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I thought you might like to show this to your classes.

**Caleb Odom writing advice questions**

Caleb Odom, a Troy journalism student approaching graduation in December 2013, emailed ESPN reporter Kevin Van Valkenburg. It was Odom's effort to reverse-engineer a news story -- to learn how the reporter achieved what he did. Odom's email and the reporter's reply are reproduced here with their permission. ss

Tue, Dec 10, 2013 at 1:45 PM

Caleb Odom <codom97109@gmail.com>  
To: kvvespn@gmail.com

Kevin,

I read your Andrew Luck story in the Mag a few weeks ago. Loved the writing style. I am a journalism major graduating on Friday from Troy University and as long as I have been writing stories I have wanted to write a story that detailed.

How do you get those details like the shower conversation Luck had with his coach?

Do you just ask a bunch of questions?

Are your questions very specific?

Is Andrew Luck just really that open to tell you what he was thinking?

I have just always been concerned about how much I can "get away with" in terms of what Luck was thinking at certain moments.

I know don't have what it takes to write for the Mag right now but I do want to learn and get there someday.

Sincerely,  
Caleb Odom

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Kevin Van Valkenburg <kvvespn@gmail.com>  
To: Caleb Odom <codom97109@gmail.com>

Wed, Dec 11, 2013 at 11:40 AM

Hi Caleb:

First off, congrats on graduation! I can still remember the shoes I was wearing at my graduation, now almost 14 years ago. It goes by so quickly.

Second, thanks for the nice note. Let me buzz through your questions here:

1. How do you get those details like the shower conversation Luck had with his coach?

Luck (initially) didn't want to talk for the feature, and the sports information people who work for the Colts weren't going to pressure him. He'd been profiled hundreds of times previously, and he just didn't have a lot of interest in doing another one. So I made up my mind that I was going to simply follow him around as much as possible. I was going to be respectful, but there is tremendous value in learning how to be a fly on the wall. In the locker room after the Chargers game, I simply hung around until well after all the other reporters had left. He was the very last guy to go into the showers, and Pagano joined him shortly after. The locker room in Qualcomm is kind of a dump, so I could stand there and hear pretty much everything they were saying. Until someone kicks you out or asks you to leave, it always helps to be a fly on the wall as much as possible. Just be unobtrusive and quietly jot down stuff in your notebook. The specifics of what they were saying didn't matter, just that they were still obsessing over the game. That spoke to Luck's personality.

2. Do you just ask a bunch of questions?

In this instance, yes, but I didn't ask Luck a bunch of questions (until later) because I couldn't. So I tried to interview as many of his teammates and coaches and people around him as I could. One thing I've learned is you can't have great writing without great reporting. You just can't. There is no faking it at this level. So when you get an assignment, the best thing to do is interview as many people as possible, ask very specific questions that bring up specific details about a person, and then use that to fill out your story.

*3. Are your questions very specific?*

Typically, yes. One piece of advice I can pass on is never ask a question (if you can help it) that can be answered with a yes or a no. WHY? WHAT? HOW? Those three kinds of questions have WAY more power than any question that begins with "IS" or "Can" or "DO" because they force the subject to give specific details or emotions.

*4. Is Andrew Luck just really that open to tell you what he was thinking?*

Not really, no. He's very private, in fact. But I was able to talk to enough people who shared stories about him that I was able to go back, after I'd essentially put the story together, and in the 10 minutes I got him, bounce that stuff off of him and say "This is what people say you were feeling in this moment. What is your recollection of that?" And for the most part, he'd either confirm "Yeah, that's pretty accurate" or he'd say "Actually, my memory of it is a little different. Here is what I recall." He appreciated that I did my homework, and that I wasn't just asking questions blindly.

*5. I have just always been concerned about how much I can "get away with" in terms of what Luck was thinking at certain moments.*

I think it always depends on how reporting you're able to do. I don't advocate writing too many stories in the second person. It's a gimmicky device, but I thought it might work for this story just because I wanted the reader to feel the chaos of Luck's life. But really, it comes down to talking to people. Gather as much information as you can, then you end up using maybe 20 percent of it, but it's the best 20 percent. That other 80 percent informs your writing, even if it doesn't appear in the text.

Hope that helps. Best of luck with everything. My brief advice: Write a lot, read even more, take as many risks as you can (especially when you're young) and find people you trust who will give you honest feedback on your stuff. Be wary of people who tell your stuff is great all the time. They're not helping. The ones who say "This part is great, but this part isn't, and here is how to make it better" are the ones who will help you in the long run.

Knock 'em dead.

KVV

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