

# THE OER GUIDE TO MEDIA WRITING



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# The OER Guide to Media Writing

## Preface

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This book and its ancillary materials were made possible through an Illinois SCOERs subgrant awarded to Mark Poepsel, Ph.D. and Mitchell Haas, MSLIS at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). The materials were created for MC202 a high enrollment course for undergraduate students.

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Developing authors remix existing OER and create content from evidence-based sources that are aligned with the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

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[Writing for Strategic Communication Industries](#) by Jasmine Roberts

[Tools for Podcasting](#) by Jill Olmsted

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## Licensing

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## 1: Introduction



Figure 1.1: Greetings! (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Tyler Lastovich](#))

Welcome to *The OER Guide to Media Writing*! This text covers essential topics for students in introductory media writing courses. It is designed to be up-to-date, approachable, and immediately useful with writing examples and exercises included in each chapter.

The text is structured to provide essential industry knowledge and relevant academic information as it pertains to writing first, followed by writing examples and exercises, which make up the "guide" part of *The OER Guide to Media Writing*.

This text is intended for those studying writing for the news, advertising, public relations, and broadcast media industries. It is written in English, and examples focus on the U.S. media system and its stylistic norms; however, it is hoped that this text will be of use to students in introductory media writing courses around the world.

This is intended to be a modular text. Instructors should feel free to use only the chapters or chapter sections they find most useful. That said, the writing exercises are built to progress in a linear fashion. Instructors may wish to pull and use writing exercises from Chapters 1-3 early on in their course, even if they skip or rearrange those chapters.

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This text is itself a media product and only exists because of the work of professional instructors, professors, librarians, instructional designers, editors, and more at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

The previously published OER text that some sections of this book are based on is called [Writing for Strategic Communication Industries](#) by Jasmine Roberts. Any content in this text based on sections from Ms. Roberts' book is clearly labeled.

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Suggestions for improving The OER Guide to Media Writing should be sent to the corresponding author, Mark Poepse at [mpoepse@siue.edu](mailto:mpoepse@siue.edu).

## Content

This text consists of thirteen chapters:

1. Introduction, which includes the section you are reading and the first "Art of Clarity" writing exercise;
2. Accuracy in Media, which defines misinformation and disinformation and discusses how and why to avoid them;
3. Information Gathering and Interviewing, which covers researching and reporting techniques including searching for web resources, gathering useful data, and interviewing;
4. Writing Straight News for Digital and Print Media, which defines the news industry and news values in contemporary terms and covers how to apply classic story structures in ways that are relevant to today's media;
5. AP Style Essentials, which is a brief chapter focusing on key AP style elements that arise most often in newswriting and in writing news releases and other content for news audiences;
6. Writing Feature News, which covers researching and writing soft news stories with a focus on some of the most common story structures;
7. Writing for Audiovisual Media, which covers understanding the unique role of the "medium formerly known as broadcast," learning how to write for the ear, formatting basic audio and video scripts, and recognizing the power of podcasting;
8. Writing for the Public Relations Industry, which covers essential context about the history and role of public relations in societies, a brief discussion about key writing tasks in PR, and examples and exercises covering basic PR writing techniques;
9. Writing for the Advertising Industry, which briefly covers the history of advertising as a field, a section clarifying the difference between advertising and marketing, a brief discussion of key copywriting tasks as well as examples and exercises;
10. Writing for Social Media, which covers how professional media organizations might wish to approach publishing content on social networking platforms, a section on best practices writing for social media, and social media examples and exercises;
11. Building Audiences through Engagement, which covers what audience building is, how it differs from media gatekeeping, how digital media producers build networks, and strategies for audience building, including using demographics, psychographics, and basic audience analytics to develop content strategies;
12. Creating a Media Portfolio, which is a brief how-to guiding students in setting up a portfolio website to showcase their best work and to represent their personal brand to the media world; and,
13. Basic Law & Ethics of Media Writing, which includes an introductory-level discussion of key legal and ethical terms from the media industry as well as a few media ethics case studies taken from the Society of Professional Journalists Ethics Case Studies website.

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## 1.1: Art of Clarity - Sentence Structure and Parts of Speech

This is the first of a number of sections spread throughout the text that make up the writing guide portion of The OER Guide to Media Writing. Core media writing skills are covered in these brief sections included at the end of nearly every chapter. These may, as a collection, be thought of as a media writing primer called "Art of Clarity: Essential techniques for media writers producing across platforms."

In most chapters, these sections are paired with related content providing relevant knowledge and context.

The introduction covers a broad overview of the text with no instructional material. Thus, the writing exercises for this section, though straightforward in nature, are preceded by a brief introduction.

### Words as tools, sentences as thoughts clearly expressed

Words are the building blocks of language. They are how humans exchange meaning through symbols in real time and across time.

Sentences help us express complete thoughts. They are what gives stories their structure and afford for relationships between subject and action, cause and effect, and an entity and the attributes that define or describe it.

Well-crafted sentences allow us to record events, thoughts and feelings in ways that readers and listeners can clearly understand.

Sentences can provide a great deal of information efficiently. They can tell us who did what to whom with what effect and in what context.

Media writers should choose their words with care. They should include only one thought per sentence. They should select unambiguous words and should structure sentences so that both content and context are easily understood.

This is easier said than done, and so we must all always be practicing.

### Guidelines for writing clear sentences in the media industry

1. Limit sentences to 20 words, with one exception: News leads may run up to 25.
2. Keep to one thought per sentence.
3. Use the active voice when you have a choice.
4. Use figures of speech rarely, if at all.
5. Eliminate overused words.
6. Eliminate words that serve no purpose.
7. Understand the parts of speech, and use them with intent.

At all times when you are writing as a professional you must know the meaning of the words you are using, the role or purpose of each word in each sentence and the most likely interpretation of each sentence by a reasonable audience member.

The following section introduces lessons in sentence writing that apply across all types of media writing.

Please understand that good writing transcends the medium in which it is presented. Most of us know of news stories and novels that screenwriters and directors have made into great films. We know that the most intriguing or hilarious moments in a television show can be cut and spliced into compelling social media clips. Many of us have listened to podcasts that draw on a variety of other media sources to tell their tales. At the root of all of these meaningful media experiences (and products) is good, clear writing.

### Examples

The following examples illustrate how to put these guidelines into practice. The idea is to learn to write simple sentences for media audiences.

1. This is an example of cutting a long sentence from more than 40 words to one with fewer than 20 words. You should note that a sentence can be grammatically correct but still too long for most media writing purposes.

TOO LONG: My morning routine is like most people's because I do basic things like get out of bed, get a drink of water, put my glasses on, head to the kitchen to make coffee, and sit down with my phone at the kitchen table.

BETTER: My morning routine is to get out of bed, drink some water, put on my glasses, make coffee and look at my phone.

The second version conveys the same ideas in about half the words.

Please note that the removal of the Oxford comma in the example above is purposeful. In media writing, the most accepted style is to eliminate the Oxford comma, except when deleting it makes a sentence confusing, because it takes up space and is in most cases unnecessary.

The limit of 20 words is important whether you are writing news, broadcast copy, an advertisement or news release.

When writing lead sentences for news, however, the cap is extended to 25 words because leads usually convey the key Who, What, When, and Where of a story.

2. The following is an example of how you might unpack two ideas crammed into one sentence.

TOO MANY IDEAS: He actually loved white bread, but he drove a Mustang.

BETTER: He loved white bread, but he was not boring. He sped around town in a Mustang at all hours.

Here, the second example is longer, but the ideas and how they are connected are conveyed more clearly.

3. The following example demonstrates why it is better to use the active voice. In grammar, "voice" refers to whether the subject is acting on something or being acted upon.

PASSIVE, WEAK: He was hit in the jaw by the bouncer's right fist.

BETTER: The bouncer hit him in the jaw with a right jab.

The better example depicts a person actively punching someone else. It is clear from the start of the sentence who punched whom. If you visualize the PASSIVE, WEAK example, it is not clear until the end of the sentence that a punch was thrown.

4. The following example uses too many figures of speech.

UNNECESSARY METAPHOR: She is a unicorn with great typing skills, an understanding of Microsoft Excel, and the ability to paint fantastic murals.

BETTER: She has all the skills we are looking for. She types fast, knows Excel and can paint fantastic murals.

The mental image of a unicorn is unnecessary in the example sentence. It does nothing to add to the reader's understanding.

5. The following is an example of a sentence that includes overused or "dead" words. These words might once have described rare or exceptional things, but their overuse has rendered them stale, boring.

OVERUSED WORDS: Stan loved the awesome flavors in citrus soft drinks.

BETTER: Stan loved crisp and tart citrus soft drinks.

In this case "awesome" does not mean that something inspires awe. Instead, it is a tired replacement for "great" or "distinctive." Replacing the generic term with descriptive words works.

6. The next example indicates sentences with words that should not be replaced but instead should simply be cut.

EXTRANEIOUS WORDS: Terra Thompson found her new roommate to be needlessly loud and annoyingly disgusting.

BETTER: Terra Thompson found her new roommate to be disgusting and loud.

In media writing, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases are often the first to go. Unless they are essential, cut them.

7. If you read the previous example regarding someone being "needlessly loud" and "annoyingly disgusting" and did not immediately recognize which words were adverbs and which were adjectives, you would not be so different from many students in introductory media writing courses, but it is essential that you learn all eight common parts of speech immediately.

Just as carpenters and artists need to know the materials they are working with, writers need to know parts of speech. These are the materials we use to construct sentences.

The eight parts of speech are,

- noun
- pronoun
- adjective
- verb
- adverb
- preposition

- conjunction
- interjection

These terms classify words based on what they do in a sentence.

### Noun

A noun is a word that names a person, place, thing, or idea. Nouns can be specific, including proper nouns such as "Paris," or general, including common nouns like "city." Other examples include "dog," "happiness," and "computer."

### Pronoun

A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun to avoid repetition and to simplify sentences and paragraphs. Examples include "he," "she," "it," "they," and "who." For instance, in "Lisa forgot her book," "her" is a pronoun that references "Lisa."

### Adjective

An adjective is a word that describes or modifies a noun or pronoun. It provides details about qualities such as size, color, shape, quantity, and/or condition. For example, in the phrase "a blue car," "blue" describes the car.

### Verb

A verb is a word that expresses an action, occurrence, or state of being. Verbs deliver the action in sentences. They indicate what the subject does, experiences, or feels. Examples are "run," "is," and "believe."

### Adverb

An adverb modifies a verb, adjective, or another adverb, often providing information about how, when, where, or to what extent an action happened. For instance, in "She walked briskly," "briskly" indicates that she walked in a quick and focused way.

### Preposition

A preposition typically indicates location, direction, or time. Examples include "in," "at," "on," and "under." For instance, "The book is on the table" uses "on" to show location.

### Conjunction

A conjunction connects words, phrases, or clauses within a sentence. Conjunctions help to show the relationship between parts. Common conjunctions are "and," "but," "or," and "because." For example, "I wanted to go outside, but it was raining."

### Interjection

An interjection is a word or phrase that expresses a strong emotion or reaction. Interjections are often punctuated by an exclamation mark. Interjections usually stand alone and are set off from sentences. Examples include "Wow!" "Oops," "Hey!" and "Omigosh." (The British English pronunciation of "omigosh" is delightful.)

When you understand a word's part of speech, you know what it is capable of and how to make the best use of every word you know and learn.

#### Art of Clarity Activity - Sentences and Parts of Speech

This activity has two parts. The purpose of the first part is to practice writing clear sentences. The purpose of the second is to practice recognizing parts of speech.

#### Writing clear sentences

1. Cut the following sentence down to 20 words or fewer.

The fluffy, brown Lagotto Romagnolo ran quickly across the park until he reached a group of dogs, and then he playfully hopped around two of the larger dogs in a circle until he was tuckered out.

2. Separate the following compound sentence into two sentences.

Jamie rushed to finish cleaning up the counter before it was time to clock out, and he took the trash to the back lot while watching for his ride.

3. Change the passive voice to the active voice.

Charlie was hit in the head with a bowling trophy thrown by his brother.

4. Eliminate the figures of speech from this sentence.

My former boss said I was so slow that I was a box of fries short of a value meal.

5. Eliminate or replace the overused words.

Cheryl Lynn said it was awesome how nice her cousin in Chicago with the pretty hair was.

6. Eliminate the unnecessary adjectives and adverbs.

When Thomas saw his daughter frolicking playfully in the watery ocean waves, he smiled happily.

### Identifying parts of speech

1. Identify the nouns in the following sentence, and label them as proper nouns or common nouns.

Félix Trinidad Hernández from Veracruz, Mexico got a tattoo on his arm of sprinter Sha'Carri Richardson to honor her comeback after she made the 2024 U.S. Olympic Team.

2. Identify the pronouns in the following passage.

Sharita developed her baking skills in culinary school. She practiced them week in and week out before she took a job at Chez Claudette.

3. Identify the adjectives in the following sentence.

Stella made a quick video showing off Friday's haul featuring a pair of classic loafers, a green T-shirt and a flowy skirt.

4. Identify the verb in the following sentence.

Diving under the stairs, Carrie Anne hid from the charging monster.

5. Identify the adverbs in the following sentence.

Andrea quickly downed half of a delicately seasoned rotisserie chicken.

6. Identify the prepositional phrase in the following sentence.

Harry dropped the screwdriver, and it rolled under the workbench.

7. Identify the conjunction in the following passage.

Emma watched one of her favorite streaming shows, and she scrolled through multiple social media feeds at the same time.

8. Identify the interjection in the following sentence.

"What?! Get off the game!" yelled Samuel.

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## 2: Accuracy in Media



Figure 2.1: A man holding a burning newspaper. (Unsplash free-to-use license, [Marek Pospíšil](#))

### Learning Objectives

- Define misinformation vs. disinformation
- Recognize the value of verified information
- Develop strategies for verifying information and demonstrating verification
- Consider the social impact of misinformation and disinformation

Accuracy in media is essential as it relates to trust, and trust relates to short-term and long-term audience building. If you or your organization are not known to be truthful, your reputation will likely suffer, which can drive away audiences. Losing your audience can have serious financial implications, but there are social implications as well, particularly in journalism. When people stop trusting the news, they stop believing in each other's ability to make informed political decisions.

This chapter addresses why accuracy matters. It defines misinformation and disinformation as threats to accuracy. It helps media writing students to develop strategies for verifying information and demonstrating to audiences what sets their fact checking skills apart from those who claim to have "done their research" but who have actually gone down a social media misinformation [rabbit hole](#).

Having a commitment to truth telling is central to most mass media professions. Most professional organizations address accuracy, honesty, or truth telling among their core ethical values. Professional journalists, for example, put accuracy atop their list of professional values. The [Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics](#) lists as its first foundational principal: "Seek Truth and Report It."

Professional journalists and news organizations live and die by their reputation. [Freedom of the press is Constitutionally protected](#) and is related to the idea that the foundation of a democratic society is that well-informed citizens have the power to elect leaders and then to demand that they act in the best interests of their constituents. Accuracy in the news media is foundational to the business model. From a broader perspective, it is foundational for democratic societies.

Advertising and public relations (PR) professionals also list accuracy high in their codes of ethics. The American Marketing Association lists "Honesty" as its [top ethical value](#). The American Advertising Federation puts honesty second in [its code of conduct](#) behind only "To act in the best interests of...the organization." The Public Relations Society of America puts honesty just after advocacy in its [list of professional values](#) as well. Across the spectrum of mass media professions, honesty is seen as an essential value.

And yet, the American media, in a general sense, are experiencing historically [low levels of public trust](#). Much of this is related to efforts to sow partisan mistrust in mainstream news media. Media professionals have to acknowledge that there are forces working

to undermine trust, and they also have to acknowledge that research suggests many media consumers [do not connect their personal media use habits with a "desire to be informed."](#)

This means everyone in the mass media industry including journalists, advertising professionals, public relations representatives, etc., must persuade audiences not only to trust that what they are hearing and reading is accurate but also to care about being informed in the first place.

Declining trust in media is almost universally accepted as negative for the industry. Prioritizing values other than advocacy for truth is not likely to sustain the various media industries in the long term.

While there is always room to argue about which facts to prioritize and whose opinions should carry the most weight, opinions in a rational society should be based on facts and a good faith effort to learn and share truth. Democracies claim to operate on the foundation that members of the public can be informed, that they wish to be informed, and that they will make reasonable arguments for their preferences based on good information when it is made available.

In other words, democracy does not promise to put an end to disagreements. Instead it proposes a system where decisions are made based on reason, and the base of reason is accurate information. The fact that it is more difficult to locate truth in an age of massive electronic flows of information, misinformation, and disinformation does not mean it is acceptable to give up on accuracy. It only means that media professionals need to do the necessary work to be informed, and they need to be prepared to advocate for accuracy more than ever.

This chapter helps readers define misinformation and disinformation in the context of accuracy not only in news but across media professions. It then goes into a deeper explanation of the value of verified information in digital media marketplaces. It proposes strategies for verifying information and transparently demonstrating to others that one's assertions are backed by facts.

Finally, this chapter discusses the threats posed by misinformation and disinformation to democracy and social order. While media professionals are not solely responsible for maintaining a functioning society, they play an essential part.

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## 2.1: Defining Misinformation and Disinformation



Figure 2.1.1: I can't believe we're marching for facts! - Fridays For Future Demonstration; Bonn, Germany, 2021-03-19 (Unsplash free-to-use license, [Mika Baumeister](#))

Most religions and professional organizations have clearly defined codes of ethics that either explicitly forbid or at least discourage telling lies. It is generally agreed upon in human civilization that being untruthful is a negative character trait that may diminish an individual's or organization's reputation.

Whether inaccurate information is shared because of ineptitude or out of malicious intent, it is up to all of us who live in media ecosystems where vast flows of information pass by us every day to be wary. A suggested mantra for our times: Media consumers beware; media professionals be vigilant.

What makes misinformation and disinformation so concerning that they warrant a prime spot as the first full chapter in this text? They are having an [effect on global politics](#). The World Economic Forum, which if anything is pro-business and relatively technocratic, lists misinformation and disinformation [among its top threats in 2025](#) because they contribute to global instability. This is troubling for people who take seriously the responsibility of communicating with mass audiences.

In a media field where most industries have largely transitioned from business models based on selling physical copies of content to business models related to providing digital content and information services, being consistently reliable is essential. There is a glut of content in digital spaces but not a glut of factual, verified and easily verifiable information. Providing reliably accurate information in this environment is a value-added service, which is to say the work has market value on top of its social value.

These types of services translate to jobs or job functions. Journalists, for example, may be expected not just to file reliable news stories but to serve as real-time fact checkers, helping people separate fact from fiction on social media platforms. In an age of the burgeoning influence of artificial intelligence (AI), fact checking is expanding. The threat of AI fakery is so great, [governments and tech companies have issued warnings](#) during elections. Journalists and other professional fact checkers have had to broaden their scope from analyzing mostly written text to analyzing the accuracy of texts, photos, videos, and voices.

More detailed discussions of the social and political implications of misinformation and disinformation as well as the economic opportunities presented by the need for human information verification are shared in the last sections of this chapter.

### Definitions

First, readers need crystal clear definitions of accuracy, misinformation, and disinformation.

#### Definition: Accuracy

**Accuracy** is a condition or quality of information that it is correct and as precise as possible.

Providing accurate information and demonstrating that it is accurate are different tasks, but above all else media professionals should be accurate in their reporting, advertising, and advocacy. Being accurate in media writing can be as basic as spelling an

interview subject's name correctly or accurately estimating the size of a crowd at a local pancake breakfast. It can also involve covering complex scientific studies without inaccurately summing up the results.

At a basic level, communicating accurately means keeping straight the facts and figures, names and dates, addresses, and place names in news reports, avoiding making false claims in advertisements, and presenting accurate and truthful, though often strategically prioritized, information in public relations declarations. Basic accuracy is constantly expected of media writing professionals.

This text argues, though, that it is not enough to be accurate. In an environment where misinformation and disinformation abound, mass media professionals also have to be prepared to attack both, particularly online.

[Scholars have been concerned](#) about the veracity of information on the internet since the early days of mainstream internet adoption, i.e. the early days of [consumer dial-up](#). If future media professionals are going to go to battle to preserve and promote factual information in chaotic networked information spaces, they need to know the enemy.

#### Definition: Misinformation

**Misinformation** is partially or completely incorrect information.

Misinformation can be created by accident or by negligence, yet [it can still have negative effects](#). Misinformation is known to be spread rapidly and [not just by bots](#). The prefix "mis" simply means "wrong." Sharing wrong information is a professional failure. Although, it is a failure that in the age of social media and AI-generated content, is incredibly easy to do. Often, the more compelling a piece of misinformation is, the more likely it is to be spread.

#### Story Time

An example of misinformation reaching millions of audience members is when National Public Radio reported that former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was killed in a mass shooting at a community event in Tucson, Arizona in January of 2011. The gunman injured Giffords and 18 others, but she was not killed. The journalists covering this story were misinformed, and yet they [shared the inaccurate news with followers on the radio, on social media, and on a news blog](#). The author of this text personally knew some of the journalists involved in this unfortunate situation, and they made the error in good faith. They attempted to double-source the information, but their sources were wrong. It was widely assumed Congresswoman Giffords would die from her critical wounds, and yet she did not. She recovered over time and is now a gun control advocate married to the U.S. Senator from Arizona, Mark Kelly. Misinformation that fits our assumptions often offers a tantalizing invitation to make an [embarrassing, if not necessarily career ending, public error](#).

Though both can be harmful, disinformation is more sinister than misinformation.

#### Definition: Disinformation

**Disinformation** is false information purposefully created and disseminated to mislead audiences.

Media professionals, whether they work in journalism, advertising, PR, or a related field, must be on the lookout for disinformation. Organized, well-funded, targeted, and often successful disinformation campaigns on social media are now a regular [aspect of politics in all sorts of systems](#), including democracies, authoritarian states, and states in chaos, that is, nations with active, widespread warfare happening within their borders.

Disinformation campaigns are often masked as regular social media posts from concerned, politically active citizens. Disinformation may be privately funded, funded by political groups, or even [funded by one nation as a means of attacking another](#), although the study cited in the previous paragraph concerns only internal disinformation campaigns.

#### [Types of misinformation and disinformation](#)

Reporters Without Borders (RWB) has a [comprehensive breakdown of types of disinformation](#). The list is included here in its entirety. Note how disinformation, like many forms of lying, has some basis in fact but with manipulations applied or false information added in order to mislead.

## Seven "Sins" of Disinformation

The information in this box is quoted from Reporters Sans Frontières, a.k.a. [Reporters Without Borders](#) with minor edits for style.

The following are ranked in order of harmfulness:

- 1. Fabricated content:** entirely false news content, designed to deceive and do harm. While the world may have laughed after an AI-generated image of [former] Pope Francis wearing a Balenciaga coat [went viral](#) in 2023, influential figures are often at the centre of more serious instances of fabricated content, such as [false reports](#) in 2016 that the Pope had endorsed Donald Trump's candidacy in the U.S. presidential election.
- 2. Manipulated content:** genuine information or imagery that is manipulated to deceive the reader. Edited images can spread especially quickly: for example, a [photoshopped picture](#) of a pro-Beijing Hong Kong politician carrying an American flag surrounded by pro-democracy protesters sparked backlash from his supporters.
- 3. Imposter content:** genuine sources that are impersonated to fool the reader and/or discredit the supposed source. This tactic was used during the 2017 Kenyan elections, when videos and reports [mimicking well-known international news outlets](#) such as CNN and the BBC shared false information, including inaccurate polling data.
- 4. False context:** genuine content shared with false contextual information, such as video clips that showed [former] U.S. President Biden [stating he "sold a lot of state secrets"](#) without indicating that the remark was a joke. False context also includes sharing old content under the guise of new information, like an outdated South African [weather report](#) warning of low temperatures and snowfall that has repeatedly been circulated as if it was current.
- 5. Misleading content:** misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual in a certain narrative. For instance, some news articles have misrepresented scientific data related to COVID-19, such as a report that used a study showing vaccines had a minimal impact on overall mortality to [discredit their efficacy](#) against the coronavirus, when the actual purpose of the study was to examine whether vaccines had any effect on non-COVID-related causes of death.
- 6. False connection:** headlines, visuals, and captions that contradict or do not support the news content. Sometimes, even mainstream media outlets use this tactic, such as [reports that make connections between consuming certain foods and longer life, shorter life, or both!](#)
- 7. Satire or parody:** has no intention to cause harm, but has the potential to fool the reader who does not check references. For example, popular American satire website *The Onion*, well-known for its political parodies, has still occasionally had its claims [mistaken for truth](#).

Source: [RSF Resource for Journalists' Safety](#)

Disinformation is sophisticated. Often, only parts of images or portions of information are altered. Faking entire reputable news sites and filling the false pages with disinformation is also a common tactic.

[Often, social media accounts made to spread disinformation will build a following by sharing innocuous information and then be "activated" to take part in disinformation campaigns.](#)

It takes time and resources to create a disinformation campaign. A good question for media professionals to consider is why individuals or nations might wish to invest precious resources in this type of communication. What is their expected return?

Now that you can differentiate misinformation from disinformation, perhaps you noticed that some of the examples in the RWB list above might more accurately be called misinformation. It is likely that RWB has decided not to make the distinction because both types of information are misleading and worth watching out for.

While it can be difficult to uncover and explain the intent behind publishing false information, it can and should be called out, critiqued, and countered when feasible.

## Writing Prompts

1. Identify which of the seven "sins" listed above are truly disinformation and which would more accurately be defined as misinformation, according to the definitions used in this chapter. Briefly explain each choice.

2. In three paragraphs or less, explain why an individual or a nation might spend their resources to carry out a disinformation campaign. What do you think they expect to be their "return on investment?"

### What you can do

Future media professionals are encouraged to choose their battles when combating disinformation and misinformation online. The adage, "Don't feed the trolls," holds true much of the time. Some false statements are made simply to get a rise out of others on social media or in comments sections. These can often be left alone rather than to fan the flames of disinformation.

The job is not to correct everyone who is [wrong on the internet](#). Rather, the job is to identify when mass audiences are being misinformed or in danger of being misinformed and to communicate clearly the most accurate possible version of events, complete with evidence and a strategy for robustly promoting the accurate story. One who has the skills to verify and clarify information but no resources to disseminate an accurate story is at risk of toiling in futility.

Media organizations should boost accurate posts, and professional communicators should form networks of their own if they are to reach mass audiences in ways that compete with professional disinformation campaigns.

Above all, media writers are encouraged to "first do no harm" by not adding to the mis/disinformation phenomenon themselves. Share with caution or be left apologizing.

In the future, AI-generated influencers, videos, articles, photos etc., will likely make misinformation and disinformation even more enticing to share and even easier to disseminate. Part of joining the fight for accuracy is to anticipate disinformation strategies and common misinformation mishaps and to be skeptical of information that looks too good *not* to share.

One constant of successful disinformation and widespread misinformation is that the information appears to be interesting. Most mass communication professionals strive to create and amplify content that audiences will care about. Thus, professionals will always be at risk of sharing inaccurate information. Misinformation and disinformation work because they fill an attention-getting need. Media professionals need to actively practice when to share and when not to share information they find online.

The best policy for media professionals, and for consumers for that matter, is to develop and nurture a healthy skepticism about all information and to practice multiple types of checks before sharing information. It is better to be accurate than to be one of the first to share potentially poisonous information.

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## 2.2: The value of accurate information



Figure 2.2.1: Photo illustration of data accuracy. (Unsplash free-to-use license, [Scott Graham](#))

Although it is difficult to place a dollar value on accurate information, it is easy to think of times where inaccurate information is costly with direct financial impacts. This section addresses the value of accuracy in media both by showing examples of when it is costly to be wrong and by describing in a general sense the financial benefits of being accurate. Although protecting your reputation and serving factual information to mass audiences in a democracy are reasons enough to strive to be accurate, failing to do so can also directly affect the bottom line.

Section 2.4 deals with the broader impacts of misinformation and disinformation on societies.

### Costs of inaccuracy

Some of the most concrete examples of the costs of relying on inaccurate information come from outside the media industry. Most tech startups, for example, gather user data and [apply what they learn to determine how to continue to improve](#) their products and services. They use this information before going to market and when fighting for survival and market position. If a tech company suffers data loss, has gaps in its data collection, or receives misleading data from a supplier, it could threaten the business by influencing leaders to make bad decisions.

Individual investors also rely on accurate information to make decisions about where and when to move their money. Acting on bad information can cost an investor millions. Likewise, consumers rely on accurate information when making purchases. If an individual or a business finds they have been lied to when making a purchase, they may not only lose faith in a product, brand or service, they may sue.

An example of the direct costs of misinformation comes from the social media platform X, a.k.a. Twitter. Following Elon Musk's takeover of the company and his decision to ease content moderation regulations, the platform experienced a marked rise in misinformation, disinformation, antisemitism, and hate speech. In the fall of 2023, dozens of major advertising buying firms [paused or even vowed to stop using X](#) to promote their businesses out of concerns that their promotional content might run alongside false and/or hateful content. One estimate suggested [X might have lost about \\$75 million worth of advertising](#) during the holiday season of 2023 alone.

Through the first half of 2025, advertising on X began to rebound with some advertisers [thought to be attempting to buy favor with the Trump Administration via Musk's platform](#). However, the relationship between Musk and the Trump Administration is [on shaky ground at best](#). Advertisers must still be wary of presenting persuasive messages on any problematic platform. Even with the revenue increases of 2025, X is taking in about half of what it did in 2021 (\$2.26 billion, projected in 2025, as opposed to \$4.46 billion in 2021, per [Gizmodo](#)).

### Defamation

Another example of direct losses related to false information came in the defamation lawsuit brought by Dominion Voting Systems against Fox News. Fox settled the lawsuit in April of 2023 and agreed to pay out \$787.5 million. [In the settlement, Fox admitted it made false claims](#) about Dominion but stopped short of apologizing. Fox News had repeated false conspiracy theories about Dominion changing votes in the 2020 presidential election in favor of Joe Biden. Superior Court Judge Eric Davis stated in the ruling, "The evidence developed in this civil proceeding demonstrates that it is CRYSTAL clear that none of the Statements relating to Dominion about the 2020 election are true (orig. emphasis). Therefore, the Court will grant summary judgment in favor of Dominion on the element of falsity" (Source: [DominionVoting.com](#)).

## Reputation

Although a dollar amount loss is difficult to enumerate, the New York Times (NYT) lost credibility, likely significant advertising revenue, and two top editors lost their jobs, after NYT reporter Jayson Blair [was found in 2003 to have been plagiarizing news stories for years](#). Blair lifted quotes from other news organizations, made up details and quotes for stories, and claimed to be reporting from the field when he was, in fact, [in his apartment or in the NYT building](#). Blair has [apologized and acknowledged character flaws](#) that, in addition to bipolar disorder and substance abuse, contributed to his failures to report accurate news.

The scandal not only hurt the NYT, it gave ammunition to those who opposed affirmative action hiring in media organizations, even though these programs are relatively recent and relatively limited attempts to countervail [historically inequitable hiring practices for people of color and women in major news outlets](#). The scandal likely gave some news organizations an excuse to ease off of affirmative action practices, and racial as well as gender-based [inequities persist](#).

In general, the Jayson Blair scandal hurt the credibility of the U.S. news media because it happened at one of the most popular and most trusted news organizations in the country. The ramifications of individual acts of plagiarism coupled with a lack of editorial oversight can be devastating and take decades to recover from.

### Quick Writing Exercise

Write 4-5 sentences about a time when a media company or an influencer lost your trust because they published inaccurate information. Answer the following questions:

- What was the name of the media company or influencer?
- What was the information they got wrong?
- Does it appear that this was a purposeful or negligent release of false information?
- How did you feel when you found out the information was bad?
- Did the revelation that this media company or influencer was wrong cause you to stop following them, viewing their posts, or stop otherwise engaging with their content?
- What are or what might be the long-term effects of this failure to deliver accurate information?

Thus far, this discussion has demonstrated that individuals, media companies, and tech businesses may suffer significant losses after sharing or trusting inaccurate information, but there are potential macroeconomic effects as well. National and global marketplaces [risk becoming destabilized](#) if investors and companies no longer believe they have accurate or adequate information to act upon.

### Example: Climate Change

As large scale global investors find themselves dealing with the impacts of climate change more and more, "G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors" put together a task force to recommend what types of disclosures companies should make about how climate change is likely to affect their bottom line. The nature of this task force is based on the idea that markets need accurate information to function: "One of the essential functions of financial markets is to price risk to support informed, efficient capital-allocation decisions. To carry out this function, financial markets need accurate and timely disclosure from companies."

The key to that quote is the phrase "to price risk," which means that investors need to be able to discount stocks that might be hurt by climate change and to anticipate potential increases in value for companies that might, one way or another, benefit from changing climates. The group made several suggestions for the [types of disclosures that governments might require from companies](#).

What this means for media writers is this: If those at the highest levels of finance recognize that accuracy is essential for functioning global markets, it stands to reason that accuracy (about all sorts of topics, including but not limited to climate change) is also important in smaller markets, public relations content, advertisements and various other influencer-generated and even AI-generated products in the "marketplace of ideas" that is our global news and information ecosystem.

In fact, in advertising and [integrated marketing](#), inaccuracy may be illegal. False advertising is against the law. If a brand or business is found to be making false claims, [it may be forced to pull its ads and face fines](#). Being inaccurate in advertising may fit

[the legal definition of deception](#). As the previous link indicates, deceptions in product descriptions, pricing, measurements, product comparisons, guarantees and warranties might carry civil and/or criminal punishment, depending on state laws.

During a crisis, if a brand or public relations firm lies to the public and is caught, it can [damage the brand's long-term reputation and lead to lawsuits](#).

#### Story time: The BP Oil Spill

In 2010, British Petroleum (BP) lost an oil drilling rig called the Deepwater Horizon in [an explosion that killed 11 people and sent 4 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico over an 87-day period](#). That the gusher was unstoppable for nearly three months was public knowledge, but the amount of oil being lost to the company and spewing into the gulf was not known at the time. BP famously made [multiple grave PR errors](#) during the early days of the oil spill, but what got the company into legal trouble for lying was hiding the true extent of the spill. BP paid U.S. investors \$175 million for publicizing that false information. In the context of the [more than \\$70 billion](#) BP spent on health, business, and environmental settlements, as well as other costs, \$175 million may seem like a drop in the bucket, this is one cost that after the oil spill had begun was still completely in BP's control. The long-term environmental effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill are still being felt. (This text was first published in 2024). So are the long-term effects of BP's public relations errors on the brand's value, market position, and level of public trust.

### Highlighting accuracy in news

In the news business, trust, and reliability are central to the brand. Consumers often hold news organizations to higher standards than PR firms and advertisers, who are expected to advocate for corporate interests, private companies, brands, etc.

There are two ways to place economic value on accuracy in news. The first has already been stated: Accuracy contributes to trust, and trust can help build and sustain news audiences. Fact checking news sites and services have also found value in providing nonpartisan, trustworthy reviews of claims made in the news and on social media.

When news organizations had near monopoly dominance over the delivery of daily information to audiences in cities around the world, they often had large staffs, and it was not uncommon for there to be three, four, or more layers of editorial review for popular and/or potentially controversial news stories. Now, though, journalists are often tasked with serving as their own copy editors to make sure basic facts are correct and news editors are often stretched thin. Accuracy is as important as ever, however news organizations have fewer resources to devote to ensuring it.

### The rise of fact checking as a business model

There appear to be business opportunities in working to cover accuracy gaps, particularly because conspiracy theories abound in social media spaces and are [sometimes repeated in mainstream media outlets](#). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a massive influx of misinformation. The study linked previously, called the phenomenon an "infodemic," and found that "media mentions of U.S. President Donald Trump within the context of COVID-19 misinformation made up by far the largest share of the infodemic." If political leaders are determined to spread disinformation, mass media outlets can find themselves in a conundrum. As a matter of historical practice, it is in their nature to share with the general public what leaders are saying, but with some leaders it is impossible to repeat what is said without repeating misinformation.

One solution might be to report what politicians say and to follow with clarifications from well-researched third party fact checkers. If news organizations hesitate to contradict political leaders for fear of being accused of being biased, reliable and trusted fact checkers might serve a vital role in correcting the record.

Poynter.org conducts an annual review of fact checking websites and finds a mix of nonprofit and for-profit [fact checkers in the global marketplace](#). Although some fact checking services are profitable, most are fighting three battles. First, they must do the challenging work of fact checking in an information ecosystem where information moves at a continuous, breakneck pace. Second, they face backlash from those who would rather they did not combat misinformation. Third, they are constantly seeking funding sources as the business models for fact checking are still being tested.

The most recent "State of Fact Checkers" report from Poynter noted that fact checkers are already employing AI to assist with their work, and they plan to continue to use it in a "limited role" in the future, which might increase these services' ability to manage large flows of information meaningfully. But just as AI adds to their capabilities, it presents a host of new challenges for fact checking around the world.

Websites such as FactCheck.org clearly identify the processes they use to check information. FactCheck mostly focuses on political news, but other successful fact checking services seem to follow similar guidelines.

#### The Fact Check Process

1. Select a topic.
2. Conduct research to analyze a claim and supporting information.
3. Write a fact check report.
4. Put the report through multiple rounds of editing.
5. Have a robust system in place for making corrections or retractions, if necessary.

Source: FactCheck.org, "[Our Process](#)"

As news organizations work to maintain audience levels that can sustain local and regional news in a digital information ecosystem, they continue to place accuracy atop their list of key features, but business models for providing accurate information will not be limited to news organizations alone.

Newswriters and news organizations that fail to provide clear, accurate information break their readers' trust and fail to serve their core function in society. This is not to say that misinformation will necessarily chase away audiences. There may well be mass audiences for false information in support of one ideology or another, but in the long run it is easy to demonstrate that these outlets are lying.

Building audiences by telling people only what they want to hear is an ethical and professional failure for media writers in a democracy. Constitutionally, it is a duty to provide citizens with factual information they can use to make reasonable decisions.

The next two sections cover strategies for verifying information and a brief discussion of the social implications of misinformation and disinformation.

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## 2.3: Accuracy strategies



Figure 2.3.1: A man working on a computer and talking on a mobile phone. (Unsplash free-to-use license, [Vitaly Gariev](#))

Media writers in every branch of the industry not only have to publish accurate information, they must be prepared to demonstrate to skeptical audiences where their information comes from and why it is as accurate as can be. Transparency is essential for news practice but may be expected of all types of media professionals particularly when engaging with audiences on social media.

### Definition: Transparency

Transparency in the mass media industry refers to professional openness regarding the creation and dissemination of content. A transparent media writer consistently demonstrates where their information comes from and what their personal or organizational biases are when it comes to prioritizing and framing information. Though not prized in aspects of the mass media industry that must protect trade secrets, in news and in many social media influencer roles, transparency is a key means for writers to demonstrate that they and the information they publish are trustworthy.

Media consumers are being taught rightly to question what they read and see in the mass media and on social media. Most members of the public have been burned by misinformation and disinformation in the past. Media consumers look for authenticity, openness, and up-front acknowledgement of biases where relevant. Given recent technological advances, consumers are on the lookout for content generated by AI as well.

Accuracy in professional practice is about consistency and about being as transparent as you can be, depending on your industry role. A reputation for accuracy is built over time as professionals consistently publish well-supported, factual information. Being transparent in media writing means documenting and demonstrating your process for gathering information, crafting messages, and making dissemination choices. It means demonstrating to audiences *how* the writer knows whatever it is they claim to know.

Media writers should refrain from publishing conjecture. They should publish only what they reasonably believe to be true and only what they can support with multiple factual sources. Media writers should be honest and open. They should clearly communicate how certain they are about specific claims.

Let the philosophers argue if there is such a thing as absolute truth. For the sake of publishing useful information for mass audiences, the standard should be to publish only information that is reasonably well supported by multiple sources that are complete, accurate, and as precise as possible at the time of publishing.

Different media outlets will set their own expectations for publication standards and for how they deal with corrections if and when they are needed. In news, many professional organizations change story webpages when corrections are needed but include notes at the bottom of the article indicating that edits were made and what those edits were. This is essential for keeping newswriters and editors accountable.

### Advocacy versus accuracy

It is acknowledged that in many cases media audiences prefer writers and content that advocates for their preferred point of view rather than seeking outlets with strict standards of accuracy. Audience trust and engagement are not always directly linked to accuracy. Sometimes, advocates for a certain point of view would prefer to ignore or change facts to better fit their version of events. In the United States, getting [different versions of events from opposing partisan media outlets predates the nation's independence](#). Advocacy and accuracy are often at odds in contemporary mass media and social media.

This text argues that advocates must be held to basic standards of accuracy just like anyone else. The long-term health of societies demands that opinions be based on facts, not the other way around.

This text aims to teach ethical professional practices for sustainable media writing careers that contribute to media systems citizens can rely on. As demonstrated earlier, the ethical consensus across the media industry is that professionals should tell the truth. The best practices and guidelines outlined in the rest of this section serve that aim and address accuracy in news, advertising, and public affairs.

#### It's a skill issue

Those who [study and promote best practices](#) for producing trustworthy news have the following guidelines:

- **Publishers must take reasonable steps to ensure accuracy.**
- **Publishers must distinguish clearly between statements of fact and opinion.**
- **Whilst free to be partisan, publishers must not misrepresent or distort the facts.**
- **Publishers must correct any significant inaccuracy with prominence equal to the original article at the earliest opportunity.**

Source: [IMPRESS](#), independent press monitoring

#### Unpacking best practices

1. Steps to ensure accuracy include finding knowledgeable sources with first-hand information, double-sourcing factual claims with sources that are independent of each other — including institutional and non-institutional sources when possible. Further steps include taking notes of important details for every claim of fact; where criminal or ethical allegations are made, naming the source of the allegation(s) when possible; and providing information that corroborates the claim in the published report. These pointers are based on guidance from the [Media Helping Media](#) website (CCBY, NC, SA), a free training resource for journalists and news managers.
2. Distinguishing between statements of fact and opinion seems straightforward enough, but some media organizations attempt to blur the lines. If you find you are being instructed to present opinions as though they were facts, you should seriously consider finding another employer.
3. With transparently labeled opinion content, it is professionally acceptable to represent points of view that support a political party or group. After all, all published content related to advertising, PR, military, and government public affairs, etc., presents information from a certain point of view, however this is not a license to generate your own disinformation. The difference between prioritizing facts and misrepresenting or covering up information is key.
4. When corrections are necessary, they should be published on the same platform with the same level of prominence as the original content that included any erroneous information.

These are behaviors you should not only practice professionally, you should expect them of your favorite news outlets and creators as a consumer. The steps outlined above are probably clear enough if you have experience gathering information and producing content for mass audiences, but for beginning reporters, influencers, and other media writers, it might help to go into a bit more detail about why these steps are so important.

#### Digging Deeper

Finding sources with first-hand information is considered most valuable because they should have direct empirical evidence of what took place. That is, they can describe the sights and sounds of events. They can often explain not just what happened but why, and for more in-depth stories they might have paper or electronic documentation that supports their claims. No eyewitness account will be perfect. This is why journalists demand that factual claims be backed up by multiple sources, even for information that seems obvious. Still, a human with detailed, direct knowledge is usually considered the best source.

Official sources, sometimes called institutional sources, can be both knowledgeable and limited in what they can share. Knowledgeable officials are not immune to mistakes or inaccurate statements.

#### Definition: Institutional source

News sources are people who provide information for a story. Accurate stories can only be built on trustworthy sources. Institutional sources are people who typically represent large, formally recognized organizations in society. These sources are often knowledgeable, but they are not infallible. Just as with other sources, information from even the most reliable institutional sources must be double sourced.

Often, government and other institutional sources are tasked with maintaining the status quo. Attempting to find information that challenges the status quo might lead to sources being uncooperative or might lead to them providing incomplete or poorly supported facts. It is up to professional journalists to hold institutional sources up to at least the same level of scrutiny that they apply to others.

Officials, such as those who represent police, fire departments, courts, educational institutions, and governmental bodies as well as corporate and other organized business interests, should not mind being fact checked because they, too, are responsible for providing accurate information to the public.

### Allegedly...

In news, when a story involves an allegation of illegal or seriously unethical activity, alarm bells should go off for the media writer. These types of stories can trigger lawsuits if done poorly. The basic standard for accuracy is that any detail relating to an allegation should be corroborated by at least two sources who are independent of one another, and the published report should include as much evidence as is reasonable to present publicly.

It is not unusual for sources to request anonymity if they are making serious allegations against someone else. These requests can only be handled on a case-by-case basis. At times anonymity in published reports is granted to protect the identity of an accuser, but news reporters and editors may want to obtain corroborating evidence including sourcing beyond standard double sourcing practices.

Attention to accuracy in reports of criminal or ethical allegations must extend to every detail, large and small. If you are publishing or sharing an accusation of criminal conduct, triple check that you have the right name and correct spelling.

### AI tools and other online resources

Although they should be skeptical of information provided by AI tools, media writers may wish to augment their research efforts with AI. It is essential to note, though, that just because AI tools based on large language models access massive amounts of data and present information in a clear, straightforward manner, this does not mean they are accurate.

AI tools can be disturbingly inaccurate with regard to basic facts, which is an issue not only in the media industry but in corporate circles and [in higher education as well](#). Media writers should feel empowered to make use of the same tools available to every other corporate and creative professional, but in the interest of accuracy, media writers should take extra care in verifying information provided through AI tools.

There are many other sources of knowledge and opinion content that media professionals might also use when gathering information. As for podcasts, influencer content, blogs, advice, ratings websites, and other general information sources online, it is important to use them if they help improve the breadth and depth of your news coverage. When considering their level of accuracy, refer to the following suggestions based on the [University of Texas at El Paso's guidelines](#) for telling good online sources apart from bad ones.

