

# READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

## English in the Real World: A Sports Journalist Video Transcript

### **Ken Shulman:**

I loved sports as a kid. All I cared about was baseball and hockey. And when the newspaper came, my father would take the front page, I would grab the sports section, and that's where I learned to read. I never thought I'd be a sports writer. I thought I'd be a novelist. In the middle of writing novels that I couldn't publish, I got a job in Rome at the Associated Press covering soccer in Italy, and that changed everything. I'm Ken Shulman and I'm a journalist specializing in sport.

### **Recorded Voice:**

Every day I would go over there. This is when I didn't skate, and I would just watch him skate because he was the only one that, like, stood out that was really good...

### **Shulman:**

At the beginning, I was just happy to have work and happy to go to games, and I couldn't believe people paid me to watch soccer.

### **Recorded Voice:**

I'd always go to the park and watch him skate...

### **Shulman:**

Later on, I started to think, "What can be done with this great pursuit that everyone loves? "Can we do something more with it?" With sport, you can talk with almost anyone. It bridges the gap of education, it bridges left and right in politics. Somehow sport is the one space where everyone is comfortable connecting. I chose to use sport as a way to call attention to situations in our country and beyond our country – situations of injustice, situations of human rights, political situations, cultural situations. So in terms of finding stories, the world is my oyster. My job as a journalist is to tell an interesting story that is true, that is compelling, and that is going to get people to read, watch, or listen. The skills needed for a sports writer are very similar to the skills needed in school. You need to be able to read, you need to be able to analyze, and you need to be able to summon that information. Moreover, you need to be able to express yourself both verbally and in writing concisely, directly, and convincingly. The first thing you have to ask is, what is it that you're trying to

say? What is the best strategy I have to accomplish this? What does my reader need to know?

Recently, I wanted to do a story about American Indians in sport. I called up a dear friend of mine who used to work at the Museum of the Native American in Manhattan and we brainstormed for a while. And she said as an aside, "Maybe you want to consider skateboarding. It's really popular on the reservation." I asked her if she'd give me some leads, and that was how that story began. Digital tools have changed among the access I have to information. I have a command center just because I have a computer. When I take on a story, I prepare as much as possible. If I can't learn specifically about the people I'm working with, I will read up extensively on their culture.

The White Mountain Apache are among the few tribes in all of the continental United States that managed to secure their ancestral homeland. Skateboarding for some reason really plugs into their character. They're skateboarding on the lands where their ancestors hunted and rode horses, so they're connecting with their own tradition.

The first thing a radio journalist has to remember is, it's about sound. Sound has a way of placing you in the story. We get the sound of the reservation. The sound of skateboard wheels rolling on concrete.

**Skater:**  
Whoo!

**Shulman:**  
The sound of a body hitting the ground after falling off a skateboard.

I've got to get photographs that illustrate every part of the story. Portraits of the skaters, and then landscape photos. Photos that are also evocative of the reservation.

Tell me your name, please?

**Ronny:**  
My name is Ronny Altahar, Junior.

**Shulman:**  
How do you spell Altahar?

**Ronny:**  
A-L-T-A...

**Shulman:**

Interviewing is an art and it's also very tricky.

Are both your parents Apache?

**Ronny:**

Yeah.

**Shulman:**

Do you guys speak the language at home?

**Ronny:**

My mom does, my mom and my brother.

**Shulman:**

When did you start skateboarding and why?

As a writer, I try to be very attentive to the tones of a person's speech and also the rhythms.

How long are you going to keep doing it?

**Ronny:**

Till I get old. Till my legs give out on me.

**Shulman:**

For a seven-minute radio piece, I'm coming back home with between four and eight hours of sound. Writing a radio script to me is sort of like patching together a quilt. I've got all these beautiful squares, I've got this great sound bite, then I've got sounds of the skating. And I'll put those together in an order that I want the story to go to.

**Recorded Voice:**

Skateboarding is like... like a natural high, I guess I could say.

**Shulman:**

Then I have to stitch together these various building blocks with what I say. "The concrete surface is littered with debris and broken glass. The concrete surface is littered with debris and broken glass. Still, the skaters come almost every day." The shorter and more to the point my voice tracks are, the better the story is. In many ways, it's like writing music. You've got a verse, you have a chorus, you have another verse, and then you have a bridge and you go

somewhere else. And when I write my narrative bridges, I'm always speaking them out loud. I want to hear how they sound.

"Skateboarding is strong medicine on the reservation, an edgy sport for kids already living on the edge."

Once it's done, I will send my senior producer a copy of my script.

Yeah, I've got 7:10. It's too long? 12 seconds too long. Well, we can... let's go back on the script and trim a little bit.

You need someone who can be more objective and can tell you not only does the story work, but does the story work for that particular audience. It's not how good the sentence is or the paragraph is, it's whether it helps propel the piece forward. I made my living by being versatile. That means knowing how to communicate not only with the people I'm interviewing and writing about, but even more importantly, knowing how to communicate for the people I'm writing for.

"Kids have to shimmy through a hole in the fence to skate. The concrete surface..."

Being a sports writer is one of the few places where you still have a lot of liberty. You can be ornate, you can be creative, you can be romantic. In almost every other aspect of journalism, you're so focused on getting the facts out. Sports writing is one of the most creative forms of journalism. You can have fun, you can express an opinion, and it's a good place to learn how to write. I love to connect across obstacles and cultures. Sports has allowed me to do that more readily and with more pleasure than all of my other pursuits.

Thanks very much. Great to meet you, nice talking to you.