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## [Unlocked: How to Push Past a Career Barrier](#)

April 12, 2016 Lucas Laursen



Brendan Borrell was feeling low about his career. He had been freelancing for several years and no longer worried about paying the rent. But he wanted more adventure in his work. He wanted to tag along with environmental scientists and advocates at their labs and in the field, tracing the ups and downs of their work. He wanted to apply for ambitious fellowships that would support far-flung reporting. But the deadlines slipped by. He was letting routine assignments crowd out the sort of big stories that had years earlier prompted him to trade field biology for journalism. He was always [collecting “string”](#) for future stories. But “it’s easy to collect and collect and collect and never have a chance to step back,” he says.

As the next big fellowship deadline loomed, Borrell drove to a rented cabin in Vermont, toting his mountain bike, laptop, and a few of his leading story ideas. He stayed for a month, telling himself, “I’m gonna write this proposal this year no matter what.” For that month, he went mostly offline. The change in scenery and schedule helped him review old ideas and synthesize them in new ways. Either the mountain biking or the deep thinking paid off: his proposal won him an [Alicia Patterson Fellowship](#) and a reporting trip to Uganda.

Borrell has since repeated the trick, winning more [fellowship support](#) and assignments that support globe-trotting reporting. But although a combination of pig-headed focus and uninterrupted time are great boons for a reporter, Borrell says he’s also learned how to work smarter. He attributes much of his success to hard-won lessons on how to improve the quality of his stories before he files copy.

Most writers, like Borrell, at some point find themselves up against what seems like a locked door—looking across a barrier that others appear to have crossed to achieve professional success. Unlocking that door isn’t just a matter of luck: It takes attention to craft, from story planning and pitching to fact-checking and revision.

### Trafficking in Ideas

Part of a strong quality-control process begins in a story’s earliest stages, even before the pitching process has begun. Borrell’s pre-pitching work includes due diligence to make sure he’s aiming at the right audience. “When I began, I would come up with an idea and create a pitch without a specific magazine in mind,” he says. But trial and error is time-consuming, and it can alienate editors, since it betrays a lack of knowledge and forces them to spend extra time slogging through ill-conceived pitches. Borrell began studying the magazines he wanted to pitch. He wanted to understand their usual fare and make sure his ideas weren’t too similar to what they’d already run. Doing that, as well as accumulating feedback from editors on the pitches they rejected, helped Borrell target his ideas more effectively.

Freelance journalist Rachel Nuwer also says seeking feedback about why certain pitches weren’t a good fit for specific magazines has helped her. “The best editors will give you feedback about why they’re rejecting an idea,” she says. Sometimes, the feedback is simple. “I used to write really super-massive pitches,” Nuwer says, “and someone piped up and was like, ‘By the way, don’t write so much.’ ” Now, she sends only enough to convey what the story is about and who the major players are. These shorter, to-the-point pitches also sped up the feedback cycle.

Another way to stretch to new levels is to specialize, by developing deep knowledge and go-to sources in a niche area of science. Heather Pringle began freelancing after working as a museum researcher, a book editor, and a magazine science editor. At first, the British Columbia-based journalist focused solely on pitching enough stories to make a living. She relied on volume to make up for low pay rates.

When she began specializing in New World archaeology stories, “A lot of fellow freelancers thought I was nuts,” she says. But now, after covering the topic for many years, she often gets wind of stories before her sources have even published their results. “I have those in the back of my mind and I can start chatting a little bit to editors,” Pringle says. Today that includes editors at *Archaeology*, *Science*, and *National Geographic*, who trust her because they know she has cultivated a beat and knows the area better than most of her peers.

### Getting the Story

Thinking about the narrative possibilities of your stories is another way to take reporting to a new level. That was a key step for Borrell. “I used to think, all right, I’ve got this story, I’m going to have a chance to meet my main character in person and ... the narrative’s just going to fall into my notebook,” he says. What he found is that when you meet them in person, some people merely demonstrate their pipetting technique. “You have to be alert to the possibilities of the story and, if you have an option to meet somebody in a more dynamic context than a one-on-one interview, then you should go for it.” Ideally, he says, you want your subject to be doing something interesting and interacting with other people.