1. Scrutinize the source's identity: Check the domain name. Check the username and profile for online comments and influencer content. The first step in analyzing information from an online source is to know whether the source is legitimate. With practice, you will recognize fake web links, bots and other fake social media accounts, and you will be able to disregard their information out of hand.
2. Dig deeper into source credibility: Once you are sure you are dealing with a source that is who or what they say they are, as a media writer, you still need to ask if this is someone worth listening to. Does the website or article list an author? Check their biographical information. Check to [make sure websites are not parody sites](#). Check the date of publication, and check to see if other reputable publishers have ever referenced this website or individual. Note that mere quantity of content does not guarantee trustworthiness. There are many YouTube accounts that publish hours of misinformation almost daily to garner attention and clicks, but an ocean of misinformation is useless to a media writer thirsting for trustworthy information.
3. Look for corroboration from those with different points of view: While partisan news sources and influencers with political biases rarely agree about who deserves the praise when things go well or the blame when things go wrong, they will often agree on the fact that something happened and when and where it took place. It is important that you do not repeat lies from politically biased sources, but when sources with different viewpoints do agree this can be a sign that the information at a base level is real.

4. Consider some sites "background only" sources: Websites like Wikipedia, blogs, most podcasts, and social media chatter can be good resources when starting to learn about a topic, but they are not definitive sources of information and should not be cited in news stories. Consider the metaphor of a mountain stream in gold country which carries all types of silt, fool's gold and flecks of the real thing. These can tell you where to begin to look for valuable information, but when looking for substance, for the mother lode, so to speak, these are only starting points.

### Automation transparency

Media organizations find themselves with access to more tools than ever that are capable of automating data gathering, data analysis, formulaic writing, and dissemination tasks. The algorithms they use to collect, analyze, interpret, and present data as narrative for human consumption are often hidden from public view. There are growing calls for media organizations to be more transparent about how they use algorithms to generate and disseminate content, but research suggests there are limits on how much media companies are willing to expose.

For example, Nicholas Diakopoulos & Michael Koliska analyzed focus group discussions with 50 news media professionals and scholars to learn about the possibilities and challenges of being more transparent about the algorithms being developed to produce news content. They found, in their [study published in 2016](#), that media companies understood the push for transparency but saw releasing too much information about proprietary algorithms as a threat to their business.

Essentially, it would cost news media companies to prepare algorithmic data to be shared publicly, and there was no financial incentive for doing the work. "Costs identified in producing transparency information included: data preparation, documentation writing, source code polishing, and benchmark testing," according to [Diakopoulos and Koliska](#).<sup>1</sup>

For these reasons, the general public may not be aware of how media organizations use algorithms to collect and analyze so-called "big data." More transparency in the industry is needed if media organizations expect the general public to trust them. Individual professionals can do their part by being transparent when using software to gather and analyze data that refer to members of the public. A media organization might not allow or wish to fund full disclosure about how proprietary algorithms work, but journalists and other media professionals should demand the right to divulge when algorithms have been used and for what purpose.

### Accuracy in advertising and public relations contexts

The first rule of accuracy in the advertising and PR fields is that professionals must not lie to consumers or stakeholders. Consumers have varying levels of skepticism for advertising and PR content, but they also look to both for information about the world around them. Advertising and PR writers are usually up front about the fact that they are advocating for a point of view. Painting a product or a brand or a business or institution in the best possible light, given the facts at hand, is professionally legitimate. Lying to mass audiences, covering up for crimes and other misdeeds, and omitting information that could cause great harm are not acceptable.

Over the past two decades or so, it has become increasingly clear that news organizations are not considered objective even when they strive to be. Audiences tend to evaluate news in relative terms according to the audience's political point of view. A staunchly centrist news organization that goes out of its way year after year to demonstrate that its content exhibits less political bias than almost every other mass media outlet available to the public might still be considered too far to the left or to the right based on an audience member's perspective.

What matters most is not so much the political leaning of a given news outlet. What matters is if it tends to report false information, and if this is the result of journalistic practices that need improvement or if it constitutes disinformation.

Professional advertising creatives and PR writers may be more cautious than many journalists when it comes to discussing current events, sharing social media content, or speculating about future events because there may be dire legal and financial implications for misinforming the public when representing a brand.

Regardless of your mass communication subfield, following professional codes of ethics and developing a personal sense of applied ethics and a vigilance against misinformation and disinformation is essential in this industry moving forward.

### Strive for accuracy, not infallibility

Philosophers, particularly philosophers of science, generally acknowledge that there is no absolute truth because there are limits to our perception and because no one has access to all of the facts all of the time, and yet, anyone who writes for mass audiences has a responsibility to be as factual as possible. It is easier than ever to verify basic information through the careful application of critical thinking skills to the wealth of knowledge available online.

### Information Accuracy Exercise

To get a sense of how valuable accuracy in professional media is, open your favorite social media app and scroll or swipe until you come across something you know to be false that is, however, presented as though it were a fact. Answer the following questions:

- Which social media platform did you use?
- What was the piece of information or story that was presented inaccurately?
- Does it appear that this bit of false information was created by accident, by negligence, or spread to purposefully confuse audiences?
- What was the likely motivation for creating or spreading this inaccurate information?
- Was AI involved in the creation or spreading of this false information?
- How many posts or videos did you scroll through before you found an inaccuracy?
- How common do you think it is that people are misinformed or purposefully fed disinformation on social media platforms?
- What strategies do you have for checking information to see if it is true?
- Finally, should societies consider studying media literacy as nearly important as studying how to read and write?

Many avid social media consumers, when they first learn about media literacy and start to face how much false information they see in a day, find the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation staggering.

Misinformation and disinformation are troubling for societies the world over, but their prevalence suggests there is a market for professional, honest, clear, and interesting fact-checking services.

Accuracy permeates almost every aspect of media writing. More specific situational advice for being accurate appears throughout the rest of this text.

Media consumers also have a responsibility to think critically about all of the information they consume. For a more complete text on media literacy, consider reading [Media Communication, Convergence and Literacy](#), another Open Educational Resource text that deals specifically with media literacy.

The next section briefly deals with the big picture social implications of misinformation and disinformation and makes the case that media professionals should not only avoid misinformation and disinformation but should actively attack it because it undermines all branches of professional practice.

1. Diakopoulos, N., & Koliska, M. (2016). Algorithmic Transparency in the News Media. *Digital Journalism*, 5(7), 809–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2016.1208053>

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## 2.4: Social implications of misinformation and disinformation



Figure 2.4.1: Professionally dressed people pulling out their mobile phones.  
(Unsplash free-to-use license; [Camilo Jimenez](#))

One of the primary effects of the global spread of misinformation and disinformation is a decline in trust, not just of media institutions but of [all kinds of social institutions](#). Institutions are formally recognized, human-made social structures such as governments, health care systems, educational systems, military, police, religions, etc. They are powerful, but they are not immune to attacks. Most institutions are legally recognized sources of power. How they wield power is open to scrutiny. In fact, holding institutions accountable is one of the main reasons that freedom of speech and freedom of the press are protected in the U.S. Constitution.

Reasonable skepticism of institutions is healthy for societies. After all, no major institution is historically free from scandal, but for all their shortcomings, institutions provide necessary services and human connections that enable societies to function.

The spread of mistrust through misinformation and disinformation can contribute to collective confusion and even violence. This can lead to a breakdown of institutions and threaten social order.

Wrecking the social order in a given society might sound like the fastest way to meaningful change. Some of the most successful nations on Earth arose through revolutions. However, the violence brewing around much of the globe today favors existing authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian structures and may only serve to give those structures more authority to wield over massive populations. Historically speaking, tightly consolidated, repressive power is one of the things people have rebelled against the most.

Right about now, readers may be asking, "What does this have to do with media writing?" In the context of accuracy and fighting misinformation and disinformation, this is the "why."

People may choose to make their societies more or less open in terms of trade and social norms. They may choose to elect leaders who are more or less interested in centralizing power, but if citizens are making electoral and advocacy decisions based on misinformation and disinformation, they are not making freely informed decisions. They are living in state of constant manipulation. Free and open media systems, and the people who work in them, should consider attacks against media systems and other institutions to be existential threats.

[You may ask yourself, "How did we get here?"](#)

Persuasive speech, including fact-based speech, misinformation, and disinformation have existed and been studied for as long as philosophers have examined rhetoric, but misinformation and disinformation in a networked society is a phenomenon most of us are not prepared for. Fighting misinformation and disinformation is difficult because they spread rapidly through social networks and other digital platforms. Additionally, misinformation and disinformation often include emotional appeals, which can circumvent our powers of reason. Despite these facts, it is the responsibility of mass media professionals to be aware of the damage misinformation and disinformation can do and to fight it with a commitment to ethics using the tactics outlined in the previous section.

The rest of this section covers a case study of how misinformation and disinformation can have global, national, and local implications.

### [The case of COVID](#)

To quote a late-2023 analysis published in Time magazine, "[Misinformation is Warfare](#)." The gist of the article, written by Joan Donovan, an expert in the use of networked communication technologies to spread misinformation and disinformation, is that social media users have been drafted into a war of information influence and that it is everyone's responsibility to fight for the truth.

The position mass media professionals find themselves in is that they have all of the capabilities and responsibilities of average social media users coupled with the power to amplify messages for mass audiences in ways that extend message reach and depth. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation and disinformation about vaccines can lead to vaccine hesitancy, which researchers have linked to [the deaths of more than 300,000 people](#). That loss of life is staggering.

Though preventable, COVID deaths due to vaccine misinformation are not entirely the responsibility of professional news organizations, advertisers, or PR professionals, they underscore what is at stake with misinformation and disinformation, and they boost the argument that misinformation and disinformation in networked communication systems are not topics for detached discussion but rather an ongoing battle that surrounds us whenever we create or consume media.

At the global level, [many societies grappled with misinformation and disinformation when the virus first started to spread](#). The study cited in the previous sentence notes that although the proportion of people who believed misinformation about COVID in the early days was usually a minority, those who did believe in misinformation were much more likely to disregard safety measures.

The study, which examined populations in the UK, Ireland, United States, Spain, and Mexico, published by Jon Roozenbeek and eight other scholars of psychology and neuroscience says, "Across all countries surveyed, we find that higher trust in scientists and having higher numeracy skills were associated with lower susceptibility to coronavirus-related misinformation. Taken together, these results demonstrate a clear link between susceptibility to misinformation and both vaccine hesitancy and a reduced likelihood to comply with health guidance measures, and suggest that interventions which aim to improve critical thinking and trust in science may be a promising avenue for future research."

According to Google Scholar, nearly 1,600 academic articles have cited that paper as of July 2025, but academic research related to mass communication is most useful when media writers put the guidance into practice. In a global sense, confusion spread by misinformation and disinformation is a call for media writers to encourage critical thinking among audiences. Journalists and other media writers will not stop misinformation or disinformation from being created and spread, but they can counter misleading messages through fact checking. They can reiterate fact-based information in promoted posts rather than waiting for social media algorithms to elevate their reporting, and they can hold social media managers, social media platforms, and their corporate owners accountable for allowing misinformation and disinformation in spaces they own or control.

### "Infodemic"

The World Health Organization dubbed COVID-19 an "infodemic" because misinformation was spread widely and led to an increase in risky behaviors that led to deaths.

#### Definition: Infodemic

"An infodemic is too much information, including false or misleading information, in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak."

Source: [The World Health Organization](#)

Two medical scholars, Farooq Azam Rathore and Fareeha Farooq of Pakistan, recognized in a [commentary piece published early on in the COVID-19 pandemic](#) (May 2020) that on a global level misinformation was leading people to try "miracle" cures and other unsafe approaches to dealing with the threat. They noted that COVID was the first global pandemic to hit in the internet age and found that boredom during lockdown coupled with easily available massive flows of information led to information overload around the world. Along with other advice, they suggested media consumers limit themselves to one or two pandemic updates per day. They suggested that healthcare professionals refrain from sharing large PDFs and slide presentations full of information. Consumers as well as many healthcare professionals were already overloaded with pandemic information and did not have the bandwidth for this level of detail.

They supported direct-to-consumer text messaging services that countered false COVID claims in real time, and they lauded news reports of healthcare professionals making sacrifices to try to stop the spread. In future crises, not necessarily as large as a global pandemic, mass media companies could develop targeted text message apps and services. They could encourage healthy media habits with a maximum of one daily update on days when there are no major shifts in the crisis. This could be applied during hurricane season, earthquakes, localized epidemics, and more.

## 📌 Story Time

The film "Contagion," 2011, directed by Steven Soderbergh and written by Scott Z. Burns, predicted [several issues that would arise](#) less than 10 years later with the real-life COVID pandemic. Themes that appeared in the film that were also prevalent during the worst years of the COVID outbreak included difficulty figuring out the origin of the pandemic, the respiratory nature of the disease and disease transfer, the fact that symptoms vary widely for different people who contract the disease, the spread of misinformation and false "miracle" cures online, inequality in access to vaccines, and significant shifts in lifestyle, although in the fictional film there was greater civil unrest which went along with a much higher mortality rate.

If "Contagion" was intended as a warning about "not if, but when" a pandemic hit the globe, global leaders and members of the general public did not seem to take the film's core themes to heart.

One key takeaway is that factual information can be difficult to promote, even if lives depend on it, if the message is something people do not want to hear.

Perhaps this explains why "Contagion" has [one of the widest splits between critics' and audience's ratings](#) on Rotten Tomatoes, although both groups rate the film above 60%, i.e. the threshold for "certified fresh."

On a national level, major U.S. news media coverage of COVID was found to be more negative on average than coverage in international media outlets. This is according to a [study by economists Bruce Sacerdote, Ranjan Sehgal, and Molly Cook](#). Negative coverage and negative language choices can influence the psychological state of mass audiences.

Two scholars in India, [Shakshi Priya Giri and Abhishek Kumar Maurya](#), suggested that negative news coverage "may generate various negative emotions" which may have a detrimental effect on people's mental health and may also put an adverse effect on an individual's ability to be resilient in these conditions."

Locally, in every media market, this translates to journalists balancing the need to warn people about the threats of major, long-running negative events without hyping up the language or threats of death. When it comes to covering misinformation and disinformation about chaotic events as they unfold, journalists, advertisers, and PR professionals must carefully weigh whether or not to address misinformation in its own terms.

For example, [medical research shows Ivermectin is not useful for reducing COVID symptoms](#), but media professionals might choose to refrain from covering this study because the mere mention of the drug in mass media outlets might reinvigorate public desire to try to use it to treat COVID.

Ivermectin is a useful anti-parasitic drug, but misinformation made it popular with people looking for "secret" or "miracle" cures. Many would pay top dollar to obtain it, which made it [difficult or even impossible to procure for patients who truly needed it during the worst of the pandemic](#).

In an age of massive threats from misinformation and disinformation, developing strategies for quashing false information might be as important for future mass media professionals as developing research, reporting, and interviewing skills.

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## 2.5: Art of Clarity - Paragraphs

This section covers the basics of writing paragraphs for mass media publications. Mass media outlets often publish on multiple platforms. They may develop broadcast-style shows for television, social media platforms that prioritize video, or for streaming. They may publish predominately text content on their own websites or on text-heavy social platforms. They may create content for print publications available to subscribers who prefer to engage with physical media. Whatever platforms media writers are creating for, they are almost never using formal academic language.

This should matter to students in college media writing courses because most of the writing you do on a day-to-day basis is academic in style and tone. To some extent, you have to unlearn what you have learned about writing paragraphs to be a good media writer. Formal style and tone are essential in many parts of society. These are used in business, in government, in legal proceedings, in religion, and, of course, in academia. Media writers are not encouraged to let their formal writing muscles atrophy. They should be able to use formal and less-formal writings styles at a professional level.

### Paragraphs, media style

Media writers typically write at a sixth- or seventh-grade reading level for audiences made up of people who have anywhere from a grade-school education to a terminal degree. Even professionals who use formal writing in their day-to-day work life usually prefer media content that is easy to understand more or less immediately. Media writers are most often delivering new information or persuasive information. It is best not to make people work too hard understand you.

What follows are three guidelines for constructing paragraphs for text-based mass media platforms. Broadcast style is covered in another chapter. The imagined audience for these guidelines is college freshmen and sophomores.

1. A paragraph for a mass media publication is almost never five sentences long. Paragraphs are short, usually 2-3 sentences.
2. Most paragraphs in mass media writing focus narrowly on only one concept. A sentence should be limited to one idea. In this sense, a concept might be two or three ideas that logically hang together.
3. In text-based media, quotes get their own paragraph. The attribution indicating who made the comment and the quote, set off in quotation marks, are all that is needed.

### Demonstrations

1. The following paragraph comes from a public domain book called *The Treasure of Mushroom Rock*. Up to this point in the story, two boys have found a hidden room in a castle near an English village. The room had likely not been seen in decades, or even centuries, and the boys have started a fire in the chimney. Thinking the castle may be on fire, villagers approach.

"But though the villagers had no trouble in deciding that the supernatural smoke was due to the agency of witchcraft, Sir Anthony was by no means so easily satisfied. The old Baronet was the largest landowner and chief magnate of the neighborhood. He had been a great sportsman in his day, having shot buffaloes on the plains of America and tigers in the Indian jungles, and though he was now too old for such enterprises, he was still as keen as ever with his gun, and preserved the game upon his large estates with great strictness. Poachers were the bane of his existence; and his declaration that he would prosecute to the utmost extent of the law anyone found infringing upon his game-rights was well known to us and to everybody else in the village."

What follows is a version of the same paragraph as it might appear in a contemporary news feature story:

Sir Anthony was the largest landowner in the village. An experienced big game hunter, he had stopped traveling but still hunted locally. On his properties, he preserved the local game strictly. He hated poachers, and it was well known that he would prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law.

Both types of writing have their place. The literary paragraph paints a more rich picture. The paragraph for media audiences is stripped of certain details and descriptions. Some of the outdated phrasing has been changed. Some of the grandeur has been lost, but what remains is a character description that is much more to the point. In the interest of holding readers' attention and driving the narrative forward steadily, media writers strive to write short, sharp prose.

2. The concept covered in the two demonstration paragraphs above is the same. Summarized succinctly: Sir Anthony, influential local landowner and hunter, hates poachers.

Students should practice distilling paragraphs of various lengths down to their essential elements. This will help you to write concisely, and it should improve your reading comprehension skills as well.

3. The following example news brief demonstrates how to set a quote aside in its own paragraph.

More than 400 students and staff narrowly escaped a fire at the student union Monday afternoon.

The blaze did not cause any injuries, according to campus police. Officials with Student Affairs said that the blaze broke out in Best Burgers Grille when an oven malfunctioned.

Jeff Rotel, a student worker who was in Best Burgers at the time, said, "It was kind of shocking how fast it took off. My co-worker said that the oven was on fire, and by the time I turned around the fire was spreading up the walls."

A fire suppression system contained the damage to the restaurant's kitchen.

From these examples, you are meant to see how to cut paragraphs down to 2-3 sentences, how to limit paragraphs to only a few ideas, and how to place quotes in their own paragraphs separate from other content. The activity that follows gives you a chance to practice what you just learned.

### AOC Activity 2

This activity covers identifying the core concept of a paragraph, distilling descriptive, narrative paragraphs down to short paragraphs, and putting a quote in its own paragraph.

*The method for students to edit and submit this assignment is left up to instructor preference.*

1. Summarize the following story in your own words in two short paragraphs. The summary paragraphs must be shorter than the originals. Each paragraph should be 2-3 sentences long. No sentence should be longer than 20 words.

The ad for the write-in drawing appeared in the local newspaper. The newspaper only published two days a week, but it was a small town where nothing much ever happened. Twice a week was enough to cover most of the local news. Stan cut out the ad and carefully wrote his name and address in his best cursive on the form, making sure to include his entire phone number, all ten digits. He sent it in with high hopes.

For the three or four weeks that followed, he checked the same newspaper section. The drawing winners were set to be announced in more or less the same spot where the ad had appeared. One day he saw the results. He didn't have to search long before he saw his name, but there never was a semicolon that frustrated him more. The paragraph listing drawing winners said: Martha Davis, \$500; Gerald Holmes, \$250; Jermaine Johnson, \$100; Stan Powers, antique teddy bear. Stan's eyes had rushed to see \$100 next to his name. He had stared to celebrate before he looked more closely. His heart sinking, Stan thought he had no idea what an antique teddy bear was, but it sure as hell wasn't a cash prize.

2. Once you have summarized the two paragraphs above into shorter paragraphs, take those two paragraphs and distill them once again so they are suitable for a mass media publication. Leave out all unnecessary details. Step 2 will be complete when you have two paragraphs of only 1-2 sentences each.

3. Now it is time to add the quote included below. Decide whether it should go between the two paragraphs from Step 2 or at the end of the passage. Feel free to edit those two paragraphs again, if needed. You may also edit the wording that provides context for the quote but not the quote itself. Your response should be your best and final version of a brief three-paragraph story.

Stan found his parents and said, "I won a prize in the drawing, but I think I will give it to her," and he gestured to his baby sister.

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### 3: Information Gathering and Interviewing



Figure 3.1: Visual representation of "big data." (Unsplash free-to-publish license; [Joshua Sortino](#))

#### Learning Objectives

- Learn basic information gathering techniques for journalists and other mass media professionals
- Understand the role interviewing plays in information gathering and learn essential interviewing techniques
- Recognize the possibilities and ethical challenges of using audience targeting data

Information gathering refers to searching, reading, and interviewing in order to collect enough facts to produce a piece of media content. For a basic social media post or a brief report, information gathering still requires effort and verification.

You might begin by reviewing the social media content of knowledgeable individuals and organizations. You should conduct multiple internet searches for relevant facts, and you must double check your facts so that each piece of information is backed up by at least two reliable sources.

Random people on social media are not reliable sources no matter how confident their assertions may seem. Verifying information does not mean finding people who agree with your point of view on a topic. It means finding facts from individuals and institutions who might reasonably have and understand the information that you need.

For more in-depth reports, information gathering usually requires a combination of gathering previously published articles, conducting fresh interviews, and consulting relevant data when you can get it. Reliable data for news, advertising, and public relations purposes often comes from government sources. They can usually reasonably be expected to gather basic information in good faith, particularly when it is their profession to gather, analyze, and store that information.

In other words, for example, census data may not be perfect, but it is better than assumptions of someone who created a TikTok account, which requires no effort or particular knowledge.

Please note that requests for government data may take weeks to be filled. If you are planning an in-depth report, please keep this in mind.

Media reporters and writers should always seek to gather additional original documents and data whenever possible. For example, an academic researcher may independently examine a topic for which there are also government reports. Rather than trying to pre-determine which source is accurate, it is better to compare both sets of data and think about how they were gathered and analyzed.

When gathering info, it is essential for media professionals to develop a sense of when "enough is enough." There are almost infinite possible sources of information that you might consult, but it is not possible to contact every person and gather every document. Setting expectations based on the scope of the expected media product is essential.

This is not an investigative journalism textbook. The focus here is on teaching you how to gather enough information to be able to create basic media content that is professional, accurate, and done on deadline!

The core concepts covered in the next few sections should be enough to get you started whether you expect to go into social media management, journalism, advertising, or public relations and related fields.

- The first content section of this chapter covers techniques for gathering information found online and in print.

- The second section briefly covers interviewing for mass media purposes. (There are other types of professional interviewing such as conducting job interviews or gathering interview data for market research or academic research purposes. Those are covered in great depth in other texts.)
- The third section covers basic data gathering and analysis techniques again for media writing purposes.
- That same section includes a brief discussion about the ethical challenges of information gathering in a society where people with access to OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Gemini AI, etc. might assume that everything a large language model tells them is true. We work to carefully critique that line of reasoning.

We also briefly mention privacy concerns. Media professionals must respect the privacy of all the stakeholders involved in the content they publish, and media writers must still practicing rigorous, thorough information gathering techniques.

#### Food for Thought

The best simile for information gathering in the media writing context is that it is like gathering ingredients before preparing a meal. Depending on the complexity of the meal and how innovative and/or complicated the final product is meant to be, gathering resources can be as simple as making a pit stop at the local grocery store or as wild as traveling halfway across the world to [sample cuisines that almost no one in your home country has tried before](#). We make every effort to avoid stale, rotten, and unhealthy ingredients. Through practice we learn what we need and when we have enough to get cooking.

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### 3.1: Basic information gathering



Figure 3.1.1: Attendee takes notes at a climate conference. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [The Climate Reality Project](#))

Information gathering for the purposes of media writing can be broken down into four main areas: information archived by your organization, information gathered from direct interaction with people outside of the organization, information gathered from documents and other original data sources, and information gathered from previously published sources, e.g. news reports about the topic.

Search tools will help you access all four types of information. Becoming proficient at using database search tools, search engines, and artificial intelligence (AI) large language models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, is essential for media professionals today. Finding large amounts of seemingly relevant information is no longer a challenge. The more important task in most media professionals' day-to-day work is sorting through information, verifying it, and distilling it for audiences.

As media writers use AI more and more to gather information, it is essential that they continue to verify all information using multiple sources and seek multiple perspectives whether writing about historical events or breaking news.

In an age when [AI is known to invent sources](#) and [phone calls can be faked using AI](#), it is essential to bring a healthy skepticism to all types of information. In an age when it is getting harder to trust your eyes and ears, media writers need to consult multiple sources across multiple information platforms to do their best to verify information before spreading it to mass audiences.

This will help protect media writers from embarrassment and potentially far worse professional consequences.

It is also worth noting that people do not need sophisticated AI tools to lie or misrepresent information. Responsible media writers have always carried a healthy skepticism about the world with them at all times.

Before delving more deeply into the four categories of information gathering, it should be helpful to get a sense of some basic types of information media professionals regularly gather.

#### Basic elements

The following are some general types of information that media writers should know about. You may not need all of these elements for every news article, broadcast story, advertisement, news release, or social media post, but it will help you as a professional to commit this checklist to memory as part of your routine practice.

You may wish to use this as an information gathering checklist.

As you go through the list, you might ask: Does the current project require this type of information or not?

- target audience data
- background information regarding stakeholders and their interests
- basic who, what, when, where, why and how information about an event
- institutional and regulatory information regarding the marketplace or the service in question
- interview information from witnesses or participants
- contact information, addresses, online accounts, etc. that should be saved for follow-up research
- quotes
- photographs
- video

- documents such as government or business records where available
- relevant updates or changes to core who, what, when, where, why and how information (allow for updates as more information is learned)

You might gather audience data to justify pursuing a story as a journalist or taking a particular approach with an ad campaign or public relations strategy.

Writers always need background information about stakeholders and their interests to have a grasp of the basis for any story and why it matters.

The basic concepts of who, what, when, where, why, and how, a.k.a. the 5 Ws + H, are necessary elements for any story large or small. In fact, these concepts are so essential they are often covered in grade school language arts classes.

Institutional and regulatory information is necessary because it gets at the question of "Who is in charge?" Journalists often rely on official sources to get basic information for news stories. Advertising and public relations professionals often need to understand regulations related to the products and services they promote or support.

Interview information is essential for most news stories written by journalists. Advertising and public relations professionals might interview individuals inside and outside of their organization to gather the facts and feelings needed to promote certain products or points of view.

As a matter of routine practice, contact information should be saved when interviewing anyone outside of your organization.

Quotes, photos, and video content are essential elements of most media products. It is good to plan ahead for which elements you will need for a particular media product.

Documents and data are helpful for in-depth projects no matter the media field. Depending on the scope of a project, more or less data may need to be gathered.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that your understanding of the who, what, where, when, why, and how of a given topic or story might change as you gather more information. It is essential to periodically return to those core points and ask how your understanding of each may have shifted.

The rest of this section covers internal and external information gathering.

Interviewing is covered in some depth in Section 3.2.

### Before you walk out that door

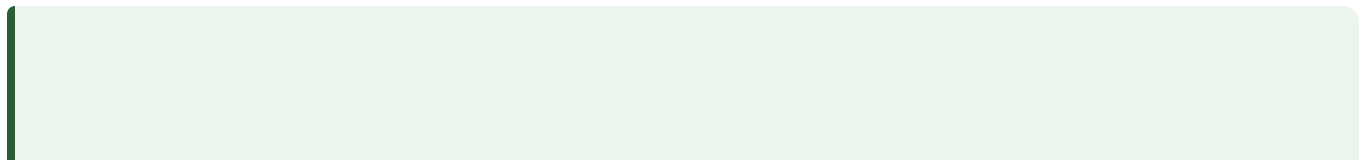
Assume you are a media writer with an assignment in hand. It helps to have a plan for information gathering before you start.

Almost every media professional gathers as much information within their organization as they can before they start looking to set up interviews and search for external documents and data.

In newspapers, historically, this would have meant a trip to "the morgue," which is the internal archive where past newspapers are cataloged and stored along with finding aids. Finding aids are tools used in libraries and archives that help people narrow down their searches and find what they are looking for.

Additional in-house information often comes from colleagues and co-workers. Media professionals regularly attend all-hands strategy sessions, information sessions, small team meetings etc., and although there are at times meetings that "could have been an email," it is necessary for an organization to share knowledge internally before those who gather information externally get to work with outside sources.

For example, media writers in advertising agencies, known as copywriters, are constantly in communication with small teams within the ad agency, with brand representatives, and with representatives of the legacy and social media outlets where their content will be placed. They have a good idea of what the final product should look like before they gather most of the information they will use to write. This communication practice is essential for setting a project scope and understanding what types of information they are expected to gather.



 Definition: Copywriter

In the advertising field those who write advertising messages, be they for social media, video, audio, text display advertising online or IRL (e.g. billboards), etc. are called copywriters. When copywriters write ad copy, they have various communication goals including making people aware that a product or service exists, convincing them to try the product, and/or trying to convert consumers to advocate for the brand.

Most advertising copywriters would say that information from the brand is not enough to successfully market a product. Advertisers not only need to know product features and specifications, they need to know what previous ad campaigns have focused on. They also need timely information about what audiences think, and they need to know what trends are dominating the market for any given product. Before asking for funds to conduct external research, copywriters and other creators working in advertising should find out if that information is available in house.

Public relations professionals constantly concern themselves with understanding what the companies or agencies they represent would like to share and what they would prefer to downplay or not make public at all. In regular public relations work, much of the information needed will come from the organization being represented. Internal information gathering means gathering facts about what the company or agency is doing and how that information should be prioritized and presented publicly. This part of the process may be the same for "good" or "bad" news. A good public relations professional will demand to constantly be made aware of programs or products under development and will strategically plan months in advance for releasing information in the best possible ways on the best channels to reach target audiences, both large and small.

Public relations and public affairs professionals have another challenge, which is to manage crisis communications. When a crisis happens, be it at a large corporation, small company, or government agency, etc., public relations professionals will demand to know everything possible about the causes of the crisis and what the organization's plan of action is. Public relations professionals may suggest plans of action, but they are primarily charged with learning about the issue and quickly developing a strategy for a public communication plan. At the root of internal information gathering in public relations is to get the internal "story" and to discuss what will be emphasized when and on which media platforms.

Internal information gathering is essential. It helps set expectations for the writing task or project and makes sure relevant institutional knowledge is shared. That said, it is only the start of a process.

### Firsthand information gathering

Once you have gathered all of the relevant, available in-house information and ascertained the expectations of your team, you should be ready to gather firsthand information from human sources outside of your organization.

Since this text aims to serve all types of media writers, perspectives from different media writing fields are offered here:

- **Journalism:** Interviewing sources by phone or in person is the one of the best ways to gather accurate information efficiently. While the details of interviewing will be covered in the next section, a good initial goal is to cover the 5 Ws + H with *each person you interview*. That way, you can double source facts and add nuance to your reporting. Attendance at events is a particularly common way to gather information.

Journalists separate news events into two main categories including breaking news and planned events. News organizations are made aware of breaking news events by tracking social media constantly, by listening to law enforcement scanner traffic, by cultivating community relationships, and by getting tips from loyal readers and listeners.

At planned events, commonly called press conferences or news conferences, representatives from government, law enforcement, the business community, citizen groups, etc. provide the news media with information that they want or need to make public. When covering planned events, the job of the journalist is to act as more than mere stenographer repeating what the official sources say. Instead, journalists should take what they learn at planned events and examine if there is more to the story.

- **Advertising:** The boundary between internal and external information gathering in advertising agencies is somewhat fuzzy. It is common for ad writers to meet with brand representatives and representatives of media platforms along with knowledgeable internal agency staff at the same time.

What is most important to know about firsthand information gathering outside of the organization is that it should be done with

caution and with specific information gathering goals in mind. In other words, advertising writers might conduct interviews with consumers or collaborate with social media influencers, but the collaboration should always be purposeful and done with a communication strategy in mind.

Besides interviewing consumers about products and what their messaging preferences are, advertising writers sometimes take part in focus group meetings and social media interactions. Copywriters, along with advertising researchers, might share product information or trial versions of ads with audiences individually or in group settings to get in-depth responses.

They might write different versions of social media posts and see which ones garner more engagement. The information they gather should tell them not only what product features and messages people respond to. The data should indicate why certain messages resonate. The goal is to learn how to build emotional connections between brands and audiences.

- **Public Relations:** If internal information gathering is, in a sense, getting an organization's story straight before going public, firsthand information gathering in public relations involves communicating directly with community stakeholders and with target audiences.

In this way, information gathering in public relations is similar to the work done in the advertising industry because the purpose is to connect audiences with positive, informative messages about the company or agency. Similar practices of interviewing individuals, conducting focus group meetings, and testing social media messages are essential to know and to practice.

### Documents and data

Data for use in news stories, advertising, and public relations strategies also comes from primary and secondary sources. Although different branches of the mass communication field have different uses for data, we are generally talking about large amounts of information organized and available for either online viewing or as downloadable files. This section applies to all mass media subfields. Key points for different for different branches of the industry are made when necessary.

One thing is almost a guarantee for future media writers: You will have to be data literate and at the very least able to understand audience tracking data in order to function as a professional in the field.

A good place for media writing students to begin searching, analyzing, and making sense of data is the [U.S. Census site](#). Data from the U.S. Census can be used to compare geographical regions across a variety of topics and social issues.

The applications of census data for journalism vary widely. It is often useful to know how many people live in a certain region or how many fall into a certain income group or how many identify with one ethnic group or another. Techniques for breaking down U.S. Census data and a host of other data journalism applications are covered thoroughly by the [Investigative Reporters and Editors](#) group.

Educators are encouraged to demonstrate how Census data may inform news stories in their own classes depending on the latest data available.

For advertising and public relations students, working with Census data can be your introduction to working with demographic and target audience data.

If you were to download census data from the U.S. government, you would be accessing the data from the source. This is by definition primary data.

#### Definition: Primary data

Large amounts of information collected from individuals or organizations for governmental, scientific, industrial, marketing, or other purposes is considered primary data. Collections of primary data are usually stored in databases, which might be directly accessible online, downloadable as database files or as spreadsheets, or at times made available in text-based files such as PDFs.

### Secondary sources

Professional researchers and writers draw a line between information that comes directly from the source that gathered the data and any other type of information that has undergone some form of analysis.

The primary use of the term "secondary sources" refers to published news reports because in news stories information has been sorted, verified, and distilled before being published.

Another secondary source is secondary data collections. Secondary data collections may look like primary data in form. They often come in spreadsheets, PDFs or other documents, but secondary data collections are those that have been manipulated in some way.

In this case, "manipulated" does not mean anything nefarious. It indicates that the data have already undergone some analysis. A good example of a secondary data source might charts and spreadsheets from a nongovernmental organization that collects data about a topic from multiple sources and then draws comparisons while still making large amounts of data available to the public. For example, data about unhoused people in multiple cities might be kept by city and state governments, depending on the region.

When a nonprofit organizes and compares these data sets while making new files available to the public, they are providing secondary data.

#### Definition: Secondary data

A good definition of secondary data comes from Rodrigo Zamith's [Data Driven Storytelling](#) open educational resources textbook. It states, "You can think of secondary data sources as those that have been aggregated or otherwise modified by some third party (not the originators of the data). This may include, for example, a single dataset produced by a non-profit environmental group that combines information from multiple government datasets. It may also include a "cleaned" version of a dataset produced by someone else.

Zamith breaks down the advantages of different types of data. The advice is shared here in its entirety, again from [Data Driven Storytelling](#).

#### Looking deeper

##### Advantages of primary data sources

Data journalists will often begin by looking for the original ("raw") data and obtain it from the primary source. That is because there are several advantages to this strategy.

By working with the original data, you can dig into all potential aspects of those data and not be restricted to what a third party believes is most interesting (e.g., their decision to aggregate data to the state level). Like journalists, the authors of studies, white papers, and reports can only discuss some aspects of the data due to time and space limitations, and they might not focus on the relationships that might be most interesting to the citizens in your community. Similarly, some agencies will choose to only post a portion of their data online in order to (a) reduce the size of the dataset that they have to host and (b) make those data more manageable for 'regular' citizens. However, they may be able to provide the complete dataset upon request.

Additionally, by using a primary data source, a third party's analytical mistake does not have to affect you. Put another way, you can run your own calculations on the primary data and thus have greater confidence that everything is in order, from the quality of the data in the dataset to the way a mathematical operation was executed.

##### Advantages of secondary data sources

There are also certain advantages to working with secondary data that can make them an alluring option for data journalists.

Doing your own data analysis might be really time-consuming, so a data journalist may want to let someone else do that heavy lifting. Additionally, the third party may be better at analyzing data or have certain subject expertise that a data journalist lacks. For example, a third party may be more capable at detecting and correcting issues in the original data and combining it with outside data to produce a more robust and accurate dataset. In those cases, it might be perfectly sensible to rely on secondary data sources to produce accurate and insightful journalism.

A data journalist simply must be certain they *really* trust the source of the secondary data and recognize that this option may limit their ability to find stories in data and tell them through data. In other words, there is a lot of useful information that can get lost through the filter of a third party.

##### Collecting one's own data

Data journalists can also collect data themselves, or rely on a third party to collect the data on their behalf. Indeed, news organizations have won awards for their original data collection efforts, as with the Washington Post's database on [fatal](#)

shootings involving police.

Collecting one's own data has several advantages. The main advantage is that the journalist can choose exactly which variables to get data for and who to get it from. Data journalists will often find that the data they are most interested in has not yet been collected. Put simply, there is no data if the journalist does not collect it themselves. Additionally, data journalists can also get the most recent data possible if they do their own data collection. If they rely on existing data, journalists may have to work with information that is months if not years old.

Media organizations may also wish to collect their own data but delegate the task to a trusted third party that is experienced in collecting data. This is often the case with polling data, but it can also involve other tasks. Letting a third party take charge of data collection can yield better data since research consultants tend to have the skills and background necessary to increase the likelihood the data will be representative and robust.

### News as secondary source

Anyone who has ever written a research paper in high school or college is probably familiar with the use of the terms "primary" and "secondary" sources in academia. Primary sources in this context include original documents, creative works, and artifacts, according to this [libguide from the University of Missouri](#).

Secondary sources are those that "analyze, interpret, or comment on primary resources," per the same libguide. Following this definition, academic research papers, documentary films, news reports, encyclopedias, high quality blogs and podcasts, and particularly knowledgeable influencers might all be considered viable secondary sources.

All secondary sources do not carry the same weight or value in the eyes of an audience. Media writers should be cautious citing secondary sources, but building a foundation of knowledge from multiple secondary sources is commonplace.

- Journalists as a matter of habit will often start researching a potential story topic by reading everything other journalists have written about it in the past that they can get their hands on. This is a good way to establish a basic understanding of events, key stakeholders, upcoming events and unfinished business, and to learn the terminology used as well as attitudes and opinions about the issue or phenomenon.
- Advertisers will want to gather published reports about previously successful and unsuccessful ad campaigns for any brand they partner with or wish to partner with. A common period of initial research in the advertising industry happens when the agency decides to make a pitch to a major brand to manage an ad campaign.

Secondary sources in this case include previous ad campaigns, write-ups in advertising blogs and magazines discussing previous campaigns, wins, fails and everything in between, and any news article discussing the brand, whether or not specific ad campaigns are mentioned. Companies seeking a pitch from an agency will expect the agency to know almost as much as they do about their previous successes and failures at branding and launching products.

- Public relations professionals live and die by their ability to get their version of messages into the mouths of broadcasters and onto the pages and platforms of other media companies. A PR professional's portfolio will likely include published reports that document where they were able to garner coverage for their client, how favorable the coverage was, whether accurate information was delivered to mass audiences, and how large the audience reached was likely to have been.

The regular work of a public relations professional is not that different from a news reporter's work. Generally, PR professionals research a topic and write a news release that they hope will resonate with journalists and their audiences. The same research habits that apply to journalists searching through secondary sources also apply to public relations writers.

A public relations firm representing a corporate brand facing a crisis might look at news reports covering similar crises to note how news stories framed the events and individuals involved. In this case they might search for news reports based on the topic at hand (oil spill, fire, CEO misconduct, etc.) to see what the potential pitfalls are and to look at examples of how similar crises have successfully been managed in the past.

Secondary sources of information must be referenced carefully. Many cases of plagiarism (inadvertent or not) from the highest levels of academia down to moderately popular influencers have occurred when a media writer repeats something they read or heard elsewhere without giving credit to the publication or individual who said it first.

Develop good organizational and labeling habits for all of the information you gather to avoid accidental plagiarism.

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## 3.2: Interviewing



Figure 3.2.1: Reporter at a crime scene. (Pexels free-to-use license; Cottonbro)

Interviewing is such an essential part of information gathering that several books have been written on this topic alone. Most texts and web resources include most or all of the following list of essential practices for conducting interviews in the mass media field. This list applies primarily to journalism students, but every mass media student can learn from this approach.

- First, the interviewer must research the topic and the person they intend to interview.
- Interviewers should prepare a list of questions but not feel stuck to the list.
- Treat interviews like a conversation, neither too friendly nor too formal.
- Keep your opinions out of your questions.
- Save potentially contentious topics for the end.
- Be respectful of interview subjects and their time.

### Pre-interview research

It is essential to know what you can about a topic or event before conducting an interview. Use the information in the previous section to work to establish a basic understanding of the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How of a topic. Only after you make note of what you have can you truly get a sense of which of those elements you need to know more about.

The purpose of conducting pre-interview research is not to try to know more about the topic than your interview subjects. Interviewing someone assumes that they can provide information or some perspective that you need. The purpose of conducting research before interviewing someone is so that you can plan for the interview and write down questions or talking points that get at what you need to know without taking too much of the subject's time.

An aspect of pre-interview research that is often overlooked is the initial conversation. In the process of requesting an interview, you should get a sense of what aspects of the topic the interview subject can cover, how knowledgeable they seem to be about the topic, and whether their understanding of the basic information is the same as what you have already gathered.

For phone or video conference (e.g. Zoom) interviews, the pre-interview might immediately precede the more formal interview. In some fields, such as broadcast journalism, the reporter will usually contact someone by phone, email, text, or direct message before meeting them in person. This initial conversation should be brief, but in it the media professional and interview subject should come to an understanding about the nature and scope of the interview.

Most often, mass media professionals conduct interviews for three reasons: 1. The interview subject has basic information they cannot find elsewhere; 2. The interview subject can add to their depth of understanding; or, 3. The interviewee can provide emotional context that might help an audience understand the story better on an emotional level.

Many times the same interviewee can help you address multiple aspects of the subject matter. For example, the organizer of a charity fundraiser can tell you how much money they raised for their cause as well as whether this amount was about what they expected, disappointingly low, or delightfully more than they had hoped for. They can tell you more about whom or what the funds are for, and they can tell you when the funds will be transferred to the individual or charity in need.

Pre-interview research might happen in a quick conversation the same day as the interview or it might take weeks in advance. It depends on the scope of the project and how central to the project the interview is.

### Looking deeper

From professional experience, the author has developed a sense that the 5 Ws + H can be different for different individuals involved in a news story.

When interviewing people, it is almost always the case that they can contribute depth to our understanding of the general 5 Ws + H as well as their own unique 5 Ws + H, relative to their point of view.

For example, if you are interviewing people about a tornado that hit their city, you will not need to ask everyone you interview for general information. The established facts are that a tornado (WHAT) hit their city (WHERE) at a certain time of day (WHEN). It took a path through the city (WHERE), and it affected the people who live there (WHO).

Meteorologists can explain general concepts about the weather conditions that generated the tornadoes (WHY and HOW), but there are also personal narratives that reflect and are embedded in this larger story.

When the general 5 Ws + H are established, you can focus interviews with the people who experienced a breaking news event on their own personal point of view.

You might ask: Who was in their home when the tornado hit? What did they see, hear, and feel? Where in their home did they take shelter and why? Were they prepared for it? Based on the time of day it hit, they might or might not have gotten warning.

You could ask questions that get at their personal "How" and "Why." For example: How did they respond when the tornado hit? How did they get everyone in the home to a safe place, or if they were not able to, why not?

Questions that get at sensory perceptions of these events can be tricky. Some people will simply refuse to relive the trauma of an emotional event, and the interviewer should not push them further into topics that are too difficult to discuss. It is a matter of simple ethics and decency.

That said, interviewees should always be asked if they have something to add. Readers and viewers relate to sensory experiences. These descriptions can make events seem more real; however, audiences do not necessarily need to hear the cliché soundbite, "The tornado sounded like a freight train!"

Let us collectively agree as professionals to find other ways of describing loud noises when possible.

To reiterate, information about individual sensory experiences can enhance our emotional understanding of an event, but each interviewee should be treated with the utmost respect. Interviewers should take "no" for an answer if someone would prefer not to talk about particularly emotional aspects of their experiences.

### Developing a set of questions or points of discussion

Beyond the breaking news context, an interviewer should know, after they have conducted some research, what they already know and what they need to know to tell a coherent story.

They should decide whom to interview based on their information needs. Once capable and willing interviewees are found, crafting questions will be a relatively straightforward process.

