

# BASIC NEWS WRITING

The ABCs of news writing are Accuracy, Brevity and Clarity.

The first and most important is accuracy -- a story can be creative and compelling, but if it contains errors, it is worthless.

Actually, it is worse than worthless; a false news story undercuts the public trust necessary for the survival of a free press. Keep in mind that the First Amendment specifically protects the press from government control so that the public can receive accurate and unbiased information. The public needs unbiased information to make intelligent choices in the voting booth. This is critical to the process of democracy in our country. If the public loses faith in the accuracy and fairness of the press, loss of faith in democracy will soon follow.

Always check numbers, spellings of names, who said what, and the other basic facts of any story. A reporter's job is to find out what is going on, then write a story that's interesting and informative. Accuracy always comes first.

Second is brevity. Each word in your story should do a job. If not, take it out. Get to the point. Say it just once. Don't be redundant. Don't say "**8 a.m. in the morning,**" since 8 a.m. *is in the morning*. Just say 8 a.m. Or say 8 in the morning. Remember the inverted pyramid style of writing. Put the most important fact in the lead. Hook the reader's attention. Explain the lead and then go on to the next most important fact in the second inverted pyramid. And then the next. Lead up to an interesting finish. Don't just stop writing when you run out of information.

Clarity starts before you write. Clarity starts with complete, competent reporting. You should understand your subject so completely that your story leaves it crystal-clear in the reader's mind. Your story should leave no questions unanswered. Avoid jargon. Explain anything that

wouldn't be obvious to the average person. The more information you gather, the more you have to sift through to determine what belongs in the lead. The more you know, the harder it is to tell it quick and make it simple. It's only easy if you don't know what you're talking about. No one said good reporting is easy.

## THE GATEKEEPER

Who decides what stories will be printed in the Monitor? Who picks the stories for the 10 O'Clock News on Channel 2? Journalists make those decisions, and when they do, they are performing their "gatekeeper" function. They decide which stories to let through the "gate" and which to toss into the trash.

Journalists decide which stories are important enough to run on page one, and which ones run inside.

But the gatekeeper function also affects the way we write our stories. The reader looks to the journalist to make sense out of a confusing world. It is the journalist's job to find out what's going on, then choose from a notebook full of scribbles only those facts necessary to give the reader a clear, concise picture of the most important events. Obviously, this process leaves some facts out of the story. You must be sure that your story includes the most important information.

But for you to make that judgment, you have to learn everything possible about your subject, and that means you will end up knowing a lot of less-important facts that will never make it into a news story. A good reporter loves to dig into a story. The rule is: "Write 10 percent of what you know."

## THE FIVE 'W's'

Every news story must cover the "Five W's:" Who, What, When, Where, Why and sometimes

How and So What? You don't have to cover all these in the lead, obviously, but usually you will address one or two in the first graph.

The rest should come soon. Make sure they are all covered somewhere in your story.

## NEWS VALUES

What is news? The cliché is, when dog bites man, it's not news. When man bites dog, that's news. Critics say, why is the newspaper always full of bad news? Because bad news is unusual, and no one wants to read about ordinary events.

**"The Monitor adviser arrived on campus this morning and found things much as he left them the night before."** Who cares? If the adviser finds a mountain lion waiting for the elevator in Building 5, then there's a story. With photos.

News usually has at least one of these elements:

- **Impact.** Impact is determined by the number of people affected, the number of boats that sink, the number of cars wrecked, etc. The more people affected, the more boats sunk, the bigger the impact of the story.

- **Proximity.** The closer your audience is to the event, the greater its news value. If a train hits a bus in Bangladesh, it may receive three column inches behind the sports section. If a train hits a bus on Niles Canyon Road, the Argus will play it on page one.

- **Timeliness.** "New" is a big part of news. If it happened just before deadline, it's bigger news than if it happened last week. Even "big" stories last only a week or so. News, like fish, is better fresh.

