



Breakthrough MyLinh Shattan

Experiences lead to a new career as military correspondent

When I chose to stay home with my young children, I explored writing and wrote for newsletters and other venues for free. I realized how much I enjoyed it and how little I missed corporate America. But I had no regrets about my work history. I'd taught at college, worked in business and served as an army officer. My editor told me to write about my experiences. And as it turns out, they've provided a wealth of information for my writing.

Breakthrough

Reading the *Tampa Tribune* one day, I saw a small ad midweek in the editorial pages looking for columnists to bring a local, fresh flavor to the pages. I drafted a letter, attached clips of published pieces that I'd done for free, and crossed my fingers. Weeks and months passed, and I wrote it off.

Then, listening to my messages on the machine one day, I learned that the newspaper had selected me as part of its inaugural group out of more than 800 applicants.

So I wrote a column (without pay) at least once a month and developed a nice clip file. I wrote about the military, education and culture with a local slant—areas where my experience gave me credibility.

After about a year, the managing editor pulled me into her office. She told me she enjoyed my columns and that I was a good storyteller. Considering my background and writing on the military, she asked if I would take over the newspaper's weekly Sunday feature covering

deployed soldiers. I landed my first paying job as an editorial contributor and military correspondent.

Spending time with the editor who previously wrote the military feature, I learned how to coordinate a recorded phone interview with soldiers in the Middle East. I also developed key skills such as “finding the story” in the interview and crafting a lead and an effective closing. After writing several features, I suggested writing a piece about a military issue, and now I write an occasional opinion column in addition to the regular feature.

What I learned

Writing is not necessarily a gift, as many friends and non-writers suggest. For me it often starts off with bad writing, anything I can get out, sometimes just putting words on the page.

Using a general outline helps guide me, but I'm not afraid to veer from that. And, I try not to make excuses for not writing. There's always laundry and cleaning to do, bills to pay. But I make myself sit down and write, if not for publication then to make the effort to journal every day.

Editors, the bane of existence for many writers, proved invaluable to me. Having never freelanced before, I initially found the editing/publishing process frustrating. My first few submissions emotionally devastated me. Editors cut hundreds of words, moved paragraphs around, changed transitions, all as suggestions for improvement and clarity. I started to understand the saying “write tight,” especially with 750



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words per column; get rid of excess words and say it with less.

Remember to revise, revise, revise. I spend as much time or more on revising as on writing. Once I got over the emotional attachment to my words and listened to editing advice, my writing improved. Each venue has its own style requirements, and I began to see this, adjusting my writing as necessary. I've also learned to stand my ground when needed, and my pieces go to print now with minimal, if any, editing. While my writing has improved, the editors have learned to respect my research and style.

Advice

If you're getting started, my suggestion is to just write! Also, read everything, subscribe to trade journals, join a writing group, seek honest feedback and listen to your editors. Doing this will help you improve and find your niche, whether it's a freelance article, an essay or a novel.