- Look for the individual with the greatest depth of knowledge you can find who is also available within your time frame.
- Draw up a list of questions on your smartphone or on paper. Make sure you cover the who, what, when, where, why and how. Having a list prepared will help ensure that no key topics are missed.
- Put the questions or talking points in an order that manages the tone of the interview. Start with general, non-invasive questions and work to more specific more emotional topics later.
- Always leave room for the question: "Is there anything else you think people should know?" Many interviewers uncovered key information with this single question.

### Treat interviews like a conversation

The tornado story example comes from a breaking news situation, but most media interviews are not conducted during breaking news.

In more standard interview settings, the interviewer should make sure both the interview subject and interviewer are physically comfortable if possible. Comfortable people are more likely to have a fruitful conversation. It is almost always best to interview

only one person at a time. Establishing a rapport and keeping an interview focused on the topics the interviewer needs to discuss in the order in which they need to address them is much more manageable in one-on-one settings.

Interviewers should keep their list of questions or talking points close at hand for the sake of reference but should not merely read their list of questions to the interview subject. This is a dead giveaway that the interviewer is inexperienced. Inexperienced interviewers should conduct practice interviews whenever they get the chance. Try out your questions on a loved one, a roommate, or a classmate to get a sense of how the conversation might go.

Listening during an interview is key to asking good follow-up questions. Follow-up questions might provide helpful details for the story already developing, or they may direct the interviewer to change the core story substantially and focus on a new "Who" or "What" or "When," etc.

The most common mistake in professional mass media interviewing is when an interviewer feels the need to demonstrate what they know and fails to get the interviewee to open up and share what *they* know and feel. One-sided conversations are not truly conversations. They are lectures or diatribes and should be avoided.

Conducting interviews is more art than science because no two interview subjects are the same, and the context for different interviews can drastically shape the scope and tone. Interviewers have to be aware of the intellectual and emotional state of the person they are interviewing. Interviewers should connect on both intellectual and emotional levels with interview subjects. This is not to say that the connections should be deep. Appearing as though the interviewer is trying to become friends with an interview subject can be off-putting, annoying, or even creepy.

That being said, professional interactions can be engaging on both intellectual and emotional levels if the interviewer is present, attentive, thoughtful, and reasonably caring depending on the circumstances of the interview.

### Regarding bias and contentious topics

One of the best approaches to interviewing is to return to the Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How of the story before and after each interview. This will help the interviewer to keep their biases out of the conversation, and it will make sure subsequent interviews are conducted with the most up-to-date information in mind.

When it comes to avoiding bias in interviewing, the challenge for the interviewer is to keep a balance between being honest about your values and convictions without putting your thoughts and opinions at the forefront.

If the interviewee is not asking for your opinion, do not share it. If an interviewee does ask, be honest but not overbearing.

To reiterate, if you plan to address contentious topics with an interview subject, save those questions for the end of the interview. This gives you a chance to establish a rapport and gives you the best chance of getting an honest response from an individual, even if they may have something to hide.

Deciding how much to push a reticent interviewee about a controversial topic or behavior on their part is best handled on a case-by-case basis.

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### 3.3: Big data, analytics, and audience targeting



Figure 3.3.1: Data analytics graphic illustration. (Free-to-use from Unsplash; [Choong Deng Xiang](#))

Media writers and producers have access to vast amounts of data and the ability to analyze that data for all sorts of creative purposes. This section looks at how various subfields in mass communication deal with big data in a general sense.

#### Journalism

For journalists, access to big data means they have more powerful tools to practice investigative journalism. This [article about the use of AI in analyzing big data to facilitate investigative journalism](#) notes how journalists tracked Israeli bombings of Gaza using AI.

"The paper's journalists used artificial intelligence to track satellite images that showed more than 200 craters in densely populated civilian areas, which experts say are likely caused by 907-kilogram (2,000-pound) bombs."

The article goes on to state that AI might enable more journalists even in smaller news organizations to do the types of investigative journalism only previously possible in large newsrooms with large staffs.

Investigative Reporters and Editors, a leading group that supports the practice of using data to report on impactful stories, breaks the process down to four essential steps including

1. asking a question
2. gathering appropriate data
3. cleaning and analyzing the data, and
4. doing further reporting and writing of the story.

For more information about how data journalists are working to effectively and ethically use AI, read [this article from the Global Investigative Journalism Network](#).

The data gathering and analytics tools available to journalists are too numerous to mention here, and new ones are being developed all the time. Suffice it to say that students interested in data journalism may want to add learning the computer programming language Python and the R statistical package to their repertoires.

A good list of resources for journalists interested in doing data journalism can be found at [this page by the Public Media Alliance](#).

#### Advertising

For advertisers, access to "big data" and the tools to analyze much of that data means they can target audiences not just by demographic characteristics but based on behavioral tendencies and likelihoods. They have the ability to target not just women in their late 20s who own a home but women in their late 20s living in certain ZIP codes with certain income levels, with one or more children, who have visited an upscale clothing store in the past two weeks, who use Pinterest, who appear to be renovating their kitchen and are likely to buy new appliances in the next 4-6 weeks. That level of hyper-targeting is valuable in terms of reaching those at the opportune time when they are making a purchase decision, but that same level of persuasive power can be disruptive, even destructive in electoral politics, which is, of course, heavily influenced by advertising.

For example, Cambridge Analytica shared Facebook user data with the Trump campaign in 2016. Before falling back on trope that "all's fair in love and politics," consider this statement from a [Vox article on the scandal](#): "Facebook allowed a third-party developer

to engineer an application for the sole purpose of gathering data. And the developer was able to exploit a loophole to gather information on not only people who used the app but all their friends — without them knowing."

The data was used to build profiles for millions of voters, which could be used to target their behavior. Cambridge Analytica also facilitated an illegal relationship between a Super PAC and the Trump campaign, according to [this article from Campaign Legal Center](#). Advertisers in the coming decades can expect to grapple with the ethical challenges of audience targeting.

That said, audiences appreciate relevant messages.

As the [Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin](#) puts it, "if advertising is unavoidable, it makes sense to at least have advertising that is relevant to us. In fact, such targeted advertising can be helpful in many ways, rather than just tolerable."

But the same article sums up our fears as consumers that the entire practice may not be ethical simply because it requires deeply personal, previously private information to work.

### Public relations

For public relations professionals, access to vast amounts and types of consumer data and the ability to conduct advanced data analytics presents the ability to not only test messages but to target that testing like never before. Brands and institutions want to know everything from which platforms their intended audiences use most to which word choices are most likely to be effective.

#### Definition: Message Testing

In marketing and public relations, message testing refers to the practice of presenting different versions of a persuasive message to targeted audiences in order to gather feedback about how receptive they are to the premise, structure, wording, length, and platform of the message as well as other more detailed qualitative responses in each case. In simple terms, message testing measures if audiences understand the message the organization is trying to convey and what they may like or dislike about the message and how it is presented.

The way messages from brands and institutions meant for mass audiences are written is important. Creative success in this area can make a significant difference in what people think about a brand, industry, or institution, and this can equate to greater power, influence and success in society, but there is more to messaging than creative writing and testing messages with target audiences.

Consider this quote from [a paper put out by the Institute for Public Relations](#): "A common misconception holds that 'messaging' is a purely creative endeavor based on clever phrasing, brilliant visuals and edgy disruptive execution. While creativity certainly plays an important part, successful messaging is as much science as art; and the required science actually enhances the creative process by focusing resources on those messaging opportunities with the highest potential. All of these tools can mean a more catered, personal media consumption experience, but they can also mean the death of privacy as an individual's media use data can easily be tied to their movement, shopping, and purchase habits as well as their proclivities."

The ethical concerns in public relations are similar to those in advertising with an added caveat. In addition to working with consumer data, PR professionals often gather large amounts of mass media and social media content to analyze how much their organization is being talked about and what is being said. While it is possible to track the success of a message or a campaign, PR professionals should not mislead their partners, internal or external, into thinking that they can control the narrative at all times.

Human communication is influenced by numerous variables, and no PR writer or firm can predict them all.

### Ethics of audience targeting

The [ethics of targeted advertising](#), as discussed in [this ethics case study](#), have been discussed at length in recent years and touched on in the context of journalism, advertising, and public relations in this chapter section. From the consumer's perspective, it comes down to the convenience and usefulness of targeted advertising versus the potential damage that could be done if their privacy is breached.

There have been astonishing cases of trauma made worse by hyper-targeted ads. The example in the case study linked just above mentions a woman who had a miscarriage but continued to see maternity ads on her social media feeds. This type of targeted messaging was both too aware and not aware enough at the same time. Advertisers had just enough information about this individual to add to her trauma.

Not only are circumstances like this bad for business, in the long run they are likely to be bad for society. Media writers must exercise extreme care and caution when working with data for targeted messaging. The people on the receiving end are not an imaginary, abstract audience. They are individuals who can be helped or hurt by what you write.

#### Thought exercise

Do social media apps seem to be able to predict your physical or mental state, your behavior and preferences? This is because cross referenced data including essential demographic information about you, to behavioral data about what you do online, to data about where you go in the real world, what you believe in, what you do for recreation, what you buy, and even how you sleep can all be used to predict your behavior. Consider carefully what you share and how you interact online.

The [University of West Virginia's Information Technology Services](#) has a list of suggestions for individuals modified to fit this space:

- 1. Don't overshare information on social media.**
- 2. Collect only essential information in your professional capacity as media workers.**
- 3. Use incognito or private browsing in your personal internet use.**
- 4. Limit app access to personal data by opting out of inessential data sharing choices.**
- 5. Change your privacy settings and check them often for apps, websites, and devices you use often.**

For more help, ITS at West Virginia writes: "The National Cybersecurity Alliance has a helpful [Manage Your Privacy Settings page](#) with links to dozens of popular services."

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### 3.4: Art of Clarity - More about Quotes

The previous Art of Clarity section ([2.5: Art of Clarity - Paragraphs](#)) taught that quotes in media writing should be placed in separate paragraphs that include attribution. This helps readers to recognize that the narrative has shifted from the voice of the media writer to the voice of the interviewee.

This practice also keeps the narrative flowing and gives media writers a chance to pack emotional punches into narratives that might otherwise be dry.

#### Using quotes

Some of the emotional depth that exists in literature is lost in media writing, which prioritizes presenting information as clearly and succinctly as possible. Knowing how to add powerful quotes from interviewees in news stories, from organizational representatives in public relations news releases, and from invented characters or celebrity endorsers in advertising copy is an art form. The chance to select and incorporate quotes offers media writers an outlet for creativity and some flexibility where they may otherwise be limited in what they can write.

This section covers types of quotes and how they might be incorporated into your writing. For our purposes, paraphrasing is included in this section. Paraphrased statements are not quotations, but they include information from interviewees. They require attribution and can be incorporated creatively in your writing.

#### Examples

There are three categories of quotes including direct quotes, partial quotes, and indirect quotes. The next section covers how quotes may be used and how to use punctuation when adding them to media content.

##### 1. Direct quotes

Direct quotes include the exact words of the person being quoted and are set apart using quotation marks. The one caveat to using an interviewee's exact words is that it is customary to delete "Umm..." "Omm..." "Ahhh..." and other unnecessary words that do not carry meaning when writing out the quote. For the sake of the reader, writer, and the person being quoted, this is standard practice. Media writing students should not be anxious about cleaning up quotes in limited ways.

What they should focus on is whether cleaning up a quote changes the meaning of the quote in any way. This is not allowed. It goes against the ethical principle of truth telling, and changing the meaning or leaving out important context when quoting someone is the surest way to get an angry email, phone call, or even lawsuit, potentially. When in doubt about trimming words from a quote, ask your editor.

When formatting direct quotes, attribution can be placed before or after the quote. Writers should select where to place the attribution based on what they want to emphasize, the speaker or what was said. Pay close attention to the placement of quotation marks and other punctuation marks. One of the most common errors for students in basic media writing courses is using incorrect punctuation.

These simple examples demonstrate correct punctuation usage.

Attribution before the quote: Professor Jones said, "You should turn in the assignment before Friday."

Attribution after the quote: "You should turn the assignment in before Friday," Professor Jones said.

Do not format attribution in the passive voice, e.g. "said Jones." This construction is awkward.

In newswriting, the only word that should be used in attribution of a direct quote is "said." Do not use "exclaimed," "complained," "moaned," "groaned," etc. These words are useful in literary writing to explain the tone of voice of the speaker, but in media writing they are considered superfluous. In newswriting in particular, readers might suggest that the writer is biased.

##### 2. Partial quotes

A partial quote is a quote that does not comprise a complete sentence. Partial quotes should be used sparingly. Usually, a full-sentence direct quote is more appropriate if one is available. Partial quotes are helpful, however, for quoting long statements clearly

and succinctly.

For example, sometimes government officials make long statements and save the key phrase for the end. They often do this to emphasize the final point, but media writers may not wish to include the complete sentence in their news story or news release. This is when the artful use of the partial quote is called for.

Partial quote example: Mayor Springer said he was discussing options with the Public Works Department about "repairs to Main Street and a lot of other projects that we hope to start soon."

### 3. Indirect quotes

Indirect quotes are paraphrased statements where attribution is necessary but it does not make sense to quote the language of the speaker or interviewee directly. The previous example combined a paraphrased summary of the first part of a long quote combined with a partial quote set off in proper punctuation. This is one way paraphrased comments are commonly used.

Another common use of paraphrasing comes when the writer can explain an interviewee's point more clearly or briefly than they can. When attributing paraphrased comments, media writers should simply use "said." The word is concise and non-judgmental.

Paraphrasing example: Jean Davis said her husband was a lifelong Orioles fan who attended dozens of games each year after he retired and who decked out the guest room in memorabilia.

Often when talking about events that occurred over long periods of time, interview subjects cannot help but use long, detailed sentences. Paraphrasing can help writers capture heartfelt meaning without having to include long quotes.

Generally, block quotes are never used in media writing, particularly not in newswriting or advertising copy. Rarely, a block quote may be used in a news release put out by a public relations firm or by the public affairs division of a government agency if the goal is to provide a lot of information without necessarily subjecting the organization to an interview.

Quotes can serve different functions in news stories. They can provide information, help readers connect with story subjects, and they can provide emotion and depth. The functions of quotes are covered in greater depth in the newswriting chapter. For this chapter, the goal is to learn to differentiate between types of quotes and to learn how to properly format them.

### Demonstration

What follows is a made up list of questions and responses from a news conference with a public information officer (PIO) from the local police department. After the list of questions and responses are three examples of quotes pulled from the interview and presented as they might appear in a media publication. One is a direct quote, one is a partial quote, and one is an indirect quote. There are no perfect answers when selecting quotes, but there are good selections and poor selections.

The most important part of this example is the selected quotes and the explanation of why they were chosen to be direct, partial, or paraphrased.

The interview subject is Officer McBane, with the Anytown Police Department, APD. The story is that burglars hit a local Italian restaurant and stole thousands of dollars from the on-site safe.

Question: Can you tell us what happened?

Answer: At approximately 1 a.m. this morning, APD responded to a burglar alarm tripped at the Little Italy Italian restaurant here at 123 Main St. in Anytown. Two officers arrived on scene within seven minutes of the alert and found that the restaurant had been broken into, and the safe was open and empty. No one was in the restaurant at the time of the burglary, and so we can gladly say no one was hurt. The officers secured the scene, and we called in a detective to investigate.

Question: You said the safe was open. How much money was taken?

Answer: We spoke with the restaurant owner this morning, and they said they are not sure how burglars got into the safe because only employees have the combination key code and the safe was not broken, but about \$15,000 was taken.

Question: Why was there that much cash in the safe?

Answer: The restaurant owner said that amount represents about three days' worth of cash receipts for the restaurant and bar. They were due to deposit the cash this morning, but obviously that's not gonna happen today.

Question: Do you have any suspects?

Answer: Surveillance video shows two white men entering the building just after midnight by breaking the glass doors at the front entryway. The restaurant closes at 8 p.m., and the owner tells us the crew usually leaves by 10:30 p.m. So we are looking for the two men. One is about 6 feet tall and was wearing jeans and a white or gray hooded sweatshirt and black running shoes. The other was shorter, about 5 feet 6 inches tall and wearing black sweatpants and a black hoodie with black shoes. We will share that video footage with media soon.

Selected direct quote: "No one was in the restaurant at the time of the burglary, and so we can gladly say no one was hurt," said Officer McBane, APD.

Selected partial quote: APD said the burglars got away with about \$15,000, but it is a mystery how they got into the safe "because only employees have the combination key code, and the safe was not broken," said McBane.

Selected indirect quote: According to APD, there are two suspects who are both white men. One is about 6 feet tall and was wearing jeans and a white or gray hoodie while the other is 5 feet 6 inches tall and was wearing black sweatpants, a black hoodie, and black shoes. Surveillance video will be released when it is available.

### AOC Activity 3

This activity requires you to select and properly format one direct quote, one partial quote, and one indirect quote. The scenario has been invented for instructional purposes.

Your task, to reiterate, is to select one complete sentence that would be useful as a direct quote, one phrase that would make for a good partial quote when combined with a bit of paraphrasing, and one indirect quote, which should be entirely paraphrased.

In each case, be careful not to change the meaning of what was said, not to remove essential context, and to think about what is most likely to interest readers. Be sure to use proper attribution and punctuation.

Each different type of quote should cover a different statement from the interview subject.

Your instructor may choose to enter these prompts into a homework assignment or have you copy and paste these into a text document to be turned in using your learning management system.

\*In the following activity, instructors should consider reasonable selections as correct. Proper attribution and punctuation are perhaps more important at this stage than quote selection.

The interview subject is Fire Chief Blaise O'Connor with the Anytown Fire Department, AFD. The story is that a fire broke out overnight partially destroying the kitchen and office of Little Italy Italian restaurant located at 123 Main St. in Anytown.

Question: Can you tell us what happened?

Answer: At approximately 1 a.m. this morning, AFD responded to a fire alarm tripped at 123 Main St., which is the Little Italy Italian restaurant. Engine 5 responded within seven minutes and found the back of the restaurant in flames. We were able to tap into the fire hydrant just out front here and limit the damage to the kitchen and office areas.

Question: Can you tell us how the fire started?

Answer: The official cause of the fire is pending an investigation by the fire marshal, but I can tell you the fire started in the office not the kitchen.

Question: Do you suspect arson?

Answer: As I said, the official cause of the fire is pending an investigation by the fire marshal. That is all I can say at this time.

Question: Can you estimate the amount of damage done to the building?

Answer: I am not an insurance adjustor, but given the fact that property values in this area have been rising and given the fact that this has been a popular spot for decades with locals and with people from the surrounding area, I would estimate the building's value at about \$3 million. From previous experience, renovating even a fraction of a building like this might cost up to one-third of its worth, so I would estimate about \$1 million in damages caused by this fire. Also, that's what the building's owner said to me about 15 minutes ago.

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## 4: Writing Straight News for Digital and Print Media



Figure 4.1: Sipping coffee and reading the news in Sweden. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Mattias Diesel](#))

### Learning Objectives

- Understand essential news values
- Recognize the importance of news leads and learn to write straight news leads
- Learn to recognize and use essential straight news story structures

Large portions of this chapter are remixed, revised, and amended from *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries*, <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/>

### The purpose of news

While the structure of news stories and the ways people consume news have evolved rapidly in recent decades, the overall purpose remains the same. News informs and entertains readers and listeners. News stories give citizens information about events happening in their communities and around the world. News plays an essential role in shaping public opinion.

We can know something about what is happening in a foreign country without traveling there. We can develop an opinion about a public figure without meeting them. News gives us a general sense of what is happening in the world and what our place and our role in these events might be. This chapter covers types of news, news values, and how to write news stories using essential story structures.

### Types of news

News comes in two basic types often called straight news and feature news. If you were to go to an online news site or read through your social media feed, it would be possible to classify all news as straight news or feature news, so it is important to thoroughly understand both terms.

#### Definition: Straight news

Stories that report only the most essential information in a concise and impartial manner are referred to as “straight” news stories. Another term often used for these types of stories is “hard news,” which suggests the serious nature of most topics covered in straight news.

You will notice that the definition suggests that the type of story and the way it is written go hand-in-hand. This is no mistake. Usually, straight news stories are written in a fact-focused, straightforward way. Writing straight news is different from most other

forms of writing in that it cuts to the chase and offers little in the way of descriptive language. It is meant to convey the facts in a narrative form that is efficient and clear above all else.

#### Definition: Feature news

A feature article often goes into more depth than a hard news article and uses storytelling devices and the inclusion of details that you might expect to find in short stories and novels. Feature stories are often considered “soft news” and do not focus solely on facts.

Feature stories differ from hard news in terms of topic and tone. Feature news writers typically have the flexibility to use a wider range of story structures. They often provide rich descriptions and include scene-setting anecdotes. Features are usually longer in terms of word count and page count than straight news stories, and features are almost always accompanied by photos, photo illustrations, graphics, including infographics, maps, and more.

Generally, hard news stories deliver “just the facts” as efficiently as possible, while feature news articles aim to provide readers with an immersive experience that infuses factual, timely stories with emotion and a sense of place and broader purpose.

Some examples of straight news topics include social issues, general politics, economics and local business news, crime, government and court proceedings, education, and technology. This is not to say that readers will never see feature stories that delve into these topics, but most straight news is about the latest developments in these core social, economic, and political fields.

#### Straight news story structures

The format of news stories should follow the intended function of the story. Since straight news articles are meant to cover core facts efficiently, most straight news stories follow the inverted pyramid structure, which organizes information in descending order of importance with the most newsworthy information placed atop the story in a summary news lead.

More details about the inverted pyramid story structure are shared in the third section of this chapter.

The next chapter delves more deeply into writing feature news.

#### Editorial pages

Although the standards of journalism ethics call for general newswriting to be objective in content and tone, news editors may communicate personal points of view about current events and topics. After all, news editors are usually some of the most knowledgeable people in a community about current events. The editorial is a type of article that delivers an argument or opinion backed up by facts. News editors historically have been quite influential in swaying readers’ opinions.

News editorials may be written by individual editors, by invited contributors, or they may represent the official view of an editorial board, that is, a group of editors at a newspaper who will deliberate before delivering some shared perspective on current events.

Historically, readers have questioned how news editors could be objective when overseeing news pages but opinionated in editorial pages. News editors have long taken pride in striving to set their personal points of view aside when covering news, but many also relish the chance to influence public opinion directly when they feel they have something to say.

Many media scholars, [including some in this article](#), would say that objectivity in news reporting was more goal than practice and that scientific objectivity in news has never been truly attainable.

#### About “objectivity”

There is much more to newswriting than learning how to “be objective.” Striving for impartiality in news was a way [to bring multiple perspectives under one banner in regional media operations in the early 1900s where partisan newspapers had previously been the norm](#).

News organizations in the days leading up to the Civil War in the United States, for example, were sometimes openly violent toward one another. Besides being bad for society, open violence between news outlets was bad for business. Setting an [objectivity standard suited business interests and 1920’s progressive interests](#) who saw the application of science as the answer to society’s major ills.

Today, many in the audience are critical of the business interests of corporate-owned newspapers while others are skeptical about how well science as a matter of practice can be applied to human behavior, which is influenced by so many factors. Impossible

applications of science may be leading some to question all of science, which was never the intention of those who supported making newspapers more impartial or "objective" in the early 20th Century.

Claiming impartiality puts newswriters in a predicament where any hint of an opinion or refutation of an official source might lead to claims of bias, even when journalists are stating factually that they are being lied to. In subsequent sections, approaches for how to write stories with as much impartiality as possible are discussed, but so are other options for newswriters interested in demonstrating to mass audiences that they are being truthful.

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## 4.1: News values



Figure 4.1.1: News essentials sign. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Lora Ohanessian](#))

### News values

In order to write news, it helps to first have a sense of what it is. Not every event that happens or issue that arises is likely to be interesting to audiences. Of course there are targeted audiences and small groups that wait for every drop of information in their different fandoms, but for large, general audiences we need to understand in an essential sense what kinds of information people consider so important that they want to be consistently updated about them.

Understanding news values helps to answer the question, “What is considered news?” In the 1960s, researchers Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge examined news stories worldwide to determine their similarities, and their seminal study, which created the first list of news values, is still cited and [referenced in updated examinations of what news and other media professionals consider to be worthy of public interest](#).<sup>1</sup> Their [somewhat scholarly list of the values exhibited by news professionals](#) included 12 topics. Some of those values are more useful from an analytical perspective than a practical one, but they are foundational concepts.

This section pares the list of general news values down from the 60-year-old academic list of 12 and adds some contemporary values to the mix. [Journalism Professor Meredith Clark, Ph.D. offered perspective to the discussion of news values](#) with her article for the journalism training outfit [Poynter](#) in 2016. What follows is a list of nine values derived from historical research and practice and from Professor Clark's additions. These are not listed in order of priority. They should be given equal weight and should be analyzed consciously, critically, and continually just as other value systems are.

### List of nine news values

#### Authentic autonomy

Journalism is more believable when it is reported firsthand by people who are not afraid to share who they truly are and be open about their personal values. Originally reported stories that can be presented transparently by people acting as their authentic selves should be considered more valuable than stories curated from other outlets or presented from behind a mask conforming to dominant interests and expectations. Stories that include more curated content than original reporting might still be considered news, but they are not as authentic as other reports. Stories from outlets that expect journalists to conform to objectivity or partisan political standards might still contain valuable information, but they are not presented with autonomy, and their authenticity may be diluted. To be clear, biased news reporting is not the same as authentic and autonomous journalism. If a journalist finds themselves downplaying facts that they consider to be interesting or important for audiences, they have to question whether the news they are putting out is authentic and presented from a position of autonomy.

#### Conflict

Strife or power struggles between very large groups including ethnic groups, smaller groups and organizations, and individuals within society often grab the attention of audiences. For example, stories about war, social discord, government budgets, and crime

are newsworthy because there is embedded conflict and a ready narrative likely to spur readers' interest. The continual coverage by U.S. media outlets of worldwide terrorism is an example of conflict reporting. Stories about major sports competitions, such as the National Basketball Association finals or the Super Bowl, also contain an element of conflict because teams are vying for a prestigious title.

### Human interest

Stories that are emotionally compelling capture the audience's attention and appeal to their attitudes and beliefs. Feature articles are often good examples of human-interest stories when they depict a person, organization, or community in a way that triggers an emotional connection between the audience and the characters. Other examples are behind-the-scenes reports about athletes or celebrities, or stories about people struggling to overcome obstacles in life.

### Impact

Generally, people are more likely to care about stories that directly affect their lives. The larger the possible or real effect and the larger the number of people affected, the greater the potential impact of a story. News editors and writers often devote more time and resources to stories that have implications for their respective audiences. An example of stories about impact include hurricanes in the United States. Hurricanes are often covered for days in coastal communities from the time when they threaten landfall; whereas, in landlocked states hurricanes tend to garner coverage only when they are quite large and almost certain to hit the US.

### Inclusivity

News stories that can and do include perspectives from multiple stakeholders should be given priority over news that only includes information from powerful, easy-to-access sources, who often have massive budgets to help them try to influence public opinion. Stories where stakeholders affected by events are available and included should be considered more valuable than news that parrots powerful agendas and perspectives, which are always relatively easy to find. An example of adhering to the inclusivity news value is to speak to people who might be affected by a legislative change before the law is passed so that they may have a chance to weigh in.

### Novelty

Stories that are odd, unusual, shocking, or surprising have novelty value. An example would be a story about an unusual animal friendship, such as [this one between a dog and a deer](#). Because such a friendship is not a normal occurrence, it can spark audience curiosity.

### Prominence

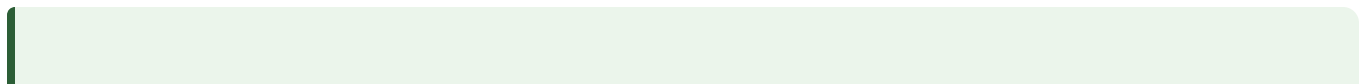
Stories that feature well-known individuals or public figures, such as politicians, entertainers, and professional athletes carry news value. From the summer of 2023 to the summer of 2024, much news attention was dedicated to covering [the developing relationship between Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce](#), both world-class performers in music and professional football, respectively.

### Proximity

When the geographical location of an event is nearby in relation to a journalist's or news organization's target audience, the proximity news value is in play. Audiences are more likely to pay attention to stories that take place in their local communities. For example, a news station in Ohio usually wouldn't cover day-to-day events at the Indiana State Fair. However, happenings at the annual Ohio State Fair always get daily coverage in central Ohio news outlets. The same could be said for almost any neighboring states in the US.

### Timeliness

Events or stories that have recently taken place or will happen in the immediate future have an element of immediacy or timeliness. Breaking news stories or stories about unexpected events that are developing are good examples. Newswriters and editors sometimes deem these stories so important that they interrupt regular television schedules to immediately bring audiences the information. Social media sites, such as X, a.k.a. Twitter, thrive on the constant flow of new information. Recent events typically carry more news value than yesterday's news. Timeliness also takes into consideration factors such as seasonal events, commemorations, and holidays. For example, it is common for magazine editors and others who produce long-form journalism to plan many of their articles around seasonal calendars.



 Definition: Long-form journalism

Long-form journalism refers to news articles that typically cannot be reported in a single day and that are longer in length or runtime than standard stories. Although the norms for "standard" story length in text, audio, and video are evolving, there will always be formats for audiences interested in learning more about a topic, an issue, or a certain type of news. Common forms of long-form journalism include in-depth investigative news stories, feature news stories that run longer than 500 words, most magazine articles, broadcast news stories that run longer than two minutes, and news podcasts.

1. Galtung, J. & Ruge, M.H. (1965). The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(1), 64-90.

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## 4.2: Straight news leads



Figure 4.2.1: BBC News Front Page. (Pexels free-to-use license; [alleksana](#))

The lead is the most important part of a news story. It should grab the reader's attention and hold it. This was true when print media dominated news consumption habits, and it is even more important now when many readers come to news pages through social media portals and do not necessarily have loyalty to news sites.

Roughly 50 percent of U.S. audiences say they consume news on social media "Sometimes" or "Often," according to [this survey from the Pew Research Center](#). It is likely that news consumption on social media will continue to grow. Thus it is essential that social media posts get readers to "bite," i.e. click on the story, and that news leads "set the hook," to continue with the fishing metaphor, and keep readers on the page.

A goal of every newswriter for everything they publish should be to write leads that invite readers to become loyal consumers of their content. Whether they find your story through a search engine, a link on social media, or by browsing your site, they should feel rewarded for joining you and encouraged to spend more time with your content.

### Lead with strength

The key to writing a good straight news lead is to have the information in hand first. Straight news leads are also called summary leads.



#### Definition: Summary lead

A summary lead is the first sentence of a straight news story and covers the essential information while prioritizing among those facts which should feature most prominently. Essential points are selected from the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How of a story.

In order to have a story to tell, you need to gather all of the 5 Ws + H. You may have multiple entries under one of category. For example, if two city leaders get into a fist fight in City Hall, they would both fall under the category of Who and would both probably be named in the lead. Likewise, if a police chase starts in one city and ends in another, there might be two cities to list under the Where category. What matters most is covering all 5 Ws + H thoroughly so that no important, verifiable facts are missed.

Newswriters must consider professional information gathering to be the first step of good newswriting.

After diligent info gathering, when it is time to come up with a lead, identify the most important Who, What, Where, When, Why and How elements of a story. Then, determine which among those is the most essential and make sure that that element is featured most prominently. Most straight news stories tend to focus on the Who and What, but there are times when the Where or even When, Why, or How is the most important element. The Art of Clarity at the end of this chapter includes examples of each.

For now, focus on the Who and What. The following is an example of prioritizing the What over the Who in a summary news lead: An SUV crashed into the Little Italy restaurant in Anytown Monday night causing an estimated \$50,000 in damages.

Of course the SUV had a driver, but imagine in this case that the driver was a citizen of no particular prominence. Here the primary What is an "SUV crashed." The Where is "the Little Italy restaurant in Anytown." The When is "Monday night," and the story includes an additional What, which is "causing an estimated \$50,000 in damages." For this example, the Who is left out of the lead,

and the Why is not yet known. You might mention in the story that the cause of the crash is unknown, but you would not include that in the lead.

Now let's look at how the lead must change when new information is learned.

Hypothetically, let's say instead of a random citizen it was Anytown Mayor Steve Vibes who crashed his SUV into the restaurant. The mayor of a city has prominence, at least for readers in that city.

To play up the prominence element, put that information first:

Anytown Mayor Steve Vibes crashed his SUV into the Little Italy restaurant Monday night causing an estimated \$50,000 in damages.

This lead puts the Who element front and center while covering the same What and Where. Again, you might mention that the Why element is not yet known, but you would include that information later in the story and make a note to follow up and try to gather that information at a later time. If the mayor was drunk or high, that might be the key element in another story.

Writing good summary news leads comes down to honing your skills at recognizing key elements and connecting them in concise, logical ways. With practice and with a well developed set of personal and organizational news values, selecting a priority among news elements becomes almost second nature.

When you follow these guidelines to write summary leads, you can address a specific news value with the first few words of any straight news story. This will give you the best chance to hook your readers' attention and pull them in.

### Good leads

In addition to finding facts, taking note of key 5 Ws + H elements and prioritizing among them so that your lead aligns with key news values, newswriters have identified a few other key guidelines for writing straight news leads.

#### More guidelines for straight news leads

- Stick to the facts. Straight news is about what the writer knows and can verify, not what pundits and social media keyboard warriors are speculating.
- Put the most important information in the lead. Trust that if you "set the hook" readers will stick with the story to get the rest of the necessary information.
- Keep your summary leads to 15-25 words. This will visually tell readers that this story is not complex. Remember, any story worth telling can be summed up in a few words. These news leads describing monumental, historical stories all come in under the limit:
  - Terrorists hijacked commercial jets and crashed them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon earlier today, killing thousands.
  - The Space Shuttle Challenger exploded just over a minute after takeoff this morning, killing all seven astronauts on board.
  - Two American astronauts landed safely on the moon today and were the first to walk on its surface as millions watched on live TV.
  - A gunman shot and killed President Kennedy just after noon today as his motorcade passed through Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas.
- Write in the active voice. This paints a picture of action in the mind's eye.
- Use verbs that capture the action. Instead of writing, "The mayor was a no-show for his court appearance Tuesday," write, "The mayor failed to make his court appearance Tuesday." The first version uses a "be" verb and forces readers to think for a bit about what it means to be a "no-show." The second version clearly paints the picture of someone actively failing to do something they were supposed to do.

### Beat the block

News writing often happens on deadline, so it is important to develop methods for getting past writer's block. Even with good info gathering skills and solid guidelines for writing leads, it can be difficult to come up with a summary lead. Newswriters are often pressed for time and have many facts, figures, and quotes in their head that they want to remember to include in the story. This can cause confusion and writing paralysis. When you get stuck, consider the method of "writing boring and translating to interesting."

In K-12 English and Language Arts (ELA) classes, teachers will try all sorts of things to get students to move past the thinking stage and to start writing. They might suggest freewriting, i.e. writing down whatever comes to mind. They might try word association exercises, etc.

The following newswriting practice is more structured than those examples but still encourages writers to start writing even when they don't know where to begin.

### Starting a rough draft by "writing boring"

"Writing boring" is straightforward. Take the Who, What, Where, When, and Why and mash them together in a sentence or partial sentence. The purpose is to get the ingredients for a good lead onto the page. It is in rewriting that most newswriters really cook.

Example:

- Who: City of San Clemente
- What: New storm drains
- Where: Near Cyprus Shore, south part of town
- When: Next week
- Why: Landslides took out old ones in 2021

Writing boring: San Clemente is putting in new storm drains in the south part of town near Cyprus Shore starting next week because they were destroyed by landslides in 2021.

This version basically takes the 5 Ws and connects them with prepositions. It uses the passive voice. It is wordy. This is definitely not the final form, but this is something a writer can work with. Now, the writer can prioritize the information, add an action verb, and highlight the most interesting element.

### Rewriting straight news leads by "translating to interesting"

Translating to interesting example lead: Three years after landslides destroyed storm drains, the City of San Clemente will break ground to install new ones near Cyprus Shore starting next week.

How is the edited version more interesting? The new version of the lead focuses on the When because it enables us to use the image of landslides destroying the old storm drains. "Destroyed" is an active verb. The new version also changes the second verb from "is putting in" to "will break ground" for two reasons. It paints a bit more active picture, and it indicates accurately that this is the beginning of a process.

This type of story might come out of a city public works meeting that some reporters would find boring. On its face, even the improved version is not the most exciting lead, but it connects an upcoming public works project to the major ongoing concern of landslides in a coastal city.

Newswriting students should be careful not to focus only on old information in a lead. There is technically no news value in old information because it ceases to be news by definition, but sometimes adding a bit of context with imagery helps.

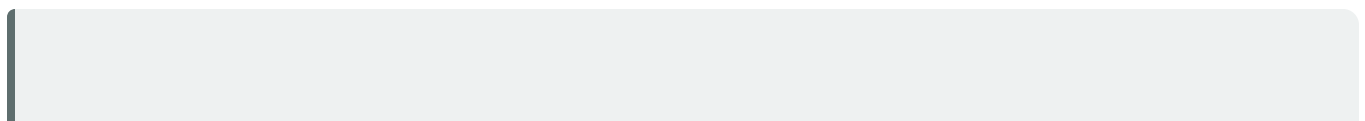
The writer's block that strikes many students when learning to write straight news leads can be approached by "writing boring and translating to interesting."

This method is particularly helpful for those who struggle with perfectionism because it is often easier to make bad copy better than to birth fully formed great leads straight out of the writer's mind.

### Avoiding bad leads

Learning to avoid writing bad leads is probably just as important as learning approaches for writing good ones. NPR, known for radio and online journalism, published lead writing guidelines that include some great examples of bad leads. The common thread through all of these is that they distract the reader and force them to focus on figuring out what the writer is saying rather than focusing on the story.

Often, the best lead writing goes unnoticed because readers will find themselves immersed in the story rather than thinking about the writing. Bad leads just get in the way. The following is an edited list taken from NPR.org.



#### 📌 Things to avoid when writing leads

- **Clichés and terrible puns.** This goes for any part of your story, and never more so than in the lead. Terrible puns aren't just the ones that make a reader groan — they're in bad taste, inappropriate in tone or both. Here's [one example](#).
- **Long, rambling sentences.** Don't try to cram way too much information into one sentence or digress and meander or become repetitive. Clarity and simplicity rule.
- **Straining to be clever.** Don't write a lead that promises more than it can deliver. You want your reader to keep reading, not to stop and figure out something that sounds smart but is actually not very meaningful. Here's John McPhee: "A lead should not be cheap, flashy, meretricious, blaring: After a tremendous fanfare of verbal trumpets, a mouse comes out of a hole, blinking."
- **Saying someone "could never have predicted."** It's not an informative observation to say someone "could never have imagined" the twists and turns his or her life would take. Of course they couldn't! It's better to give the reader something concrete and interesting about that person instead.
- **The weather.** Unless your story is about the weather, the weather plays a direct role in it or it's essential for setting the scene, it doesn't belong in the lead.

Source: "[A good lead is everything -- here's how to write one.](#)" by Hannah Bloch, NPR

The next section covers how to structure straight news stories. It goes hand-in-hand with this section and expands on the foundation of the summary news lead.

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4.2: [Straight news leads](#) is shared under a [CC BY](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

## 4.3: Inverted pyramid story structure

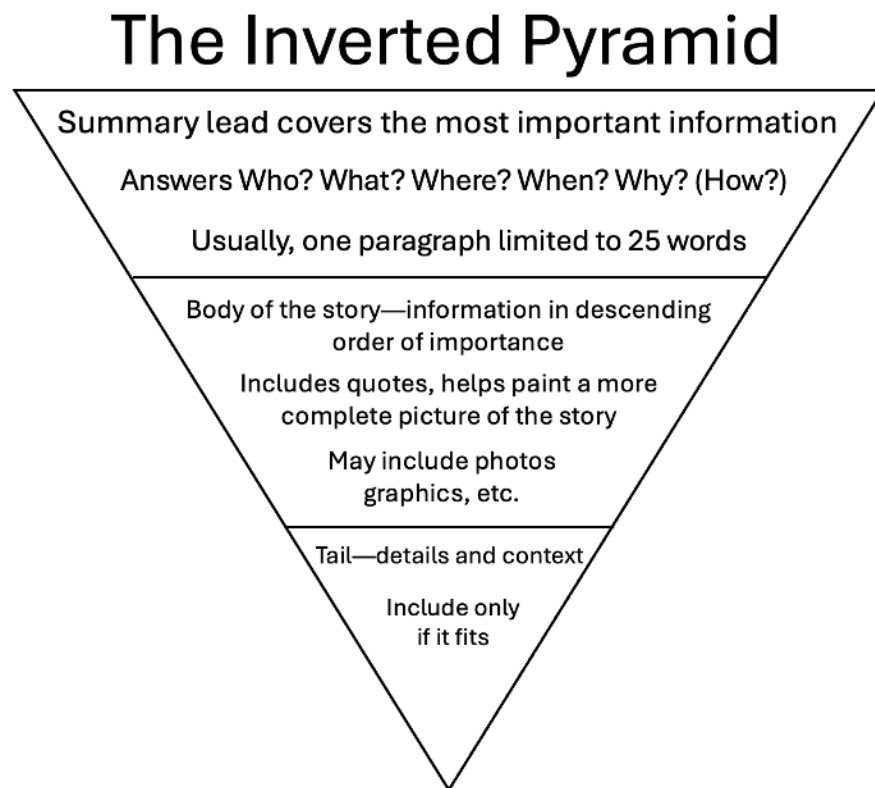


Figure 4.3.1: Inverted pyramid graphic. (CC BY 4; Mark Poepsel, 2024)

Straight news stories that start with strong summary leads are well on their way to being done, but many beginning newswriters may not know where to go next. The model of the inverted pyramid gives us a complete picture of how to tell the rest of the story.

The vast majority of straight news stories are organized using the inverted pyramid structure. It allows readers to grasp the most crucial details quickly and then continues adding information in descending order of importance. This serves two purposes. It is convenient for readers, and using the inverted pyramid format makes it easier for editors to cut a story from the bottom, if necessary.

Invented more than [a century ago](#), the inverted pyramid remains the basic formula for writing straight news stories.

Once you've written the lead, give the reader more information in the body of the article. This is your opportunity to elaborate by including facts in descending order of importance.

Use short, simple sentences written in the active voice where possible. Organize them into paragraphs of no more than two to three sentences. This goes for straight news and most feature news stories. Use direct, partial and indirect quotes properly formatted with attribution to provide readers with emotional, personalized perspectives. The least important details should appear at the end of the article, where they may be cut by an editor to save space or to save readers time.

Almost all hard news is written in the third person. This means writers should avoid pronouns such as "I," "me," "we," and "us," which are first-person pronouns that, if they are ever used, might be more suited to opinion pieces. The second person, or use of "you" as a pronoun of direct address, is usually avoided in news writing.

### About objectivity

While traditionally most newswriters and editors strive to present news from an objective point of view in terms of word choice and tone, [absolute, scientific objectivity is not possible to achieve when writing about human events and issues](#).

Newswriters should strive to include and to accurately represent all of the key stakeholders involved in a story and their points of view. Additionally, they should not show favoritism or bias in what they include in news stories, what they leave out or how they present information, but they should also be transparent about the values, ethical priorities and ingrained biases they bring with them to their writing.

Being objective does not mean repeating lies or publishing information from sources without thinking critically and verifying information before publishing it. Nor does it mean pitting two extreme stakeholder representatives in opposition to one another as a means of providing readers with a false sense of balance.

#### Definition: "Bothsidesism"

Bothsidesism is the belief that journalists should strive to always provide equal coverage to all sides of an issue, to paraphrase from [a research article by Forman-Katz and Jurkowitz](#). The problem with covering both sides of every issue equally is twofold. Sometimes the stakeholders interested in an issue do not neatly align themselves into two "sides." Also, there are many instances where those on one side of an issue present mostly verifiable facts while those on the other side of the issue present misinformation or unverifiable information, such as conspiracy theories. Lies do not warrant equal weight in news stories just because they are repeated often enough that large groups of people believe them.

All news should be based on facts. Straight news stories in particular should stick to the facts, even when groups have a vested interest in obscuring or clouding facts with their opinions or fabricated information.

#### Other story types based on the inverted pyramid

Some straight news stories build on the inverted pyramid story structure in creative ways without treading into feature news territory.

One model goes by different names but involves starting a straight news story by focusing on an individual and their circumstances before broadening out to what would otherwise be a summary lead. From that point, the rest of the story is structured like the inverted pyramid before returning to the main character. Essentially, the writer is adding the central character's POV as a frame wrapped around an inverted pyramid story. Stories told using this structure can cover a topic affecting millions of people in a relatable way.

Another hard news story structure that builds on the inverted pyramid starts with a summary lead, includes a relatively short but complete inverted pyramid story before concluding with a chronology of events.

This form of story is useful for attempting to make sense of a chaotic event where many things happened at once. The reader can still be hooked and informed with the traditional summary lead and inverted pyramid story, while the writer can also include important information in an orderly fashion.

Chronological storytelling works in these cases because the event is so great in terms of its impact that readers will be interested in knowing how things unfolded to the best of the writer's knowledge at the time.

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## 4.4: Hashtag relatable - news freelancing



Figure 4.4.1: Robert Kelly, freelance reporter and writer. (Courtesy Robert Kelly)

 Robert Kelly, freelance reporter and writer, retired St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter and editor

Becoming a freelance reporter and writer in my mid-60's for a weekly labor-oriented newspaper has given me an ideal way to keep my professional skills sharp during my retirement years.

I accepted a buyout from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, a major metropolitan daily newspaper, at age 65 after more than 40 years of daily newsroom reporting and editing work.