- **Prominence.** If it happens to the mayor, it is bigger news than if it happens to the Monitor adviser. The public cares more about celebrities than they do about people they don't know. If President Clinton goes jogging, reporters take pictures. If the Monitor adviser goes jogging, dogs bark, but no one else notices. (This is fine with the adviser.)

- **Novelty.** If an event is unusual, bizarre, the first, the last, or once-in-a-lifetime, it has more news value than if it is something that happens

all the time.

- **Conflict.** War, politics and crime are the most common news events of all. If everyone got along, there wouldn't be much news.

- **Relevance.** How does the story affect the reader? If there's no effect at all, maybe there's no news.

- **Usefulness.** How can I use this information? Home, business and leisure news sections have sprouted in newspapers in an attempt to give readers news they can really use.

- **Human interest.** A story may be weak on the other news values, but be interesting anyway. It can be as simple as an interview with a fascinating person who does unusual things. If people are talking about it, it's news, even if it doesn't meet the criteria of our other news values.

## OBJECTIVITY/FAIRNESS

The reporter's job is to find out the truth and tell it, regardless of who might be made uncomfortable. The reporter's responsibility, as implied by the First Amendment, is to serve only the reader.

The public needs unbiased information in order for democracy to succeed. That means that your stories must be unbiased. Most reporters believe pure objectivity is impossible. When you select one word over another, your judgments enter the story.

But fairness *is* possible, and fairness should be every reporter's goal. Fairness requires the reporter to recognize his or her own biases in the story, and then consciously include all relevant points of view -- even ones that the reporter doesn't like, personally.

Always look for the "other side" in any story. If someone or some institution is accused of something by a source in your story, you have an absolute obligation to contact the accused party and give them the opportunity to respond. This should be done in the first story, not in some later "response" story.

Use neutral language. Avoid exclamation points. Don't say "our college" when referring to Ohlone. Say Ohlone. Our tone should be one of the disinterested, but honest observer.

A reporter's credibility is the only guarantee the reader has of the story's accuracy. There are no policemen in the newsroom forcing reporters to be accurate. The First Amendment wouldn't allow that. If we write inaccurate or biased stories, the readers will stop trusting us. And if that happens, we all might as well go into some other field.

## THE LEAD

The lead is usually the toughest part of writing a story. The lead is the first word, sentence or paragraph of the story. Sometimes it can be two or three paragraphs.

Whatever its length, the lead has several important jobs to do. First, it must interest the reader in the rest of the story. Imagine the reader as impatient, with lots of other things he or she could be doing instead of reading your story. Imagine the reader saying, "Get to the POINT! Don't waste my time! Tell me the STORY!"

If your reader were stranded on a desert island with nothing to read but your story, you could probably get away with a vague, rambling lead. But today's reader has a BART train to catch, the kids are fighting again and the TV never stops blaring. Your story has tough competition.

Surveys have shown that most people say they get their news from TV, but many then turn to newspapers for the details behind the headlines.

Your job is to write a short, punchy, informative lead to attract readers who have grown accustomed to TV's "sound bite" journalism. But then you must supply the details, the insights, the context that TV doesn't have time for.

What are the rules for a good lead?

- Keep it short. News writing is always tight, but the lead calls for special care. Condense your story into one sentence, then one phrase, then one word. Make sure that word is near the beginning of the lead. As a general rule, no lead sentence should be longer than 10 words.

- Get to the point. What is the story about? Tell the reader in the lead. Don't say, "The city council met last night." Tell the reader what the

city council *did*. "**Business taxes were raised a whopping 30 percent on a 6-1 vote of the city council last night.**" What's the story about? Taxes. So get taxes in the lead.

- Focus on the action. Use the "active voice." Instead of saying something happened, say who did what to who. Use the action word. If nobody did anything, it may not be a news story.

