REPORTING AND WRITING WITH THE AUDIENCE IN MIND



John Kroll
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Reporting and Writing with the Audience in Mind

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

For instructors

About the Author

About Kent State University

Acknowledgements

1: Why This Course Matters

- 1.1: Why This Course Matters
- 1.2: Chapter Review
- 1.3: Optional Exercises
- 1.4: Anatomy of a News Story

2: What Is News?

- 2.1: What Is News?
- 2.2: Chapter Review
- 2.3: Optional Exercises

3: Reporting Essentials

- 3.1: Reporting Essentials
- 3.2: Chapter Review
- 3.3: Optional Exercises

4: How to Find Stories

- 4.1: How to Find Stories
- 4.2: Chapter Review
- 4.3: Optional Exercises

5: Interviewing Essentials

- 5.1: Interviewing Essentials
- 5.2: Chapter Review
- 5.3: Optional Exercises

6: News Writing Essentials

- 6.1: News Writing Essentials
- 6.2: Chapter Review
- 6.3: Optional Exercises

7: Summary Ledes

- 7.1: Summary ledes
- 7.2: Chapter Review

- 7.3: Optional Exercises

8: Inverted Pyramid

- 8.1: Inverted Pyramid
- 8.2: Chapter Review
- 8.3: Optional Exercises

9: Story Formulas

- 9.1: Story formulas for events
- 9.2: Story Formulas for Other News
- 9.3: Chapter Review
- 9.4: Optional Exercises

10: Scenes

- 10.1: Scenes
- 10.2: Chapter Review
- 10.3: Optional Exercises

11: Alternative Ledes and Endings

- 11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
- 11.2: Chapter Review
- 11.3: Optional Exercises

12: Writing About People

- 12.1: Writing About People
- 12.2: Chapter Review
- 12.3: Optional Exercises

13: Structure Essentials

- 13.1: Structure Essentials
- 13.2: Chapter Review
- 13.3: Optional Exercises

14: Alternative Story Forms

- 14.1: Alternative Story Forms
- 14.2: Specialized online reporting forms
- 14.3: Chapter Review
- 14.4: Optional Exercises

15: Photography Essentials

- 15.1: Photography
- 15.2: Chapter Review
- 15.3: Optional Exercises

16: Multimedia Essentials

- 16.1: Multimedia Essentials
- 16.2: Chapter Review
- 16.3: Optional Exercises

17: Headlines

- 17.1: Headlines
- 17.2: Chapter Review
- 17.3: Optional Exercises

18: Online Optimization

- 18.1: Online Optimization
- 18.2: Chapter Review
- 18.3: Optional Exercises

19: Social and Parasocial Media

- 19.1: Social Media
- 19.2: Parasocial media
- 19.3: Chapter Review
- 19.4: Optional Exercises

20: Grammar Essentials

- 20.1: Grammar Essentials
- 20.2: Chapter Review
- 20.3: Optional Exercises

21: AP Style Essentials

- 21.1: AP Style Essentials
- 21.2: Chapter Review
- 21.3: Optional Exercises

22: Wordiness

- 22.1: Wordiness
- 22.2: Chapter Review
- 22.3: Optional Exercises

23: Quotes

- 23.1: Quotes
- 23.2: Chapter Review
- 23.3: Optional Exercises

24: Grace Notes

- 24.1: Grace Notes
- 24.2: Chapter Review
- 24.3: Optional Exercises

25: Quality Control

- 25.1: Quality Control
- 25.2: Chapter Review
- 25.3: Optional Exercises

26: News Releases

- 26.1: News Releases
- 26.2: Chapter Review
- 26.3: Optional exercises

27: Closing Words

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Transcripts

Detailed Licensing

Licensing

*A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in **Back Matter/Detailed Licensing**.*

For instructors

About this book

"Reporting and Writing With the Audience in Mind" is intended for use in high schools and universities, in introductory and intermediate journalism classes that focus mostly on reporting and writing. It can be used to introduce students to more advanced topics, such as longform writing, and specialized ones, such as photography, but it is not a substitute for material dealing with those in depth.

Sections

Basics: Chapters 1-8 cover basic concepts that are generally taught in introductory courses; they may also serve as a useful review in intermediate classes.

Producing stories: Chapters 9-13 are most suitable for courses in which students are expected to produce stories for student media and/or are preparing for internships. They provide practical information about many common types of stories and introduce more advanced reporting and writing techniques.

Specialized topics: Chapters 14-16 move beyond text reporting to familiarize students with other ways to deliver information.

Marketing: Chapters 17-19 deal mostly with methods journalists use to draw attention to their work, both traditional and modern. Chapter 18, covering digital journalism, also explains online-focused storytelling in live posting and through aggregation. As with the specialized topics, these chapters match modern expectations for a beginning journalist's knowledge.

Reference: Chapters 20-25 deliver advice about good writing through a journalism lens. They are suitable for any writing class. When a professor gives feedback on a student's writing, it may be helpful to direct the student to specific sections in these chapters for more explanation.

Finally, Chapter 26 briefly outlines the form of a standard news release, for courses that include public relations writing as one of several streams.

Chapter structure

Main content: Instructional material. This includes embedded homework questions. These are designed to ensure students have actually read the book.

Chapter review: Quick summary of the main points students are expected to take away from each chapter. For these questions to be available to students, the instructor must set up an ALPHA course in LibreTexts and copy the course shell.

Optional exercises: Suggestions for assignments, in or out of class, that build on skills students should gain with each chapter.

About the Author

John Kroll

John Kroll was an adjunct professor of journalism at Kent State University's School of Media and Journalism from 2014 through 2025. He taught:

Media, Power and Culture | Media literacy

Writing for Media | Introduction to writing for print and broadcast, as well as public relations

Reporting | Advanced reporting and writing skills

Reporting on Public Policy | Specialized skills for covering government and politics

Editing | Copy editing and working with reporters

The Business of Journalism | Financial issues with an emphasis on entrepreneurism

Ethics and Issues in Mass Communication | Ethics for journalists and digital media producers

He holds a bachelor of science degree in journalism from Northwestern University (1980) and a master's degree in education from Cleveland State University (2014).

Kroll worked for the Muskegon (Mich.) Chronicle, the Saginaw (Mich.) News, the Detroit Free Press, the Chicago Sun-Times and the Cleveland Plain Dealer. He had many newsroom roles, including reporter, copy editor, page designer and picture editor. After many years as a business section editor, he developed the Plain Dealer's first podcasts before moving to the online team. As director of training and digital development, he created the newsroom's first comprehensive training program in digital journalism, work he continued as online editor. He was the last director of NewsTrain, a national journalism training program, before the closing of the News Leaders Association.

Some elements of this book trace back to material he created for newsroom training. More was developed while teaching at Kent State. A collection of PDFs was consolidated into a digital textbook hosted on the Top Hat platform as "News Writing and Reporting: A Writer's Guide" in 2018. This revised and expanded edition was transferred to LibreTexts in 2026.

Kroll, a Chicago native, lives outside of Cleveland with his wife, Kathryn Kroll. He may be reached at john@johnkrolldigital.com.

About Kent State University

Acknowledgements

No one is born knowing how to find information, use language properly and tell stories well. No one is born knowing how to teach. And no one who wants to do those things well ever stops learning.

This textbook would not exist without the lessons, examples and encouragement of many people. These are just some of them:

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Why This Course Matters

1.1: Why This Course Matters
1.2: Chapter Review
1.3: Optional Exercises
1.4: Anatomy of a News Story

True knowledge is more than just knowing what to do; it's also knowing why. Throughout this textbook, we will try to explain not just how professional communications is done, but also why it's done that way. To begin the process, this chapter explains why learning this things is important.

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1.1: Why This Course Matters

Why this course matters

By the time you've gotten to this course, you've already been taught something about writing. What makes this textbook different from the ones you've already used? What is there left to learn?

First, this is about a specific kind of professional writing, the kind used most often in journalism and public relations.

Second, this is writing based on facts, so you'll learn not only to write in the proper format, but also how to gather facts to use in your writing.

Third, unlike some other instruction, this course uses what we know about human psychology to inform its structure and its explanations.

Writing for professional communications

Have you posted a tweet? Written a paper with footnotes for a college class? Constructed a poem? All of those are forms of writing with their own characteristics. In this course, you will practice writing for professional communications. This is not like other forms you may have used.

Writing for interpersonal communication includes emails and letters sent through snail mail, as well as tweets and other social media posts that you put up mostly to talk with your friends.

Academic writing includes term papers as well as shorter pieces you may have written for classes, such as the “five-paragraph essay” format.

Creative writing can be fiction or poetry.

Writing for journalism or public relations can appear in print, on websites or in social media.

All these have some things in common. For example, they all impose certain formats (more or less). Social media posts may be limited to a certain number of characters; academic writing may require you to use MLA or APA style. Even in creative writing, certain poetic forms set rules for which syllables are stressed or how many syllables are in a line.

Each has stylistic elements (more or less). When you email a friend, you probably use informal language; you may use words, acronyms, emojis or abbreviations only you and your friends understand. When you write a term paper, you probably use longer words and sentences.

You’ve been writing in one or more of those other forms for many years. You’re used to them. You may not be aware you’re following certain styles, or you may be so familiar with them that you don’t have to think about them; you just write.

To do well in this course, you will have to break many of those habits. Let us repeat: **To do well in this course, you will have to break many of those habits.**

Adjustments you must make

Style: You may have worked and worked to learn APA style for previous classes. In this course, you will use a different set of rules, from the Associated Press Stylebook (also known as AP style). The AP Stylebook is a mix of rules -- some about grammar and punctuation, some about preferred spellings, some about topics such as how to refer to someone who’s been accused of a crime.

The stylebook is stuffed with such rules -- and the printed book (or e-book) doesn’t even contain all of them. More are listed in the online version of the book, and even more are not listed but instead are mentioned in a question-and-answer section of the site. Here’s some good news: This book includes a boiled-down set of AP style rules, covering the most common issues. It's not a substitute for having access to the entire AP Stylebook, but it's a handy reference.

Grammar: In addition to AP style, this book will provide other grammar rules. Some of these may differ from things you’ve learned (or thought you learned) in other classes. That can be confusing, but this course’s rules are designed to prepare you for the type of writing expected by most employers in journalism or public relations.

Tone: Professional writing has its own tone. When you email your friends, you may not even use complete sentences. When you write term papers, you may write sentences several lines long, with multiple clauses, in paragraphs that stretch on for a third of a page or more. In professional writing, we use standard grammar and punctuation. We write mostly short, simple sentences. In basic news stories and news releases, paragraphs are usually short -- one to three sentences. Our words are short, too, when possible, and we use as few as we can.

Truthfulness: Unlike creative writing, professional writing must be based on facts. Opinion has a role in journalism -- movie or music reviews, for example -- but not in this book. Here, we will not teach you to express your opinion in your writing. You will not praise or criticize. You may quote others who do so, but you won't do it on your own. (Even when opinion does appear in journalism, it must always start with sticking to the truth.)

Ego-stroking: First-person writing (I did this, I saw that, he told me) has a role in professional writing, too -- but not in this book. You will keep yourself out of your stories. You can describe what you saw, but without mentioning yourself.

Whom you're writing for: The most important difference between professional writing and other forms is how you think about your audience.

You are going to learn to write for large audiences. Some of the style rules and such were crafted specifically because of that. When you write in this course, you will have to think about whom you're writing for. You will have to remind yourself your audience doesn't know everything you know. You will have to explain and provide context.

Gathering & evaluating information

Ethical professional communication is based on values including truth, accuracy and fairness. To live up to those, you must learn to find and verify information. And to make your communication worthwhile, you must learn to evaluate its interest to your intended audience.

You have, we assume, already had experience getting some information -- in particular, that needed to write term papers. For the most part, that involved looking at published sources. We do some of that in professional communications. But we also rely heavily on interviewing people.

This textbook is designed to be used in courses that send students out into the world -- or at least their campus -- to find, report and write stories. Each chapter tries to provide the instruction you need to succeed in a particular task. But we know that instruction alone is not enough. You will make mistakes. So the chapters are built to make it possible -- we hope -- for you to get as much use of them *after* you start reporting as before. We encourage you to go back to the appropriate sections of the book time and again.

When you make mistakes, look up the applicable chapters. Only after you've endured a long, unproductive interview may you be willing or able to digest our advice about how to do it properly.

We want you to treat this as a reference work, not just a textbook. For example, the very first chapter discusses how to evaluate the worth of news stories. Your first time through, you may be overwhelmed by what it says, and it can be hard to translate the broad statements here into advice specific to the types of stories you're trying to find.

But that chapter is vitally important. In some previous writing courses, you probably wrote about things that interested you, or topics your instructor assigned. To be a professional communicator, you must understand what interests your audience.

So we want you to keep going back to that first chapter, each time you take on a new story. We'll refer back to it in future chapters, as well. Over time, and through repetition, you will come to understand each chapter better.

The psychology of writing

Professional communications is a craft, just as much as carpentry or education. A good carpenter knows how to use a hammer properly, how to form a mortise and tenon, how to measure and cut exactly. Great carpenters know more. They understand the differences among different types of wood, and even among the same type of wood that's been subject to different storage conditions. They know why one kind of joint is best in one application, a different joint in another.

In other words, they know not just the how, but the why. They understand the raw materials they're working with.

This textbook seeks to turn you not just into good communicators, but great ones. To reach that goal, you must understand your raw material. That's not words. Those are just tools, along with images, sounds and more. The raw material of your profession -- as it is

for education, among others -- is the human mind.

There is much we don't know about how the mind emerges from the gray matter of our brains. Fortunately, you don't need to know that for this course. We can treat the brain as a black box. Stuff goes in -- sights, sounds, touch, smell, tastes -- and comes out as thoughts and actions. What matters to us is what input is related to what output; the mysteries of how that happens we can mostly leave to neuroscience.

In particular, we need psychology, an understanding of the mind, to accomplish the two main goals of any communicator: informing and persuading.

Consider public relations: It seeks to inform an audience about a new or existing product, a cause, or whatever, and it seeks to persuade the audience to like that product, act for that cause, etc. In journalism, the "inform" part is even more important. But journalism, too, must persuade -- and we don't mean just in editorials or other commentary. Every journalist must know how to persuade an audience to pay attention to stories and to believe in their truth.

Traditionally, instruction in professional communication focused mostly on the tools: How to string words together in the proper order, for example. Textbooks provided formats to be used to write about various kinds of stories. This textbook includes those formats, too. But it also explains why we use them. It provides tips on interviewing, but also explains why certain techniques work. It gives you guidance about what types of stories are worth pursuing -- but also explains why certain approaches are effective.

Let us repeat one more time:

To do well in this course, you will have to break many of your writing habits.

We understand this is difficult. But that's why you are here, to learn. Let’s get started.

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1.2: Chapter Review

Key points

Every main chapter in this textbook will include a chapter review. It's not a substitute for reading the chapter. Instead, it's a way for you to review and see if you remember and understand the chapter's contents. If you aren't sure about something, reread that part of the chapter.

- Writing professionally, whether as a journalist or in public relations, comes with specific skills and rules that differ from other forms of writing.
- Professional communicators rely mostly on Associated Press style and use the AP Stylebook.
- Professional communicators strive for concise, clear writing with mostly short, easy-to-understand words.
- Truth is the bedrock of all professional communications.
- Because we value truth, we work hard to verify the information we're conveying.
- Professional communicators focus on a specific audience. What they write and how they write it are determined by the audience.
- Being a good reporter and writer is not just about memorizing rules. You must understand why rules exist. As much as possible, we should base our decisions on our understanding of psychology.

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1.3: Optional Exercises

Optional Exercises

Each chapter of this textbook will include one or more optional exercises. These are suggestions your teacher may use to reinforce the chapter's lessons.

? Exercise 1.3.1

Use the Anatomy of a News Story included in this chapter to go over basic terms. Then pull stories from a newspaper or news site and identify the parts.

? Exercise 1.3.2

Compile examples of various forms of writing -- email, poetry, term papers, personal essays, etc. Examining each one in turn, explain the ways in which it differs from the type of professional communications described in this chapter.

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1.4: Anatomy of a News Story

Typical news story

If you're not familiar with the terms journalists use, the instructions you're given about your story may be confusing. Let's dissect a short news story. First, here's the story as it might appear on the screen (minus the computer code that would control how this all appeared on a website or in print):

> CAKE-FIRE
>
> 3 die in Ohio house fire
>
> By Malik Crisden
>
> mcrisden@news-bugle.com
>
> STREETSBORO, Ohio -- A mother and her two young daughters were killed Thursday evening in a house fire that may have been started by a tipped-over birthday cake.
>
> Ann Angelos, 33, escaped the blaze, neighbors said, but then went back into the house in search of Kalli, 5, and Nevaeh, 3. Firefighters found their bodies later and said a falling roof beam may have blocked their exit.
>
> It was Angelos' birthday. Her husband, Mark Angelos, had bought and brough home a cake from a neighborhood bakery. He said that he had forgotten to pick up the birthday napkins he'd also ordered and went back to get them. By the time he returned home, flames had engulfed the house and firefighters were on the scene.
>
> Arson investigators found a metal cake tray on the floor near a window where the fire appeared to originate, they said. While the investigation continues, Fire Chief William Husted said it seemed possible the cake's candles had set fire to curtains and spread through the room.

Although it's a short story, it has several elements.

Table 1.4.1 Analysis of news story format

Text from story	Category	Explanation
CAKE-FIRE	Slug	A "slug" is a short label for a story, used to identify it through the reporting and editing process. In a fully digital workflow, the slug would not appear above the story, but instead would be part of the name of the story's file. A typical example would be C04CAKEFIRE, with the "C" indicating it comes from the city desk and the "04" signalling the day the story should be published.
3 die in Ohio house fire	Headline	The "headline" appears above the story, set in a larger type size. Journalists often use the shortened version "hed" to refer to this. Note that a story may have more than one headline, with the largest type size on top, followed by another of a smaller size. Online, headlines are typed out as one line; in print, they may be split into two or more, like this: 3 die in Ohio house fire
By Malik Crisden	Byline	Most news stories carry a "byline" naming the writer(s). In a fully digital workflow, the reporter's name may be automatically attached to the story based on whose login was used to create the file.
mccrisden@news-bugle.com	Credit line	Bylines are often placed atop credit lines. These may be just the name of the writer's organization -- News-Bugle, Associated Press, etc. -- or, as here, use an email or other link to contact information.
STREETSBORO, Ohio --	Dateline	A "dateline" may begin a story, depending on the newsroom's practice. Traditionally, the dateline told readers where the writer was -- so a story about a riot in Frankfurt, Germany, might carry a Berlin dateline if the writer worked the story by phone. Some news organizations instead use a dateline solely to indicate where the story takes place. Online, this offers another way to make sure search engines can figure out the relevance of the story to a location.
A mother and her two young daughters ...	Lede (lead)	The start of a story is called the "lead" or, in newsroom speak, "lede." For basic news stories, the lede is almost always just a single paragraph. For longer stories,

Text from story	Category	Explanation
		especially features, the term may be extended to cover two or more paragraphs that work together.
neighbors said ...	Attribution	"Attribution" is used in professional communications to refer to the parts of sentences that tell the readers where the information comes from -- who said it, who wrote it, what document it was in. Note the distinction between "attribution" -- usually a noun plus a verb, such as "neighbors said" -- and "source" -- the person or document, such as "neighbors."

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: What Is News?

2.1: What Is News?
2.2: Chapter Review
2.3: Optional Exercises

Why news matters

Before you can write news stories or news releases, you must understand what news is.

Up to now, you may have done little, if any, writing involving news. Everyday emails or text messages squirt random facts or comments. Essays in English classes often focus on your opinions. Research papers require you to rely on existing information; you pepper your paper with citations to prove it.

Perhaps you've reported for student media already, in high school or college. Even so, you may not know as much as you think you do about what news is. If people praised your story, they may have meant "I agree with your opinion" or "You're my friend and I support you," rather than "This is news to me" or "Your story was interesting and informative."

Professional communication, in journalism or public relations, is a battle for the audience's attention. This chapter is the first step toward building an arsenal of skills for the battles to come.

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2.1: What Is News?

What is news?

One old saying declares that news is what someone somewhere doesn't want published. (The rest is advertising, the saying continues.) That comes out of the tradition of journalism as an adversary of those in power. It's true news includes information some people find uncomfortable. But what if there's an outbreak of disease in your town: Is there anyone who *wouldn't* want people to know it's there and how to avoid it?

Another common definition goes something like this: If a dog bites a man, that's not news, because it's common. But if a man bites a dog, that's news. There's some truth to that. It wouldn't be news if a passenger jet arrived safely and on time in its destination airport; it would be if the plane landed at the wrong city or airport, or if it crashed. Unusual and unexpected events often make news.

The definition isn't complete, though. It's even dangerous. The idea that common things aren't news could be used as an excuse to ignore problems: Most politicians are corrupt, so why point it out? Crime always happens in that neighborhood, so why report it?

The simplest and yet most precise definition may be this: **News is what your audience doesn't already know.**

Maybe that sounds too simple, too obvious. And yet some student journalists ignore this simple rule.

For example, our university's student center replaced two restaurants one recent fall. Two months later -- after that had been reported in the student paper and website, after most students had gotten a chance to cruise past the new places -- a student's proposed story was "There are two new restaurants in the student center." That wasn't news anymore. The student audience already knew it.

Another example: After a snowy week, a student proposed a story saying the university didn't consider driving conditions in nearby counties when deciding whether to shut down. The policy was commonly known, at least by students and faculty affected, and the school had said as much in emails to everyone during the week. The student's defense: She thought the policy was unfair to commuters. That might be a reason to write an opinion piece, but not a news story.

Let's say you're sharp enough to understand and apply the principle that news is what your audience doesn't already know. Now you're ready to start working on news stories, and you've got tons to choose from, right?

Not so fast. **All news stories involve news, but not all news is worth a story.**

Newsworthiness

- In the 1700s, wealthy European families often ate off pewter plates.

You didn't know that before, did you? So it's news to you. Are you interested? Does it make you want to read more? No, we didn't think so.

- The tomato plant is a member of the family Solanaceae. Also news to you, we bet. And also boring.
- For centuries, much of the information taught and published about anatomy, botany and other scientific subjects was simple repetition of ancient texts, not based on experimentation or physical analysis.

Slightly more interesting, if you've got a streak of nerdiness in you. Still, we suspect many of you are stifling a yawn and have no interest in reading a story based on any of those sentences. Too bad, because you'd be missing an interesting yarn.

To understand why you're not interested and how we could change that, we need to consider some things commonly referred to as news values. These characteristics of a story make it interesting to an audience.

You may have encountered news values in a previous class. They're often explained using terms such as "proximity," "impact" and "human interest." If any of that sounds familiar to you ... please try to forget what you were told. We take a different approach to discussing news values.

Imagine we rush up to you, out breath and wild-eyed. "A car crashed into a store!" we say.

Clearly, we're excited. Will you be? Perhaps not until we add some details: The store was the coffee shop closest to campus. The driver had to go to the hospital. She was the university president. And it happened five minutes ago.

Suppose we added these details instead: The store was a small, out-of-business mom-and-pop grocery in Peshtigo, Wisconsin. The driver was unhurt. He was some guy named Joe Nycz. And it happened in 1983.

The first version of the facts had several factors that got you interested: The crash was near campus, at a store you're familiar with. Someone was hurt seriously enough to be taken to a hospital. That someone was a person you know, a celebrity of sorts to students. And it just happened.

The second version happened further away, at a place you (probably) don't know, to someone you've never heard of. No one was hurt. And it happened before you were even born.

Both versions are news to you, but only the first one is newsworthy. Why? Because it has factors that tend to interest people like you.

That's the first important thing to understand: **News values are determined by your audience.**

Two things derive from that.

Stories must appeal to readers

It doesn't matter what you think is important, or what you think your audience *needs* to know. What matters is whether your audience will care enough to read or watch or listen to your story.

This doesn't mean you can only write about a topic if readers already are interested. It doesn't mean you should ignore stories that your audience needs to know. It doesn't mean you can't write about issues you care about.

Instead, it means your belief that a topic is important, even your conviction that it's something readers need to know about, isn't *enough*. You must find a way to write about it that will turn it into something your audience will be interested in. You must find some approach that lures them into the story. **Regardless of how important a story is to you, it won't matter if no one reads it.**

Different strokes for different folks

Stories newsworthy for one audience may not be for another. You have to know whom you're writing for.

The identity of your audience starts with basic demographics. Are its members young, old or a mix of ages? Do they all live in one area or are they spread out?

It also concerns common connections. Are audience members largely students at your school? Are they people who share an interest in fashion?

You must also think about how your outlet fits into their lives. Is your publication or website a place your audience would go to find out this type of news? This aspect has gotten more important because of the internet's impact. Say you're the editor of a student-run news site at your university in Alabama. A protester in Minnesota dies after being shot by law enforcement. That story has many aspects of newsworthiness in general. But should your website cover it?

On the one hand, even though the event happened far from campus, your student readers may be very interested. But would they turn to your site to find out more? Could you, at your laptop in Birmingham, provide any relevant information they couldn't get faster and more reliably from sources closer to the event?

News values

This list has two categories. "Core values" by their very nature tend to make an audience interested. "Multiplying values" don't carry as much weight on their own, but they can increase the interest in a story that already has one or more core values.

For example, Beyoncé is a celebrity known around the world, including among your school's students. If we have a story about her, we can bet a good portion of your student media's audience will be at least a little interested. "Prominence" is a core value. If our story is that she will perform on campus next week, interest will skyrocket. "Closeness to home" and "timeliness" are multiplying values. They're multiplying, not core, because if we told you Joe Shlabotnik would appear in concert next week on campus, neither the location nor the date would likely be enough to make you care about someone you've never heard of.

These values aren't absolutes. They can apply to greater or lesser extent. Beyoncé and Iggy Azalea are both celebrities, but one's much more famous -- and thus interesting -- than the other. Also, your college town isn't the same as a big city 50 miles away, but

that city's closer than one on the other side of the country. So a story about a concert in the next big city would gain at least a bit from the “closeness to home” multiplying factor, while the one far away wouldn’t get any boost at all.

This list was put together based on our experience with online news traffic and on available research. It probably isn’t complete, but it provides a good framework for talking about newsworthiness.

Core values

Affiliation: Audience members can see themselves in the story because it involves a group they identify with. In general, the broader the group, the weaker the identification.

Basic needs: Food, shelter, health, safety. This is strongest when the story concerns direct threats to the audience.

Competition: A central theme of the story is one side pitted against another with the outcome in doubt.

Follow-up: Follow-up to a significant event. These stories draw interest because the initial event lingers in the audience’s memory, and thus the value diminishes as the initial event grows older.

Mysteries: The mysteries are not simply things the audience didn’t know yet, but rather things it would take some effort to discover.

Opinion confirmation: Stories reinforce the audience’s opinions.

Personal profit and loss: The story explains how the audience can gain or lose money.

Prominence: A story about a celebrity – people very familiar to the audience. In some circumstances, this value may apply to nonhuman or even nonliving things.

Quests: The story calls on ancient narrative elements. Quests must involve some struggle, the overcoming of obstacles.

Sorrow, anger and the warm fuzzies: Stories stir strong feelings. This value does not concern the emotions of those described in the story, but rather of the audience -- the people you’re writing for, not the people you’re writing about.

Weird or funny: It is likely to make the audience laugh or make a funny face. Even a hint of this, a la “... and you won’t believe what happened next,” can trigger the audience.

Multiplying values

Big numbers: A central element of the story involves an unusually large (or unusually small) dimension.

Call to action: A significant thrust of the story involves some way the audience can get involved and do good.

Characters: One or more people in the story are fully fleshed. To qualify, these people must do more than offer a quote or be referred to; the audience must come to know them in human terms.

Closeness to home: Usually, a simple geographic measurement. The closer the story is on a map to the audience, the more interest it will attract.

Completeness and closure: The story promises all essential information or the conclusion of a narrative.

Disagreement: Two or more sides are at odds over some issue. A baseball game isn’t a disagreement; both sides agree on the rules and what sport they’re playing.

Familiarity: The story involves some part of the audience’s daily lives. This is often an add-on to “closeness to home”; something can be nearby but unfamiliar, or vice-versa.

How-tos: A significant element of the story involves instructions for a task important to the audience.

Hidden trends: The story reveals a previously unrecognized pattern to events. The events may have each been too trivial to notice until the pattern was revealed. Alternatively, the events may have been individually significant, but the connection story reveals unknown links between them.

Rarity: The central focus of the story is something out of the ordinary.

Timeliness: The central event of the story happened recently or is going to happen in the near future.

Using news values to produce story ideas

Those were long lists, weren't they? Don't worry if you don't understand quite what each value means. There's a more detailed discussion to come.

Before then, we have to confess a lie. Remember when we told you not all news is worth a story? Looked at one way, that's not quite true.

> ONE JOURNALISM legend describes a brilliant reporter who got in trouble with his editor. To punish the writer, the boss assigned him the least important work he could think of, covering the local sewer district. No previous reporter covering the district had ever found stories worth more than a few paragraphs buried in the back of the newspaper next to the death notices. The placement was appropriate because covering the sewer district was considered a graveyard for reporters' careers.
>
> This reporter, to the surprise of his colleagues, took the reassignment with gusto. He revealed to readers their wastewater was contaminating their drinking supply. He uncovered corruption on the sewer board, resulting in the conviction of six officials. And he won a top writing award for his profile of a district secretary who, at 19, was raising her eight brothers and sisters because their parents had died and she refused to let the children be split up and sent to orphanages.
>
> After the reporter got back from collecting yet another journalism prize, he met a colleague at a bar.
>
> They ordered a round of drinks, and the colleague insisted on paying.
>
> "Here's to you," the other man said. "Revenge must be sweet."
>
> The reporter furrowed his brow. "Revenge? What do you mean?"
>
> "On your editor, of course."
>
> "I still don't understand," the reporter said. "What did my editor ever do to me?"
>
> "He assigned you to cover the sewer district."
>
> "I know! Wasn't that grand of him?"
>
> "But," the colleague persisted, "it's the worst assignment of all."
>
> "You're wrong. It's the very best."
>
> "How can you say that?"
>
> "Simple," the reporter said. "Because it was assigned to me, and I'm the best reporter on the staff. I just knew that if they gave an assignment to me, it must have a lot of great stories."

The point of that story is not that great reporters are egotists, although we've known our share. Instead, it's that stories can be everywhere, but it may take great reporters to know what to look for. So, yes, all news can be worth a story -- if you put in the effort and thought required to find it. The news values listed above are essential tools in that search.

The reporter in the legend knew, for example, "basic needs" such as health and safety attract a lot of interest. He knew if something about the sewers posed a serious risk to his audience, they'd want to know about it. He investigated and discovered the problem with the drinking supply. He knew stories about losing money get attention, as do those stirring strong anger. Corruption that costs the taxpayers money combines those two, so he dug into the district budget. Finally, he knew stories about people facing and overcoming obstacles are popular, especially if the story makes at least one of those people come alive for the audience. His profile of a young woman raising eight children on her own provided rich detail about her actions and personality.

When we ask you to come up with story ideas, we want you to follow the same kind of path. Don't just write down the first thing you think of. Examine your ideas:

- Do they contain some core values? Which ones?
- Are the core values central to the story? You can't claim "prominence," for example, if the only mention of Beyoncé is that someone you interviewed said she's his favorite singer.
- How strong are those core values? If you claim "prominence," is the person truly well known to your audience? If you claim "basic needs," is the story about a threat the audience might starve, or just that they might not be able to get tomatoes on their cheeseburgers?

- Do your ideas contain any multiplying values? Which ones?
- Are the multiplying values going to be prominent? You can't claim the value of "call to action" if you just add one sentence at the bottom telling the audience how to donate to a cause.
- How particular to your idea are all the values? Most story ideas students propose can claim "affiliation" because they involve students and "closeness to home" because they're happening on campus. Does your idea just have those, or does it have others to make it stand out?

What if you examine an idea and it doesn't have strong values? Do you have to abandon it? Not necessarily.

In addition to using the lists to evaluate your original idea, you can use them to make it better.

Say you're interested in yoga, and you want to write a story about how yoga can help people relax. College students need to relax, you tell yourself, so the story will have some "affiliation" value. Not much, though, if the story mostly describes the basics of yoga and just mentions in passing that relaxation could be good for students, including those at your school.

You could give up and try another idea. Or you could think about ways to write a story about yoga and relaxation with more news values for your particular audience. Some possibilities:

- Find a yoga group on campus. Instead of talking about yoga and students in general, you'll have a much stronger "affiliation" value when you include real classmates of your audience.
- Research the effects of stress on college students. Maybe it's a serious health issue, so you can count "basic needs."
- Find out if any campus celebrities practice yoga. If half the football team does "downward dog" after practice, you've got "prominence."
- Don't forget multipliers. What if you discover a study saying 95 percent of all college students miss a day or more of class because of stress-related illnesses? That's a "big number."
- Talk to members of the yoga group. Does one person have an interesting personal story of struggling with stress and discovering yoga could help? Tell that person's story in rich detail and make her a "character."

You may have noticed adding news values to your story idea required you to research and interview. That's right: Most good story ideas don't just pop out of your head. **The more you know about a topic, the better your story idea can be.** You may get story proposals thrown back at you with comments such as "There might be a story here, but you haven't found it yet," or "Interesting -- if true."

Using news values to write better stories

The lists of news values continue to be helpful even after you've come up with a good story idea or had one handed to you.

Writing a news story or news release, you have to decide which facts are most important. But what does "most important" mean? You get sent to cover a house fire. What's more important:

- How much it would cost to repair the damage, or how many people were hurt?
- How many fire trucks responded, or how long it took to put the fire out?
- How the fire started, or how someone noticed it?

The answers will change with each fire, depending on the details. The news values can help you figure them out.

- Twenty people were hurt, and the fire did $3 million in damage? Your audience will be much sadder about human beings than dollars and cents; "sorrow, anger and the warm fuzzies" counts.
- Seven trucks responded, and it took six hours to extinguish the blaze? You want the "big number." It's not as simple as comparing six and seven; you need to know how "big" each number is in context. How many trucks usually respond to house fires? How long do they usually take to put out?
- Was there anything unusual about how the fire started? Is there a mystery? (Something as vague as "they don't know how it started" is not as much of a mystery as "fire inspectors said they found evidence the fire started in six separate spots.")

It should be clear that considering news values isn't as easy as checking items off a list. Each value can be more or less present, and different values can interact with one another.

As complex as these may be, however, it's important you understand them. They will underlie much of what we talk about in the rest of the course.

Before we get to that, let's finish a discussion started in the Newsworthiness section above. Remember? We presented three facts:

- In the 1700s, wealthy European families often ate off pewter plates.
- The tomato plant is a member of the family Solanaceae.
- For centuries, much of the information taught and published about anatomy, botany and other scientific subjects was simple repetition of ancient texts, not based on experimentation or physical analysis.

As we said then, these facts don't seem very interesting. Yet K. Annabelle Smith, writing for Smithsonian Magazine, found a fascinating story in them. The way she did it shows how news values can be used to find the newsworthy story in a seemingly dull topic. Here's her first paragraph:

• In the late 1700s, a large percentage of Europeans feared the tomato.

Boom: strong values for "basic needs" (a food-based threat to health), "weird or funny" (is this reality or the old B movie "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes"?) and "mystery" (what could make you fear a fruit?).

Plus, when you get into the story, there's a "hidden trend" -- some seemingly unrelated facts add up to a story much more interesting.

Smith explained the history of the tomato. She reported it was slow to gain acceptance among Europeans as a food because of several factors. One, those who ate tomatoes off pewter plates might suffer illness -- not due to the tomatoes themselves, but because acid leached lead out of those plates. Two, the tomato plant is a member of the same plant family as the "deadly nightshade," known to be poisonous. And three, the main plant reference book contained lots of errors in its description of the plant, copied from earlier works without verifying.

If she could find an interesting story in a plate of tomatoes, you can find many on and around campus.

How to get story ideas

Students often think news writing works like this:

• Story idea → Reporting → Writing

Story ideas, they figure, come spontaneously to their minds or the minds of their editors. Even when it may seem that way, the process really works this way:

• Information → Story idea → Reporting → Writing

Story ideas -- good ones -- do not come out of a void. You can't come up with even the weakest ideas without knowing something about them. "I want to write about the rugby club" is a weak idea because it has no details, no news values. But you wouldn't have had even that idea unless you knew the club existed.

To turn that weak story idea into a good one, you'll have to dig. That makes the process look like this:

• Information → Reporting → Story idea → Reporting → Writing

If you're covering a beat, such as student government or off-campus housing, you can't rely only on information you happen to come across. You'll have to work just to get the initial spark:

• Reporting → Information → Reporting → Story idea → Reporting → Writing

In a later chapter, we discuss reporting in detail. Here, we'll concentrate on the kind of reporting needed to generate story ideas.

Official sources: To improve the idea about the rugby club, you could talk to the person who manages it. Club presidents, department heads and the like usually know the most about their organizations. Don't be shy. It's not you, meek college student, asking the questions. It's professional you, the voice of your whole audience.

Subordinates: Just because the club's manager is in charge doesn't mean that person is the only member worth talking to. You could ask a player what the club's biggest problem is, or which game was the toughest. Organizations sometimes set policies saying only top officials or other designated spokespeople can talk to the media. But they're not your boss. You can ask anyone you want for an interview; it's up to them to agree or not.

People affected: If you're looking for story ideas about a student-centered office of your school, administrators there may tell you about the programs offered and the benefits for students. That's only one side. Find students who've dealt with the office, too.

Observers: A business reporter covering a major public company -- say, Goodyear Tire & Rubber -- will keep in touch with financial analysts who watch the company. The analysts work for financial firms, helping decide whether companies are good risks for investment or lending. They don't work for Goodyear and they're not directly affected by the company's decisions, but they have specialized knowledge. Useful observers for a student reporter would include professors and others who've been around campus for many years or longtime residents of the area.

Past coverage: Some story ideas are worth revisiting every so often. Looking at old stories about a topic or from a certain time of year can turn up potential revivals. Or you may read a five-year-old story announcing the rugby club was going to become a varsity sport; there's a good follow-up opportunity. Sometimes the history itself is interesting. After our university announced it was buying the land on which a Starbucks sits, a student reporter went through decades of past reporting and discovered the location had been a focal point of student life since the mid-1930s.

More and more universities have online archives of student newspapers going back decades. At the very least, your school's online media probably archive all the stories since they went digital.