Just weeks after taking the buyout I was fortunate to have friends in the industry hire me to teach a part-time media writing course at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. And I soon realized that if I wanted to be the best instructor I could be I needed to keep doing some of what I had always done as adult — get out in the world and continue to report and write.

Other industry friends welcomed me to submit articles to the Labor Tribune.

Admittedly taking a pro-union stance in my work for the weekly, I soon found the skills I had learned and refined at the Post-Dispatch still apply. I still try my best to ask tough questions, not settle for mundane answers, meet quick online deadlines, and get the good stuff in my leads. Plus the joy of being out in the field again energizes me in my college instructor role.

The small income from my freelance work is not what keeps me going. It's the pride I feel when editors at the weekly express satisfaction and sometimes praise for what I contribute to the product.

And I am so glad that the reporter and writer in me never had to take a long pause from my work. Newspaper work, for all its long hours and frustrations, truly gets into the blood of those who are lucky enough to do it for a living.

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## 4.5: Art of Clarity - Summary Leads and Inverted Pyramid

This section focuses on developing skills writing summary news leads and using the inverted pyramid story structure. It differs from previous Art of Clarity sections in that the guidelines portion is abbreviated. Previous sections in this chapter cover those guidelines in detail.

### Guidelines for writing summary news leads

1. Stick to verified facts.
2. Lead with the most important information.
3. Cover most of the 5 Ws + H.
4. Keep summary leads between 15-25 words.
5. Write in the active voice.
6. Choose verbs that describe action rather than "be" verbs.
7. When stuck, craft a "boring" sentence that connects the 5 Ws in order. Then, "translate to interesting," i.e. edit the lead to appeal to a wide audience.
8. Do not put quotes in a lead.
9. Do not put questions in a lead.
10. Do not lead with old news, but include limited context when necessary.

### Demonstration

This example takes a list of facts, sorts them according to multiple 5Ws + 1H, prioritizes them, and presents a summary lead. The notes are presented as they might appear in a reporter's notebook as a story develops throughout the day.

Facts:

- The Anytown Police Department arrested the city's mayor this morning.
- The arrest happened at City Hall.
- A news release from the Anytown Police Department (APD) said the mayor is suspected of having been drunk when he crashed his SUV into the Little Italy Restaurant.
- The public information officer (PIO) from APD, Sarah Lawrence, said in a news conference today, "The mayor refused to submit to a field sobriety test at the time of the crash." Officer Lawrence also said that the mayor refused to turn himself in this morning.
- The crash happened Monday night.
- Mayor Steve Vibes' office released a statement just before Noon today saying he plans to step down as mayor early next week. The quote: "Steve Vibes plans to step down from his role as mayor of Anytown early next week after years of dedicated service to the community."
- The news release does not specify why he is stepping down.
- The mayor does not admit to being guilty of driving drunk.
- The news release from Mayor Vibes' office said he will "ensure a smooth transition."
- The fire at the Little Italy Restaurant happened just over a week ago.
- In case you forgot, today is Wednesday.

Organized 5 Ws and H:

Who: Anytown Police Department

What: Arrested Mayor Steve Vibes

Where: City Hall

When: This morning

Why: Mayor Vibes refused to take a field sobriety test, crashed into Little Italy Monday night

How: According to APD, the mayor refused to turn himself in, had to be arrested

Throughout the course of the day, more facts became known. We need to add additional W's to our list because they change the story significantly!

Who: Mayor Steve Vibes

What: Announced he will resign

Where: Announcement came from the mayor's office

When: Announced late this morning, plans to step down early next week.

Why: The announcement comes after he was arrested on suspicion of driving drunk and crashing into Little Italy

How: The statement from the mayor's office said he plans to "ensure a smooth transition."

We can only write one lead, so we have to prioritize between the lists first. The mayor stepping down is a bigger story than the arrest, so that is the lead. Information about the arrest might still be useful and might be used in the lead, but the focal point must be that the mayor is stepping down.

It is going to take a couple of tries to write this lead since there is more than enough information.

In the first draft, after noting that the mayor plans to step down, we will simply list other facts. We can "translate to interesting" once this step is done.

Draft lead: Anytown Mayor Steve Vibes announced he is stepping down in a statement released from his office after APD arrested him because he failed to turn himself in after he refused a field sobriety test after he crashed his SUV into Little Italy Monday night.

This is far too much information for a lead, and it is not yet coherent. The lead should focus on the Who, Mayor Steve Vibes. The most important What is that he is stepping down. The When should probably cover both when the announcement dropped and when he plans to step down. The Where may or may not be needed in the lead. The Why should probably be included because the lead should mention that this comes after he was arrested.

Better lead: Anytown Mayor Steve Vibes announced today that he will step down from office early next week. This comes after the Anytown Police Department arrested the mayor earlier today on suspicion of driving drunk when he crashed his SUV into the Little Italy restaurant Monday.

This version is longer but easier to read. It has been split into two sentences, but in this case both would need to fit into the 25-word limit. This version is almost twice that. We will have to be selective in which facts to leave in the lead and which ones to leave for the next few sentences.

Publishable lead: Anytown Mayor Steve Vibes announced today that he will soon step down following his arrest on suspicion of drunk driving.

This puts the most important information in one sentence at the top of the story.

The purpose of the straight news lead is not to tell the whole story. It is not to tease the story the way a headline would. The purpose is to tell readers the most important, most current information as clearly as possible.

With experience, newswriters will learn to trust their judgment about what should be included in a lead and what can wait for subsequent paragraphs.

### Guidelines for following the inverted pyramid story structure

1. Add additional information in order from most important to relatively least important.
2. When adding quotes, consider both the importance of the information in the quote and the pacing of the story.
3. Paragraphs should be 1-2 sentences long.
4. Quotes get their own paragraph.
5. Generally, try to include a quote after every 2-3 paragraphs of copy.
6. Not all straight news stories have a clear ending, but do not leave open threads.

### Demonstration continued

Starting with the lead from the exercise above, we can write an inverted pyramid story and add a suggested headline. Think critically about how to rank facts. The following draft is complete but still needs an editor's touch to finalize the story and headline:

Suggested Headline: Anytown Mayor Arrested, Will Step Down

Anytown Mayor Steve Vibes announced today that he will soon step down following his arrest on suspicion of drunk driving.

Police arrested the mayor this morning at City Hall. They believe the mayor was drunk when he crashed his SUV into the Little Italy Restaurant Monday night.

Anytown Police Public Information Officer Sarah Lawrence said, "The mayor refused to submit to a field sobriety test at the time of the crash."

She added that the mayor refused to turn himself in today.

Mayor Vibes did not admit to driving drunk, but his office released a statement that said, "Steve Vibes plans to step down from his role as mayor of Anytown early next week after years of dedicated service to the community."

The statement added that he plans to "ensure a smooth transition."

The mayor's office did not say which day Vibes plans to leave.

### Quick summary

Writing news stories requires applied critical thinking skills. Newswriters take information from news releases, planned events, such as news conferences, breaking news events, previously published stories, interviews, and more, and they write a story. Stories not only organize and clearly present interesting information, they anticipate questions audience members might have.

Good writers recognize when they have incomplete information, and they either gather more information to fill in the gaps, address each gap by stating the limit of what is known, or they remove reference to the incomplete information.

### Reflect

From this example, students can see how a story might develop throughout the day and how it might be published online that afternoon as a breaking story. Although there may be more to the story, this information is what is known at this time and what is most important to include for a mass audience.

Further reporting would reveal reactions from citizens and city leaders. If the mayor had any initiatives in the works, reporters might examine what will happen to those plans.

Reporters would also look more deeply into the goings on at the Little Italy Restaurant. It may be that the restaurant fire and the mayor's crash are related, or it may be mere coincidence.

#### Writing prompt

On social media, Anytown residents and people with no ties to the city are speculating that the fire at Little Italy and the mayor's crash are related. Given that there is interest online, should this speculation be added to the story?

Write a brief paragraph explaining your position. If the speculation should be added, explain how and where. If not, explain why you would not add it.

Now that you have a sense of what summary news leads are and how they are written, it is time to practice writing summary news leads. Instructors should use their learning management system (LMS) of choice to copy-paste these prompts into assignments. Instructors may add more prompts, if they wish.

#### AOC Activity 4-1

1. Take the information provided and write a summary news lead.

Who: Simone Biles

What: won the silver medal in the floor exercise

Where: Paris, Bercy Arena

When: Monday

Why: She scored a 14.133. Rebecca Andrade of Brazil scored a 14.166

How: 2024 Paris Olympics, individual events, final event for Simone Biles, 11th medal of her career, did not medal in the balance beam

2. Take the information provided and write a summary news lead.

Who: Edward Spellman, owner of a local entertainment complex

What: opening a mobile LED board business, i.e. a large screen on a truck that can be used for events

Where: in and around Anytown

When: started the business three weeks ago, hosting a kickoff party in City Park this coming Saturday 11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Why: Spellman saw a need for large screens at events at a reasonable cost.

How: According to Spellman, other business charge \$10,000 per event. His mobile screen costs \$2,000 - \$5,000 to rent, depending on duration and distance from Anytown.

This chapter section calls for students to write a straight news story in the inverted pyramid style complete with a suggested headline, summary news lead, additional facts, and two quotes. The information provided here may be copied into the course LMS as an assignment.

#### AOC Activity 4-2

Take the information provided and write a straight news story in the inverted pyramid style. Students should list the suggested headline first, then a summary news lead followed by facts in descending order of importance. Many stories would include quotes. This exercise does not include quotes so that students may focus on story structure.

Please note that although the suggested headline goes first, it is often the last thing written.

Who: Alex Caruso, business manager of Little Italy, a popular Italian restaurant located in downtown Anytown

What: According to a news release from restaurant owner Max Whiffs, the restaurant's business manager Alex Caruso has been caught embezzling funds.

Where: The embezzlement took place at Little Italy Italian Restaurant, located at 123 Main St. in downtown Anytown.

When: The embezzlement began in early 2022 and was discovered in late July 2024 after a routine audit flagged discrepancies in the financial records.

Why: According to statements from Whiffs, the embezzlement was motivated by Caruso's personal financial troubles and his desire to support local political candidates.

How: Caruso manipulated the restaurant's accounting system to divert funds to a series of shell companies and personal accounts. He created fake invoices and altered financial reports to cover his tracks. His scheme went unnoticed due to a lack of oversight and inadequate financial controls.

Further information:

The case is now under scrutiny as the restaurant's owners seek restitution and potential legal action against Caruso.

The restaurant is also reassessing its financial management practices to prevent future incidents.

Anytown Police detectives are looking into the case. Their investigation has already revealed that Caruso had been using the stolen funds to cover gambling debts and to support Mayor Stephen Vibes' bid for Shelby County Commissioner.

Investigations reveal that over the past two years, he siphoned approximately \$250,000 from the restaurant's accounts for personal use.

Subsequent legal proceedings are being conducted in the downtown district courthouse. Charges have not been filed yet, but Whiffs said he does plan to press charges against Caruso.

The most likely charges would be theft, fraud, and embezzlement.

#### Bonus assignment: Finding the "When" in digital and print news

For print journalism, the general rule about mentioning time is to think about it in terms of when the print publication comes out. If a digital version of a breaking news story includes references to "this morning" or "earlier today," those references may need to be changed to "yesterday" for a print story that will not be published until the next day.

Alternatively, many online publications do not bother with any references to "today" and instead will use the day of the week on all references, even for stories occurring on the same day. This avoids confusion and the to change time references in different print or online versions of a story.

Your assignment is to find five local online news stories that mention the day on which the story occurs. Note if they mention the day of the week by name, if they reference "today" or "yesterday," or if they reference day parts, e.g. "this morning."

As a group, have the class pool their data about time references in news stories. Which reference to the date is most common, day of the week, "today" vs. "yesterday," or day parts?

Explain in a discussion or in a brief couple of paragraphs to be turned in why you think this is the most popular approach to addressing the day of the week.

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## 5: AP Style Essentials



Figure 5.1: "Create" in type. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Kelly Sikkema](#))

### AP Style Essentials

Associated Press style, or AP style for short, is a set of rules that governs how journalists worldwide write news stories.

Not to be confused with APA style, which is for organizing academic papers and the references within them, the purpose of AP style is to ensure that newswriters follow a standardized way of writing everything from ages and street addresses to dates and job titles, regardless of the platform.

Simply put, it's how it's done in the news business, and beginning journalists won't last long in a newsroom without being familiar with and using AP style.

While there are separate stylebooks professional journalists may follow that cover some of the finer points of online writing and broadcasting style, most journalists follow AP style for any type of text-centered media including newspapers, online news sites (which includes the online products of most broadcast news outlets), magazines, and most social media posts published to official profiles.

AP style has been around for more than 100 years and is considered the gold standard for newswriting. It ensures that commonly used phrases and story elements are formatted in a way that is easy for readers of serious news outlets around the world to recognize and understand.

AP style provides guidelines for writers at newspapers and other mass media outlets in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation and language usage. The guiding principles behind AP style are: consistency, clarity, accuracy and brevity.

The AP Stylebook – available in both print and digital formats – is a seemingly endless list of do's and don'ts for newswriters. Besides an A-to-Z listing of guidelines for capitalization, abbreviation and usage, it also contains sections covering business, data journalism, health and science, religion, sports, media law and more.

The book can be intimidating for some at first, and it's easy to wonder how you're ever going to memorize it all. The beauty is, you don't have to. The basic rules soon will become second nature without realizing it. Once you're familiar with what's there, you need only look up a specific style rule while writing your news story. The AP Stylebook is meant to be used as a desk reference, and the sooner you learn those core common elements, the sooner you will realize you're only pulling out the guide for somewhat obscure or unusual terms.

### What is the Associated Press?

The Associated Press is an American-based news organization that has thousands of members around the globe. These media members, operating as an independent nonprofit cooperative, produce news, feature and sports stories, photos, videos and other content that is shared with other media members for a fee.

Journalists working for a media outlet in Southern Illinois, for example, could see their content appear in dozens of other newspapers or websites.

Founded in 1846, the AP has been providing unbiased and factual reporting and real-time updates for nearly 170 years. It is also known for providing election results and conducting polling, including the popular NCAA top 25 football and basketball polls in season.

The first publicly available AP stylebook was published in 1953 and was about 100 pages, although the AP had been issuing brief style pamphlets since around 1900. Nearly a quarter century after the first publication, the stylebook received a complete overhaul, and it is the 1977 version that is regarded as the benchmark for future editions. Editors added more entries and put them in alphabetical order, making the book easier to use.

Today, AP style in book format is over 600 pages and published every two years; it's updated regularly in digital format. It is a living document that is constantly changing. Something that was a rule five years ago may no longer be the rule today.

Here's what AP editors observed in introducing the first version of the AP Stylebook in 1953:

"The English language is fluid and changes incessantly. What last year may have been very formal, next year may be loosely informal. Word combinations, slogans and phrases are being added and becoming part of the language..." "Because of the constantly changing usage, no compilation can be called permanent. Nor can any one volume be infallible or contain all the wisdom and information of the ages."

There is not always a definitive right or wrong in every AP style rule. There can be gray areas and sometimes even contradictions. Writers and editors may need to make judgment calls based on common sense, and in some cases, like the New York Times, adopt their own local style rules.

The print edition of the AP stylebook costs about \$20 and is available from Amazon or at your campus bookstore. The online version, a searchable guide that is updated throughout the year, costs about \$30 and includes a dictionary and monthly updates. It is available at [apstylebook.com](http://apstylebook.com) or [ap.org](http://ap.org).

### Common AP style rules

There are more than 5,000 AP style rules, some relatively obscure, others used every day by working and aspiring journalists. Here are some of the most-common entries you will need to know: (*Editor's note: The following list may not include every rule found under a particular entry. Consult the stylebook if clarifications are needed.*)

#### Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviate many titles when used before a name: Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Sen. Rep., the Rev., Gen., etc., but not Mayor, Councilman, Chancellor, etc. Rule of thumb: If it's not in the stylebook, spell it out.

If a title is used before a name, it should be capitalized and generally is abbreviated: Gov. J.B. Pritzker of Illinois. When titles come after the name, they should be lowercase and not abbreviated:

**Right:** *Pritzker, the governor of Illinois, spoke at the rally.*

**Wrong:** *Joe Biden is the President of the United States.*

Titles are never capitalized without a name: *A senator, mayor and secretary of state all walked into a bar.*

Do not continue to use the title before a name after the first reference unless it's in a direct quote.

In most cases, acronyms are not used on first reference, such as SIUE (avoid alphabet soup.) Some exceptions are FBI, CIA, NAACP, NASA, GOP, etc. For more examples, consult the stylebook. AP style suggests to avoid acronyms and abbreviations that are not widely and commonly known.

Generally, omit periods in acronyms unless the result would spell out a word. Example: C.A.R.D., C.O.R.E. Use periods in most two-letter abbreviations: U.S., U.N., D.C. (*Ironically, not AP*).

Avoid using courtesy titles before a name (Mr., Mrs., Ms.) on all references (except in quotes or if your media organization requires it.)

#### Addresses

Use the abbreviations Ave., Blvd. and St. with numbered addresses, otherwise spell out Avenue, Boulevard and Street. (All similar words are spelled out: Alley, Drive, Road, Terrace, etc.)

**Right:** *The White House is on Pennsylvania Avenue. The White House is at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.*

Spell out First through Ninth streets, but use numerals in addresses for 10th and above. *North Ninth Street*, but *North 10th Street*. (This is in keeping with the rule that says generally spell out numerals one through nine, but use figures for 10 and above. There are exceptions, see Numerals.)

Always use figures for an address number: *9 Morningside Circle*.

Abbreviate compass points in numbered addresses: 22 N. Ninth St., but otherwise spell out: He was traveling north. Thus, you would write: John Smith of 22 N. Ninth St. (*not* “*who lives at*” or “*whose address is*” ... *This is why we have AP style.*)

### Ages

Always use figures for ages. (This is an exception to the rule of spelling out one through nine in text). *The girl is 3 years old. The law is 8 years old.* Note that when used as an adjective before a noun or as a substitute for a noun, use hyphens: *a 3-year-old girl, the 8-year-old law.*

Write name, age and address like this: John Smith, 30, of 22 N. Ninth St., Edwardsville (*not 30 years of age or who is 30 ... This is the purpose of AP style.*) But 30-year old John Smith is all right in some cases.

The woman is in her 30s (no apostrophe).

Separate two numbers, such as age and address, with “of”. So you would write: *John Smith, 30, of 22 N. Ninth St.* (This avoids the awkward construction of having two numbers run together.)

### Capitalization

Capitalize proper nouns, proper names, company names, compositions, titles and abbreviations, among other things. But avoid unnecessary capitalization.

Use lowercase for the common noun elements of names in all plural uses: Democratic Party, the party, the Democratic and Republican parties; Main and State streets; the Mississippi River, the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, the river.

### Dates

Use Arabic numbers only — March 1, April 2 (without the st, th, rd or nd). (Beware: Word often will put these in automatically.)

### Days of the week

Spell out, do not abbreviate in news copy (Friday, not Fri.)

### Doctor

Use Dr. on first reference as a formal title for medical doctors, dentists, veterinarians, etc. “Dr. Bob Smith” but “Bob Smith is his doctor.

Drs. is the plural form. Do not continue to use the title in subsequent references.

Do not use Dr. before the names of individuals who hold other types of doctoral degrees. Instead, say “Bob Smith, who has a doctorate (or PhD) in philosophy. (However, use your own judgment. At a campus newspaper, for example, it may be that publication's in-house style rule to use Dr. as a title before the names of all people who have doctorate degrees.)

### Months

When a month is used with a date, abbreviate Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., and Dec. *The paper is due Feb. 22.*

However, spell out these months when used alone or with a year: *December is the coldest month of the year. She hasn't worked since November 2019.* When a phrase lists only a month and a year, do not separate with commas.

**Wrong:** *She hasn't worked since November, 2011.*

But when a sentence has a month, day and year, set off the year with commas.

**Right:** *The ship sank on April 15, 1918, after hitting an iceberg.*

Get rid of the “of” between a month and a year.

**Wrong:** *November of 2015.*

### Names

Use a person's first and last name on first reference but only use last names on second and subsequent references.

When two people in a story have the same last name, repeat the first and last names on subsequent references, unless the context of the story makes it clear who you are talking about.

Use first names for children 15 and younger on subsequent references, unless they are involved in a serious crime or are athletes or entertainers. Use your judgment on people ages 16-17.

### Numerals

Generally, spell out one through nine and first through ninth in news stories, except for: ages, addresses, distance, dimensions, fractions, time, dates, dollars and cents, height and weight, highway designations, legislative districts, number sequences, percent, speed, temperatures, sports scores and vote totals. (See stylebook.)

**Right:** *Ricky is in the fourth grade. There were only six people in the theater. She is 9 years old. He lives at 7 Sycamore Drive. He walked 4 miles to school. The storm dumped 9 inches of snow.*

Don't begin a sentence with a numeral, except when referring to a calendar year. Otherwise, spell it out or rewrite the sentence.

**Right:** *Fourteen-year-old Tommy Smith won the award. Tommy Smith, 14, won the award.*

**Wrong:** *933 freshmen entered SIUE last year.*

In number sequences, use a hyphen: A pay increase of 12-15 percent. Youths ages 13-17 are invited. The City Council passed the bill by a vote of 10-6.

### State names

Spell out the names of the 50 U.S. states when they stand alone in story text: *The Missouri woman was caught speeding through Illinois.*

Abbreviate states when used with datelines except *Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah*, which are always spelled out. But in news stories, spell out all state names that come after cities.

**Wrong:** *Springfield, Ill.*

**Right:** *Springfield, Illinois.*

No need to put states behind major cities, like Chicago, Denver, etc. For smaller cities, use states to avoid confusion: *Nashville, Illinois.*

### Time and time elements

Always follow this simple rule: Time, Date, Place.

**Right:** *The event will be held at 2 p.m. Thursday in the Meridian Ballroom.*

Use figures for time, but don't put 12 before noon and midnight.

**Right:** *1 p.m., 3:30 p.m., 9-11 a.m.*

Avoid the redundant 10 a.m. this morning. Use the day of the week instead.

**Right:** *10 a.m. Thursday.*

Use the days of the week, not today, tonight and tomorrow, in news stories.

Spell out time sequences, except in sports copy.

**Right:** *The speech was 26 minutes, 30 seconds long. But: He ran the race in 1:12:31.*

### Author Bio

Gary Dotson is a national award-winning journalist who has extensive experience in digital and print journalism. For three decades, he was senior editor at the Belleville News-Democrat and BND.com in Illinois, which is owned by McClatchy. In recent years, he has been working remotely with newsrooms across McClatchy as an editor and supervisor. He has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri Columbia and a master's degree in mass communications from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where he has been teaching a basic newswriting class for the past 12 years.

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## 6: Writing Feature News

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Figure 6.1: Feature news. (Pexels free-to-use license; [Cottonbro studio](#))

Good feature stories are captivating works of nonfiction that evoke all sorts of emotions from readers. They are news stories that draw power from many of the same news values that drive straight news, but they are not necessarily time-bound. Feature stories do not fit the mold of straight news, nor should they.

Feature news stories leave room for setting the scene creatively, establishing characters, and providing context that usually would not fit in a straight news story.

Feature story writing involves many more creative writing techniques than writing straight news.

This is not to say that newswriters are encouraged to overwrite feature stories. They are not, but in feature stories, writers are free to use more descriptive language, more details about their nonfiction characters and (limited) turns of phrase that would usually not be acceptable in straight news stories.

In feature stories, writers combine their unique experiences and storytelling approaches with trusted story structures and essential techniques to grab readers and hold them.

This section introduces different options for writing feature news leads and includes a few suggested story structures. Some general guidelines applicable across most feature stories are included, but writers should not feel bound by formulas.

This section also includes brief analyses of a few feature news leads and stories to illustrate the aspects of feature writing which may be, more or less, universal.

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## 6.1: Feature news leads



Figure 6.1.1: Feature news reader. (Unsplash free-to-use license; Roman Kraft)

Large portions of this chapter are remixed, revised, and amended from *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries*, <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/>

Feature news leads come in a variety of flavors. They prioritize hooking the reader with a compelling anecdote or some delicious scene setting description rather than hammering them with the facts right away.

Feature stories cover topics, issues and stories that can't be summarized in a few paragraphs listed in descending order of importance based on the prevailing sense of the status quo and what is normal. Make no mistake, for most readers, for most stories, the straight news story structure complete with summary lead works just fine. If a story can be covered as straight news, at least in the short term, it probably should be because that format delivers necessary information in a way that balances comprehensiveness and convenience.

However, there is more to life than the minimum list of need-to-know facts, and sometimes readers want more context to better understand a story, or they want to be entertained by a story that is both true and intriguing.

Great feature stories are not just based on a true story. They are accurate and verified. They go through the same fact checking processes that straight news stories do.

While it can be challenging to captivate an audience with a nonfiction story, many of the best tales, even ones that seem wild and unbelievable, are, in fact, real.

### You can look it up

As a classroom exercise, find the most outlandish nonfiction news feature you can and share it with your class in an online or in-person discussion. It is essential for this practice that you do not include works "based on a true story." Use only carefully vetted feature news articles or briefs.

Consider these questions: What makes this story stand out? Are the story subjects presented as well developed characters who change over time? How are they described? Does the writer, or do the writers use descriptive language well? How did the writer verify story facts and demonstrate their accuracy? If any of the stories presented in class went viral, do readers and social media users spread accurate versions? Provide complete sentence responses.

### Is it a feature, though?

The story topic, the amount of details necessary to convey essential information and the news values appealed to typically determine if a news story is covered as a feature instead of straight news.

If a straight news story touches on an issue that should be addressed in depth, or if readers indicate they want to know more, reporters may pitch a feature news follow up.

Feature articles give writers the creative freedom to develop a narrative. This can be a relief or a challenge to news writing students depending on their existing skill set, but, with practice, every media writing student is capable of writing feature news.

### Let's start at the beginning

Feature news articles do not start with a summary lead. There are many ways to start a feature story well, and of course there are many examples of bad feature leads too. Often, bad feature leads use "journalese," the term we use for [phrases that seem to appear only in news stories](#).

The only rule for writing feature leads is that you need to grab the reader's attention without resorting to using clickbait or other trite tactics.

Unlike a summary lead, a feature lead can be a few sentences long and does not necessarily include the story's essential, Who, What, When, Where, Why, or How.

The most common types of feature leads are anecdotal leads and descriptive leads. Other styles or approaches should be covered in more advanced journalism courses and texts. This chapter focuses on these two types of leads. The next section covers the story structures that flow from them.

### Anecdotal leads

An anecdotal lead tells a brief story that grabs the reader's attention and engages them in a way that makes them curious about the rest of the story. The anecdotal lead should give readers a sense of the tone of the story. It should also introduce the main subject or one of the main subjects of the piece.

#### Anecdotal Lead Example

Consider this lead used with permission from [The Lens, an indie news site based in New Orleans](#):

"For years, people incarcerated on the disciplinary tiers at David Wade Correctional Center in north Louisiana — including those with mental illness — were confined for too long in cells that were too small, sometimes without bedding or without anything except a paper gown.

They were not given meaningful access to mental health care beyond psychotropic medication — and even that was administered haphazardly.

Those were the findings of U.S. District Judge Elizabeth Foote of the Western District of Louisiana in 2022."

Note that this lead is three sentences long. It tells a brief story about deplorable conditions faced by some prisoners at the correctional facility in question. It is relatively broad as far as anecdotes go, but this is necessary to establish the scope of the abuse. The lead involves multiple "characters." It sets a bleak tone, and it includes details that would not be included in a summary lead.

Anecdotal leads may bend the rules discussed in the straight news chapter. For example, this one delves into history a bit, but the purpose is not to focus on history. Instead, the purpose is to draw readers in with a brief, compelling story about documented cases of prisoner abuse.

From this lead, readers get the sense that the main characters in this article will be prisoners who suffered mistreatment. Readers will understand that the court system has uncovered a social ill that needs to be addressed, and they can see that claims will be backed up by court records.

In other words, this signals to readers that they are in for an investigative news story with serious implications about real human characters.

### Descriptive leads

Feature stories that start with a descriptive lead do not strive to tell a story-within-a-story but instead aim to set the scene before continuing to the nut graf.

Scene-setting descriptive leads should appeal to the reader's senses. Think about the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures that will immerse a reader in the story and capture details to the best of your ability.

### Descriptive Lead Example

Note the details included in this lead also from [The Lens](#):

"At the back of the old McDonogh 35 school on Marais Street, near the trash bins and uneven ground that fills with water after rainstorms, is a special room.

The baby blue classroom has bright carpets, toys, puzzles, whiteboards and tables of varying heights. A full kitchen is equipped to teach life skills. Next door is a 'cool down' room, with padded walls and floors and an observation window."

This lead is two sentences long. It does not introduce a main character but instead sets a scene. The careful, accurate, but selective use of details lets readers know that the rooms in question are near trash bins that might sometimes be swamped with rainwater.

The lead juxtaposes bright colors and items you would see in an early childhood education setting with images of uneven tables and padded walls and floors. The takeaway message is that this is a space for children with behavior issues in a school that is not the most well funded.

News feature stories find creative ways to hook readers and convey essential information while holding other facts back. Feature leads do not always convey the full set of news values being addressed in the story. Instead, they quickly develop a sense of trust between writer and reader that this story matters both because of what is covered and how the story will be told.

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## 6.2: Feature news story structures



Figure 6.2.1: Reading the news in Cartagena, Colombia. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Jorge Gardner](#))

There are many ways to build on a great feature lead and organize a compelling feature story. All great news features have a clear beginning, middle and end. To drive a narrative, writers need a character or characters who change over time. Real people dealing with real life can make for the most compelling characters.

Professional newswriters see character arcs in real life and tell compelling stories by deciding which facts to prioritize, which details to include and which to leave out all while being faithful to the truth.

While details help flesh out a story, the skeleton of any narrative is a main character (or group) who starts in one place physically, emotionally, and intellectually and ends somewhere else on most or all of those fronts.

Features almost always include more imagery and emotional quotes than straight news, but this is not a license to let a feature story drone on. As with any other type of storytelling, a great feature should hold a reader's attention throughout, or it needs an edit.

The previous chapter section covered common feature news leads. The rest of this section details where to go from there.

### Lead + nut graf

One of the most popular feature news story structures is the anecdotal OR descriptive lead + nut graf. The term "nut graf" refers to a paragraph containing some of the key points of a story that might otherwise have been put in a summary lead in a hard news story.

The nut graf conveys the news value. It connects the character to issues or events that affect large numbers of people. In news, what often makes a character arc most compelling is if it represents circumstances similar to what many others have experienced.

#### Lead + Nut Graf Example

##### Anecdotal lead

Sharon Jackson sat at her Formica-topped kitchen table leafing through an old magazine filled with stale celebrity gossip. Page after page of photos of film stars past their prime flipped past. Jackson was only vaguely interested in who used to date whom and which former reality stars were pregnant. She coughed more out of boredom than necessity. Her phone buzzed.

It was a reporter asking to set up an interview to discuss a social media controversy involving Jackson and another young woman.

"Sorry," she said, as she stuck to her practiced response: "I've already spoken to several reporters about the incident and do not wish to make any further comments at this time."

Notice how the lead tells a brief story before transitioning to the topic at the heart of the piece.

The nut graf follows immediately

Jackson, 21, and her best friend Carla Brown, had gone viral earlier in the week after a bystander shared a video of them getting into an argument outside of a local Houston restaurant.

Notice how the nut graf includes much of the Who, What, When, and Where. In many ways, a nut graf is comparable to a delayed summary lead. It includes essential information not covered in the feature lead. It connects the lead to the piece's news value, and it serves as a transition between the attention-getting lead and the rest of the narrative.

From this point, the story can continue to use descriptive details to explain Ms. Jackson's thoughts, feelings and experiences related to being thrust into public view for a fight that might otherwise have only taken a few minutes of her life before being forgotten.

This feature goes beyond the viral video and beyond the straight news story you might read about a woman who went viral for having a fight.

It provides context and details the aftermath of this woman's viral moment.

When placing the nut graf, let the flow of the story dictate where it should go, and keep with the tone of the rest of the piece.

### The middle of a feature and narrative flow

If most feature stories include either an anecdotal lead or a descriptive lead and then a nut graf at the beginning, what should go in the middle? Most are organized according to themes. Writers should only include the number of themes necessary to bring readers from the beginning to the end of the story. Paragraphs should still be no more than 1-2 sentences long, and quotes and descriptions should be used as necessary.

The body of a feature story can go in a number of directions depending on the facts, the tone of the story, and whether or not the ending of the story can be sewn up neatly or left somewhat open-ended.

Identify essential pieces of information that drive the character arc forward or that provide details that evoke emotion. Separate those pieces into themes, and label the themes in the body of the story with subheadings. Work your way to the conclusion and clearly demonstrate where your main character has ended up and what might be next if there is no definitive resolution.

### Show, don't tell

When writing the body of a feature story, show through examples and description how the story unfolds rather than telling readers through mere statements of fact what happens next. By showing readers instead of telling them, they can better visualize places, characters, and events. They can relate to the story more deeply and should find it more engrossing.

#### Telling

Friends describe Amariah as a generous and vibrant person who was involved in several nonprofit organizations.

#### Showing

Tracey proudly recalls her friend's generosity. "Amariah is usually the first person to arrive at a volunteer event, and the last to leave. She spends four hours every Saturday morning volunteering at the mentoring center. It's rare to not catch her laughing, flashing her perfect smile. She's just a burst of positive energy."

The previous example uses a quote to provide detail and to try to evoke readers' emotions. Writers have many options when deciding how best to deliver the details that make a feature story sing.

### The living end

The end of a feature story should not be a simple summary.

- If the story started with a central character, the end should return to them.
- If the writer sets up a problem in the lead, readers should be presented with a solution or set of possible solutions before the end of the piece.
- If the feature is about an event, it is not enough to say that the event ended. Describe how and why.
- If a story is about an urgent need, it might end with a reasonable call to action. The level of advocacy a story adopts will depend on the outlet where it is published.

Feature stories should have a clear, concise ending statement. This is not an invitation to end with a cliché. Usually, great feature stories do not end with quotes, although there is no hard and fast rule against it. What matters most is that the story ends on a

memorable note that sticks with readers. Leave them with a feeling worthy of the gripping lead you used to hook them at the start, and reward them for making the journey with you.

### The case for publishing features in a social media age

Feature articles are often more compelling and potentially more historically and culturally important than flashy social media posts or standard straight news stories.

Professional media writers will need to know how to create all types of media content in the future, but as an industry it is important to maintain the positive elements of the feature writing tradition.

Features enable readers to understand main characters on a deeper level. They impart facts about issues in a way that readers can relate to. They convey snapshots of culture at a given time, and professional news features, whether they appear in newspapers, magazines, online news sites with legacy brands or independent online publications, demonstrate that the craft of writing compelling nonfiction is alive and kicking.

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## 6.3: Hashtag relatable - community news reporting and writing



Figure 6.3.1: Rasheed Z. Ajamu- Editor/Reporter at Germantown Info Hub. (Courtesy Rasheed Ajamu)

Rasheed Ajamu is an editor and reporter at Germantown Info Hub (GIH) in Philadelphia. GIH is a community journalism project focused on sharing news and stories about the Germantown neighborhoods of Philadelphia. The project is a product of the Resolve Philadelphia newsroom, which defines itself as a new kind of local newsroom designed for community impact.

Resolve Philly focuses on three strategic areas of focus: "We center three principles in our work that allow us to cultivate more informed and engaged communities and demonstrate how news can better serve those communities when rooted in solutions and community voices. We strongly believe this is a model for the future of local news."<sup>1</sup>

Ajamu writes: GIH is a hyperlocal, community-centered newsroom producing news for the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. By community-centered, we mean **being engaged with the community** we report on and **centering solutions**, not just the problem. We primarily produce digital web content, but we also tell stories through many media, including our biweekly radio show and social media.

This work is invaluable to me. It is the antithesis of what I learned in journalism school, where relationships with the communities and people you report on were discouraged. In our reporting style, you are encouraged to lean into those relationships and see the neighbors around you as experts on their environment and the issues that affect them.

While reporting doesn't only have to look like digital news stories, writing is still a vital part of these things.

Our radio show requires a script and the formation of questions ahead of an interview, a social media reel needs storyboarding ahead of time with scenes and thoughts brainstormed ahead, and prepping for a community event needs plans and strategies to be drafted.

So, while writing may not feel centered within these things, writing certainly is a lot of the backbone.

### For the love of a city

Ajamu's [bio on Resolve Philadelphia](#) includes a quote that explains their love for the work: (Note that Ajamu purposefully varies her use of pronouns.)

"As Germantown Info Hub's editor and reporter, Ajamu is endlessly fascinated by the neighborhood's people, culture, small businesses, and history.

'It's a place of magic; there is a certain level of surprise almost every day,' they said. 'It's probably to me one of the most organized neighborhoods in Philadelphia.'

Ajamu grew up across the neighborhood — first on Duval Street and later on Price Street, close to Waterview Recreation Center. She's seen lots of changes over the past two decades, such as school closures, including Germantown High School, more expensive development, and the disappearance of many family-owned businesses rooted in the community.

At the same time, 'I do think that there is a certain level of neighborliness that I have always felt from Germantown,' Ajamu added. 'When I see articles about social isolation on the rise, I specifically can't relate because I'm in a place where there is

always something happening, and people are always communicating. There is always something going on.'

1. Resolve Philadelphia. "Germantown Info Hub Archive." Accessed November 14, 2024. <https://resolvephilly.org/gih/>.

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## 6.4: Art of Clarity - Feature News Leads and Feature Story Puzzle

This Art of Clarity entry covers what goes into writing an anecdotal lead and nut graf, a descriptive lead, and a brief feature story.

Since the previous chapter described these concepts at some length, this section focuses on the ways the reporting process and writing process mesh to make feature stories work. Leads are deconstructed to indicate how writers think in terms of identifying and using elements of a lead similar to the way a chef might gather ingredients and prepare an appetizer.

Students in an introductory media writing course may not be expected to report and write a feature story. Thus, the assignment for this chapter involves a similar process of breaking down a feature story into its elements, which students then need to recognize and assemble.

### Gathering anecdotes and details

Anecdotes compelling enough to grab the attention of a mass audience come from careful and thoughtful interviewing. Reporters skilled at conducting interviews as conversations rather than interrogations will often pick up on moments where an interviewee has an anecdote to share.

Some questions you might ask when a subject brings up an interesting story-within-a-story include:

- Can you tell me how that happened?
- Would you set the scene for me and explain what led up to this?
- What images and sounds stand out to you from that moment?
- What went through your mind as this was unfolding?

Anecdotal leads are primarily paraphrased with brief quotes included if necessary to convey emotion or to share details as only an eyewitness could. Ideally, the anecdote is brief and has a clear beginning, middle and end.

Whether you find a perfectly structured anecdote or not, the essential task is to relay a brief, true, attention-grabbing story that opens a window to a larger narrative. It should set the tone for the rest of the story and, if possible, give the readers a sense of the main character's personality.

As with all news, in feature stories claims of fact must be verified with at least two independent sources before the story can be published. This is to say that if an anecdote seems too good to be true, writers should be skeptical and pay extra attention to verification and fact checking.

### Writing an anecdotal lead

Let's take apart a published anecdotal lead and reassemble it. The story has been broken down into three parts including information for the anecdotal lead, information that provides context that we can label "save for later," and some brief quotes.

The keys are to identify where to begin and end the anecdote so that readers are compelled to continue, to write the anecdote in such a way that it leads logically to the rest of the story and to use quotes sparingly to pepper the anecdote with emotion.

The key facts for the anecdote have been pre-sorted for students' convenience. Normally, the writer would have to decide which details to leave in the lead and which to put in the "save for later" pile.

Facts for the anecdote:

At the end of the day at a local French immersion charter school in New Orleans, the state superintendent of schools entered the building just as students were leaving. He entered alone. His name is John White. The name of the school is Lycée Français de la Nouvelle-Orléans charter school, which most of your readers will recognize as a French immersion school. It has 340 students. White needed to convince teachers to stay at the school for the 2013-14 school year. The purpose of the meeting was to hear from faculty about their daily experiences. About 30 staff members met with White. This took place on the Wednesday afternoon before the story was published.

Quotes for the anecdote:

White said, "My sense is we have stumbled." He also said, "We need your help." When walking into the school, he greeted the students with "bonjour."

"Save for later" facts:

The school recently received word that only four out of 18 French teachers were willing to stay another year. A former teacher is suing the school's president (not to be confused with the state superintendent of schools) and another board member. Those administrators were asked not to come to this meeting. At least two school administrators have been fired in the past several months. The state directly oversees this charter school.

#### Example anecdotal lead

Here is the lead [as it appears in The Lens](#):

As children filed out of Lycée Français de la Nouvelle-Orléans charter school Wednesday afternoon to cars and waiting parents, Louisiana's top education official strolled in alone.

State superintendent John White offered friendly "bonjours" to any who greeted him. But his mission at the embattled French curriculum school was clear. He wanted to hear directly from faculty about their day-to-day experiences inside the 340-student school — and, most importantly, to exhort them to stay for 2013-14.

"My sense is we have stumbled," White said, standing before a classroom of about 30 staff members seated in kid-sized chairs. "We need your help."

#### What makes this a good anecdote?

This is a brief story about a man entering a school to talk to 30 teachers and staff to try to convince them not to leave. It begins with his entrance and ends with, "We need your help." Thus, it has a clear beginning, middle and end.

Note the way the writer, Marta Jewson, puts the main character in motion. White does not simply walk into the school. He strolls in alone past students on their way out. This suggests that although this issue is ultimately about how these students will be taught, they are not the focus of this story. The lone administrator is the main character here.

The "bonjours" set the scene reminding readers that not only does the school have a French name, it is a French immersion charter school.

The anecdote folds in some important facts and frames this meeting as part of a "mission." Then it ends with an image of teachers in "kid-sized chairs" who are being asked, probably not for the first time, to help, as in help keep the school open.

This anecdote builds suspense. It mixes key details with essential contextual facts. It does not tell the whole story of whether or not teachers were receptive to the pitch and what that portends for the future of the school. The lead only hints at larger issues with charter schools in New Orleans and with the state of education in Louisiana in general. To find out more about these issues and how they played out in this school, [you have to read the story](#).

Students in an introductory media writing course should be able to recognize an anecdotal lead and what makes it tick. This text does not include an exercise for writing anecdotal leads, but one could be added by an instructor, depending on the course.

Next, we look at the nut graf that immediately followed this lead.

#### The French charter school nut graf

Remember that a nut graf is not a summary lead but a paragraph that follows a feature news lead, usually immediately, that contains further essential information.

#### Example nut graf

Two weeks ago, the head of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana sent a letter to the school's interim chief warning her that [only four of the school's 18 French teachers were willing to stay at Lycée](#) amid recent leadership turmoil. Unless the school retains more instructors, CODOFIL's head said, the organization could not promise future help placing French nationals at the school.

In this story, the main function of the nut graf is to establish the stakes of the meeting. Now, readers who are invested are prepared to read another 30 paragraphs or so to get further context and to understand how the meeting went. Ultimately, it ended with a set of plans and promises to change and to involve teachers and staff in the process.

A standard straight-news meeting story might have said just that, but telling the story this way invites readers to care about a complex issue and to see the drama unfolding in an administrative visit.

### Descriptive leads

A good descriptive lead can be just as compelling as an anecdote. Not every feature story has a convenient, compelling, quick narrative reveal itself to reporters, but there are always details that can help a reader become immersed.

Consider the following descriptive lead from another story in The Lens. Note how it focuses heavily on descriptive language rather than delivering a mini-narrative.

#### Descriptive lead example

As they watched the sky, filled with fire and smoke, older residents of Garyville, Louisiana thought back to a half-century ago. It was a different time, before the sugar-cane fields lining the Mississippi River were replaced by the massive Marathon Refinery, lined with gleaming, puffing smokestacks.

Though Marathon was built in 1976, it is considered the last significant oil refinery built in the United States.

That's partly because of community opposition to new refineries, a position that people in Garyville understood well last month.

This story details concerns about pollution in the area and cancer rates that may be related. It indicates how area residents are wary of further industrialization if it is going to bring more pollution into an area inhabited predominately by people from minoritized groups.

The story continues with a nut graf, several paragraphs about the fire detailed in the lead and two subsections that delve more deeply into resisting the spread of industry and difficulties getting accurate data about pollutants.

#### Feature story puzzle assignment

This assignment is different from most others in this text in that it requires students to piece together a story rather than to write something of their own creation. A completed, published story has been chopped up and pasted out of order below. The assignment requires students to recognize the descriptive lead and nut graf, to recognize which pieces of the story belong under which subheadings and to consider a logical order for story sections and for paragraphs within each section. Students do not need to edit or alter any text for this assignment. Instead, they should open two documents and cut and paste from the jumbled page to a story that flows logically.

The goal is not necessarily to structure the story precisely the way the original writer did. Instead, the challenge is to read through the available information thoroughly and to come up with a structured feature story that follows the skeleton provided.

\*Note to instructors that this assignment is meant to be completed in one class period with no browser access other than using the LMS to submit work, as the source article is available online.

Assignment: Take the out-of-order, professionally written, paragraphs listed below and use this outline to piece together a feature story puzzle.

Students should not be graded on how close they get to the original source material but rather whether their organization of the story flows well, has a clear descriptive lead and nut graf, and if its story elements fit the subheading under which they were placed.

Put this headline, subheadline and byline at the top of your story.

#### **Living Memories**

*This week, as the Living School moves toward its final graduation, the Class of 2024 mourns the closure of their unique high school — and explains why it mattered.*

by **Marta Jewson**

Then continue with this outline:

Descriptive lead

Nut graf

Continuing body section

Subheading: How long does it take to create a new school?

