Everything I know about Journalism
(and most of it I stole)

REPORTING

1. Journalism is an attempt to discern the truth from liars. Don't expect anyone to tell you the truth. They won't. It's up to you to find it. Look for contradictions in what people say. Three words to live by: compare and contrast.

2. Most lies are those of omission. Most people aren't going to lie totally. They're just going to tell you the version of the truth that makes them look good.

3. There's a big difference between repeating and reporting. Repeating what someone said is easy. It doesn't require much judgment or intelligence. Reporting is a search for the best version of the truth. It requires intelligence, skepticism, hard work and lots of digging. Strive to be a reporter.

4. The last reporter to get the truth from one source was a guy named Moses. Unless your source is God, you're not going to get the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth from one interview. And if you're getting interviews with God, you're in the wrong business.

5. Reporting requires common sense - all five of them. It's not enough to just listen to what someone says. God gave humans - even reporters - five senses. Sometimes how someone looks is just as important as what he or she says. Sometimes the way their voice wavers can tell you a lot. Use your senses.

6. Too many journalists try to climb a mountain from the top down. If you go right to the top and interview the big guy first, you're dependent on what he wants to tell you. If you interview the little people first, you'll know what to ask when you get to the big guy. Take it one step at a time. Start at the bottom. Hit the library and find out everything you can about the subject. Interview the little people second. You'll get to the top quick enough - and you'll know what to do when you get there.

7. Most business stories are not news stories. But most news stories are business stories. If you don't understand business, you can't understand news. Look to see how the news affects business - and why.

8. What someone knows is important. But the real question is how do they know it. Ask them. Beware the person who knows everything - college professors are a good example. They may just be good at talking about nothing.
9. Good writing will take you further than good reporting. The reason? Most editors can recognize good writing. But few of them can recognize good reporting. Be a good reporter. But also be a good writer.

10. Writing is like making love - it's a lot more fun with a partner. Unfortunately, too many journalists think they're writing for themselves. They're so interested in satisfying their own ego that they forget about satisfying the reader. Keep your focus on your readers. Tell them the story. They'll think better of you in the morning.

11. Good writing starts with a KISS. That's a maxim political consultants live by - Keep It Simple, Stupid. Leave the big words and the complex sentences in your English classes. Your job is not to impress the reader with your vocabulary or your ability to say nothing in 4,000 words. It's to eloquently elucidate a communiqué - uh, communicate a message.

12. People are more important than statistics. You tell your reader that 500,000 people went broke in America last year, he'll yawn. You tell him the personal story of one person who went broke, he'll listen. Statistics are important and they have to go into the story. But your focus is on people.

THE NATURE OF NEWS

13. News is never new. It is simply recycled for a new audience. The only journalists who think they've found something new are those who are too dumb to read and too lazy to research. Read what other reporters in other towns are doing. Read what other reporters have done. Here's betting the story they covered could be covered in your community. Do it. And then everybody will think you've found something new.

14. Anyone can cover an event. But only the good reporter can put it in perspective. Most reporters have an institutional memory of one day. The good ones can relate what happened on any one day to the historical trends that created the event and the ripple effect the event will have across society. Don't be satisfied with covering an event. Stretch the envelope.

15. Reporting and writing are tools that a journalist uses. But what he or she really is selling is knowledge. If you think the Mujahadeen sell ice cream in Beijing, that Khadaffi is the French word for coffee, that Mekong is what a big gorilla once said, you've got a problem. Three words to live by: Read. Read. Read.
16. Ethics are elastic. It's easy to be ethical when the story is small. It's a lot harder when the story is huge. Develop an ethical code that you can live by. And live by it. The rule one reporter lives by: he never does anything to get a story that he would be ashamed to have printed alongside his story.

17. More libel suits are caused by bad manners than by bad reporting. You write something. Somebody gets mad. They call you up to complain. You listen to them, they feel better. You act like an arrogant jerk, they sue. Be nice. It will save you numerous libel suits.

RESPONSIBILITIES

18. Journalists can't tell people what to think. But they certainly tell people what to think about. What you decide to cover and the way you organize your story all impact on what the reader is going to think about. That's an awesome responsibility. Think about it.

19. The journalism profession doesn't need any more bad reporters. It's got plenty of those already. If you're going to be a journalist, be a good one. If you're not going to be a good one, find another field of work.

20. There's no such thing as objectivity. But there's something called fairness. If you don't think your preconceptions influence the questions you ask and the story you write, you're dreaming. Don't worry about being objective. Be fair. Let everyone tell their side of the story. If you do that, people will think you're objective.

CONSISTENCY

21. And finally, remember: most people will remember you not for your best story but for your worst.