Outside coverage: Many media outlets limit their coverage by city, region or country. Public relations writing is usually limited to the organization sponsoring it. But there's a whole world out there. A student reporter should monitor news from other colleges (for example, by looking at their student media sites). A smart PR pro will keep an eye on other organizations in the same sector, as well as news in general.

Yourself: "Mindfulness" is a psychiatric therapy emphasizing self-awareness and living in the moment. Applied to reporting, that can mean paying attention to what's going on and your reactions to it. What's surprised you? What's changed around you? What do you find yourself talking about with friends a lot?

More than anything, finding good stories requires communication. Look, listen and talk. If you limit yourself to your existing knowledge or official sources, your story ideas will be weak and unoriginal.

In a beginning class, you may be able to come up with a single good story idea by luck. But luck won't sustain you when you're covering a beat for news media or public relations. Practice now.

How to pitch story ideas

A bar in working-class Pontiac, Michigan, was just off an expressway. You couldn't see much more of it than the roof, though. The tavern owner made the best of it by putting his entire sales pitch into a sign at the peak of the roof. Everything potential customers needed to know was included. The sign read:

STRONG DRINKS

In sales and marketing, they call that the USP -- the Unique Selling Point. It's what makes your company or product stand out from everyone else (unique), highlighting the value you deliver and the problem you solve (selling point). A story pitch is a reporter's USP for their idea.

Some story ideas don't need much more than that bar owner did: The president was shot. The war is over. Beyoncé had twins. Most, though, require more.

> BAD: The Student Center has some new restaurants.

And ... what? The story needs an "angle" -- something that makes it special, something that draws on one or more news values.

> BAD: I want to write about how the Student Center has ...

Stop. I don't care what you want. It's not my job to please you; it's my job to please the audience.

> BAD: Readers should know more about how important it is to eat healthy. The ...

Nope. People should eat healthy, but there are a lot more places that sell hamburgers than tofu. I don't care about what readers *should* be interested in; I want stories they *will* be interested in.

> BAD: This is an interesting story about ...

Show me, don't tell me(opens in new window). I'll be the judge of whether it's interesting.

> BAD: This story will have the news value of basic needs because ...

Do I look like I have all day? Just describe the story.

> BETTER: Many of our school's 24,000 off-campus students rely on the the Student Center's fast-food restaurants for lunch. But those were franchises offering the same menus nationwide. Commuters haven't benefited from the university's wellness campaign, which brought healthier options and even a gluten-free dining hall to on-campus students. That's changing. The new dining contractor, YumYumYum Inc., will replace two Student Center eateries this fall with locally owned restaurants focusing on fresh, healthy food.

Now, there's a pitch. It's loaded with news values: basic needs (health), closeness to home, big numbers, timeliness. It positions the story as a follow-up to previous coverage of the wellness initiative.

Addendum: A closer look at news values

Remember these aren't yes-or-no factors. You have to consider how strong the value is for a particular story, not just whether it's included.

Core values



Affiliation: If you're in a sorority, you will probably be interested in stories involving Greek life, even if they don't take place on your campus. If you're a college student, you'll probably notice a story about a successful business more if it's run by someone your age than by a 40-year-old.

This category also covers the interest you have in stories about individuals or groups you're a big fan of. In Cleveland, for example, news media can count on big audiences for any story about the Browns.

STRENGTH: Consider two factors: How large a share of your potential audience feels a connection to the story, and how intense is their connection?

For a story about sororities, the most intense connection would be felt by sorority members. That may be a relatively small percentage of your readership. To appeal to more of your audience, the story needs other news values.

For a story about how much fast food Americans eat, everyone in your audience eats and almost all are Americans. But the intensity of the connection they feel to their identity as "American eaters" is probably low. Again, the story would need more values -- or a narrower focus on fast-food consumption by your school's students.

Affiliation also comes into play when considering how long a story should be and how detailed it should get. A story that is almost only of interest to sorority members may be worth running, but in a publication of general student interest, a short version suffices to alert that audience and point them to places they can get more information.



Basic needs: Abraham Maslow created a pyramid of human motivations called a "hierarchy of needs." Basically, he said we have to be satisfied we can meet needs on one level of the pyramid before we start to worry about those on the next highest level. His pyramid started with basic biological needs such as food and health, then moved on to safety and shelter before ascending to more psychologically based needs such as love and self-esteem.

Stories dealing with the needs at the base of the pyramid speak to the audience's deepest fears.

STRENGTH: The strength of this value can vary along three axes: level of need, level of threat and impact on individual member of the audience.

At the bottom of Maslow's pyramid are the most direct threats to life: starvation and disease. Those topics will attract far more attention than discussions of self-esteem or self-fulfillment.

Students sometimes try to claim this value for stories about a restaurant opening in town or a new snack trend. While those ideas do involve food, they don't have anything to do with whether someone will go hungry. The threat level is too low to earn this value.

Finally, we care most about the needs of ourselves. A story about people going without health care in Asia will not pull in as many readers (all other things being equal) as one about a threat to the audience's own health.



Competition: News media often get criticized for "horse race coverage" of political campaigns, meaning an emphasis on who's ahead in the polls rather than a discussion of issues. There's a reason media focus on who's ahead and who's behind, though: Audiences are attracted to stories about two sides battling for victory.

This value isn't just about two sides disagreeing. Indeed, they may be in complete agreement; sports teams agree to follow the same rules. The keys are a) both sides are trying to win the same thing, and b) the winner will be decided either by an agreed-upon standard (who gets the most votes, who gets the most points) or an objective judge (someone not a part of either side).

STRENGTH: Two things make a difference in judging this value. The first is what's at stake; the second is how close the competition is.

Doug Lesmerises, a sports writer for cleveland.com, instinctively applied this idea when he talked about covering a bowl game between Ohio State and Notre Dame in January 2016. It was a blowout for the Buckeyes, who won 44-28. And it wasn't for the national championship; Lesmerises said it amounted to an exhibition game.

What was Lesmerises's main story afterward? Not the game, he said. It wasn't close (i.e., not really competitive), so it wasn't as interesting. Instead, he went to a highly touted freshman player who hadn't gotten to play a down all season, and talked to him. That story -- which had solid news values -- was extremely popular online.



Follow-up: Maybe this has happened to you: You get a car, and suddenly it seems as if half the cars on the road are the same make or model. There's a term for that: the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon (or, less colorfully, the frequency illusion). When something we haven't known about is brought to our attention, we suddenly notice it everywhere.

Just as the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon primes us to notice things we overlooked, news audiences who encounter a big story are primed to be interested in related ones. If there's a shooting in a high school, for example, there will be an uptick in interest for stories about guns, school safety and whatever the shooter's apparent motivation was.

STRENGTH: Ask two questions: How much was the audience interested in the original story, and how long ago was it? Follow-up stories are most popular when the original story got a lot of interest and the follow-ups come out within a few days of the original. An exception to that rule: "whatever happened to" stories. A topic that was big news but faded quickly can generate interest years later.



Mysteries: We're naturally curious. If you can engage the audience's desire to know how or why, who or what, you've got strong interest. This is why so many story teasers end with "and you'll never believe what happened next."

STRENGTH: Students sometimes claim this value just because they don't know the answer to a question yet: Why did the university replace two restaurants in the student center? That's not good enough.

The strength of this value depends on how mysterious the mystery is. If it's something you could discover with a simple question, or by searching on Google, it's no mystery. The best mysteries are those for which the audience cannot imagine what the solution could be, or for which the writer can suggest the answer is not what most people would expect.



Opinion confirmation: "[O]ur overwhelming tendency to look for what confirms our beliefs and ignore what contradicts our beliefs is well documented," Samuel McNerney wrote in Scientific American. This can have damaging effects, especially since the internet makes it very easy to find stories confirming our beliefs and ignore those contradicting them. We don't recommend using this news value, therefore. But it exists.

STRENGTH: The deeper the split in opinion about a topic and the more defensive one side is about its opinions, the greater the attraction of stories agreeing with the beleaguered side's view.



Personal profit or loss: Wealth isn't a basic need, even though we may need it to satisfy the ones that are. Still, many people care about their finances. This value accounts for the interest in many kinds of stories: tuition increases, tax cuts, job opportunities, discounts and more.

STRENGTH: Note the word "personal" in the label. To get the most out of this value, a story must make clear the direct effect on each individual member of the audience. That's why good reporters know that when they write about a tax increase, they shouldn't just mention the percentage. They break it down something like this: "The 1.5 percent tax hike will cost the average resident about $320 more a year."



Prominence: A quirk of human curiosity: The more aware we are of someone, the more we want to know about them. The easiest example to recognize is individual celebrity. If you make a pronouncement about politics, no journalist would think it worth reporting. But if George Clooney makes a statement, reporters know many people will want to hear it.

Applying this value gets fuzzier when you move beyond individuals. Even on most campuses, for example, few individual players on the school's football team have much celebrity recognition. Their names won't add value to a story. But the football team as a whole may have prominence, so mentioning someone is a player -- a part of that prominent team -- may help.

STRENGTH: Prominence is one of the more difficult values to assess. These are some factors to consider:

- Prominence is relative to your audience. People of one generation have a different set than those older or younger. (Indeed, the examples we're using in this book to illustrate prominence may not be resonating with you, because we're old.) Someone such as your university president is quite prominent on campus, but wouldn't draw much interest in a national publication.
- Prominence can be a negative value. Nickelback is well-known to a certain audience, but many of those people may hate the band and refuse to read anything about it. Prominence can also interact with "confirmation bias," so people read stories confirming their opinion of someone but avoid those contradicting it.
- It's not enough just to mention a celebrity's name. This value works because of our desire to know more about famous people. Your story has to tell me something about a celebrity I don't already know. The more you tell me, the greater this value for a given story.



Quests: Storytellers -- novelists, playwrights, movie directors -- can get into arguments about how many basic plots there are. A computer analysis by researchers at the University of Vermont declared there are only six: rags to riches (a rise from failure to success), tragedy (a fall from success to failure), man in a hole (a fall followed by a rise), Icarus (a rise followed by a fall), Cinderella (rise-fall-rise) and Oedipus (fall-rise-fall). Christopher Booker boiled his list down to seven, with categories such as "overcoming the monster," a struggle against some obstacle, and "voyage and return" (think Homer's "Odyssey"). Other lists have as few as three entries or at least as many as 20.

We use "quest" to refer to these basic storytelling plots, with special emphasis on ones involving a deeply meaningful search or a struggle against some opponent or obstacle. You won't find this value in many news stories. It requires a hero.

(Note to public relations majors: When discussing crisis communications, you will hear about a standard structure for viewing a crisis, involving a victim, a villain, and a vindicator. That structure is one example of the "quest" value.)

STRENGTH: What's at stake? How arduous is the hero's struggle? Are you writing about the struggle, or is it only implied or referred to in passing?



Sorrow, anger and the warm fuzzies: We're emotion junkies. We seek things that stir strong emotions. In particular, we are attracted to stories that bring forth tears, get us upset or provide a glow of good feeling. Among the emotions not on the list: disappointment.

Important to remember: This value is about the likely reaction of the audience, not whether such emotions are mentioned in the story.

STRENGTH: How strong an emotional hit will the audience get? How central to the story is the element providing it?



Weird or funny: This value also has an emotional component. It covers stories that make the audience laugh, whether in amusement or bewilderment.

As with "sorrow," remember this is about the audience's likely reaction, not the mention of laughter in the story. One student proposed a story announcing a talent contest would occur in a few weeks, and claimed this value because some acts would probably do weird things. That's like trying to get a laugh from your friends by telling them you've got a great joke -- but not telling the joke.

STRENGTH: How funny or weird is the element, and how prominent will it be in the story?

Multiplying values



Big numbers: Sheer size can impress an audience. The home team won? Great. The home team won by 50 points? Wow. The same effect works with dollar amounts and other numbers.

STRENGTH: Obviously, the bigger the number, the greater the impact. But note: Numbers are only big or small in context. If I told you a football team scored 80 points, you'd be impressed. A basketball team? Not so much.

According to legend, Everett Dirksen, a U.S. senator from Illinois, made a remark about federal spending that illustrates this concept. As Congress works on the budget, dollar figures are tossed around with abandon because, in the context of the total budget, even otherwise eye-popping numbers seem insignificant. Or, as Dirksen reportedly said, "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money."

To understand whether your number is big, you need background -- and so does your audience. If a sorority raised $1,000 for charity, how does that compare with its previous fundraisers? Will the money go into a much larger fund, or to one needy individual?



Call to action: Some stories, including those with the "sorrow, anger and the warm fuzzies" value, can be enhanced by giving the audience a chance to help or take part. Kristen DelGuzzi, then a top editor at the Arizona Republic, said stories that provide information such as how to donate to tornado victims get lots of clicks online.

For this to work, of course, potential readers have to know the information is in the story. One line buried at the bottom of a long news report won't work, because they won't know it's there when deciding whether to read the story.

STRENGTH: This value works in combination with others, such as "closeness to home." The more an audience already cares about a problem, the more interested they are in how to help or take part.



Characters: Tell me 11,400 Americans were injured by fireworks in 2013 and I may be concerned ... or not. Tell me the story of one woman, a mother of three and an award-winning painter and musician, who had three fingers blown off on her brush hand and lost hearing in one ear -- now you've got my attention.

Why? The bigger number means more tragedy, doesn't it? But if we don't come to know any of those 11,400 people as individuals, our sympathies don't get triggered as much.

The more you bring a story down to specific individuals and make them come to life, the greater the reader interest.

Note that part about "come to life." It isn't nearly enough to just mention someone's name or provide a quote. You can only claim this value if your characters stand out as individuals. That means things such as describing them physically, showing them in action, providing their background or using vivid, original quotes.

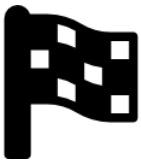
STRENGTH: The more relevant a character is to the core values of the story, the greater contribution it makes. The level of detail provided also matters. One-dimensional characters -- described in generic terms such as "pretty" or "handsome," sketched in labels such as "father" without specifics, etc. -- are like movie extras. The audience hardly notices them.

Closeness to home: In traditional lists of news values, the label "proximity" is used to point out that audiences are interested in stories near them. That's true, but there are many things going on close to me. I don't care about many of them. Geographical closeness can multiply the interest in a story only so long as the story already has other core values.



One reason we don't use the word "proximity" is to emphasize the idea of "home." Home isn't always where we're sitting as we see a story. If you were born and raised in Chicago, but now live in Mississippi, you may continue to have a special interest in stories from the Windy City.

STRENGTH: Of course, physical distance is one measure. But also consider the depth of the connection your audience feels to the area you're considering a home to the story. For many students who live in dorms, anything more than a block or two off campus may be as irrelevant to them as something 100 miles away.



Completeness and closure: Digital journalists have learned headlines such as "47 ways to leave your lover" or "The best burgers in Boston" are audience gold. But why?

One theory: They suggest to the viewer that what's underneath is a complete package. It's not "some of the best burgers," it's "the best." An unusual number, like 47, seems to work better than a round number because it appears to be non-arbitrary. (Unless you're Paul Simon and you've got 50 ways to leave your lover.)

The same drive may pull an audience into stories promising an end instead of just a beginning and middle. "How Hillary Clinton won the nomination" is likely to get more eyes than "Hillary Clinton's campaign so far."

STRENGTHS: How clear is the promise?



Disagreement: This is one of the weakest multipliers. It simply indicates there's an argument, a difference of opinion.

Imagine you come across a story about a bridge proposed for a road you travel regularly. You'll have some interest. Now imagine the story says people living around the proposed bridge are angry. They say the bridge will split their community and bring extra traffic that will cause problems. Even though there may be no "competition" aspect -- the public doesn't have a vote -- the existence of contrary opinions adds some intrigue.

Note the disagreement must be present in the story. It's not enough to tell your editor some people don't like something; will those angry people be in the story? Will their opponents? Nor is it this about whether the audience, when it hears of the story, will disagree. What's in the story itself?

It matters how many people are arguing, too, and what they're doing about it. Our students often proposed stories about the scarcity of parking spaces on campus. They would say people are angry. What people? Well, they know a couple of friends who always complain about it. And what have they done -- a petition? a walkout? Well, they complain about it a lot. Not good enough. You can almost always find somebody who doesn't like something If we wrote stories about all of those disputes, we'd wear out out keyboards and our audience's patience.

STRENGTH: How sharp is the disagreement? How loud? How evenly matched are the opposing arguments?



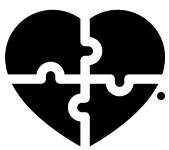
How-tos: This value has some things in common with "action." Rather than explaining how the audience can help others, however, it's about how they can help themselves.

The Zika virus is coming close? A how-to might list the best steps to avoid it, or the warning signs that you've contracted the disease.

STRENGTH: How much interest a how-to will attract depends on two factors.

First, how deep is the audience's concern? In the Zika example, how immediate is the threat? How dangerous is Zika? This doesn't apply just to risks. A how-to on Pokemon Go can add interest, depending on how intrigued your audience is about the game.

Second, how complex are the instructions? If the solution is simple and obvious, the audience's need for a how-to is weak.



Familiarity: This sits somewhere between the core value of "affiliation" and the multiplier of "closeness to home." Consider these two potential stories:

A shop in a neighboring town that sells cloth and sewing supplies is going out of business. It was the only store within 100 miles that specialized in that stuff. Students in your fashion school relied on it; the place was like a second home to them.

- A bowling alley six blocks from campus is going out of business. It hadn't gotten much business in years, mostly old people.

The bowling alley was much closer to home. But it's probably unfamiliar to your student media audience. The sewing shop is farther away, but very familiar to a chunk of your readers.

STRENGTH: Some element of this value is woven into others, such as affiliation and prominence, so it doesn't make sense to claim relevance or familiarity unless those others are absent or weak. When you do claim it, consider how *strong* the audience's connection to the topic is. One way to think about that: The topic should be both a big part of the audience's daily lives and at the same time a small or nonexistent part of the daily lives of most other people.



Hidden trends: Imagine you hear a bike was stolen on campus. You might have mild interest, especially if you ride yourself. But it's not super exciting; you probably wouldn't bother mentioning it to your friends. There would be no buzz.

Now imagine you find out this was only the latest in a string of bike thefts over the last few weeks. That's something to talk about, isn't it? Because now you've revealed a previously unnoticed pattern, a connection between events far more interesting than the sum total of a series of stories about unrelated individual events.

Similarly, in the tomato story, we wrote about earlier, a handful of boring facts become fascinating when the connection among them is revealed.

One of our students noticed a social media post in which a student complained that their package had disappeared after it was delivered over the weekend to the central desk that accepted all student packages. Mildly annoying, although it does involve loss. But a few other people responded to the post, saying they'd had packages disappear, too. The student sensed a trend. His reporting confirmed it. He showed that the desk was unstaffed over the weekend. Delivery services were supposed to hold packages until the next business day, but they didn't bother. Instead, the packages stacked up on the unmanned desk in a public area. *That* was a story.

STRENGTH: When the newspaper USA Today debuted in 1982, it was chic among other journalists to make fun of it -- for being (literally) colorful, for having a huge weather map, for writing very short stories. And for declaring various quirky things to be new trends. "Two is a trend," other journalists snarkily said of USA Today's philosophy. In other words, connections were being declared based on thin evidence. See two people wearing pinky rings on the same day? Write a story about it!

The strength of "hidden" depends on how solid the connections are and how extensive the pattern is.



Rarity: If something is the first, the last or the only, it builds interest.

STRENGTH: How rare is it? One student said a particular festival had this value because it only happened once a year. Not only is once a year not so rare, the event was regularly scheduled. Similarly, you couldn't claim rarity for a story about some person because "he's our state's only incumbent governor now."

Don't overestimate the power of this factor. Rarity in itself doesn't capture interest. If we pitched a story about a guy in Toronto who owned the world's only seven-ring binder, a U.S. college paper editor would not be intrigued.



Timeliness: The simplest to understand and apply. How recently did something happen, or how soon is it expected to occur?

The only tricky part: There must be some specific time element crucial to the story. We eat food day in and day out; you can't claim timeliness for a story about nutrition with no other time peg.

STRENGTH: Obviously, it matters how long ago or far into the future the story's time element occurs. Also consider how specific the element is, and how narrow the window of time over which it occurs. Yes, a story about studying will get more interest on a college campus when school is in session than when it's out, but nine months is too broad a window to give this much of a boost. On the other hand, a story about exam anxiety that runs during Finals Week does gain significantly from its timeliness.

To claim this value, you must have a good answer to this question: Why should we use this story *now*, and not six months from now?

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2.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- News is what your audience doesn't already know.
- News can only be judged in the context of the audience you're trying to reach. The two ideas, news and audience, are inextricably linked.
- Not all news is worth a story.
- While humans are curious animals, that curiosity has limits. You cannot rely solely on your audience's ignorance to guarantee they will pay attention to your story. You must find an angle that gives the audience reasons to be interested.
- Newsworthiness is determined by the number and intensity of the news values.
- Some core values, such as "prominence," draw audiences directly. Others, such as "big numbers," build on those core values, multiplying their power.
- You should recognize and be able to explain these:
  - Affiliation
  - Basic needs
  - Competition
  - Follow-up
  - Mysteries
  - Opinion confirmation
  - Personal profit or loss
  - Prominence
  - Quests
  - Sorrow, anger, warm fuzzies
  - Weird or funny
  - Big numbers
  - Call to action
  - Characters
  - Closeness to home
  - Completeness and closure
  - Disagreement
  - Familiarity
  - How-tos
  - Hidden trends
  - Rarity
  - Timeliness
- Use this list when you are thinking of story ideas. If you can't identify such values in your idea, you may need to consider an angle -- an approach, a narrowing of the topic. Also use them when writing stories, to help you figure out what the most important facts are.
- The more you know about a topic, the better your story idea will be.
- Good story ideas are specific and based on answers, not questions. Research before you pitch. That may include interviewing people with knowledge, looking for research or exploring previous coverage, and being more aware of what's going on around you.
- Story pitches should describe the story in a way that makes the news values clear.
- You don't have to use the labels this book applies to news values, but your description should mention examples of the story's strongest values.

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2.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 2.3.1

Look at a newspaper, news magazine, news website or TV news program. Examine the stories used. Do they include some of the news values listed in this chapter? Which ones?

Exercise 2.3.2

Talk about how to apply the news values to come up with story ideas.

One approach is to start with an issue, event, person or organization you think deserves coverage in your student media. Work through the list. Which might be applied? For example, say there's a club at your school that trains service dogs. It's been several years since anyone wrote about it. The group doesn't have any special events coming up; you just think it's time to revisit. You might consider the "quests" value, by proposing a story about how one member worked through a year to train a dog, as the core value. The value would be increased because the member is a student, like most readers (affiliation), on campus (closeness to home); by focusing on one person and one dog, you can develop them as characters.

Another approach is to start with an ongoing news story and use the list to come up with stories that go beyond breaking news. For example, say there's a state election coming up. The "competition" value is built into the coverage, but what can you do beyond listing the candidates and issues on the ballot? A how-to story could explain voter registration. A disagreement story could show how the two candidates clash on a key concern. A story about a tax issue could focus on basic needs and how increasing the tax -- and the improvements that should result -- would directly affect voters.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Reporting Essentials

3.1: Reporting Essentials
3.2: Chapter Review
3.3: Optional Exercises

Why Reporting Matters

All news values, the things that make your story or news release newsworthy, rely on facts that must come from somewhere. But where, and how do you find them? That's reporting.

Some information is handed to you. The mayor's going to be at the grand opening of a downtown store? City Hall probably makes sure reporters are told when and where it's happening and why it's important.

But what if the mayor doesn't want you to know the store was built on a toxic landfill? What if City Hall doesn't know the store is the first of its kind in your state? What if the administration knows the store owner developed the concept while a student at your college, but doesn't realize your audience would care?

If some of you are tuning out because you're public relations majors who will be spoonfed information by your employers or clients, tune back in!

The people you're going to work for are not experts in news values. They won't know what you need to do your job well. Sometimes, they may not even want to help you, for reasons ranging from "not my job" to "I know better," from "I'm too modest" to "What's in it for me?" You need reporting skills, too.

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3.1: Reporting Essentials

Don't plagiarize

We presume your school has a policy banning plagiarism in all classes. In journalism courses, that ban is even more important. Because plagiarizing is such a serious offense, we list these guidelines both here and in the reference chapter on quotes. Note that the guidelines are different in public relations.

Not using quotation marks indicates you have put the information in your own words. Omitting quotation marks but using all or almost all of your source's original wording is plagiarism.

- It's plagiarism to use someone else's words without quotation marks or other indications (such as block quotes online) *even if you attribute the information to the source*. It's worse if you don't attribute, but copying verbatim without attribution is still a journalistic and academic sin.
- It's plagiarism *even if your source is a news release or an organization's website*. You cannot copy word-for-word the description of a club from your university's website, for example, unless you put it in quotation marks and say where you got it.
- It's plagiarism *even if your source invites you to borrow the wording*. The readers were not party to that agreement. They have a right to know whether your writing is original.

Get it right

All good professional communicators share one passion: an fervent, undying, absolute commitment to getting the facts right.

We accept no compromises. **"Almost correct" isn't correct.**

Verify

More than a hundred years ago, the many newspapers then serving the city of Chicago competed fiercely for news. Even so, they realized it was a waste of resources for all of them to send reporters to every nook and cranny of the city.

They formed the City News Bureau. The bureau sent reporters into all key news locations. It had police reporters on the lookout around the clock. Whatever the bureau's reporters found was shared with every paper.

The bureau was a kind of boot camp. Young would-be reporters in those days normally started out in newsrooms as "copy boys," running errands for the real journalists. At the City News Bureau, they instead would be thrown directly into reporting.

The bureau was famous for its demanding and meticulous editors. A saying many journalists live by is thought to have originated with a bureau editor: **"If your mother says she loves you, check it out."**

What does that mean?

- Trust nobody. Verify everything.
- Sources lie. Or they get confused. Or they heard things wrong. That doesn't matter. **If an incorrect fact or a misspelled name gets into a published story, it's the reporter's fault.**
- Attributing facts to your sources isn't good enough. Not if there was any way to independently confirm them. Generations of City News Bureau reporters lived by that code. And they didn't have the internet.

In this video, reporter Asha Glover talks about the difference between getting a fact wrong in a term paper and getting something wrong when you're writing for publication.



Video 3.1.1: Asha Glover: Check your own work | Watch on YouTube(opens in new window) [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Names

Whenever you talk to someone, ask them to spell their name. Then spell it back to them: “That’s J as in joker, O as in Oscar ...” Never accept “it’s the common spelling.”

Some reporters instead hand their notebooks to sources and invite them to print their names. Even if you do that, read it back to them to make sure you can decipher what they’ve written.

If you’re talking to someone in an official position, that’s enough. But if you interview some random person, go further. Far too many reporters have been naive enough to quote the likes of Haywood Jablome and Jim Shue.

Yes, that means asking for ID. Or at least checking in some way. At some schools, an online directory provides information such as name, grade level and major.

Sometimes the information in a directory may differ from what the source tells you. AP style will tell you to go with their preference. If you're referring to someone by a name other than the one an editor would find online, you must let your editor know. Otherwise, they might change the name, assuming you got it wrong.

Here's what professional communicators say about how to persuade students that spelling names correctly is critically important.

"Would you care if your byline was wrong?" -- Kristen DelGuzzi Alltucker, newspaper editor

"Zero for the assignment. That usually wakes them up." -- Jackie Jones, journalism school dean

"If you can't correctly spell the name of someone you talked with, how can you be trusted to get ANYTHING else right?" -- Teresa Dixon Murray, reporter

"I would almost always eliminate job applicants whose portfolios and tapes showed [spelling] errors. One such person defended his error-ridden writing by telling me, 'When you're in TV news, you don't need to know how to spell.' Really? Sorry. You need to be able to spell to work in this newsroom." -- Mark Cavender, executive director, RTDNA

"Among the common mistakes made by PR pros, few are as embarrassing -- and easily avoidable -- as misspelling a journalist's name in a PR pitch." -- Steve Beale, PR trade publication editor

"You get it pretty quickly the next day when the principal, coach, father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, brother and sister call you to complain. If you are really blessed, they all call." -- Tim Graham, sports page designer

"My first name has many spellings. I know it shouldn't matter to me, but as a child I never found a keychain, fake license plate or other personalized item with my spelling. I am not Stacy, Stacey or Staci -- I am Stacie." -- Stacie Paulsen Chandler, academic advisor

> **"I interviewed a woman whose last name was, I thought, Kennedy. It sounded so normal that I never asked how it was spelled. Her name was Canady. The city editor asked about it. I said, 'No excuses, my mistake.' He lit into me. I said, 'Listen, I wrote six stories yesterday ...' He stopped me and said, 'I thought you said no excuses.' From that day on, I never took a name without asking the spelling -- from Jones to Smith, etc. ALWAYS."** -- Eric Kinkopf, reporter

Phone numbers

Before you put any phone number into a story, call it to be sure it's the right one.

Websites

Before you link to any website, try the URL in a browser. If you searched online to find the page, copy the URL from your browser search bar and paste it when making the link.

Watch out for fake sites, especially if you're aggregating news. Snopes.com, a great resource for sniffing out fakes of all kinds, has a list of some of the most cited fake news sites. New ones spring up all the time, though. There's more on this later in the chapter.

Addresses

Before you put any address into a story, look it up in Google Maps or something similar. Use the satellite view so you can be sure the location looks like what it's supposed to.

Times, dates, other basic info

Be wary of this kind of information. Look for a flyer, brochure or website confirming it. But don't trust those entirely. People make mistakes. We tell reporters they should make at least one phone call for any story written based on a news release -- to confirm the information's correct. (And also because news releases are even easier to fake than news stories.)

People often confuse dates. Ask about the day of the week, then check a calendar to make sure those match. If not, check with the source again.

Students can be confused about their own status, saying they're seniors when their progress only qualifies them as juniors, perhaps. Check what they tell you against an online directory, if your school has one. If you see a discrepancy, ask them about it.

Numbers

Do the math. If a person is 25 years old but claims to have graduated from college six years ago, the numbers don't add up and you have to dig deeper. Basic arithmetic mistakes get past reporters because they don't stop to think about them.

Other claims

If someone makes a verifiable claim, try to verify.

For example, if the president of a student club says it's celebrating the 20th anniversary of the club's founding, search whatever archives you can (perhaps online issues of student media).

If the university says its newest hire has a Ph.D. from Harvard, at least search online to see if that seems to be true.

If a sorority tells you it raised $10,000 for charity, ask to see proof -- a bank deposit, a note from the charity, etc. This may feel uncomfortable. Being a journalist often does.

Don't trust yourself

Even if your sources are all accurate, your story can end up wrong because you were sloppy. You misread your notes. You typed too fast. You garbled a sentence. None of these are valid excuses. As that professional communicator Ice Cube said, "Check yourself before you wreck yourself."

Don't guess

You know the old saying: "If you assume, you make an ass of U and me." Don't U be an ass. You interview a young woman on campus and ask her major and year in school; she tells you. But does she go to your school, or is she just there visiting a friend?

This also applies to taking information from your notes. And if you can't read your own writing, print or type your notes.

Editors hate it when they ask a question about a story, such as “Did the bowling ball go through the window?” (that’s a real question we heard an editor ask) and the writer replies “I think so.” Or, even worse, “It must have.”

If you don’t know something for certain, admit it. **Never guess, not even if you know admitting ignorance will infuriate your editor.** Trust us, the editor will be even angrier if you guess and get it wrong.

Record interviews

This is the only way to guarantee your quotes are accurate.

Some states have "single consent" laws. As long as one party to the conversation is aware of and approves its recording, it’s legal. Of course, most of the time you don’t want to conceal what you’re doing. And in some states, the law requires mutual consent. But that should give you the confidence to push back if a source declines when you say you’re going to record. Tell them you’re doing it so you can be sure you get their words right.

Learn how to calculate percentages

A lot of writers joke about how they got into the profession because they didn’t like math. That’s not funny.

You can find some basic advice online; just search. Until you feel confident about this, always check with someone wiser before putting percentages into your story.

Copy and paste

You know plagiarism is wrong. You can’t pass off someone else’s work as your own. That’s not what this advice is about.

Rather, it refers to those bits of your story that, properly attributed, you quote from digital sources. If you have that material in a format you can copy and paste, do so. That reduces the potential to introduce typos.

CQ

Those two letters are journalism code for “this is correct, and I’ve double-checked it.” Writers or copy editors would circle names, phone numbers and similar data in a story and write “CQ” next to them to indicate the next person who looked at the story didn’t have to repeat the checking.

Different organizations and different instructors have different methods for indicating information has been CQed. Whatever method you’re instructed to use, one thing is absolute: CQ must mean CQ. Did you really check?

Sources

A source is someone or something from which you get information.

Types of sources

Broadly speaking, reporters rely on three ways to get information.

People

You’ll use human sources for two things: information and opinion.

The people you interview for information should be **knowledgeable**. You can’t get blood from a stone; you can’t get good information from people who don’t know any.

Imagine you’re writing a story about two candidates campaigning to be president of the country. A political science professor who has studied American elections could be a qualified source; she has special knowledge of the history of presidential campaigns. But what if the story is instead about two candidates campaigning to be president of student government? The history of U.S. presidential elections doesn’t matter, so that same professor is not a qualified source.

The reverse would be true of the incumbent student body president. That person may not know anything special about federal campaigns, but would have particular knowledge related to student government.

Some qualified sources are mere **witnesses**. A student who was in a local shop when a masked man entered and robbed the store is a limited expert witness.

The people you interview for opinions don't need the same level of knowledge, but not everyone qualifies.

The student who was in the shop can tell you what she remembers, but her opinions about what the store should do to increase security probably are uninformed. On the other hand, that political science professor knows so much about American elections that her opinion about who's likely to win is informed and potentially newsworthy.

Documents

You can get information in many ways: from websites and publications; in text, data or images.

The nonhuman sources you pick should be as authoritative as the people you choose to interview. Whenever possible, track information down to its origin. If you find a good quote printed by another media outlet, see if there's a video available so you don't get the words secondhand. If you have a news release explaining some new research, get a copy of the study itself.

Whenever possible, use human sources to check your understanding of documents. "From the data, it looks as if applications to the school have fallen 10 percent in the last year. Does that sound right?"

Observation

If you really want to get the news firsthand, there's only one way: Be there.

You can interview the subject of a personality profile for hours, but your story will still be thin unless you were able to observe the person going about daily life. You can get several people to tell you a public meeting was heated and there was a lot of shouting, but only if you were there can you be sure you're getting the details that best capture the chaos.

And the best news stories are rich in detail.

When we were in journalism school, instructors drove that point home by telling us a story they assured us was true. Thing was, several instructors, and later several editors, told different versions of the story, featuring different reporters and entirely different accounts. The only thing that stayed the same was the punchline.

To honor those storytellers, we've taken some of the best parts of several versions and added a few bits of our own. But the story's still true, or at least truthy.

> SATURDAYS AND SUNDAYS, the newspaper was put out by a skeleton crew. The youngest, rawest reporters had to work weekends; it was a kind of hazing.
>
> This Saturday, one young reporter was doing the rounds of the cop shops. She stopped at one police station after another, flipping through the day's reports to gather items of one sentence or less for what was called the blotter, a roundup of crimes and misdemeanors.
>
> Every weekend was the same. A couple of burglaries, some DUIs, vandalism. Reporters vied with each other to spot weird nuggets to spice up the blotter, like a 7 a.m. report about missing lawn decorations that could show up in print as "Theft of elf."
>
> The young reporter was half-heartedly perusing the reports at a suburban station while devoting most of her brain to pondering lunch choices. She found it hard to concentrate on the blurry carbon-copied reports. Bored and hungry, she skipped the last pages and shut her notebook.
>
> The desk sergeant pulled the pile of reports back across his desk. As he did every time the young reporter showed up, he asked her where she was going for lunch. She mumbled a response and got up.
>
> This time, the sergeant asked, "Are you going to do anything with that weird accident on Old 44?"
>
> The reporter shook her head automatically. There had been nothing of interest in the reports. But, as she took one step toward the door, she thought about those last few ignored pages.
>
> "What accident?"
>
> The sergeant started to explain. The reporter took notes. When he was done, she raced out of the station, jumped into her car and sped to Old State Route 44, then on to the county hospital.

Back in the newsroom, her fingers flew over the keyboard. A county commissioner driving down the dirt road had come over a hill to discover a dog lying in the sun, right in the middle of his lane. The commissioner swerved hard, skidded on the dirt and flipped his car two and a half times, landing in a wire-mesh chicken coop.

To the driver's own surprise, he was unhurt although upside-down. Unbuckling his safety belt, he crawled out his broken windshield only to encounter a furious farmer.

The farmer swung a fast right hook at the commissioner, who ducked. They danced back and forth, the farmer punching and jabbing, the politician playing a very successful defense.

The farmer's wife came out and threw a bucket of cold water over her husband.

"Old Jake is full of pepper," the wife told the reporter, "but he doesn't have the stamina he used to. I was afraid he'd hurt himself with all that to-do."

When Jake calmed down, the commissioner wrote a check to cover the damage to the coop. He called his son to pick him up and called his insurance agent to assess the damages and take care of the wrecked car.

By the time the son arrived, 20 minutes later, the farm couple and the commissioner were splitting a six-pack and exchanging stories. They all shook hands and promised to stay in touch. The politician put down his Bud Light and followed his son to the road.

That's when six chickens that had fled the ruined coop ganged up on him in a mass pecking. Since they could only manage awkward hop-flights, they could only reach his mid-thighs. He would have been fairly unscathed, except two cluckers got tangled in his legs and he fell into the dust. Suddenly there were two dozens chickens on him, pecking at every inch of exposed skin. His son and the farmers grabbed chickens and flung them away, but the birds waded back in as the rescuers grabbed for more.

The commissioner ended up in the hospital with a nasty but not life-changing wound in his eye, along with a flock of other cuts and bruises.

Delighted with her story, the young reporter turned it in to the crusty weekend news editor and sat back to await her well-earned praise. She had never put as much effort into a story. She had quotes from the farmers, the politician, the son and the doctors. She had CQ'd every name and verified the farm's address. Every verb had punch; every paragraph was tight and to the point.

There followed 10 minutes of silence. Finally, the editor looked up from the copy. He fixed a baleful eye on the reporter. He had one question.

"What," he asked, "was the name of the dog?"

The point of the story is simple: **Every detail matters.**

When you interview someone, don't just take notes about what's said. How does the person act? Fidgety? Stiff? What about the surroundings? Is the desk messy or tidy? Are there photos all around or weird abstract art?