Subheading: Visual learning and individualized attention

Story paragraphs and elements, not listed in any particular order:

The school became known as a place that was a little offbeat and accepting of differences. “It feels more welcoming than other schools, because at other schools, you feel more like a number than a student,” said student Khloe Jones.

At Living’s student fair in December, just after the school board had voted to close the school, students were abuzz about their first-semester projects in audio, science, and art, all part of the school’s Winter Exhibition.

For the Living School, facing its first contract renewal, the anomaly could not have hit at a worse time.

Not everything within a school progresses at the same pace. Even five years into its tenure, some aspects of the Living School – including the soccer and basketball teams’ inaugural seasons – had just begun.

Up until last year, the school’s standardized test scores had held steady at a C. Then last spring, they dropped to failing, resulting in an F letter grade from the state.

In the exhibition, one student explained the stark effects of climate change through her display — a globe divided in half, with a green oasis on one side and brown dried-out plant life on the other.

The result was a one-of-a-kind environment where Saturn Paul could more easily absorb knowledge, because she could be herself and relax her mind, she said.

The high school’s staff and students took pride in the school’s unconventional learning space, with its high ceilings, bright walls, and thriving garden next door.

“They’re saying our LEAP scores are bad,” Senior Byren Coleman said. “But check this out, come swing through and see all the good work we’ve been doing. We’re really productive.”

By the metrics at hand, Living had failed. “Certainly we have work to do. We did not have a good year last year in terms of our standardized test scores,” CEO Stefin Pasternak told the board in December. “That’s an anomaly.”

This spring’s conversations about Living School have also centered about how long, realistically, it takes to launch a charter school from scratch.

“This is my people. This is all I know,” said Brianna Smith, as she stood in the place that had become her haven, a converted laser-tag venue in New Orleans East that was renovated five years ago into the Living School New Orleans.

In December, the Orleans Parish School Board voted to close the Living School at the end of this school year.

Though this week should have been celebratory, Smith, a member of the Living School’s Class of 2024, had mixed emotions.

Other parts of the school felt more advanced, as if they were on their way to becoming crystallized Living School traditions. In teacher Jimmy Luttrell’s advanced-carpentry class, students bragged about building musical instruments from scratch. Language arts students created a book about New Orleans artifacts for teacher Katie Wills Evans. A science class took a school bus to the Common Ground disaster-justice headquarters in the Lower 9th Ward to install intricate water-retention and distribution systems that were designed in Living School engineering class and built during carpentry classes.

“It’s so much easier for me to learn, because I am a visual learner and we do visual-learning things, like projects and stuff,” said student Saturn Paul, who said that she thrived at Living because of focused attention from staff. “That’s where I really need it from,” she said. “I receive a lot of positive energy and motivating energy.”

Then, this week, it was over.

Despite impressive graduation results last year, the school’s other indicators weren’t strong enough to earn a new contract and stay open.

In a city where all public schools are now charters – with closures and start-ups as bedrock parts of the charter model – the shuttering of Living School prompted conversations about how a start-up school’s success should be measured, monitored, and supported by NOLA Public Schools.

Performance is only closely scrutinized in contract-renewal years. If Living School's contract wasn't in play, the school would likely still be open.

#### Inspiration from award-winning features

If you want to read the best of the best, consider [the winners of the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing](#), most of which are linked for free from Pulitzer.org.

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6.4: Art of Clarity - Feature News Leads and Feature Story Puzzle is shared under a [CC BY](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

## 7: Writing for Audiovisual Media



Figure 7.1: Television with voice option remote. (Unsplash free-to-use License, [Glenn Carstens-Peters](#))

### Learning Objectives

- Understand the power of audiovisual media
- Learn what it means to write for the ear
- Learn basic formatting techniques for audio and video scripts
- Recognize the emerging power of podcasting

### The media formerly known as “broadcast”

For our purposes as media writers, the “audio” comes first in “audiovisual media” because most often audio carries the narrative. If you think about your favorite film or TV series, it is usually the combination of dialog, narration, ambient sound — i.e. “natural sound,” music, and sound effects that delivers the information that moves the plot. If you need an example, turn on your favorite film, mute the sound and turn off captions. Depending on the movie, the images will likely convey most of the plot in broad strokes, but as a viewer you will probably be left wondering often about characters’ motivations, about what they plan to do next, and about whether a scene is meant to be intense, thrilling, lighthearted, calm, etc. Audiovisual storytelling is built on a foundation of sound.

This is true across all sorts of media dissemination platforms. When we listen to podcasts, we relate to the hosts’ voices. When we watch television news live or catch video news clips on social media, natural sound — ambient sound recorded at the scene of events — draws us into the story.

### Definition: Natural sound

Natural sound is ambient sound recorded at the scene of events that can help audiences immerse themselves in audiovisual productions. The term is used most often in radio and television news reporting.

Television news stations request 9-1-1 audio from newsworthy events, and sound effects specialists go to great lengths to create the sounds of storms and [sandworms](#) for the same reason: Great sound design makes fictional things seem real and makes factual events seem hyper real. Our secondhand experience of events via audiovisual news and social media is often more clear than if we had been there ourselves because superfluous sounds containing unnecessary information have been edited out.

This chapter addresses writing for audiovisual media including radio, television, and podcasting. Writing for social media and tips for writing screenplays are handled elsewhere in this text. Throughout this chapter, readers should think about the power of audio, the driver of audiovisual narratives.

### The power of the radio wave

Writing for audiovisual media means writing scripts. Students may be more familiar with dramatic scripts than nonfiction ones, but the term is used across the media industry.

### Definition: Script

In media writing, the term script applies to anything written for sound and/or video production. It indicates that the writer is following a format familiar to other professionals in the field. Professional fields that use scripts include radio & television news, commercial production, podcasting, social media, film, etc.

The root technology that established many of the audiovisual writing norms and conventions still in use today is radio. The use of radio waves to convey information laid the foundation for broadcast media and for reaching mass audiences as we conceive of them today. While newspapers were the first widely available, affordable, daily mass media product, broadcast radio was the first technology to reach mass audiences with free content in their homes with the power of the human voice and music.

Radio receivers were often offered at discounted prices in the early days of radio adoption in the United States because producers saw the opportunity to create a marketplace out of thin air, and governments recognized that ideologies could be reinforced efficiently using broadcast media.<sup>1</sup>

The combination of the draw of entertainment and news, the ready-made revenue streams of advertising-sponsored programming, and the potential for social influence made radio a force to be reckoned with in the 20th century. Primarily because people of every generation in the U.S. still listen to radio in their cars, it still has the most reach of any mass medium, according to Statista.



You will find more infographics at [Statista](https://www.statista.com).

*Statista.com chart on contemporary popularity of radio.*

Source: <https://www.statista.com/chart/3589/weekly-reach-of-media-platforms/>

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Radio has the unique ability to transcend physical boundaries to connect people across vast distances. The telegraph may have collapsed space and time in terms of the transmission of text-based messages, but radio broadcasters proved they could transmit the human voice, music, and dramatic presentations almost instantaneously to waiting audiences. An added benefit was that radio receivers, what we commonly refer to as simply “radios,” are easy for consumers of all ages and levels of education to use. Broadcast media serve everyone from the highly educated to those who are not able to read.<sup>2</sup>

Radio and other audio-based media also have an emotional component. The intimacy of the spoken word delivered over radio waves helps shape public opinion and creates a sense of unity and, potentially, trust. When you learn to write scripts for audiovisual media, you learn how to tap into this power.

## Television

It is appropriate to think of television as the visual extension of radio, although the term "television" does not mean merging sound and images. It means something closer to "seeing from far away." Being able to extend human vision across space and time was considered nearly magical when television was invented, but, as has already been suggested, the real power of broadcast media came from the merger of sound, images, and rapid dissemination.

The marriage of rich, colorful images to narratives delivered through sound on a platform that has, at times, been free, or at least affordable to mass audiences, is what has made television so popular. Globally, television is a ubiquitous source of information and entertainment. Its content is a touchstone of cultural representation.<sup>3</sup> Television broadcasts have the power to shape public opinion, reflect and reinforce popular culture, deliver education and entertainment, and bring about social change.<sup>4</sup> Great television scripts deliver powerful narratives via audio and flesh out those stories into fully immersive content with visual cues.

In this chapter, you will learn both single-column radio scripting techniques that apply to all kinds of audio media, as well as two-column TV scripting techniques where the narrative audio is indicated on the right and video, graphics, and other visual cues are indicated on the left. Great scripts are blueprints for towering media productions that have the potential to move mass audiences.

1. Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of plenty: The evolution of American television*. Oxford University Press, 1990.
2. Ibid.
3. Fiske, John. *Television culture*. Routledge, 2010.
4. Carson, Clayborne, et al., eds. *The eyes on the prize civil rights reader: Documents, speeches, and firsthand accounts from the Black freedom struggle*. Penguin, 1991.

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## 7.1: Writing for the ear



Figure 7.1.1: Young man in a cafe listening to headphones and writing in a notebook.  
(Unsplash free-to-use License, [Dollar Gill](#))

### Writing for the ear

Writing for audiovisual media is often called “writing for the ear,” because the text is primarily spoken rather than displayed. If listeners/viewers do not understand what is being said, they may come away misinformed from a news report. They may literally lose the plot of a story and they will be much more likely to swipe away from your content or simply turn it off. In the media “formerly known as broadcast,” even when text can be visualized, e.g. with captions, audiences tend to watch only once. This makes audiovisual media, **linear media**.

#### Definition: linear media

**Linear media** refers to media formats that present audio and/or video content to consumers as though they were located on a fixed point with content flowing past them on a line.

A metaphor for experiencing linear media is a person standing on a platform watching and listening to a train pass them by. Imagine the train moves by slowly with all the windows open but never stops. People on the platform can see and hear much of what is going on inside. Sounds emanate, and various scenes can be viewed within each passing car, but once the train has passed, the viewer is not likely to hear those sounds or see those people again.

Now imagine the people on the train are trying to communicate with people standing on the platform. Those on the train, if they were practiced, would speak clearly and directly in the simplest possible terms, and they would take turns speaking.

Consumers of linear media are like the people on the platform. If you were to write scripts for those on the train you would need to write in clear and simple terms not because the people on the platform are slow to understand but because they only get one chance to make sense of all that they see and hear.

The essential rule for writing for audiovisual media is to keep the language clear and simple. Of course, some audiovisual works will be more sophisticated than others, but even complex audiovisual stories must leave out unnecessary details. You may use vivid, evocative language to engage the audience's imagination, but choose words and sentences that would be comfortable for

someone reading at a seventh-grade level. The point is not to oversimplify complex events. The point is to be understood through the spoken word at first impression.

Additionally, quick pacing is critical. You achieve quick pacing in audiovisual stories by using mostly short and medium-length sentences. Paragraphs should only be one or two sentences long. This goes against what students are taught in English composition courses, but English comp courses are meant to prepare students from a variety of backgrounds to produce academic writing for a variety of potential fields.

Mass media audiences include everyone from highly educated people to people with little formal education. In a globalized, networked information system, media consumers are often watching in a language other than their native tongue. These are additional reasons to keep the writing clear, brief and approachable.

Even those who communicate for a living and who love intellectual radio, television, podcasts etc. still expect to be able to clearly understand what they are watching and listening to the first time through.

### Say less, know more

Writing clearly to be understood by as large an audience as possible is challenging. It requires the writer to anticipate what audiences know and what they might not yet know. There is no single term for the concept of anticipating an audience's knowledge. In practice, the most common approach to the challenge of neither saying too much nor too little is to think of a target audience member and address the work to them. If you practice writing scripts as though you are communicating with an individual whose age, background and interests are known to you, this can help you anticipate your audience's familiarity with the topics and terms.

Individual media outlets often have their own guidelines on how to address the target audience. Some urge writers to assume viewers know nothing. Other media writers, particularly those working in niche fields, including social media influencers, often use some version of this phrase: "Most of you know this, but in case you need a refresher..." This approach helps writers welcome newcomers without insulting the intelligence of those already in the know. Some viewers might be tired of this disclaimer, but the goal of media writing in the mass communication context is to reach as wide an audience as possible and to communicate as clearly as possible.

The goal is not perfection. Perfection is subjectively defined, unattainable and ultimately frustrating. Media writers should strive to be understood and to be memorable. To do this, they must connect with audiences. To connect with mass audiences, writers should consume enough media and gain enough familiarity with the culture to have a good sense of what a target audience member already knows.

### General pointers for writing for the ear

Most audiovisual scripts include an attention-getting opening line. In audiovisual newswriting, this acts as something of a combination headline and teaser sentence about what is to come. This line should typically be a complete sentence. Radio news scripts, audio and video ads, engaging social media videos, etc. all tend to begin with attention-getting statements that do not attempt to tell the whole story.

Writing body paragraphs clearly and concisely addresses audience needs, and it can also help make your content easier to retain, which is particularly important when writing ads. By prioritizing clarity and conciseness, writers can hold on to the listeners they capture.

One of the core jobs of audiovisual media writers is to translate, so to speak, official language into language that regular audience members can understand. Writers accomplish this when they read corporate and official news releases, comprehend the necessary information and present it with jargon and unnecessary details removed.

Writing for the ear also means writing with rhythm. This section already mentioned the importance of pacing. When soundbites or other pieces of audio are included, they should also be incorporated into the script to match the overall pace.

The best way to accomplish this is to be careful not to stack too many lines of narration, too many soundbites, or too many sound effects, bits of music, or special effects together.

Great audiovisual writers can predict what a script will sound like when completed. They indicate down to the fraction of a second how long bits of sound should be used, and thus can create a blueprint that accounts for the pacing not only of dialog and narration but of the entire work.

Establishing different rhythms for pieces of different lengths can be a helpful approach to writing for audiovisual media. A 60-second commercial will likely need multiple music or sound effects breaks to split up bits of narration. A 6-second social media script must make its point quickly and might have space for only a bit of background music.

Writing for the ear means selecting the right words and thinking about pacing. The next section gets into more specific "Do's and Don't's."

### Heard around the newsroom

Imagine walking into a television newsroom for the first day of an internship. The pace of work is incredibly quick. Everyone seems to be moving at all times, and they sometimes speak in a language you have never heard. Some of the most common terms used in newsrooms and in news scripts are defined and broken down here to help students begin to develop an understanding. Some terms may be replaced depending on regional culture, newsroom culture, and technology, but the concepts are essential.

#### TV Terms

**Story meeting** - A story meeting is a story *pitch* meeting where news producers, managers, reporters, photographers, those who promote newscasts, social media managers, etc. come together, usually near the start of a shift, to discuss the potential news stories of the day and make assignments regarding who will cover which story, what approach they will take, who they are likely to interview, and what video they expect to get

**Story slug** - The label given to a news story internally so that news professionals can discuss them as works in progress. These are usually specific enough to avoid confusion but only 2-3 words. For example, a house fire in a nearby town might get the story slug, "SHELBYVILLE HOUSE FIRE." This would avoid confusion if any other fires were covered around the same time.

**VO (Vee-oh)** - VO stands for Voice Over, which refers to a type of video news presentation where the anchor reads a story live as related video plays under. Where this term might get confusing for someone new to the industry is when a video photographer is sent to "go get some VO." In this case, VO is more or less synonymous with "video," as in video needed for a VO. Another somewhat generic term for video is "B-roll."

**B-roll** - This term dates back to the days of shooting video news on actual film reels. Typically, the A-roll was for interviews, and the B-roll was for accompanying video. By the way, video does not mean "videotape." The term predates the invention of videotape and was used since the early days of television to refer to the visual counterpart to audio.

**Soundbite, bite, or SOT** - Most, whether they work in the industry or not, know what a soundbite is. It is a video clip from an interview where viewers can hear often emotional information firsthand from a knowledgeable source. What most viewers might not notice is that soundbites on average are only about 9-10 seconds long. Consider 15 seconds to be the upper bound-for-soundbite length in television news. In documentaries and other long-form productions, they may run longer. In radio, the classic equivalent term for soundbite is "actuality," although this term is in declining use. SOT is short for "Sound on Tape" and is synonymous with soundbite.

**VO/SOT (VOH-saht)** - This term refers literally to Voice Over/Sound on Tape. In practice this is a type of video news presentation that includes both a VO portion and a soundbite.

**Package** - In broadcast news, a package is a prepackaged story that has been edited to fit a pre-determined amount of time that typically includes voice over from a reporter, soundbites, natural sound, and b-roll. Packaging a story before a live show leaves less room for error. A standard television news package usually runs between 1-minute and 15-seconds and 1-minute and 30-seconds.

**Read rate (RR in scripts)** - Read rate indicates how fast an anchor typically reads. In some news production systems, i.e. the software news producers use to plan the order of news stories and list how much time is allotted for each, the read rate must be entered in order to calculate the expected running time for a story. To calculate your own read rate, take the number of words you read aloud in a minute (usually between 140 and 190) and divide by 10.

**Total run time (TRT in scripts)** - This indicates the total time a story is expected to take to be read when presented live. In the case of pre-produced elements, such as news packages, the TRT can be reported precisely. When editing video to accompany a VO, it should run at least 5-10 seconds longer than the TRT in case the anchor takes longer to read than expected.

**Natural sound, natsound, or nats** - Sound recorded in the field. When audiences hear a natural sound, they should see the action creating it. Some examples of natsound are shoes crunching on gravel, cars whizzing by, a door slamming shut, or food sizzling in a pan.

**Time code** - Time code tells an editor the range where a piece of video or a soundbite appeared in the original recording. For example, a soundbite found at 5:05 in a video file that ran until 5:15 is a 10-second soundbite. Editors need this information to quickly find the specific bite that is called for.

**On-cam** - As one might expect, on-cam is a direction that refers to an anchor being shown live on camera.

**Anchor intro** - Most broadcast news stories start with an anchor intro. It should be a complete sentence that is one part headline, one part story lead and one part story tease, i.e. it draws people into the rest of the story.

**Broadcast lead** - In most cases, the broadcast lead is the first sentence in a pre-produced news package or the first line in the script after the VO begins to role. It may be similar to a hard news lead from print and digital news, but it must also reference the video being seen.

**Outcue** - The last few words said at the end of a soundbite or the end of a news package. This is essential information because it affects the audio mix in a live show.

**Take VO and Take SOT** - These cues indicate transitions to a technical director in charge of mixing the sound and video in a live broadcast.

**Pronouncer** - This is a parenthetical notation to tell an anchor or reporter how a term should be pronounced. This is used most often for place names and people's names. For example, the main editor and author of this text is Mark Poepsel (PEP-sill).

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## 7.2: Do's and don'ts



Figure 7.2.1: Title: Decisions. The words "Yes" and "No" carved into granite blocks placed in a brick wall. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Florian Schmetz](#))

Classic broadcast writing textbooks have lists of dozens or even hundreds of guidelines—things to do and not to do. This section is a summary that offers 10 "do's" and 10 "don'ts" that seem to be the most helpful to students in audiovisual writing courses. These tips all apply to writing audiovisual news. Most apply to others types of audiovisual content as well.

Each tip is followed by a brief explanation and an example where helpful

### Do...

Write in a conversational tone.

Viewers and listeners want to engage with stories. Meet them with a tone that matches their expectations and hopes.

Example: Tens of thousands of college students every spring choose to skip parties and do service projects instead. The popularity of alternative spring break is booming. Students say they find projects like spreading literacy, teaching about art and science, or cleaning up waterways fulfilling and fun.

Revise until scripts are clear and sharp

Most audiovisual scripts start out wordy. In our everyday conversations, we often say more than is necessary. Revising helps to maintain tone while eliminating unneeded words.

Example: The author's first draft of the first sentence of the previous passage needed some edits. Originally, it read as follows: "Tens of thousands of high school and college students go on alternative spring break every year to do service projects instead of partying at clubs."

The edit removed references to high schoolers because they are not the focus of this story. Sometimes editing requires removing excess facts, even if they are accurate.

The revised first sentence focuses on actions, i.e. skipping parties and doing service projects, rather than the concept of alternative spring break, which was simply pushed to the next sentence.

Use the active voice when possible.

We use the active voice to paint better mental images.

Example: This sentence focuses on a bag: “The bag of gold coins was taken from the woman before she could lock it in her safe.”

*This sentence focuses on the action: “Robbers ripped a bag of gold coins from an elderly woman’s hand before she could lock it in her safe.”*

This is the same information, but the second version paints a more vivid picture.

Search your own copy for sentences that place the object first and that use some version of “was + verb + -en” (was beaten, was stolen, was awakened, etc.) to find possible passive constructions to fix.

Use the present tense when it makes sense.

This advice is particularly potent for audiovisual newswriters who should use the present tense to describe ongoing events but who should not pretend events that happened yesterday are still going on.

Example of good use of the present tense: Two suspects accused of burglarizing a convenience store are set to appear in court later today.

Example of the false present: Two suspects burglarize a convenience store and are nabbed by police within hours. It happened last night...

The first example is about events occurring now or that are soon to occur. The second example takes last night's news and forces it to masquerade as today's.

Start strong, particularly in newswriting.

In audiovisual newswriting, the lead sentence is the most important part of a story, but it should not sound like the start of a newspaper story. Audiovisual leads should include a bit of context and the most important information in broad terms.

Specifics, such as the names of individuals involved (unless they are famous) or information about how and why an event took place can be included later.

Video news example:

*The average price of a new home in Las Vegas continues to rise.*

*Local realtors say the average new single-family home price shot up 20 thousand dollars from January to February.*

Note that the lead sentence is short and sweet. The attribution, specific amount, and time frame are all included near the top of the story, but the audiovisual news lead is attention-getting and as clear as possible.

Develop your own understanding first

Before you can write about an event, be sure you understand what happened. A tip for newswriters applies to all types of audiovisual writing. Make sure you can clearly state the Who, What, Where, When, and Why of a story before attempting to write it.

Always include a step in-between information gathering and writing where you outline these in your mind, on paper, or on a phone or computer. Here you will recognize the difference between facts necessary to the narrative and bits of dialog, a.k.a. soundbites in news, that pack emotional punch.

Use action verbs where possible.

Choose verbs that illustrate the action over more commonplace verbs. It is best to use subject-verb-object construction, which will also cause you to write in the active voice, per tip #3.

Example: The slugger smacked a two-run homer over the left-field wall in the bottom of the second.

Here, “slugger” is the subject, “smacked” is the verb, and “homer” refers to the homerun ball, i.e. the direct object. This is much better than writing: “Another home run was hit in the bottom of the second.” Even though it uses more words, the preferred version paints an image in the mind’s eye.

Include only one idea per sentence.

Instead of stacking multiple concepts into a complex sentence, in audiovisual writing it is preferable to simply use two shorter sentences.

Example of an overly complex sentence: Organizers say the event brought in more than one thousand families caring for someone with Parkinson's disease, and they were excited to learn of a surprise Zoom chat with Michael J. Fox.

Using two sentences conveys the information more clearly: Event organizers say more than one thousand families attended the event. Guests say they were surprised Michael J. Fox joined via video chat.

If you want a word to stand out, put it at the end.

This guideline needs to be balanced with others, but if possible, put a strong word at the end of a sentence if you want it to pack a powerful punch.

Example: The crowd broke out in an uproar.

This is particularly preferable to burying the force of the word by using its adjective form. The sentence, "The uproarious crowd made itself known," manages to be both awkward and anticlimactic.

Always read your copy aloud.

To best understand how an audience will receive copy written for the ear, you need to hear it. Reading your copy aloud will help you find places to tighten and clarify. It may also help you avoid confusing homophones.

Example of a sentence that could be improved: A tax on cigarette smokers will become law with the start of the new year.

The previous sentence probably does not look confusing on the page or screen, but spoken aloud in a live broadcast it could cause confusion. (Sounds like "Attacks...")

A better version would be something like this: "A new statewide cigarette sales tax will go into effect January first."

### Don't...

Don't make factual errors.

This goes without saying for broadcast news content, but writers of audiovisual fiction also need to be careful to check facts. Nothing kills the suspension of disbelief more quickly than finding a glaring factual error. Review all copy for inconsistencies and errors. Even the most fantastical audiovisual creations must be rooted in the familiar, and if something is familiar to a mass audience, some part of that audience will look for your mistakes.

Don't use language from advocates if your goal is to be neutral.

This is another guideline from newswriting that works for all types of audiovisual writing. People prefer to be shown examples of ethical vs. unethical and moral vs. immoral behavior. They do not generally watch news or entertainment content to be preached to.

If you are writing for a mass, diverse audience, it is usually a good idea not to adopt the language of advocates for extreme positions. In some cases, interviewees in news and characters in fictional stories may express extreme views, but these should be utilized out of duty to the audience and community stakeholders not out of laziness.

Rule of thumb: Rather than using language directly from a campaign's news release, think critically about how you might convey whatever bits of information are relevant for your audience from your own perspective as a reasonable person who is neither too accepting of nor too critical of the individual politician in question or their party.

Don't use racist or sexist language.

Unless the writer has compelling reasons to allow a character or an interviewee to use offensive language, it is best not to present a mass audience with language that will offend them. It is not enough to merely avoid obvious slurs. Writers need to familiarize themselves with language considered racist or otherwise offensive and work to eliminate it from their writing.

Purposeful use of racist or other loaded language may be valid when writing fiction if it is used in a context where the audience is likely to understand why the word choice is necessary for setting, plot, characterization, etc. Only use racist language in newswriting if it is essential for accuracy, and redact the worst of it so it is neither seen nor heard if your audience may contain children who pick up words without understanding context.

Example: Sometimes a spectator will use blatantly sexist language about a woman athlete and say something like, "She's amazing. She plays really well, for a girl." If you air this as a soundbite it will likely be taken as tacit approval by an audience. You can either

edit the soundbite to capture accurately what the spectator feels without indicating their condescension: "She's amazing."

Or, you may simply find someone else to interview. In most cases when covering sports there are plenty of other spectators you could turn to for soundbites who are not sexist (or racist, or ethnocentric, or xenophobic, or homophobic, etc.).

**Don't overuse the command tense.**

Audiences usually do not wish to be bossed around. Use of the command tense is particularly aggravating in advertising.

Rule of thumb: Generally avoid telling people what to do in your media writing. (For textbooks, however, sometimes the command tense is appropriate.)

**Don't tell audiences how to feel.**

The excessive use of adjectives or adverbs to try to elicit emotional responses is annoying to audiences. Rather than telling them directly how they are meant to feel about certain characters, events, or story subjects in the case of audiovisual journalism, craft a story that gets the feeling across through circumstances, dialog, and other uses of sound.

Rule of thumb: If you find yourself using adjectives or adverbs related to emotions, strive to cut back or eliminate them altogether. This is particularly important in newswriting but even in entertainment writing the audience would rather be made to feel something than told how to feel.

Example: Instead of writing that a child had an exciting time at the state fair, write that their eyes grew wide when they petted a prize hog and they couldn't stifle a scream when riding on the Ferris wheel.

**Don't use slang.**

Using slang is not edgy or creative. It forces listeners to notice the writer's word choices rather than their words' meanings. Using slang, unless it is for a targeted audience from someone within that same group, can be annoying, frustrating, or even discouraging for audiences. Also, most slang has an expiration date that writers may not be aware of.

Example: (From a 40-something writer directed to a mass audience) I'm not gonna lie, but, on God, the young man's radical outfit was on fleek. No cap; It was boss.

**Don't start audiovisual news stories with quotes or questions.**

It is considered jarring to deliver a soundbite or actuality without context. Question leads are considered patronizing—an uninspired means of getting viewers' attention.

**Don't reference people by name who have not been introduced.**

For the listener, a reference to the name of someone they have never heard of can be confusing. Fiction writers should provide context before inserting a name into a script. In newswriting, an individual's name is never included in a lead unless they are a prominent figure.

**Don't raise unanswered questions.**

This general guideline is most applicable in newswriting where focus and clarity are essential. Bringing up a topic without explaining what its impact may be or why it is in the story is poor form. This is a common issue with rough drafts. These should be eliminated by writers as they revise their own work. Do not count on editors who are not familiar with a story to notice which topics are left open-ended in your copy.

In fiction writing, leaving major plot holes is only allowable if the writer is purposefully building suspense.

**Finally, don't be shut off to critique.**

This is another piece of general advice that some writers need to hear more often than others. No piece of writing is so precious that it need not be subjected to scrutiny. Editing makes writing stronger. Writers should fight for their audiences, not for a preferred manner of speaking.

If this seems like a bitter pill for you as a budding writer, please know that writers have always struggled with receiving criticism. Fiction writers sometimes refer to making necessary cuts in the editing process as "[killing your darlings](#)." Writing is a mentally taxing creative effort. It makes sense to try to preserve what you have created, but for the good of the work and for the audience's benefit, you must be willing to delete phrases, sentences, storylines and even entire pieces if they are not working.

On the other hand, writers who demonstrate poise in taking criticism are often taken more seriously when they refuse to make a cut or to give up on a project.

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## 7.3: Podcasting and the future of audiovisual media

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In 2024 listening to podcasts and online audio hit new all-time highs, with an estimated half-a-billion people expected to listen to podcasts. The growth is driven by large increases in female listening and for 18-34-year-olds, podcast reach is now as big as TV.

In fact, podcasts are now replacing traditional media consumption with not only less TV watching but less time browsing social media and playing video games, according to research and consultancy firm [KS&R](#).

After 20 years a once fringe medium is mainstream, fueled by the growth in smartphones, smart speakers and in-dash entertainment systems.

### RECORD High Podcast Listening

Listeners spent more time with podcasts than ever with increased listening across all age groups for both women and men and in both weekly and monthly podcast listening. In fact, today the term "podcasting" is familiar to three-out-of four Americans. The result is that the gap between familiarity and listening has narrowed, with a 10 percent climb in podcast listening over the past four years.

The listening figures come from [Edison Research's Infinite Dial](#) which has tracked digital media consumer behavior and technology use for 26 years. A January 2024 nationwide telephone survey conducted in English and Spanish used random digit dialing techniques to call both cell phones and landlines.

Other researchers say these numbers may actually be low as some podcast consumption involves co-listening, which is not counted in traditional podcast metrics. This occurs because of in-room smart speakers and in-car listening with friends, family and kids. The

[report](#) comes from Cumulus Media and Signal Hill Insights.

In the U.S. *where* you live also makes a difference in listening patterns. Urban audiences spend over twice as much of their daily audio time with podcasts as rural listeners, according to Edison's [Share of Ear](#) study.

This chapter gives an overview about the landscape of podcasting, who's doing it, what researchers have discovered about audiences, and identifies top trends.

### Growth in DIVERSITY & FEMALE Audience

Among women, podcasts had the biggest listening surge since 2020 with monthly audiences up a whopping 15 percent since 2023, elevating the size of the female audience to nearly equal levels with men. That is a dramatic rise from the early days when podcasting was dominated by white male listeners.

There's also been an increase in racial diversity with the number of Black and Hispanic podcast listeners increasing over 30 percent in the U.S. in recent years.

### YOUNG People Listen Most

The largest demographic group of listeners is Gen Z (those born between 1997-2012), according to a study from [Sounds Profitable](#). While most began listening as teenagers, a good number started as children, and they are racially diverse.

They mostly discover podcasts from social media and eight-in-10 monthly listeners say they don't do anything else when they listen to podcasts, according to an [Edison report](#).



While podcast listening in the 55+ age bracket lags behind that of other age groups, numbers are growing and expected to surge as technology makes podcasts easier to access through mobile devices such as a phone or tablets; use of smart speakers Siri, Alexa and Google; and cars with built-in internet access.

### Young People CREATE Most

Young people also dominate when it comes to podcast creation. In terms of **age**, the largest number of creators are in the 25-44 age group, while those in the 55+ demographic barely exist. This can be an opportunity for both creators and advertisers.

### Minorities Want To HEAR & SEE Their Communities

[The Black Podcast Listener Report](#) from Edison Research says that 43 percent of the Black population in the U.S. has listened to a podcast in the last month. Black females are more likely to be monthly listeners while Black men are more likely be weekly listeners.

It's clear that **representation matters** as more frequent listeners follow or seek out content that focuses on Black stories and perspectives. Younger listeners are more likely to listen to shows hosted by Black hosts. The Black-owned news aggregation app, [Hayti](#), is the largest source for podcasts with Black hosts, offering access to over 2,000 Black hosts.

Video is also a strong attraction for Black podcast listeners (80 percent), as they like to see representation.

### **LATINO Podcast Listening Hits Record**

Podcast listening among Latinos has increased by 52 percent since 2020, nearly four times faster than the rate of the general U.S. population.

Edison's fourth annual [Latino Podcast Listener Report](#) says that 38 percent of U.S. Latinos are monthly podcast listeners, a record high estimated to be 17 million Latino adults who live in the U.S. They are more likely to be employed, earn a higher income, and are more likely to be entrepreneurs.

They are listening in both English and Spanish.

Past surveys have also shown that video draws in high numbers of Latino podcast listeners (76 percent), with a large number first introduced to podcasts because of YouTube.

IHeart Media, the largest radio station group owner in the U.S. has a partnership with the Latino [Oyénos](#) audio network to distribute dozens of [Hispanic-focused](#) podcasts on the IHeart platform.

### Latin America's Boom-Bust

In Latin America there was a podcast boom in 2019, due to large investments in programming by Spotify, which at one time owned 90 percent of the market. But the company has reversed course the last few years and canceled shows and had large layoffs. An investigative reporter in Bogotá, Columbia [traced](#) the shake-up.

### More ETHNIC Creators

In **ethnicity**, the number of podcast creators is more in line with the overall U.S. population for Whites, African Americans, and Asians, while Latino creators are growing significantly.



The data on **education** levels for creators does not look like the average American since 40% of creators have an advanced degree, which leads to higher levels of employment and higher income. Analysts point out that this makes the creator class more privileged than the general public, which can impact content creation.

All these numbers can be overwhelming but it's useful to know some of these metrics as a way of understanding the birth and growth of the podcasting industry.

### The KIDS Podcast Listening Report

Podcasts already have considerable reach among kids 6-12 in the U.S., according to the [Kids Podcast Listening Report](#) by Edison Research.

Forty-six percent have **ever** listened to a podcast, and 29 percent of ages 6-12 in the U.S. listened in the last month. That percentage soars to 42 percent if their parents listened to a podcast in the last month.

Kids listen because they think podcasts are fun to listen to and a way to avoid boredom, with the top genres being games, music, adventure, comedy, short stories, and bedtime stories such as those from [Sleep Tight Stories](#). For parents, podcast listening is a way to connect as a family as they listen together and discuss. The national online survey of parents was administered by parents and in-home interviews.

In the U.S. and around the world there is a rise of [child podcast superstars](#), with pre-pubescent hosts 13 years of age and younger.



[KidsPod](#) is an app for children 3-13 years of age with both free and paid subscriptions, developed with a kids' tech expert. Co-founder Rachel Lacy says kids, just like parents, like to multitask while listening, "making podcasts more interactive helps audio compete with streaming and gaming when kids do have a device in hand."

### **WORLDWIDE Podcast Audience**

Worldwide, the average number of podcasts consumed monthly has grown from a quarter to about a third (35 percent), according to the [2024 Digital News Report](#) and attracts a younger and better-educated audience. The survey covers six continents and 47 markets in a study commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

According to the study, the highest reach among the 20 countries surveyed shows that nearly half of respondents in the U.S. and Spain reported listening to a podcast in the past month, with listening the lowest in Japan.

*Courtesy 2024 Reuters Institute Digital News Report*

- By 2027, Latin America will have more podcast listeners than anywhere else in the world, according to [research](#) by Genuina Media.
- Edison Research has conducted surveys in five countries – including the U.S., [UK Podcast Listener Report](#), Australia, Germany, New Zealand, and South Africa. Triton also has a [Canadian Podcast Report](#).
- YouGov also has [data](#) about regular podcast listeners around the world.

### How To FIND Podcasts

The smartphone is the most popular way to hear a podcast, although some listeners do download shows to their computer. Taking information from [OP3](#) – the free, open podcast analytics service, Podnews created a graphic that shows **Spotify** as the dominant app for most of the world, while **Apple** is the biggest app in the U.S. The United Kingdom uses more independent podcast apps than any other large country.

You can filter apps by platform: [iOS](#), [Android](#). All podcast apps all have a library of podcast shows categorized alphabetically or by genre.

## How To Find Podcasts



*Photo by Fausto Garcia on Unsplash.com*

**Most people get podcast recommendations from their friends, family, and colleagues, as well as from social media, online communities, top podcast charts, and “best of” lists.**

**There are also free podcast recommendation newsletters that you can sign up for to be sent directly to your inbox weekly, see the list below.**

- [Trailer Park: The Podcast Trailer Podcast](#)
- [Triton Podcast Rankers](#) measures average weekly downloads of podcasts
- [Edison Podcast Metrics](#) offers measurement of top podcasts, networks, and shows listened to by women, Black listeners, etc.
- [New Podcast Trailers](#), from the creators of [The PodNews](#) daily newsletter, which also has new podcasts.

- [Podcast The Newsletter](#) (Weekly recommendations on a variety of podcasts)
- [Earbuds Podcast Collective](#) (5 podcasts on a theme curated by someone new)
- [Find That Pod](#) (5 recommendations each week, [archive](#))
- [Radio Ink](#) (Daily headlines and news about new podcasts)
- [Podcast Guide](#) (Community search engine for podcasts)
- [Your Next Podcast](#) (Podcast that recommends a new podcast)
- [Podnews](#) (Global news about podcasting including new and continuing podcasts)
- 'Best Of' from: [Vogue](#), [Esquire](#), [Vulture](#), [New York Times](#), [Appendix B](#)
- Riverside has a list of 15 best [popular](#) podcasts of 2024

## Podcast APPS

In podcast listening, listeners can use open podcast apps that support [Podcasting 2.0](#), which seeks to standardize and improve delivery of podcasts to all audiences and not just those who have paid for access.

They include:

- [Podcast Guru](#) (Apple & Android)
- [Podcast Addict](#) (Android)
- [Antennapod](#) (Android)
- [Pocket Casts](#) (Apple & Android)
- [Podverse](#) (Apple & Android)
- Apple's Podcast app
- See list of all [podcast apps](#) that support Podcasting 2.0



[Hosting services](#) that support Podcasting 2.0.

Podnews has a [list](#) of host services and [how to add your podcast](#) to every podcast directory.

## How MANY Podcasts Are There?

In all, the number of podcasts is considered to be between 2 to 5 million. The differing numbers reflect the podcast **directory** being used.

[Podcast Index](#), which is primarily built from discovering open podcast RSS feeds on the web, says there are more than 4 million podcasts.

The [Apple Podcasts](#) catalog lists nearly 3 million podcasts while Spotify says they have more than 5 million podcasts, reported by [Podnews](#).

## How Many Are ACTIVE?

While it may seem like there are too many podcasts competing for ears and eyes, many of the large numbers of podcasts created during the pandemic years are no longer in production. By July 2024 the number of active podcasts – meaning that a new episode has been released in the last 90 days – dropped to 13.4%, according to figures from [PodMatch](#).

Most significantly, more than half of all that listening now happens on YouTube and Spotify combined, with one-third using YouTube followed by a quarter on Spotify, according to a survey by [Cumulus Media](#) and Signal Hill Insights.

## Listeners Average EIGHT Podcasts A Week

Overall in 2024 people listened to an average of eight podcasts a week, with females listening to even more, according to [Edison Research](#).

**Hard-core listeners** consume 12 or more podcasts a week, while **medium listeners** hear three to six podcasts weekly and the **casual listener** one to two shows.

Podcast “[super listeners](#),” spend an average of 11.2 hours listening to podcasts weekly, up from previous years. Over half of this group listens to podcasts through YouTube, often discovering new podcasts through the platform.

### What Are The Most Popular GENRES?

In the U.S. the most popular genres are Comedy, Society & Culture, News, and True Crime, followed by Sports and Education.



In particular, Gen Zer’s value diverse podcast content and the importance of mental health with a focus on self-care and unplugging.



*Photo by Canva.com*

### TRUE CRIME, INVESTIGATIVE Podcasts

Among the overall audience, listening to the True Crime genre remains immensely popular with shows regularly at the top of podcast charts, spurred by the phenomenal success of [Serial](#). Some cover cold cases and unveil family secrets while others bring publicity to underrepresented communities looking for justice.

[Criminologists](#) say interest in true crime is driven by the basic human emotion of fear, allowing people to experience fears without the consequences of actual trauma. Rolling Stone came up with a list of “[The best 25 True-Crime Podcasts of All-Time](#).”



In a similar vein, **investigative** podcasts may involve true crime but they also run the gamut – [terrorism](#), corporate or political scandals, health care, or [inequality in education](#).



Both genres are expensive to produce and time-consuming to create because this kind of watchdog journalism can take weeks, months and even years to come to fruition. “I believe investigative journalism is really like you are solving a mystery,” said LA Times reporter Joanne Faryon.

[The Investigative Reporting Workshop](#) (IRW) at American University in Washington, D.C., [has a look](#) at how investigative reporters develop their stories for audio.

### NEWS Podcasts



Globally, the number of **news podcasts** has increased and several regularly rate at the top of podcast charts according to a [2023 Pew Research Center Report](#).

One-in-three adults ages 18 to 29 listen at least sometimes to get news from podcasts, making them the largest demographic listening group. But more than half of Americans (56 percent) say they *never* get their news from podcasts, which means there is still significant growth potential.

While just one-in-five U.S. podcast listeners listens to podcasts from a news organization, the legacy media organizations have put money, time, and staffing into news podcasts – from audio organizations such as NPR to national publications like *The New York Times*, which is building an audio empire by buying audio companies and adding [more podcasts](#).

A [Pew](#) survey found the most popular news-related podcast format to be when a topic in the news is explained in depth (57 percent), followed by a host offering opinions (53 percent), or a summary of the major news stories of the day (51 percent). “Most consumers are looking not for *more* news, but news that feels *more relevant*, and helps them *make sense* of the complex issues,” says the report.

## News Podcasts Worldwide

- [The Daily](#)(New York Times)
- [Up First](#)(NPR)
- [Simple English News Daily](#) (a seven-minute daily podcast with news from four continents, has reached [five million](#) downloads)
- [Post Reports](#)(The Washington Post)
- [Today Explained](#)(Vox)
- [CNN 5 Things](#)(CNN)
- [Global News Podcast](#)(BBC)
- [FT News Briefing](#)(Financial Times)
- [Please Explain](#)(The Sydney Morning Herald)
- [Today In Focus](#)(The Guardian)
- [La Story](#)(The French newspaper Les Echos)
- [The DR](#)(Danish Broadcasting Corporation)

## TOP-RATED News Podcasts

The massive success of [The Daily](#) from *The New York Times*, is credited with driving the growth of **news podcasts**, which attracts a younger and better-educated audience than traditional media. Since being launched in 2017, the powerhouse explanatory podcast has been downloaded more than 3 billion times with some 20 million people listening monthly. The format takes one big story and explains the issues in depth for 20 to 40 minutes.

*The Wall Street Journal* reported that the *Times* would start putting up a paywall for audio but it would be limited to old episodes while new shows would continue to be free.



The *Times* launched a shorter daily news podcast in 2023 that covers three top stories in about 10 minutes. *The Headlines* can be heard on [New York Times Audio](#), an iOS app for subscribers. In addition to podcasts, the app will have audio features curated by *Times* journalists.



Among competitors, *The Washington Post* offers [The 7](#), which explores seven or more important or interesting news stories of the day with reporting and insight in about a 10-minute time span, while [Reuters World News](#) has a 10+ minute news briefing, and the [BBC](#) has a 15-minute news podcast aimed at 16-24-year-olds around the globe.



Also topping the podcast charts are two [NPR](#) news podcasts. [Up First](#) is the daily news podcast discussing the three biggest stories of the day with reporting and analysis in 10 minutes. [NPR News Now](#) has the latest hourly news in 5 minutes.



In the best news podcast category, Vox's *Today Explained* won the [2024 Ambie](#) for excellence in audio. The podcast covers the most important news of the day in about 30 minutes. The award comes from the professional member association, [The Podcast Academy](#).



News listeners generally view news podcasts as accurate, especially compared with news from social media. But there are danger signs ahead as the proportion of news consumers who say they **avoid the news** has grown sharply worldwide because consumers feel it has a negative impact on their mood and because of concerns over false and misleading news.

### Top Podcast HONORS

Podcasts are now recognized at the highest levels of excellence in American journalism, with prizes that include the **Pulitzer**, **Peabody**, **du Pont-Columbia Awards**, and [The Radio Television Digital News Association](#) (RTDNA), among others.

Investigations have righted wrongs by getting inmates released from prison and exposed injustices that resulted in new national laws.



The U.S. Supreme Court felt the impact of a podcast in 2019. The [In The Dark](#) podcast prompted the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) to review and throw out the murder [conviction](#) of Curtis Flowers, a black Mississippi death row inmate who had been tried six times for the same crime.

A new trial was ordered after the investigative unit of [American Public Media](#) uncovered evidence of a pattern of racist jury selection by the prosecutor. After 23 years, Flowers became a free man after the Mississippi attorney general dropped state charges against him. The show also won top journalism honors including the Peabody, George Polk, and Edward R. Murrow awards.

Creation of the [national sex-offender registries](#) came after the 2016 podcast [“In the Dark”](#) documented how police mishandled the [child abduction](#) and murder of a small-town Minnesota boy.

The prestigious [Pulitzer Prize Board](#) added a new category for Audio Reporting in 2020.

**2020:** The first Pulitzer was awarded to “[This American Life](#)” for its reporting on the personal impact of the Trump administration’s “Remain in Mexico” policy.



**2021:** NPR took home the second-ever Pulitzer for Audio Reporting for an [investigative report](#) about Iowa-based gun rights advocates, looking at how two brothers used social media to try and eliminate gun regulations in America.



**2022:** A third Pulitzer was won for a podcast about juveniles sentenced to spend their whole lives in prison. [Suave](#) was produced by two non-profits, [Futuro Media](#) and [PRX](#). The U.S. is the only country in the world that allows juveniles to be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole and the podcast tells the story of one man's redemption.



