



## Want to Write Better? Watch ‘Columbo’

By SHAHAN MUFTI    SEPTEMBER 25, 2013 5:03 PM    15 Comments

*The author of [this last weekend’s Lives essay](#) shares an insight about writing.*

Over the years, as a writing student and as a working journalist, I’ve received all sorts of advice from teachers and mentors and colleagues. There are timeless tips like “Write what you know” or the even simpler “Rewrite.” There has been other advice tailored more to the moment, like “Start a blog” or the similar but more dubious “Build your brand online!” But in the midst of all this mostly practical advice, the wisdom of one writing mentor has always stuck with me: “Watch ‘Columbo’ reruns.”

This wasn’t advice handed out as a glib aside or a clever joke. This was the advice that my graduate-school professor would give, looking right into my eyes, as he handed me an edited assignment that had bled red all over the page. The advice wasn’t narrowly tailored to the information-gathering process, so integral to any nonfiction writer’s work. No, my teacher would insist that in the essential nature of Detective Columbo lay the answers to the entire set of problems a nonfiction writer could ever face. “Go watch some Columbo reruns,” he would say, with an exasperated sigh.

Columbo is a master of reporting. To begin, he is polite. Regardless of whether he was talking to someone he knew, to a murderer or to a victim, he never failed to respect a source. He was relentless. He never stopped asking questions until he had everything sorted cleanly in his head. And most important, in the end he was always humbled by the reality he had been able to reconstruct. He never got cocky. Since facts are the essential ingredient of any work of nonfiction, and the truth is what all writers strive for, “Columbo”



Peter Falk in 1972 as homicide detective Lieutenant Columbo in the NBC series “Columbo.” NBC, via Associated Press

reruns are the perfect inspiration. I did watch some old “Columbo” reruns during graduate school and my early reporting career, but to be honest, I never really thought that they impacted my work.

Years later I began work on a book, in which I traced my family roots all the way back to the inner circle of the Prophet Muhammad and the emergence of Islam, and discovered the kinds of surprising things that I write about in [my Lives column last week](#). I was in a tiny mud hut village in the Punjab region of Pakistan, miles away from any paved road, on a scorching summer day a few years ago to interview a distant relative in his home about our shared family history. The reporting trip was grueling in every way: hot, long and without any promising leads. I was finally about to leave, when I turned around at the door and spoke in Urdu, something to the effect of, “You know, there’s one more thing that still doesn’t make sense.” The acutely annoyed expression on the face of the distant uncle made me realize how deep those reruns had sunk into my work. All he wanted was for me to leave already. But I knew that I needed to tell the story.

I was not solving any murder mystery here. Any forensic evidence of my family’s millennia-old history was long gone. But the family’s history was baffling to me nevertheless, and I had become more interested in the roots of belief. More than anything else, I was trying to understand in my conversations in rural Punjab why people believed the things that they believed. And not surprisingly, Columbo was relevant there, too. I had to be polite. I had to be relentless. I had to be gracious to get anywhere in reconstructing the truth. And only then would the writing come easily.