When someone tells you a story, don't just listen. Press for details. What was the weather? What time was it? Who else was there?

If you can be there when the news happens, or go to the scene afterward, go. Look and listen. Where do the shadows fall? How loud is the ticking of the clock? How much can you see from the supposed eyewitness's window? **What was the name of the dog?**

Looking for human sources

You may think it's hard to come up with story ideas. Trust us: It's often much, much harder to find the right sources. We'll explain more about this in the chapter about interviewing, but let's start with an overview.

What kind do you need?

If you're reporting on a specific event -- for example, the university changing two restaurants in the student center -- you'll want to talk to the person who made the decision. That will be someone working for the university with responsibility for the center. You probably also want to talk to the managers of the two new places, and possibly the managers of the previous spots.

The same is true for all sorts of stories: Who is in charge? Who made the decision? Who's directly involved?

What if the story isn't so specific? A law has been passed discriminating against certain types of people. Some potential sources are directly connected to the law: the legislators who wrote the bill, those who voted for or against it, an official from the agency in charge of enforcing the new law. But what about those affected by it? What about expert opinions about its constitutionality?

It may seem your task is too big. You've got a world of choices, and no obvious place to start. That's not true.

Your choices are limited by practicality. How much time do you have? Who are you working for? (That can affect whether top sources will bother to talk to you.) What are the most important facts you need, and who's most likely to have them?

How can you find them?

Once you know the types of sources you need, you have to figure out exactly who fits the bill.

Previous stories: Look at coverage of the same topic, whether by your organization or other media. See what sources they used. This can include not only your student media but also local news sites.

Source pools: Schools and trade organizations gather experts. Got a story about personal finance? Look up local trade groups representing financial advisers or other relevant professionals.

College students have a diverse pool of experts close to home: professors. To find one who's right for you, start with a department's faculty page. Click on individual profs to see their specific research interests, or ask the department chairman or secretary which professor knows what you need. Or ask your university's public relations team. That's one of the things the PR people are there for: to help journalists find the right sources from within their organization.

Referrals: Good reporters keep lists of every person they've met related to the stories they cover. They don't just reuse the same names. The list also ties them into a much bigger network. The reporter may have met only three nuclear physicists; maybe none of them knows about the next story she's working on. But each of those physicists probably knows dozens, if not hundreds, of others in the same field.

You haven't built up a list of experts, but you have friends, family, co-workers, and professors. Who do they know?

Social media can link you to a massive network. Even students with no experience and few followers can try a post in a Facebook group or other social media asking for help.

Connections: If you can't get a personal introduction, maybe you can take advantage of a broader connection. Journalists look for ties they hope will make sources more likely to cooperate.

As students, you have a pool of potential sources likely to be sympathetic to your needs: your school's alumni. Need a lawyer with knowledge of immigration law? Go to LinkedIn.com and type a few relevant words into the search bar, including the name of your school.

Cast a wide net

A common problem is to fixate on one source. If that interview falls through, the story's sunk.

Almost any fact can be gotten at from different angles. For example, a student wanted to report on the closing of a local entertainment spot. He approached the owner. Twice, the owner agreed to interviews, but then refused to answer questions about why the place had closed or what would happen next.

End of story? It shouldn't be. Potential alternative sources included:

- The building's landlord. If the place was closing because of failure to pay the rent, surely the landlord would know. No matter what the reason, most likely the landlord would have some hint. Property owners are registered with the county. Many counties make those records available online.
- Nearby owners. People in the same business tend to know each other's business. The reporter might end up with rumors instead of facts, but that could spur more reporting and allow for sharper questions the original owner might feel compelled to answer.
- City officials. Politicians and others in government will care about businesses coming and going. Who represents the neighborhood at City Hall? Who's in charge of business permits or liquor licenses?

- Entertainers. Closing an entertainment venue usually means cancelling scheduled gigs. Did the owner say why? This would be second-hand sourcing, but if the owner told several groups the same thing, that's worth reporting.

Sometimes reporters get a single source and stop because they've gotten enough information for the story. Again, deadline pressure can make this an attractive option.

But any good news story uses just a small percentage of the reporting behind it. Writing a news story should be an exercise in selectivity. You pick the best quotes, the most important facts, the most interesting and relevant anecdotes. If you only have enough to fill a story, you've probably lowered your standards too far.

In this short video, reporter Asha Glover encourages you to seek out as many sources as you can.



Video **3.1.2**: Asha Glover: Talk to everyone | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be](opens in new window) | Transcript(opens in new window)

Not too close

We suggested asking friends or family to suggest sources. That's fine. Using friends or family as sources? That's not so fine.

Different media organizations have different standards about whether to allow closely associated sources or what kind of notice to readers is required when they're used. Major news organizations usually don't allow reporters to use family members or close friends as sources. Many go much further, even forbidding reporters to interview the relatives of any staff member.

Ethical sourcing

You know that truth is the bedrock of professional communications, so you won't completely make up sources. But other temptations await.

Right to reply

We've mentioned balance -- representing all sides of an issue. The right to reply is related.

Say your team just won its homecoming football game. The quarterback, star of the game, talks to the media afterward. He says he called his own plays, ignoring the head coach's choices "because they were stupid."

If you write the story without giving the coach a chance to respond, you've violated two principles. First, you haven't verified the information. Maybe the coach says the QB's blowing smoke. Second, you've let someone attack the coach without an opportunity for rebuttal.

Whether the criticism is leveled at someone in power or someone at the bottom, whether it's aimed at people or organizations, you should give the other side a right to reply. That may mean going back to sources interviewed earlier. It could mean getting blamed for the criticism when you repeat it to them. That's part of the job.

The target of the criticism may choose not to respond. You must tell the audience, with a sentence such as "X declined to comment on the allegation." You need to show you tried to be fair.

Note

Ignoring the right to reply isn't just unethical; it can be very expensive.

One example came up just as we were finishing this textbook. A news outlet in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, published a profile about a young man who had earned honors for a project focusing on domestic abuse. It was one of those "local boy makes good" stories newsrooms love. Good news makes everybody happy.

But this story didn't make one person very happy: The young man's estranged father. In the story, the reporter said the father had abused his son. In at least one place, that accusation wasn't even attributed to the son, so it appeared that the reporter was declaring it a fact.

The reporter never tried to reach the father, apparently relying only on the word of the young man and his mother. The reporter never sought out court records that might verify the claims.

In fact, in a court case, the father had been cleared of allegations of abuse.

The father sued the news outlet. He won. And he was awarded $25 million.

Some commentators saw this as bad news for journalists. With the industry's finances so poor, one big judgment could wipe out a newsroom. And, they said, with all the pressure to produce lots of stories, reporters don't have time to ... um ... report, so of course the reporter didn't ask the right questions.

We see it as bad news for *bad* journalists. No matter how pressed for time you are, some ethical considerations cannot be ignored.

Diversity

Key concept: **Ethical reporting is representative of the community it covers.**

Avoid the human tendency to keep to your own group. We all have our groups. Even if your coterie of friends includes people of many races and gender identities, it’s probably limited in other ways: They’re all around your age, or they all come from the same community or they all have the same major.

For class assignments, you might only interview a handful of people about a limited number of topics. Even then, examine your choices. Did you take the easy way out, talking only to people like you, only people you feel comfortable around?

The SPJ website offers several tips for diversifying your sources. Many of them boil down to this: Break out of your shell. Read sites you normally wouldn't. Look for people on social media who aren't part of your circle. Find sources your media outlet hasn't used before.

Finding diverse sources isn't just about stories that deal with minority issues. A column in the Phil Delta Kappan argued for considering diversity all the time. It quotes an Atlantic writer:

> "I don’t think you can make every story perfectly balanced … but I think you can just try to make sure that other voices … are being heard in a way that ensures the story is really being told to the fullest.”

Phantoms

Reporting is hard. Sometimes you just know something is true, but proving it seems like too much of an effort.

> BAD: Many students think the new menu options taste terrible.
> BAD: The audience loved the show.
> BAD: The average student doesn’t know where the journalism school is.
> BAD: Most professors would agree that laziness is the biggest cause of low grades.

Even if one of these statements is true, how can you prove it? Did you interview everyone in the audience?

Don’t pretend to have broader sourcing than you do. Be honest with your audience. In this case, truthfulness is even more important for those in public relations. If you write that “most consumers prefer Snuggies diapers over other leading brands,” you’ve made a product claim. If you can’t back it up with solid evidence, you’ve broken the law.

Looking for document sources

The internet has made it much easier to get your hands on relevant information. Among other things, this allows you more ways to verify what your human sources tell you.

What do you need?

Background: Grab any material your human sources or the organizations you're covering offer you: pamphlets, handouts, news releases. Check their websites. Use a search engine to find other relevant sites or previous stories.

Data: In interviews, sources may mention a "huge" increase or a "significant" decline. Ask for the numbers -- the full data set, not just two numbers.

One student wrote a powerful story about a woman who'd been raped. Her story initially began by referring to an epidemic of campus rapes around the country and specifically at our school. That was based on comments some sources had made.

Her instructor searched the university website and found its annual report on campus crimes. The numbers, based on all reports, not just those leading to convictions, showed no significant change for years. And the percentage of reports per 1,000 students was far below the estimated national average.

The woman's story was powerful on its own. The original, apparently false reference to a local epidemic, intended to make the story more significant by making it part of a trend, would have weakened it.

Originals: As we've said before, secondhand sourcing isn't good. Even if you need humans to interpret the original documents for you, having the papers, PDFs or web pages is best.

Not only will the originals make your writing more authoritative, it will also allow you to increase your credibility with the audience. Readers today expect to be able to click through to the original research paper or arrest report.

Images: Thanks to digital imaging and the internet, you don't have to be somewhere to see what's happening. Photos and videos put you on the scene. That allows you to write with more authority and be more descriptive. (Just be very careful; fakes are everywhere these days.)

How can you find them?

Ask: Many organizations and individuals love to share documents, especially those designed to make them look good. Search relevant websites: Companies, colleges, and major organizations have more information on their sites than anyone working for them realizes.

Google: Even after using the search bar on an individual website, it's worth seeing if Google could find more there. (Type your search terms into Google followed by site:myschool.edu (that is, your school's internet domain name) to search only the university's site.) Search the whole web -- and go past the first page of results. If you're writing about an issue on campus, search more broadly to see if it's come up elsewhere. Use the specialized video or image searches as well.

Check archives: In addition to the websites of online publications, many schools have digitized historical student media. These are fantastic sources.

Use online tools: College libraries often offer access to current and historical newspapers through outside databases. And, of course, they have rich collections of academic journals. That's a resource many professional writers envy; those databases and journals cost a lot.

Authenticating sources

Poor sources or too few will sink any news writing. The temptation for student journalists is to rely only on those sources easiest to reach. Good reporters do more.

Identity

You see a social media post from a celebrity. Can you flatly attribute it to that person? (No, not even if it's from a "verified" social media account. Who knows who actually typed that post?)

Verification has always been important. Technology has made it both easier and harder than ever.

On the one hand, people and organizations create massive paper (er, pixel) trails online. We can look up your name and probably quickly find facts including where you went to high school and whether you've got a criminal record.

On the other, we could create a fake history for you by building lookalike websites, spoofing your number on Caller ID and Photoshopping you into images.

Fake websites are one key to the "fake news" trend. Some warning signs:

- Does it look legitimate? Most "real" sites have a clean design. Suspect those with clashing colors, odd fonts, very poor grammar, lots of misspellings or broken images.
- Is the URL what you expect? Is it nytimes.com or nytimescom.co?
- What's on the rest of the site? Does it have only a handful of pages? Is there a "contact us" link that includes a phone number or address, or just an email form?
- Does it admit it's a joke? Look for a page on the site saying it's a satire.
- Does the headline match the story? Even if the headline's written dramatically to attract clicks, the story may stick to the facts, or fail to back up the headline.
- Does the story include sources? Most legitimate stories and news releases have some attribution.
- Does the story have links? It's easier to make up one phony story than a whole network of pages.
- Do the links support the story? A common trick is to make wild statements citing online sources that do discuss the topic, but don't say anything like what the fake story does.
- Does the story have an author? Most legitimate stories will credit a writer or a news service; many news releases will include a media contact.
- Does the author have a history? Most legitimate pros will be on LinkedIn or have some other online presence.
- Does the story ring true? Don't leave your common sense behind. If a story sounds too good to be true, it usually is. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.
- Are the photos authentic? You can't always tell a Photoshopped image by looking at it. Investigate further by pasting the image's location (URL) into a site such as Tineye.com or Google's image search. Look for almost-duplicates that could indicate tampering; check the posting dates to see if an old photo's being passed off as new; check the captions on the first-posted versions to make sure the one you saw was described accurately.

Authority

Authority doesn't have to mean having a title. If you're writing about reaction to a change in menu options at dining halls, students who eat at them can authoritatively speak about their experiences. However, no individual student would be an authority on how all students feel, or on whether the changes affected sales.

Does the source have first-hand knowledge? If you're reporting on an event, being there yourself is best. Interviewing eyewitnesses is next-best. Everything else – whether it's from official reports or not – comes third.

Does the source have expert knowledge or experience? If a civilian and a soldier both witness a shooting, the soldier's likely to have a better understanding of what happened than someone who is not familiar with guns.

Bias

Who's your favorite musician? If I interview you about that person, you're going to say good things, right? You have a bias in favor of your favorites, which will color your responses.

Biases are inevitable. But journalists try to rely on people with less bias in regard to the topic. That's not always possible. So journalists at least ensure they understand their sources' biases and put them in context. To do so, you must be able to answer several questions.

Can you use the source's name? In journalism, an "anonymous source" is one who is known to the reporter, but not identified to the audience. The practice has a long history, but it is always dangerous. The best practice is to avoid anonymous sources. If you think you have to, ask these further questions:

- Is the story important enough? Don't bother granting anonymity to someone telling you they liked the ice cream at a street fair.
- Is the source necessary? Could you get the same kind of content from someone else, or in another way?

- Does the source have a good reason to get anonymity? Don’t grant it lightly. Would they risk losing their job or even their life if their identity was revealed? Those are good reasons. They’re just modest? No. (If you do use an anonymous source, your story should briefly explain why they’re anonymous, and identify them as much as possible: “a neighborhood resident who asked for anonymity because of ongoing threats.”)
- Is it fair? The worst practice is letting anonymous sources offer unverifiable criticism.

Do you know the source’s likely biases? If you ask a Republican and a Democrat to tell you who won a presidential debate, their party affiliations will affect what they say. You can’t avoid sources with biases completely. However, you should alert your readers to those potential biases in the story, and try to provide balance.

Do you know your own biases? If what a source says confirms your own opinions, you’re likely to trust it more.

Can you verify facts through other sources? The more people, publications or web sources agree on a fact, the likelier it is to be true. However, be sure you’re not just seeing duplicates of the same ultimate source. Online, for example, a mistake made on Wikipedia can be repeated over and over by other websites. Try to track stories to their original sources.

Do the source’s actions back up his or her statements? If your mom says she loves you, but your siblings get all her time and money, you at least need an explanation.

Does the source have a history of accuracy and reliability? Liars gonna lie.

Context

You can collect all essential facts for a news story and still not have enough to write a useful article if you don't dig deep enough to help the readers understand not just what happened, but what it means and how it fits into ongoing narratives.

Lack of context is especially a problem for student media. The collective memory of most of the audience goes back no more than four years -- as it relates to stories about the school, anyway. It's difficult to understand the significance of many events unless you know what came before.

That's not to say context is unimportant in professional media. Stories that fail to provide background make readers unsettled. It's a basic human desire to want to fit what we know into a coherent narrative. Faced instead with apparently disjointed incidents, we retreat from the news.

A student reported on plans to build a new home for a unit within the university that had outgrown its 40-something-year-old building. His first draft included the expected price, the square footage, the improvements. It had quotes from students and faculty about the shortfalls of the existing building. He had thoroughly covered the essential facts. It was an acceptable story.

But it wasn't a good story -- not yet. We pointed out several ways he could improve it by providing context, from the smallest individual facts to the biggest overall narratives.

- The new building was expected to cost $65 million. How did that compare with the cost of other recent construction? How did that compare with the price of the existing building when it went up in the 1970s?
- The new building would have 150,000 square feet. How did that compare with the old building that was too small? That figure sounds big, but readers probably don't have a mental image of how big. What building on campus is closest in size?
- The new construction wouldn't start for at least a couple years. What other construction projects were in the works before then? The university had put up several buildings recently. When was the last time there *wasn't* a building going up on campus?

In several other stories, we prodded students to look beyond the boundaries of the campus.

- Students in an aeronautics program were falling behind because there weren't enough flying instructors. What seemed like a story about bad program management turned out to be about a national pilot shortage that had been going on for several years.
- The campus was gaining several full-service Starbucks outlets. That remained the key point, but the story also explained Starbucks was targeting colleges because it had run out of other locations to put up shops. The new food service provider had been partnering with Starbucks for several years and got close to 20% of its revenue from coffee sales.
- The school had been one of a few to sell beer inside the football stadium when it started about 25 years earlier; it was now being visited by administrators from other colleges considering similar plans. Research in student media archives showed that the '90s

decision to sell beer was the second time that had happened. The university had ended decades of dry games about 40 years ago, only to turn off the beer taps just a few years later when the drinking age was raised to 21.

As you work on stories, ask yourself key questions.

- Has this happened before?
- How long has this been happening?
- Is this happening anywhere else?
- Why is this happening?
- How big or small is that number compared to similar things?

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3.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Nearly correct isn’t correct.
- Every fact in your writing is important, and absolute accuracy is the goal. Don’t guess.
- If your mother says she loves you, check it out.
- It’s not enough to say “But that’s what the source told me.” If a fact is checkable, check it. Call phone numbers to make sure they’re correct. Copy URLs from your browser before pasting them into a link, then click on those links to make sure they’re working properly.
- You can’t get good information from people who don’t know any.
- Seek authoritative sources, but not just authority figures. Those who are affected by a policy are as important as those who created it or enforce it.
- What was the name of the dog?
- The best news stories are rich in detail. The best way to get that detail is to go to the scene. Look around. Pay attention to what you see, hear, taste, touch. If you can’t do that, the next best thing is to pump your sources for specifics.
- Searching for good sources takes effort. Consult previous stories. Ask people you know for referrals. Use social media. You’ll have more luck if you look for people you already have a connection to, such as someone who also went to your school.
- Don’t take the easy way out. Avoid classmates, friends or employers.
- Whenever possible, track information down to its source.
- Look for original documents -- studies, memos, court records. Don’t write about a research study if you’ve only read the news release.
- Don’t get fooled by phony websites.
- You should be able to explain and demonstrate at least some of these ways of authenticating a web page.
    - Does site look legit?
    - Is URL what you expect?
    - What's on rest of site?
    - Does it admit it's a joke?
    - Does headline match story?
    - Does story name author?
    - Does author have history?
    - Does story include sources?
    - Does story have links?
    - Do links support story?
    - Are photos authentic?
    - Does story sound true?
- Don’t allow biased sources to bias your reporting.
- You should be able to explain and demonstrate these checks on proper sourcing.
    - Can you name sources?
    - Is source reliable?
    - Do you know sources' biases?
    - Can you verify information?
    - Do you know your own biases?
    - Are sources representative?
- Stories that fail to provide background make readers unsettled.
- Nothing is big or small on its own, only in comparison to other things. Show your reader.
- Look beyond your own memory and beyond the campus boundaries. Has this happened before? Is this happening elsewhere?

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3.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 3.3.1

Examine some longform nonfiction stories. Make a note of every source, human or documentary, that's attributed.

For each source, try to figure out:

- What did this source contribute to the story?
- What made this source relevant and knowledgeable?
- What did it probably take for the reporter to find and use this source?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: How to Find Stories

4.1: How to Find Stories

4.2: Chapter Review

4.3: Optional Exercises

Why finding stories matters

All the reporting and writing skills in the world will get you nowhere if you don't have a story to cover. In some cases, you may get lucky: An editor will assign you something to cover. You still have to find the newsworthy elements within, but you've got a big start. But most professional communicators can't just sit around waiting for a boss to drop a topic into their laps.

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4.1: How to Find Stories

How to find stories

Some professional communicators are assigned "beats," or specific topics to cover. This narrows the range of available story ideas, but has the advantage of allowing the reporters to identify key sources of potential ideas more easily. Others may be "general assignment," available to propose or be assigned to any type of story on almost any topic. All of them need the same basic skills.

Methods

A good reporter doesn't rely on just one way to find stories.

Passive

One step removed from just waiting for an editor are a set of ways stories may be found without much effort. People who have a story to tell may already be looking for a way to get their message to the public.



News releases: Before the internet, companies and organizations that wanted to spread a message needed a mediator: the news media. News releases (also called press releases) targeted editors and reporters, trying to convince them to share the news with their audiences.

Although the internet makes it possible for anyone to bypass the news media, news releases are still used. Many companies and organizations have a section of their websites devoted to hosting these. In addition, or instead of that, they may use a service such as PRNewswire or Business Wire, which handle the broad distribution of releases and also host them online. Both of those sites have search bars you can use to look for issuing organizations or likely topics.

If you expect to cover a beat in the long term, you can ask about getting on email lists to have releases sent to you as well.



Announcements and email: News releases are usually used for information intended for the general public. When companies or organizations want to reach just their customers, clients or members, they send targeted announcements -- usually, these days, through email.

If you're a part of the intended audience, you'll get those announcements. For example, university students will get emails, many of which contain important or interesting news.

But remember: News is what your audience doesn't already know. They're getting the same emails you are, so merely rehashing what was in the announcement isn't helping.

Think about what you can add:

- What wasn't said? What details seem to be missing? Is there vague language that might be hiding bad news?
- What's the context? Can you dig up history related to the announcement? Find out if the same kind of thing is happening elsewhere?
- What's the reaction? Talk to the people most affected by the news. Yes, this may mean delaying your story -- but a story that's up quickly but has nothing readers don't already know is actually worse than posting nothing at all. You're training the readers to avoid your site if they want to learn things.
- What does it mean? Official announcements are often couched in bland language or obscured by legalisms. One of a reporter's roles is to translate bureaucratese into English.



Tips: The same internet that allows companies and organizations to bypass the news media allows every individual the same power. Fortunately for journalists, not everyone who has something to say takes advantage of that. Some people still want to tell a reporter and let them spread the story. Or someone may not even realize what they know is worth telling.

If you're covering a beat and people get used to seeing your name associated with certain kinds of stories, you may get purely voluntary tipsters. Even if you're that lucky, it's best to work on ways to encourage tips:

- Add notes to published stories asking for more information. For example, one published story about a professor accused of harassing a student might include a note offering students who know of similar cases a way to report those to you.
- Get your editor to include a box on the news site -- or even on every page -- inviting readers to "tell us your news." Never overestimate how well the public understands how news media work. They may think the newsroom magically knows everything going on. A simple reminder may stir up some tips.
- Always ask anyone you interview if they have any other story ideas. And let them know that if they think of any in the future, they should let you know.

Look online

The internet may have reduced the news media's power as the only way to reach the public, but it's also provided ways to find stories faster and more efficiently.



Google: Alas, Google searches aren't as helpful as they once were. You'll have to wade through ads and AI and loads of sites that steal news and repackage it. But using a search engine -- whether Google or something else -- is still the best way to broadly look for what's out there.

Learn to target your searches by including just the right keywords. Put quotation marks around the words or phrases you want to ensure show up in the results.

Use Google Alerts to set up searches that send their results to you automatically. Simply putting your university's name in quotation marks may turn up ideas -- perhaps a former professor who's doing something newsworthy elsewhere, for example. (You still may need to scroll through a lot of sports stories to find those, but it's worth it.) If you're interested in a particular topic -- say, legal marijuana -- you can try those words along with "college" or "university" to find stories about what's going on at other campuses.



Other media: The earliest newspapers borrowed stories from other papers. Of course, by the time a paper from far away made it to the newsroom in the 1700s, the stories might be weeks or months old, but they were still news to local readers.

It's much faster to look at other media today. You may run into paywalls, but a lot of news is still free. Keep an eye on news sites of all types in your area. If your reporting is aimed at a college student audience, track down news sites at other colleges in your state, your school's athletic conference or so on.

What are they reporting? Are there general topics you could adapt? A story about how students at one university decorate their dorm rooms might inspire you to try the same thing. Do you see echoes of stories you've already seen at your school? Building on what's already been reported by showing that it wasn't just a My College issue could be interesting. Sometimes, it may be that an event at another school is interesting enough on its own that your readers would care.



Archives: Many news organizations have taken advantage of the "long tail" -- the ability of even very old stories to attract a bit of web traffic -- by putting their archives online. For commercial news sites, those archives are usually behind a paywall. But college papers often make their archives free, usually through the campus library site, and they may go back more than a century thanks to scanning technology.

Archives can provide many kinds of story ideas. Look back five, 10, 25, 50 years to find events that can be turned into anniversary memories. When an old building is renovated or torn down, recap its history. Find out how a policy has changed: When was smoking forbidden? Are there stories about students evading the new rule? Just browsing through old issues may turn up interesting facts. Once, we discovered that a couple of professors had introduced the school's first LGBTQ+ course, years ago -- and went through the same battles that were happening today.



Social media: Where does your audience talk online? Instagram? TikTok? Reddit? You don't have participate if you don't want to, but you can observe. What's the buzz?

You must be careful. You don't know who's hiding behind a screen name or whether they're telling the truth. Real reporting will be required. But let's say you notice someone on a subreddit devoted to your university who's asking how to find friends. If you DM them and arrange to meet in person to verify who they are, that could turn into a story of general interest about how lonely students build relationships.

Get out

There's a whole world out there, abounding with stories. Even if you're shy about talking to people, you can find some of them by getting out of your room.



Walls and doors: What's posted there? Is someone trying to start a band and needs a drummer? Someone offering a phone line where you can anonymously apologize for anything? Don't rush past the bulletin boards. Stop and look. Go into buildings you don't normally visit.



Clothes and accessories: Look at what people in your audience are wearing. (Please don't stare too long!) Are you seeing the same fashion label? Maybe that's a trend story. Several T-shirts advertising a band you've never heard of? Maybe it's a hidden favorite. Is it the worst of winter and a few guys are still walking around in shorts? That's a story.



Keep your eyes open: Just ... keep looking and listening, questioning and thinking. Maybe you notice several local stories going out of business. Why all at once? Or you walk into a classroom a few weeks into the semester and sit down without thinking about it, only to realize everyone's staring at you because that's not "your" seat. That's how one of our students got the idea for a story about "unassigned assigned seats" -- the way students quickly stake their territory.

It's even OK to eavesdrop at the local coffee shop or to conversations in between classes. (Just don't be too obvious; don't pull out your phone and start recording!) An innocent curiosity is a good thing for a reporter.

Talk to people

Notice that the title of this section isn't "talking to sources." You know that it's common to refer to the people you interview for stories as sources. Journalists use the same term to refer to people they get ideas from. But students sometimes get stuck on the idea that they can only talk to sources when they've already got a story to use those sources in.

Not only does that mean passing up a lot of opportunities to hear about great ideas, it can make your interviews harder -- harder to get and harder to get much out of. If the first and only time you talk to someone is when you have a story to pursue, you've made it into a lopsided transaction: You need something from them; they probably don't need anything from you. You're like a panhandler begging on the street.

Developing relationships before you need something makes it easier to ask. So, if you want to find ideas, use your feet: Go ask!



Officials: People in authority are, we usually presume, aware of what's going on underneath them. They're often the first people you think of as potential sources. So you've got a lot of reasons to seek them out for story ideas.

Don't just march in, though. Prepare first. Show them you cared enough to research: What are they in charge of? Which departments report to them? How long have they been in charge? What did they do before? What stories have they featured in recently?

When you set up an appointment, let them know why. They'll be wondering if you have something specific in mind, so they can prepare. Be honest. Tell them you're looking for story ideas. If you're covering a beat they're involved in, tell them that; let them know you want to get familiar with the territory.

You can simply ask if they have story ideas, but you're the journalist. They may not realize that something is a good potential story. So ask questions such as:

- What's new?
- What don't students understand about your job or your department?
- What's your biggest concern?
- Who else should I talk to?

Before you march in to the president's office and ask for a chat, though, be realistic: The more responsibility someone has, the busier they are. Especially if you don't have a beat and you're just trolling for ideas, the biggest bosses probably won't have time for you.

Same principle works for government: The governor wouldn't sit down with some student who's just curious, but a local councilperson might.



Staff: You know who might have some time? The staff. The secretaries, the clerks, the second assistant vice presidents who no one ever talks to.

If you've set up an interview with, say, a dean, arrive a bit early and chat with the executive assistant. Maybe bring them a doughnut. And just ... be nice. Don't ignore them. Say hi. They know at least as much as their boss does about what's going on.



Thought leaders: Professors aren't just lecturers. They're experts in something or other. What are they researching? What perspectives do they have about outside events?

They're also experts in teaching (we hope). And how teaching is done is a topic of interest to an audience of college students. What do they wish students knew? What changes have they made to the way they teach?

Lots of other people around you have expertise you can tap into for story ideas. When you're talking to your own adviser, can you slip in a few questions about what the most common issues are that they hear about from students?

Are you interested in mental health? Some calls might land you a local therapist who's willing to talk about common issues.

Lots of people -- even professors! -- have hobbies, outside interests. Say you learn that a prof does some music producing on the side. The industry's been massively changed by social media. What ideas could the prof offer about how that affects students who want to be musicians, or already have a garage band?



Group leaders: The president of the campus D&D club isn't exactly an official, but they do have an inside view of a world invisible to most students. Leaders of fraternities and sororities can tell you about planned events, but can also tell you what they're hearing from their members about a lot of things -- academic, emotional, social.

Think about anyone whose position has them meeting lots of other people. Ministers? Someone in student government?

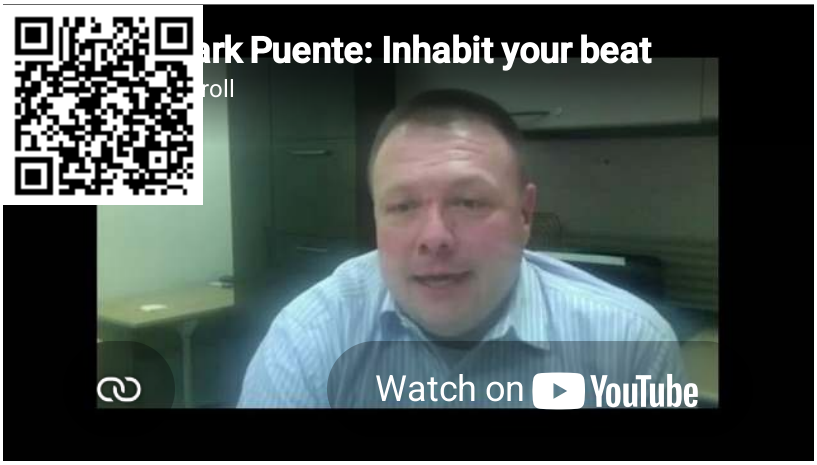


Invisible people: A standard journalism cliche is the reporter from out of town who flies in to cover big news and interviews the cab driver that takes them to the hotel. It's considered lazy; you just talked to the first person you met. But there's some actual logic: People talk to cab drivers just to do something, or they talk to each other as if the driver wasn't there. Cab drivers hear things.

So do bartenders. Baristas. The guy who has a hot dog cart in front of the county courthouse.

Don't march up to a random barista and demand story ideas. But is there one you regularly see? Smile at them (you should be doing that anyway, of course). Chat a bit. Let them know you're looking for stories.

In this video, a veteran reporter talks about how he developed story ideas by making connections with people you wouldn't think were top sources.



Video **4.1.1**: Mark Puente: Inhabit your beat | Watch on YouTube [www.youtube.com] | Transcript(opens in new window)

People: Just anyone. Everybody is a potential source of story ideas. But what do you do, just stop anyone on the street?

No. Not just anyone, and not just on the street. Think more creatively.

If you're covering a beat, we'd tell you to figure out where the people related to your beat hang out. There's a small food counter in the architecture building; do those students use it and sit around there at lunch? If you're looking for stories about the architecture school, you could do worse than stopping by some of those tables.

OK: That's scary. Talk to strangers? When you're just looking for ideas? It works for some intrepid reporters. But you're young-ish, and new-ish, and maybe shy-ish. Don't despair.

You talk to people every day. Friends, roommates, classmates. Think about the categories they might fall into that could give you insight into worlds most of your readers are unfamiliar with. Do they use a wheelchair? What do they know about getting around campus or around the city that most students wouldn't realize? Are they gamers, or jocks, or cyclists? Do they have a major that's rare, or one known for being difficult? Are they in some way a minority -- by race, ethnicity, religious, gender, sexuality?

One student used to room with an architecture major who talked about how difficult that was and how many students dropped the major, or even dropped out entirely, after a year or so. Our student verified that with data, talked to more students and had a great story. He also learned that architecture students had to buy their own chairs, and at the start of every school year they'd have to make a pilgrimage from their dorm to the classroom building, rolling their chair along. Another great story!

Don't be so blunt as to say, "Give me a story idea." But do ask: What bugs you? What don't you understand about this place? What have you heard within your group?

You: Yes, you. Story ideas are floating around inside your brain right now. Asking yourself the right questions can bring them out: What don't you understand about this place? What are you curious about? What surprised you? Have you noticed how often students and professors ignore the signs that say you're not supposed to bring food or drink into classrooms? Were you surprised to learn that some of the regional campuses have their own sports teams?

Psychology

When you rely on people, powerful or not, for story ideas -- or quotes, or anything else you need as a reporter -- you must use what we call people skills.

Respect: No matter whether you're talking to a U.S. senator or the kid behind the counter at Chipotle, be respectful. Look them in the eye. Don't smirk or roll your eyes. Most of all: LISTEN! And prove you're listening by responding to what they say.

Common courtesy is so uncommon that it will earn you brownie points you can cash in when you need help.

Sincerity: As the saying goes, if you can fake that, you've got it made. But seriously: Be honest.

Openness: Most people love to help others. If you approach them respectfully and sincerely, they will want to answer your questions. Give them a chance to do that.

Favors: A good journalist will report the truth, even if it's about a person or institution they will have to keep covering. You shouldn't hold back an important story or look the other way because reporting it might make future conversations awkward.

But it is possible to do a favor for someone on your beat without abandoning your principles. You can bend your definition of newsworthiness to get in a story that's not spectacular, but will please a source. Reporters call these types of stories "beat sweeteners."

That's not much help unless you're covering a beat, but it's something to keep in mind.

ABC: Always Be Calling. This motto came from a young reporter who was covering several cities as his best. But it applies whether you have a beat or not. If you need story ideas, make it part of your weekly routine to reach out to one or two new people and one or two established contacts regularly -- once a week, if you're in school; daily, if it's your job.

For the established contacts, the connection can be short and simple -- say hi, ask what's new. But regular connections will pay off because they put you at the top of the other person's mind when news happens.

And forcing yourself to find new people regularly -- put it on your schedule! -- ensures that your network keeps expanding.

Covering a beat

As we said at the top of this chapter, advice about finding stories applies whether you're open to any kind of news or focusing on a particular topic -- a beat. In our tips, we pointed out specific things that are most useful to beat reporters. It may feel intimidating to be given responsibility for all stories on a given topic, though, so let's focus just on what that means and how you should approach it.

Limits and flexibility

The first question you should ask your editor or instructor when you're assigned a beat such as fashion or the College of Arts & Science is: What are you looking for?

The titles of beats are usually that vague, but the intentions of your superior may not be. Does fashion mean covering what students are wearing? Does it mean covering fashion trends in general? Or what's going on in the fashion school? All of those?

If you've been assigned a beat, that means other students in your class or working for your media outlet also have beats. Inevitably, some stories will fall into gray areas; they might fit under more than one beat. Are there any hard limits you should watch out for? If your reporting on the College of Arts & Sciences leads you to a story that would require talking to the university's provost or president, should you do that yourself or pass it on to the reporter who covers the administration?

Have a conversation about this before you start. And as you work the beat, keep in mind some of our key advice: **Never let your editor be surprised.** If you find yourself moving toward something that might be a conflict with another beat, let your editor know before it becomes a whole thing.

Get to know the beat

Veteran beat reporters know that two periods are the hardest: when you first start a beat and when you've been doing it for years. As a student reporter, you don't have to worry about the latter. But you probably won't cover the same beat for more than a year at most, so you'll be very familiar with the former.

The problem is that there's so much you don't know. The solution is to learn. Use archives to look up past coverage. Talk to previous reporters. Use search engines to find stories related to your topic, wherever they are.

As you're doing this, keep in mind some of the tips about what stories to look for: Do you read about projects started in the past that haven't been updated? Are there any anniversaries coming up -- five years since the dean of the journalism school was appointed? What kinds of stories have popped up every school year at about the same time?

Get to know the people

We won't repeat everything we wrote above, but reread the whole section about talking to people. Most importantly, your first act of reporting on your beat should be to identify, reach out to and have conversations with the most prominent sources -- the ones who show up most in previous stories.

These are not interviews for specific stories, although a conversation may turn into one if something comes up. No, you're having conversations so you establish relationships and get ideas for future stories.

We worked with a reporter named Michelle Jarboe who covered real estate news. She consistently produced interesting stories about people and projects, and got them into print and online before her competition. One of her methods: She made it a point to meet with at least one *new* potential source every week. Building a squad of sources makes beat reporting easier in several ways:

- Sources who have met you are most likely to remember that when they have news to get out.
- If they feel a personal connection, they are also likely to share tips about news they've heard about other people or organizations.
- When you have a story to pursue, they're more likely to answer your call if they already know you.
- When you're having trouble reaching a needed source, someone in your squad may be willing to act as a go-between.

If you're going to be on a beat for only a semester, you don't have much time to build up a really big squad. Don't let that stop you from trying. Devote a lot of time in the first couple weeks to just making contacts and having conversations. It may feel as if you're not getting anywhere because you're not churning out stories. It will pay off, though.

Think creatively

We told you to look for the kinds of stories on your beat that get covered year after year. That's a good start. But don't just rewrite the same old version with new quotes.

Suppose you're covering the fashion school. Every year a student club puts on a design show to raise money for a charity. Every year the same story is written, with quotes that sound very much the same: the theme, the purpose, a reaction or two from the audience. An acceptable story.