**2023:** Gimlet Media and journalist Connie Walker won the Pulitzer for audio reporting in a series that revealed the abuse of Indigenous children at an Indian residential school in Canada, [Stolen: Surviving St. Michael's](#).

For a behind-the-scenes look at how such stories come together, there is a six-episode podcast, [Pulitzer on the Road](#), that talks with the 2023 winners in conversations with Pulitzer Board members.



**2024:** The latest Pulitzer for [audio reporting](#) went to [You Didn't See Nuthin](#), a series that revisits a Chicago hate crime from the 1990s utilizing memoir, community history and journalism, produced by the staffs of [The Invisible Institute](#) and USG Audio. This is the fifth Pulitzer won by an investigative journalism podcast since the audio reporting category was created in 2019. This same podcast was also awarded the [Peabody Award](#), given to the “most compelling and empowering stories released in broadcasting and streaming media during 2023.”

**Other top awards:** The [84th Annual Peabody Awards](#), rewarded “stories that matter,” in news to entertainment programming. In the Radio/Podcast category there were five winners, including two different podcasts from [The Washington Post](#). Winner Moriah Balingit was one of the reporters who embedded in a Richmond, Virginia high school to explore how students are dealing with gun violence in “[Surviving to Graduation](#).”

Previous Peabody Honors for groundbreaking investigative podcasts have gone to such podcasts as [Serial](#), [S-Town](#), and [In the Dark](#).



[The Divided Dial](#) covered the beginnings of conservative talk radio and how what happens on the radio still shapes the American political landscape.



[This American Life: The Pink House at the Center of the World](#) offered stories from the day the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, focusing on human lives at the clinic at the center of the legal case, Mississippi's last abortion clinic.

### So Does EVERYONE Have A Podcast?

It may seem like everyone has their own podcast since technology has made it possible to be your own creator and publisher – giving more people a voice to be heard. But it's not just individuals who podcast, its institutions, government, business, the arts, religion, non-profits, and education.

The power and reach of the medium are so pervasive that the U.S. [Library of Congress](#) has its own podcasts and added podcasts to its [archive](#) “as part of its mission to collect and preserve sound recordings,” and is contacting selected podcasters to seek permission to add their shows.



[The Smithsonian's](#) storytelling got a boost from a partnership with PRX. Their podcast, [There's More To That](#), covers history, science, and culture with journalists from Smithsonian Magazine. Among the first episodes were the backstories of two blockbuster movies, *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie*.

### Podcasts in EDUCATION

In education podcasts play a variety of roles – encouraging student learning, creation of content, and allowing for greater access to information from the deep research done in academia. Students can download a podcast lecture to a mobile device and get 24-hour access. In today's fast-paced world, students will listen longer than they will watch or read and are able to go back over material they find difficult.

While some educators may want to keep their content restricted to enrolled students, other colleges and universities have created podcasts for public consumption. A wide variety of topics include business, medicine, law, the environment, enrollment, administration, and a number that feature academic research or revolves around academic stars.

“[Deep Background with Noah Feldman](#)” from Harvard explores the news from a historical, scientific, legal and cultural context. “[View From The Top](#)” is based upon a Stanford University Dean speaker series. Other podcasts feature students, such as “[A Hard Look](#),” a podcast by the Administrative Law Review that I advised in their startup for the American University [Washington College of Law](#).



## 7.4: Art of Clarity - Audio and Video Scripts

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Formatting scripts is an essential step for audio and video projects that are not done as off-the-cuff social media posts.

This section provides templates for basic radio news scripts,

The first template provided here is for an audio news story that might air on the radio or on a streaming service. The template and assignment are listed below.

As for video scripts, there are templates for a VO, VO/SOT, and basic news package. A VO/SOT assignment follows.

a VO/SOT, that is, a video news story with a soundbite. Assignments related to these two templates are included. Links to blank Google Doc versions of each template are clearly labeled in the text of each section.

The final two examples include template blanks and breakdown graphics for a podcast skeleton script and a video news package script. Instructors may develop assignments based on these templates if they wish.

VO/SOT

Podcast skeleton script

Video news package template

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## 8: Writing for the Public Relations Industry

Large portions of this chapter are remixed, revised, and amended from *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries*, <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/>



Figure 8.1: Good news is coming. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Jon Tyson](#))

### Learning Objectives

- Understand key terms related to public relations
- Learn the common roles and tasks in the PR industry
- Practice writing a news release and thinking beyond the basic PR pitch

### Public relations defined

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”<sup>1</sup> Simply put, public relations helps to influence an audience’s perceptions by building relationships and shaping public conversations about a client or company. These public conversations often take place through mass media and social media, which is why public relations professionals need to understand how to work with and write effective messages for the media.

Public relations professionals manage a wide range of communication activities that may include increasing brand visibility and awareness, planning events, and creating and seeking to place media content. Some PR pros also deal with crisis communications and help to salvage a brand’s integrity and reputation during a scandal or ongoing crisis.

### The value of PR to industry

There was a time when many companies did not see the value of public relations, unless a crisis happened. Even now, some public relations professionals face challenges in convincing key executives of their professional value.

With an overwhelming abundance of information readily available to audiences worldwide, corporations and the brands that the public knows them by are more vulnerable than ever to misinformation. An audience’s attitudes and beliefs about a company can greatly influence its success. Public relations professionals can help monitor and influence conversations about a corporation, its many companies and brands, or individuals and their reputation in the marketplace.

Viewing public relations as a key management function and part of a cohesive overall business strategy is appropriate. Public relations professionals help accomplish important goals such as establishing trust among key publics, increasing news media and social media presence and maintaining a consistent voice across communication platforms.

For more on the impact of reputation on business success, take a look at [this article](#) from *The Entrepreneur*.

1. <https://www.prsa.org/prsa/about-prs...anization%20is>

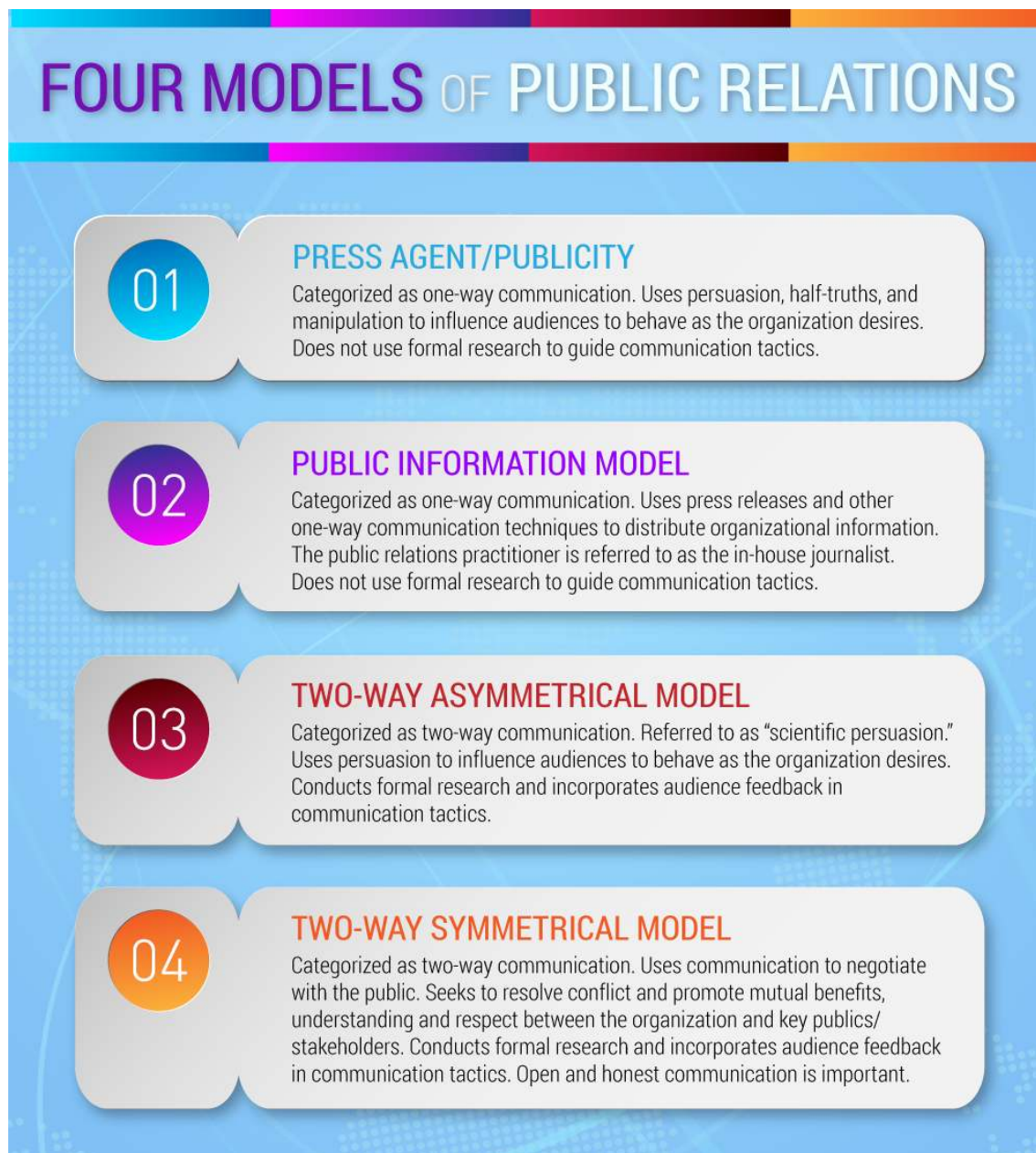
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## 8.1: Key PR Terms

### Public relations models

Grunig and Hunt developed four models of public relations that describe the field's various management and organizational practices.<sup>1</sup> These models serve as guidelines to create programs, strategies, and tactics. The infographic below outlines four models that range from a top-down, one-way communication model in which the PR professional talks down to audiences in a manner of speaking to a two-way, symmetrical model where the PR professional and their targeted public groups, i.e. their publics, are on more equal footing, communication is relatively open and consistent efforts are made to find mutually beneficial solutions should conflicts arise.



*"Four Models of PR" by Michael Shiflet and Jasmine Roberts is licensed under CC BY 2.0*

For the visually impaired, [text from the graphic above can be found here](#).

In the **press agent/publicity model**, communications professionals use persuasion to shape the thoughts and opinions of key audiences. For those following this model, accuracy is not emphasized. Organizations do not seek audience feedback or conduct audience analysis research. It is a one-way form of communication. One example of this publicity model is the propagandist media model employed in totalitarian North Korea. In general, communicators presenting themselves as news anchors and reporters have little to no freedom to report facts. Instead, they report a version of reality pre-approved by the [repressive, authoritarian Kim family regime](#).

The **public information model** moves away from the manipulative tactics used in the press agent/publicity model and presents more accurate information. However, the communication pattern is still one-way. Practitioners do not conduct audience analysis research to guide their strategies and tactics. Some press releases and newsletters are created under this model, but audiences are not necessarily targeted or thoroughly researched beforehand.

The **two-way asymmetrical model** is a way of communicating with key audiences in which audience research is taken into account, and reciprocal communication occurs but not in a balanced manner. Here, content creators conduct research to better understand audience attitudes and behaviors, which, in turn, inform the message strategy and creation. Persuasive communication is used in this model to benefit the organization more so than audience; therefore, it is considered asymmetrical. The model is particularly popular in advertising and consumer marketing, fields that are specifically interested in increasing an organization's profits.

Finally, the **two-way symmetrical model** argues that the public relations practitioner should serve as a liaison between the organization and key publics, rather than as a persuader. Here, practitioners are negotiators and use communication to ensure that all involved stakeholders benefit, not just the organization that employs them. The term "symmetrical" is used because the model attempts to create a mutually beneficial situation. The two-way symmetrical model is deemed the most ethical model – one that professionals should aspire to use in their everyday strategies.<sup>2</sup>

Some experts think of public relations more broadly. For instance, they may argue that political lobbying is a form of public relations because lobbyists engage in communication activities and client advocacy in order to shape the attitudes of members Congress and other leaders in government;<sup>3</sup> however, this text focuses on a public relations approach situated in the field of mass communications.

### [PR/Marketing/Advertising disambiguation](#)

Many confuse public relations with marketing and advertising. Although there are similarities, the most important difference between marketing, public relations, and advertising is the focus. Public relations emphasizes cultivating relationships between an organization (or individual) and key publics for the purpose of managing the client's image. Marketing emphasizes the promotion of products and services for the purpose of generating and increasing revenues. Advertising is a communication tool used by marketers to influence consumer behavior. The image below outlines additional differences.



"The difference between marketing, public relations, and advertising" by Jasmine Roberts and Michael Shiflet is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

For visually impaired readers, here is the [text from the Marketing/PR/Advertising comparison](#) graphic.

1. Grunig, J. E. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
2. Simpson, E. (2014). The four models in Grunig's and Hunt's PR theories. *Linkedin.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140...-s-pr-theories>
3. Berg, K. (2009). Finding connections between public relations, lobbying, and advocacy. *Public Relations Journal*, 3(3), 2-19.

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8.1: Key PR Terms is shared under a [CC BY](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

## 8.2: Representing a corporate brand



Figure 8.2.1: Put in the work. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Aman Upadhyay](#))

### General roles in PR

According to Smith,<sup>1</sup> public relations practitioners can be placed into two groups based on their responsibilities. These are communication managers and communication technicians.

**Communication managers** assist in the strategic planning of an organization's communication efforts. The broad term "communication manager" includes several similar public relations positions: expert consultant, problem-solving facilitator, and communication liaison. Expert consultants develop a specific communication plan to help achieve organizational goals. Problem-solving facilitators provide crisis management services. Liaisons speak on behalf of the brand and facilitate communication between the organization and its key publics.

**Communication technicians** write press releases, pitches, feature articles, and other communication materials. Additionally, they assist in event planning. Before entering a managerial role, most public relations practitioners begin their career as communication technicians. The term "communication technician" can refer to a variety of entry-level positions, including public relations specialist, communication assistant, and junior account executive. Together, communication managers and technicians play a vital role in relationship building and the management of a brand.

A large part of the public relations profession involves working with the news media. Public relations professionals seek to garner publicity in ways that benefit their client. Mass media channels are the preferred platforms for reaching out to the public because audiences view media coverage as more credible than traditional advertising and/or promotional efforts. Learning how to develop and manage relationships with reporters and editors is critical to outreach strategies.

#### Definition: Media relations

**Media relations** refers to the mutually beneficial relationship between journalists and public relations professionals. One of the biggest benefits for journalists is the easy access to story ideas and sources. As previously discussed, reporters spend a large amount of time and effort gathering information in order to write a story. Working with public relations professionals cuts down on the time needed to look for sources and other information to validate an article's content.

Public relations practitioners benefit from media relations because it secures free publicity and promotion for their clients. By using the mass media as promotional tools, they are able to reach large audiences at a much lower cost than buying a comparable amount

of advertising.

As with any professional relationship, there are do's and don'ts to be aware of when developing relationships with journalists. Take the time to research reporters and influencers to identify those who will help you achieve your organization's publicity goals. Once you've found an appropriate journalist or influencer, think carefully about how you plan to pitch your story to the individual. Be aware that some influencers will demand payment for mentioning your brand. Be up front about if and how much you are willing to pay.

Avoid gimmicky or hyped-up press releases. They may catch the attention of reporters but for the wrong reasons. Also avoid jarring language such as "urgent," "must read," or "extremely important," even if you need to secure media coverage quickly. In general, developing a rapport with journalists takes time, strategy, skill, and practice. Hyperbole often has a negative influence on journalists' perceptions of PR practitioners in the moment and in a long-term perspective.

## PR Pitches

Simply contacting members of the news media will not guarantee coverage for your client. You have to persuade the journalists that your story idea is newsworthy. Review the news values that journalists use to evaluate potential story topics. Public relations professionals typically pitch to reporters, editors, bloggers, and social media influencers. Pitches can take place via email, phone calls, and social media. The channel you choose for your pitch depends upon your target audience and which media they use most frequently.

Pitching is a skill that requires creative thinking, persuasive communication skills, and knowing how your story idea benefits the reporter and the audience. Your pitching skills can improve with time and practice. You will feel more confident reaching out to reporters if you write pitches regularly.

### Before pitching

Before you send an email pitch or call a reporter, it is important to have a solid understanding of your key audience. Carefully examine the interests, preferences, media consumption behaviors, and the key demographic information associated with that group. Then you can more accurately select which media outlet will help reach the target audience. Go where your audience is. For example, as you conduct research about your target audience, you might learn that members view YouTube or TikTok videos or read blogs more often than they read news articles. Reaching out to influencers, including bloggers, could be more beneficial in this case than targeting news reporters.

One of the most common complaints from journalists about public relations pitches involves the use of mass emails. Generic pitches sent out to anyone and everyone come across to reporters as careless and can compromise your credibility. Remember, reporters are going to look at how your story will appeal to their specific readers; therefore, your pitch needs to be strategic. Failure to keep this in mind may result in a rejected pitch or no response at all.

Before you pitch to a particular media outlet, be sure to research which specific writer within the organization can help you target your audience. Many reporters cover specific topics or set of topics on their beat. Reading some of a reporter's previous stories will give you an indication of whether he or she is the right person to cover your story.

Let's say your client is a restaurant that wants to publicize the opening of a new location. A reporter who covers entertainment, food, and other lifestyle topics, or the restaurant industry in particular, would be the most logical journalist to pitch to.

### Writing the pitch

Now that you've done your homework on the audience, media outlet, and specific writer, pay close attention to how you craft your pitch.

The subject line is especially important if you're using email. It needs to be creative enough to catch the attention of the journalist, but it should avoid exaggerated phrases or visual gimmicks such as subject lines written in all caps. Do not use generic headlines such as "Story Idea" or "Cool Upcoming Event." Try to create a subject line similar to a headline the news organization might use when publishing the story.

Next, address the reporter or blogger by name and begin the body of the pitch. State why you're writing and provide some information about yourself and the company or client you represent.

Next, summarize the lead of the story. Writing in this manner resonates with some reporters, as it is the style they are accustomed to. You also can start the email with a catchy line that will hook the journalist, but be careful not to overdo this. Reporters and

editors do not like flowery or gimmicky language because it sounds more like a hard sales pitch than a public relations pitch.

Continue with the pitch by providing important details about the story and by talking about why it would be interesting to the media outlet's audience. Doing this communicates the story's news value. Toward the end of the email pitch, state when you would like a response, indicate when you plan to follow up, if necessary, and offer specific help. Be sure to thank the reporter or blogger for their time.

Be aware that the needs of broadcast journalists differ from those who work for newspapers or online news sties. Broadcast journalists need opportunities for good visuals and subjects willing to be interviewed on camera.

### Following up

Don't feel discouraged if the reporter does not respond immediately. Journalists are extremely busy, and sometimes they simply overlook emails. If necessary, send a reminder email by the follow-up date you mentioned in the first communication. This date depends on when you hope the story will hit the press. If you pitched a story that needs to be published quickly, you may want to follow up within two days after sending the initial pitch. If there's more flexibility, you may indicate that you will follow up within a week.

If the person still does not respond to your pitch, move on to another outlet, reporter, or blogger who can help you accomplish your publicity goals.

It is important to also consider timing. For example, do not make a follow-up call close to press time for print journalists, which is often when they are headed out the door for the nearest bar or for home. Do not contact broadcast journalists on their personal mobile phone just before the start of a newscast. They are often preparing to go live on another story at that time.

Grammar, punctuation, tone, and spelling are important when writing email pitches. Some journalists have admitted to not responding to a pitch that contains grammatical and spelling errors. Be your own editor. Reread your message several times to check for errors.

Here are more articles that discuss media relations, proper etiquette, and tips on gaining media exposure:

- [Surprising tips to get the media's attention](#)
- [How not to pitch your stories to the news media](#)

1. Smith, R. (2013). *Strategic planning for public relations*. Routledge.

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## 8.3: Hashtag relatable - internal communications

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Figure 8.3.1: Copy and Paste Caption here. (Copyright; author via source)

James Moss graduated from Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville in 2018, earning bachelor's degrees in Mass Communications and Applied Communication Studies. He interned at a weekly and a daily newspaper while in school, then worked as the primary reporter at a small weekly newspaper in southern Illinois for three years after graduating.

He now works in training & development and manages the training department at the largest nonprofit in St. Louis.

In his job as the training director at MERS Missouri Goodwill Industries, Moss uses skills developed in both degree programs. Internal training communications are part organizational communication part public relations, which relates to his coursework in Applied Communications. The training materials James develops and uses in his work reach hundreds of employees. An essential part of his job is to teach every employee how to relate to the general public and how to represent the nonprofit to the public.

Moss' Mass Communications degree was key in getting his foot in the door in both his newspaper and non-profit positions. The writing skills learn in his mass communications program remain pivotal to his daily job.

Web design skills, design know-how, video editing abilities, and photography expertise have all proven valuable, but writing skills are "foundational," according to Moss.

Much of his team's work is to create e-learning modules, which means they write dozens of scripts each year. Being able to write clearly and concisely in a way that's designed for the ears rather than the eyes is a necessity. It is something he has used countless times when editing scripts or coaching employees to improve their writing.

Since the organization uses closed captions, following grammatical rules remains essential. The team's core goal is to facilitate learning for those who participate in our training, and using professional writing skills aids in achieving this goal.

Moss said that even the more mundane, corporate aspects of his job require effective writing. Crafting emails that people will read and understand, for example, helps his team hit their goals regarding training completion. Additionally, tasks as simple as presenting an idea concisely or providing an update in a meeting with a variety of stakeholders present benefit from the principles of telling interesting stories and making human connections.

Thus, even in a job where the title might not suggest it is a corporate writing position, using a variety of writing skills is still crucial.

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## 8.4: Art of Clarity - Beyond the Basic News Release

### Newswriting vs PR writing

Effective public relations writing draws from newswriting principles because news media outlets are the preferred channels for promoting products and services; however, newswriting and public relations writing may differ in terms of audience, tone and preferred media channels.

Newswriting should be objective in tone, with the purpose of presenting information to educate an audience about newsworthy events. Public relations writing advocates for the client. It is informative, but it should also strive to influence key publics' perceptions of the organization. Some would also argue that public relations writing is often more concise than newswriting.

Reporters usually write primarily for the audience of the respective media outlet. Public relations professionals may have to write for a variety of audiences, including internal audiences (such as employees, shareholders, and distributors) and external audiences (such as legacy news media professionals, customers, volunteers, influencers and/or bloggers).

Newswriters tend to focus on one primary communication channel and one writing style such as text-based approaches for newspapers or online news or broadcast scripts for radio or television news, perhaps with limited social media writing responsibilities. Public relations professionals use a variety of platforms to distribute their messages and may need to be versatile, i.e. able to write for print and online publications, audiovisual outlets, social media campaigns, advertisements, blogs, press kits, and more.

All media professionals bring varied skill sets to the table, but it is important to know PR professionals do more than write news releases that mimic classic newspaper style.

### PR Writing

Public relations professionals at all levels need to have solid fundamental writing skills. Public relations professionals are responsible for developing communication materials intended to influence the attitudes and/or behaviors of massive numbers of people belonging to a wide variety of different publics. The best approach to writing for widely heterogeneous audiences is to write using clear, effective, professional, and approachable language.

Use straightforward sentences and story structures. Use the active voice and action verbs. Choose your words carefully, and pay attention to grammar and, when writing with the hopes of news publication, use AP style correctly.

Many employers require candidates for public relations positions to complete a writing test and provide writing samples to demonstrate writing proficiency. It is critical to understand how to craft effective messages.

Here are some of the many materials and types of messages that public relations professionals write:

- Press/News releases
- Fact sheets
- Straight news articles
- Feature articles
- Social media messages
- Blog posts
- Speeches
- PowerPoint presentations
- Brochures
- Media pitches
- Statements for candidates or business leaders
- Posts for the company website, etc.

### Writing the news release

The news release is one of the most common communication materials written by public relations professionals. "News release" is the preferred term because it encapsulates all types of news including print, online, broadcast, and social media news productions.

News releases are sent to outlets such as newspapers, broadcast stations, magazines, news websites, news podcasts and news influencers to deliver a strategic message from an organization. Ideally, the media outlet will publish or broadcast the information if

they deem it newsworthy, and when that happens there is no additional cost to the brand.

The primary audience for news releases is reporters, editors, producers and news influencers, although some organizations publish news releases on their own websites for audiences to view. These posts may turn up in search engine results, so it is essential that they are written clearly and have a professional presentation in terms of design.

Journalists use news releases as a reporting tool, relying on them to provide essential information that may make it easier for them to cover a variety of events in a given day.

With the increase in media platforms and near constant demand for social media content, some view news releases as outdated. Why attempt to go through professional journalists or news influencers when you can simply publish the content online and on social media yourself? This misses the fact that the credibility and access to audiences offered by massive news media outlets is difficult, perhaps impossible, to replicate in open online publishing.

Audiences are more skeptical of brands than they are of news content. Even if a news release or some other message from a PR professional goes viral on social media, the credibility of the message and the audience reached may not be what was intended or what is ideal for the brand or individual represented by the public relations professional.

The use of news releases continues to be widespread in the profession. PR practitioners should know how to write an effective news release.

Traditionally, news releases use the inverted pyramid style, which makes it easy for journalists and editors to receive the most essential information first. It may also make the news reporter, editor or producer more likely to use the content. This means the news hook should be indicated in the headline and revealed in a summary news lead in the release. Journalists will not take your press release seriously if the content is not newsworthy and it is not written in an accepted style, i.e. Associated Press (AP) style.

Make sure that the news release clearly indicates how information should be attributed that the referenced sources are appropriate and that the copy is error free.

Before writing the release, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the announcement or event newsworthy?
- Does it appeal to the media outlet's audience?
- Who is the target audience for the release?
- What is the key message? What should the reader or viewer take away?

Although you're writing the release for the media, you need to keep in mind the kind of readers or listeners you hope to attract.

### News release writing tips

- The release should be written on company letterhead, with the words "News Release" at the top of the page.
- Below this, indicate when the information is available for publication. The phrase "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" means the information is ready to publish and can be used by journalists as soon as they receive it. Occasionally, you would prefer that journalists publish the story based on your announcement at a later date. In this case, use the term "UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL" followed by the embargo end date and time.
- Write the body of the release using proper newswriting techniques and, usually, AP style.
- Be sure to include a headline, a subheading, a dateline (which should include the date and location), and write a summary lead.
- Include a few paragraphs of the most necessary information, a quote if applicable, and nothing more. Journalists appreciate brief news releases that give them a head start on covering a real news story rather than detailed releases about irrelevant topics.
- Always include contact information for the journalist's reference, preferably at the top right corner and again at the bottom of the news release.
- Indicate at the bottom of the first page if there is more content on a second page, e.g. -more- .
- Put ### to indicate the end of the news release. This is a symbol borrowed from journalistic tradition.

### Beyond the basic news release

In the assignment that follows, you will be required to write a news release and to develop three social media posts that might spur interest in the topic online. Often if there is social media chatter about a topic or an event a journalist is more likely to cover it because it shows that people care. Although you are not expected to include photos with the assignment, indicate your plan for including a photo with each post.

#### News Release + Social Media Plan Assignment

Choose a brand that markets heavily to college students. Either find an actual event planned for the near future or make one up. The default example is that the brand will visit *your* campus soon to help launch its new product.

Write a news release using the template in this section. Be sure to include all of the necessary elements.

Then, in a separate document, draft a brief social media plan to accompany this news release. Since this is added to an existing writing assignment, the expectations are limited. This calls for planning only a handful of social media posts. Instructors could increase or decrease the scope of this portion of the assignment depending on what is best for their course.

The social media plan should indicate the social media platform best for reaching the brand's target audience. It should include *descriptions* of five photos or graphics that would be placed at the center of each social media post. It should include text to encourage students *and* media to attend the on-campus event. In this way, this mini social media campaign might catch the attention of students as well as local media.

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## 9: Writing for the Advertising Industry

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Figure 9.1: Advertising billboards. (Unsplash free-to-use license; Deon Fosu)



### Learning Objectives

- Learn the core concepts of writing for the advertising industry
- Study and be able to deconstruct a pro-social ad campaign model

### Advertising industry overview

Advertising is a massive global industry with a variety of methods of bringing marketing messages to target audiences. Whether brands wish to target sectors of mass audiences on mass media platforms or they want to create social media campaigns that narrow the target audience down to specific types of individuals at specific points in the [purchase funnel](#), advertisements are most often written with an audience in mind.

From a media writing standpoint, advertising is one of the most fascinating subfields because it draws on many other types of writing while still having some unique characteristics, particularly when it comes to persuasion. Persuasive writing exists in other mass communication fields. Public relations professionals write to persuade journalists and wider audiences to identify a corporation, a brand or an individual in a certain way. News editors and columnists often aim to write persuasively about policy. But advertisers are in the mode of persuasion at all times.

Those who write advertising copy might write social media posts, text copy for display ads and a video script for an influencer in the same day. Advertising copy writers strive to keep their messaging fresh but familiar enough that audiences can relate to it. Writers also must keep in mind what audience research data say about what audiences want to hear and how they want to hear it. Advertising is a highly technical and highly creative field.



### Definition: Advertising

Advertising is paid promotional content that combines long-term strategies and tactical messaging about the benefits of a product or service to influence a target audience's attitudes and/or behaviors.

### The prevalence of advertising

From all forms of mobile and online communication to television, radio, and print, the average American sees hundreds — potentially thousands — of advertisements daily. Although many consumers find them annoying, advertisements play a prominent role in shaping opinions about products, people, and politics.

Advertising is a key source of revenue — at times, the *only* source — for many forms of mass media. Many media institutions could not exist in anything resembling their current form without it. This includes the news industry, television industry, radio, search engines, and social media.

For example, according to a March 2023 report, [WORDSRated](#), a non-commercial research organization that studies the publishing industry, advertising made up 46 percent of revenues for U.S. newspapers in 2021. According to [Pew Research](#), digital ads make up about 40 percent *of that amount*. Circulation revenue, which is revenue from subscribers, totaled about 40 percent of newspapers' total revenues. Thus, even in an age of declining advertising revenues, ads are still the single most important revenue stream for newspapers.

Advertising influences agendas for television and digital-only news outlets, and it provides topics of conversation and debate for myriad social media platforms.

Although much advertising revenue has migrated away from the venerated newspaper industry, the advertising industry on the whole is incredibly lucrative. Total U.S. advertising expenditures in 2022 were \$318 billion, according to [Forbes](#). That is about \$980 per person in the U.S.

The year COVID lockdowns hit, digital advertising had a relative boom, according to [Digiday](#). In other words, advertisers tend to spend freely when the economy is up and strategically when it is down. Advertising is considered essential in our corporate, consumer economy. With its economic and cultural influence on society, the advertising industry has an expansive reach. Advertisers reflect changes in society and, at times, have bolstered positive social change; however, they “are also cautious not to alienate consumers and other stakeholders,” according to [McDonald, Laverie, and Manis](#).

The advertising industry continues to be a powerful force influencing various aspects of the global economy, and is it a major media industry unto itself.

### Jobs in advertising

The Advertising Educational Foundation's [Career Guide](#) outlines five broad categories of advertising industry jobs.

- [Account managers](#) serve as a liaison between the client and the advertising agency. They conduct research and oversee creative aspects, production, and more.
- [Account planners](#) are responsible for presenting information about the consumer. They analyze audiences and figure out ways to achieve brand loyalty.
- Those in the [Creative Department](#) of ad agencies are responsible for developing messages and images. They also pitch advertising plans to clients.
- Employees in the [Media Department](#) work on advertising placement strategies, media buying, and analyzing consumer behaviors.
- [Digital marketing](#) professionals develop interactive web and mobile tools that can connect consumers to brands in deeply engaging ways. These roles are diverse in terms of their expectations and day-to-day duties, but the work is interdependent.

Developing advertising strategies and delivering on campaigns are truly team efforts.

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## 9.1: Copywriting core concepts



Figure 9.1.1: Coca-Cola Ad. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Thomas Charters](#))

The core concepts of media writing apply to composing advertising copy and contributing in other ways to ad campaigns. Clear, concise writing is essential. Knowledge and application of AP Style is a must. Advertising messages should influence the target audience's perceptions and/or behaviors. Word choice, tone management, and message delivery are some of the techniques you will need to master to be a strong communicator. These core features apply to all kinds of advertising writing.

Word choice refers to the careful selection of each word in a sentence. Professional writers think carefully about the subtle differences between similar words. It means one thing to eat a slice of pizza, another to enjoy a slice and something else to devour a personal pan pizza the way an avid reader devours books.

Tone management refers to the need to select words, phrases and narrative structures that are most likely to evoke a particular emotion in audiences. Every piece of writing has a tone. Some textbooks are dry. They may be written in consistently long paragraphs with a large amount of jargon. The goal is to impart information clearly and accurately, though sometimes at the expense of the reader's attention. Political speeches tend to try to project a confident tone. They indicate the speaker's strengths. Paragraphs may vary quite a bit in length, which allows the speaker to speed up or slow down the pace to keep the audience on their toes. The underlying message is that the speaker is comfortable being in control and that they can be trusted to accomplish what they say they will. A sermon might be written to be reassuring or inspirational. Sermons are often written as a series of anecdotes with explanations. The anecdotes are easy to understand and relatable, and the explanations often offer solutions to common problems or reassurance about concerns. In all of these cases, tone serves to persuade and tone is imbued through word choice and structural choices.

Message delivery refers to the ways messages are presented. You could write the best advertising copy known to humanity, but if audiences do not notice it, it doesn't matter. Delivery is a matter of designing the visuals of an ad to be eye-catching, making audiovisual presentations as professionally produced as possible, and placing the ads on the right platforms to reach the target audience at a time and place where they are open to receive persuasive messages.

To illustrate how a copywriter might contribute to an ad campaign, this text presents a pro-social campaign model and a sample creative brief.

 Definition: Copywriter

A **copywriter** is an advertising industry professional whose primary job is to write the text used in ads. They may write print ads, scripts for audio or video ads, social media posts, blog posts, website copy, marketing emails, news releases, and more.

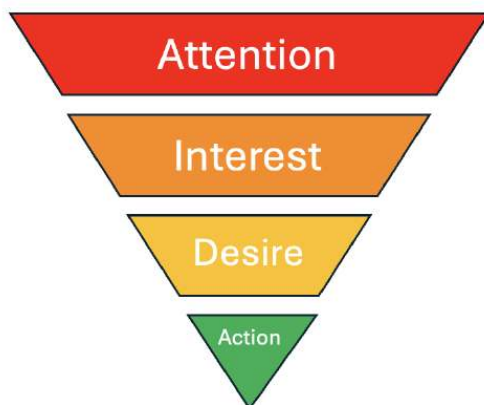


Figure 9.1.1: A-I-D-A Funnel. (CC-BY license; Mark Poepsel)

## AIDA

For an overall framework for crafting ad copy, consider using the Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) framework.

- Attention - Good advertising copy should effectively grab the audience's attention through words, images and design. This can be challenging. Since consumers see hundreds or even thousands of advertisements each day, capturing their attention needs to be informed by strategy.
- Interest - After gaining the audience's attention, copy should maintain their focus by generating interest. This involves crafting relevant messages.
- Desire - The next step is to provoke a desire for the advertised product or service. Dozens of approaches for provoking desire can be used. Copywriters must choose what is best for the brand and the campaign. One of the most common methods of establishing desire is to describe a problem many people have and show how the product being advertised solves the problem.
- Action - If and when desire is instilled, the copy should then motivate the audience to act. Copywriters craft a call to action in most ads. The call to action tells the audience what it is that you want them to do. This could be buying the product, visiting the organization's social media page, volunteering, or attending an event. The call to action should be memorable. Experienced copywriters often craft messages that use this structure without having to think about the AIDA framework.

When AIDA is employed well, consumers may get the sense that trying or buying the product or service was their idea because cognitively this is how most humans approach new information. They first decide whether or not to pay attention at all. They then quickly decide if they are interested. Both processes may happen in a split second. If an audience member's attention and interest can be held, they may be led farther down the path to make a decision to try, buy or believe what the copywriter is selling. Ultimately, a call to action is often used to carry the consumer beyond deciding they will do something to encourage them until they actually follow through.

In the age of "big data," it is possible to target repeated ads to audience members at a particular point in the funnel. For example, if an audience member has recently bought a home and has purchased a dishwasher and refrigerator in the past several weeks, they are much more likely to be in the market for a washer and dryer than other consumers. These individuals may be targeted based on their online shopping behavior, credit card purchase information and web search data.

This level of targeted marketing might take some consumers by surprise, but for advertising copywriters, being assured by data analytics that the messages they are crafting are very likely to reach the (nearly) perfect audience at the (nearly) perfect time can be reassuring. The words that are chosen and the style with which they are presented can truly make the difference in hundreds or thousands of people's purchase decisions.

The goal for many copywriters working on organized ad campaigns comes after a consumer has made this AIDA journey. The additional step is to become a brand advocate.

 Definition: Brand advocate

A **brand advocate** is an individual who is so impressed by a product or service they have purchased that they encourage others to buy or try the same product or service.

Encouraging brand advocacy may or may not be addressed in a specific advertisement, but a key goal of many campaigns is not only to convert people to become their consumers but to talk them up, so to speak, with other consumers in ways that are organic, that do not rely on paid influencers or other forms of paid promotion, but which are honest testaments to the value of a product or service shared between friends or acquaintances.

Some online advertisers attempt to mimic this form of organic interaction in social media, but it is risky to attempt to fake this kind of organic interaction. Consumers who are made aware that they have been fooled into thinking a campaign was organic when in fact it was manufactured may harm a brand's image online and in person. The best products advertise well and are of such good quality that their customers become advocates out of actual appreciation for the quality of a brand and, in the case of social campaigns, for the good that they do.

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## 9.2: Overview of a pro-social advertising campaign strategy



Figure 9.2.1: Makin' dreams come true. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Peter Fogden](#))

### Focusing on positive social outcomes

Numerous conceptual frameworks and models exist to provide examples for how to run successful advertising campaigns. This section focuses primarily on the social marketing model. This framework describes how to design information campaigns that focus on improving social welfare. First and foremost, this model is used for health and environmental campaigns; however, as Atkin and Rice<sup>1</sup> state, it is appropriate to apply the social marketing model to consumer advertising campaigns because they share similarities with health and environmental campaigns.

Some examples of social welfare campaigns include smoking cessation campaigns, anti-littering and anti-pollution efforts, and vaccine campaigns, which have been conducted since at least the early 1800's.

The essential steps in the social marketing campaign model are consistent with many other strategic communication models.

In a symbiotic manner, applying a social welfare model to a consumer advertising campaign can reinforce positive social behaviors while, at the same time, serving marketing objectives.

The difference between more standard consumer advertising campaigns and social welfare campaigns is the primary goal. Consumer advertising campaigns aim to sell a product or service to a mass audience while social welfare campaigns aim to influence large group behavior in pro-social ways. Although not all advertising campaigns include reference to or concern for social welfare, appeals to social welfare can be successful at helping to influence consumer choice.

The **social marketing campaign model** identifies five steps in a campaign process: planning, theory, communication analysis, implementation, and evaluation.

In the **planning stage**, advertisers establish message goals. This is a critical step as it informs both strategy and tactics. In the strategizing stage, advertising account managers, planners, and creatives, including, of course, copywriters, pose the following questions to the team:

- What kind of response do we want from the audience?
- How do we want them to feel?
- What do we want them to do?
- How does this product or service address a problem or challenge in their lives?

In the **theory** step, advertisers try to determine the best way to achieve the campaign objectives. Perloff<sup>2</sup> writes about the theory stage as an idea generation phase where broad strategies, specific appeals and potential pivots are all identified. This step is also when advertisers complete a creative brief that further outlines the strategy. The next section covers creative briefs.

There are two main strategic categories: product-oriented and consumer-oriented.

#### Definition: Product-oriented strategy

**Product-oriented strategy** focuses on highlighting specific benefits related to the product or service.

One example is commercials for paper towels that compare the product's specific features, such as absorbency and strength, to those of competitors. These commercials often show side-by-side shots of people using the featured brand and the competing brand, with the featured brand as the better option.

Other product-oriented strategies may focus on something that can be found only at a particular company or under a specific brand. McDonald's occasionally uses this strategy in its advertisements, reminding viewers that they can purchase America's favorite french fries only at its restaurants.

#### Definition: Consumer-oriented strategy

The **consumer-oriented strategy** connects the audience's daily experiences and lifestyle with the advertised product or service.

Advertisers frequently use this strategy for branding purposes, that is to define a brand rather than to sell a certain product. The idea is to associate the company with a particular lifestyle, personality, or characteristic that the audience identifies with or aspires to. Car companies often use consumer-oriented strategies. Rather than focusing on the specific features of the car, consumer-oriented commercials might simply show an attractive person driving along a winding road.

The luxury motor company Lincoln used this strategy in a campaign starting in 2014. The commercials featured actor Matthew McConaughey simply talking and driving a Lincoln MKC. There is little mention of product features. However, the campaign associates McConaughey's wealth, talent, confidence, and attractive physical features with the car. In doing so, the ads help to shape Lincoln's brand identity.

These basic strategies may be combined. Many ad campaigns strike a balance between presenting product-oriented facts and consumer-oriented feelings. Social marketing campaigns are particularly adept at combining the positive, practical outcomes of a behavior or a set of behaviors with positive feelings, more in line with the consumer-oriented approach.

For example, ads that encourage consumers to reduce pollution by purchasing products that use fewer fossil fuels or that encourage consumers to cut down on waste by purchasing products that use less packaging are making product-oriented appeals, but they may also highlight the positive feelings that come along with caring about the planet and its future, which are considered pro-social consumer-oriented appeals.

Advertising essentially involves persuading people to act or feel a certain way about the message topic. Incorporating several ideas and strategies may increase the odds of accomplishing the goal.

The third step in the social marketing model is **communication analysis**. Here, advertisers conduct market research and audience analysis to test core campaign ideas. This step helps advertisers refine their strategies.

For example, if you are designing a campaign to convince a target audience to try local cuisine, you want to examine perceptions of the food prior to launching the campaign. You can do this through focus groups or audience surveys. For a copywriter, it makes a world of difference in such a campaign if the target audience already has a positive perception of the local restaurant scene. The tone and content of advertisements reminding people about the popularity of local restaurants should be quite different from ads directed at an audience that does not trust local eateries.

Audience research for the sake of refining a communication strategy cannot be taken lightly. Opinions change. Think about a brand that saw its popularity drastically drop or rapidly rise in recent memory. Campaigns that ignore audience perceptions may fail to connect or may have a negative impact on brand perception and sales. For example, in 2017, Pepsi ran an ad with model Kendall Jenner in which she joins a Black Lives Matter protest, but rather than protesting police brutality, she hands an actor playing a police officer a can of Pepsi. Critics argued that Pepsi was clumsily and superficially attempting to capitalize on issues and

expressions of grave importance. Pepsi, many argued, made [an appeal to unity through commercialism](#) that largely missed the tone and attitude of the nation in support of the protests at that time. Though referencing social movements had worked for Coca-Cola in the past (also referenced in the article linked in the previous sentence), this particular appeal was not well received. Pepsi pulled it [within 24 hours](#).

The next step in the social marketing campaign model involves **implementing the campaign**. This is done by carefully considering the four P's of marketing: Product, Price, Placement, and Promotion.

- **Product** - You must know the product you are attempting to sell. In a social marketing campaign, this means you also must have data to support any claims you are making about positive social impacts.
- **Price** - You must understand how the product or service will be packaged and priced. Miscommunication about available package deals or about certain features being available at certain price points can frustrate consumers. In some campaigns, price is a major selling point.
- **Place** - You must strategize about where and when ads will run while also thinking about the physical or digital location of the products and services being marketed. If the goal is to connect consumers to products and services, you need to know where each are positioned in order to best make that connection. This includes the concept of advertising placement. Although the media department in an advertising agency is ultimately responsible for making sure ads are placed where and when they are supposed to run, strategizing about placement is a group effort. Copywriters who fail to understand where, when and in what context an ad will be placed run the risk of confusing or alienating audiences. Not all contingencies for ad placement can be planned for, but writers should know, at the very least, what audience they are targeting, what type of media platform they are writing for — such as social media, print media, broadcast, etc. — and the context of the related content — such as the types of shows or clips that are likely to run adjacent to your video ad, and the physical location of a billboard.
- **Promotion** - In the broader marketing sense, promotion encompasses all of advertising as well as PR efforts to maintain the brand's image. Thinking about promotion when working on an ad campaign means thinking about the past, present and future of the product or service in the context of the brand that is attached to it.

The last step in the social marketing model is **evaluation**.

#### Definition: Evaluation

In the context of an advertising campaign, evaluation refers to tracking the success of the campaign itself. This is often done in terms of both reach (How large of an audience did you deliver the ad to?) and engagement (How many signs of connection with the ad did the audience indicate?)

For a social marketing campaign, this means tracking audience opinion about the pro-social message as well as any impacts on brand perception, sales, or other metrics specific to the product. Evaluation provides an opportunity for campaign designers to see how well their efforts succeeded in reaching targeted goals. Media campaign goals are often set in terms of **key performance indicators or KPI**.

#### Definition: KPI

Key performance indicators are the goals for a media campaign established in the context of the platform on which the ad appears. For example, goals on YouTube might include the base number of views or impressions but also the number of times viewers watched for at least 10 seconds and/or the number of times they clicked through the ad to learn more about the product or service. KPIs may also measure how often viewers elected to skip the ad.