Sometimes you have to improvise to make the most of a reporting trip. While Borrell was reporting a 2013 [High Country News story](#) on a South Dakota Native American reservation, a source told him she couldn’t make time for an interview because she had other plans for the evening. “It turned out she was going to a meeting of the tribal council,” he says. Instead of letting her off the hook, Borrell said he’d go along. “It

ended up being a really interesting scene to include in the story.”

It’s easiest to be dogged and adaptable when you care about your subject. Nuwer recently traveled to India and Nepal to [write for the BBC](#) about the corpses strewn along the path to Mount Everest’s peak. Before her departure, she completed about 30 interviews and even sketched out a book idea. She dug so deeply because she found the subject so compelling, she says. “The stories that are driven by my own curiosity I write more passionately,” she says. “It also makes the process of researching and writing them more interesting.”

Borrell echoes that idea. It’s all too easy to put less work and creativity into stories you don’t care about, so he’s learned to focus on stories he knows he can do well, he says. “You start to notice what your limits are and avoid putting yourself in a situation where you’re not going to be able to deliver your best work,” he says.

### **Adding Value**

If a story is riddled with inaccuracies or if the writing is sloppy, no amount of reporting can make it great. That’s why the best writers take time to fact-check and carefully revise their stories before they file their copy. Doing so takes time, but it can make for lighter editing, happier editors, and more compelling stories.

It helps to be able to pump out first drafts quickly, Nuwer says. She once had a gig writing a dozen short blog posts a week for *Smithsonian* and learned that one way to deliver better work is to simply do more of it. “It definitely honed my skills,” she says. “Now, instead of dwelling on perfectly crafted writing, I’ll just slap everything down on the page that I want there, and then afterwards go through it a bunch to get it into shape.”

Because she tends to write her rough drafts long, Nuwer says her pre-submission revision process often includes pruning and trimming. She reads her stories out loud to herself to catch awkward phrasing or repetitive words. “I read through everything, from a 300-word story to a feature, at least five times before sending it in,” she says. The final step in her workflow is to fact-check her stories—she typically sends lists of facts to her sources so that the copy she delivers to editors has the best chance of being error-free.

Borrell’s strategy is similar. “My goal is to write my draft as quickly as possible,” he says. Sometimes he finishes first drafts weeks or even a month before his deadline, leaving himself plenty of time to revise. “If you just close the thing down and let your subconscious figure it out, when you come back to it you’re just that much more efficient. You can immediately see the flaws and fix them.” Taking time away from a first draft also makes it easier to trim copy and helps a writer be less “precious” about the writing, Borrell says.

### **Teaming Up**

Producing high-quality journalism goes beyond self-discipline and writing prowess: It’s also important to develop a good working relationship with editors. “The reality of the way our business works is that it’s driven by the quality of your idea, how good you are with the tools, and who you know,” says Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist Dan Fagin.

One way to create a trusting relationship with your editors is by making an effort to see a story from their point of view, says Fred Guterl, executive editor of *Scientific American*. The good writers grasp the spirit of his comments—perhaps the story as a whole wasn’t working yet and the editor inserted some smaller comments to help jump-start an overall revision. Lesser writers, however, “technically answered your questions, but they didn’t really take [the edit] to heart,” he says.

Reporters who get to the heart of an edit earn trust that is repaid over the course of a career. Working with editors who trust you, and with whom you have a rapport, “makes life so much easier,” Pringle says. “You don’t have to develop the same extensive pitches you would if you were an outsider.”

It takes time to build that trust—just as it takes time to hone a specialty, craft well-targeted pitches, report deeply, check facts, and revise again and again. Putting in that time is a major investment. That’s why caring about stories in the first place is so important for moving beyond career barriers.

And that’s why Borrell is always on the lookout for the next story “that really makes me happy and captures my imagination and becomes an obsession.” Not long ago, he went to Woodstock, New York, in search of more mountain-biking descents—and more inspiration. Hard work may be enough to pay the

rent, but it takes obsessive dedication to make it big.



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