Take that as a challenge. How can you cover this event in a new way? Could you use it to explore the gap between what shows up at fashion shows and what people wear every day? Or look at the design process of one participant from start to finish? (We write a lot more about event coverage in another chapter.)

When we had a beat including coverage of a town called Chesaning in mid-Michigan, it fell onto us to cover the annual Chesaning Showboat festival. Each day for about a week, an old barge fitted with a false front to look like a steamboat would float up to a pier. The show would include some C-list celebrity along with a mix of regional pros and local amateurs. Every year, the beat reporter would tell readers who won the talent contest and how many people attended, including some quotes from the organizers and audience members. They'd write a profile of the main celebrity. Basic stuff.

We wanted to do something different. We got permission to ride along on the barge and stay backstage. Our story showed readers what happened behind the glistening white wall of the "showboat." We wrote about the scrambling of stagehands and performers, and how hard they worked. We also wrote about the poor conditions -- exposed wires, rotting wood. This version of the showboat had been around longer than most, and it showed. This was not a hard-hitting story; it was just the truth. And the organizers knew it, and wanted to replace the setup; they just didn't have enough money.

Still, this did not please the festival's organizers. In fact, when we showed up on the last day to get the final attendance numbers and the names of the talent contest winners, they threw us out. Fortunately for us, we had a different beat by the time the festival rolled around the next year. And fortunately for Chesaning, they were able to replace that aging structure. Who knows? Maybe our story gave that project the push it needed. That's what can happen if you go beyond the same old story.

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4.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- You should be able to provide examples of each of these categories describing ways to come up with story ideas:
  - Passive (news releases, announcements, tips)
  - Online (Google, other media, archives, social media)
  - Getting out (walls and doors, clothes and accessories, keep your eyes open)
  - Talking to people (officials, staff, thought leaders, group leaders, invisible people, regular people, yourself)
- You should be able to describe how these psychological principles would apply in practice:
  - Respect
  - Sincerity
  - Openness
  - Favors
  - ABC
- You should be able to explain why these things are important when covering a beat:
  - Understanding the limits and flexibility of the beat
  - Learning about past coverage
  - Meeting important sources
  - Being creative

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4.3: Optional Exercises

? Exercise 4.3.1

Explore an archive of news coverage to come up with story ideas.

Find an archive: Perhaps your school maintains an online archive of student media. At Kent State, the library has made searchable PDFs of almost every student newpaper issue going back to the first in the mid-1920s.

If not, you may at least be able to search a student media website, if it's been around awhile and hasn't purged older stories.

If all else fails, look around for an archive you can get access to. Maybe through your school library you can access the archives of a local paper.

Search: Anniversary stories -- 10 years, 25 years, etc. -- provide an excuse to revisit old news. Pull up publications from those periods. Look at everything. You may find simple anniversary angles: 25 years ago the student center was built. Or you may notice stories that suggest general ideas: Students 75 years ago were stuffing themselves into phone booths, a prank that went viral across the country long before the internet. What's the history of dumb student pranks?

Hopefully, the archives are searchable so you can also use key words. What topics interest you? A student was concerned about recent incidents in which controversial guest speakers were either banned from college campuses or subject to loud protests. A search for terms such as "controversial speaker" turned up lots of stories going back to the early 1960s, involving speakers on all sides of the political spectrum, and even a state law in the early '60s that barred certain types of speakers -- including Communists and just people who had visited Cuba -- from appearing on campuses.

Pitch: Come up with at least three story ideas based on your research. Remember that your pitches need to be newsworthy for today's audience.

? Exercise 4.3.2

Do a news scavenger hunt.

In small groups, fan out across campus. Each group should target a specific building or, if you're in a high school, a section of the building. Within a time limit, try to come up with as many story ideas as you can. These don't need to be fully developed pitches, but you should be able to defend them as newsworthy.

Signs and posters: Check the bulletin boards and walls. What's up there? Don't just look at official postings. If you're in a high school, are students allowed to decorate their lockers? Do teachers decorate their classroom doors or walls?

Observation: Look around at what's happening in your location. What's unusual? Why is that one classroom so loud? Are students sitting on the hallway floors because there are no other places to congregate?

Pop-ins: Don't interrupt classes or meetings, but look for teachers or administrators who don't look busy. Tell them what you're doing. Ask simple questions: What's new? What are you most excited about for this semester?

Students: Stop random students. Be polite. Again, ask simple questions.

Be creative; try to make your ideas as interesting as possible. For example, if you see a poster on a bulletin board saying there are tryouts for a play, an obvious story is a preview of the play. But what else? Perhaps a story explaining the process of casting a play.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Interviewing Essentials

5.1: Interviewing Essentials

5.2: Chapter Review

5.3: Optional Exercises

Why Interviewing Skills Matter

Even if your career doesn't involve writing news stories or news releases, it likely will require you to get along with people and get information from them. That's all interviewing comes down to.

If you are lucky enough to become a professional communicator, you'll need to get a lot of information from a lot of people. Knowing how to do so most efficiently -- to get what you need and get it the first time -- will give you more time to do everything else.

As a journalist or public relations professional, you'll need specific qualities in the quotes you obtain. You'll learn that most people do not answer questions as directly or speak in sentences as crisp and clear as you need. Good interviewing is more than a casual conversation.

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5.1: Interviewing Essentials

The agony of being rejected

Prepare to be frustrated. People will ignore your messages, decline to talk to you because you're "only" writing for a class, cancel appointments or just not show up.

This happens to every student journalist. It happens to every working journalist, too.

If it doesn't happen to you the first time you try to arrange an interview, it will happen the next time. Or the time after that.

If you get frustrated, that's understandable. But getting frustrated when you have only yourself to blame isn't understandable. It's whining. You've been warned that lining up interviews is difficult. It's up to you to overcome that. We use a baseball metaphor to explain why dawdling or taking the easy way out is wrong.

The baseball metaphor

Imagine you've been challenged to put together a baseball team for one game, for a chance to win $1 million. Do you:



Wait until a day before the game to look for a team? Let's hope not. You want to line up your lineup ASAP.



Reach out to exactly eight other players, assuming they'll all agree to play? People are busy. If you focus on only what you absolutely need, you risk being short-handed. You'll reach out to more players to have a good pool to pick from.



Leave messages for potential players and just wait for them to call back, however long it takes? With $1 million on the line? You'll be persistent.



Grab whoever's easiest to find, rather than working harder to get skilled players? No. You'll want the best, even if that means having to track them down.



Assume your team equipment is all set, instead of checking it carefully? Game day is hardly the time to find out you're missing some gloves or your bats are broken. You'll want all your gear squared away.

You wouldn't (we hope) be so lackadaisical with $1 million on the line. If you want your stories to be golden, you'd better be diligent and persistent about your interviews, too.

Avoiding crises

We can guarantee that if you work as a professional communicator long enough, you will run into frustrations with sources. And "long enough" isn't very long. Every semester, most of our students encounter some source-related obstacles. It's the nature of the

profession.

The hard work

Reporting is hard. The hardest part is usually getting the right sources to talk. You can't avoid the hard part, but you can do things that improve your chances.

Start early, schedule early

If you're given two weeks' notice for an assignment and you don't start looking for sources until three days before, you're asking for trouble.

Figuring out whom you need to talk to is the first task when tackling an assignment. When you do get people to agree to talk, schedule appointments quickly. An interview scheduled for the day before deadline is asking for a disaster. Plans change. People get ill. They get busy and forget. That's not their problem, and it's not your professor's or editor's problem. It's yours. Give yourself time to recoup if an interview falls through.

Every time we've taught reporting classes, we've asked students what advice they would give to future students. And every time, several students say the same thing: Start early! Start right away!

Multiply your chances

You need one expert source? Don't contact just one person and wait. Request interviews from several people.

Students sometimes worry about this. What if someone finally gets back to me after I've already gotten one interview? The answer is simple: If you have time, interview the extra person, too. Maybe that person will be a better source. Even if not, it doesn't hurt to hear from more than one source.

If you don't have time, just respond politely. Thank the person, but say you already got someone else. They won't hate you.

Get personal

The first instinct of most students is to email an interview request. That's OK, but it may not be effective. If your target is on campus, go in person. If they're off campus, try calling. The best reporters will tell you there's no substitute for asking someone face to face. Think about it: If someone was asking a favor of you, which would you find harder to reject? If they sent you an email, or if they were standing next to you?

The industry slang for this is "shoe-leather reporting," as in, "**Get off your butt, get out from behind your screen, put your feet on the floor and walk over there**."

In this video, veteran reporter Mark Puente has strong words for young reporters like you.



Video 5.1.1: Mark Puente: I believe in shoe-leather reporting. Watch on YouTube [www.youtube.com] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Be clear

In your initial contact, tell the source your name, that you're a student and what you want to interview them about. The more specific you are, the better they can judge whether they want to do it. (When in doubt, people usually say no.)

When a source does agree to the interview, nail down day, time and place. Put it in writing (email is fine for this).

Be apologetic

You need something from your sources. Most of the time, they don't need anything from you. The relationship, then, is out of balance. Acknowledge that. Apologize for bothering them.

Mark Puente's first career was as a truck driver. He then got a journalism degree, but he says that wasn't what made him a journalist. In this video, he talks about a valuable lesson he learned from observing a colleague.



Video 5.1.2: Mark Puente: Learning to apologize | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Be persistent

You need the interview. Your potential sources, on the other hand, don't need you. The burden is on you to push this forward. If you don't get a response to an email within a couple of work days, try again. If a receptionist tells you your target is busy, ask to leave a note – and follow up with a call. If someone promises to get back to you by a specific day and doesn't, check up.

Do this politely. That's not just because you don't want to anger them; it's also because you want to give them an escape from embarrassment. Say someone doesn't respond to your email. Maybe that person meant to, but forgot. A flat reminder could make them feel ashamed. To avoid having to admit their slip-up, they stay silent. If your reminder said something like "I know you're busy at this time of year ..." or "I may not have been clear in my first email, but, ..." you've given them a ready excuse.

All too often, students come to professors in a panic just days before deadline because the one source they've been waiting for hasn't gotten back to them.

Don't be one of those students.

The interview

You've followed the advice above and you've scheduled an interview. Now what?

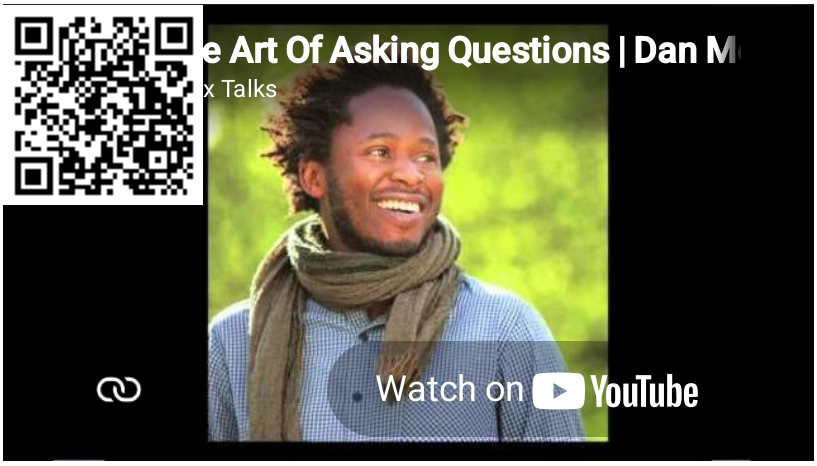
Curiosity pays off

One key personality trait separates good interviewers from everyone else: curiosity.

You can overcome shyness; you can develop a thick skin about conflict. But if you're not curious about the world around you, your interviews will be lifeless.

The importance of curiosity is why many beginning journalism courses quiz students on current events. Fascinating things happen every day, all over the world. If you don't care about that, how will you care enough to focus on whatever it is you're writing about?

Dan Moulthrop, a veteran of public radio, gave a Tedx talk in 2015 about interviewing. Everything he says is worthwhile, but it's significant that he starts off with curiosity. This is 17 minutes long; there's a lot to the art of asking questions.



Video 5.1.3: The Art of Asking Questions by Dan Moulthrop | Watch on YouTube(opens in new window) [www.youtube.com] | Transcript provided on YouTube

Askophobia

In the section above, we blithely said you can overcome shyness. Time to be honest: It isn't necessarily easy.

The good news is that many successful professional communicators are shy people. These tips are taken from the experience of people like that.

Schedule yourself into a corner: If you let shyness defeat you before you've even begun, you're sunk. Tell yourself you're only setting up the interview; don't think past that to actually asking questions. Once you've got an appointment, the hardest part is over.

Put on a uniform: We had difficulty interviewing strangers, too. We found a difference, though, between asking questions as ourselves and asking them as Jane Doe of the Daily Bugle. Maybe it was because that helped us think of it as a job. Every job has its annoying elements, but you do them because, as a wise editor named Pat Anstett at the Detroit Free Press once told us, "That's why they call it work."

Take on a role: Pretend to be the brave person you aren't. Act the part. This is easier in an interview than at, say, a party. You don't have to convince dozens of people you aren't shy, just one. You know what to expect. Whether you pretend to be generic Reporter Person or model yourself after someone you know or have seen, being an actor for the length of an interview can get you through.

Lucia Herndon Horning put it this way when she talked to editor and writing coach Steve Buttry:

> As a young reporter I used to think of the question-asking-reporter as a different part of myself. She could ask questions and get rebuffed sometimes and it didn’t bother the more sensitive side of me.

Rehearse: This is true for everyone, but for the shy, rehearsal is extra important. Some people can get away with rehearsing in their heads. You may want to ask a friend to pretend to be the source, to make it more realistic.

Empathize: Most people you interview will be at least as nervous as you are. You at least have a list of questions. They don't know what you're going to ask; they have to come up with answers off the top of their heads.

Also understand that your sources probably want to tell you things. But, especially with sources not used to talking to news media, they may not tell their story well. Your questions help them.

As a sports writer, Doug Lesmerises had to interview a lot of people. He always wanted to go beyond the usual sports cliches about leaving it all on the field and giving 110%; he wanted stories. In this video, he acknowledges that young reporters may consider it impolite to press for details, but encourages you to go ahead.



Video 5.1.4: Doug Lesmerises: Helping the source tell a story | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Be honest: If it's your first-ever interview, why not admit it? You'll gain some sympathy, perhaps.

Or tell a white lie. One reporter we know deliberately fumbled with his audio recorder at the start of interviews, complaining about the new equipment his bosses made him use. Fact is, he knew how to operate it. But the fumbling earned him some sympathy (and perhaps created a false sense of security in the interviewee).

Remember it will end: People who are afraid to ask others out on dates or ask questions in class are told to ask themselves, "What's the worst that can happen?" We don't advise that, because, frankly, we could come up with some extremely horrible scenarios.

Instead, we focus on getting past it. Whatever disasters you encounter, they'll end when the interview ends. It's easier to endure pain if your brain accepts that it won't last forever. Trust us; we've had kidney stones. The pain is terrible. How can we cope? Just knowing the blessed relief of painkillers is on the way is enough to let us endure.

One step at a time: More advice we give everyone below: Make a list of questions. For the shy, this is something you can cling to for safety. No matter how awkward you feel, push yourself to ask the next question on your list, and the one after that.

Finally, some good news. It gets easier the more you do it. Really, it does.

Before the interview

You've gotten someone to agree to an interview.

In-person interviews are best. Not only are you talking face to face, but you can see the person's surroundings, their office or home. That can give you clues about who they are and provide color for your story. Video interviews are second-best; a phone interview is a last resort.

Email interviews aren't really interviews. They lack the back and forth. It's harder and slower to follow up when you get an interesting but incomplete answer. Most journalists would accept email interviews only when the source is someone they must have and the person refuses any other method.

Whatever kind of interview you set up, you have two things to do before you go.

Research: Don't go into an interview cold. Study your topic and your source first. Why?

- Specific questions are often better than vague ones. Rather than "How did you get into public relations," you can ask, "I saw that you started out as a reporter. How did you make the switch to PR?"
- Knowing something about what a source is talking about helps you understand the answers.
- Learning basic facts about a topic first keeps you from wasting time in the interview asking for simple information.

Know your goals: Why are you interviewing this particular person? What role will they fill in the story you expect to write?

Thinking about those questions will help you focus your questions.

Prepare: You don't want to waste your source's time or your own. So:

- Write your questions in advance. You're free to improvise during the interview, but a list will ensure you've gotten all the information your wanted.
- Play out the interview in your head: If I ask this question, what is the answer likely to be? What if it's something else? Rehearsing can make you better prepared to handle difficult sources.
- If you're seeing someone in person, plan your route and leave plenty of time. You'll start off with a bad impression if you have to apologize because circling the block looking for a parking space made you late.
- Check your equipment and have a backup plan. Whatever you're going to use – laptop, smartphone, camera, etc. – have it charged. If you can swap out the battery, pack a fully charged replacement. If not, pack a charger. Bring a pen and paper, too.

Dull questions produce dull answers. Doug Lesmerises thinks a lot about how to frame the questions he asks, as he explains in this video.



Video 5.1.5: Doug Lesmerises: Framing the question | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

During the interview

It should go without saying, but experience says it doesn't: Never blow off an appointment with a source.

One student found a source willing to talk. The woman said she had a busy week coming up, but would be free at the start of the week. The student didn't get back to her. The source asked the professor, a friend of hers, what was up. The professor nudged the student, who finally responded. An appointment was set up for a Friday afternoon.

Friday came and went. On Saturday, the student sent the source a short email saying she'd "gotten busy" and skipped the interview, but still needed responses. She offered to send a list of questions, noting didn't have many so it wouldn't take long.

The source responded (copying the professor) that while it might not take the student long to write the questions, it would take the source time to respond thoughtfully. Time that she didn't have then.

Do not be that student.

Instead, do these things.

Be punctual: If you're interviewing someone in person, be early for the appointment and have all your equipment ready to go. If you're using video chat, sign on early to make sure the network is working and your software is ready to go. If you're calling, test out your recording capability ahead of time and call within a minute of the agreed time.

Eliminate distractions: Turn off the ringer on your phone; turn off the sound on your tablet or laptop. If the source meets you in a noisy room, ask if you can move to someplace quieter.

Introduce yourself: That includes reminding the source why you're there and telling them (if true) that the interview is for a story in a particular media outlet. Thank the person for talking to you.

This is important: You must identify yourself and your role when interviewing someone. Going undercover causes serious ethical concerns.

One student of ours got stonewalled asking a police dispatcher for information. She waited awhile and called back, this time only saying she was curious about how the department worked. To keep up the deception, she avoided asking the dispatcher for her full name. That was the clue that rang our alarm bell.

Don't be that student.

Record: Record every interview. You want exact quotes. You want to be able to review in case you missed something. You want to get context right.

Start slow: Use small talk to put the person at ease: How's your day going? Ease into basic questions: Have them spell their name. If there are other details you need, get those first. You want to get sources into the habit of answering your questions by asking them ones they don't have to puzzle over.

Begin with noncontroversial questions: If you're going to ask tough questions, save them for later in the interview. That gives the source more time to feel comfortable with you, and ensures you've gotten as much as possible from the interview if it ends abruptly.

Some reporters argue for the opposite: Ask the tough ones first, so you get them in before you get kicked out. Certainly, you don't want to wait until your time is almost up to get to important questions. But if your early questions blow up in your face, you've given up any chance of getting anything.

Establish the structure: Before your interview spins out into specifics, make sure you understand the basic order of information. Often, this means chronology. If the person's background is important to the story, sort out that timeline: when and where they were born, grew up, which job they had when.

Take notes: Whether you do this on a keyboard or with a pen, take notes for three reasons:

- To remind yourself of ideas for more questions. Rather than interrupt someone as they're talking because something's just occurred to you, write it down. Did they say something you didn't understand? Write that down, so you can ask about it later.
- To help you remember the conversation. The mere act of taking notes, research shows, boosts memory. Research also says writing is better than typing, but if your handwriting is a mess, typing's probably acceptable.
- To make it easier afterward. You've recorded the interview, but it may have taken a half-hour or more. If you're on deadline, you may not have time to listen to it all over again. A note that tells you when something interesting was said, and at about what elapsed time, will help a lot.

Stay in control: Some people start talking and never stop. Others drift away from your questions, deliberately or accidentally.

This is your interview. You have to get your questions answered. If someone won't stop talking and your time is limited, jump in at a pause, ready with another question. If the answers don't match the questions, ask the questions again, and again (worded differently each time). Be polite, but be firm.

Make eye contact: Don't let note-taking keep you so busy that you never look up.

Look around: In any interview that's more than just collecting basic facts, observation is important. When you're looking at your source, take mental notes: What are they wearing? What are they doing -- staring off into space? tapping a finger? swiveling in a chair? What's on their desk? Their shelves? What's framed on the walls?

You're doing this for three reasons:

- Communication isn't just verbal. Their actions are clues to how they're feeling, which can guide your questions. The actions could add context to their quotes and improve your story: Did the source just say that, or did she say it while pounding her fist?
- You may find questions in what you see. A student profiled the football team's longtime equipment manager. He noticed shelves filled with helmets from other schools, some facing front and others backwards. He asked. Turned out the manager swapped helmets with his counterparts at each game, and the orientation of the helmet indicated whether his school had won or lost.
- Our surroundings can define us. If the politician who campaigns as a dedicated family man has no photos of his spouse or children in his office, that's a telling detail. The fact that a lawyer about to appear before the Supreme Court works out of an office the size of a broom closet behind a desk cluttered with files will tell your readers more about him than adjectives can.

Practice silent affirmation: Even if you're not working on an audio or video story, it's good practice. Silent affirmation means you avoid the things we often say to show that we're paying attention: "Uh-huh. Oh! I see. Yes. Really?" Instead, convey the same thing with a nod, raised or furrowed brows – even a hand gesture (a polite one, please).

Some students have told us silent affirmation earned them odd stares. It can be disconcerting to sources, particularly if you avoid eye contact while you're nodding or whatever. If you don't need the audio from your interview for publication, it's OK to interject sometimes.

Have a conversation: This may be harder when you're starting out, but it' something to work toward. An interview is a one-sided transaction: The source has something; you want it. There's a natural tension. A conversation is a fair exchange.

How do you manage this while retaining control? Fake it 'til you make it. Journalist and author Isabel Wilkerson strongly advocated for conversations to produce the best quotes. Here's what she wrote for Nieman Reports:

> I only really interview in the strict sense of the word when I have to. I try to do everything else that I can to make sources feel comfortable enough to talk with me. That doesn't mean that I don't ask questions. It means I ask lots of questions. But what I mainly try to do is to be a great audience. I egg them on; I nod; I look straight into their eyes; I laugh at their jokes, whether I think they're funny or not; I get serious when they're serious. I kind of echo whatever emotion they seem to be sending to me. I do whatever it takes to get them talking.

In this video, Doug Lesmerises says another way to turn an interview into a conversation is to be an active participant. Don't just ask questions; talk the way you would to a friend.



Video 5.1.6: Doug Lesmerises: Make an interview a conversation | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Don't stop them when they're on a roll: You should schedule interviews so you have time to go far beyond the scheduled end. If the source is still talking, don't point out that time is up; let them decide.

Also, don't stop recording until you're out of the building. Even as you're packing up, the source may have something to say. If you're not recording, you may not be able to remember the quote exactly.

Complete your goodbye checklist

- Ask a general question such as "Is there anything else I should have asked?" or "Is there anything else you think I should know?"
- Ask if there is anyone else you should talk to.
- Double-check contact information and ask if you can check back for follow-up questions.
- Thank them. Profusely.

After the interview

Back up your recording: "The network ate my interview" is not an acceptable excuse for a professional, and it's not one for you. Back up your recording as soon as possible onto a secure storage device.

Summarize: The longer you wait to process your interview, the more you'll forget. Type a summary of the high points without looking at your notes or listening the recording. At some point you should go back to your notes to spot anything you missed. You'll also need to check the notes and the recording to be sure you've got accurate quotes. But good reporters say starting with a top-of-the-head summary helps clarify your thinking without getting bogged down in details or spending so much time playing the recording over and over that you forget key points.

Follow up: Send an email thanking the source. Yes, again.

Keep a list: Save the names and contact information of everyone you talk to, with identifying notes such as what their expertise is or where they're from. Professional writers build up lists of sources because you never know when one will be useful.

There's another important reason for students to save this information. You will want internships and jobs. If you showed up prepared for an interview, conducted yourself professionally and keep in touch, your past sources can help you get those opportunities.

Should you transcribe?

That is, should you type out the whole interview? In the past, our advice was usually not; typing all of an interview when you only needed a quote or two was a waste of time. But now transcription apps or plug-ins are very good, and free or low-cost options exist. However, they're not perfect. Don't simply run the program and then copy-and-paste the quotes you want into your story. Listen to those parts of the audio and edit the transcript as needed.

If you've interviewed someone of prominence and the interview covered several important points, it might be worthwhile to offer a full transcript as an extra piece of the package. But, again, that will mean listening to the whole thing while scanning the generated transcript to ensure accuracy. We had to do that to generate the captions and transcripts for the videos in this textbook. We used the tools built in to Adobe Premiere, and they were very good. But we had to fix words in every transcript.

Questions

In this book's chapter dealing with quotes, we discuss weak quotes. Because a common cause of weak quotes is poor interviewing, the only real way to fix those weak quotes is to ask the right kinds of questions and react properly during the interview.

In this video, Lesmerises emphasizes the difference between a good question and just throwing out a topic.



Video 5.1.7: Doug Lesmerises: The importance of good questions | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript

Ask open-ended questions: Avoid questions that can be answered with a yes or no. "Do you like your job?" will get less useful quotes than "What do you like about your job?" "Is Obamacare a good idea?" isn't as good as "What do you think of Obamacare?"

Don't lead the witness: Your source may want to help you out. That's generally a good thing. But if they're trying too hard, you can end up with quotes that are just your words spit back at you:

You: "How excited were you to be selected?"

Them: "I was very excited to be selected."

Keep your words as neutral as you can.

Listen: Don’t be so attached to your pre-written questions that you miss a chance to follow up on something interesting. Be open to useful diversions.

Don’t be afraid to sound dumb: You’ve researched your topic first, but you can’t know everything; that’s why you’re talking to an expert. Ask about things you don’t understand.

Sometimes you think you understand things, but you’re not sure. Ask. “You said the new restaurant offers healthy dining options. Does that mean the old one didn’t?”

Sometimes you know you understand things, but you ask anyway. Say you’ve boned up on a scientific theory. Great, but you’re going to have to explain it to your readers. You can ask directly for a simple explanation, or you can try something like the method above: Explain it in your words, and ask if you’ve got it right.

Echo: Language is a poor method for communication; unfortunately, it's the only one we have. Each of us provides our own context for what we say, and we apply that to what we hear from others as well. What you understood, filtering a source's words through your experiences, is not necessarily the same as what the source meant.

One way to lessen the problem is to restate things. Tell your source, in your own words, what you thought she said. Like this:

- So, do you mean ...
- I'm thinking about how I would phrase this in my story. Could I say ...
- If I understand you correctly, ...
- In other words ...

Don’t be afraid to ask for a better quote: Not literally, though. But if your source winds through a complicated thought in fits and starts, it’s OK to say something like “I didn’t quite follow. What was that again?” Give your sources a chance to take a second run and they’ll often appreciate it.

This can be especially useful if you're going to use video or audio of the interview in your story package. The second time around, they're likely to speak more smoothly, with fewer hesitations.

If you hear a good story, pounce: If your source says something extremely intriguing or gives you the snippet of what might be a great anecdote, don’t let it fly past. Start firing questions to get details or expand on the point.

Anna Sale, host of the podcast "Death, Sex and Money," wants her audience to understand what her subjects mean, so she told Current:

> When I’m interviewing, it’s always about if you say one thing, ... it’s how am I going to make it concrete. “You need to tell me more so I can understand and see it and kind of understand exactly what you’re trying to say.” So it’s asking about physical details; it’s asking about, if someone says, “Yeah, that was a really crazy moment.” Well, what was it really? What was it like? Tell me more about that. Where if someone says, “Like, yeah, we went on this camping trip and all these things happened. ...” Did you go on a bus together, all of you together? What was it like? And then they have to describe more. So it’s just about continually trying to make it more concrete so that I can understand, and then that also really helps with the storytelling because it makes it more vivid for the listener.

Digging out the storytelling details means asking lots of questions, as Lesmerises says in this video.



Video 5.1.8: Doug Lesmerises: Fleshing out stories | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Ask "why": Some quotes are weak because they're too vague: "I liked the event." "I had a good time." "I'm glad I came." "The speaker was interesting." "This topic is important to me."

When you hear those kinds of statements during an interview, you should immediately recognize they won't help your story. Push for specifics. Often, that's as simple as "Why did you like it?" "Why are you glad?" "Why do you say she was interesting?" "Why do you care so much?"

Ask for superlatives: Another way to improve weak quotes is to press the source to make choices. "What did you like most?" "What was the best thing about the event?" "What will you remember most from the speech?"

Use two key questions: Some quotes are weak because they're plain statements of fact: "Our research showed that students who drank coffee were more alert in class." There's no reason to use a direct quote for a statement that plain.

To move beyond such answers, try these two questions:

How do you know that?

What's an example of that?

Pull back the curtain: If you've followed our previous advice and thought about why you're interviewing this source and how they will fit into the story, you may need a specific kind of quote. If you're not getting it, ask them to help.

For example, we wrote an article profiling a historical figure in our region. We already knew the story would start with quotes from his decades-old obituary. We wanted to end the story with a quote from the man currently running the organization our subject founded. Rather than dance around that, we made it clear: "I'm looking for a quote that sums up how X's legacy affects the organization today, or how it affects the world."

Shut up: Sometimes silence is the best question. Long pauses create tension. People tend to want to release that tension by saying something. As awkward as it may feel for you to stare at the source without speaking, your source is feeling the same thing -- and that's good for you. The intense psychological need to fill the silence may overcome whatever restrictions they're trying to put on their words and let the truth come out.

Make statements: One of the secrets of great interviewers is that not all their questions are questions. For example, your subject tells you about a frightening experience. "How did you feel?" could produce a flat answer: "I felt scared." But "I can't imagine how I would react to that" or "I don't know how I'd be able to keep going after that" prompt more detailed responses.

Challenge: Throwing your source off balance with an impertinent question can produce great quotes. Obviously, you don't want to insult your source or turn the interview into an argument. But asking a question with bite challenges the source to confront an issue directly.

Lesmerises covered Ohio State football and its then-coach, Urban Meyer. As he explains in this video, sometimes that meant asking questions that poked the bear.



Video 5.1.9: Doug Lesmerises: Ask challenging questions | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Tough questions

In the previous section, we told you to sometimes ask challenging questions to elicit better answers. Other times, you'll have to ask difficult questions because that's why you're there. They might be difficult because they could anger the subject: A coach is accused of cheating. They might be difficult because they're emotional: A family just lost a son in a car crash.

If you're avoiding questions because they make you uncomfortable, remind yourself: It's not you asking the questions. You're just a conduit for your audience. Does the audience deserve an answer to the question? Then ask it. If the audience doesn't deserve it ... why are you asking?

Having decided to ask, use these tips to do your job ethically:

Just ask: Some students go into interviews assuming the sources don't want to talk. Sometimes they don't, but more often they welcome the opportunity. The cheating coach? He may want to get his response on the record. The grieving family? The late Steve Buttry, an editor and writing coach, said this:

> You will assume (and often be right) that the disaster survivor or grieving mother won't want to talk to you. But it's her story, not yours. Tell her you'd like to tell it. When she says yes, respect that she has honored you and tell her story well. If she says no, respect that decision and offer to tell it at a later date if she wants to.

Reporter Liz Navratil sometimes has to talk to people who've suffered a tragedy. In this video, she says she's a human being first, a journalist second.



Video 5.1.10: Liz Navratil: Tough interviews | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript

Explain why you're asking: Maybe the coach is too upset to think straight. You can remind him that your interview is his chance to tell his side of the story.

Be curious: If you're talking to someone affected by trauma, don't zoom straight to the point. They may react poorly if you show that you care about them only for what you'll need in the story. Buttry, in that same interview for the Dart Center, said:

> I start out asking about the mundane. I want to know about the person's life, not just to make small talk, but to give me understanding and provide context for my story. ... I will talk about family, school, work and such things. Often it is the person who steers the interview toward the trauma, when he's ready and I have context.

Offer control: Our general advice about interviewing is to assume control of the situation and not let go. But unusual circumstances call for unusual choices.

If you're interviewing someone affected by trauma, give them choices -- where to be interviewed, for example. True, every source could insist on that option. But trauma survivors have already lost control in some way. By explicitly giving them options, you help them feel comfortable.

The same thing might work with confrontational interviews. But with someone you're putting on the spot, you want to avoid, if possible, concessions that could make the interview less useful. For example, you might invite a trauma survivor to bring along a friend for emotional support. With confrontational interviews, push against having lawyers or others in the room.

Negotiations

When sources suspect interviews will be confrontational, they may try to negotiate special conditions. Some sources may try to do that with every interview as a way of seizing control.

For all these questions, reporters should consult editors before agreeing to anything, or at least know what their media outlet's general policies are. We offer our own advice, but each outlet may have its own rules and each situation can be unique.

Questions in advance

You may run into this especially if you have to go through a public relations person to get to the source. Part of their job is to prepare people for interviews. Having a list of questions in advance obviously helps.

However, you don't want pre-written, rehearsed answers. You want to avoid providing questions in advance for the same reason you want to avoid e-mail interviews.

Our first response to such requests is to decline, politely. Our fallback position: We'll provide a list of topics, but not specific questions. Our last-ditch proposal: We'll provide a partial list of questions, but remind the source that we may ask other questions as the interview proceeds.

Note that most of the time, you'll give the source some idea what the interview's about when you request the appointment. Providing a list of topics doesn't go much further. And we would consider providing some questions in advance, even without being asked, if we're interviewing experts in complicated subjects who may need time to research their answers.

Anonymity

We discussed this in the Reporting Essentials chapter. Remember the four key questions:

- Is the story important enough?
- Is the source necessary?
- Does the source have a good reason?
- Is it fair?

Even if you *can* answer "yes" to all those questions, granting anonymity is dangerous. Your audience relies on attribution to determine credibility. If you don't identify the source, the only reason the audience has to believe the information is faith in your journalistic skill and ethics. Stories that rely only on anonymous sources are hard to believe.

We would use anonymous sources rarely, and preferably only when we also have on-the-record sources going over similar information. (Why would we need both? To make the scope of something clearer.) Most important: Remember the rule "**Never let your editor be surprised.**" Most newsrooms discourage anonymity but may allow it in special circumstances. It's generally not up to the reporter to make that decision. Never grant anonymity unless and until you've discussed it with your editor and gotten approval.

Some types of stories are more likely than others to lead to requests for anonymity: You're going to interview a whistleblower, or someone who hasn't come out to their family yet. Be smart: Talk to your editor before you contact your sources about what they would accept.

Off the record

Connected to anonymity is the concept of going "off the record" or "on background."

These are not legal terms. Some journalists use them as if their meaning was clear and universal; they're wrong.

If your source does try to negotiate using these terms, make them spell out exactly what they mean.

- Can you quote them directly without naming them, or must you only paraphrase?
- In what way can you identify them, if not by name?
- Can you use the information in the story at all, or only as unwritten background to help you understand what's going on?
- What parts of the interview will the agreement cover?

We recommend avoiding "off the record" or "on background" discussions with any sources. You're just a conduit for the audience, remember? How does it serve them if you know something but can't tell them?

In any case, understand that going off the record or on background must be a mutual agreement. A source can't unilaterally declare it.

Some sources will try to invoke "off the record" after they've said something embarrassing, or after the whole interview is over. You are under no legal requirement -- nor any ethical one, we believe -- to even discuss the issue in that case. They said it, you heard it, that's it.

Students have told us that they've done whole interviews only to have sources say "Oh, I didn't know you were writing a story about this. No, you can't quote me."

This is why it's important to identify yourself at the start of every interview and tell sources why you're talking to them. If they still don't get it, that's on them.

Prior review

Sources sometimes ask to see your story before it's published. Many newsrooms ban this practice.

Why? Wouldn't letting a source read the story help ensure the facts are correct? Perhaps. But there are at least two key reasons to keep the story private until it's published:

- Your story contains more than the information you got from that one source. What right does one source have to know what other people told you?
- Giving them the story can make them believe they have the right to make changes. Time and again, students have agreed to such deals only to have their stories returned with editing -- even rewriting direct quotes.

As an alternative, some journalists allow sources to review their quotes. That gets around the first point above, but not the second. If you (and your editor) do decide to allow quote review, have a clear conversation with the source first. Explain that you will consider what they have to say, but you won't necessarily change anything.

Now, having said this, we admit we've sometimes agreed with reporters to show some parts of stories to sources in advance. We've done that when the subject is complex and we're concerned about getting the facts straight. And some reporters we greatly admire have admitted that they've shown stories to sources when they felt it necessary to ensure accuracy.

Those were very experienced reporters, however. You're starting out. The chances that allowing prior review will blow up in your face are high. Disobeying the guidelines of your professor or editor could have extreme consequences. Play it smart.

How to bargain

What do you, the new reporter, say when a source wants to set conditions?

That's not our policy: As an editor, I invited reporters to use me as an excuse. "My editor says we're not allowed to show stories in advance," for example. Done properly, this can get the source to feel sorry for you, or at least decide that it would be fruitless to try

to argue.

I can't promise, but I'll listen: Sometimes, sources worry for no reason. Just letting them know they can appeal after the interview may be the reassurance they need.

Tell me why: Without sounding confrontational, ask them why they want special treatment. Some may fold right there. With others, you may be able to talk them out of their fears.

Students have run into sources who blame them for student media mistakes of the past. We advise them to turn the conversation away from past mistakes to focus on what they're doing to make their story accurate -- pointing out that they're recording the interview, offering to repeat back complicated responses to make sure they were understood.

I'll have to ask my editor: The source has set out time for the interview. Suggesting that it may have to be rescheduled until you can get the OK may get some sources to cave. And the suggestion may not be a lie: You shouldn't make concessions unless you're sure they're acceptable to your newsroom. Why waste your time getting answers you won't be able to use?