- Hook the reader. Put the most important, the most interesting, the most exciting thing in the lead. A novel may take 100 pages to lead up to the climax of the story; a news story puts the climax first and then explains what led up to it.

These rules are sometimes thrown out for feature leads, or "anecdotal leads" that start with a little story that sets the scene for the point you are trying to make. But the lean, punchy news lead will work best on most stories.

## THE NUT GRAPH

Every story needs a "nut graph" that answers the question: Why am I writing this, and why do I think the reader should read it? The best way to make sure your story has a point is to state it, simply, somewhere near the top of the story. It doesn't have to say, "**The point of this story is...**" But if the story is about a budget shortfall, a good nut graph might quote a district official on whether the shortfall would force an increase in tuition.

How does the story affect the reader? That's what should be in the nut graph. If it doesn't affect the reader, maybe it shouldn't be a news story.

## QUOTES

Quotes bring a story to life. Let your sources tell the story. The reporter's voice in the story should outline the main points and set the stage for the quotes. Quotes let your sources "talk" to the reader, giving a personal impact that you can't get any other way in print.

But quotes should be special. Don't use quotes for information that can be more clearly explained in your own words.

Only direct quotes are contained inside of quotation marks. Information inside quotation

marks must be the source's exact words. But another step is needed to achieve accuracy: The words inside the quotation marks must also convey the intent of the speaker. To use the speaker's exact words to say something he or she did not mean is to take the quote *out of context*. It is a serious complaint often made by sources. At the end of the interview, always check quotes that you intend to use, and if you are unsure what the speaker meant, ask.

The proper form for using a direct quote is:

**"I won't run for president," Dan Quayle said Thursday. "But I may walk a little."**

Notice that punctuation is inside the quote marks. The quote is attributed after the first sentence.

Try to minimize the use of partial quotes:

**When asked about his presidential plans, Quayle said he "won't run."**

The first example, using the full quote, is both more interesting and more accurate. The partial quote leaves a false impression.

Indirect quotes don't have to use the speaker's exact words, but they must convey what the speaker meant. For example:

**Brett Favre Thursday denied reports that he would retire from football at the end of the season, but he said he is feeling his age.**

Indirect quotes can be used to introduce direct quotes. For instance, the next sentence in the

Favre story could be:

**"I feel every tackle of my career when I wake up in the morning," he said.**

Make sure that the reader knows who is talking. If you've quoted one person for several paragraphs, and then plan to quote someone else, use a graph of transition between the two quotes. For instance:

**Meanwhile, another city councilman had opposite views.**

**"I think the planned development stinks," said Councilman Joe Smith.**

If you end one quote and start another without tipping off the reader, confusion will result.

Remember, you may accurately report what a person said, but that person may be wrong. Verify any questionable statement by calling other sources. It's not enough to say later, "But that's what he *said*."

Keep in mind that your goal is to inform your readers. Never rely on only one source. If you find that one of your sources doesn't have the information you need, switch sources.

## TRANSITIONS

Each paragraph in your story should flow naturally from the one before it. If you have gathered enough information, and if your lead is strong enough, you may find that your story seems to "write itself," flowing naturally from



beginning to end.

But other stories seem "choppy," with the narrative taking jags and loops that could lose or confuse the reader.

Transitions smooth out those jags and make the story easier to read. Here are some guidelines:

- Make sure your story elements are presented in a logical order. The most common order is the chronological order. This happened, then this happened. For the sake of variety, you want to use the word "then" no more than once.

- Use introductions as transitions between speakers. For example:

**Ed Smith, professor of biology at Ohlone, disagrees with the idea that frozen yogurt causes split ends.**

**"That's the craziest idea I've ever heard," he said.**

- Set the scene for a new area of discussion. Don't just start in a new direction without notifying the reader. For example:

**Meanwhile, a group of Ohlone instructors have been developing another theory, one based on experiments with bananas.**

**"We think we're on to something," said Professor Harold Foote.**

## ENDINGS

Although the news writing style tries to put the most important information in the beginning, in order to draw in readers, it is also important to save something for a good ending.