- It is expected that clickthrough rates (CTR), or the number of times a viewer clicks on an ad to find out more about a product or service, will be relatively low. After all, a clickthrough means someone is leaving the media they intended to watch, listen to, or read to find out more about the product or service you are trying to market, but variance within that small number is still important to brands. Brands will likely also evaluate sales before and after the launch of the campaign, allowing some time for the campaign to take effect. They may tabulate statistics beyond media impressions, CTR, and conversion rate, such as average view duration of video ads *after* “Skip Ad” appears on screen. They may track audience attendance at events and/or conduct focus groups to learn not just what ads people prefer to spend more time with or to click through but also to learn why.
- Successful evaluation empowers brands and their partner agencies to refine their strategies for future planning, theory, communication analysis, and implementation. A successful social campaign will also measure consumer attitudes, intent to alter

behavior, and behavioral shifts as they relate to the pro-social messaging aspects of the campaign. Ideally, consumers who make positive changes in their own lives associate those changes with the brand, product, or service that encouraged or empowered them to make the change. Of course, communication strategizing is easier said than done. The next section addresses how to outline a detailed advertising plan.

1. Atkin, C.K. & Rice, R.E. (2012). *Advertising creative: Strategy, copy, and design*. Sage Publications.
2. Perloff, R.M. (2010). *The dynamics of persuasion: Communication and attitudes in the 21st century*. Routledge.

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### 9.3: Art of Clarity - Pro-social ad campaign with audio script

This section covers planning a pro-social advertising campaign. It includes an assignment to develop a creative brief and also calls on students to write an audio ad to gain practice writing for the ear as well as writing for the purpose of persuading an audience.

Before they begin the process of designing, writing and producing advertisements, advertising professionals work on explaining and outlining their strategy in a creative brief. This is a document for the creative team, the advertising director and the client that gives a clear objective for the campaign. Subsequent ad copy would then be expected to adhere to concepts covered in the brief. The creative brief is like a game plan. Without it, specific ads and the campaign on the whole may not be successful. Using correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and a concise writing style are essential in a creative brief. Clients, creative team leaders, account managers, and account planners might all have access to the brief. Professionalism in writing is essential. There are several broad categories to consider when completing a creative brief.

For the purposes of the related assignment, students should consider these to be a checklist.

- **Key consumer insight(s)** - The key consumer insight(s) statement demonstrates a clear understanding of the consumer's general behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes as they relate to the message topic. It also considers general opinions and thoughts about the subject matter. Imagine you are developing a creative brief for a cookie brand. Market research and careful audience analysis can reveal key insights into consumer behaviors, such as the fact that many consumers believe that so-called healthy cookies do not taste as good as their high-calorie, sugar-filled counterparts. This knowledge will help you as you design your advertisement.
- **Advertising problem** - The term "advertising problem" does not refer to a problem with the advertisement itself or challenges in delivering advertising to the key audience. Advertising problem refers to the product's biggest consumer-related obstacle. In the cookie example above, the advertising problem is that consumers face a choice between buying great-tasting cookies that are loaded with calories and sugar and buying ones that are low in sugar and calories that don't often taste as good. From the perspective of the advertising agency and the copywriter, advertising problems are good things. These are challenges in the form of consumer perceptions that brands will pay advertisers to help overcome. Consumer insights can inform your advertising team what some potential advertising problems might be. An advertising strategy should address this problem, which sometimes is framed as a need. Without a problem to address, the ad will appear pointless; however, advertisers must ask themselves if they are identifying important concerns consumers actually face, or if they as advertisers are creating problems to fuel a compelling narrative. It is much more ethical to help brands identify real issues consumers face and to help address those concerns than to create uncertainty or anxiety in the general public to sell products.
- **Advertising objective** - The advertising objective should explain the promotion's intended effects on the target audience and clearly articulate the campaign's overall goal. The goal is not simply to persuade the audience. Think about how your writing might lead to measurable changes in audience feelings or beliefs in surveys. Think about what you want audience members to do in response to reading, hearing and/or seeing the ad. An example of the objective for the cookie advertisement might be to convince cookie lovers that the featured product is a healthy option that does not compromise substantially on taste.
- **Target consumer** - Target consumers are imagined types of people with whom you specifically want to communicate. They are often described in detail in the form of a persona as though they were real people to aid in crafting campaigns and specific messages. For example, a fashion brand might create the persona of Kiah from Nashville, a woman, a college graduate in her late 20s, who is mixed race, living on her own in an apartment with a great full-time job in music promotion who dresses for success but also to look her best when she goes out after work from time to time. To fully understand the audience, consider their demographic characteristics, including age, income level, ethnicity, gender, etc., as well as their psychographic characteristics, which include aspects of their lifestyles, values, and interests. Be able to answer the following questions about the persona:
  - Why would these people be attracted to the featured product or service?
  - What are the benefits of targeting this particular group?
  - What tones and terms are most appropriate for appealing to but not appropriating from this audience
- **Competition** - In this section of the creative brief, perform a detailed assessment of the competition that considers strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, examine the competitor's history, products, services, brand, and target audiences. Analyzing key competitors will help you articulate your company's or product's market niche. You need to establish how your product or company stands out from similar products or companies.
- **Key consumer benefit** - The key consumer benefit describes what the consumer gains from using the advertised product or service. This section also discusses how the product or service solves the established problem. Narratives, testimonials, and

relevant data may be used in actual advertisements to help enhance persuasiveness.

- Support - The support section explains the validity of the proposed advertising plan. It makes a case for why the campaign will motivate the audience or make them believe that the claims are true. This is particularly important because a creative brief serves as a pitch to a brand meant to secure their business. If your agency is to secure the advertising account, you must convince your client, which might be an individual or high-level executives representing a corporate brand, that your plan will work best. When drafting a creative brief, a team usually expects several other advertising agencies to be drafting similar briefs at the same time. You will often wish to include evidence from third-party sources such as external research reports or polls that bolster your approach. Also include feedback from focus groups to persuade the client that the advertising plan will be effective.
- Other categories to consider - Some creative briefs might include a section called "tonality." This explains the desired feel or attitude of the campaign, such as classy, fun, modern, youthful, extravagant, conscientious, etc. You may also wish to include a description of the advertisement's visual elements, or the creative mandates, which are elements that the brand requires to be included in the pitch. This section should provide a detailed explanation of the images, slogans, logo(s), and other visuals that you intend to employ so that clients can imagine how the advertisements will look.

The creative team usually presents one or more sample advertisements to the client in a pitch presentation. Pitching is typically covered in campaigns courses and other advanced advertising classes.

After completing the creative brief and receiving approval from the client, your next step may be to throw a small party because you just earned the right to keep your jobs. It is now time to develop the advertising campaign. A large part of this process involves copywriting. Copywriting puts together the headlines, sub-headlines, body text, images, captions, and scripts for audio and visual elements included in the campaign. Not all campaigns include all of these elements, but in a media environment where social media grows more and more powerful every day, it is not unusual to see multi-platform or multimedia campaigns.

Copywriters use persuasive communication to influence target audiences. They also create the advertisement's call to action and slogan, and they may have input on logos and other visual elements that include text. Here is a brief list of some of the types of ads copywriters consistently create:

- Text-only print or online display ads
- Text + photo print and online display ads

Note that these are usually static. They must be appealing based on typeface selection, type color (where applicable), word choice, photography (where applicable), and layout alone.

- Billboards
- Direct mail print ads, which can appear in newsprint, in magazines, pamphlets, or in the form of letters

Note that the text in these ads must be triple checked because once an ad is printed to be mailed or put on a billboard it can be difficult or impossible to alter.

- Scripts for radio and TV commercials as well as audio and video ads appearing on online video platforms such as YouTube

Note that these types of ads require pre-planning because the shooting and editing of multimedia content may take days or weeks to complete, depending on the complexity of the ad or the campaign. Advertising scripts must be written for the ear, which is to say they must make sense to the listener or viewer the first time they are heard. Often viewers, and, of course listeners, will not see the speaker's lips as they enunciate spoken texts. Listeners and viewers generally will not rewind audiovisual content to review what they have missed. This is particularly true of ads. Thus, the writing style must be clear and simple for the sake of audience comprehension and enjoyment.

- Branded social media posts and threads for all manner of platforms

Note that copywriters in these situations need to think about the most common phrases and types of slang that might appear on each platform. A comment that is meaningful on one platform might not make sense in another context. Note which platforms are heavily into photography and thus demand high quality images. Note that the tone for a message on one platform might not be appropriate for another.

- Scripts for social media influencers when they collaborate with brands and ad agencies

Advertisers may wish to use product placement to enhance the reach and image of the product being promoted.

### Definition: Product placement

**Product placement** refers to the presentation of a brand's products or services within the content of another medium. Examples of product placement include characters in a movie or TV show eating at a specific restaurant or driving a specific brand of car. Influencers are often called on for product placement opportunities as they can sometimes seamlessly mention brands in the course of their regular discussions about fashion, relationships, sports, cooking, sex, news, politics, history, raising children, etc.

Product placements must be planned and related copy written with care so that they are integrated into the context of the content as seamlessly as possible. In most cases, content authors, influencers, and others will collaborate only to a limited extent with copywriters. Copywriters must do their best to convey the essence of core messages clearly because the intricacies of conveying problems and solutions, presenting a certain tone, and balancing product vs consumer focus may be lost in translation from ad copy to product placement context.

### Advertising assignment I - Brief<sup>2</sup>

Craft an **abbreviated creative brief** to demonstrate your understanding of the key elements of this type of document. Do not feel the need to conduct in-depth research or to write a complete brief. Instead, think of a brand with a problem that you could help solve through advertising. Put the name of the brand at the top of a Word document. Then, address each of the following topics in about one paragraph each: key consumer insights, advertising problem, advertising objective, target consumer persona, primary competition information, key consumer benefit, support for this strategy, and tonality. You should be able to complete this with careful web searching. Using AI to help generate responses should be encouraged for this particular assignment.

Be sure to frame the benefit to the consumer both in terms of the advertising problem and solution and in terms of a social benefit that may be realized.

### Audio advertisement template and breakdown

The [template breakdown provided here](#) matches the blank template linked in the Advertising assignment II box below. Students should review the labels and descriptions that define and describe key parts of the template.

## The OER Guide to Media Writing

Audio advertisement template guide

- 1 **Agency Name**  
**Studio Location**  
**Writer**
- 2 **CLIENT:**  
**PRODUCT:**  
**LENGTH:**
- Announcer: classic deep voice, anchorman type  
Zara: energetic woman, clear and confident, any age
- 3 **MX: LOW TEMPO, SAD POP [UNDER]**
- 4 **Announcer:** Tired of dull, coffee-stained teeth? Want a picture-perfect smile?
- 5 **SFX: CAMERA SHUTTERING**
- Announcer:** Try a teeth whitening kit that lasts longer and costs less than having your dentist do it!
- SFX: CHA-CHING**
- MX: UPBEAT, DANCE POP [UP AND UNDER]**
- Announcer:** Try Chompers strips and light therapy just 30 minutes each night for a few days...That's all it takes! Since Chompers uses the same enamel-safe ingredients dentists use, you'll have noticeably whiter teeth in just one week.
- SFX: SPARKLING CHIMES [UP AND UNDER]**
- Zara:** I'm so glad I chose Chompers. It helped me reveal my best smile!
- MX: FADE OUT**

- |   |                                                                                                                                                                        |            |
|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 1 | Production company and staff information                                                                                                                               | <b>Key</b> |
| 2 | Client and length of ad                                                                                                                                                |            |
| 3 | MX = Music. Indicate tempo and type. Indicate mix in brackets. "Under" means the music can be heard under the voice. "Up" means the music replaces the voice, briefly. |            |
| 4 | Indicate the speaker's title or character's name if using actors, e.g. <u>Narrator</u> or <u>Mary</u> .                                                                |            |
| 5 | SFX = Sound Effects. Clearly & briefly describe desired sound. Indicate mix in brackets. If no mix is indicated, assume the sound effect replaces the voice.           |            |

Figure 9.3.1: Audio advertisement template and template breakdown graphic.  
(Copyright CC BY NC; Mark Poepsel)

### Advertising assignment II - Audio ad

Thinking about the creative brief you just completed, write a script for a 30-second audio ad that would be a suitable contribution to a campaign pitch. Imagine it might run on a streaming service or on a radio broadcast. It should address the problem and solution indicated in the brief. You may use this [template for an audio ad](#) if no other template is provided for you.

Refer to the example template and breakdown depicted above, which indicates the key elements of an audio script.

Make sure to use at least one music cue, at least one sound effects cue and two different voices in your script. If you use an announcer, that may count as one of the two voices.

Professors/Instructors: Various mass communication programs and courses have their own script templates. Please use whichever template suits your students best. The purpose of including this template and associated breakdown document is to be able to provide a complete set of open educational course materials.

The template breakdown indicates key header information, descriptions of each speaker, indicators for music and sound effects, and a means of differentiating between effects and dialog.

9.3: Art of Clarity - Pro-social ad campaign with audio script is shared under a CC BY license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

## 10: Writing for Social Media

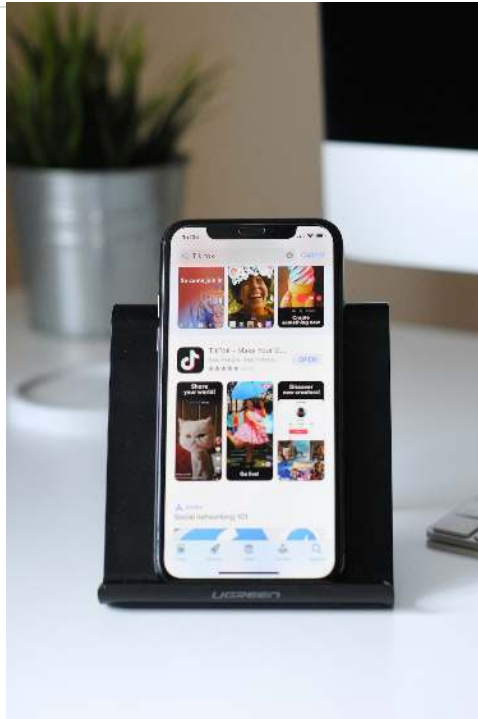


Figure 10.1: User searches for the TikTok app. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Nik](#))

### Learning Objectives

- Strategizing social media
- Key themes and techniques for writing social media content
- Crafting professional social media threads

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Writing professionally for social media is a challenging task, but social media platforms are the fastest growing interpersonal and mass media channels the world has ever seen, so it is essential for mass media professionals to know how to write for social media. Whether your goal is to become an influencer and grow your own audience before a larger media entity hires you for access to your audience or you plan to work for a professional media outlet using social media to attract audiences to your content, you will need to take all that you know about writing for text-focused and audiovisual media and apply it well to attract and hold an audience.

Social media users and platforms are notoriously fickle, that is they change their interests and their minds often. Social media platforms are known for contributing to an [overall decrease in attention spans](#). Writing in this environment requires focus, personality, creativity, knowledge of trends, and the ability to give audiences what they want without devolving into pure pandering.

### Social media background

Social media are communications platforms that allow people to share personal content, news and other information that they feel others should know. The term "social media" calls to mind sites and apps such as TikTok, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Snapchat, LinkedIn, etc.; however, there are many other forms of social media where people share text, photos, videos, music, podcasts, discussions, and ideas. YouTube, Vimeo, and other video sharing sites are platforms for social media. Blogging platforms and social bookmarking sites such as Reddit are also social media in that they enable people to share and converse across time and space with anyone else who has access.

Social media are everyday communication tools. Many brands use social media to expand the reach of their marketing and public relations efforts. Organizations often use social media to enhance brand awareness, roll out promotions, and drive website traffic. Social media also provide opportunities to develop relationships with audiences through engagement. Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012) note that “social media provide a relatively inexpensive means to communicate with, and, more importantly, to enter into a dialogue with strategic publics.”<sup>1</sup>

Several characteristics differentiate social media from what are often referred to as **legacy media**.

#### Definition: Legacy media

**Legacy media** is a general term for mass media platforms that were popular before widespread adoption of the internet. Although they originated in analog forms, most legacy media platforms, including books, newspapers, magazines, film, radio, television, etc., can now be found in digital forms as well.

Social media platforms are unique in that they are both interpersonal and mass media platforms. Every user on a social media platform has the opportunity to be both a media consumer and content creator themselves with the possibility of reaching hundreds, thousands, and occasionally millions of other users. In other words, social media platforms are hubs of two-way communication where those who primarily consume media and those who publish content professionally are on relatively equal footing.

Having noted, that it is important to understand that mass media outlets and anyone else who wishes to be influential on a social media platform often pay to promote their content so that they are ensured of reaching an audience. As users and creators of social media content, professional media writers need to be awake to the fact that not all “viral” content reaches audiences organically, i.e. based on word of mouth.

#### Definition: Word of mouth

It may seem obvious that **word of mouth** means the promotion of content, whether it is social media or mass media content, where users communicate it to one another by talking about it in person, sharing physical media, sharing, tagging, re-posting, etc. on social media. What is less obvious is that this is a major area of academic research. What makes word of mouth marketing so fascinating is that it connects mass communication and interpersonal communication. It is no wonder that social media platforms are ripe for word-of-mouth promotion. This connection is what social media were made for.

Legacy media platforms produce content with the intention of reaching mass audiences, primarily in a one-to-many model of communication. In other words, the mass media outlet is a single source reaching (hopefully) a mass audience.

On social media, people can build their own brands on Instagram or TikTok. They can share their thoughts on issues in depth in blogs or vlogs. Social media enable users to be active participants in the communication processes of major brands and larger media companies. Audiences may be more engaged with brand messages on social media because they can provide feedback and expect to be heard and possibly responded to [or even roasted](#).

Another characteristic of social media is that it gives instantaneous communication. Audiences do not have to wait until scheduled news broadcasts to receive information because reporters and media outlets can bring the news directly to social media platforms. Furthermore, people can easily share and post news content to their followers. Social media also foster a sense of interconnectedness and community by bringing people across the globe together online.

Learning how to write for social media means learning to take all of the lessons learned from legacy media about writing clearly -- using professional grammar and style, writing conversationally and referencing images where appropriate -- and applying them in spaces where information flows at breakneck speeds and where fan bases can be grown and lost in a matter of days rather than years.

This chapter introduces some strategies for writing for social media, discusses key terms and techniques and covers why it is essential to bring a mindset of professionalism to these spaces where often anything goes.

1. Valentini, C., Kruckeberg, D., & Starck, K. (2012). Public relations and community: A persistent covenant. *Public Relations Review*, 38(5), 873-879.

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## 10.1: Strategizing social media



Figure 10.1.1: Social media folder on a smartphone. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Nathan Dumlao](#))

To write and create content professionally for social media, it is necessary to plan strategically. Social media networks are platforms for all other media types. If a media writer/content creator enters into these spaces without a plan, they will soon learn that it is quite difficult to gain and hold an audience's attention without outstanding presenters, outstanding forms of presentation and consistency. Developing a strategy is the key to consistency. For guidance on developing media content strategies, writers should turn to the experts in strategic communications. Those working in marketing/advertising and public relations have nearly a century of experience in researching how to craft messages that will be salient with mass audiences and how to develop strategies to have the greatest impact in the most efficient way.

### Advertising and social media strategies

The rise of social media has had significant effects on the strategic communication industry. Marketers use social media to enhance traditional efforts such as direct mail fliers and television advertisements. Social media also enable marketers to create interactive content for audiences. In the public relations field, social media platforms give professionals easier access to journalists and news media outlets. For example, it is common for PR professionals to reach out to reporters via X (formerly Twitter).

In many ways, social media have made it easier for consumers to hold organizations, public figures, and large institutions accountable.<sup>1</sup> Users can easily find and reveal information about a previous event involving an organization, whether it was advantageous or damaging to the brand. Users can also provide instant public feedback by voicing their opinions via social media networks. Furthermore, social media have made it challenging for many organizations to control their brand and present a consistent message across platforms. Audiences can generate information that can be damaging to a brand's reputation.

Social media require strategizing both because of their amazing potential to reach audiences with targeted messages and because they have an amazing capacity to do harm to reputations. This is all the more reason to think strategically about producing social media content.

The following are the key steps to developing a social media strategy:

- Identify the message goal. Social media message goals should reflect the organization's overall mission. Message goals can include increasing brand awareness, creating a favorable perception of an organization, and convincing the audience to buy a product. The goal should be clearly articulated in the content. Also, select the social media platform that would be the most effective in accomplishing the message goal. Each social media tool has specific characteristics and audiences, which will affect whether the message goals are achieved.

- Identify the target audience. Similar to public relations writing, social media messages need to be targeted. After identifying the key audience, examine what they're talking about including their interests, attitudes, and beliefs. Social media content should reflect audience analysis research. As you tailor the content of messages to an audience, do not exaggerate attempts to be interesting or relevant. Because social media messages are audience-centered, they're not necessarily grounded in what you personally think is appealing.

The lack of attention to audience analysis can have serious consequences. One example is IHOP's Twitter controversy in 2015. In an attempt to reach a young audience and produce attention-grabbing content, IHOP tweeted about its pancakes, making a provocative comment that compared them to a woman with small breasts: "Flat but has a GREAT personality." Audiences quickly reacted with outrage, causing the company to issue an apology.

Another somewhat notorious example can be found in the case of social media influencer, Logan Paul, who was the center of a public outcry in response to a video he posted while on a trip to Japan. Paul recorded video of his visit to Aokigahara, a forest location known for its high suicide rates. The video appeared to show the body of a deceased individual. He posted the video on his YouTube channel and clips of it later surfaced on Twitter, gaining more than 100,000 retweets and a swift negative response from a global public. Although Paul apologized for the insensitive nature of the video and temporarily suspended his vlog, the negative impacts of this unethical production have had lasting effects on his reputation.

These mishaps demonstrate the need for careful message and audience analysis. They also reinforce the point that although you may think a message is humorous in the moment, your target audience may not appreciate it.

- Identify your organization's social media approach. Communication choices should reflect organizational strategies. Wilson, Guinan, Parise and Weinberg identified four ways in which companies use social media. They are determined by the "company's tolerance for uncertain outcomes and the level of results sought."<sup>2</sup>
  - The "predictive practitioner" approach uses caution when sending out social media messages. Instead of launching a social media strategy that involves all departments in a company, only a specific department (example: marketing or human resources) uses its social media platforms. This allows more control of social media messaging and guarantees some level of certainty in accomplishing the stated objectives.
  - The "creative experimenter" approach accepts uncertainty and deploys small social media "experiments" to learn and improve overall business functions. Sometimes, businesses will take to Facebook or Twitter to receive feedback on products or business practices from internal (example: employees) or external (example: customers) audiences. The overall goal is to listen and learn from interactions; therefore, unpredictable results are accepted.
  - The "social media champion" approach takes strategies to a more advanced level. A designated team is in charge of the organization's overall social media presence. The team also creates an official social media policy and guidelines for the organization. Larger social media projects typically use this strategy. Unlike the predictive practitioner strategy, this approach does not confine social media use to a particular department and considers social media messages across various functions.
  - The "social media transformer" strategy targets both internal and external audiences by launching large-scale projects that involve multiple departments. As with the social media champion approach, a team is devoted to planning, creating, and launching the organization's social media projects. However, these projects are usually larger and more advanced than those using the social media champion approach. This strategy specifically considers how social media can influence business strategy, brand, and culture.

Each type of strategy involves different levels of resources and different-sized teams involving one or more departments within the organization. None of these professional strategies revolve around a single media writer attempting to research, plan, create, disseminate and measure the impact of their campaigns on their own. Organizations use multiple approaches when designing social media message campaigns, and some of these roles can be combined, but it should help when planning a social media campaign to think first about your role.

Are you acting as a practitioner in a narrow space? Are you experimenting with different message strategies to learn which type of message or which content is most relevant to your audience? Are you presenting an entire organization's face to the world via social media? Are you not only presenting an entire organization's identity to the world but also using social media as part of a strategic image overhaul?

If you know your role, you can plan which social media platforms to use, what types of content to include (text, photos, graphics, videos, music and other sounds, talent, etc.), how many posts or other pieces of content to create and how long the social media campaign might be backed by paid social promotion.

1. Green, D. (2012). How to think about social media. *New Statesman*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/david-green/2012/01/social-media-regulation>
2. Wilson, H., Guinan, P., Parise, S. & Weinberg, B. (2011). What's your social media strategy? *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2011/07/whats-your-social-media-strategy>

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## 10.2: Key themes and techniques for writing social media



Figure 10.2.1: Social media work. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Corinne Kutz](#))

Creating social media content begins with the written word. Any of the previously introduced templates in this text may be of help including hard and feature news templates, audio scripts, video scripts, and even the news release template, as it serves to deliver information strategically in such a way that journalists might do a news story on the topic. PR efforts using social media often have the same goal and present key information in roughly the same order as a classic news release.

This section includes key themes and techniques for writing social media messages. It focuses first on general concepts before discussing best practices for writing for text-based vs. video-based social media platforms.

The goal of creating social media messages is not only to reach your audience, but also to achieve an intended effect. Proper grammar and punctuation are important in social media writing, as is accuracy. A careless error could undermine the credibility of your news content or your brand. Here are a few other factors to consider when creating social media messages:

- Engagement, engagement, engagement. Social media messages need to motivate the audience to engage with the content so deeply that they feel a greater connection with the brand or news outlet that published them. Several strategies can encourage engagement, such as responding quickly to feedback from audience members, creating contests, and inviting the audience to respond to a question. Including photos and videos in social media posts substantially increases engagement, as does integrating trending topics.<sup>1</sup>

All of these techniques require careful consideration and research that will pay off if the trending topics, related hashtags, etc. are chosen wisely.

- Consistency. The core message needs to be articulated across all social media platforms in a consistent way that conveys a unified voice. The message also needs to reflect the brand image; in other words, it should reinforce the brand “feel” or personality. The same goes for news content. News organizations should have a consistent tone appropriate for engaging their target audience. Straying too far from that tone can bore, annoy or even alienate readers.
- Concise writing. Similar to news writing, social media writing is straightforward. Because you’re competing against countless other messages in the social media sphere, you do not have much time or space to capture the audience’s attention. Make one point. Make it clear. Make it compelling. Move on to the next message or to “response mode,” which is the stance a media organization takes on social media once a campaign or major story is launched. In response mode, those authorized to post to branded social media accounts monitor social media content related to the campaign and to the broader brand identity and answer users directly if necessary.
- Personality, presence and popular sounds are the keys to creating good TikTok and other short-form videos. Since social video posts are short and users may scroll past them at any time, the best strategic approach to being heard and understood is to focus as much on the person presenting the message as the message itself. The face of a TikTok or related campaign should be someone who is recognizable, not unappealing, but not necessarily classically attractive. The individual or individuals should have a great stage presence, which means they should be charismatic enough to hold someone’s attention in interpersonal space. Additionally, those crafting posts should keep track of trending sounds including music, sound effects, spoken word memes, key hashtags and even visual cues that carry meaning for audiences.?

So much of TikTok, and to a lesser extent other social media platforms, is filled with insider references that those who spend quite a bit of time on the platform might recognize before others. Those who plan a TikTok or Instagram video strategy of anywhere from one to a series of posts should keep in mind that the sound and video capture viewers' attention first. These must be selected with care and with foreknowledge for the post to be viewed much at all. Great writing in the wild realm of social video should be brief, engaging and knowledgeable of trends without being so vague as to annoy users.

Nothing is more annoying on TikTok than when a user posts a reference to something they claim everyone should know that is in no way viral or well known.

### Successful social media campaign

An example of a successful social media campaign that included a compelling overarching message, great writing, engaging content, outstanding brand partnerships with engaging, talented individuals, and the use of relevant hashtags was Apple's 2015 #ShotOniPhone campaign.

A detailed breakdown of why this campaign was considered so successful can be found at [The Brand Hopper](#). It is included as a prime example of how the best social media campaigns are run.

Apple is no stranger to viral marketing campaigns. What made the #ShotOniPhone campaign compelling was that it spoke to an assumption users already had, that is, that Apple's iPhones tend to shoot high quality photos under most conditions. The campaign also signaled that the brand was paying attention to a key feature of *any* smartphone, i.e. its ability to take great photos and shoot great video.

Critics have pointed out that Apple's iPhone did not take great photos in low light at the time and that what made the commercials for the campaign great were techniques out of reach for most regular iPhone users, and yet what the campaign conveyed was that the technology of an iPhone's camera was good enough to take professional quality video and photos under those professional circumstances.

In other words a smartphone camera in 2015 when paired with the right tools and talented individuals could function almost as well as a high-end camera capable of capturing still and video images.

The challenge that accompanied the advertising and social media campaigns encouraged regular users of the hardware to submit their content. The brand worked with influencers to trade off of their personalities and talents in terms of on-camera presence.

This campaign started with the iPhone 6s, and various references to the campaign and reboots of the concept and challenge have continued over the past decade.

There is not a key theme covered in this section that was not accounted for in that campaign. It was engaging on various social media platforms and on a contest website. It was consistent with Apple's brand message, with the tone of its advertising to millennials, with user data regarding which smartphone features are the most important, with concise messages in social media posts, legacy media ad campaigns, and billboards that often bore only the message "Shot on iPhone." The campaign serves as a prime example of how strategy informs practice in professional social media efforts.

To return to a text-focused viewpoint, what matters most is that the messages in a social media campaign are interesting, clear, coherent and engaging in and of themselves and that they all contribute significantly to a unified strategy.

The Art of Clarity section appearing next centers on crafting a thread of messages, including photos and videos, that might appear on X, on Threads, on TikTok or on Instagram.

1. Redsicker, P. (2014). Social photos generate more engagement: New research. *Social Media Examiner*. Retrieved from: <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/p...ment-research/>

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## 10.3: Art of Clarity - Crafting professional social media threads

### How to craft a professional social media thread on Bluesky, Threads or X (Twitter)

#### 1. Start with a hook

Your first post should capture readers' attention. Use a clear, bold, factual statement, an engaging question, or a statement of purpose to draw readers in. Keep the post concise. Focus on audience impact and raise questions in readers' minds that will intrigue them enough to want to scroll through the entire thread.

#### 2. Organize subsequent posts

Break down the supporting information and the continuation of the brief narrative into quick points or steps. Each post should make only one point so that the information is clear and easy to follow. Consider numbering your points in a separate document to provide a roadmap for the thread so it will have a cohesive flow.

#### 3. Add visuals and examples

Offer examples of key points backed by images whenever possible. Include statistics if the information is clear and easy to understand. On Bluesky, Threads and X, you can enhance engagement by attaching charts or short videos to illustrate your message.

#### 4. Maintain a professional tone

Keep the language respectful, polite, and to the point. Avoid jargon and avoid antagonizing the trolls. Write in the active voice as much as possible. Use short, clear sentences to maintain readability.

#### 5. Use tags and mentions thoughtfully

Only include relevant hashtags to avoid clutter and to avoid appearing like a "hashtag stuffer," i.e. one who uses popular but unrelated hashtags in a transparent attempt to grab clout. Mention (or tag) individuals or organizations only if it adds mutual value. Always credit sources of direct or paraphrased quotes, and shout out your collaborators when drawing on their work.

#### 6. Expressly encourage engagement

Conclude with an open-ended question, a call to action, which might be to encourage readers to get the full story on another website. Invite readers to engage by sharing their thoughts and questions. If appropriate, encourage resharing. Use your best ethical judgment to determine if a thread should include a request for readers to repost for their followers.

#### 7. Proofread

Before posting, double-check each post for possible factual errors, typos, or style issues. Check that your posts actually form a coherent thread. It is *essential* to plan out a thread ahead of time to avoid making corrections mid-stream. Good, professional social media threads are not often longer than 8-10 posts. Any longer than that, and audiences may lose interest. Your thread should answer the question it raised with the first post to the extent possible, or it should tell readers why the question is left open.

#### Social media thread assignment

In a word processing document, create a draft of a social media thread about a newsworthy event. It might be hard news or soft news. The choice is up to you. Use a numbered list. Write out the full text of 8-10 posts. Follow the guidelines above when crafting your posts. Your thread, overall, should include at least three images and should encourage readers to ask questions, comment or re-post, if appropriate.

After carefully crafting your thread, answer the following questions in the same document:

- What platform do you intend to publish this thread to and why?
- Who is the target audience for your thread?
- Explain why you selected the visuals (which may include charts or other graphics) that you did.
- What is your plan for getting readers to engage with the thread beyond liking the first post or two?
- Do you offer a conclusion for the topic raised at the start of the thread? If not, do you explain why the question is left open? Explain briefly.

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## 11: Building Audiences through Engagement



Figure 11.1: (Unsplash free-to-use license, [bruce mars](#))

### Learning Objectives

- Define audience building
- Recognize the ways legacy media outlets historically worked as gatekeepers of content for mass audiences
- Determine how digital media producers must work to build audiences through networked engagement
- Examine strategies for audience building, including using demographics and psycho-graphics, audience analytics, and content strategies

This chapter covers audience building through engagement, a broad term that encompasses everything from the most basic feedback form in an app or on a website to the practice of using social media to connect with audience members on a regular, personal basis to the point that members of the audience contribute substantially to a media product. What unifies all types of audience engagement is the idea that media professionals are working to relate directly with audience members, usually in networked communication spaces.

The ability to develop audiences and engage with them is essential for the survival of the mass media. In an age of information overload, or "information glut," the major challenge facing professional media creators, especially media writers, is to balance their efforts to produce professional content with their need to make it stand out among massive amounts of free content generated constantly by anyone with a smartphone and a story to sell.

This chapter defines what it means to build an audience and explains why it is essential for the survival of the industry that all media writers have a sense of how audiences are developed in digitally networked spaces. It also covers the interplay between legacy media platforms, which enjoy a large but often dwindling pre-existing audience, and social media platforms where much of what consumers see is based on algorithmic choices made by tech companies and creators' ability to attract attention.

Finally, this chapter covers some essential strategies for targeting audiences and reaching them with content that is in line with their interests while still serving the mission of the professional media organization.

### Definition: Information Glut

The term "information glut" refers to the overabundance of information available to media consumers on a constant basis on social media and other digital platforms. It has a negative connotation because it suggests effort is required to sort through useless information to find what media consumers actually need or desire.

In a world of free-flowing information, where there are few if any barriers to publishing massive amounts of content online, the sheer amount of content and the lack of organization can be mind boggling for consumers. Few if any of us experience information scarcity in these times, however, many experience a scarcity of quality information and a [scarcity of attention](#).

Much of the value media writers create for consumers in the foreseeable future will involve not just creating great content but sifting through free or cheap content created by influencers, bots of unknown origin, and AI to find what is accurate, useful, and desirable for consumers whose attention is always in demand.

This chapter addresses how to build audiences around original, high quality content and how media writers might practice careful curation as part of their work.

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## 11.1: Defining audience building

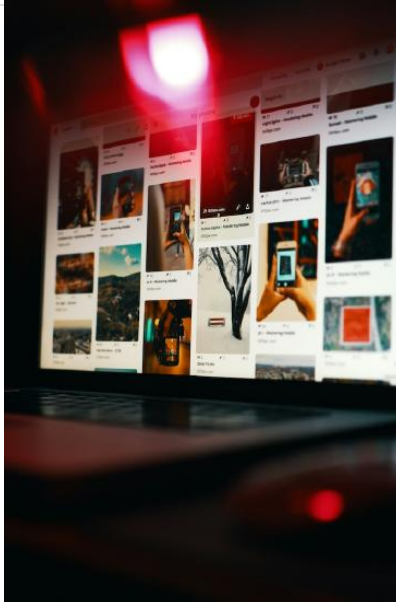


Figure 11.1.1: Creators of audiences, audiences of creators. (Unsplash free-to-use. [Szabo Viktor](#))

Media writing students must recognize that for most media companies, regardless of whether the product is journalism, advertising copy, public relations content, audiovisual content, etc., the primary purpose of most everything they will write professionally will be to contribute to the production of content that attracts and holds audiences. It might seem obvious that gaining audiences is essential. It might follow that media companies and media writers simply need to figure out what attracts audiences and create content in that vein, but in practice there are many factors that make media writing more complicated than simply "giving the people what they want."

### More than a Feeling

It is not enough to simply study what has worked in the past and try to replicate it when our individual and collective attention spans are now shorter, audiences are consuming more media than ever, and audiences' preferences are changing constantly. We need strategies in the media industry for consistently presenting fresh content and fresh approaches to delivering content without losing sight of the missions and ethics that anchor professional media organizations. Every media organization has, or should have, a clearly defined long-term mission with a basis in professional ethics as well as some general approaches to audience building that connect to that mission.

This is absolutely easier said than done, but this is what media professionals are faced with: They must know who their audience is and what they need and want. They must deliver content to them creatively and consistently without pandering, and they must be simultaneously innovative and consistent. For some this might sound like an impossible challenge. For others, this is just the type of career they have always been looking for.

#### Definition: Audience Building

Audience building in the context of digital media refers to the development and nurturing of online networks of fans, supporters, followers, etc. centered around the media brand, its content, and the information services it provides. Audience building may involve working within the confines of an existing social media platform, or it may mean developing a proprietary platform connecting audience members with each other and with professional media content and services. Audience building is substantially different from tapping into relatively passive mass audiences, which is to say the nature of audiences as networks is conceptually different than in the past.

Examples of audience building include developing a podcast that reaches thousands of listeners every week; building a TikTok or YouTube following around fun, games, and philanthropy; or developing a fact-checking service that licenses its fact-checked reports to local TV news outlets. In all of these cases, there are common forms. Audiences are identified. Audiences are served

with content and information services such as fact checking, and fresh content is published regularly that is both innovative and, usually, on-brand in order to maintain not just brand integrity but community integrity.

This means that audience building is community building in networked communication spaces. If it were as simple as following a three-step process, more people would succeed at it more often. There are inherent challenges in each one of the three aspects outlined here.

Perhaps most importantly, audience building usually takes place in spaces where audiences have thousands or even millions of media choices. Their attention is so much in demand that many scholars agree [the most valuable asset in today's media economy is not media content but audience attention](#).

Media organizations are constantly observant of the attention economy. Most are constantly tracking user data on social media and other platforms. This can make pandering to audiences seem appealing, but sooner or later, audiences will recognize when they are being pandered to and leave.

Alternatively, if audiences decide they are fine with being pandered to, then media organizations face a different threat -- the likelihood that another media organization will come along that is simply better at pandering to their audience.

Either way, constant pandering is not a key to long-term success for a media organization, and it may do lasting social and cultural harm. Pandering to audiences can create echo chambers where people surround themselves mostly with like-minded individuals and media outlets. Although the process of becoming immersed in a media echo chamber is by no means automatic, the constant appeal to attention and connection of attention to emotion, particularly to radical, politically charged emotional content, can lead to greater polarization in society, which can lead to violence.

To reiterate: There are many steps on the journey between consuming media content that panders to one's preferences and turning toward violent polarization, but [the pathways are there and well documented](#).

The relevant [reference in this collection is the article, "Polarization on Social Media Platforms"](#) starting on p. 172 by Abdullah Ar Rafee, which states:

 Quote, Unquote

Unfortunately, the impact of...increased polarization and intolerance have regularly transformed from online mediums to the ground level, manifested through attacks on minorities, Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, Christchurch Mosque shooting, ISIS propaganda and numerous other instances of online radicalization.

Your charge as a media writing student is to learn to walk the precarious middle ground between being interesting, fresh, and edgy without completely devolving into constant attention-seeking behavior where your intellectual and artistic capabilities are ground up and served to audience members with near-zero attention spans seeking not so much to be informed but to [get a dopamine fix](#). Not only does this type of media feed addictions, it can contribute to polarization around the globe, which can breed violence and lead to breakdowns in society.

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## 11.2: Audience building vs. gatekeeping



Figure 11.2.1: Magazine newsstand. (Unsplash free-to-use license; Thom Masat)

For the purpose of this text, the term "legacy media" refers to newspapers, magazines, film, radio, TV, and other mass media platforms that originated as analog media. The work of building audiences in the heyday of legacy media was significantly different from developing networks of engaged audience members in networked platforms. Mass audiences generally had fewer media options at their disposal, and so it was not uncommon for popular newspapers and magazines to have millions or even tens of millions of subscribers who would gladly pay for content they could not get elsewhere.

The rise of broadcast radio and television (in the early-to-mid 20th century in the United States) made constant streams of media available to consumers for free over the airwaves, provided they could afford a receiver, i.e. a radio or a television. Audiences for popular broadcast television shows in the mid-20th century were often in the tens of millions. Often these are ratings only reached by top shows on television and on streaming today.

Media writers with fairly captive audiences probably had more ability to dictate audience tastes than media writers today. Writers were also gatekeepers whose decisions about what to publish or broadcast made the difference between whether people would have access to content or not. Now, professional media writers, producers, etc. amplify content, but in networked spaces once information is made public it is quite easy for audience members to share information between themselves and to bypass media professionals altogether.

### Definition: Gatekeeping

With legacy media, gatekeeping decided what information was presented to mass audiences on major media platforms. Information that was not selected to pass through the "gates," so to speak, was largely inaccessible to mass audiences in practice. An academic definition of gatekeeping according to Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos states that gatekeeping is the "process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people everyday."

Gatekeeping on major media platforms still happens. Where media products need a great deal of promotion to be noticed such as with major motion picture releases, media companies often forego producing films that they do not believe have blockbuster potential. Depending on the medium, the costs of production, and the costs of promotion, gatekeeping is a prevalent but no longer ultra powerful role.

### Audience members as media creators

In the days of analog media dominated by gatekeeping, most individuals who did not work in the media professions had no way of publishing content that could be consumed by mass audiences.

However, some individuals could pay for advertising, find a media company willing to publish their book or article, write a letter to the editor of a print publication, or host an event for public relations purposes in the hopes that the news media might cover it. As you might expect, all of these possibilities were also subject to gatekeeping.

The democratization of media in digital networks means almost anyone has the potential to reach a mass audience, to "go viral," at any time if they create content that is interesting enough to be shared widely. That said, going viral is not audience building. Viral content is not particularly engaging, predictable, or sustainable in the long term.

Individuals also have the potential to build audiences organically through engagement as discussed throughout this chapter. Think of a successful podcaster or musical talent who got their start on social media. Often, these producers publish content for years and grow their audience slowly at first and then in bursts as they improve their skills and learn what is compelling to their audience.

### The interplay between creators and media companies

One goal of many who build networked audiences as digital media producers is to grow enough of a following that they can essentially market their audience to legacy media platforms. Legacy media companies often have much larger budgets for promoting new content to audiences. Legacy media also have the power to use their existing popular products to promote new content. This is why networks pay so much to air the Super Bowl or the Olympics. They use much of the commercial time during those broadcasts to promote their other content.

An example of an individual producer who built an audience and then brought that audience to a platform with gatekeeping power on promotion is Issa Rae. Her most popular early independent production was a YouTube web series called "Awkward Black Girl," which had stellar writing and strong comedic acting mixed with relatively low-cost production values.

In the future, it is likely that media organizations will continue to amplify the work of select independent producers but also that they will follow this audience building model of production themselves when possible.

Near the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, there are still mass audiences to be reached, and many of them are reached on legacy media platforms such as films, television, radio and their digital counterparts. However, the idea of tapping into audiences with messages created by a single sender meant for millions of receivers is losing ground to audience building in networked communication structures.

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## 11.3: Strategies for audience building



Figure 11.3.1: The media worktable. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Marvin Meyer](#))

Audience building in digital networks can be broken down into three steps: Identify your audience, develop a content strategy, and measure and respond to audience engagement metrics.

### Target acquired

All media products, even those geared toward millions of media consumers, have a target audience in mind. Think about top grossing film franchises like James Cameron's *Avatar* and the *Marvel Avengers* movies. They tend to focus on a white, male millennial audience in terms of whom the films represent, first and foremost, and in whom the films were primarily promoted to when first released. This is not to say that these films lack any representation of women, people of color, or people from different age demographics. It is simply to say that the primary target was white, male millennials at a time when their disposable income was the largest media revenue source filmmakers could hope to reach. The fact that this type of media consumer could enjoy the film with family members and buy the toys for their children (and themselves) also proved lucrative. These films did have target audiences in mind. The target was simply a large one that already enjoys representation in many other media forms.

In order to grow audiences further and also to respond to critics who noted a lack of representation of people of color and women in blockbuster films, the motion picture industry has diversified its offerings in recent decades with mixed results. In some cases, such as *Black Panther* (2018), the primary target audience was African American millennials, but the film proved popular with a much wider audience. The quality of story and production value make a world of difference regardless of whom the target audience is when it comes to blockbuster film success. Mere pandering to diverse demographics is not enough to sustain blockbuster movie audiences.

Audiences from all backgrounds are understandably unenthusiastic about half-hearted efforts to appeal to various groups, but films such as the *Black Panther* franchise, *Coco* (2017), *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), *Barbie* (2023), and various [film sequels with diverse casts](#) have demonstrated how films can target people of color and continue to reach all types of moviegoers.

When media writers conceive of a new media product or try to re-tool an existing one to broaden its appeal they, along with media managers, need to have a target audience in mind. Ideally, the content is so innovative, creative, exciting and powerful that appeal reaches different demographics, but every media creation has to start somewhere.

### Demographics and psychographics

Media writers need to be aware of two factors when they craft news stories, stories for entertainment purposes, advertising, PR content, etc. They need to pay attention to demographic and psychographic data.

Demographics are baseline categories that can help you define, but hopefully not stereotype, your target audience.

- Age - Understanding the age range of your audience is fundamental to tailoring your content and communication style. Different age groups have distinct content preferences and expectations with regard to language, tone, and depth of content.
- Gender - Gender considerations may play a role in how you craft your messages and in your approach to selecting images when used. An audience that identifies as predominantly male may respond differently than one that identifies as predominantly female. Media writers should not play into gender stereotypes, essentialism, or assume through prejudice that people identifying as women, men, or non-binary must want certain things in their media content determined by how they identify. However, if an

audience is predominately one gender or the other, or both, or neither, you may find them responding more to some styles or tones in content, and it is the job of an audience-building media professional to know how their audience responds.