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5.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Get off your butt, get out from behind your screen and walk over there.
- Finding sources is hard. Getting them to talk is harder. Don’t procrastinate; start looking for sources and scheduling interviews as soon as possible. Don’t rely on email or voicemail; track them down in person. Don’t let interview requests fester. If you don’t hear back promptly, ask again.
- It gets easier the more you do it.
- Being shy or nervous doesn't have to stop you from doing great interviews. Many journalists overcome their nerves by thinking of themselves as actors taking on a role. Preparation -- writing out questions and rehearsing -- helps, too.
- Email interviews aren’t really interviews.
- Real interviews require the opportunity for a back-and-forth discussion. In-person interviews are best. Skype is next, because you can at least see the interviewee. Phone interviews are acceptable.
- The work of an interview starts before the interview.
- Just as with live coverage, you must research before an interview. Know who you’re talking to. Prepare questions. Test out your equipment. Make sure you know where to go and when.
- Be professional.
- You should be able to explain these elements of the best practices for interviewing.
    - Be punctual
    - Eliminate distractions
    - Introduce yourself
    - Record
    - Start slow
    - Begin with noncontroversial questions
    - Look around
    - Have a conversation
    - Stay in control
    - Make eye contact
    - Practice silent affirmation
    - Take notes
    - Don't stop them on a roll
    - Complete goodbye checklist
- Ask the right kinds of questions.
- You should be able to explain these elements that make for strong interviews.
    - Open-ended questions
    - Be willing to sound dumb
    - Jump on good stories
    - Ask "how do you know that?"
    - Shut up
    - Don't lead the witness
    - Echo
    - Ask "why?"
    - Pull back the curtain
    - Make statements
    - Listen
    - Ask for better quotes
    - Ask for superlatives
    - Ask for examples

- Challenge
- Ask the tough questions.

- Don't avoid questions that make you uncomfortable if you need the answers. Sources are often more willing to talk than you think. It may help to explain why you're asking, or to offer the source some sense of control.
- Know your newsroom's standards.
- You should be able to explain these common requests by sources and what your newsroom's policy about them is.
  - Questions in advance
  - Off the record
  - Prior review
  - Anonymity

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5.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 5.3.1

Split up into groups of two. One person will be the interviewer, the other the source.

To get extra value out of this exercise, start with a question that might come up when a student is being interviewed for a job or internship; it's good practice. Examples:

- Tell me about a time you showed leadership.
- What is your greatest strength as a potential hire for (whatever your career choice is)?
- Tell me about a time you made a mistake, and how you dealt with it.

It's likely the source's initial response will be incomplete. That's where the interviewer comes in. Using the tips in this chapter, press for details. Get them to move beyond generalities to focs on a specific incident.

The disadvantage to doing this in class is that your source knows -- if they've read this chapter -- what you're trying to get. They might be more helpful than a regular source. But it's been our experience that even primed with tips, students will produce incomplete stories when being asked about themselves.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: News Writing Essentials

6.1: News Writing Essentials

6.2: Chapter Review

6.3: Optional Exercises

Why news writing matters

Consider the last social media post you've written and the last research paper you've submitted. Of course, they differ in length, but how else? Probably they vary in choice of words, structure of sentences and many other ways.

Those who study linguistics -- the stuff of language and communications -- sort writing and speech into "registers" or "styles." At one end is the intimate, the way you talk to those closest to you when no one else is around. At the other end is the static, rigid wording that almost never changes, such as the Pledge of Allegiance.

Smack dab in the middle is the consultative. It's more formal than intimate or casual (peer group) conversation, less so than static or formal (speeches, court decisions) language. It's "consultative" because it generally has at least two participants -- you and your professor, a patient and a doctor, etc.

News writing, whether for journalism or public relations, traditionally leaned toward the formal side. To be recognized as a proper news story or news release, writing had to start a certain way, use certain words and avoid others, and so on.

This is changing, driven at least in part by the internet. As blogging software and the web allowed small organizations and even individuals to reach broad audiences, the delivery of news began to separate from the style of its presentation. As comment sections and social media blurred the distinction between writer and audience, consultative or even casual style became accepted.

Even so, learning the principles of news writing retains value.

Pragmatically, it will make you more employable. Major news organizations, public relations agencies and corporations or nonprofits with PR operations use traditional style for most of their communication and want writers who can produce it.

Standard news writing isn't preferred just because that's the way it's always been done. Core elements of news writing -- being clear, being accurate, not wasting the audience's time -- continue to apply even if your vocabulary changes or in other ways you get the rhetorical stick out of your ass.

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6.1: News Writing Essentials

Journalism basics

It's time to develop a mindset for professional communications. These key concepts will help you adjust.

Writers read

This book has a lot to say about news writing, and your instructor will give you practice and feedback. All that should help. But many students come to news writing classes with a critical handicap: They're not familiar with news writing. Unlike past generations, many of you grew up without regular exposure to newspapers or news websites. You almost certainly read some news stories from traditional outlets, but they're mixed in with much less formal writing. It's hard to emulate a writing style you rarely encounter.

If you want to be a professional writer, you must read professional writing. And if you want to be a good writer of any kind, you must read critically. Stop reading just for information. Read for the writing and reporting: What choices did the writer make? What parts of the story are the most interesting? How could the reporter have gotten that information? How were the sentences structures, the paragraphs organized?

In this video, reporter Asha Glover explains how reading helped her develop her own writing style.



Video 6.1.1: Asha Glover: Read to become a better writer | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Key differences

You've been warned you will have to break some habits you'd acquired from writing for English classes and producing term papers. Some of those involved specific grammar and punctuation rules. Others are broader.

Attribution vs. citation

The purpose of citation in academic writing is not only to let the reader know who wrote what, but also to allow the reader to find the exact location of quoted or paraphrased material. That requires lengthy entries listing not just the authors' names but also the titles of the journals they wrote in and the articles they wrote, as well as page numbers and dates of publication. To avoid interrupting the flow of the text, most of that is confined to footnotes or lists of sources.

In journalism, attribution also lets the reader know who wrote what. But journalists traditionally were not as concerned about directing readers to original material.* Rather, **the main purpose of attribution is to help the reader determine whether a particular source is relevant and authoritative.** Therefore, journalism generally does not use footnotes or parenthetical citations, and does not provide as many specifics.

> BAD: Smith and Jones (2011) wrote ... (With a full citation at the end of the paper.)
> BETTER: John Smith and Mary Jones, professors of economics at Yale University, wrote ... (Neither the name of the publication nor the full title of the article is necessary, although they may be used.)

BAD: Newsweek reported (Smith, 2013) ...
BETTER: A 2013 Newsweek article said ...

BAD: Jones said (as cited in Smith, 2004) ...
BETTER: Mary Jones, in an interview with John Smith, said ...

Note the phrasing of the journalism examples above can vary considerably. The last example could also be “Mary Jones told Time magazine ...” or “Time magazine reported that Mary Jones said ...”

* Now that much journalistic writing will appear online, journalism is adopting the academic concept of pointing directly to original sources. However, this is done through links, not citations.

One-idea paragraphs vs. topic paragraphs

Typical paragraphs in academic writing or in the classic five-paragraph essay are many sentences long. You may have been told each paragraph should be about a particular topic, introduced by a sentence explicitly declaring its topic, and concluding with a sentence providing a transition to the next topic.

Journalism paragraphs are generally much shorter* – most often, just one to three sentences. Journalists say **each sentence should contain one fact; each paragraph should express one idea.** Several ideas – and thus several paragraphs – add up to a complete discussion.

BAD (all one paragraph): Students are not the only people aware of unassigned assigned seats and seat-taking, however. Professors with unassigned seating arrangements are aware when students are absent from class because their usual chair is empty. Some professors even have theories as to why unassigned assigned seats are so important to students. Zach Schiller, an associate professor of sociology, believes students choose and sit in the same seat every class may be due to a newfound sense of freedom, general comfort, power, control, and familiarity. He thinks the comfort and familiarity may stem from where they sit in other classes, and how they learn in general. The freedom may come from leaving high school and turning 18, and choosing a seat is one of the new freedoms in pursuing a higher education. Schiller said he would not assign seats because this would be taking away this freedom.

BETTER (broken into five paragraphs): Professors, too, notice unassigned assigned seats. They can tell at a glance who’s absent by seeing which seats are empty. And, being professors, they have theories about what’s happening.

Students cling to unassigned assigned seats, sociology professor Zach Schiller believes, because of comfort, familiarity, control and a newfound sense of freedom.

The comfort and familiarity may come from choosing similar locations in other classrooms, he thinks, or from their learning style.

They get a sense of freedom, he said, from having turned 18 -- officially adult -- and leaving high school. The right to choose a seat is one thing they gain from moving to college.

Schiller chooses not to assign seats because he doesn’t want to take away that freedom.

The “better” version makes many changes from the original, not just breaking it up into paragraphs. It’s used here to demonstrate that once you break your writing up into single-idea paragraphs, it will be easier to spot wordiness and other problems.

* Like many things in journalism, the original reasons for short paragraphs are more likely mechanical than philosophical. Newspaper copy was first set in very narrow columns of tiny, muddy type. Short paragraphs, with indentations at the start of each, broke up the otherwise uniformly gray pages. Short paragraphs also made it easier to trim a story “on the stone” -- the stone-topped counters between Linotype machines, where columns of metal type would rest.

Objectivity vs. opinion

Opinion writing is part of journalism – but not in this book. We will focus solely on reporting facts.

No writer can be purely objective. Every story you write will require decisions about what to include and exclude, how to phrase things and in what order to present the facts.

However, you can seek journalistic objectivity(opens in new window). Among other things, that requires you to attribute anything other than your own personal knowledge or commonly known facts.

If you saw a fire consume the local hardware store, you can report that. But if you know about it only through an interview with the fire chief, you must attribute the information to the chief.

If your story requires you to note the sun rose in the east, you can write that without attribution. Everyone knows it. If it requires you to note the specific time at which the sun rose, you can write that without attribution as well: Such information is readily available from multiple sources. But if it requires you to write that the sky was overcast, with limited visibility and 10 mph winds, you would be wise to attribute that to whichever source you used.

Some decisions about attribution are clear while others slip into gray areas and require judgment. What doesn't require judgment: whether to attribute opinions.

A music critic can write, on his or her own authority, that "Only the Good Die Young" is Billy Joel's greatest song. The critic is paid (one hopes) to have opinions. A reporter profiling Joel would have to write that "many critics say" the song is his best (if they have evidence of that), or name specific critics who say that.

Opinion vs. description

Understand the difference between expressing your opinion and simply describing something. That's important, because good news writing DOES include description. Students who can't tell the difference may produce stories that are more boring or less informative than they should be.

Opinions are about values: This is good, that is bad. Opinions make recommendations: You should do this, you shouldn't do that.

Descriptions are statements of fact: This is green, that is blue. Descriptions report on how others reacted: The audience cheered, the audience booed.

Those definitions are distinct. In practice, you must navigate gray areas.

Watch out for adjectives that make judgment calls, such as "beautiful" and "ugly." Beauty, as the saying goes, is in the eye of the beholder. You can't substitute your eye's judgment for that of all the audience. Instead, describe: What qualities of this person or dress or whatever made you think of it as beautiful or ugly?

Some adjectives are iffy. Consider "spicy" and "bland." A restaurant reviewer could use those without qualm, because the reviewer's job is to express opinions. What about a regular reporter? "Bland" carries a lot of negative connotations, whether you're referring to food or someone's personality. Probably best to avoid it. "Spicy" probably isn't as judgy, but that will depend on the context -- and, remember, what's spicy to you might be bland to someone else.

Other adjectives are fine if you provide evidence, but risky otherwise. Every business owner is likely to tell you their store is "successful" -- but can they back that up? What do they mean: Is it turning a profit? A big one or just above breaking even? Are sales up or down?

When you describe how an audience reacted to something, actions -- cheering, booing -- are OK, but avoid declaring emotions: loved it, hated it. Even when using actions, though, be careful. Did most people cheer, or just a few sitting around you?

Invisible author vs. personal essayist

Very little traditional journalism is written in the first person. Because breaking the habit of mentioning yourself in your writing can be difficult, we recommend students relatively new to news writing go cold turkey: Don't use it at all (for now).

That means first-person pronouns (I, me, we, my, mine, our, ours) should never appear in your writing unless they are in direct quotes.

> BAD: I saw 10 students gather outside the dormitory.
> BETTER: Ten students gathered outside the dormitory.
>
> BAD: Three students I interviewed all agreed that smoking should be allowed on campus.
> BETTER: Some students said smoking should be allowed on campus.

BAD: John Smith told me studying is the path to success.
BETTER: John Smith said studying is the path to success.

BAD: John Smith said I should join student media if I wanted to be a journalist.
BETTER: John Smith said students who want to become journalists should join student media.

BAD: I asked John Smith what students who want to be journalists should do. He said they should join student media.
BETTER: John Smith said students who want to be journalists should join student media.

BAD: I asked John Smith if Common Core is a failure. He said, “Yes.”
BETTER: John Smith said Common Core was a failure.

The rule about keeping yourself out of the story applies even if you don’t use the first-person pronouns, but imply your presence.

BAD: **When asked** if Common Core was a failure, John Smith said, “Yes.”
BETTER: John Smith said Common Core was a failure.

Remember it this way: The readers don’t care about you. You are only the middleman between them and the information. Your job is to convey information from sources to the readers, as efficiently, accurately, interestingly and unobtrusively as possible. **The readers don’t care what your questions were; they want to know the answers.**

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6.2: Chapter Review

Chapter Review

- Attribution’s purpose is to help the reader decide whether to trust the information.
- In academic writing, citations allow readers to find the original information behind each statement. In professional writing, attribution more generally allows readers to decide how much to trust each statement.
- Each sentence should contain one fact; each paragraph should contain one idea.
- Break up long paragraphs to help readers recognize and understand the points you’re making.
- Focus solely on reporting facts.
- This textbook does not include opinion writing. Stick to what you know to be true.
- Readers don’t care about you.
- While first-person writing is a part of professional writing, this textbook avoids it. Don’t use “I,” “me,” etc. to refer to yourself in the story.
- This extends to the implied first person, such as “When asked about ...” As a writer, you should fade into the background. You are not the expert; you are just the messenger.

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6.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 6.3.1

Select a sampling of news stories from reputable sources. Examine each and create lists of the facts they contain, along with whether those facts are attributed to anyone or anything and how that attribution is phrased.

Analyze your list. What kinds of facts are stated without any attribution? Do you agree that those facts can stand on their own? Where attribution is present, does it follow the formats described in this chapter, or is it done another way?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Summary Ledes

7.1: Summary ledes

7.2: Chapter Review

7.3: Optional Exercises

Why Summary Ledes Matter

The beginning of a story in journalism – most often a single paragraph – is called the lead, often spelled lede for ... reasons. No matter what form it takes, the lede in journalism has one key purpose: to get the reader to keep reading.

Every story has to start somewhere. Think about how you would start if you were telling a story to a friend. Maybe you'd tease them first: "You won't believe what happened to me!" Or you might start from when an event began: "So, I was walking to class this morning ..."

Those might work, but what if your friend is in a hurry? You might give her the basic facts right away: "I almost got run over by some old guy on a bicycle outside Franklin Hall this morning."

If your story is interesting enough and your friend isn't in too much of a hurry, she'll stick around to hear more. But even if she has to run, at least you told her what happened briefly.

That mix of motives, worrying not just about intriguing the reader but also providing the basic facts quickly, describes the summary lede. It's not the only way to start a story, and often isn't the best. But it's efficient and effective when you want to get to the point quickly.

That's why the summary lede is the most common way of starting a news release and why it has a solid place in online journalism.

In addition, writing a good summary lede means practicing important skills: identifying the key elements of a story and writing concisely.

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7.1: Summary ledes

Inside a summary lede

This is a classic summary lede:

> Cleveland police arrested 32 people Thursday after a protest at City Hall about officer-involved shootings turned violent and two police officers were injured.

The 5 W's

If you've had any exposure to journalism before this course, you've likely learned about the 5 W's. You can see them at work in the lede above:

- What (the main action)
- Who (the person who carried out an action, or the person acted upon)
- When (the main action occurred)
- Where (the main action occurred)
- Why (the reason for the main action)

Although this lede provides a lot of information, it still may draw the reader into the rest of the story, because it doesn't answer every possible question. How did the protest turn violent? How serious are the injuries? What led to the protest? What's going to happen to the protesters?

You can use the 5 W's (and sometimes "how") to decide what goes into your summary lede. It's not as easy as filling in blanks, though. You have to think about the right answers for each W.

In the example above, the "when" and "where" were easy. The reporter had choices to make, though.

- What's the main action? Is it the arrests, the protest or the violence? Something else? (A difference choice would have affected the options for "who" and "why.")
- Are the police or the protesters the most important "who" to put at the start of the sentence?
- Is it fair to characterize the protest as violent?

Beyond the 5 W's

What else is worth putting in the lede? The 5 W's are useful, but you need some other guidelines. These help you decide what the 5 W's of a particular story are, and which should be in your lede:

1. What is the most recent event the story includes?
2. What is the most important event or fact in the story?
3. What other facts would add news value or help readers understand the significance of the story?

Using those criteria, examine the example again.

What (and When): The order of events goes like this:

> Police shootings → Protest → Violence → 2 officers injured → Arrests

From that list, it looks obvious that the arrests were the most recent action. Depending on when the story was written, though, the reporter might have known about later events, such as whether the arrestees got bail or what a hospital said about the condition of the officers. If "most recent" was the only criterion, one of those would be the lede.

However, the current status of the arrestees doesn't seem very important. If the officers were in grave condition or dead, that could change things. If they were not seriously injured, the reporter's choice here would be the most appropriate.

In many instances, the most recent thing *hasn't happened yet*. **The future is newer than anything in the past.** If you had the right information, our story might start out like this:

> Protesters arrested after a violent downtown Cleveland demonstration will be arraigned in court Tuesday afternoon.

Who: Some reporters might opt to start the lede like this: “Thirty-two people were arrested Thursday ...” That emphasizes the big number of arrests and makes those people the focus. It doesn’t even say “arrested by police,” because who else would be arresting anyone?

That alternative, though, would require writing out the number (because you can’t start a sentence with digits) and using passive voice (“were arrested”). An active-voice lede only delays mention of the 32 people by two words. Finally, considering the multiple connections in the story -- police were injured, and the protests were sparked by police shootings -- the reporter could feel fully justified in writing it as in the example.

Why: Not all ledes need a why. If your lede is “Two armed men robbed a downtown bank Wednesday,” you don’t need to add “to get a lot of cash.” The motive is understood. But if arrests are the main action, readers will want to quickly know why. One way to answer that question would be to describe the charges: “Police arrested 32 people on charges of vandalism and assault,” perhaps.

Here, the reporter chose a broader answer, which required more reporting. You can describe the charges made against individuals easily; they’re on the official record. To characterize the protest as turning violent, the reporter would have to know details, and would have to have witnessed them or heard them described by multiple others.

What else: We described this extra information in two ways: what would interest readers, and what would help them understand the significance of the story. Those often overlap.

The point of the protests, for example, adds context. That it involved complaints about police actions to begin with makes the arrests more significant. But it also adds news values, at least by following up on the past coverage of police shootings and community reaction.

Choosing what else to put in a lede is a difficult but important task. Summary ledes are supposed to be short, propelling the reader quickly into the rest of the story. But a lede that fails to mention key news values is selling the story short. The reporter here chose just two added facts, both likely to grab the attention of many readers.

Remember the beginning of this book, where we discussed the many kinds of news values and multipliers? Think about those as you're constructing summary ledes.

Which news values are present in your story? Those are candidates to be mentioned in the lede.

Very often, your story will have many elements that provide news value for your readership. How do you choose? We said news values aren't just present or absent; they can have varying strengths.

Which news values bring the greatest strength to your story? Those are the best choices for the lede.

Key concepts

These ideas apply to all summary ledes. They also have uses in other kinds of ledes.

Brevity

Most summary ledes are **one or two sentences long**.

That’s not a lot of words to summarize a story. News writers use several methods to squeeze more information into fewer words.

Choices

A news writer has to be selective. Part of the challenge in professional writing is improving your news judgment, the general term for the ability to make choices such as which stories are worth covering and which facts are most important.

The main thing to remember about the choices you make in writing a summary lede: **News values depend on the audience.** What parts of a story will be most useful or interesting to *your* readers?

Also, keep in mind that the summary lede is only the start of your story. You have more paragraphs below to expand on information in the lede or mention secondary elements.

Even the 5 W’s are not exempt from selectivity. Summary ledes may omit the “where,” the “when,” the “why” or even the “who” in some cases. The only absolute is the “what.”

As you write your first summary ledes, you may be asked to stick to all five. But you’ll read news stories that omit one or more.

Heavy winds tore trees from the ground throughout Kent Wednesday.

That lede has no “who” (don’t anthropomorphize the wind). If the windstorm caused injuries, the lede would mention those. With only property damage, there’s no need to bring a “who” into the lede.

Levels of specificity

When the example lede in the previous section was written, the reporter knew exactly when the first arrests were made, so the lede could have included a “when” anywhere in this ladder:

At 4:07 p.m. → Around 4 p.m. → Thursday afternoon → Thursday → This week → This month → This year

Summary ledes usually will not use the most specific reference; that can be provided later in the story.

A writer will decide how specific to be based in large part on the type of news value a detail provides. In this story, specifying the “when” could provide timeliness. However, if this story was being published the next day, anything more detailed than “Thursday” wouldn’t add much to the perceived timeliness. If the main action had happened at 11:30 p.m., it might be worth writing “late Thursday night.” If it had happened many days before, “last week” could have worked.

Look at that lede again. How many other elements had levels of specificity that were left for later? For example, it just says “Cleveland police.” Were they regular patrol officers or a SWAT team? How recent were those police shootings? How many were there? For each choice, the reporter must look for the point that delivers the peak of news value for the least specificity.

Why should you want less specificity? Because being unnecessarily specific, especially in a lede, may confuse or distract the audience. Why, your readers will wonder, does it matter that this happened at exactly 4:07 p.m.?

Names

Using full names in a lede can be not only wordy but also confusing. If your lede says “Police arrested John Jones,” but readers don’t know who Jones is, they won’t understand why the name is important.

You could write “Police arrested John Jones, a political science sophomore,” and student media readers would get the significance: He’s one of them. But you’d accomplish just as much if you kept most of the description but skipped the name: “Police arrested a student.”

Summary ledes **avoid using names of people or organizations unless they’re already well known to the readers.**

Think about the news values: If a specific name adds prominence to the story, include it. If it doesn’t, save it for later in the story.

In some cases, it's not clear how familiar someone is to your audience, and there is no bright line dividing those who should be named in the lede from those who shouldn't.

Some common situations:

- The person is familiar to a segment of the audience, but not all of it.
- The person is familiar to the audience, but possibly not by name.
- The person held or holds a prominent position, but you're not sure if your readers know that.

If you're in a gray area, you may be able to compromise: Name the person, but also include the identifier that helps anyone unfamiliar with the name understand the significance. For example, if an actress in a popular Netflix series is coming to campus, you might be fairly sure many students know the series and the actress's character, but they may not know the actress's real name. Identifying her as "Danielle Brooks, who plays Taystee on 'Orange Is the New Black'" covers your bases.

Long names

A student story about a campus event said in the lede that it was hosted by “the College of Communication and Information and the Journalism and Mass Communication Diversity and Globalization Committee.”

Jeepers. The reader almost needs a bus ride to get from one end of that to the other. **Keep long names out of the lede whenever possible.** (The names of groups sponsoring events usually aren’t worth putting in the lede anyway, but we’ll talk about that in another chapter.)

Other keys

It's not enough to be concise.

Proper tense

Print writers generally write in the past tense, because most of what they're writing about has already happened long before the stories are published. (Of course, sometimes they write about scheduled events using the future tense.)

Broadcast journalists use the past tense when appropriate, but a standard broadcast format uses present tense in the lede to give a sense of immediacy.

Online writers may want to provide the same sense of immediacy as broadcast reporters, but they can't control how long it will take for readers to see their stories. In general, treat ledes online as if they were for print: Use past tense for past events.

Attribution

Even though a summary lede is an intentionally incomplete summary of events, it cannot escape the need to attribute anything other than established facts.

Consider this pair:

> BAD: Police arrested five Garden Heights men Tuesday after they were caught placing explosives under an Interstate-71 bridge.
> BETTER: Police arrested five Garden Heights men Tuesday and accused them of placing explosives under an Interstate-71 bridge.

Unless a reporter was underneath that bridge, watching the men, the first lede is potentially libelous. It can be verified through official documents that the men were arrested, but what they were doing is a matter for the courts to decide. The difference between convicting someone without a trial and doing your job correctly can be a matter of just a few words:

> BAD: Police arrested a university student Saturday for urinating outside a downtown bar.
> BETTER: Police arrested a university student Saturday and charged her with urinating outside a downtown bar.

First words

The best summary lede will start with one of the most important elements of the story. Usually, that's a "who"; occasionally, a "what." Almost never is it a "when" or "where." Alas, this seems to be a common mistake among students new to news writing.

> BAD: On Wednesday, police arrested 32 people after a protest ...
> BAD: At City Hall, police arrested ...

For similar reasons, if attribution is needed it goes at the end of the lede, not the beginning, unless the name of the source is a big part of the story's newsworthiness.

> BAD: Police said five Garden Heights men tried to place explosives under an Interstate-71 bridge Tuesday.
> BETTER: Five Garden Heights men tried to place explosives under an Interstate-71 bridge Tuesday, police said.
> ACCEPTABLE: University President Sarah Sarahi said Tuesday that Taco Tontos is better than Chipotle. (If this appeared in student media, the president is presumably well known to readers.)

Provide new news

What else would a news story do? Many bad ledes are bad because the writer failed to tell the readers something they didn't already know.

> BAD: The new school year began Monday in classrooms across our region.

Well, duh. Even those who didn't know which specific day school would start surely knew it was about that time of year. But how do you craft a better lede when you're writing about something that happens every year? The answers lie in doing reporting. Maybe you discover something new about this year:

> BETTER: Classes began at 9 a.m. Monday as a new law mandating later start time took effect.

Or you decide that there is no breaking news, so you abandon the summary lede and take a softer approach:

> BETTER: Six-year-old Mandy Jones clutched her mother's hand as she approached Smithson Elementary Monday morning for her first day in school.

Provide news that matters

Sometimes, your lede is dull because you haven't thought carefully enough about the story. Consider this trio:

> BAD: The city school board met Wednesday.
> BAD: The city school board met Wednesday and voted on a new academic calendar.
> BETTER: City students will start the school year later and finish earlier, after the school board voted Wednesday to change the academic calendar starting in fall 2020.

The first lede says a planned event happened. Boring!

The second mentions a specific issue came up at the event – but it doesn't even tell us whether the vote was favorable or not, let alone explaining the change.

The third focuses on the most important thing – the change, and how it affects students.

Note



Figure 7.1.1: King Kaufman, left, and "Stacy" from Kaufman's video "Taking the Lead."

Writer King Kaufman was working with Bleacher Report, a sports news site that used volunteer, amateur writers, when he created a video series (opens in new window)explaining how to write better ledes. Here's an excerpt:

King: I can pretty much guarantee that you can make your writing a lot better by writing better leads. You do that by getting right to the point. Let me show you what I mean.

To do that, I have to take you back to a very dark time. High school. It was 1981. Terrible things were happening in the world, mostly me having to go to high school every day. So I'm walking across the yard when my friend Stacy comes running up to me.

Stacy: King! Did you hear? Someone shot the Pope?

King: She couldn't get my attention any better if she grabbed me by the throat. I'm intrigued. I want to know more. Now she can fill me in on the background. Imagine if she'd done it a different way. See if you recognize your own writing this time.

Stacy: King! The Roman Catholic Church is the world's largest Christian church based in Rome. It's one of the oldest institutions in the world. ...

King: I'm bored. She's telling me all this stuff I already know. And even if I don't know it, it's not interesting to me because I don't know why she's telling it to me.

> So she lost me before she even got to her main point. The Pope got shot. If I were an online reader, I'd have clicked away. Now I hear what you're saying. You want to bring the reader up to speed. Fill them in and you're not boring. You're a pretty clever writer. Watch.
>
> **Stacy:** King! Papal assassination seems to happen all the time, but it's been nearly a thousand years since last murder. And nearly 20 since the last attempt. Until today, Pope John Paul the second. ...
>
> **King:** See, that was a little more interesting. But she still lost me before she ever got to her main point: *Somebody shot the Pope.*

A common flaw in summary ledes is placing the focus in the wrong place. Consider this lede:

> BAD: Mayor Thomas O'Connor announced Thursday that the city council had approved an increase in the city income tax rate to 2%, from 1%.

That sentence implies the most significant news value is that the mayor did something (because his name is first). And it focuses on the announcement, not what actually happened. Let's try a revision:

> BETTER: The city council approved an increase in the city income tax rate to 2%, from 1%, Mayor Thomas O'Connor announced Thursday.

That's better. Instead of making the announcement the key action, this version shifts to the significant event -- the council's approval of a tax increase. Actions are almost always more important than announcements. But we can do even better:

> BEST: Citizens will pay twice as much in income tax next year because the city council approved a rate hike to 2%.

This puts the impact of the event at the start. We can even drop the "announced" part because something like a city council vote can be independently verified; we don't need the mayor's attribution.

The basic principle is that consequences are more interesting and important than actions, and actions are more interesting and important than the act of announcing them (in general). In formula form:

> Consequences > Actions > Announcements

To avoid the "announcement" trap, watch out for ledes that start like this:

> BAD (probably): John Jones announced that ...
>
> BAD (probably): Major Industrial Co. released a report that ...
>
> BAD (probably): Big State University revealed that ...

Ask yourself: WHAT was announced or revealed? WHAT did the report say? Then take it a step further if you can: WHAT does the action announced mean for my audience?

Give away the punchline

Basic jokes have a setup and a punchline, in that order.

> A PRIEST, a minister and a rabbi walk into a bar. The minister complains about how distracted his congregation was the previous weekend. The priest says the minister should blame himself, not the congregants.
>
> The rabbi disagrees. “I’ve seen his flock. They always look like they’d rather be somewhere else. But at least he doesn’t have it as rough as me. My temple -- I could just as well be talking to a stone wall!”
>
> “Ah,” the priest says, “both of you are whiners. A good priest could have that stone wall weeping and regretting its sins in 15 minutes. Preaching is easy, if you do it right. It doesn’t matter who you’re talking to.”
>
> They keep arguing and keep drinking. Eventually, they make a bet. Each one will go out into the woods and try to convert a grizzly bear. Whichever one could claim the bear as a member of his religion would win the bet.
>
> A week later, they’re back at the bar. The priest has a cast on his arm. He’s using a crutch. Angry red scars cross his forehead. “I tried to baptize the bear,” he says. “It didn’t go so well. Not only did the bear not come to church on Sunday, I spent the day in the hospital getting stitched up.”

The minister's head is wrapped in bloody bandages. Both arms are in slings. "I got the bear into a stream to dunk him," he says. "Then I started reading from the Bible, and it was going pretty well. But it turned out to be a trout stream and I was between the bear and the fish. I just got out of the hospital yesterday."

They turn and look at the rabbi, who was delivered to the bar in an ambulance. He's in a full body cast, bent into a wheelchair, moaning loudly.

The priest holds a glass of Scotch up to the rabbi's lips so he can take a sip, and then sits back. "Well," the priest says, "I guess none of us won the bet."

The rabbi calls out, "No! I won!"

"What?" The minister almost falls off his stool. "You converted the bear? But you're barely alive!"

That's how you tell a joke. You build up to the climax, filling in more and more intriguing details. A summary lede does the exact opposite. It gives away the best stuff right up front.

Oh, did we leave out the punchline in the example above? Well, the equivalent of a summary lede for this joke would go this way:

"In hindsight, I should not have started with circumcision," a rabbi said Monday, explaining why a half-ton grizzly bear attacked him in the woods.

Giving away the punchline, whether the news is comedic or tragic, is a common criticism of the summary lede. Some stories lose all their punch if the key information is in the first line. Writers sometimes get around this by blurring the summary lede into a teaser lede.

A rabbi's poor choice for a method of proselytizing put him in the hospital but won him a bet Monday.

If you think about it, that's just moving further along the ladder of specificity. Acceptable? Yes, if the story warrants it. For most basic news stories, however, the punchline isn't nearly that strong and won't lose much value by going first.

Deconstructing summary ledes

See how the summary lede works for different stories.

Example 7.1.1

Consider this simple summary lede:

One person died in a single-vehicle crash on Hudson Road in Franklin Township early Saturday morning.

What choices were made?

Table 7.1.1 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Reasoning
One person	Who	The person isn't well known and has no characteristics (such as being unusually young) that would increase the news value. So no name is used and the description is vague.
died	What	A death can make readers sorrowful, adding to news value. And it's just humane to place the death before the crash in priority.
in a single-vehicle crash	Why/how	It's natural for readers to wonder why or how someone died, and it's the manner of death that makes this newsworthy.
on Hudson Road in Franklin Township	Where	A single death in a car crash is likely to be of interest only to a local audience, so let's assume this appears on a local news site. Naming the street and community add the news value of being close to home. It's not necessary to use a specific address.
early Saturday morning	When	Why not just "Saturday"? News sites usually try to post stories quickly, so "early morning" could increase the timeliness factor. And those words may also suggest another answer to "why."
(no words)	Context	No other information is needed to understand the basics of this simple story.

Example 7.1.2

Now consider a different kind of story.

> Rihanna is set to star in a 2027 movie from filmmaker Lee Daniels, co-creator of Fox TV's "Empire."

Table 7.1.2 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Reasoning
Rihanna	Who	Rihanna was a major celebrity; many readers will be interested in a story just because it's about her. There's at least one other "who" in the story -- Daniels -- but he's not as prominent and doesn't add as much news value.
is set to star ... in a movie	What	Short, strong verb. Consider how much better this is than a wordier alternative such as "will have a major role."
2027	When	Why choose this rather than saying when the announcement was made? Because the most important thing to her fans will be when they can see the film. And because this is the most recent event, based on the notion that the future is more recent than the past.
from filmmaker Lee Daniels, co-creator of Fox TV's "Empire."	Context	What makes this movie stand out from others? In the writer's judgment, Daniels and "Empire" add news value and make Rihanna's role more significant. Note that while including Daniels' name, the writer hedged their bets on his familiarity by labeling him a "filmmaker" and adding more background.
(no words)	Where	Adds nothing. The writer chose to focus on only those elements that added the most news value.
(no words)	Why	Sometimes the "why" goes without saying. Rihanna's famous, Daniels has experience and, well, a job's a job.

Note that neither lede includes attribution. Should they? In the car crash, you might add "police said." But if you confirmed the facts by checking also with the hospital and a witness, the facts could stand on their own. In the Rihanna story, "is set to" hedges your bet. You don't know that she will star -- things happen -- but because an announcement was made, you can say for a fact that she might.

Different audiences, different ledes

The right lede depends on the specifics of a story and whom it’s aimed at.

Example 7.1.3

Start with a basic summary lede written for a student news site:

> The Kent State women's basketball team added three players during the early signing period after its division-winning 2016-17 season.

Table 7.1.3 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Reasoning
Kent State women's basketball team	Who	The "who" doesn't have to be an individual. Here, the most news value comes from this being a school sports team. Note that this news probably came via an announcement by a coach or other athletic department official, but the writer properly chose to focus on the impact, not the announcement.
added three players	What	Few student readers would be familiar with high school players, so adding names wouldn't add news value.
the early signing period	When	A "when" doesn't have to be a day or date. Here, the most important "when" is that this is during a period when teams compete for top players.
after its division-winning 2016-17 season	Context	Is this needed? The writer could argue that the team's recent success provides context for its ability to reload with new talent.
(no words)	Where	Not important.
(no words)	Why	There might be an important reason, but if you don't know for a fact, don't speculate.

Now let's look at how the lede could morph because of other information or being aimed at a different audience.

Table 7.1.4 Alternative summary ledes

Change	Lede	Explanation
One of the new players is exceptionally talented.	The Kent State women's basketball program added the Ohio high school player of the year during the early signing period after its division-winning 2016-17 season.	The detail adds news value. But the player still might be unfamiliar to student readers, so only the description is used. Two other players were also signed, but that doesn't add much value, so it can wait until a later paragraph.
The story runs on a site with a broader audience, such as a national recruiting newsletter or a metro newspaper.	Ohio's high school girls basketball player of the year will go to MAC division-winning Kent State.	Because the audience is not restricted to Kent State, the balance of the news value comes from the quality of the player; that goes to the front. Should the name be used? That would depend on the reporter's judgment about how familiar it would be to the audience.
The story runs in the player's hometown newspaper.	Mentor High's Katy Kudravi, Ohio's high school basketball player of the year, will go to MAC division-winning Kent State.	This lede plays up the "close to home" angle and uses a name probably familiar to the paper's sports readers.

Building a lede

Now that you've seen some ledes taken apart, let's go in the other direction by putting some together.

✔ Example 7.1.4

We'll start with a set of the 5 W's.

Who: Kent Clarks a cappella group

What: Hosting a concert

When: Friday, 6:30 p.m.

Where: Student Center Ballroom

Why: Sixth anniversary of the group's formation

This is how a student might turn these facts into a lede:

The Kent Clarks will be hosting their sixth anniversary concert at 6:30 p.m. this Friday in the Student Center Ballroom.

That includes all the provided W's. Is it a good lede? We'd give it a C or a low B. Here's why.

Table 7.1.5 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Reasoning
Kent Clarks	Who	The group is the most important "who." But maybe many readers won't know the Clarks.
will be hosting ... concert	What	"Will be hosting" is wordy; it could be shortened to "will host." But there's a bigger problem here. "Hosting" just says an event is taking place. We recommend that you never use any form of the words "host" or "hold" in stories about events. You can do better.
their sixth anniversary	Context	A sixth anniversary doesn't carry any special news value. It's not one of the usual milestones, like a fifth or tenth. And six isn't a big number.
at 6:30 p.m. this Friday	When	In the interest of using the lowest useful level of specificity, "6:30 p.m." could just be "evening." That's enough for readers to figure out if they'll be available. And the "this" isn't needed.
in the Student Center Ballroom	Where	This is a proper level of specifity. If this were happening not on campus but instead in a different city, you probably wouldn't name the building. If it were happening in a small room, you could probably just use the building's name. But this is on campus and most students would know where the Student Center Ballroom is, so the lede should include all of that.
(no words)	Why	There's no need to explain why performers perform, and no indication that there's anything special, such a raising money for charity.

How could we improve this? We can fix most of the issues with rewriting. But the facts we were given don't provide enough for a truly strong lede, so we'll need to do some reporting. Here's what might result:

> The Kent Clarks, Kent State's a cappella group, will present 90 minutes of pop, rock and hip-hop in a free concert Friday evening in the Student Center Ballroom.