A good ending gives a "rounded out" feeling to a story, especially if the end makes reference to information in the lead. For instance, in a story by a Monitor staff member about a young man trying to quit gang crime and turn his life around, the ending was:

**Valle gave a convincing "yes" when asked if he is going to graduate from college.**

**This means that he will have to see his mother cry again, although this time he will see her from a stage while he is wearing a cap and gown, holding a diploma in his hand.**

The lead had talked about how his mother

cried when he received a scholarship to attend college, shortly after he had been released from jail. The ending made a smooth reference to the lead, tying the story together.

## OTHER STUFF

**Avoid one-source stories.** Talk to as many people as possible in the time you have for reporting. Make sure you leave enough time for the writing portion of the story. How do you know when you've done "enough" reporting, talked to enough sources, read enough reports? Experience will teach you the answer, and it will be a lot more than you thought at the beginning.

**The news reporter's job has three parts:** Reporting, writing and meeting deadlines. All three are important, but news reporting couldn't exist without deadlines. The deadline is your discipline. Learn to meet deadlines, learn how to gather information, and the writing style will come eventually.

**There is a broad, clear distinction between news writing and advertising.** Use your normal objectivity and fairness when writing about advertisers, even if they push you for a "positive" story, and threaten to pull their advertising if they don't get it. Our focus is on the reader. Our job is to write truthful, fair stories, and sensible advertisers will respect that.

The same applies to our college administration. We must always give all sides of a story, and we must ask for reaction from all interested parties, but our job is to report the news objectively, regardless of who is involved.

**Make sense out of numbers.** A number is meaningless without a comparison. If enrollment grew 5 percent this fall, how does that compare to last fall? How does it compare to the average fall semester?

**Story-telling is part of being human.** We try to understand experience by turning it into a story. We use the story to remember the experience, and to share the experience with others. We learn through stories. News is a special type of story, one that presents facts without the storyteller's judgment.

## HOW TO WRITE A NEWS LEAD

1. Condense story into one or two words. Put those words as close to the beginning of the first sentence as possible without destroying the flow of the lead sentence.

2. Keep leads short — 20 to 30 words for the first sentence. Or fewer.

3. The news lead should tell the reader what the story is about and be interesting enough to draw the reader into the rest of the story. Remember that the readers won't know what the story is about until you tell them.

4. Find the action in the story. Put the action in the lead.

5. Always double-check names and numbers. Check spelling, style and grammar. Put everything in order.

6. Attribute opinions. Stick with the facts.

7. Details, description. Report first, then write. Learn all, tell 10 percent.

8. Decide which of the news values best applies to the lead of the story. Write a lead that emphasizes that news value.

9. Write in the active voice. 10.

Don't lead with a name, time or place unless that is the most interesting/important thing in the story.

## WHAT NOT TO DO IN LEADS

1. Don't make the lead too complicated. Don't load it down with too many names, figures or details. Keep the lead sentence short -- never more than 35 words.

2. Don't begin with the time, day or date, or place. Better to focus on the action, the who or what.

3. Don't begin with an empty, say-nothing expression or a generality that fails to distinguish this news from other news: *There were... In a report released today... According to...*

4. Don't begin with a question if the question is answered in the story. Question leads are cliché leads.

5. Don't begin with a direct quote if it is a full sentence. Don't start with a quote unless it is an exceptional quote.

6. Don't use a form of the verb *to be* in the lead, if you can avoid it. Use an action verb.

7. Don't overstate the news in the lead, making it more dramatic than it really is. Watch "disaster" words.

## ELEMENTS OF GOOD WRITING

1. Precision. Use the right word. Say exactly what you mean. Be specific. Avoid sexism in your writing. Use generic terms: firefighters instead of firemen, letter carriers instead of mailmen.

