Tips on writing an Alumni newsletter:

If you’re like most Cornellians, the class news section is your favorite part of the Cornell Report when it arrives in the mail. Class news helps the newsletter you compile to be more personalized and focused.

A well-read newsletter is one that conveys lots of information about many classmates. This is journalism, thus you need details for an effective newsletter. The more you compile, the easier it will be to write and more enjoyable for your audience to read.

In writing your newsletter, think of it as a conversation. How would you say what you are writing? If you were telling someone---orally---that a classmate just got married, received a promotion, or moved to Hawaii, what would be the opening 2-3 sentences in relaying this news?

The newsletter is simply transferring this phrasing to a keyboard for print. The process is not much different than posting on Facebook with this exception: Each newsletter item is fact-based, and not opinion. In reading over your items, check to see each includes some element of the 4 W’s---who, what, when, and where.

Have you heard the quote: “If I had more time, I would’ve written a shorter letter”? You do not have to feel compelled to use all the information in hand. Each item, with some exceptions, should have a central theme and this may mean leaving out some details. If two or three classmates have a similar theme---a wedding, exotic vacation, retirement, etc.---try tying them together in a thread.

Bottom line: Have some fun. You should enjoy relaying news that is appreciated and not likely to be learned elsewhere. In doing so, your newsletter will be as eagerly anticipated as the Cornell Report.

Tip sheet:

1. Compile and maintain a list of telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and, if applicable, Facebook sites of classmates.

2. Remember your audience: The content is for classmates with a variety of interests and backgrounds, but who also have shared numerous, mutual milestones in their lives since leaving the Hilltop. The newsletter is for them.

3. Your writing style should be conversational and informative without being too wordy or cutesy. Eliminate words and sentences that are not necessary. Don’t preach or try to make a point. Make your language straight-forward. Paraphrase quotes.
4. Facts are important. They should be sprinkled throughout and be specific (i.e. cities, awards, titles, schools, companies, national parks etc.) when possible and appropriate. One exception to being explicit: Try to avoid using specific dates referring to past events.

5. Work in names of as many classmates as possible in each newsletter; it is better to write shorter items (50 words max) on more people than lengthier items on fewer people.

6. Enlarge your Cornell circle. Make an effort to gather items from alums you did not know (or thought you didn’t want to know!!). You’ll get some pleasant surprises. When identifying classmates, always try to indicate where they live. In fact, simply learning that a classmate moved can be an item.

7. What is notable for a newsletter? Strive for a mix of items that are professional, social, and personal.

These are legitimate themes: Changes in residence, job status or movement, promotions, awards, births, marriages, informal reunions or get-togethers among classmates, additional degrees or certifications, hobbies, homecoming plans, new elective roles, vacations or trips, organizational involvement, prizes, and publication of work.

Hypothetical examples:

A. Edward Jones was featured in a Northwest Indiana Times article focusing on the role chess played throughout his life. He recently started the ACME Pawn Pushers, a free, all-abilities chess club, in his hometown of Hammond, Ind.

B. Claire Smith is a freelance dramatist in Milwaukee. She is working on a play about the Roller Derby with The New Colony Theatre Company. She reports her day job is working as a teacher’s aide at St. Anthony’s school in West Allis, Wis.

C. Jerry Grams says he hasn’t played baseball since his senior year with the Rams, but stays involved with the sport coaching his son Jim’s Little League team in Florissant, Mo. He reports the team’s city championship last season was a thrill bigger than anything from his own playing days.

D. James Gibbons was elected 2012-2013 president of the University of Continuing & Professional Education Association in Washington, D.C. James and his wife, Mary, reside in Bethesda, Md.

E. Hope Arneson is in her 10th year teaching fifth grade in the Huntsville, Ala., school system. An avid gardener, Hope says Alabama’s hot and humid summers are good for her roses.

F. Melissa Clinton is in her 2nd year of residency in internal medicine at Rush-Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago. Last winter, Melissa took a break to join classmates Ruth Kiefer, Rose Carney, and Andrea Woods-Quigley for dinner and a House of Blues concert.
G. Bob and Joan Goode recently celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary with a trip to Yosemite National Park in California, where they hiked, biked, and camped for a week. Thanks to his Cornell science classes, Bob joked he had no trouble identifying all plants and wildlife.

8. It is OK if some items seem more significant than others (someone is appointed to a Federal judgeship vs. someone enjoys collecting stamps). This is about your classmates’ wide variety of activities, not traditional news values. We are not making judgments. Or think of it this way: You are looking for almost any reason to get names into the newsletter.

9. General news from the campus—staff changes, athletic results—is not the most appropriate information to include unless there is a specific tie to a classmate (alumni award recognition, speech, etc.) or offspring, who might be a student. Homecoming-related activities and other high profile events are an exception, too.

10. How do you gather items for newsletters if no one volunteers it?

   A. Follow up on what you hear from others and do not simply rely on hearsay. Just e-mail or call to verify, indicating you think it would make for a good newsletter item.

   B. Check with Cornell faculty or staff. A favorite professor can be a good source for what his or her former students are doing. An occasional e-mail or telephone call to the alumni office often provides good items or suggestions.

   C. Try checking for updates and activities on classmates’ Facebook pages. Any information you gather from Facebook needs to be approved by your classmate(s) before it can be printed.

   D. Get familiar with, and check, the Cornell web site. It is OK to fit and re-cycle appropriate content found there. Don’t assume that something on the school site has been read by everyone. In particular, read the Cornell E-Report and Alumni E-Newsletter for items you could re-write in some fashion to fit your style.

   E. Send a blanket e-mail to classmates asking for contributions.