What have we done?

Table 7.1.6 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Reasoning
Kent State's a cappella group	Who	The descriptive phrase clues in readers who may not have heard of the group.
present 90 minutes of pop, rock and hip-hop in a free concert	What	Unless you're simply a rabid fan of a cappella groups, or you're dating one of the singers, you probably would want to know more about what to expect than just "a concert." Adding the time and, especially, that it's free add news value because they could be key factors in deciding whether. to attend.
Friday evening	When	This is shorter and still provides enough information for the start of an informed decision by readers.

Example 7.1.5

Let's try another set of the 5 W's. This story discusses sensitive topics; reader discretion is advised. We're using it because it shows that more goes into creating a lede than just applying writing rules.

Who: Anne Harrold, 54, an insurance agent, and her son Neville Harrold, 19, a Kent State sophomore majoring in architecture.

What: Died. Police say they were shot by her daughter, Ellen, who then pointed the gun at herself but survived.

When: Around 5 p.m. Thursday

Where: At their home, 4254 Longsdale Ave. in Stow, Ohio, one of Kent's neighboring cities.

Why: Police said there were rumors of a long-simmering dispute involving the family’s rock band, the Harrolds, of which all three were members. The group has played often in and around Kent.

That's a lot of information. Before reading further, ask yourself: What would I include in the lede? Which facts add the most news value?

Here's one way of writing the lede:

> Kent State sophomore Neville Harrold and his mother, members of a family band, were killed Thursday by his sister, who then attempted suicide, Stow police said.

That's more clauses than we'd usually want in a lede, but the sentence is still clear. And it leaves out many other facts.

Table 7.1.7 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Explanation
Kent State sophomore Neville Harrold and his mother, members of a family band	Who	Three people are mentioned in the notes. Neville is the first mentioned in the lede because he has the most connection to Kent State readers. Why name him? First, some readers will know him personally. Second, some may be familiar with him through the band. Third, many journalists would say a murder victim generally should be named in the lede out of respect. Indeed, some would include the mother's name as well
were killed	What	The sister's attempt is more recent. Presumably she's been arrested, although that's not even mentioned here. That's because the main "who" is Neville, so the "what" must focus on him.
Thursday	When	Presumably this story will publish within a day or two of the event, so this is AP style. Including the time of day wouldn't add significant news value.
by his sister	How	Adding more specific, such as that this was a shooting, would be relatively insignificant compared with the idea that it was a family member. Note that the inclusion of this allegation makes it absolutely necessary to have attribution in the lede.
who then attempted suicide	Context	Including this in the lede would deserve discussion in the newsroom. It certainly would add to audience interest; humans can be ghoulish. But should we be taking advantage of that? What do you think?
Stow	Where	If this had happened in a public place, or somewhere on campus, more details might add news value. In this case, though, just the city is enough.
police said	Attribution	Any time you include an allegation of criminal action, you must tell the audience who's making the charge.
(no words)	Why	The police mentioned a family dispute. Why not include that? The most important reason is that this was based only on rumors. Readers will naturally wonder why this happened, but you don't have anything solid to answer.

Example 7.1.6

This one introduces some important concepts regarding coverage of official announcements.

Who: Alison Janney, 48, Kent State University provost for 12 years and alumna of the school, a resident of Ravenna, Ohio.

What: Announced her resignation.

When: Announcement was made Tuesday at 10 a.m. She said she will stay in the job through the end of the year.

Where: Announcement came in an email from Janney to faculty and staff. A university spokesman confirmed that Janney told President Beverly Warren earlier in the day.

Why: No reason was given in the email. Janney could not be reached for comment.

Once again, you're reporting for Kent State student media. You've been told to write quickly; your editors want the story posted online by noon. Before you read further, think about what you would include and how you would write the lede.

Here's one possible solution:

> Kent State Provost Alison Janney resigned Tuesday morning after 12 years in the job. She will continue in the role until the end of the year.

Table 7.1.8 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Explanation
Kent State Provost Alison Janney	Who	She is clearly the most significant "who." And as provost, usually one of the top university officers, she should be well known to student readers.
resigned	What	You might be tempted to instead write that she announced her resignation. But in most cases, **focus on the effect, not the announcement.**
Tuesday morning	When	AP style requires using the day, not "today." You might say that "morning" isn't needed; that's a judgment call. You would not include a specific time, in part because that's ambiguous -- do you use 10 a.m., when the email was sent, or the unspecified time she talked to Warren?
after 12 years on the job	Context	It would make a difference if she'd only been on the job a few months, or had been there for decades.
She will continue in the role until the end of the year	When	It's unusual to have two examples of "when" in a lede. Here, the resignation is by far the most significant event, so the first "when" should be tied to it. But readers would naturally wonder what comes next, so explaining that requires the second.
(no words)	Where	The inclusion of "Kent State" in her title provides all the news value to be squeezed out of the "where" possibilities.
(no words)	Why	Readers certainly will wonder about her reasons. But you don't know. And you generally should not use the lede to tell your readers that you don't know something.
(no words)	How	Don't be fooled into thinking "in an email" or "in a meeting with President Beverly Warren" is needed. Neither adds news value. And in general, the way an announcement is made is not important enough for a lede.

Example 7.1.7

Now we're going to start with a less organized collection of facts. You'll have to think harder about what you need. You're writing for student media.

- Lisa Goddard, 19, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Black hair dyed blonde, brown eyes, dark complexion. About 5-foot-4.
- Sophomore at Kent State studying nursing. Had a 2.9 GPA. Went to a rock concert last week: Motorhead.

- Kent State Police report: She was apparently standing on a ladder; fell from the window in her fourth-floor room in Koonce Hall. Roommate was in class.
- Unidentified man outside the residence hall called police at 1 p.m. today and said he had just seen someone fall.
- Police arrived a few minutes later. Found Goddard on the ground outside the dorm. She told them she'd fallen.
- Students interviewed who were in or around Koonce told reporters they had heard a scream and a thud, and saw an open window on the fourth floor later identified as Goddard's room.
- Taken by ambulance and is reported in serious but stable condition at 8 p.m. in Robinson Memorial Hospital, 6847 N. Chestnut St., Ravenna, Ohio. Multiple injuries including broken bones and internal organ damage.
- Her parents have arrived in town this evening. They declined to speak to a reporter.
- The university spokesperson referred all questions to the police. Police referred everyone to their report.

It’s Tuesday night. We need a story to run online by the time students wake up Wednesday morning. How can you quickly sort through all this? Use the 5 W's first.

Who: The most important person or organization. Once you decide on that, another question: Are they well known to your student audience? If so, you'll want to name them; if not, a short description will do.

What: What happened? What's the key event? Is it the most recent thing you know? If not, you have to decide whether to use one or the other. Or you could use both; then you have to decide which comes first.

When: Does the "when" matter? If so, when did events happen? What is the lowest level of specificity that will deliver strong news value?

Where: Again, does the "where" matter, and if so, at what level of specifity can you produce strong news value for your audience?

Why/how: Do you know why the event happened, or exactly how? Remember: When in doubt, leave it out.

From the answers to those questions, decide what's most important or interesting to your audience. Then consider two more issues:

Context: Does the audience need any other information to understand the significance of what happened? Do you have such information?

Attribution: Is it necessary to include attribution? Will the lede contain any allegations of criminal activity? Are any of the details you will use in doubt?

Considering all of the above, what would your version of the lede look like? Here's one possible version:

> A Kent State sophomore was in serious condition Tuesday night after falling from a fourth-floor window at Koonce Hall.

Here's the thinking:

Table 7.1.9 The lede, deconstructed

Words	Category	Explanation
A Kent State sophomore	Who	With no indication that Goddard was well known, the most newsworthy description is that she was a Kent State student, like most of your readers. "Sophomore" adds a suggestion of her age.
was in serious condition ... after falling	What	Her condition is the most recent thing you know that's significant, while the fall is the most important. The writer could argue that because some readers may have already heard about the incident through word of mouth or social media, the newest news should come first.
Tuesday night	When	While the fall happened earlier, the decision to put her condition first means that's the most significant time for the lede.
at Koonce Hall	Where	It's likely most students would know the location of most dorms, so being this specific captures the most news value.
a fourth-floor window	Context	Including this specific detail explains why the fall was serious.
(no words)	Why/how	You don't know if this was a deliberate act or an accident. The police report hints that she might have fallen off a ladder, but no more.
(no words)	Attribution	That she fell from her room seems to be fairly established from the police report and your reporting, and there's no allegation of criminal conduct. Later in the story, you will specify which hospital reported on her condition. Some journalists might disagree, but holding the attribution for later in a situation such as this would be common.

As a further exercise, you might discuss what questions you would ask the police and the students in the area.

Example 7.1.8

One last exercise. Getting even closer to how you may encounter stories for real, start with an email sent by your university president. This just popped into everyone's inbox. (The email is adapted from a real one sent by a former president of Kent State.)

> 10:13:04 a.m., Monday, May 9
>
> Dear Kent State Community Members:
>
> I am pleased to announce the appointment of Alice Roosevelt Long, Ph.D., as senior vice president for financial affairs, effective June 10.

I believe that Dr. Long is an outstanding choice for Kent State at this time She brings successful and significant experience in financial leadership and a very cooperative style that is valued by our university community. She has served professionally as our interim senior vice president since Sept. 9, after six years as assistant treasurer. She served with grace and distinction as acting President for much of last year during my medical leave. Dr. Long joined Kent State in September 2015 after 14 years in a series of increasingly responsible roles in finance at the University of Akron and Indiana University at Gary. She holds a Ph.D. in financial administration from Notre Dame University and an MBA from the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University.

My thanks to to every member of our academic community who invested precious time to mee the three finalists for the position during their campus interviews, including students, the vice presidents and deans, the staff in financial affairs, the Faculty Senate's Committee on Administrative Officers (CAO) and members of the Board of Trustees.

With deepest gratitude I offer thanks to Vice President for Student Affairs Marty Barron for his leadership as chair of the search committee. I am also grateful for the dedicated and diligent search committee members who were key to bringing three quite talented finalists to campus interviews: Mary Sunshine, graduate student trustee; Harrison Bergeron, Executive Director, Undergraduate Student Government; Lainie Kazan, Student Diversity Advisory Council; Donald Eider, Director of Student Services; Nike Orange, M.D., Director, University Health Services; Plentyforth Hamlin III, Ph.D., Chair and Professor, Department of Political Science; Leah Snyder, Ph.D., vice president and treasurer; Harold Stassen, Ph.D., Dean, College of Communication and Information, and Assistant Professor of Journalism; Chip O'Cedar, Ph.D., Interim Dean, University College, and Rufus T. Firefly, Ph.D., Professor of Architecture and Interim Chair, School of Visual Communication and Design.

On behalf of all our Kent State community, I congratulate and offer good wishes to Dr. Long upon her selection. We look forward to working together to achieve our vision of Kent State as an affordable "Students First" university.

Best regards,

Beverly Warren, Ph.D.

After you finish reading that epic email -- which, we remind you, is adapted from a real one of similar length -- you quickly search your newsroom's website for background. Based on past stories, you take these notes on Long and the job:

- Kent native
- Will oversee Flash Technology Center, Kent State University Bookstore, Residence Services, Bursar’s Office, Financial Aid, Endowment and Development Office
- Reports directly to Warren; top finance officer of the university
- Was the signer of every student financial aid check and tuition bill since the fall of 2010.
- One of three finalists in national search. Others: Dr. Terrence Hogan, special assistant to the president, University of Eastern South Dakota, Dr. Dione Somerville, vice president for finance, Pittsburg State University
- Search took 17 months, following retirement of Helena Soo.

You need to quickly turn this into a story, and that starts with a lede. You have lots of information. Use the tools you've learned so far to come up with one paragraph to start the story. It's going to be posted as soon as possible.

Below are several possible versions, ranging from the weakest to the strongest. Where would your version fit?

Table 7.1.10 Alternative summary ledes

Lede	Comments	Grade
Alice Roosevelt Long was named Kent State's new senior vice president for financial affairs on May 9 in a university email sent by President Beverly Warren.	Passive voice, which isn't forbidden but could be avoided. Violates AP style ("May 9" should be "Monday.") Uses Long's name, but that's no help to students who don't know her. Provides no context. Uses job title that may not mean anything to audience. Has irrelevant information (in a university email).	Below average.
Kent State President Beverly Warren named Alice Roosevelt Long, the interim senior vice president for financial affairs, to the job permanently in an email sent Monday to the university community.	Warren is not the most important person. Like the lede above, unnecessarily mentions the email. Long name and title awkwardly separate the verb (named) from the prepositional phrase (to the job).	Below average.
Alice Roosevelt Long is Kent State's new senior vice president for financial affairs. Long, a long-time university official, had been interim senior vice president since fall.	Weak verb (is). Still uses long title without explaining what it means. Vague context (long-time university official).	Average.
Kent State has a new senior vice president of financial affairs. She's Alice Roosevelt Long, who has worked for the university since 2015.	Weak main verbs (has, is). Somewhat better context than previous lede, but still vague.	Average.
Kent State's new top financial officer is a familiar name. Alice Roosevelt Long, who signed every financial aid check and tuition bill for years, was promoted Monday.	Emphasizes the job, not the person, and describes what the job does rather than the official title. Includes detail (what she signed) that may remind readers why her name's familiar. Still has a weak main verb.	Above average.
Alice Roosevelt Long, who filled in for President Beverly Warren last year, is now the university's top financial officer.	Uses the thing that would make her most familiar to students. Avoids elements, including the "when," that don't add much news value. Still has a weak main verb, though.	Above average.

Even the best ledes here have some flaws, but nothing major. What's most important is the content. They cut through jargon, such as the specific job title, to focus on what things really mean. They use interesting context to make the story more interesting.

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7.2: Chapter Review

Chapter Review

- The summary lede is the most common way of starting news releases and remains valuable in journalism.
- Summary ledes are appropriate for delivering news quickly and clearly.
- A lede that fails to mention key news values is selling the story short.
- You should be able to identify the who, what, when, where, and why or how in a story. Stories can have more than one of each. To determine the most important W's to put in a lede, you should recognize and be able to apply these standards:
  - What is the most recent event the story includes?
  - What is the most important event or fact in the story?
  - What other facts would add news value or help readers understand the significance of the story?
- Most summary ledes are one or two sentences long.
- Choose only the most important facts; you have the rest of the story to fill in the blanks.
- In most cases, avoid the most specific descriptions of the W's. Use more general descriptions in the lede and get more detailed in the rest of the story.
- Do not use names of people or organizations in a summary lede unless they are already familiar to the audience. Avoid long names in the lede if possible, even if they are familiar to the audience.
- Write in the past or future tense as appropriate.
- Avoid the present tense when writing straight news stories.
- First words matter.
- Start most summary ledes with the main who or what. The when and where should be placed later in the sentence or even in another paragraph.
- Many bad ledes are bad because the writer failed to tell the readers something they didn't already know.
- If a meeting was scheduled in advance, it isn't news that it took place. What happened? If a decision was made, what is the impact of that decision? If a court decides a case, the fact that a decision was reached isn't news. What was the decision? What is its impact?
- Give away the punchline.
- All ledes should be written with the goal of luring the reader into reading the rest of the story. However, the summary lede does not tease; it does not withhold key information. The summary lede's lure is a quick presentation of the gist of the story.

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7.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 7.3.1

Select news stories from a variety of professional and student media. Read and analyze the ledes, using these questions:

- Is this a summary lede or something else?
- If it is a summary lede, which of the 5 W's does it contain?
- Which of the W's are mentioned first? Are those the most important or interesting?
- What event in the story happened most recently (remembering that the most recent event may be in the future)? Is that in the lede?
- For those elements that could have various levels of specificity, do you agree with the choices made about what level was used?
- Is there anything you would take out of the lede?
- Is there anything missing?

Do not assume that the ledes you see are good just because they've been published. Apply the guidelines from this chapter.

Exercise 7.3.2

Using a set of facts that your instructor provides, work in small groups to craft a summary lede. When you're done, send one person up to the board to write your entry. Try to be quick; news moves fast.

Use the guidelines in this chapter. First, decide what's most important or interesting, what's newest and if any context is needed. Then use those factors to decide the most items for each W. Finally, put those together into a sentence or two, with the most newsworthy elements close to the beginning.

Once every group is done, your instructor can point out common issues and specific good or bad points. Pay attention to what they say about all the ledes, not just your group's.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Inverted Pyramid

8.1: Inverted Pyramid

8.2: Chapter Review

8.3: Optional Exercises

Why the pyramid matters

News stories consist of collections of facts -- names, dates, places, events, actions, quotes, explanations, etc. In the chapter on summary ledes, we told you the most recent and most significant of these usually go into the first paragraph. But what about all the other stuff?

Story structure describes how the information in a story is organized. To put it another way, it’s how you decide which paragraph goes where.

The structures used in journalism and public relations are designed to serve the audience. Just as the summary lede works well when the goal is to deliver news quickly and clearly, the structure underneath a summary lede works best when it’s adapted to the needs of impatient readers. And just as with the summary lede, the inverted pyramid is not always the best choice, but it's useful when news is breaking fast.

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8.1: Inverted Pyramid

Pyramids

You know some story structures -- although you may not have called them that -- from previous writing. Maybe you were taught to write a five-paragraph essay. Or you may have been told how to organize a research paper as something like thesis, evidence, conclusion. You use a story structure when you talk to your friends, too. If you start talking about a recent vacation by describing the plane ride out, then go day by day through your return, you're using chronological order.

For basic journalism, you need to learn a different structure. It's called an inverted pyramid.

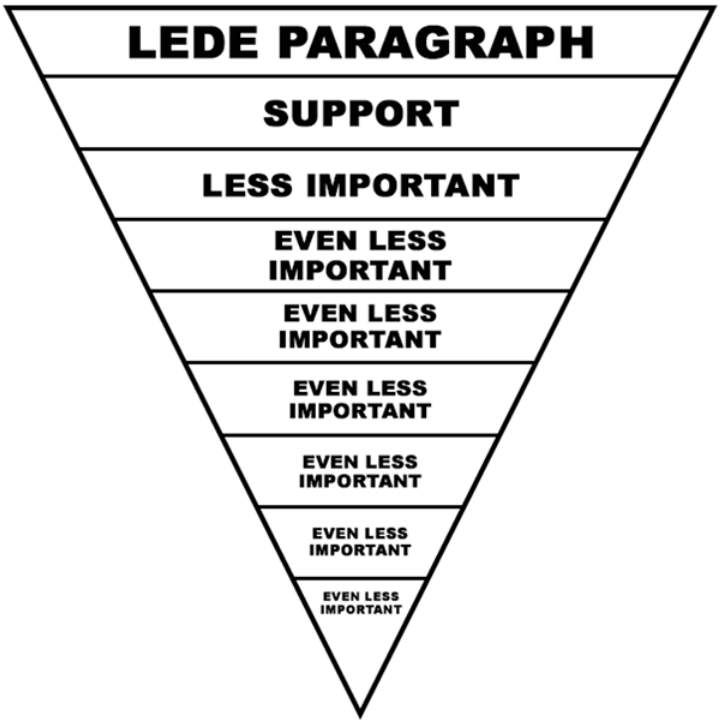


Figure 8.1.1: The inverted pyramid (CC BY-NC-ND John Kroll)

What is an inverted pyramid?

In journalism, "inverted pyramid" refers to a story structure in which facts are arranged in order of importance, from the most important (top) to the least.

If this sounds like an odd way to organize a story, there's a reason for that. The inverted pyramid was not created to make for better storytelling. It was created to keep journalists from being crushed to death by irate printers.

Briefly: A story written in inverted pyramid style can easily be shortened by cutting off as many paragraphs from the bottom as needed. Since each paragraph at the bottom is less important than the one above, a trim of any length is still guaranteed to leave the most important facts.

The crushing comes in because in olden days, newspaper pages started out as wooden forms into which were inserted long columns of heavy lead type. In the chaos of newspaper makeup then, stories would be sent back at whatever length, and a journalist in the back shop would work with a printer to jigsaw those stories into the space available. There was no time to fuss and fidget, and no easy way to drop a few words here and there. Trims had to be made quickly and simply. Journalists who kept printers from doing their jobs efficiently might find several pounds of lead accidentally landing on their toes, or even a squirt of molten metal burning a hole in their new paper shirt collar. Thus, the inverted pyramid.

It turned out the format created to solve mechanical problems had other advantages. With some refinement, the inverted pyramid remains useful today.

What makes a paragraph?

Before we can talk about structure, you should understand the parts that make it up.

That's a fact, Jack

Let's start small. Let's start with a fact.

Here's a fact:

> Afi Little is your university's new vice president of student affairs.

That's about as concise as you can make that point and still be understandable. Leave out any piece and you're skipping something essential. **Most sentences in journalism should contain one fact, and one fact only.**

Here are three facts: She got her bachelor of arts degree in psychology from Baylor University. She got a master of science degree in counseling and student personnel services from Oklahoma State University. She got a Ph.D. in counseling and student personnel services from the University of Georgia. Three facts, but they all have the same subject and verb. They can easily be combined into one sentence without violating the one-fact guideline:

> She got a bachelor's degree in psychology from Baylor University, a master's in counseling and student personnel services from Oklahoma State University and a Ph.D. in the same subject from the University of Georgia.

Here are two facts:

> She had been associate vice president and dean of students. Jennifer Kulics is filling that role on an interim basis.

Those two facts can stand on their own, but they are closely related. They could be combined with appropriate punctuation:

> She had been associate vice president and dean of students; Jennifer Kulic fills those roles on an interim basis.

The ideal in journalism is one fact per sentence (even if those sentences are part of one compound sentence).

What's the idea?

Similarly, **the ideal is one idea per paragraph**.

"One idea per paragraph" is a guideline found in advice for all sorts of writing, not just journalism. Some describe even the bulky paragraphs of five-paragraph essays or novels as having just one idea. Obviously, not everyone agrees about what an "idea" is.

Some writing advice cheats a little by using the number of sentences (usually one to three per idea) as a way of determining how many ideas there are. It's true journalism paragraphs are generally short, which generally means one to three sentences, at least for newspapers. But that's like saying a recipe should contain only the ingredients needed to cook a dish, and then saying you can figure out if you have everything you need by counting the number of ingredients. You might end up trying to make a cake with flour, sugar and light bulbs.

These are some ways writers have tried to explain what "one idea per paragraph" means:

- What is the main point the paragraph makes? Do all the sentences relate directly to that point?
- Could you come up with one short label to describe all the facts in the paragraph?
- Are transitional words (such as "meanwhile," "furthermore," "in addition") at the start of the paragraph, or in the middle? (Transitional words indicate some transition, some shifting of topic.)

No one of these is perfect. For example, "one short label" doesn't tell you how to figure out the appropriate labels. We could lump all the information about Little's life, education and work into the label "background," but that would be a lot to cover in one paragraph.

The real answer probably lies in a combination of these guidelines and the "one to three sentences" tip. If you find yourself adding more sentences than that to one paragraph, give it a second look and think about how you might break it apart.

How not to write

It might help to look at some bad examples of paragraphing.

BAD: Tomiko Kagawi was born in a small town north of Tokyo. She graduated from high school with honors and earned a degree last year in economics from Tokyo University. She bought a red sports car after graduation with money she'd earned as a waitress. She lives in Tokyo now, where she buys and sells bonds for a major bank.

It should be obvious the third sentence, about the car, is out of place. While it flows in chronological order, it doesn't have any topical relation to the other sentences. Let's improve it.

BETTER: Tomiko Kagawi was born in a small town north of Tokyo. She graduated from high school with honors and earned a degree last year in economics from Tokyo University. She lives in Tokyo now, where she buys and sells bonds for a major bank.

That missing sports car may still have a place in the story, but only if the writer can find a logical place to put it.

Sometimes paragraphs have the right information in the right order, but too much is smooshed together.

BAD: Student Success Programs Coordinator Arnold Ziffel sees the impact SmashGuides have and the help they give to the newest members of the Hoover State family. Ziffel explained, "The SmashGuides have a large impact on the incoming freshmen. They (freshmen) can see them as upperclassmen who have been successful, who have done a lot of different things." The SmashGuides are chosen to bring a lot of diversity to the table. "We choose a very diverse group of SmashGuides so they have a variety of majors, a variety of stories, they come from a variety of hometowns," Ziffel said. "They can to connect with many different types of students, and I think that speaks powerfully to feeling connected to the campus and feeling you do belong here, no matter who you are."

The sentences do have something in common; they're all related to things Arnold Ziffel said about SmashGuides. Look closer, though: The first three sentences are about the effect SmashGuides have on freshmen. The other three are about how diverse the guides are. A journalist would first split this into two paragraphs based on ideas.

BETTER: Student Success Programs Coordinator Arnold Ziffel sees the impact SmashGuides have and the help they give to the newest members of the Hoover State family. Ziffel explained: "The SmashGuides have a large impact on the incoming freshmen. They (freshmen) can see them as upperclassmen who have been successful, who have done a lot of different things."

The SmashGuides are chosen to bring a lot of diversity to the table. "We choose a very diverse group of SmashGuides so they have a variety of majors, a variety of stories, they come from a variety of hometowns," Ziffel said. "They can to connect with many different types of students, and I think that speaks powerfully to feeling connected to the campus and feeling you do belong here, no matter who you are."

Another rule regarding paragraphs: Put direct quotes that are complete sentences in their own paragraphs. (More about that in the Quotes chapter.(opens in new window)) The passage needs a few other fixes to end up like this:

BEST: SmashGuides offer help and role models, said Arnold Ziffel, student success programs coordinator.

"The SmashGuides have a large impact on the incoming freshmen," he said. "(The new students) can see them as upperclassmen who have been successful, who have done a lot of different things."

The SmashGuides are chosen to serve all students.

"We choose a very diverse group of SmashGuides so they have a variety of majors, a variety of stories, they come from a variety of hometowns," Ziffel said. "... I think that speaks powerfully to feeling connected to the campus and feeling you do belong here, no matter who you are."

Here's another example.

BAD: Rafa Mandalo eats the same breakfast every morning: two eggs, over easy; two pieces of whole- wheat bread, lightly toasted; a glass of orange juice and a cup of fat-free yogurt. He cooks the eggs and toasts the bread using a hot plate he got last year as a gift from his cousin, who lives in New York City. The hot plate was designed and manufactured in Botswana. It uses small cubes of liquid fuel. A complicated set of wires and baffles spread the heat from the flame over the cooking surface efficiently, saving on fuel and avoiding a concentration of heat that might start a larger fire. Mandalo takes his time over breakfast, chewing slowly as he plans his day. However, like his breakfast, the rest of each day doesn't change.

This paragraph should be split into four ideas: What he has for breakfast, how he cooks it, how he eats it, and the transition (the "however" is a clue that there's a shift in ideas).

> BETTER: Rafa Mandalo eats the same breakfast every morning: two eggs, over easy; two pieces of whole- wheat bread, lightly toasted; a glass of orange juice and a cup of fat-free yogurt.
>
> He cooks the eggs and toasts the bread using a hot plate he got last year as a gift from his cousin, who lives in New York City. The hot plate was designed and manufactured in Botswana. It uses small cubes of liquid fuel. A complicated set of wires and baffles spread the heat from the flame over the cooking surface efficiently, saving on fuel and avoiding a concentration of heat that might start a larger fire.
>
> Mandalo takes his time over breakfast, chewing slowly as he plans his day.
>
> However, like his breakfast, the rest of each day doesn't change.

Notice the second graf: It's four sentences long. "One to three sentences" is a guide, not an absolute rule. Are you getting the idea? This is adapted from a student's story:

> BAD: It's Game 7. The Indians are down two runs in the late innings. Rajai Davis comes to plate and ties the game on a two-run home run. Cleveland Indians beat writer Paul Hoynes of cleveland.com said that was one of his favorite experiences from the entire playoff run. "There had been so many Cubs fans in the stadium the whole series and they were so loud," Hoynes said. "God love Cubs fans, but they were obnoxious as hell," Hoynes said. The Davis home run "shut the Cubs fans up," he said, but Indians fans took up the slack, and it was the loudest the stadium had been in a while.

If you remember to keep one idea per paragraph and to put direct quotes of a sentence or more in their own grafs, you get this:

> BETTER: It's Game 7. The Indians are down two runs in the late innings. Rajai Davis comes to plate and ties the game on a two-run home run.
>
> Cleveland Indians beat writer Paul Hoynes of cleveland.com said that was one of his favorite experiences from the entire playoff run.
>
> "There had been so many Cubs fans in the stadium the whole series and they were so loud," he said. "God love Cubs fans, but they were obnoxious as hell."
>
> The Davis home run "shut the Cubs fans up," he said, but Indians fans took up the slack, and it was the loudest the stadium had been in a while.

One last caution: Once you learn to write in shorter paragraphs, don't overcorrect.

> BAD: A family of four survived the quake thanks to a crying baby.
>
> Heather Mauston, the child's mother, said she woke around 3 a.m. and got up to comfort her 6-month-old daughter.
>
> As she walked to the child's room, she felt the first rumblings and called out to her husband and 5-year-old son.
>
> They fled their bungalow.
>
> Just seconds later, the full impact hit and reduced it to rubble.
>
> BETTER: A family of four survived the quake thanks to a crying baby. Heather Mauston, the child's mother, said she woke around 3 a.m. and got up to comfort her 6-month-old daughter. As she walked to the child's room, she felt the first rumblings and called out to her husband and 5-year-old son. They fled their bungalow.
>
> Just seconds later, the full impact hit and reduced it to rubble.

The first version, split into five one-sentence paragraphs, is choppy. The reader isn't given any clues to how closely one sentence is connected to another. And the impact of the final sentence is weak. In the second version, the change in rhythm from a longish paragraph to a short one adds to the drama.

Inverted pyramid principle

Now that you know what paragraphs should look like, how do you string them together? In an inverted pyramid structure, you follow these guidelines.

The story starts with a summary lede.

Luckily, you already know how to write one. We don't have to say any more about that.

The lede is a promise that must be kept

In a summary lede, you use the most important and interesting facts. You're making a vow to readers: Keep going and you'll find out more about these things. You must follow through. **Any fact given in the lede must be explained somewhere in the rest of the story.**

If the lede left out any essentials, those should go in the second graf or as soon after as possible.

If you left one of the 5 W's out of the lede, put it in the second graf. If there's a strong news value you couldn't squeeze into the lede, mention it up high.

The inverted pyramid assumes you are in a fierce battle for the readers' attention. Putting attention-grabbing topics near the beginning increases the chances they will stick around. Getting the basics of the 5 W's up there assures you that even if they leave early, you've gotten the meat of the story across.

An inverted pyramid story has three parts: the essential, the interesting and the rest.

As you've already gathered, essential information goes at the beginning. What's essential? The reader should know the core of the story, focusing on those elements that add news values.

Some people won a prize: Who won? What did they win? Why did they win?

Is what they said in acceptance speeches essential? Only if it adds news value. Did they accept the award humbly? Then, probably nah. Did one of them do 10 one-handed pushups, at 73 years old? Then, yeah.

After that comes the interesting or useful stuff. A colorful quote. Background that says they used to live in your publication's hometown, but moved away. A more detailed explanation of why they won.

Finally, you sweep up the leavings. Past winners. What the winners will do next. Stuff that no one would miss if it fell off the page.

Many inverted pyramid stories will never get to the third part.

The story gets more detailed as it goes on

It's common for an inverted pyramid story to revisit a topic several paragraphs later. The first discussion is general; the second fills in more details. It might even get a third go-around with even more specific information.

Think about meeting a friend who blurts out, "I got robbed today!"

That's her lede. The who, what and when are there. She's got your attention. You'll ask what happened.

"Well, I was walking to Franklin Hall around 11:30 this morning. This guy stole my backpack with my laptop." You've got the essential information. If you've got time, though, you'll ask more:

"Did he get away?"

"Yeah. This other guy on a bike had almost run into me, so I stopped and started yelling at him. Then this guy runs up out of nowhere while I wasn't paying attention and yanks the backpack so hard the straps break. He runs off in one direction. The guy on the bike pushes me to the sidewalk and races off in the other direction. Somebody called the cops, but by the time they showed up the two guys were nowhere in sight."

Interesting, possibly useful, but not essential. Notice how the incident that was first described in four words -- "I was robbed today!" -- expanded to two sentences, then to five?

Perhaps your friend would keep talking. She might say she was lucky she had backed up her homework to the cloud. The missing homework hadn't struck you as very important, and you wouldn't have gone away wondering if she didn't mention it.

What works in conversation works in writing. Let's look at an example from a story that could appear on a local news site.

Table 8.1.1 A story, deconstructed

Words	Explanation
A truck slammed into a school bus on a rain-slicked road in Franklin Township Tuesday, killing two brothers and seriously injuring four other students and the bus driver.	The summary lede presents the key elements: An accident (what) Tuesday (when) in Franklin Township (where) that killed or injured seven people (who) on a rain-slicked road (possible why). If this were just one item in a collection of brief reports, the story could end here.
The vehicles collided shortly after 7:30 a.m. as the bus turned left from Ravenna Road onto southbound Rte. 43, police said. The truck had swerved onto the wrong side of the road and appear to be out of control, a witness said.	The second graf goes into more detail. It's more specific about the "where" and "when." Because it has a suggestion of blame, it's important to provide attribution. And because it's based on just one witness, it's best to keep it out of the lede.
A 14-year-old boy died at the scene; his 12-year-old brother died later at a hospital, officials said. They declined to identify the victims pending notification of their parents. The bus driver, Erin Morgan, is unconscious and has internal organ damage, according to Resurrection Hospital. Four students are being treated for concussions and crushing bone injuries. The truck driver, Ed Swanson, was unhurt, as were the other students on the bus.	These grafs complete the **essential information** with details about the victims mentioned in the lede. The lede's vow is fullfilled. Readers know everything important. The story could end after this section.
Morgan's bus was near the start of its run and had only eight passengers, the Kent City School District reported. A motorist just behind Swanson's Hastings Dairy truck said its brake lights flashed briefly as it reached a deep puddle. "Then the front of the truck swung hard to the left," Aaron Gold of Kent said, "and the back end drifted right. It looked like the driver tried to fight it back onto the right side, but it swung over again just before the intersection." The bus itself may have skidded through the turn and ended up slightly on the wrong side of the road, several neighbors said.	The story returns to the central incident a third time, telling it in chronological order and greater detail. This narrative may be **interesting** to readers, especially if they're familiar with that stretch of road. It also provides more information about the sentence in the second graf citing the truck's motion. By the end of this section, readers have a complete picture of the event.
Two mile of Rte. 43 on either side of the intersection were closed to traffic for four hours as police investigated. Kent City Schools remained open, but classes were cancelled at the victims' schools and grief counselors were brought in. Classes will resume Wednesday. No decision about possible charges against either driver has been made, police said.	The rest of the story covers additional information not directly relevant to understanding the accident itself. As is common at the end of inverted pyramid stories, the writer makes no attempt to transition from one paragraph to another. Each is an island.

Defining importance

Whether you're told to look for essential information or told to put things in order of importance, you're still stuck with a basic problem: What does "important" mean?

You're not alone. Chip Scanlan, who would go on to a long career as a reporter, editor and writing coach, winning awards and writing textbooks, told this story on the Poynter.org site about his start as a reporter:

> Summing up three hours of a school board meeting or trying to answer the five W's about a fatal car accident in a single paragraph, then deciding what other information belonged in the story -- and in what order -- was arduous and frustrating, especially with the clock ticking to deadline.
>
> Also, as a beginner, I usually didn't have the knowledge of the subjects I covered to easily answer the central question posed by the event: What was newsworthy about it, and in what order of importance?

As Scanlan says, the problem begins with the very first paragraph. But the summary lede is one short paragraph; your choices are narrowed. It gets tougher as you consider the rest of the story. Keep these concepts in mind.

Focus on your audience

Always know whom you're writing for. The student media audience, made up mostly of students, would have different priorities than the readers of the closest metro newspaper, who would have different priorities than those reading a national magazine such as The Atlantic.

In addition to your broad audience, consider segments of it that might have a particular interest in a story.

Look again at the bus crash story. Most of it is written to appeal to a general audience. Within that audience, though, two subgroups -- commuters who use Rte. 43 and parents of children in the affected schools -- had particular questions.

The reporter had to address those concerns. Where they went in the story depended on what the answers were. Since Rte. 43 was already reopened and the schools were back to normal operation, they could go at the bottom.

What if the schools were going to close the next day? Even though that would not affect most readers, it would have a big impact on some. It would have gone near the top of the story, possibly in the second graf.

Commit to the lede

If some angle of the story didn't make it into the first or second graf, it's not essential. The top paragraphs are for expanding on the essentials, not introducing new concepts.

The middle section most often will retain some connection to the first grafs. It may zoom in on some detail, expand the description or offer background. For example, if the intersection mentioned in the story above had been the scene of similar accidents in previous years, that would go in the middle.

The last section collects facts not closely connected to the start of the story, or at least not mentioned there.

Use the news values

Keep using the list of values you were provided earlier in this book. Especially when you're new at this, they can help you identify the key elements of a story and decide how strong each is.

Beat the closing door

King Kaufman, whom you met in the previous chapter, had to coach inexperienced, volunteer bloggers to write interesting posts. Talking about the first paragraph, he encouraged them to think about standing outside an elevator talking to someone inside, just as the door began to close. You'd want to blurt out the most interesting stuff, right?



Video 8.1.1: Taking the Lead Part 2 by King Kaufman | Watch on YouTube(opens in new window) [www.youtube.com] | Transcript available on YouTube

Think about your story in a similar way, except you don’t know when the elevator door is going to close. You could get cut off at any point. Organize your story so if the door closes after a particular paragraph or short section, you won’t be left on the other side saying “Ooh, I forgot to mention ..."

Ask for help

If you don’t know much about the type of story you’re writing, how can you tell whether, say, the dollar figure put on damages from a house fire is “big”?

You find out the answers. For example, you ask the fire chief or look online to compare the cost of fire damages with similar incidents. Don’t guess; report.

Keeping the audience in mind

Stories such as the one outlined above about a traffic accident are common assignments for reporters in local newsrooms. There, the audience is broad, defined only by region. But what about when you're dealing with an audience that has more in common? The story below is more like what you might be asked to write for student media.

