

How to Write Humor

By Patrick F. McManus

I have written humor columns for New York magazines for nearly 50 years. Casual observers of the craft might assume that we humor writers

skim comic ideas off the tops of our heads. Not so. Much care and deliberation goes into the creation of the idea for each humor piece. Here is an example.

Many years ago, New York editors figured out that by taking advantage of the three-hour time difference between their fair city and Spokane, they could catch me asleep and unaware at five o'clock in the morning. I wouldn't, therefore, be able to think up any lies about why I had missed a deadline or some other inconsequential matter.

So one morning at about five, or maybe it was eight or nine, I was suddenly awakened by the ringing of the telephone. Still groggy from sleep, I answered it.

Without so much as a "hello," a gruff voice growled in my ear, "It had better be in the mail!"

At the time, I was writing a monthly piece for

Field & Stream magazine and consequently had no trouble figuring out the identity of my caller. It was the editor of the magazine, one Dave Psinsky, as I'll call him here.

I instantly realized that Dave was calling about my piece. I wasn't too surprised that he hadn't received it yet. I hadn't mailed it yet. In fact, I hadn't even written it yet. I hadn't even thought about writing it.

I knew the only decent thing to do was to confess my error to Dave and plead for mercy.

So I said, "What! You haven't received it yet?" "You mailed it?" Dave said. "The bleeping post office! Well, maybe it will arrive today."

"You never can tell," I said.

I figured I was off the hook for the moment.

About the Author

After working as a reporter in Idaho and Washington, Patrick McManus – nationally acclaimed outdoors humor writer – joined Eastern's faculty in 1959, teaching journalism and creative writing until retiring in 1983.

Over the past 50 years, he has turned out at least 1,000 stories for magazines and written 15 books, the 16th and 17th to be published by Simon & Schuster in 2006. Number 16 will be Pat's first mystery novel, *The Blight Way*. Number 17 will be another collection of his humor pieces.

For the first 20 years of his writing career, Pat wrote everything on his old manual Royal typewriter, which he still defaults to today "when I get furious with my computer."

Of all his books, *The Deer on a Bicycle* is one of Pat's favorites. It was written for the EWU Press, and all proceeds go to the Press and to student scholarships in journalism and the English graduate and undergraduate writing programs at Eastern.

Pat now divides his time between puttering in the backyard of his Spokane home and writing. Having written a book on writing, he said he is now thinking about doing one on puttering, which he feels is a lost art.

I'd get busy right away, think up an idea for the piece, write it, mail it and blame the whole delay on the post office.

Then Dave said, "Wait a minute. I need to get the artist started on the illustration right away. Describe one of the big scenes to me."

"Hmmm," I said. "Let's see, there are so many big scenes."

By then, I'd been writing magazine pieces for a long time, and I knew that it was good to have a little conflict in each story. So I said, "My wife and I are having an argument."

"Okay, got it," Dave said.

"What are you arguing about?"

"What are we arguing about?" I said. "Well, we are arguing about a big box."

"Okay," Dave said. "What's the outdoor angle?"

"The outdoor angle is this," I said.

"The box is full of old outdoor gear that my wife wants me to throw away."

"This box any particular color?"

"Green," I said.

"What's the title?"

"The Green Box."

So there is an example of all the thought and care that goes into developing an idea for a short humor piece.

But do you have any idea how hard it is to write a 2,500-word story about a stupid green box?

