



WRITING

by Kevin Zhou

When Kevin Zhou first wrote for *Imagine* as a high school junior, he already had an impressive résumé, with bylines in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Tri-Valley Herald*, and *Contra Costa Times*. After that 2004 article, about his experience with the United States Institute of Peace's National Peace Essay Contest, Kevin wrote three more times for *Imagine*. Now a senior at Harvard, Kevin shares here what he learned about writing from internships and writing contests.

I always enjoyed writing. I found it relaxing to unwind after a long day of school by just putting my thoughts on paper. When I wanted to start pursuing writing more seriously, I was happy to find a wide range of activities available to me. I've participated in internships, essay contests, and extracurriculars at college, and every experience has helped me grow as a writer.

Lesson 1: The best way to get started is to get started.

I started writing about high school football after reading an advertisement in my local newspaper, the *Tri-Valley Herald*. The sports editor was looking for correspondents to cover Friday night games. An avid football fan, I eagerly sent in an application. Because I had never written about sports, I included a mock sports story I wrote about a high school football game I had previously attended, modeling the writing style of professional sports writers. A few days later, the editor called to offer me the job.

Newspapers often claim that they offer internships only to college and graduate students, but I discovered that many make exceptions for talented high school students. You should send in your résumé, a statement on why you are interested in journalism, and a few writing samples from class or your school newspaper or even a letter to the editor of your local paper to demonstrate your writing abilities.

You may receive many rejections along the way, but all you need is one editor who's willing to give you a shot. Once you've gotten your shot, give it your all.

Lesson 2: Learn from criticism.

One of the most valuable benefits of my internship at the

Tri-Valley Herald was that it allowed me to interact with and learn from professional journalists. After I finished writing each article, I sat down with the sports editor to discuss my story. He would point out strengths and weaknesses and offer suggestions on how to improve.

At first, I was easily demoralized by my editor's feedback. All of his comments seemed critical, and he virtually rewrote my first story. But when I read my story in the newspaper the following morning, I noticed how much better it had become. After that, whenever my editor would go over my articles with me, I carefully listened to all his pointers and tried to absorb his advice like a sponge. Although criticism might hurt initially, I quickly saw it as a tool to improve my writing.

Lesson 3: Build on your writing successes (and remember Lesson 2).

By the end of football season, I had caught the journalism bug and started to search for other internships. I sent my résumé and writing clips to several local papers—and received many rejections. But it wasn't long before the editor of the *Danville Weekly* offered me a position covering teen life and local events.

This new internship gave me

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the chance to write about issues that directly impacted me and my peers. For example, in my first month, I wrote an article about my friends' addiction to networking sites like MySpace and the negative ramifications of their addiction. I received a deluge of e-mails from parents and students who had read the article and agreed with many of my points. Of course, when you put forth an opinion, someone will always disagree with you. But just like feedback from an editor, their comments can help you reflect on different viewpoints and help you recognize if you need to make your stories more balanced in the future.

Lesson 4: Write about topics that truly interest you.

While I spent most of my afternoons writing for newspapers, I discovered that national essay contests offered another venue to explore topics I cared about. Since diverse organizations sponsor essay contests, there were numerous prompts and questions that piqued my interest.

I had always had deep interests in international relations and politics, so I searched for essay contests that directly pertained to these subjects. In my sophomore year, I wrote about post-conflict reconstruction for the United States Institute of

Peace's essay contest and was named the California state winner. In my junior year, I wrote about political courage for the John F. Kennedy Profiles in Courage essay contest and won first place nationally. I wrote about humanitarian aid for the United Nations Association essay contest and won first place. I think I did well in these contests because I was genuinely interested in the research, and the writing came easily because my topic was something that had always intrigued me.

Lesson 5: You can write your way up the masthead.

In college, I have continued to write as much as I can. Over the past three years, I have written more than 80 stories about news around campus for *The Harvard Crimson*. Last year, I was appointed an executive editor. I have also continued to pursue my interests at the crossroads of international relations and writing. In my sophomore year, I joined the editorial board of the *Harvard Asia Pacific Review*, a journal that publishes articles on the region, and was named editor-in-chief this year.

What I enjoy most about writing now is the same thing that hooked me back in high school: I have a chance to share my opinion on topics I am truly passionate about. Whether I was writing for a local newspaper or for a national essay contest, I cared about my topic and wanted to see what others thought about my views. From that simple motivation grew these important lessons that I hope you'll have the chance to learn, too. **i**



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