- Location - Geographic location influences culture, including language preferences, and time zones should be considered when scheduling publishing. Tailoring your content to resonate with specific regions can bolster audience development.
- Income level and social status – Knowing your audience’s socioeconomic status as well as their perception of how much socioeconomic status matters can help you reach them on their terms. That being said, playing to a sense of superiority or preying on the fears of audience members is unethical and likely not sustainable in the long term if only because pandering media outlets can easily be undercut by those who pander harder.

Psychographics are audience identifiers that look more deeply at their preferences, habits, values, and beliefs. Most psychographic data is gathered without the direct knowledge of consumers, although most of us are aware that social media platforms, web browsers, and other technologies are constantly gathering “our data.” Media companies should use psychographic data to better serve audiences, but media professionals must always bear in mind how creepy and personally invasive these technologies are becoming. We must be able to harness psychographic data as a tool to provide better service. However, we must be willing to back off of specific uses of data or be aware that regulators might “pull the plug,” so to speak, when we think about using such data to target individuals.

- Lifestyle – lifestyle choices include career goals, family structures, and daily routines. Considering lifestyle information can help you to shape the timing and nature of your content posts and interactions.
- Beliefs & Values – Aligning your content with the values and beliefs of your audience helps to create a sense of collective identity that goes deeper than surface level and, again, helps build loyalty to the brand and/or to the writer.
- Interests & hobbies – Knowing your audience's core interests and which hobbies they prefer should help you to create content that aligns with their passions. This can create deeper relationships and loyalty, which are key elements in audience building. In basic terms, it can help you create content that resonates on a personal level, and it can keep ‘em coming back!

### Blurred lines

The previous two subsections dealt with identifying your core audience. All the audience research in the world will not help your media company if you lack high quality content. There is a gray area between pandering and using good audience targeting to craft content that resonates. Successfully navigating paths through that gray area depend on how well the media company and media writers know their network community, a.k.a. their audience.

It is best if we are honest with ourselves about this reality as media writers: We do not always know what audiences want and part of the issue with knowing what audiences will like is that audiences *themselves* do not always know what they want. Media audiences often crave novelty. The [research cited in this article](#) does not suggest that humans always prefer novelty over familiarity but instead suggests that *when* we are curious, seeking novel information can satiate that curiosity.

One tip for developing a content strategy is to speak to your audience's curiosities or to produce content that makes them curious. The nature of news is that it satisfies our inherent curiosity about what is happening in the world around us. Audience members may be more or less curious about specific aspects of news, but almost everyone wants to have some idea about what is going on in the world.

The challenge for newswriters is to avoid sensationalizing news events. Professionals should not misrepresent events to make them sound more exciting than the reality. Nor should they focus only on the most violent or gruesome aspects of an event. Some forms of media writing have built-in curiosity engines. During a professional sports season, the outcome of the next game or match is always unknown. For all other types of media writing, creators need to constantly be aware of what people are curious about and strive to satisfy and/or stoke that curiosity.

Entertainment writers, which often include advertising copywriters, often strive to create curiosity and satisfy curiosity in the same message. By writing simple problem-solution narratives, they can pique readers' interest and provide a payoff. An example of a problem solution narrative is an ad that shows people exercising and getting thirsty. Thirst is the problem and then the sports drink, soft drink, or premium bottled water can be presented as the solution.

Social media platforms are known to cultivate curiosity through the use of algorithms that analyze user preferences and serve up a constant menu of the types of content audiences have already shown an interest in. Thus, social media platforms can reliably deliver instant payoffs. What they are not particularly good at is verifying information or evaluating the quality of content.

Media companies need to be present on social media platforms to make consumers aware of their work, but their professional charge is not necessarily to cultivate this somewhat perverse short attention span cycle. Instead, they can curate the best content in tandem with the processes that are native to digital social media networks.

### More about content strategies

Aside from the meta-discourse about appealing to curiosity, there are more tactical approaches to developing content strategies. Assuming you know as a writer what your audience is interested in, you can create or find characters that audiences identify with and tell stories through their eyes. You can engage audiences in co-creating narratives by inviting them to share their input.

Fashion and tastes change quickly, particularly in a period of information overload. The time it takes for media consumers to become bored with a performer, a topic, or a media work may be shorter than ever. Consider [this article about how short-lived most social media trends are](#) from early 2023. It references TikTok trends and other viral social media content from mid-to-late-2022 ("dabblons," "my money don't jiggle jiggle," and more) that were already outdated at the time the article was written. At the time media writing students read this, these may, at best, be faint memories with little to no current usage, and these were massively popular viral memes in 2022.

All of this is to say that media writers cannot plan on going viral to build sustainable audiences. We need to funnel audiences from the kinds of information that attract their attention to the kinds of information that foster trust and reliability.

Think about the most popular and lasting advertising campaigns. They have had both short-term attractiveness and long-term appeal because they created deep connections with audiences and continued to reciprocate audience loyalty. Audience building is about building lasting, deep connections with dedicated fans who appreciate both the content you provide and the way it is presented.

[This thesis](#), which led to one of the most-cited academic articles about audience engagement, defines "engagement" as connections reached with media audiences on cognitive, behavioral, and emotional terms. This is to say if you want to build audiences, engage media consumers' rational minds and their emotional "hearts," and then make a habit of it.

In summary, a coherent content strategy is based on what audiences need and want, it sustains and satisfies curiosities, it does not pander to base tastes, and it balances feeding users' emotional wants and needs with providing reasonable information -- even in the context of entertainment content.

Your content will often directly address the needs and interests of your audience. What was once considered a special category of news, sometimes referred to as "news you can use" in the industry is now a staple of content intended to build audiences. This type of information focuses on the timely and practical. Whether the content solves a problem, strives to educate about a key issue, or thoughtfully breaks down a complex process into a "How-To," it is advisable to focus your content on what resonates most with your target demographic.

It is often not considered sufficient to identify problems audience members face without offering solutions. While no media outlet has all of the answers to the problems audience members face, content is considered much more valuable if readers and viewers have a sense of what to do with the information provided. Identify challenges your audience faces, and, where possible, include real solutions in your content. This not only addresses their immediate concerns but positions you as a valuable resource. Problem-solving content enhances credibility and fosters trust.

Ultimately, you will want to strive for a balance between educational and entertaining content. Informative content establishes authority, while entertaining content keeps your audience engaged. A mix of both contributes to a well-rounded and appealing content strategy.

### Measuring impact

The final step in audience building is to develop a dynamic engine of content delivery and data analytics where the two processes inform each other to help media writers and media companies maintain and grow networks of audience members.

- Surveys – Surveys are helpful for collecting direct feedback. Craft targeted surveys to understand their preferences, hopes, and pain points, i.e. moments of frustration or annoyance in daily life that might be addressed with your content or with the brands, products, or services you represent.

Analyze survey data to identify patterns and trends that can inform your audience-building strategy. Surveys often ask about the

time of day people find your content, the platform(s) they prefer to use to connect with you, and the types of content and tone they prefer.

- Analytics – Use analytics tools to gather quantitative data about your audience's online behavior. Platforms like Google Analytics and social media insights provide the aforementioned demographic data as well as user engagement information. Interpret these metrics to refine your approach.

One of the best social media platforms, at the time of publication (2024), to use to learn how to gather and track social media engagement metrics for free is [YouTube Studio](#). Many paid services exist, but YouTube Studio is somewhat unique in terms of the breadth and depth of free analytics tools it offers users, even those who are only beginning to build their audience(s).

- Social Media Insights – Social media platforms offer detailed insights into audience behavior. Monitor engagement metrics, track follower growth, and identify popular content. Use this data to adjust your content strategy and optimize your online presence.

### Community Engagement

- Foster a sense of community among your audience. Encourage discussions, group activities, and shared experiences. A thriving community not only strengthens loyalty but also serves as a powerful word-of-mouth marketing tool.
- Encourage User-generated content. Empower your audience to contribute to your content. User-generated content not only diversifies your material but also fosters a sense of ownership among your audience. Contests, challenges, or simply encouraging sharing can spark creativity.
- Respond to Feedback and Questions. Actively listen to your audience's feedback. Respond to comments, address questions, and show appreciation for their input. A responsive approach demonstrates that you value your audience's opinions and strengthens the connection.

If you have successfully found an audience, developed a content strategy, and learned how to best measure what content is consumed the most, appreciated the most, and why, you will be well on your way to developing an online brand with a good chance at success. External factors will always be an issue when building media audiences, but as media writers contributing to the sustainability of media companies, helping to build a solid brand is essential to what we do.

For further success, consider the following steps:

#### Audience Growth Strategies

- Collaborations and Partnerships. Explore collaboration opportunities with individuals or organizations that share your target audience. Cross-promotions and partnerships can introduce your content to new audiences, fostering growth.
- Paid Advertising. Consider strategic paid advertising to amplify your reach. Platforms like social media and search engines offer targeted advertising options. Invest wisely based on the demographics and preferences of your audience.
- Viral Campaigns. Craft content with the potential of going viral. While not guaranteed, creating shareable and unique content increases the likelihood of reaching a broader audience. Viral campaigns can significantly contribute to audience growth.

#### Measuring and Analyzing Audience Growth

- Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) relevant to your audience-building goals. Metrics such as engagement rates, conversion rates, and audience demographics provide insights into the effectiveness of your strategies.
- Regularly analyze the collected data and adjust your strategies accordingly. Identify successful tactics and areas for improvement. Flexibility and adaptability are crucial in the dynamic landscape of audience building.

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## 11.4: Art of Clarity - Target Audience Member Persona

When addressing any audience, it can help to have in mind a specific individual audience member as you are writing. Media organization from news to ad agencies to broadcast outlets have defined a target audience member or members for decades.

The term for this in most media fields is a “persona.” Crafting a target audience persona helps you better understand who your audience is and how to tailor your content to their needs.

This is a quick guide to help you create an audience persona, which is followed by a closely related assignment.

Creating a named target audience persona

### 1. Set goals

Before you start, clarify your purpose. If you’re in news, you may want to increase reader engagement. For advertising, you might be focused on converting audience interest into actual sales. In audiovisual production, you may aim to keep viewers watching until the end of your YouTube videos. Setting a goal will help you focus your descriptions and guide you in gathering essential information about your persona.

### 2. Gather data

A solid persona relies on real data. In a professional media organization, you might look to some or all of the following options:

- **Audience Analytics:** Social media and video platforms including YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc. offer insights into viewer demographics, engagement, and preferences.
- **Surveys and Interviews:** Directly asking your audience about their habits and preferences gives you specific information.
- **Industry Trends and Reports:** Look for trade industry publications that detail audience behaviors in your field.

### 3. Define key segments

You’ll probably have more than one type of audience, especially if you’re creating content for mass audiences. You need to focus on a key segment for this exercise. For instance, a news outlet may have a younger audience following its social media accounts and an older audience reading news on its website. If you want to focus on encouraging your young audience to come to your website more often, it would make sense to build a persona representing a younger audience member.

### 4. Build a persona

Consider both demographic and psychographic information and create a detailed profile that includes the following:

- **Persona Name:** Give your persona a name to make them feel real, for example, “Raven from Riverside.”
- **Demographics:**
  - **Age Range:** Identify “Raven’s” age as being at the middle of the demographic range you are trying to reach.
  - **Location:** Identify and describe the specific city, region or rural town where your persona lives.
  - **Occupation:** Identify your persona’s current job and career aspirations.
  - **Income level, level of education, ethnicity:** Only indicate these elements if relevant to the effort, but in some cases identifying these aspects of your persona can help you craft strategy and messages.
- **Psychographics:**
  - **Values and Beliefs:** Is this persona concerned about environmental issues, passionate about innovation, more interested in luxury? Explain what motivates them.
  - **Lifestyle and Interests:** Do they spend weekends reading, going to concerts, gaming, spending time with family?
- **Platform targets**
  - **Favorite media:** Identify your persona’s favorite social media, video platforms, and apps. Are they more active on TikTok or YouTube?
  - **Media length and type preferences:** Do they prefer short-form video, photo content, i.e. Instagram, in-depth articles, live streams or some other form of media? You want to reach your target audience where they are and bring them to your media content and your media properties.
- **Motivations and challenges:**
  - **Motivations:** What is your persona hoping to get from your content? This could be staying informed, feeling inspired, or solving problems.

- **Challenges:** What are your persona's frustrations? Is she a busy student who needs quick news updates, an overworked barista who needs simple entertainment solutions after long and busy days at work?

### 5. Add a visual and a brief narrative

Once you have your persona you can use AI or an image search to come up with a photo that best represents what they would look like. Add to the photo a quick profile narrative using the following categories (and more, if warranted).

**Persona:** Raven from Riverside

**Age:** 25

**Location:** Suburban area in the Midwest

**Occupation:** Wait staff and part-time bartender as well as full-time college student

**Values:** Interested in developing professionally and staying informed but also wants to have a good time and not let her 20s pass her by.

**Interests:** music, hanging out with friend when she has the time, and life hacks to save time and money

**Content Habits:** Looks at TikTok and other social media several times a day, binge watches relatively high quality reality television

**Motivations:** Getting out of school with a degree and without a ton of debt while still not missing out on a social life. Needs media options that can help keep her informed but not take all day.

**Challenges:** Limited time, prefers concise, useful information

### 6. Build content strategies around one or more personas.

Once your personas are defined, use them to craft content that speaks to their needs. For news, this might mean creating brief, mobile-friendly stories for younger audiences. In advertising, you might design a campaign that targets eco-conscious consumers with messages about sustainability. In audiovisual production, it could involve creating videos that meet the preferred length and style of each persona.

### 7. Refine Your Personas Regularly

Personas should be allowed to grow and change just as real people do. Audience habits and values evolve over time. Revisit and update your personas regularly using fresh data from analytics or new surveys or qualitative interviews.

#### Creating a persona assignment

This assignment is to create a realistic persona representing a key target audience member who either follows news from your organization, buys products from a brand you represent, or views much of the audiovisual content you produce.

This persona needs a name, a photo, an age, and other key demographic and psychographic as needed.

Instructors will provide guidance about how much research to conduct and about how many of the seven tasks listed above you should complete.

The bare minimum persona should include

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Location:**

**Occupation:**

**Values:**

**Interests:**

**Content Habits:**

**Motivations:**

and

**Challenges:**

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## 12: Creating a Media Portfolio



Figure 12.1: Building a portfolio site outline. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Scott Graham](#))

This portfolio guide has been adapted from the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville [CODES](#) program's [e-Portfolio Guide](#). It has been modified to address a Journalism/Mass Communication student audience.

### What is a media portfolio?

A media portfolio is a digital space for you to track your achievements, reflect on your growth as a media writer and producer, and craft a digital identity to share with others. In almost all media professions, having a portfolio is a necessity. It enables you to show your work to potential employers and to share your capabilities with those who might hire you on a freelance basis as well.

A media portfolio functions as a personal website, a public-facing record of achievements that can be shared not only with potential employers but also with peers, mentors, community groups, and graduate schools.

In most Journalism and Mass Communication programs, portfolios serve three purposes:

- **Repository:** For each course you take where you produce original media content, you'll have a page to store all your major assignments and reflections on how the work was created, what you learned from the process, and what the work means to you. As you progress through your program, you should add works to your portfolio that demonstrate your best work. Curating your own content is essential to your learning process. As your work improves, you should find yourself adding and featuring your best content and removing or de-prioritizing other work.
- **Vivid Digital Resume:** Potential employers want to see your best work more than they want to see a progression from novice to more experienced student, so your portfolio should have a few standard sections outlined in the assignment below along with any additional sections you find relevant to your particular career goals. Note that most media portfolio sites are limited to 3-4 tabs
- **Reference for Mentors:** Over the course of your time in your Journalism or Mass Communication program, you should track your own development as you add to and update your portfolio site. Your portfolio site is your place to establish your brand and tell your story demonstrating what you have learned and what you have the potential to be.

### Portfolio Assignment

#### Assignment: Media Portfolio Website

**Objective:** Develop a personal media portfolio website that showcases your writing and production skills. This should serve to define and promote your professional brand and should make the most of web resources that allow for a professional presentation

#### Instructions:

##### 1. Research and Planning:

- Begin by searching for and examining a few portfolio websites from media professional you admire to gather inspiration. Take note of the layout, color palette, navigation tabs and tools, and how content is presented.

- Draft an outline for your portfolio. Decide on the type of work you'll showcase and how you will divide up your content for the most professional presentation.

## 2. Content Creation:

- Select your best work. Ensure each piece is professionally presented and accompanied by a description of how the work was produced. If a work in your portfolio was the result of a group project, indicate your contribution in clear, unambiguous terms.
- Include *at least* the following sections:
  - **About.** This should highlight your background, expertise, and professional goals.
  - **Portfolio.** This tab should feature your best multimedia pieces and media writing examples with clear descriptions explaining what each included piece says about your capabilities. Use thumbnail images and links and/or embedded players to demonstrate each piece.
  - **Contact.** This page should include links to your email, LinkedIn, and other relevant social media profiles.
  - **Resume.** Many media portfolios also include a tab that highlights the individual's professional resume in classic document format shared as an image file.

## 3. Website Tools and Setup:

- **Choose a Platform:** Select a content management system (CMS) that suits your level of experience and your tolerance for cost. Many portfolio and blog sites operate on a freemium model, which means they have functional free layouts that will often work many students looking for entry-level positions, and they also offer premium paid layout options that may look more professional or offer more functionality. Some options include:
  - **Wix, Squarespace, or Crevado,** which have drag-and-drop capabilities.
  - **WordPress or Webflow,** which allow for more customizable pages. Many media professionals who purchase their own domains and pay for webhosting elect to install WordPress as a versatile CMS.
  - **Framer or Ghost** for more art-focused portfolios; or,
  - **Adobe Portfolio** is another option for those who subscribe to the Adobe Creative Cloud software suite and plan to continue to do so.
- **Design and Layout:** Using pre-made templates will work for most student portfolios, however, the options for creating custom designs are practically limitless. If you do develop your own layout, remember to focus on simplicity and ease of navigation.
- **Embedded Media:** Ensure video clips and other multimedia projects are optimized for quick loading speeds so that content can be displayed quickly and clearly on mobile, laptop or desktop devices.

## 4. Key Features to Consider:

- **Search Engine Optimization:** Add meta descriptions, alt text for images, and use descriptive headings.
- **Analytics Setup:** Consider integrating a basic analytics tool, such as Google Analytics, to track visits and engagement. This is optional but recommended to understand user interactions.

## 5. Submission and Presentation:

- Submit the URL of your completed website along with a short summary of 250-300 words that explains your design choices, tools used, and the strategy behind your portfolio layout.

### Evaluation Criteria (Suggested for instructors):

- **Design (25%):** Is the design visually appealing and consistent with the media portfolio's purpose?
- **Content Quality (25%):** Are the chosen works of high quality, relevant, and well-organized?
- **Functionality and Responsiveness (25%):** Does the site function well on different devices? Are all links and media working?
- **Professionalism and Clarity (25%):** Is the site free from errors, and does it communicate your professional brand effectively?

### Exemplary student or recent-graduate portfolio sites

- [Bethany Seely](#)
- [Trinity Bishop](#)
- [Avery Everett](#)

- [Meagan Berberet](#)
- [Kenneth Yokem, II](#)
- [Madison Hutchinson](#)
- [Madison Lewis](#)

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## 13: Basic Law and Ethics of Media Writing



Figure 13.1: Scales of Justice. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Tingey Injury Law Firm](#))

### Learning Objectives

- Recognize and understand essential media law terms
- Become familiar with key media ethics debates as introduced by case studies

Large portions of this chapter are remixed, revised, and amended from *Writing for Strategic Communication Industries*, <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/>

Media law and the study of mass media ethics form the backbone of responsible, professional journalism and content creation practice. Together, they set the standards and boundaries for what media professionals can and should do in their work. While the law dictates what media professionals can do, ethics asks what they should do. Media law provides the legal framework that governs content. It defines what is permissible in reporting, advertising, broadcasting, and digital communication. It safeguards freedoms such as the freedom of speech and of the press while also protecting individual rights to privacy and reputation.

Media ethics, on the other hand, refers to the moral responsibilities that through centuries of study and practice, professionals in the field of publishing and mass media have learned are essential for fostering a functioning society as well as a fully functioning industry.

Professional writers and publishers have long recognized the moral duties we owe to the public, to the subjects of our stories, and to the truth. Studying and maintaining ethical principles is meant to help ensure that the mass media system serves as a reliable, fair, and accurate source of information, even when professionals are faced with difficult or controversial subjects.

The ethical failures in society reflected in the mass media should not be confused with a lack of professional ethics on the part of media professionals. That said, when media professionals prioritize a performative type of ethical balance that ignores our moral duties to our audiences and to the truth, journalists and other media professionals can contribute to the moral and ethical collapse of social norms. Protecting revenues and profits in a capitalist media system is not an inherent ethical good.

In today's rapidly evolving media environment, understanding both the legal and ethical aspects of media work is crucial. The laws that govern media practices vary from nation-state to nation-state and are continuously adapting to address new challenges including the prevalence and power of misinformation, digital privacy, and the impacts of social media on society. Ethical

standards also evolve to address dilemmas unique to digital media, such as transparency in news reporting, protecting sources' privacy, and minimizing harm.

This chapter introduces key principles of media law and ethics. It is intended to help students understand how to navigate the legal requirements and moral obligations of media work. By understanding key terms and examining real-world case studies involving current issues, students will learn to critically evaluate their responsibilities in both legal and ethical contexts. It is expected that students will take a further course or courses in media law and ethics. Combined with the concepts introduced here, this knowledge should prepare them to make informed, responsible decisions in a profession that affords for massive influence over public perception and opinion.

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## 13.1: Law and ethics key terms

The following terms are essential to students' understanding of the basic legal principles that govern the U.S. media.

### Defamation

Compromising the code of ethics may have legal consequences, depending upon the situation.

One of the most common ethical failures that can lead to court cases is defamation.

#### Definition: Defamation

Defamation is intentional damage done to one party's reputation by another party.

Although it is not a crime, defamation can be cause for a civil lawsuit. Individuals or organizations with particularly high stakes attached to their reputation (for example, celebrities, public figures, renowned educators, or popular businesses) are more inclined to sue for defamation.

An example is the defamation cases filed by comedian Bill Cosby. In 2015, Cosby faced allegations of sexual assault from more than 50 women, resulting in civil lawsuits and criminal investigations against him. The tremendously negative effect on his reputation resulted in the rescinding of several honorary degrees he had received as well as the cancellation of reruns of his popular TV program from the 1980s and early '90s, *The Cosby Show*. In response to the damages, Cosby sued some of the women for defamation, but [the cases were later dismissed](#). The allegations continue to have an impact on Cosby's image and legacy.

There are two categories of defamation: slander and libel. Slander is the spoken version of defamation, when something is said verbally that harms another party's reputation. Libel is the written version of defamation, when something in text is published that damages a party's reputation. Because this textbook focuses on writing, libel will be discussed in greater detail.

Libel includes both print and online publications, including social media posts, which can be grounds for a libel suit.

In 2011, lawyer Rhonda Holmes sued her former client, punk rocker Courtney Love, over a disparaging tweet Love had sent in reference to Holmes's work ethic. Love was the first person in history to stand trial for social media defamation. Prior to her case, there was no record of someone being sued for defamation because of something posted on Twitter.<sup>1</sup> Popular media dubbed the case "Twibel." A jury acquitted Love of all charges. [Click here for more information on the case and its implication](#).

Winning a libel suit is difficult. Five elements have to exist in order to render a statement as libelous:<sup>2</sup>

1. The statement was published.
2. The statement is conveyed as a fact, not an opinion.
3. The statement is false.
4. The statement is identifiable with or made about the plaintiff.
5. The statement was published with intentional negligence or malice.

The last element is particularly challenging to prove. Many libel suits are dismissed because the plaintiff fails to provide evidence for the existence of each element.

The possibility of defamation is of great concern to every strategic communication professional. Careful information gathering and rigorous fact checking are vital in order to avoid defamatory communication. Double-checking quotes and sources helps minimize the risk of publishing libelous statements.

### Conflict of interest

A conflict of interest is "a clash between a person's self-interest and professional interest or public interest."<sup>3</sup> Communication professionals should try to eliminate any action that may compromise their impartiality or the interests of their organization. That includes separating personal interests from the organization's goals.

The definition seems straightforward, but real-life situations can be murky. As a professional working at an advertising agency, should you take on two clients who are competitors? Most within the industry would say that you should inform both parties of the situation and let them decide if they want to proceed; however, let's say your agency takes on a client who has a history of using

unethical labor practices, something that you staunchly oppose. How do you remain impartial in this situation? How do you write material that benefits your client when your personal opinions may affect the content?

Should a journalist, accept a small gift from a source, for example, a \$10 Starbucks gift card, before or after an interview? Most journalists would say no, because accepting a gift from a source, no matter how small, could affect your feelings toward the individual, which could be reflected in your reporting.

There are several ways to avoid a conflict of interest. Gather as much information as you can about the potential conflict in order to make an objective decision (or as objective as possible). Firms should have formal rules, and conflicts should be disclosed to supervisors. To safeguard your career and reputation, it's important to always uphold high ethical standards and conduct yourself in a manner above reproach. You may want to ask colleagues or supervisors for advice. Also, be as upfront as possible with the parties involved. [Learn more about conflict of interest.](#)

## Plagiarism

Plagiarism is an issue in both academic and professional situations. The term refers to using another person's work without proper credit or attribution. Plagiarism is a very serious offense in the strategic communication field, and is particularly egregious in journalism. In 2011, a *Washington Post* journalist, Sari Horwitz, was accused of directly copying content from the *Arizona Republic* while covering the shooting of congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. The *Post* issued an apology and suspended Horwitz for three months.<sup>4</sup>

Horwitz also expressed her remorse and released a statement as reported by NPR:

"I am deeply sorry. To our readers, my friends and colleagues, my editors, and to the paper I love, I want to apologize. ... Under the pressure of tight deadlines, I did something I have never done in my entire career. I used another newspaper's work as if it were my own. It was wrong. It was inexcusable. And it is one of the cardinal sins in journalism."<sup>5</sup>

Plagiarism is not committed primarily by students or those new to the field. Horwitz was an experienced journalist who had received the Pulitzer Prize three times.

Another highly publicized case of plagiarism involved a speech given at the 2016 Republican National Convention by Melania Trump, wife of President Donald Trump. Soon after she delivered the speech, some took to social media to point out similarities to a speech given by Michelle Obama at the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

News media outlets later reported that parts of the speech were lifted directly from Michelle Obama's speech.<sup>6</sup>

Meredith McIver, Melania's speechwriter and an employee of the Trump organization, took responsibility for the incident and stated that it was a mistake.<sup>7</sup> McIver was not fired, and many outraged observers questioned the integrity of the Trump campaign.

Most crisis communication experts agree that transparency is key to maintaining the public's trust. Lack of transparency can have devastating effects that sometimes leave a permanent stain on a company or brand's image. Brands cannot thrive without the public's trust.

For example, in 2015, Volkswagen was accused of cheating on emissions tests. Several news outlets reported that the German car company used a "defeat device" in many of its cars as far back as 2009 to mislead the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These devices were able to detect when tests were being conducted and help reduce toxic emissions during the procedures. In reality, the vehicle emissions were consistently well above the levels permitted by the EPA. Find out more here: [The Volkswagen Scandal](#)

Soon after the public received the news, Volkswagen's sales plummeted and a social backlash against the company ensued. As a result, the CEO resigned and the company lost the public's trust. The organization went through damage control court settlements for years.

Compromising transparency to benefit a company's bottom line may seem like a good idea in the moment, but the long-term damages can be significant.

## Misleading advertisements

Similar to public relations agencies, advertising firms often have a reputation for using manipulative tactics at the expense of the consumer. This is largely due to consumers' experiences with misleading advertisements or promotions that exaggerate claims or misinform audiences. The goal of an advertisement is to emphasize the benefits of a product or service over any drawbacks or shortcomings; however, agencies should not create deceptive advertisements at the expense of consumers

Ads that “raise health and safety concerns ... and those that cause economic injury” are actionable.<sup>8</sup> By law, claims in advertisements have to be truthful and supported by evidence. Going back to the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the company faced legal troubles for falsely advertising that its cars had low emissions. The Federal Trade Commission filed a complaint against Volkswagen in federal court and argued that the company deceived its consumers through unsubstantiated claims and corrupt evidence. [Learn more about false advertising scandals here.](#)

FTC consumer protection laws vary from state to state. These laws ensure that consumers are not misled and that agencies provide fair communication to their target audiences. The FTC can determine whether an advertisement is deceptive. The criteria for deception are as follows:

- The advertisement should have a high probability to mislead the average, reasonable consumer; and
- Advertisement claims should cause the consumer to buy the product or service based on misinformation.

If consumers report an advertisement to the FTC, the organization then goes through a series of steps to decide whether the ad is truly deceptive. [You can find a list of the steps here.](#)

Numerous companies are taking measures to create an ethical brand image. One strategy is through corporate social responsibility.

#### Definition: Corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility refers to the concept of building a business model around seeking to benefit society. Not all promotions claiming social responsibility actually represent this type of deep-seated commitment, but some companies and corporations are working on sustainable models throughout their approach to doing business.

Corporate social responsibility in action can take a variety of forms from making charitable donations to local causes to underwriting beneficial projects in developing countries. There are several benefits to demonstrating and promoting corporate social responsibility. Organizations that do so tend to have a better public image. Strategic communication professionals play a key role in branding businesses as socially conscious through message design and brand management. Their efforts help to spread awareness of these initiatives and make them a part of the organization’s brand identity and core values.

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## 13.2: Ethics case studies



Figure 13.2.1: Homeowners make a statement about their personal ethics. (Unsplash free-to-use license; [Breanna Louise](#) author via source)

The following case studies are taken from the Society of Professional Journalists' Ethics Case Studies website.

The site states the following: "For journalism instructors and others interested in presenting ethical dilemmas for debate and discussion, SPJ has a useful resource. We've been collecting a number of case studies for use in workshops. The Ethics AdviceLine operated by the Chicago Headline Club and Loyola University also has provided a number of examples. There seems to be no shortage of ethical issues in journalism these days. Please feel free to use these examples in your classes, speeches, columns, workshops or other modes of communication."

The most recent three posts are included in full in this chapter. The full list is [available on the SPJ's website](#).

### 1. Kobe Bryant's Past: A Tweet Too Soon?

**WHAT:** On January 26, 2020, Kobe Bryant, a former professional basketball player, died at the age of 41 in a helicopter crash in the Los Angeles area along with nine other people, including his 13-year-old daughter Gianna. They were on their way from Orange County to Thousand Oaks to participate in a tournament basketball game at Mamba Sports Academy.

Bryant joined the National Basketball Association straight out of high school and won five NBA titles in his career playing for the Los Angeles Lakers. He became one of basketball's greatest players of all time, surpassing Michael Jordan for third place on the NBA all-time scoring list in 2014. Bryant retired in 2016 and went on to earn an Academy Award in 2018 for Best Animated Short Film.

In July 2003, Bryant was charged with a count of sexual assault involving a 19-year-old woman working at a hotel in Edwards, Colorado. Bryant conceded he was guilty of adultery but said he was innocent of the rape charge. The criminal case was dismissed in 2004, and in 2005 he reached a settlement in a civil suit filed by his accuser.

While the majority of social media praised Bryant after his death, within a few hours after the story broke, Felicia Sonmez, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, tweeted a link to an article from 2003 about the allegations of sexual assault against Bryant. Sonmez did not add any personal commentary to the tweet, but her post received a lot of backlash, including threats.

Sonmez said she expected to have a large negative response. "I can understand that it would be difficult for people to read that," she said, "but it's also difficult, I imagine, for all of the [sexual assault] survivors in the country to see these allegations essentially be erased, which is how I felt in those couple of hours in the newsroom." Sonmez deleted the tweet later the same day.

Tweets from the public in response said Sonmez's actions were "insensitive," "cold hearted," "heartless" and "show no respect for [Bryant's] family/friends."

The next day, a Monday, Tracy Grant, a managing editor at *The Washington Post*, announced that Sonmez had been placed on administrative leave while the *Post* reviewed whether her tweets about Bryant's death violated the newsroom's social media policy. "The tweets displayed poor judgment that undermined the work of her colleagues," Grant said. Afterward, though, *The Washington Post* issued a statement in support of Sonmez.

**Question: Is there a limit to truth-telling? How long (if at all) should a journalist wait after a person's death before resurfacing sensitive information about their past?**

**WHO:** The decision-makers in this case are Felicia Sonmez and management at *The Washington Post*, who have to weigh the possibility that more harm will be caused to the family, friends and fans of Kobe Bryant against the urge to tell the entire story immediately, the constant pressure to increase circulation and to get the full story first, as well as thinking about the organization's reputation. Additionally, there is pressure from the public who may feel deep sadness for the sudden loss, or from survivors who may see the allegations being "erased."

The stakeholders include Kobe Bryant, whose legacy is being negatively impacted, as well as his family, friends and fans who have just experienced a very sudden and traumatic event. Although Bryant is no longer present to witness the tweets, one incident in his past is defining who he was as a person moments after his death. Felicia Sonmez leaves little time for those who loved Bryant to mourn his death and the death of the others that were involved in the crash.

Other stakeholders include Felicia Sonmez and *The Washington Post*, whose reputations are on the line.

**WHY:** Does a journalist's dedication to seeking and telling the truth outweigh the possibility of causing more harm to the family, friends and fans of the deceased? Although it is the job of a reporter to tell engaging and credible stories, is there a point at which it is more appropriate for a reporter to back off and leave the story alone in order to give proper privacy, respect and time to those involved?

Minimizing harm entails showing sensitivity when dealing with children, victims of crime or people who are especially vulnerable due to trauma, injury, illness or other factors. Integrity implies providing anyone accused of misbehavior a reasonable opportunity to respond. In this case, Bryant had no way of responding to the resurfacing of accusations from his past misbehavior.

Telling the truth offers readers, viewers and listeners a complete picture of the subject involved, which helps gain a fuller understanding of who that person was. Timeliness is important as well. The timing of Sonmez's tweets was harmful to many people. But while the timing of the tweets is debatable, the case is a relevant detail in Bryant's life.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics says: "Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect." This is where this case becomes a double-edged sword; on one hand, respect must be paid toward Bryant and his family, friends and fans; on the other hand, respect must be paid toward survivors of sexual assault. However, SPJ also believes that journalists should "balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. The pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness."

If we apply the ethical theory that seeks to achieve "the greatest good for the greatest number," we can conclude that Sonmez should not have tweeted the link that day.

**HOW:** Is there a limit to truth-telling? How long (if at all) should a journalist wait after a person's death before resurfacing sensitive information about their past? Although there should not be a limit to telling the truth, respect and timeliness need to be considered when doing so. If Sonmez had tweeted the link a few days after Bryant's death, there probably would not have been as much backlash.

— by Lauren Zurcher, University of Denver

## 2. A controversial apology

*This case involves ethical issues that can be analyzed from both a journalistic and strategic communications perspective. There are questions of telling the truth, minimizing harm, racial dynamics and preserving the image of one of the nation's most prestigious journalism schools.*

**WHAT:** Northwestern University is a private institution of higher education in Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago. Its journalism school, Medill, has a host of prominent alumni. Its student newspaper, *The Daily Northwestern*, is independent and student-run.

In November 2019, a campus organization, the College Republicans, invited former U.S. attorney Jeff Sessions to speak. Students gathered to protest. *The Daily Northwestern* sent reporters and a photographer to cover Sessions' speech and the protestors.

About 150 people took part in the demonstrations, according to reports by the Northwestern and Chicago newspapers; some of the demonstrators climbed through open windows and pushed through doors of the building where Sessions was speaking.

After photographs of the speech and protests appeared online, some of the participants contacted the newspaper to complain. It became a "firestorm," said Charles Whitaker, Medill's dean — first from students who felt victimized, and then, after the *Daily* apologized for coverage that some students found "traumatizing and invasive," from journalists and others who accused the newspaper of apologizing for simply doing its job.

The episode contributed to the criticism that today's college students are overly sensitive and want to be protected from anything that they don't approve of: "Snowflakes," in the vernacular. Robby Soave, a columnist for right-leaning *Reason* magazine (slogan: Free Minds and Free Markets), called it "a sniveling, embarrassing apology."

"Is this what students at the country's most prestigious journalism school are learning these days?" Soave wrote. "That self-censorship is the paper's best practice if someone is offended by what's happening in the world?"

Some parts of the **700-word staff editorial** stood out to critics, such as: "While our goal is to document history and spread information, nothing is more important than ensuring that our fellow students feel safe...."

The critics argued that the first part of that excerpt is a much more important journalistic principle than the last part.

The editorial also said the coverage could have been more sensitive: "We know we hurt students that night, especially those who identify with marginalized groups. According to the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, 'Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.'"

But the critics, including professional journalists who were Medill graduates, pointed out that the protestors were involved in a public act in a public place. They shouldn't expect privacy, and if they were concerned about being interviewed, they could always have said no. The coverage was what journalists are supposed to do, they said, and journalists shouldn't apologize for doing their jobs.

**Question: Is an apology the appropriate response? Is there something else the student journalists should have done?**

**WHO:** The decision-makers are the students who run the newspaper, especially its top editor. They also have become major stakeholders, whose reputations — and perhaps even their eventual journalism careers — could be at risk. The protestors are stakeholders, too, as is Northwestern and especially Medill, which has long had a reputation as one of the nation's leading schools of journalism.

**WHY:** This is a classic example of the ethical conflict between truth-telling and minimizing harm. In this case, after telling the truth, the student decision-makers sought to atone by attempting to minimize harm.

The *Chicago Tribune*, in a report written by Dawn Rhodes, the paper's higher education reporter, quoted Whitaker, Medill's dean, who cited the pressures the students faced.

In addition to the "firestorm" of criticism from protestors and journalists, Whitaker said, there was the very nature of the contemporary learning environment. "[Y]ou have a group of students who are taking classes in critical race theory, gender studies and who are sympathetic to the notion that media has not always reflected communities of color well," he said.

“Against that backdrop, they do this soul-searching and they come to an ill-considered conclusion that they have somehow done something wrong by practicing journalism.”

Part of that academic environment, Rhodes wrote, is the “tightrope student journalists traverse in writing about their own classmates and campuses, managing disagreement about the role and responsibilities of journalism, and confronting the historic failure of a majority white industry to fairly cover people of color and minority communities.”

Margaret Sullivan, *The Washington Post*’s media columnist, quoted Astead Herndon, national political reporter at *The New York Times*, who said today’s generation of journalists instinctively “care about historically marginalized communities and rethink power dynamics.” Sometimes, Herndon added, “it is playing out in a raw and uninformed way.”

Racial dynamics were at play in the Northwestern case, where many of the protestors and complainers; the newspaper’s editor, Troy Closson; and even Northwestern’s dean are people of color.

“Being in this role,” Closson wrote in a Twitter thread reported by columnist Sullivan, “and balancing our coverage and the role of this paper on campus with my racial identity — and knowing how our paper has historically failed students of color, and particularly black students, has been incredibly challenging to navigate.”

**HOW:** The newspaper decided an apology was appropriate. And then its editor and others on the staff, battered by the ensuing criticism, explained themselves even further. Closson told columnist Sullivan that, in hindsight, parts of the editorial went too far, and that the original coverage was legitimate and in keeping with journalistic principles. “We covered the protest to its full extent and stand by our reporting,” he said.

So, as a learning experience, perhaps it had been effective. Dean Whitaker, who had been named to that position just six months before this episode, said he understood why the newspaper’s editors “felt the need to issue their mea culpa.

“They were beat into submission by the vitriol and relentless public shaming they have been subjected to since the Sessions stories appeared. I think it is a testament to their sensitivity and sense of community responsibility that they convinced themselves that an apology would effect a measure of community healing.

“I might offer, however, that their well-intentioned gesture sends a chilling message about journalism and its role in society. It suggests that we are not independent authors of the community narrative, but are prone to bowing to the loudest and most influential voices in our orbit.”

As for “the swarm of alums and journalists” who were raging on social media, “I say, give the young people a break,” Whitaker continued. “Don’t make judgments about them or their mettle until you’ve walked in their shoes.”

— by Fred Brown, *SPJ Ethics Committee*

### 3. Using the Holocaust metaphor

**WHAT:** People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, is a nonprofit animal rights organization known for its controversial approach to communications and public relations. In 2003, PETA launched a new campaign, named “Holocaust on Your Plate,” that compares the slaughter of animals for human use to the murder of 6 million Jews in WWII. The campaign centers around the power of emotion, and Lisa Lange, the vice president of PETA communications, stated that “The idea for the effort came from the late Nobel Prize-winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer, who wrote: ‘In relation to them [animals], all people are Nazis; for them it is an eternal Treblinka’ — a death camp in Poland” (CNN, 2003). A Jewish PETA member funded the campaign, but this has not lessened the backlash from the Jewish community toward the set of images.

“Holocaust on Your Plate” juxtaposes 60-square-foot visual displays of animals in slaughterhouses with scenes of Nazi concentration camps. Lange, quoted above, explains that the campaign “Is shocking, startling, and very hard to look at. We’re attacking the mind-set that condones the slaughter of animals” (CNN, 2003). In 2003, the controversial set of images was released at an exhibit in San Diego, California, and a few months later, a more graphic version was released in Berlin, Germany. The Central

Council of Jews in Germany sued PETA in 2004 for the campaign, and in 2009, the German Supreme Court banned the images from the country. In November 2012, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg voted to uphold the previous Supreme Court ruling, which had banned the campaign.

Germany's PETA group is currently appealing the European Court's vote to uphold the court ruling, fighting for their right to display their campaign based on the fundamental principles of free speech. The United States Anti-Defamation League and several other American human rights groups continue to condemn the campaign as well.

### **Question: Is “Holocaust on Your Plate” ethically wrong or a truthful comparison?**

**WHO:** Ingrid Newkirk, the CEO of PETA, ultimately made the decision to release the controversial campaign, and did not address the heated, angry emotions that arose surrounding the images for nearly two years after the campaign's release in 2003. With her decision to run the PR Campaign, her reputation, as well as the reputation of PETA, is at risk of being negatively affected.

Abraham Foxman, the U.S. Anti-Defamation League national director and a Holocaust survivor, is one of many members of the American Jewish community who were highly offended by PETA's campaign.

The Central Council of Jews in Germany represents another sector of the international Jewish community that took great offense to the campaign, suing PETA in 2004 with the support of several human rights groups.

Germany's Supreme Court became involved in the case in 2009, banning the campaign from the country, and the European Court of Human Rights' decision in 2012 to uphold the ruling is still being fought by PETA.

Consumers of media messages, both in the United States and Germany, also play a role in the case, as their perception of “Holocaust on your Plate” images greatly affect their view of PETA and the organization's main goals. As consumers, the decision on how the case is handled will be a deciding factor on whether or not to support the organization.

**WHY:** A Public Relations representative for PETA, alongside the CEO of the company, justified the campaign by describing it on CNN as “The very same mind-set that made the Holocaust possible — that we can do anything we want to those we decide are 'different or inferior' — is what allows us to commit atrocities against animals every single day.” In these regards, PETA argues that it is making its argument based upon principles of truth. PETA essentially claims that its campaign, although provocative, uses a comparison relating the murder of Jews and animals in a truthful and justified manner.

When examined under a deontological lens, it is arguable that PETA's PR campaign has done nothing wrong — protected under freedom of speech, PETA's communications team and CEO claim their campaign is legal and ethically sound, since it is rooted in fact and historical data, both from the Holocaust and slaughter house records. PETA argues that the comparison between the murder of Jews and animals is justified, due to the inherent and quantifiable nature of the slaughtering of innocent lives. However, when considering the case by applying the principles of deontology, the answer could also be argued in simpler, contrasting terms: the mass murder of millions of humans cannot, and *should* not be compared to a chicken or pig, and is inherently wrong.

This case can also be considered from a teleological perspective, placing the argument on a different plane for ethical discussion. There are two main outcomes that may arise from this case: 1) PETA's campaign spreads its pathos-driven message on animal rights successfully, limiting the number of animals consumed by humans, or 2) The campaign angers audiences to a degree that PETA loses the respect and trust that is needed for any form of audience support to ensue. Thus far in the case, the second consequence seems more likely, as the overly emotional, insensitive campaign has not motivated people, but for the most part driven them away.

Germany's High Court stated in 2009 that the “Holocaust on a Plate” made “The fate of the victims of the Holocaust appear banal and trivial.” The consequences of conveying human suffering to a human audience, whether or not they are rooted in truth, may cause more harm than overall good.

**HOW:** While PETA's claims may be justified, and the comparison between the murder of humans and animals deemed

quantifiable, the harm caused by the campaign overrides the intended message of the PR plan, and should not be used. A mix of legal questioning, high emotional ties, and extremely poor taste make this an ethical case of high stakes and varied opinions, however a decision remains clear: PETA's "Holocaust on a Plate" is ethically wrong. The mass-murder of millions in a catastrophic historical event should not be utilized as a communication tool to gain support for one's organization. The comparison, while arguably similar in quantifiable terms, is disgustingly insensitive and takes advantage of others' suffering to make a point.

PETA should utilize a different strategy to convey their message. The CEO of PETA will receive better press, and the overall reputation of the already controversial organization will improve. Stated backlash from numerous human rights groups and the Anti-Defamation League, as well the surely unstated unease of many audience sectors, is not worth a strong emotional response that could drive audience support of PETA.

**DECISION:** The "Holocaust on a Plate" PR campaign is ethically wrong: a mass-murder of millions should not be utilized as a communication tool to gain support for one's organization. It should not be used to convey PETA's message, no matter how strong the emotional argument.

— *by Jill Hamilton, University of Denver*

#### Ethics case study assignment

Select one of the case studies published here or on the SPJ Ethics Case Studies website and answer all of the question prompts in a Word document to be submitted in your learning management system.

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