

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

New Yorker writer Gladwell shares tips, stories

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Reporters should always "swing late," waiting until they begin reporting a story to decide what angle to take with it, New Yorker staff writer Malcolm Gladwell said Monday in Fisk Hall.

Gladwell said he has steadfast rules of reporting: Swing late, don't overload stories with information, decide what is truly interesting about a story and meet as many people as possible.

Gladwell, whose book "The Tipping Point" examines the intricacies of social networks and the way trends become "epidemics," also said cultivating sources for news stories can be as easy as having a social life.

"That's just something I do automatically when I meet someone, without knowing that I'm doing it," Gladwell said. "I try to figure out what they know."

He illustrated his point by describing how he wrote "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg," a New Yorker piece about a 73-year-old Chicago woman who knew everyone in the city. He said the piece practically wrote itself because so much of the reporting involved talking and socializing.

Born in England and raised and schooled in Toronto, Gladwell worked as a science writer and New York bureau chief for The Washington Post before moving to The New Yorker in 1996. At The New Yorker, he has written about everything from how fast food is killing Americans to an obese American Indian tribe giving scientists lessons on how to fight weight gain.

Wearing dark blue jeans and black Nike sneakers and occasionally pulling several coins from his pocket, Gladwell also related stories from his time at the Post, where he got his first experience with beat reporting. He described the environment at the Post as "macho" and laid-back.

Post reporters had a passion for scooping their more businesslike competitors at The New York Times, Gladwell said. He said his friendship with a Food and Drug Administration official often helped him beat the Times science reporter.

"That's what happens when you have friends," he said. "They would just feed everything to me directly."

Gladwell said he even bought theater tickets for his FDA source one night so that a Times reporter would be unable to contact him before deadline.

"We screwed them so many times," he said with a chuckle.

The working environment at The New Yorker has changed since the magazine moved into the Condé Nast building in Times Square, Gladwell said. The immense elevator bank in the new building occupies the

central "hang-out" space of the New Yorker floor that made the old office so much fun to work in, he said.

"I just work at home now," Gladwell said.

Weinberg junior Paul Flaig said that although Gladwell's lecture focused more on the specifics of his craft than its social impact, he still learned a lot from attending.

"I thought his speech was going to be more about the larger social role of journalism in our culture, but it was more about how you write, which was — despite not being Medill — really interesting," he said. "All students are writers at some point."

Medill senior and former Daily staffer Emily Biuso said that although it was entertaining to hear Gladwell tell his story of scooping The New York Times, it was also a surprise.

"I know that that stuff happens," Biuso said. "It was funny to hear him say it, but I was disappointed that it was talked about in such a lighthearted manner. I was surprised that he was joking about it so much."

But Sam Eifling, Medill '01 and a former Daily staffer, said the story didn't seem to be Gladwell's main point.

"I think that was just Malcolm being Malcolm," Eifling said. "I don't think that's where he meant to end up."

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