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# 90,000 words later ...



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Well, this is it – my one hundredth column for the Chippewa Herald.

I never thought I'd make it this far when I wrote that first column almost 10 years ago, back in December 2002.

I've always liked to write, but when someone at the Herald first asked me to write a weekly column in the 1990s, I thought, "No way!" With four kids under 10 years old, I was far too busy to add a weekly newspaper deadline to my long list of other obligations.

But in 2002, I started pondering the "community columnist" thing. The rules are simple – I could write about whatever topic I chose, whenever I wanted. There was no compensation involved, but no pay means no pressure. I figured I just might be able to keep a non-commitment like that.

What really sealed the deal is when I realized that I could just pretend I'm writing an email. I've labored at a computer keyboard for decades, so I can type almost as fast as I can talk.

And I send a lot of emails.

Of course, writing a column to be read by millions (or whatever the Herald circulation is) requires a little more care than sending off a quick email. So I do employ a team of proofreaders – all personal friends who

enjoy the finer points of spelling and grammar. (I wrote about them in my one-year anniversary column.)

To avoid writer's cramp, I usually write the first draft very quickly – typically in only 20 or 30 minutes. Then the real work begins: editing to fix problems and, more importantly, brutally cutting out entire paragraphs to fit the allotted space.

As Mark Twain once wrote, "Sorry this letter is so long. If I had more time, it would be shorter."

How deep do I need to cut? I still remember my original instructions to keep the column around 600 to 700 words. But ripping out chunks of my work is hard. My first few columns were consistently over 800 words.

I found, however, that a column over 800 words long seemed to fit just fine. (Maybe I use shorter words?) So my column length has only rarely gone below that (only 10 times between 700-800 words), and has mostly crept up, even over 900 words.

In fact, I just analyzed the first 99 columns, and it looks like I've written a total of 90,109 words, making my average column 910 words long. Of course, those are skewed a little because of 10 longer columns of over 1,000 words that turned into articles, because they couldn't fit on the Opinion page.

Maybe one of these days I'll surprise the editor and actually write a column between 600 and 700 words, like I'm supposed to.

So, how did my topics break down? I just went through and assigned a category to each, and came up with this summary:

- 19 – Boy Scouts
- 13 – Family

- 12 – Travel
- 10 – Christmas newsletter quotes
- 10 – School (marching band, science fairs, etc.)
- 8 – Technology
- 7 – Politics
- 5 – Quartet
- 16 – Miscellaneous

Of course, some categories could be combined. With four sons in the troop, much of Boy Scouting is family-related. And the "Arneberg Argus" Christmas newsletter quotes could all go into the family slot. But both those topics deserve to be in their own categories due to their frequency.

I was surprised to see that I've touched on politics only seven times in 10 years. I've had more email feedback from those seven columns than the other 92 combined.

Ironically, in my face-to-face encounters with readers, the columns that people seem to like the most are the ones I put the least effort into. Those are the travel columns, where I work without a net (i.e., send in a column from the road without any proofreaders' help).

I suppose it's like the proverbial rock band, being shocked that their "side B" quickie turned out to be the hit, while their carefully crafted masterpiece recording went unnoticed.

Maybe I should learn to put in less effort.

In fact, if I stop writing this column right now, I will have fewer than 700 words. That would be a first for me.

To the editor: Surprise!

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