2. Clarity. Use simple sentences. Noun, verb. Think clearly, then write. Watch grammar and punctuation.

3. Pacing. Movement of sentences create a tone, mood for the story. Long sentences convey relaxed, slow mood. Short declarative sentences convey action, tension, movement. Use variety of sentence lengths. Use shorter sentences when writing about the more active, tense part of the story.

4. Transitions. Progress logically from point to point. Put everything in order.

5. Sensory appeal. Appeal to one or more of our five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. What does it sound like? Was the room too hot? Could you smell the cooking outside on the walkway? Did the person speak slowly and carefully, or rapidly, with confidence?

6. Using analogies. Describe it as being "like" or "as" something that is familiar to readers.

## TEN-POINT CHECKOFF LIST

1. Accuracy

2. Brevity

3. Clarity

4. Be specific

5. Get to the point

6. Put things in order

7. Get quotes right

8. Write smooth/active voice

9. Grammar/spelling/AP style

10. Five Ws/answer all the questions

## STORY ORGANIZATION

What do I want to say? Where do I put it?

1. The lead.
2. Material that explains and amplifies the lead.
3. Necessary background material
4. Secondary or less important material.
5. Descending pyramids. Narrative.
6. Transitions
7. Quotes
8. Ending.

Form versus content. Form becomes part of content. Without form, content can be lost.

Know what you want to say. Then say it. Don't begin by saying something else which you think will lead up to what you want to say. (The city council met last night)

Never start writing without a plan in mind. Even long, complicated stories can be stated in a sentence or two.

## AVOID LOGICAL FALLACIES

**Hasty generalization** — a conclusion based on insufficient or unrepresentative evidence.

*Deaths from drug overdoses in Fremont have doubled in the past three years. Therefore, more Americans than ever are dying from drug abuse.*

Many hasty generalizations contain words like all, every, always and never, when qualifiers such as most, many, usually and seldom would be more accurate. Either have enough data to verify your statements or use qualifiers.

**Non Sequitur** (Latin for “does not follow”) — a conclusion that does not follow logically from preceding statements or that is based on irrelevant data.

*Mary loves food; therefore she will be an excellent chef.*

Mary's love of food is no guarantee she will be able to cook.

**False Analogy** — falsely assumes that because two things are alike in one respect, they must be alike in others.

*If we can put a man on the moon, we should be able to find a cure for the common cold.*

Both are scientific challenges, but quite dif-

ferent.

**Either... Or Fallacy** — the suggestion that only two alternatives exist when in fact there are more.

*Either the 49ers find a new running back, or they will never make it to the Super Bowl..*

Actually, the team could make it to the Super Bowl without a new running back.

**Faulty Cause-And-Effect Reasoning** — assuming that because one event follows another, the first is the cause of the second. Like a non sequitur, it is a leap to an unjustified conclusion.

*Since Gov. Smith took office, unemployment in the state has decreased by 7 percent. Gov. Smith should be applauded for reducing unemployment.*

We must show Gov. Smith's policies caused the decrease.

**Circular Reasoning** — instead of supporting the conclusion with evidence, the writer simply restates the conclusion in different language.

*Faculty and administrators should not be permitted to come to student council meetings because student council meetings should be for students only.*

The writer has not explained the position, but has merely repeated the point.

## ACTIVE VOICE, PASSIVE VOICE

Voice is that inflection of a verb that shows whether its subject is the doer of the action indicated or is acted upon.

If the subject performs the action, the verb is in the active voice. If the subject is acted upon, the verb is in the passive voice.

Active voice is dynamic. Passive voice is static. Active voice is vigorous and emphasizes the actor. Passive voice is evasive about naming the actor.

News writing should almost always be in the active voice because news is about action and actors.

To test for the active voice, find the subject and verb in the sentence. Put the subject before the verb so that the subject takes action: *Jill hit the ball*, not: *The ball was hit by Jill*.