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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 09, 2008

### 5 Questions: Author, Educator Bob Schaller

Today marks the beginning of a new *weekly* feature for Communication, Cognition, and Arbitrary Thoughts. I've decided the Weblog needs an infusion of new energy. So each week, I'm going to post a "5 Questions" feature with someone interesting.

I got the inspiration from Bob Schaller, who writes a number of "20 questions" features. Since Bob writes much faster than me, I decided to stick to 5. I also found it appropriate for him to be the first featured individual.

**Bob Schaller** is an accomplished author, educator, and journalist. He has published more than 35 books, including a recent biography on Olympic swimming sensation Michael Phelps titled, *Michael Phelps: The Untold Story of a Champion* (available at Amazon.com, \$6.29). He is a staff writer for [SwimNetwork.com](http://SwimNetwork.com). Currently a doctoral student in mass communications at [Texas Tech](http://Texas Tech), Schaller has worked at newspapers in Nebraska, Colorado and California. He also writes for *Splash Magazine*, published by [USA Swimming](http://USA Swimming).

1) What's the most important characteristic for a writer?

**Schaller:** To respond to criticism well, to apply it, and always get better. The best experiences I have had always involve editors who take me out to the proverbial woodshed. My talent is marginal, but my work ethic is exceptional. I like that feedback because it makes me better. Also, write across different genres, not just one or two. If you want to make a living at it, that's essential, and it's also a great way to get better. There's a narrative arc even to explicating a technical writing project like explaining a digital camera. Though that's

ABOUT ME



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different from a biography, it involves a lot of the same critical-thinking and writing skills. Passion is awesome, and people should have that in whatever they do. But a lot of people who love to write simply aren't that good at it. It's tough, because writing is so personal -- we can all do it at the basic level. But to do it professionally is a whole new skill set. Hey, I can hit a running 12-footer, maybe even more often than Kobe, but the Lakers haven't called. Still.

2) You've taught print journalism and are writing a text on online communication. What must journalism students know today that wasn't taught 10 years ago?

**Schaller:** There has been a move away from teaching -- in my brief experience -- storytelling skills. The new media present new challenges, and they require different skill sets to tell a story well across media. There are some basic components to journalism and storytelling that ring true across media -- get it right, be clear and concise, etc. -- but doing it on video, print, or audio are different skill sets. It'd be hard to be good in all three, but it shouldn't come at the expense of developing and honing one's skills. Being a jack of all trades and master of none means a small market, or limited opportunities. Or at least get good at one before moving onto the others. I like the idea of the multi-media journalist, but a lot more thought, planning and better learning outcomes are going to have to be developed before the new media journalist is part of the working world -- and curriculum. A big part of that is a lot of the good folks in academia left the "real world" before the Internet. It'd be hard for anyone to teach something they never experienced. The real-time news cycle is a foreign term to those who left the field before they had the pressure of which story to post, or hold, and when to update a Web site, how the news cycle changes fact checking and editing. Knowing how to use the bells and whistles on this new engine is awesome, but not if you are spinning your wheels. Everyone can produce media -- that's awesome -- but not everyone wants to read or hear what EVERYONE else to say. That was the big myth with the citizen journalist, that anyone would care about what others have to say. All the "interactivity" is nasty comments appended at the end of story and below YouTube videos. People want to express themselves -- cool -- but a rant or vulgar diatribe is not a form of journalism whatsoever. Now, if they have rhetoric skills, it's a different conversation -- speaking of which, those should be taught, too.

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## 3) What do you wish that more freelance writers knew?

**Schaller:** That you are a contractor as much as a writer. You'd better market yourself if you are going to put food on the table. You can't believe in writer's block and be a real writer. Sometimes the words find you, but sometimes you have to find them -- I have repeated that several times teaching, because it's a craft. Someone goes out in the real world and Joe's PR Firm needs a release written by 5 p.m., and you say, "I can't do it, writer's block." Goodbye. Next.

Being a freelance writer is a great life, a life of dreams. But your name is your brand, so you'd better attach it to projects you are committed to do, and do well. Also, there's this myth about freelancing that you have no boss. Anyone who signs a paycheck to you is your boss, and if you make them mad once, you run the risk of never writing for that Web site or magazine again -- worse, it might extend to ALL the editors in that person's network, because we all know that word travels fast in these times. Also, don't ever miss a deadline. I try to "comically" beat deadlines -- to get the assignment done well and turned in as quickly as possible, so fast that the editor laughs because she or he "can't believe how fast" I turned it in. Because when they need something under the gun in the future, they will remember you for that. And usually, with we-need-this-fast assignments, the pay is correspondingly higher because of the urgency.

## 4) You have amazing networking skills. What is the biggest mistake that recent graduates make in networking?

**Schaller:** Thinking people owe them something. I tried to help someone here, and they were so mad they didn't have an answer that week, that person stopped talking to me even when we passed in the hall. Think I will help that person again? Not likely. Also, remember that everything you do is an opportunity to network. Even if you are working for a poverty-level wage at a nonprofit (which is awesome, that's just not me), you are going to deal with big companies. Make connections, send a thank you -- send a resume and work sample. No is going to move you up unless you move yourself up. A lot of people love filling out applications online, and that's cool if it is asked for, but that's just getting you in line -- I want my students and friends at the front of the line so they get a shot, and what happens from there is up to them. Another important thing is that people think the opportunities are endless. They are, but if you get an interview, don't give it anything other than your best.

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You have a million arrows in your sheaf, but you only get one shot at most targets. Miss once, and that often is it. Also, don't ever react to a perceived (or even real) disrespect if there's a networking opportunity. Sometimes, people don't mean what they say, or they are having a bad day and take it out on you -- they'll remember the person who took the high road for all the right reasons, and you might get a job, and an apology, down the road. If you react, you just got to feel good for a second, and doors have closed. I'd rather chug a gallon of pride than throw away a five-figure freelance gig over ego.

5) If someone were to write a biography on Bob Schaller, what should the title be?

**Schaller:** Dumb luck uncovered: How do these things happen?

Thanks, Bob!

Labels: [5 Questions](#), [freelance](#), [journalism](#), [new media](#), [social networking](#)

POSTED BY SAMUEL D. BRADLEY AT 3:57 PM



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3 COMMENTS:

 [Tim Laubacher](#) said...

I look forward to reading this weekly addition to the blog.

One comment that struck me as interesting was the advice to write across multiple genres. I've been thinking recently about this exact topic.

It seems to me that although an "expert" can continue to dig and dig in one topic, the odds are good that each successive book may actually have less valuable information than the last, simply because of the decreasing odds of the author finding a book's worth of new relevant information.

I like the idea behind practicing writing in different genres. It would obviously improve a writer's skill set. But it does sound challenging.

10:30 AM

 Anonymous said...

does shaller have a blog u can link to?

11:22 AM

 Samuel D. Bradley said...

Bob Schaller just joined Twitter. Follow him at:

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12:21 PM

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