Chapter 1

The Story and the Truth

For more than three centuries, America’s journalists and authors have been after the same things: the story and the truth. Writers of both news and literature, in fact, have commonly used these terms for their products and purposes. Whether they go out and get it or sit down and write it, a story has long been something familiar to both reporters and authors. Furthermore, whether they have painstakingly assembled it from facts or woven it out of their imaginations, both frequently have insisted that they were delivering the truth. Former reporter David Simon refers to journalists as “truth-tellers”; however, to tell his own version of the truth, Simon created a fictional television series, The Wire.¹

The commonalities in journalism and literature go well beyond terminology. In each realm, writers seek to capture some aspects of reality and convey them to an audience through the medium of language. Once they have collected it, whether it consists of facts or impressions, both reporters and authors must give to this raw material some kind of form, often turning to many of the same tropes and conventions, including metaphor, imagery, plot, and characterization. Along the way, they employ similar stances and methods, generally remaining detached observers while they go foraging for “material” in the world around them. In the end, they must produce something that will appeal to an audience, at least if they are going to make a living or any kind of impact. These commonalities in the areas of purpose, product, method, and audience, which are the subject of this chapter, are important because they helped lay the groundwork for the sibling rivalry that eventually developed in the world of American letters in the early nineteenth century.² Authors came to see
themselves in competition with journalists, who were also seeking to capture truth in language, but were achieving a new prominence in American culture.

**Origins**

Although both can be traced back hundreds of years, formal journalism is much younger than literature. After some early forms of governmental reporting in China and Rome, news sheets became common in Europe in the early seventeenth century. In 1665, England produced a publication that conformed to a definition of a “newspaper” used by modern journalism historians: the *Oxford Gazette*, which later became the *London Gazette*, appeared two times a week and reported relatively current information for a general audience. The Puritans who settled in New England in the early seventeenth century set up a printing press in 1638, but the first real newspaper did not appear in the colonies until 1704, when postmaster John Campbell began publishing the *Boston News-Letter*, a small publication that carried shipping news, reports of governmental affairs, and other information for a relatively small audience. A number of similar papers followed, so that by the time of the American Revolution, journalism was playing a major role in reporting and shaping colonial affairs. The journalism practiced by Campbell and those who followed him was, in some respects, a distinctive endeavor. As the name of Campbell’s publication implies, it involved the collection and delivery of timely information, or “news.” This information, furthermore, was largely factual material—proclamations, accounts of foreign conflicts and coronations, lists of ships arriving and departing—and was thought to be of general significance. James and Benjamin Franklin, Isaiah Thomas, and other editors who followed Campbell fit Edwin and Michael Emery’s definition of a “journalist” as “one who acts as the transmission belt carrying ideas, information, and inspiration to the general public, which is dependent on such resources for rational opinion.” These journalists, however, did not restrict themselves to the publication of news. A substantial portion of the contents of colonial newspapers, in fact, belonged to the realm of literature. Essays in the tradition of English publications such as the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* were especially common. Furthermore, some items in these papers combined fact and fiction. Indeed, as Elizabeth Christine Cook has shown, British literary works—particularly *Cato’s Letters* and the *Spectator*—shaped much of the material that appeared in colonial newspapers. In short, although something modern historians can