Table 8.1.2 Inverted pyramid story, deconstructed

Words	Explanation
Three political science professors, along with colleagues from the English, education and languages departments, won Kent State's top teaching awards Friday.	The lede has the key facts. The most important decision the writer had to make regarded the level of specifity. Naming all the professors would have lengthened it a lot, and most of the names might not be familiar to most students. But saying only that six professors had won would eliminate the potential news value for students who have taken classes in these departments. And, because the awards are given out every year, not providing any detail about the winners would have only told readers that the expected annual event happened.
Distinguished Teaching Awards, given to tenure-track faculty, went to Dennis Hart and Steven Hook, associated professors of political science, along with Stephen Thomas, a professor of teaching, leadership and curriculum studies. Outstanding Teaching Awards for term and non-tenure-track faculty went to Katherine Blackbird, an English lecturer; Vernon Sykes, assistant professor of political science; and Steve Vickery, who teaches American Sign Language.	The next paragraphs quickly fill in the details omitted from the lede. As a brief, the story could end here. Everything promised in the lede has been delivered.
Several winners stressed the interaction between professor and students. "The most interesting of all," Hart said, "is to have other people think, to get them to see the world like they've never seen it before." For Blackbird, who teaches creative writing, the award isn't as important as the chance to work with young writers. "One of the gifts of teaching for me is the opportunity to really learn from my students," she said. Vickery, who is deaf, spoke through an interpreter. He said the award was more for his students. "They're the ones who brought me here," Vickery said.	A reporter should try to gather quotes from as many of the winners as possible. But in choosing which will make the story most interesting to student readers, it's smart to pick those that focus on students.
Each tenure-track winner got a crystal apple and $1,500. The other winners received engraved clocks. The Distinguished Teaching program, in its 40th year, is sponsored by the Alumni Association. The other awards have been given out for 12 years by the University Teaching Council. Professors are nominated at large. Committees choose finalists who submit statements and evaluation records before the winners are chosen.	These paragraphs are background. While the rewards for winning might be very interesting to other teachers, they're not at the top of the list for student readers.

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8.2: Chapter Review

Chapter Review

- “Inverted pyramid” refers to a story structure in which facts are arranged in order of importance, from the most important (top) to the least.
- Although designed to solve mechanical problems, the story structure remains useful for basic news stories.
- Each sentence should contain one fact; each paragraph, one idea.
- Breaking a story into small, one-idea paragraphs makes it easier to understand.
- Inverted pyramid stories start with a summary lede.
- The lede is a promise that must be kept.
- Whatever you include in the lede must be further addressed in the body of the story.
- If the lede left out any essentials, those should go in the second graf or as soon after as possible.
- If, for example, you didn’t mention when something happened in the lede, that W should be addressed high in the story.
- An inverted pyramid story has three parts: the essential, the interesting and the rest.
- Use the news values to determine what’s essential.
- “Interesting” includes quotes, color and other stuff.
- Whatever’s left goes at the bottom. That may include details that aren’t essential to your audience or background that wasn’t need to understand the key points.
- The story gets more detailed as it goes on.
- The lede establishes the starting point, the bones of a story. Later paragraphs add flesh.
- Watch out for the closing door.
- Many readers won’t make it all the way through your story, no matter how engaging it is. If they leave early, though, you don’t want them to have missed crucial information. Write your story as if it could be shortened a paragraph at a time by cutting from the bottom.

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8.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 8.3.1

Select a breaking news story from a professional or student website. Analyze it to see if it follows the guidelines in this chapter:

- Does it have a summary lede?
- Does the lede contain the most important or interesting facts?
- Are those facts expanded upon in the next few paragraphs?
- Beyond the essentials, are there paragraphs that cover other useful information? Where are those?
- Are there paragraphs that contain other information? Where are those?
- How long is each paragraph?
- Does each paragraph contain one idea?
- Does each sentence contain one fact?

Don't be surprised if the story breaks some of the guidelines. But ask yourself: Was there a good reason to do that? Would the story be better if it were rewritten?

Exercise 8.3.2

Your instructor will give you a set of facts. Your job: Arrange them into the proper order, using the guidelines in this chapter, and write a short news story in the inverted pyramid format.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Story Formulas

9.1: Story formulas for events

9.2: Story Formulas for Other News

9.3: Chapter Review

9.4: Optional Exercises

Why Formulas Matter

As a pocket-sized pilot said in the movie “Top Gun,” sometimes you “feel the need, the need for speed.”

In journalism, we call that need a “deadline.” For most news stories, publishing as quickly as possible is essential to maintaining newsworthiness. There’s a reason it’s not called a “slightlywoundedline.”

Story formulas increase your speed because they decrease your choices. They tell you what information you need to gather and how to present that information in the story.

Following a formula may not produce the best possible story, but it will produce one that’s good enough, and do so efficiently. Communicators or not, we reach for such solutions often.

Doing so is called “satisficing.” The term comes from economist Herbert Simon. He coined it to explain a flaw in classical economics: The notion that people will always try to maximize the benefit they get from a choice. Classical economics says if you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door. Simon says that given a choice of a hundred types of traps, the vermin-bedeviled homeowner will choose one that does a good enough job, without studying the alternatives in such detail as to “make impossible demands upon his capacity for thought.”

The true value of satisficing may not become apparent until you’ve finished covering a meeting that ran over its allotted time and your editor tells you the story is due in 15 minutes. When that happens, though -- and something like it will happen to every one of you, more than once in your career -- you’ll be glad we had this talk.

BE SCARED, VERY SCARED

Read the grafs below, the top of a story published by the Express & Star in Wolverhampton, England:

> The latest figures reveal that 56.5 per cent of the 3,476 babies born across the area in 2016 have parents who were not married or in a civil partnership when the birth was registered. That's a slight increase on the previous year.
>
> Marriage or a same-sex civil partnership is the family setting for 43.5 per cent of children.
>
> The figures mean that parents in Wolverhampton are less likely to be get married before having children than the average UK couple. Nationwide, 52.3 per cent of babies have parents in a legally recognised relationship.
>
> The figures on births, released by the Office for National Statistics, show that in 2016, 34 per cent of babies were registered by parents who are listed as living together but not married or in a civil partnership.

Not the brightest writing, but it gets the job done. This is why you should be scared: The story wasn't written by a human. It was generated by a computer fed a pile of data.

This is your future competition. The brilliant journalist A.J. Liebling didn't think he was the best writer in the world, but attributed his success to the right equation.

"I can write better than anybody who can write faster," he said, "and I can write faster than anybody who can write better."

Well, no one can write faster than a computer. Your only hope is to write better. That will take time. The formulas here are a way station, a guarantee that you can at least write as well as a computer.

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9.1: Story formulas for events

Moving past the pyramid

This textbook started with the inverted pyramid because it's the single most useful, and most used, structure for basic news stories. It is not the only structure, though.

Several specific types of news stories have their own standard structures, as well as other individual elements. Some are so rigid that companies use computers to write the stories. In 2015, the Associated Press began using software to generate short stories about corporate quarterly earnings reports. In 2016, the AP added minor-league baseball games. By 2026, news outlets around the world were using AI in many other ways. How does AI construct a news story? By examining examples of previous stories and trying to build a story that looks the same. In other words, AI looks for formulas.

If AI can follow a formula, why shouldn't you just let it do that, and concentrate on other parts of reporting? Because AI doesn't know why a formula works. It just tries to match that formula as closely as possible. So determined is AI to follow formulas that it will make up facts to fit when it doesn't have them at hand.

You're better than that. You have judgment. You can decide whether, on a particular story, it's best to deviate from the formula. You have integrity. You will not make up facts.

In this chapter, we will consider formulas for covering common types of news stories.

For each type, you will be given a list of questions to be answered. These questions collect the basic information each story must have. No matter what audience you're writing for and what newsroom or organization publishes your work, these questions will apply.

In addition, you will be given a specific structure to use when compiling the answers to these questions into a story. While these structures are fairly common, each publisher will have its own particular rules. One newsroom may prefer that obituaries always include the age of the person in the lede, for example, while another may insist it be in a later paragraph. But most organizations will insist on a degree of consistency for obituaries, so being able to follow a formula is important.

Finally, we must consider whether using a formula at all is proper. Labeling writing as "formulaic" is a criticism; it means the writing is predictable, cliched, uninspired. Why are we teaching you to write predictable stories?

- When communicating news, predictability can be a good thing. Let's say you were unable to watch a key basketball game, and you're keenly interested in the outcome. If you look for a news story after the game, you'd expect it to mention who won right at the top, and ideally to include the score high up as well. After you've learned that, you may want to read about key plays and other highlights, but first you want to know who won.

  The story could have begun in many ways, most of them more creative than revealing the outcome. Those ledes may be great for sidebars and follow-ups. But writing for journalism and public relations is performing a service, and sometimes that means giving people exactly what they expect.

  You might even think of it as fast-food journalism. When you go to Chipotle, you know what you want. It's not creativity. It's not unexpected. You ask for a chicken burrito with mild salsa and that's what you'll get. Some news stories have to be like that.
- You're probably not good enough to be unpredictable yet. In any training, you get drilled on the basics before you advance to fancier moves. Painters start with basic shapes; baseball players, with basic throwing and catching. The formulas presented here are what reporters start with. These rules ensure that your stories are clear and provide the information readers want and need. Only when you can understand the basics and execute them are you ready to break the rules.
- Predictability is more efficient. In modern communications organizations, writers may be expected to produce lots of stories every week to fill the yawning maw of a website. Starting from scratch with every story takes time. Using formulas for some stories saves time -- time you can use to better advantage on stories that have more potential.

This part of the chapter focuses on formulas for covering planned events. In another part(opens in new window), we provide formulas for things that you can't predict.

Previews

Writing about an event of any kind before it happens makes many decisions easy. The news -- what the readers don't already know -- is obvious: The event is coming. The W's almost write themselves:

What ...

... is the event (not just name, but description as well)?

... does it cost?

... can the reader get out of it?

Who ...

... is presenting it?

... will appear?

When ...

... is it?

... are tickets available?

Where ...

... is it?

... can readers get tickets?

... can readers get more information?

Why ...

... is it happening? (A charity? An annual event?)

... should readers want to go? (If that's not already obvious from previous answers.)

You may be able to get all that information from a news release or a website. Don't stop there, however. Even a basic event announcement is better if you have at least one direct contact with an organizer. If nothing else, you have to verify the information you were given. "But that's what the news release said" will not satisfy angry readers who missed an event because your story gave the wrong date.

On the other hand, don't pad your story with unnecessary quotes. Whenever possible, limit your interviews to people who know what they're talking about and can add information for your readers.

Building a preview

When we teach reporting classes, we ban any use of any form of the words "hold" or "host" in the ledes of stories about events.

Lede

While it's easy to figure out what kind of information you need for an event announcement story, figuring out what goes in the lede requires some thought. As with any lede, your prime job is to get your audience interested. Ledes like these, adapted from ones written by students, don't do that:

> BAD: The Chamber of Commerce **is hosting** the city's annual Festival of Lights in downtown Kent at 5:30 p.m. on Saturday.
>
> BAD: The Main Street Association **will host** its second annual Putt Around Downtown event Saturday. Local businesses will use their locations as putt-putt holes.
>
> BAD: The glee club **will hold** its first concert of the year, "Let's All Sing," starting with an introductory speech at 6:30 p.m. Thursday in the Morton Auditorium of Massie Hall, located at 1812 N. Macanudo Drive.

Ledes like those have too much of one thing and not enough of another.

They have too many details. Specific times, for examples, can usually stay out of the first paragraph. Being the “second annual” event isn’t very noteworthy. Even the titles of events may be out of place in a lede unless your audience is familiar with them. Other examples of TMI (too much information) in ledes: room numbers, names of sponsors.

They have too little description explaining why readers might be interested. How does the audience know if they’re interested in the Festival of Lights, when you haven’t told them what that means? The second lede says there will be putt-putt holes, but ... who can take part? Why would they? (Answer: There are prizes.)

This should begin to sound familiar. We snuck in an event preview story(opens in new window) back in the chapter about summary ledes. They’re good examples of a key to the summary lede: figuring out the most important “what.”

Don’t just write that an event will happen.

Describe the event in a way that helps readers decide whether they should care. Consider these rewrites:

> BETTER: The Christmas season will kick off in downtown Saturday with carolers, horse-drawn carriage rides, Santa’s arrival and free hot chocolate and cookies.
>
> BETTER: Golfers can putt their way through downtown Saturday as they compete for prizes based on skill, luck or even creative costumes.
>
> BETTER: The glee club will deliver 90 minutes of traditional folk songs at a free concert Thursday evening.

As those examples show, ledes on event announcements should provide basic “when” and “where” information. The “what” should be a description of what’s going to happen, crafted with an eye to the news values established at the start of this book.

Second paragraph

You have two goals: Fit in the names of the event and the sponsor, and get in the detail that would be most important to helping your readers decide if they want to go. In both of the stories we’re looking at now, money is a factor. It could be something else -- how long an event will last, who will benefit, etc.

> The annual Festival of Lights, hosted by the Chamber of Commerce, is free for all.
>
> Putt Around Downtown Kent, sponsored by the Main Street Association, is limited to 100 participants with an entrance fee of $15 per person or $50 for a group of four.
>
> "Let's All Sing" will start at 6:30 p.m. in the Massie Hall auditorium.

Rest of the story

Event announcement stories have a single purpose: **to help readers decide if they want to go.**

Everything you put in should contribute to that purpose. Skip the predictable quotes from the organizer who hopes it will be a success. Stick to the W’s listed above, and make sure you get all of them in.

Table 9.1.1 Preview story, deconstructed

Words	Explanation
The CEO of Kent Watersports will preach entrepreneurism at Kent State's summer commencement ceremonies Saturday.	Few readers would be on the fence about whether to attend the ceremony. But for those who are, what fact might make up their minds? The main speaker and the topic are the only variables in what's a standard annual event.
The university will offer 1,422 degrees -- 908 bachelor's, 427 master's, 67 doctoral degrees and 20 education specialist degrees -- in the M.A.C. Center.	The second graf fills in the specific "where." Without any other big factors determining reader interest in attending, the rest of the graf just provides basic facts.
Robert M. Archer will speaker at the baccalaureate ceremony, which starts at 9:30 a.m. He graduated from Kent State in 1961 with an MBA. "I've spoken to a lot of groups before, but this will be by far the largest," Archer said. "I've never been asked to do a commencement speech before, and being at Kent will make it even more interesting."	The next grafs fulfill the promise of the lede with more details. The quote doesn't repeat what's already been reported or state the obvious; it adds something.
The ceremony for advanced degrees begins at 1:30 p.m. Dennis Cuneo, a former senior vice president of Toyota Motor North America, will speak there. Both ceremonies will be streamed live.	The story concludes with other basic info. The words "streamed live" in the last sentence would be a link to the site.

Think about how you would talk to a friend you're trying to persuade to come with you to a concert. You'd focus on the stuff that would be most appealing to them. If the concert featured their favorite band, you'd start with that. If they had gone through a tough week, you might start by describing the concert as a chance to unwind. In either case, you'd start with the most significant factors in their decision, and you'd leave out entirely minor details.

Now adapt that idea to the challenge of writing a preview story:

Your readers have different interests and different experiences. You can't tailor your story to each individual. Instead, you have to think in more general terms about the appeal of the event.

Your goal as a journalist is not to persuade, but to inform. When you're pitching a friend, you might leave out or downplay aspects of the event that would discourage them. As a journalist, your goal is not to get each reader to attend, but rather to help them decide on their own. You must consider both positive and negative aspects of the event when you prioritize information. For example, if a local event has a high admission fee, that's as important a fact as if it were free, and needs to be mentioned high in the story.

Speeches and panel discussions

With the preview story done, you're now ready to cover the event itself. For student reporters, speeches and panel discussions are common assignments, so let's start with them. What you need to know:

Who ...

... spoke? (This includes names, titles and, if necessary, descriptions of what they do.)

... made up the audience? (What kind of people? How many?)

... organized or sponsored the event?

What ...

... did the speaker say? (Key points and direct quotes)

When ...

... did the speech take place? (Usually, just the day will do.)

Where ...

... did the speech take place? (As with the "when," don't be too specific. Depending on the location and your audience, just naming a building or even a city may suffice.)

Why ...

... was this speaker selected? (You may have answered this by describing what the speaker does under the "who" section. But sometimes there's more to say. For example, if a campus speaker is an alumnus, that's worth including; it the person was speaking after being given an award at the event, that's important.)

... was this topic selected? (Was this part of a regular series? A larger event? Is it related to something in the news?)

How ...

... did the audience react to the speech? (This may include general reactions, such as cheering, or individual comments afterward. However, audience reaction is worth including only if it's interesting. If the audience applauded politely and the comments you collected were as boring as "I liked it," don't waste your audience's time.)

The list is short and seemingly simple. Don't be fooled.

Notice what's missing: None of these questions can be answered with a statement such as "a speech was given." Yet time and again, new reporters will start stories about speeches with sentences such as this:

> BAD: President Millard Fillmore gave a speech Wednesday.

Why is this bad? Why isn't "gave a speech ..." a good "what"?

Think about how little a lede like that tells your audience. If the president appeared on campus, the speech was likely arranged in advance. Remember the first thing you learned: **News is anything the audience doesn't already know.**

Or think about it this way: **A lede is weak if it could have been written before the event happened.**

Would you write this lede on a story the day after an election?

> BAD: Someone was elected mayor Tuesday.

Of course you wouldn't. That wouldn't tell your audience anything they couldn't have already figured out. You would want to specify who won.

Still not convinced? Imagine you missed the last lecture in a class just before an exam. You ask a classmate what you missed. "The professor talked to the class," he says. Ah, great. You're all set for the exam, then, aren't you?

You want to know more to prepare for the exam? What if your classmate instead said this: "The professor talked about quadratic equations."

That doesn't help much, does it? You don't just want to know what the professor *talked about*; you need to know *what she said*.

Yet, when students are pressed to make their ledes on speech stories more specific, they often fall about on listing topics.

> BAD: President Millard Fillmore spoke about patriotism during a speech Wednesday.

Whenever we see one of these "spoke about" ledes, we have the same kind of question: He spoke about patriotism? For or against?

Building a speech story

So far we've told you how not to start a story about a speech. Now let's take a positive approach. (These instructions were adapted from material prepared by Kent State University professor Mitch McKenney.)

Lede

Write down three answers to the W questions:

Who spoke (the person's name and a short description)?

Who made up the audience? (type of people or type of event)

What did the speaker say (choose one key point)?

Look at the speaker again, and ask: **Is this person familiar to my audience?**

With just those questions answered, you're ready to write the lede on your story.

If the speaker is familiar to your audience, then it's worth using that person's name in the lede. The formula:

> (Person's name, possibly with title in front) + **told** + (description of audience) + **that** + (key point).
> President James Garfield told a Republican rally that the United States should stay out of the Syrian conflict.

If the person isn't familiar to your audience, you don't want to use the name in the lede. That formula:

> (Key point), + (speaker's description) + **told** + (description of audience).
> If you're considering a career in crisis management, study psychology in college, an industry veteran told students Tuesday night.

Note the words put in boldface: "told" in both examples; "that" in the first one. USE EXACTLY THOSE WORDS. They work, they're simple and they help to make you stick to the formula.

Look closer at the three variables:

Key point: You have to choose one. It's not as simple as picking the first thing the speaker said or the last. Use the news values you've learned to decide which of the speaker's points will be the most interesting and informative to your audience.

A key point is a statement -- in other words, a sentence. "College is important" is a statement. "The importance of college" is not.

Speaker: Only use a name if it's already familiar to your audience! Otherwise, use a description that tells your audience why they should care about what that person says. (Remember what you learned about the purpose of attribution in journalism.) Your description of the person will provide some indication of their expertise or importance.

Audience: Provide a short description that either makes the story more relevant to your readers ("students," for example) or provides context ("a Republican rally").

Second paragraph

The next paragraph in your story will contain a direct quote from the speaker. Not just any quote, though. It should support the key point you mentioned in the lede, without sounding repetitious.

> President Millard Fillmore told a Republican rally Saturday that the United States should stay out of the Syrian conflict.
>
> "We don't have any business sticking our noses into Middle Eastern tents," Trump said Saturday in Columbus, Ohio.

If you didn't use the person's name in the first paragraph, it should appear in the second.

> If you're considering a career in crisis management, study psychology in college, an industry veteran told students Tuesday night.
>
> "Responding to a crisis is not just about communicating facts; it's also about understanding emotions," said Bruce Hennes, managing partner of Hennes & Associates in Cleveland.

In the first example, the "when" and "where" don't show up until the second graf. Some instructors and editors wouldn't approve. We do.

Third paragraph

Use this paragraph to fill in the details of the W's. If the speech was part of a larger event, this is the place to explain that.

> If you're considering a career in crisis management, study psychology in college, an industry veteran told students Tuesday night.
>
> "Responding to a crisis is not just about communicating facts; it's also about understanding emotions," said Bruce Hennes, managing partner of Hennes & Associates in Cleveland.
>
> His speech was the keynote address of the fourth annual Career Expo, sponsored by the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. About 400 people attended the daylong event in Franklin Hall.

Rest of the story

Provide other key points the speaker made, illustrating them with direct quotes as needed. You do not have to provide a direct quote for every point.

You may also need to fill in other information. For example, if the speech was one of a series, your audience would want to know what comes next. If the audience cheered or booed, you may decide to mention that. Your editor may ask you to include comments from members of the audience.

Cautions

You're almost ready to write a speech story. Before you do, though, here are more don'ts:

Mindreading: Writing that a speaker "thinks" or "feels" or "believes," rather than reporting what he or she said. You cannot read someone's mind. Even worse: writing about the audience as if it were a hive mind and you could read it. **Don't tell the readers how the audience felt; show them by describing the reaction.**

> BAD: The audience, skeptical at first, was won over by the end.
> BETTER: Many audience members asked skeptical questions at the beginning, but by the end each statement was met with applause and even cheers.
>
> BAD: The audience was stunned.
> BETTER: All chatter ceased.
>
> BAD: Everyone loved the speech.
> BETTER: Deafening applause, cheers and foot-stamping continued for several minutes after the speech.

Tick-tocking: Mentioning key points in the order they were delivered in the speech rather than in order of importance. This is especially bad if you waste words making that obvious to the reader: "He started by saying ... Then he said ... Later, he added ... He finished by ..."

Why is the chronological approach usually wrong in a speech story? Because if that's all the reader wanted, he could get it by reading a transcript. The extra value you should be adding, as a reporter, is not only to condense the speech but to think about what the most important messages were, no matter when the speaker got around to speaking them.

Greeting: Speakers typically begin by saying hello and thanking the sponsors for the invitation, and often end with a thank you to the audience or some formulaic phrase, such as Barack Obama's "God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America."

Don't test your readers' patience by including these in your story. They add no information. They're nothing new; they're a dog biting a man.

Analyzing a speech story

Here's how these principles could be applied. Note that in addition to using the speech story formula, the story structure retains the basic structure of an inverted paragraph. At several points, it could be ended and still appear complete.

Table 9.1.2 Speech story, deconstructed

Words	Explanation
Republicans encourage divisions among Americans to defend their do-nothing policies, a blunt Texas politician told the Democratic National Convention Monday.	This story is based on events from 1988, when Ann Richards (later governor) was not well known nationally. The lede starts with a key point. A description of the speaker and another of the context are connected with the word "told." Do you think it's fair and unbiased to describe the speaker as "blunt"? Read the rest of the story and think about whether the evidence supports this adjective.
"They pit one group against the other," said Ann Richards, Texas state treasurer. "And in our isolation we think government isn't going to help us, and we're alone in our feelings -- we feel forgotten."	The second paragraph includes a direct quote illustrating, but not echoing, the key point. It also fully identifies the speaker.
Delivering the keynote address, Richards omitted the lofty phrases typical of such occasions. Instead, she drew laughs and cheers with a procession of stinging one-lines and a gritty attack on Vice President George Bush and his party.	The third graf fills in a detail -- that this was a keynote, or main speech -- and provides a general summary. Following the principle of "show, don't tell," the writer doesn't say the audience loved the speech. Instead, the listeners are described as laughing and cheering.
The GOP throws around the label "special interests," she said, to argue against any government action. "They told working mothers it's all their fault that families are falling apart because they had to go to work to keep their kids in jeans, tennis shoes and college. And they're wrong," Richards said. "They told American labor they were trying to ruin free enterprise by asking for 60 days' notice of plant closings, and that's wrong."	Returning the point of the lede, the story fills in more detail.
She saved her sharpest lines for Bush, accusing him of discovering a need to help families with child care and education only once he became a presidential candidate. "Poor George, he can't help it," she said. "He was born with a silver foot in his mouth." She even zinged the contrast between his East Coast upbringing and his emphasis on building a business in Texas. "After listening to George Bush all these years, I figured you needed to know what a real Texas accent sounds like," Richards said.	Another key point is defined and illustrated. A story about a speech should consist mostly of the speakers words or paraphrses of what they said.
Only a brief section of her speech praised Michael Dukakis, who will accept the party's nomination for president later this week.	The last paragraph adds one more point and directs the readers to what's coming next.

Contests and elections

The formula for stories about the results of contests and elections can’t be as rigid as the one for speeches; there are too many variables. But you can start with a standard set of W’s and general advice about what goes where.

Who ...

... won? (This should include name and descriptive material such as background.)

... lost? (If there were many contestants, you don’t have to name each one, but you should indicate how many there were. If the decision came down to a final few, all of those who came close should be mentioned.)

... made the decision? (In contests, who were the judges? In elections, how many people voted?)

What ...

... was won? (What was the title? What was the prize for winning?)

... was the margin of victory?

When ...

... was the decision final? (For most stories, only the day is needed. In tight elections, saying that the outcome wasn't known for hours after could be interesting.)

Where ...

... was the contest? (As with speeches, specific locations usually aren't important. But if this was an election for mayor, you certainly need to include in the lede what city was involved!)

Why ...

... did the winner win? (In other words, what were the winner's strengths or the loser's weaknesses?)

How ...

... was the decision made? (Most elections, of course, are decided by votes. But as we learned in 2016, you can win most of the votes and still lose the U.S. presidential election.)

Building an election story

Election nights can be nerve-wracking for journalists. The vote count drags on. Deadlines loom. There's pressure to announce a winner before all the votes are counted. Fortunately, while the outcome is in doubt, reporters can prepare some of the story in advance.

Lede

Your primary job when you write about the results of a contest: Tell the audience who won.

Whatever else your first paragraph includes, it almost always must include that information.

As with any lede, you have to decide whether to name the "who" or just describe them, based on familiarity to your audience. In most election stories, the candidates should already be known to the audience because of previous reporting. In many contests, however, you many instead choose to use a description, such as "a senior journalism major."

If you do use a description, choose one that adds the most news value to your story. If you write about a literary contest, the winner's class year and major may be less interesting than the fact her first language is Chinese, not English.

Many election and contest ledes will add another angle -- something about the event or the outcome that taps into a different news value. Examples:

> Rob Chmura defeated Edward Albee to become president of the Undergraduate Student Government on Tuesday, in an election that drew less than 5 percent of eligible voters.
>
> A sophomore engineering student, who only entered the Mr. Flash contest because he was bored while waiting for his friends to join him at Ray's Place, went home with the title Wednesday.

Next paragraphs

The second graf should support the lede. Unlike the speech story, the second graf of a contest story doesn't have to be a direct quote -- but it can be. Like the speech story, if the lede doesn't name the winner, the second graf should.

By the third paragraph, any other key questions should be answered. That includes the nature of the contest, if it's not obvious or familiar to the audience. If the Mr. Flash pageant is relatively new, for example, the campus audience may not be clear about its purpose or how the decisions are made; those things should be explained high in the story.

Rest of the story

The order of information in the rest of the story depends on news values; at this point, a contest story becomes much the same as any inverted pyramid. Information you may want to include:

Comments from the winner and perhaps some losers. If these people have interesting quotes, they may go high in the story. But if their statements are the same boring things you've heard a thousand times, don't risk losing your audience's interest. Bury the quotes at the bottom of the story -- and paraphrase them if they're very boring.

Details of the contest. The Mr. Flash pageant has five elements -- men's formal wear, celebrity impersonations, swimwear, talent and questions. You may want to use highlights of those in your story.

Again, use your news judgment. If a particular element -- say, formal wear -- wasn't interesting and didn't contribute significantly to the results, you don't need to describe it. Nor do you need to list the elements in the order they were presented on stage. As with a speech, you get to rearrange them in order of interest. Your job is not to transcribe, but to be selective.

Background of the winner. Even in an election story where the candidates are famous, the winner deserves more than the mention of her name. Where this goes in the story depends on factors such as how unusual that background is in the context of the event (a political newcomer's background is more newsworthy than that of a veteran politician).

Comments from others. The contestants or candidates should be the focus of your story. However, others may have worthwhile, interesting things to say. Just be sure the comments you use have both those characteristics. A judge's comments explaining why someone won may qualify, if they provide detail. A random spectator's simple statement of pleasure to have seen the contest? No one cares. Trust us: No one cares.

Other planned events

If something unexpected happens on campus -- say, a fire breaks out in a classroom building -- most students won't be at the scene, so they'll naturally be curious about what happened. They might want every detail, and want to know how it happened step by step.

But when an event is a planned one -- a formal dance, a career expo, a community fair -- your potential audience consists of two groups: students who were there and know what happened already, and students who chose not to be there and probably don't care much about what happened. That explains why you have to think carefully about how you write after-the-event stories. The biggest concern: **Don't bore the reader.**

It is so important that you avoid boring the reader, in fact, that the first question you should ask yourself as you sit down to write is not one of the 5 W's but: Is this worth a story at all? **The mere fact that a scheduled event happened is not worth a story.**

Some of our students say that statement was the top thing they remember from taking a class with us. This pleases us, because it's an important lesson.

Writing about event previews, we mentioned that we banned the use of "hold" or "host" in ledes. That rule applies even more vigorously to stories written after an event. Yet when we search the archives of our university's student newspaper, we found story after story with ledes like these:

> BAD: The Student Senate held its last meeting of the semester Wednesday evening.
>
> BAD: The Foreign Students Association hosted a presentation about India and Pakistan on Monday.

There were so many of these that we stopped compiling them after the first 50, and we'd only gone back a few years. And we kept finding ledes like that showing up on the student media website. (Written, we trust, by students who hadn't yet gotten to our class.) This is a very common and very dull practice.

How do you do better? Sometimes, you'll know heading into an event that news will happen: The speaker will have something to say; a winner will be selected. The details of what the speaker said or the identity of the winner could not have been known in advance (presumably), so you have something to tell your readers that they don't already know.

Even with those stories, though, you can't take reader interest for granted. If there's a putt-putting contest downtown, not on campus, and the winner is someone not connected to the university, why would student media readers care who won?

What if you're covering a sorority raising money for charity by sponsoring a walkathon? There will be no winners; you know going into the event that you won't be able to passively observe the event and still come away with a story, as you can with a speech or a contest.

Instead, you need a plan. You can take one of these approaches, arranged roughly in order of difficulty. Which approach is best? That depends on the event and on your reporting. But one thing is key to all of them: **Plan your coverage before you go to the event.**

Event story forms

If you just show up and hope magic happens, you'll quickly discover you're no wizard. The best reporters have at least a Plan A and Plan B for an event -- one type of coverage they expect will work, another they'll fall back on if needed.

Outcome

Was the event a success or a failure? To write this story, you first have to figure out what the measure of that should be. Just asking an organizer for a general response won't be enough. Organizers will always say their events are successes.

Nor can you rely on your own gut instincts. We saw a rally for Walter Mondale's 1984 presidential campaign in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The crowd looked big (to us) and sounded enthusiastic. Looked like the Democrat was riding high. But Mondale won only one state and the District of Columbia that year, and he lost Michigan by a 3-2 margin. So much for our gut instinct.

You need some specific measure. Is it a charity event? Then, how much money was raised? The plain figure won't tell you enough to make a judgment, either. You should have asked the organizers in advance how much they expected to raise. You should have checked on how much was raised in previous years, or at similar events hosted by other groups. Even events without monetary goals can be judged. How many people attended? Is that number higher or lower than in the past?

If you've done research in advance, you can write a lede like this:

> ACCEPTABLE: A near-record crowd descended on Ravenna this weekend for the 34th Annual Ravenna Balloon-a-Fair.

Telling your readers it was almost a record puts the attendance in context, suggesting the fair was a success. Here's an example of what happens when you provide a number but not context:

> BAD: More than 150 participants attended the fourth annual Art, Design and Architecture Fair on Sunday in the Student Center Ballroom.

Because 150 people in one place isn't an overwhelming number, readers can't judge whether this is a good thing or a bad thing. The size of the crowd is there, but without context this lede is no better than saying "The fourth annual Art, Design and Architecture Fair was held Sunday."

Depending on using an outcome as the basis of your story only works if there will be a significant, quantifiable outcome.

Reporting opportunity

To write an outcome story, you probably can get the key facts from an event organizer. You may want other interviews to add depth, but the heart of your article will be one interview. The next category adds a degree of difficulty by forcing you to build the core of your article on several interviews.

The basic idea: Don't focus on the event; use the event as an opportunity to interview several people in one place at one time.

You're covering a career expo. You might be able to write an outcome story based on the number of students attending or the number of companies exhibiting. What if neither of those is significantly changed? One answer is to decide there's no story. Another, though, is to go into the event with a plan that doesn't depend on the event itself generating news.

Who will be at the expo? Recruiters and students who want to be recruited. What stories might need just those types of sources? Maybe an advice story: How to get over your fear of job interviews. Ask students what makes them nervous, or what they don't understand about interviewing. Ask the recruiters what they look for in interviews, or what they think applicants should know. Ask both groups for funny or telling stories about interviews that went spectacularly wrong or right.

Often, planned events can be covered much like a speech or panel discussion, following the same kind of lede/second paragraph formula. For example, you go to Earth Fest, where several organizations have set up booths about their eco-friendly operations. At one booth, you learn that the local park district wants to partner with student groups on clean-up efforts. The park official tells you that young people are the key to saving the planet. At another booth, a group is showing ways students can reduce the waste they produce. Even though this is event is not staged like a panel discussion, you can cover it the same way. You can start with the key

point that young people are important, followed by a quote. A third paragraph will fill in the details of the event. You'll continue with other things you learned.

Many kinds of events can be reporting opportunities, but you can't just show up and hope an idea pops into your head. Think in advance about what kinds of stories could be produced using the kinds of people who will be there as sources.

Images

Every year, our college town's downtown becomes one big party on a Saturday around Halloween. Individual bars or restaurants may have costume contests; groups of students or visitors may have their own informal drinking contests. But that's not the point.

The whole thing isn't organized, so any crowd numbers you get will be wild guesses; you can't make a fair comparison to past years. You could count the number of arrests -- and some years, that might be newsy -- but a few disorderly conducts more or less won't mean much.

Still, it's a major event filled with wacky sights and sounds. You can make a story based on presenting those sights, sounds (and even smells), with passages such as this from a student reporter:

> Santa Claus in a red onesie strode down Water Street, passing half a dozen individuals wearing Guy Fawkes masks. A masked clown leaned out a window above Old City Bank, greeting passersby who glanced up toward him.

Image stories have to pass three hurdles.

Quantity: The event has to generate enough interesting items to carry most of the story. "Interesting" here means either out of the ordinary or unique to a particular event. Santa Claus in a red onesie walking past a bunch of Guy Fawkes impersonators hits on both counts. "Red and blue balloons bobbed from children's hands" could apply to any one of a million community events.

Reporting: You have to find these items. You will have to roam the event for a long time, paying close attention to everything around you, taking notes and names. Passive observing won't be enough. You'll want quotes to add to the picture, like this passage, from the same student:

> Tina and Vince Sferra parked on one of the benches on the corner of Erie and South Water Street, taking in the costumed sights throughout the evening. Vince, 49, a lifelong Kent resident, said he's been to nearly all the town's Saturday night Halloweens.
>
> "All these park benches around here are full of the older generation because we all just sit and observe: dinner and the shows, so to speak," Tina said.
>
> Vince said Kent's Halloween isn't what it used to be.
>
> "Times have changed," he said. "It's gotten a lot crazier. Kids here can get pretty wild and extreme, but I guess were like that once."

Writing: You'll have to turn your notes into a complete, captivating picture of the event. You'd better have many more items in your notes than you can fit in your story; image stories require throwing out a lot of dross while selecting the most golden moments. And you'll need to be at your most creative, using strong verbs and precise descriptions.

A story based on images takes a lot of time, and it will only work if the event has interesting things to describe. The value for the readers is mostly in amusement; you're touching on news values such as weirdness or sorrow, anger and the warm fuzzies.

Anecdotes

An anecdote is a very short story. This is about the bare minimum to qualify as an anecdote, again taken from the student's story:

> Members of H20 Church cooked and served up free, fresh and piping-hot pancakes. One bar hopper walking by asked the group, "You going to give a religious spiel?"
>
> "We don't give a religious spiel unless you ask for one," an H20 member replied, giving the man a stack.

Something happens. Two people talk to each other, as opposed to talking to the reporter. Some meaning can be read into their words about the attitudes of the bar hopper and the church folks.

Many anecdotes will be slightly longer and have more detail. A story based on anecdotes requires everything an image story does, but moreso.

You have to roam and pay attention, but you also have to stop and wait for scenes to develop. You probably won't be lucky enough to stumble across enough good scenes, or see them from beginning to end, so you'll have to do more reporting. When you catch part of a scene, you'll interview the participants, and maybe spectators as well, about what happened and why. You'll interview others at random to ask if they saw or heard something unusual; then you'll press them for details and seek verification.

You may get away with one dull sentence of description in a string of images, but one dull anecdote will spread over several paragraphs and kill audience interest. Writing a string of anecdotes is a rigorous test of your storytelling ability -- what to leave in and what to leave out, how to set up a punch line.

When done right, image or anecdote stories make the readers feel as if they were standing beside the reporters, taking it all in. But reporters know the picture they're painting is impressionistic, not photorealistic. They're choosing iconic images and rich anecdotes, like giving readers a two-minute highlight film from a three-hour football game.

That's why the best of these stories rely on fielding an army of reporters to bring back a mountain of moments. When a major steelmaker closed in Cleveland, The Plain Dealer sent about a dozen reporters to the plant and the surrounding neighborhood. One of the moments they came back with was a guy pushing a shopping cart through the mill. The final decision to close the mill had come down so suddenly that the company wasn't prepared, and the shopping cart was filled with layoff notices the guy was distributing. The mill was vast; one reporter could never have covered it all, and might have missed the cart. But with an army, someone spotted it and found out what was happening, and another reporter verified the background with the company. That single image -- one not captured on film -- is something many readers still remember.

