boy was adept at this and enjoying it, the grandfather always cut off their lesson a little too early, so that the boy would be left wanting more, and would be looking forward to doing it again. That's sort of the thing I apply to writing. I don't want to be a full-time writer. I don't think I could be. I wouldn't enjoy myself. It's a privilege in that it feels like something I get to do, not that I have to do.

Do you feel hopeful about the future of media?

I feel hopeful that there will continue to be... media, and that there will be people with jobs. Do I feel hopeful that there will continue to be print magazines? Probably not. What I do feel most hopeful about is, actually, that it is becoming more and more unacceptable to have the same sort of people running these publications. In 20 years, the heads of all the major newspapers and magazines won't be white cis men. It would not only be an unpopular decision, by measure of popular discourse, but it also does active harm to the content that these places are producing, because they don't have a complete view of the world. I was talking to a friend earlier about [Radhika Jones](#) and how she is probably the most recently installed person at the top of a masthead. The possibilities of who can run a major, glossy, legacy magazine will look different after her.

Do you let other people besides your editor see your drafts before they go out?

Black people. You want to do a gut check with someone who knows where you're coming from. And while I love my editor, she is white. Some people are white, it's not their fault! I just need another layer.

Do you think your identity as an older sister informs your tone as a writer?

Yeah, because you're kind of always telling somebody what to do, or how to feel or how to react. Even my inner monologue is didactic, or sort of like someone's along with me. I don't think, "Okay, I'm going to walk down the street and turn left." I think, "Here's what we're going to do. We're going to walk down the street, we're going to turn left, and we're going to have to wait at the cross light." It's always "we." And I don't know who the other person is yet. I think it's everybody.

Jazmine Hughes recommends:

[Raviya Kameir's](#) music writing (best in the biz)

[Lindsay Peoples Wagner's](#) beauty tips

[Claire Gutierrez's](#) editing

Living alone

[The Brian Lehrer Show](#)

"[Airmail Special](#)" by Ella Fitzgerald

[Lays Original potato chips](#) and orange juice

Name

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Vocation

Magazine Editor



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