Anecdotes are more powerful and engaging than mere images, but they're also far harder to obtain. You may need to mix the two to come up with enough for a story.

Through the eyes

Perhaps you've had this experience: You're showing someone from out of town around your city or campus, and that person oohs and aahs at objects you take for granted, or pulls you along to museums you haven't been inside since grade school field trips, or gushes over a Polish boy sandwich or a deep-dish pizza as if it were an unusual concoction.

To you, your hometown or campus is dull. You've seen it all; you're there every day. But to the eyes of your visitor, everything is new. Watching their reactions makes you look at your own surroundings in a different way.

What if you could use that phenomenon to make a story out of an event? What if you could let your audience see it through a new set of eyes?

You can. But it's hard.

Imagine a local pet shelter has an open house to encourage adoptions. The place has balloons and grilled hot dogs; people walk past the cages and kennels. A couple people adopt dogs. Worth a story? If that's all you've got, then: no.

But imagine seeing that same event through the eyes of a child, particularly a child who has wished for a puppy for a year and doesn't know his parents have finally decided to give in to his pleas.

See him getting out of the car, his eyes lighting up when he sees the animals, but being pulled away first to get a balloon and a frankfurter (his parents have a slight sadistic streak). See him playing with dogs that already have owners, brought back to the shelter for a kind of reunion. See him tugging at his parents' hands, drawing them faux-reluctantly into the shelter. Walking down the rows, stopping here and there. He wavers between two puppies a few cages apart before settling on the ginger one. Now his parents say they have to go. The child looks up at them, his eyes beginning to fill with tears.

"We have to go to the front desk to fill out the papers so we can bring your puppy home," his mom says quickly.

You can take it from there, right? Writing a "through the eyes" story is the easiest part. A straight chronological structure works: first this happened, then that.

The reporting take some effort, making notes on what's happening in front of you and interviewing the people afterward to fill in what they were thinking.

The hardest part, though, is finding that set of eyes. How do you find a set of parents who a) have such a plan, and b) are willing to let you tag along? Do you find them in advance, or take your chances on spotting a likely couple at the event? What if you follow a child all the way and he ends up not liking any of the puppies, or he throws a tantrum before they get to the cages and his parents give up and take him home?

The obstacles are so daunting that you don't see many reporters taking the dare. But if you have the guts, and if you're willing to face the possibility that in the end you'll have nothing to show for all your work, the payoff can be big. Look around campus. High school students come to test out prospective colleges. How does your college look to one of them? Students from China and other countries are getting their first looks at America. What does one of them make of a baseball game? What does Greek Rush Week look like from the perspective of a home-schooled freshman? What does the first day of high school look like to a kid who went from being one of the experienced eighth graders to being a lowly first-year?

Building an event story

Given the many possibilities listed above, we can't provide a formula for these stories as we have up to now; we can only offer general advice.

Lede

Start with your best material.

Don't hold your most interesting image or most telling anecdote for the middle of the story. As professional writers, you're never promised an audience that will read your stories to the end.

Every rule has exceptions. If you're writing through the eyes of someone else, you probably want to use a chronological approach, telling the story from start to finish. The payoff of the puppy story wouldn't be nearly as interesting if the reader knew throughout that the kid was going to get a schnauzer.

Still, you should think hard before deciding. Even with stories structured chronologically, there is a technique (which we'll discuss in more depth later in the book) called "in medias res" -- starting "in the middle of things." You might start that puppy story just before the payoff, with the child's eyes brimming with tears. Before you get to the mom's response, you cut to the beginning of the story. You've told the reader there's going to be a big emotional moment, but not how you'll get there or what happens next.

Rest of the story

Don't forget the event.

Somewhere -- somewhere near the top -- you have to provide the 5 W's. What was the event? When? Where? Who sponsored it? Why was it held? This may seem like obvious advice, but it's easy to get caught up in stringing images together and forget to tell your audience what day all that stuff happened.

Formula choices in practice

Compare the different approaches a reporter could use to cover an event in these two examples. These show only the first few paragraphs; the stories would continue in the same vein.

Career fair

Table 9.1.3 One story, three approaches

Results	Reporting	Through the eyes
The annual career fair for College of Communication Studies students Wednesday set a record for number of jobseekers. More than 400 students met with 62 companies and organizations in the Student Center. The event had been held in downtown Cleveland for five years, but organizers moved it to campus this year to try to reverse declining attendance. The number of job providers was down slightly from 68 a year ago. The college had expected some decline in that number because of the move, Associate Dean Cary Gilfether said. “Obviously, it’s not as convenient for companies based in downtown Cleveland and the West Side,” Gilfether said. “But some of those losses were offset by an increase from Akron and Youngstown.”	The recruiter from Acme Manufacturing Co. finished her interview with journalism sophomore Arielle Morelle by asking if the student had any questions. “Yes,” Morelle said. “I’ve read about Acme’s new line of anvils endorsed by Wile E. Coyote. How are sales going so far?” That was the moment, Acme’s Jane Leeves said, when she decided Morelle would get a job offer. Several other recruiters at Wednesday’s College of Communication Studies career fair agreed they’re most impressed when students come to an interview prepared with intelligent questions demonstrating they’ve investigated the company. More than 60 companies and organizations met with more than 400 students during the six-hour event in the Student Center. Interviews were necessarily short with so many people to see. However, recruiters said, they looked for a few key things to spot the best candidates for follow-up.	Journalism sophomore Arielle Morelle started Wednesday’s career fair with a tall skinny vanilla latte in one hand, an iPad in the other, and fear in her heart. Three hours later, she left the Student Center with two appointments for follow-up interviews, a 2-inch-thick stack of brochures, and one very embarrassing memory. Morelle spent two weeks preparing for the College of Communication Studies event, which drew 62 job providers and more than 400 stu- dents. She devoted an hour a day to researching potential internships or doing practice interviews with older students. “It was scary enough thinking about asking for a job, because I’ve never done that,” she said. “But this was also the first step in my career. I want to be a reporter -- and I wasn’t sure I could really explain why.”

Animal shelter open house

Table 9.1.4 One story, three approaches

Images	Anecdotes	Reporting
You couldn't tell who was more excited at the Portage County Animal Protection shelter Sunday -- the puppies or their prospective parents. Dogs in every shade from beige to jet black, some brindled and some with spots, yelped and leaped and otherwise showed off their adorableness to about 120 families during the annual Family Adoption Open House, now in its fourth year. The shelter uses "family" to refer to any individual or group planning to adopt an animal. Beth Turner, a junior political science major at Kent State who moved into an off-campus apartment this year, was one of the families looking for a canine companion. She cuddled and had in-depth discussions with three puppies before choosing a floppy-eared, purse-sized dog whose black-and-white coat suggested some Dalmation in ots mix. "DeVille -- that's what I'm going to call her -- seemed the most philosophical," she said. Other families used different criteria. "I was looking for the same shade as my Honda Civic," Ravenna store clerk Marty Carson said, struggling to keep his hold on a squirming puffball.	The puppy with fur the color of a foamy latte stood, unsteadily, 2 feet tall on its hind legs. The boy with a mustard mustache stood only slightly taller, and about as unsteady. Tomi Munro, 2 years and 6 months old, tried to high-five the dog. He missed, and both fell on their sides. Neither seemed to mind. Tomi and his parents, Sareah Munro and Aleseeah Halton of Stow, joined about 120 other families at the Portage County Animal Protection shelter Sunday for the annual puppy adoption fest. Tomi went home with the coffee-colored pup, a one-month supply of [uppy chow and a gold-embossed adoption certificate. Others weren't as lucky. Joy Hollyrock of Kent and her 6-year-old daughter, Elvira, went home alone. They started with free food (burgers only; no hot dogs, of course) and face painting. Elvira came away looking like a rainbow spaniel. She ran to the first corral of dogs so fast and so recklessly that her mother apologized left and right in her wake. But when the girl got to the front of the pack, an eager short-haired dog raced up and leaped at her. Elvira shrieked, spun around and buried herself in her mom's skirt.	Finding the right kind of dog to live in an off-campus apartment is easy. Finding the right kind of owner to care for one is much harder, an animal adoption expert said Sunday. "Many dogs will be happy spending most of the day inside," said Erik Feldman, director of the Portage County Animal Protection League. "As long as they get one or two brisk walks a day, for at least 15 minutes at a time, they'll be fine." If those walks are skipped or if the animal's routine is disrupted -- such as being awakened at 2 a.m. -- dogs may respond with increasingly aggressive behavior, he said. Keeping a routine is easier for families who keep regular schedules themselves, so Feldman wasn't surprised that most of the potential owners at his group's annual adoption fest were parent-and-child partnerships. A few college students showed up, including Ami Atkinsson, a Kent State freshman with an undeclared major. She lives in Olson Hall, but hopes to move off-campus next fall. She considered adopting a dog at the fest and boarding it with her parents until then. Students thinking about a pet should think about how its needs will mesh with their schedule, Feldman said.

20th add

Event coverage may be a new reporter's first experience with true deadline work. The festival's just ended; the editor wants to post your story online NOW.

Using formulas, as we've said, is one way to cope. Another: Prepare some of the story in advance.

A "20th add" (different newsrooms have different names for it) comprises a block of paragraphs with background material, written in advance and ready to copy and paste into the story on deadline.

Besides speed, the other advantage of 20th adds is accuracy. The panic of deadline is not a time you want to worry about the spelling of the organizer's name.

Government meetings

Whether it's a city council or your student government, covering a meeting is a standard assignment. But it can be a confounding one. The people around the table may talk in acronyms and shorthand, leaving you in the dark. They may cover a dozen or more issues, forcing you to figure out what's important. Reporting ahead of time is extremely important, because you can gather background information that saves time after the meeting and will make it easier to figure out what matters most.

As with any basic news story, your version will answer key questions.

What ...

... did the group do: did it vote on something? defer action? debate? listen to the public?

Who ...

... spoke?

... voted, and how?

When ...

... was the meeting?

... will changes, if any, take effect?

Where ...

... does the government body govern?

Why ...

... did the leaders vote the way they did?

... is this important to readers? How will it affect them?

Pre-reporting

Most legislative bodies publish an agenda at least a few days before every public meeting. It should at least provide a brief outline of what to expect: What legislation is up for a vote, what reports may be received, etc.

If you're covering government as a beat, eventually you'll be familiar with the issues and be able to recognize them even from a short note in the agenda. But if you're new, or just reporting on one meeting, the agenda might look like a secret code.

Your first step, even before you get the agenda, is to check on past reporting. Issues often take a long time to percolate through a legislative body, so you may see things in previous stories that are coming back.

When you get the agenda, compare it with what you found. Especially look for unfamiliar things, because something new is more likely to be news. You won't understand everything. Time to call or talk in person to someone from government. Who you talk to depends on the size and form of the group. Cities may have a media contact or a city manager who can explain things. For smaller towns or student government, you should be able to talk to the mayor or president or whoever the top official is.

Even if you think you understand the agenda, it's best to make contact before the meeting. Legislative operations can be complex. For example, your city council may require a bill to be "read" at three meetings before a final vote can be taken. And you'll probably need to ask some questions after the meeting; you'll have more success if sources already know who you are.

For similar reasons, if you see a familiar item on the agenda, you should try to contact people who past stories indicate have an interest -- not just government officials but business owners or regular citizens who've spoken about the issue before.

Building a meeting story

We've already told you that the mere fact an event happened is never the most important fact. That applies to government meetings as well.

Lede

In the Summary Ledes chapter, we provided this list of priorities:

> Consequences > Actions > Announcements

That's most important to keep in mind with government meeting stories. What's most important is not that the council met, nor that it voted 5-3 to approve such-and-such legislation. **What's most important is what that means to the readers**: The city will build a new park. The old recreation center will be razed. Voters will be asked to approve a tax increase. That pothole-filled road is finally going to be repaved.

Depending on how many words it takes to explain that, you may want to add context, such as "after the council voted 5-3 Monday to ..." But put the most important thing, the consequences, at the start of the lede.

Other tips:

- State things plainly. Don't start by writing that "The Teen Protection Act will take effect June 1." Instead, "People under 21 won't be able to buy vapes or vape equipment in the city beginning June 1."
- Use what you learned from your pre-reporting to help you decide what's most important. Use your common sense, too. And pay attention to what happened during the meeting. Did one issue draw a lot of public comment? A debate among the council?
- Don't try to pack too many things into the lede. A common mistake is to try to list every item that was voted on. Your job is to assign priorities. You'll have room later to get to secondary items.
- Sometimes, nothing of any importance happens. It's OK to come back from a meeting and tell your editor there's no news.

Note

Journalistically, the right thing to do when nothing happens at a meeting is to skip the story. Realistically, you may have an editor who insists on publishing something, anything. We don't have a solution for that kind of problem, but we can empathize.

At one newspaper, the managing editor was a bit maniacal about judging reporters by how many bylines they churned out. He put pressure on us reporters to produce stories from every meeting, no matter what. Editors like that usually produce unexpected consequences.

In this case, that was the "dead horse queue."

We filed our stories in a computer system that assigned one or more queues -- folders -- to every reporter. A colleague we'll call Jerry -- because that was his name -- created an extra one for himself called "dead horse" -- as in "beating a ..." In that queue, he stored files of background matter on several longstanding issues in the suburbs he covered. The rule was that you needed a certain minimum -- let's say 400 words -- to put a byline on your story. Each of Jerry's files had about 350 words of background, ready to insert.

One of the issues in Saginaw Township was whether to put a traffic light at a key intersection. The township council had been debating this for ages; it had commissioned reports; it had considered different variations. It just kept going. Jerry put together 350 words on the history of the proposal and stored it in the dead horse queue.

Every time he covered a Saginaw Township meeting, he could usually count on somebody saying something about the traffic lights. All he needed was about 50 words to put on top of his story:

The decision on whether to install traffic lights at the Gratiot-Center intersection was delayed Monday by ...

Then he copy-and-pasted his 350 words of background and voila, a byline and a happy editor. But, we're pretty sure, frustrated readers.

We hope you will never have to work for an editor like Jerry's or have to create a dead horse queue to keep your job. But if you do, please, don't let it become a habit.

Second paragraph

You've got two choices for what comes next.

- Fill in more details about the lede.
- Mention one or two other items of interest before returning to fill in details on the lede.

Which you choose depends on how interesting and important anything else at the meeting was. In either case, once you come back to the lede item, stick with it until you've written everything you have to say before moving on to other items.

That will include all the needed details. If there was a vote, what were the numbers? What did members and the public have to say before the vote? What did they say when you asked them after the meeting? What's the history of the issue?

Rest of the story

If you have one or two other items you consider noteworthy, go through them in the same manner. Depending on how much happened, you may even want to finish with a short bulleted list of minor items, no more than one paragraph each.

Unusual events

A good reporter is always ready to pivot when the story they expect to cover gets overshadowed. A lot of the time, the best news out of a government meeting will be a bill that gets passed or defeated. But not always.

We were covering a city council meeting in Muskegon, Michigan, when council members began discussing concerns about hiring for city jobs. A Black council member cited numbers showing people of color were a much smaller percentage of the city workforce than they were of the city population. The mayor, a white man, grew angry as he argued.

"I'm not a racist," he said. "I've had Blacks crew on my boat."

Unsurprisingly, the debate deteriorated from there. "Some of my best friends are Black" is a stereotypically bad way to respond when accused of discrimination. We knew this fight was more interesting than the relatively dull legislation and other matters. After the meeting, we rushed to the council member for comment. By the time we'd finished, the mayor had left. We called him at his home, introducing ourselves. He shouted something we couldn't print and slammed the phone down. (This was ages ago, before cellphones, when the person on the other end could literally hear someone slamming the headset down.)

That was the lede story in the next day's newspaper. Had we skipped that to focus only on legislation, the story would have been buried inside. A good reporter is always ready to pivot.

Game stories

Sports reporting involves many kinds of stories. The most traditional is the "gamer" -- a recounting of a single game. For professional sports, some journalists wonder whether there's still a place for the gamer. So many interested readers will have seen the game live or watched highlights online.

But certainly for high school or college sports, especially outside the big two -- football and basketball -- a gamer story is the only way most readers of student media will know how the game went.

What ...

... was the score?

Who ...

... won? Who lost?

... did especially well or poorly?

When ...

... was the game?

... is the home team's next match?

Where ...

... was the game played?

Why ...

... did the winner win and the loser lose? What were the key factors?

Building a gamer

We were talking to a student about the gamers he'd been writing about the school's women's volleyball team when he mentioned that he had never been to a game. Instead, he relied on a box score and some stats released by the athletic department, sometimes along with quotes from the coach.

Yikes!

That explained why the stories were dull, mostly a series of paragraphs listing some of the changes in the score. That's the kind of writing AI can and is already doing for some media outlets. If you want to show why your employer shouldn't replace you with a piece of software, you must do better. Go to the game!

What you should be aiming for is to not just provide the bare bones of what happened, but also help the readers understand the "why." What was the strategy that turned the tide? Why is that one player so good at kill shots the other side can't return? Give your readers things they can talk about with their friends that will make them sound like experts.

Lede

Gamer ledes should include these items:

- The score
- Who won
- Who lost
- One or two key factors

The factors could be individual plays, pieces of strategy or the exploits of particular players. This is the part that shows off the human touch. Be descriptive.

An alternative could be explaining the significance of the game -- that it sent the winner to the championship, for example.

Next paragraphs

As usual, this is where you'll support the lede by explaining more about those key factors. You might also work in a few other factors. Remember to keep them in their own sections. Don't jump back and forth between them.

If you have quotes from post-game interviews that relate to the key factors, use them here, in the same sections as your descriptions.

Rest of the story

Any other good quotes can go next. But be selective. Avoid the usual dull statements about how they gave 110% and are a great bunch of players. Use quotes that add to the reader's understanding.

If you have the space, you'll eventually want to provide a chronological account. Don't mention every single play. If readers were that interested, they'd have gone to the game. Pick out key highlights and tell them in the order they occurred, using time elements so the reader keeps track of where they are.

Offer analysis, not opinion: Too often, when journalism students say they want to write about sports, what they really mean is that they want to talk about sports -- to rattle off hot take after hot take. Stuck writing gamers instead of appearing on an ESPN panel, they spend most of their words explaining what they think the coach should have done. Analysis is different. It means not only describing key plays, but putting them in context: letting readers know that almost all the team's running plays were to the right, where the defense had a third-stringer filling in. Analysis is hard. It requires an understanding of the sport as well as asking the right questions.

Before you end, tell the readers what's next for the team.

Be creative

If all your story provides are the most basic facts about a game, you haven't given the audience much more than it would get from the numbers in a box score.

Any sports event is about action. Players run and jump, dive and swing. Writing about that action is a chance to use your powers of description.

A century ago, some sports game stories were almost poetry. One of the classic ledes of that era came from Grantland Rice, writing for the New York Herald-Tribune about Notre Dame's football team defeating Army 13-7. He got so caught up in his words that he didn't even tell his readers who won, except by implication:

> Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again.

> In dramatic lore they are known as famine, pestilence, destruction and death. These are only aliases. Their real names are: Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden. They formed the crest of the South Bend cyclone before which another fighting Army team was swept over the precipice at the Polo Grounds this afternoon as 55,000 spectators peered down upon the bewildering panorama spread out upon the green plain below.

By today's standards, that's going too far. As Bob Uecker said in "Major League," "juuuust a bit outside." Maybe this is a more modern example, from a 1994 New York Times story by Gerald Eskenazi about a boxing match:

> A right hand thrown from about 1973 tonight returned to 45-year-old George Foreman the heavyweight title he had lost 20 years ago.

That's got the winner, the result, the "how" and the significance. All it's missing is the loser (Michael Moorer), but after that punch it's likely even Moorer didn't remember his own name.

Your instructor or editor may rue our advice to be creative. A little literary license is a dangerous thing, especially for newer writers. We once wrote an entire story about a school district's budget using a very extended metaphor about a leaky basement (ugh). Still, especially in a chapter like this one that's about making your stories formulaic, it's good to have a reminder that journalism doesn't have to be just facts piled on facts.

What creativity is not:

Jargon: Toed the rubber, plated a run, etc. Once these were fresh expressions, but through time and overuse they've lost their zest. Once, in high school, we had filled in for the student paper's sports editor. We were excited to slip in terms such as "keglers" for the bowling team and "cindermen" for the track team. We thought it was cool. It was just confusing.

Cliches: The team never looked back. The game was a tale of two halves. These kinds of statements are devoid of meaning; they're just filling space.

What creativity can be:

Setting the scene: Let the readers know what it looked like, sounded like, even smelled like to be at the game. Was it so cold at a high school football game that the fans in the stands disappeared into a cloud of steam from their breath? Was the scent of buttered popcorn so strong that it wafted up to the press box?

Making the players human: Don't just report that Ngayo raced for 35 yards. What did he do afterward -- pump his fist? jump into a teammate's arms? When the team lost, did they walk off heads held high or collapse to the ground?

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9.2: Story Formulas for Other News

Preparing for the unexpected

Covering planned events has the advantage of being able to predict most of what's going to happen and plan accordingly. Other types of news aren't as cooperative. But formulas still apply. Knowing the expected formula for a breaking news event helps your reporting by directing your questions, and helps your writing by eliminating a lot of tie spent deciding what goes where.

Polls, surveys and rankings

Numbers have a weird influence on us. Tell us most Americans believe in unicorns and we'll roll our eyes. Tell us 56% of Americans believe in unicorns and the precision sounds more believable.

All the more reason to tread carefully when reporting on numbers, such as those in opinion polls or rankings.

Who ...

... did the survey or ranking? (This should include name and characterization. Does it have a built-in slant?)

... paid for it? (A reputable polling organization may be relied on to conduct itself appropriately, but the sponsors may be cherry-picking the results.)

... was surveyed? (How many? Were they representative of the community the survey claims to cover?)

What ...

... were the key findings?

... was the margin of error(opens in new window)?

When ...

... was the study conducted?

Where ...

... was the study conducted? (Online? In person? By phone? At a site likely to attract unrepresentative participants?)

Why ...

... are these results significant? (Do they apply to your audience? Were the findings statistically significant(opens in new window)?)

How ...

... was the study conducted? (Were participants in a survey a random sample of the whole community? Were they self-selected, such as the respondents to an online poll?)

... were the rankings calculated? (Were they based on objective criteria? Were they subjective opinions?)

... were the results manipulated? (Were "don't know" or "didn't answer" responses included? Were some answer categories lumped together? Were adjustments made to the raw results?)

... were the results verified? (Did it rely on opinions, memories or evidence?)

Even if a poll or ranking isn't perfect, you may want to report on it. But you have a responsibility to let readers know the flaws.

Judging polls

A poll usually uses responses from a small set of people to represent a larger population. ("Poll" and "survey" mean slightly different things to many statisticians, but in common language they're identical.) That isn't always true. If you asked all 25 people attending a speech what they thought of the presentation, you might say you surveyed the audience. Most of the time, though, polling refers to using a part to represent the whole.

The first question with any survey is whether the people polled were representative of the whole. Say you're given the results of a survey that says children who have been vaccinated suffer many more chronic illnesses than others.

That statement suggests the results apply broadly. But the survey only involved mothers of home-schooled children. Does that make a difference?

First, it's a curious selectivity, which raises questions. More important, parents who home-school may be more likely to have a bias against vaccination. Indeed, about 40% of those in the survey were completely unvaccinated -- far higher than in the general population.

On top of that, participants were found by asking members of home-schooling groups to volunteer. While any survey must rely on people who are willing to participate, a reputable survey will use measures to try to ensure the resulting group represents the whole. Here, everyone who signed up was included. One would guess those who oppose vaccination would be especially motivated to sign up for a survey that was described in words suggesting it would provide evidence for their beliefs.

It gets worse. The survey doesn't claim to report opinions; it's supposed to be documenting illnesses. But its numbers are drawn only from the memories of the participants. The number of those participants was relatively small compared with appropriate medical standards. And it was paid for by two anti-vaccine organizations.

Evaluating poll results takes digging. But even a nonscientist could look up the sponsoring groups on Google, notice the odd choice of sample population and realize something's amiss.

It's not always that easy. For a rough filter, focus on these questions:

- Are details of the survey design provided? If the organization won't tell you who was surveyed, when and how, you've got no reason to trust it.
- Do you know who paid for it? Even surveys conducted by researchers, such as the vaccine one, may be done with grants from outside groups. If you can't find out, you should be suspicious.
- How many were surveyed? Medical studies are like surveys in that they use results from a limited number of cases to extrapolate for the whole population. One reason these studies seem to contradict each other often is that news media overplay studies that involve only a few patients.
- Are the raw results provided? What questions were asked and how they were worded have major effects on results.

Building a poll story

The most important role of journalists regarding polls is as guardians of reliability. Polls with large margins of error or other suspicious factors aren't worth reporting on.

Lede

This should sound familiar: Start with the results, not the fact that a survey was conducted.

> BAD: The university gave an outline of the results of the Fall 2014 climate study Thursday evening. The 98-question survey, conducted over two weeks last September on the university's main campus, included 7,012 respondents — 22% of the university community, including students, faculty and staff.

Most of those details should be reported (the number of questions isn't newsworthy), but not in the lede. Just as a speech story should begin by telling readers who spoke and what was said, a survey story should start with a key finding and who was surveyed. Most stories will also list the group reporting the survey.

> BETTER: About a third of students surveyed said they have considered leaving because of campus challenges such as intimidation or hostile attitudes, the university reported Thursday.

That's the conservative approach to survey reporting. Some reporters would make the statement broader by cutting out or rearranging qualifiers.

> BETTER: About a third of students surveyed have considered leaving because of campus challenges such as intimidation and hostile attitudes, the university reported Thursday.

> BETTER: About a third of students have considered leaving because of campus challenges such as intimidation and hostile attitudes, a university survey released Thursday suggested.

What all those choices have in common: They list a key finding, describe the population it covers, say it's based on a survey and give a description of the sponsoring organization. This gives readers enough information to make a quick judgment about the credibility of the information.

Next grafs

In a classic speech story, the second graf contains a quote supporting or expanding on the lede. You could do the same thing with a survey story, using either another finding from the survey or a quote from a source connected to it.

No later than the third graf, add more detail about the survey overall, including when it was conducted.

Rest of the story

As with a speech story, continue through other key points. Concentrate on those for which you have more information to provide than just the numbers. That may be context, quotes or analysis.

If you want to include some minor findings, it might be best to put those in bullet points at the end.

Caution

Even a low margin of error can make a big difference in what a poll says, so be careful in how you report.

Say a poll finds that 51% of voters preferred Candidate A and 46% preferred Candidate B, with 3% undecided and a 3% margin of error. Can you write that Candidate A is leading in the race? Not if you want to be ethical and accurate.

The 3% margin of error means that, even putting aside the possibility of a wildly inaccurate sample, all the pollster can confidently say is that A's support is somewhere between 54% and 48%, while B's is between 49% and 43%. It is well within the bounds of possibility, therefore, that B is ahead.

You can write that A led in the poll, of course. But you must be careful to note that this doesn't translate to saying A is actually the most popular with voters.

Judging rankings

You probably know that listicles such as "8 best college towns" are popular online. Even before the internet, releasing rankings was a great way to get publicity.

Evaluating a ranking means asking two simple questions:

- Says who? Does the ranking of college towns come from a pseudonymous blogger? A real estate company that happens to do business in all the towns listed?
- Based on what? Did the ranking use objective criteria, and if so, what were they? Number of bars? Percentage of students living off campus? Did it use opinions, and if so, whose? Those of one writer, who may not have visited many towns? Or those of a national survey of college students, which ... turns it into a survey story, raising all the questions listed above.

Building a rankings story

Releasing a ranking is a great way for an organization to get some publicity. At the very least, the people, places or organizations that get ranked high are going to trumpet that news. Schools, for example, will be quick to send out news releases if they rank near the top of a ranking for any kind of achievement -- or even if they've just improved their ranking while still remaining in the middle of the pack. It's likely that student media will have to consider several ranking stories each year.

Lede

If the ranking is either limited to items close to home, such as "Best 5 burgers in Kent," or doesn't include any local items, start with the winner. Otherwise, focus on the item most relevant to your readers, even if that's low on the list.

> BAD (for a student audience from another college): Northern Illinois University's dorm food is the best in the nation, according to a Gallup poll of students nationwide.
> BETTER: Our university's Dining Services ranks 12th in the country for food quality, according to a Gallup poll of students nationwide.

As with poll stories, the lede should explain where the information comes from. If it's based on objective information or what appears to be a solid survey, the attribution can come last. If it's subjective, putting the attribution first gives readers fair warning.

> Bernie Sanders is the most popular politician on campus, based on turnout for rallies and petition signatures.
>
> A popular YouTube cosmetics blogger ranks our university's women the fourth-most beautiful among U.S. campuses.

Next grafs

If you didn't include the top-ranked item in the lede, put it in the second graf. Add details about the W's. The "where" usually isn't worth the lede, so include it in the second or third graf. Provide a brief explanation of the methodology.

Rest of the story

Most ranking stories have two key elements.

- **Why:** What factors most affected the results, either overall or for the one item your readers care about?
- **Reaction:** If the ranking includes only one item of local interest, get reaction both from people associated with that item (say, the head of Dining Services) and people familiar with it (so, on-campus students).

If the ranking is limited to local items, do the same for at least the top one or two. If the bottom of the ranking is an insult, allow for rebuttal. For example, a list of the top seven restaurants makes all of them above average, but a ranking of all coffee shops in town might need comment from the one stuck at the bottom.

If you're writing about a ranking that doesn't include any local items ... why?

Obituaries

People die. Sometimes those deaths generate news stories about the impact of the death -- the need to find a new provost, therapy given to grieving classmates. Sometimes the news stories concern the manner of death -- a shooting, a car accident, a public suicide.

Other stories are not about how the people died, but instead about how they lived. Those stories are called obituaries.

At one time, newspapers, especially smaller papers, tried to write obituaries about every death in town. To manage the volume, they wrote most of them following a rigid format, relying on undertakers to get the required information from the family and pass it on to the reporter. The legacy of those strict formulas is reflected in lists of required elements, such as details of funeral arrangements.

As newspapers became more selective in assigning obits, they also raised the bar on content. Reporters were told to go beyond bare mention of club memberships and surviving family. Obituaries celebrated what made each person unique. That produced stories like this one, written by (now professor) Mitch McKenney:

> With nearly four decades in the Downtown Lions Club and three terms as its president, Ben Wolfson earned the life membership Lions International gave him in 1991.
>
> Days before his death of a heart attack at home Monday in Century Village, Wolfson, 84, had finished copying and mailing the club's newsletter.
>
> "He devoted 39 years to the Lions," said club Secretary-Treasurer Phil Wocker. "By God, he worked right up to the end."

Story elements

To write obits like those, you must consider three sets of 5 W's.

Basic info

Who ...

... died?

... are the surviving family?

... in the family died earlier (This could cover parents, spouses, siblings or children.)

What ...

... did the person do for a living?

... clubs, churches or other organizations did the person belong to? (Always ask about military service) When ...

... was the person born?

... did the person die from (that is, what was the cause of death)?

Where ...

... was the person born?

... did the person live?

... did the person die (this might be a city, if it's far away, or something more specific such as a hospital)?

Funeral info

What ...

... services are planned (visiting hours, Mass, burial, etc.)? ... recommendations are given for donations?

When ...

... are those services scheduled?

Where ...

... will they be held?

Life story

Who ...

... were the most important people in the deceased's life?

What ...

... will the person be most remembered for?

... were the most significant events in the person's life?

... were the person's favorite things (hobbies, for example)?

When ...

... did these important events happen? At what point in the person's life?

Where ...

... did they happen?

The first two sets of W's must be in every obituary. The "life story" questions are examples of the types of questions you'll ask. Which of those things make it into the story depend on what's most interesting.

Finding information

For many reporters, reporting an obituary seems like prying, peppering people with questions while they're deep in mourning. It does require sensitivity. "Hey, I hear your old man's dead. Got any good stories about him?" is not a great way to open a conversation with a surviving daughter. However, most people appreciate the idea that their loved one's life will be celebrated publicly. They're often glad to help you.

Where do you start? Often, the funeral home, for two reasons. One, some jerks like to call news outlets and request obits for people who aren't really dead; funeral directors don't joke about things like that. Second, the funeral home has already had contact with the family and knows who's taking charge of the arrangements. If someone is steady enough to do that, they're the best person to start your interviews with.

Yes, interviews -- plural. Obituaries, like any other stories, are best if you have multiple sources and gather much more information than you'll put in the story. Exactly who you talk to depends in part on what the deceased did and how famous they were, but likely

choices include family members, employers, co-workers and leaders of clubs or churches.

Alana Baranick, an award-winning obituary writer for The Plain Dealer, left behind a free online guide, available through the Poynter website. Some of her top tips:

Look for gaps: The summary of life events you get from the funeral home or a family member may focus on just a few things. For example, a son may talk only about his mother's last five years, battling cancer. Ask, gently, what she was like before that.

Get specifics: As is the case with any interview, you have to be on alert for potentially interesting facts or anecdotes. When you recognize them, pile on questions so you can tell a vibrant story.

Some of your questions will clearly ask for interesting things: "What's the first thing you think of when you remember growing up with your twin brother?" But people, even in the best of times, aren't always the best judges of what's interesting. Often, they will consciously skip over details that they think are too common or dull, but it's the details that make each person unique. Alana wrote:

> If the deceased "retired from the automobile plant," what automaker did she work for and for how long? Which plant? When did she retire? Did she paint the car chassis, type requisitions for parts or manage the plant? If the dearly departed "worked in the food service industry," did he wait tables? Did he fill vending machines with candy and potato chips? Did he manage a steakhouse or run a chain of delicatessens?

Make your own choices: Alana again:

> Saying that someone, who was past retirement age, belonged to the American Association of Retired Persons does not enhance that person's obituary. The same principle applies to various professional memberships. We expect lawyers to be members of bar associations, physicians to belong to medical organizations and engineers to be affiliated with engineering societies. ... If the deceased had served as president of a particular professional group, we might mention it, because that generally shows a high level of commitment.

Building an obituary

Because obituaries should fulfill several tasks, a formula helps organize and reminds the writer what's needed.

Lede

The most commonly used lede for obituaries follows a formula with two possible endings:

> (Name), + (interesting fact), died (day) + *either* at + (location) *or* of + (cause).

Sometimes one other fact is added, as in this example from McKenney:

> William H. Tylander, who ran the former Tylander's lumber yards in West Palm Beach and Fort Pierce, died Monday of heart failure. He was 85.

Even when the lede is different (usually that means a short anecdote), a paragraph just like that one should appear very high in the story. Here's how Leila Atassi of cleveland.com wrote about her former co-worker:

> Award-winning Plain Dealer obituary writer Alana Baranick once guiltily confessed that while normal Americans spend the weeks before Christmas buying gifts for their loved ones, she spent her time "hoping and thinking and praying" for the ironic death of a department-store Santa, a toymaker or a Christmas tree farmer.
>
> "The dark side of my fixation is that these subjects, whose stories are so much fun to share at such appropriate times, have to be dead," Baranick wrote in a 2005 blog entry -- adding that a local "elf" had just suffered a fatal heart attack en route to his elf gig. "I do feel guilty when I get what I wish for."
>
> Baranick -- who, for decades, captured the ironies and humor in the stories of ordinary people and brought the dead to life for an extra day -- died Friday at a hospice facility in Chattanooga, Tennessee, after a brief battle with cancer. She was 65.

Note one key difference from the basic summary lede: In an obituary, it doesn't matter whether the person was famous or not. Every obit has the person's name in the lede.

Middle of the story

Since an obit is a little biography, the natural structure is chronological. How big a slice of time that includes depends on the person and the space available. McKenney wrote an obit for Willie C. Covington, a DJ “who once kept a suicidal caller on the air until help could reach him.” The lede used that fact and said Covington died. The second paragraph was a short extension of the lede, saying he died from complications of AIDS. The middle of the story picked up the lede’s key fact:

> He was the overnight disc jockey on WPOM-AM (1600) in 1990 when a man called saying he wanted to shoot himself. So Covington -- nicknamed C.C. in 3-D -- put the man on the air and let him talk for 2 1/2 hours, long enough for Riviera Beach police officers to find him standing at a pay phone.
>
> “I had a lot of respect for him," WPOM general manager Ronald Leonard said. "Anyone who can talk someone out of that -- that’s doing something."
>
> Covington left the station about a year ago but continued to play music at clubs and parties. His sister Theresa Perry said he kept in touch with the man who wanted to kill himself.
>
> “Not long before the end, he said he wanted to check on that man one more time and make sure he was going to be OK," Perry said.

In that example, you see the two types of quotes most common in obits: direct descriptions (“I had a lot of respect for him”) and illustrative statements (“Not long before the end, he said he wanted to check on that man one more time.”). Don’t be afraid of funny quotes in an obituary, as long as they reveal something about the deceased. From Atassi’s story:

> Jack Baranick described an eccentric, lovable mom, who would support him and his younger brother Michael in any undertaking, no matter how odd.
>
> “She would do anything for you," Baranick said. "We had a joke that I could tell mom that I wanted to be Satanist, and she would go out and buy me a goat."

Bottom of the story

What happened in a person’s life is almost always what’s most interesting in an obituary. That’s why it starts the story and forms the middle.

But other information is important for a select group of readers -- those who knew the person. You have to list things such as club memberships that might jog the memory of those who aren’t sure if the deceased was the same John Smith they knew. You have to provide details of the funeral arrangements so they know where and when to go.

Those go at the bottom of the obit, in basic sentences:

> In addition to his sister, Covington is survived by 11 children; his mother and stepfather, Minnie and George Anderson of Riviera Beach; a brother, Franklin Bryant of Augusta, Georgia; and another sister, Diane Hallman of Starkville, Mississippi.
>
> His funeral will be at 2 p.m. Saturday at St. John Missionary Baptist Church, 2006 A.E. Isaacs Ave., West Palm Beach.

Caution

Resist the temptation to write that someone passed away, crossed the rainbow bridge or joined the choir invisible. You may think that's being respectful. AP style says it's being wordy. In stories written to AP style, people just die.

Weather

Veteran news editors have long said stories about the weather are reader favorites. Analysis of online statistics has shown they’re right. Most of that interest flows to stories that tell people what the weather will be. But readers are also interested in stories about the weather they’ve just experienced.

Those are the ones this section covers. It (rained, snowed, hailed) a lot. It was very (hot, cold, windy). Any slightly extreme weather conditions can stir curiosity.

"The weather story formula is tried and tested and true," wrote Mark Leccesse, a media columnist, in 2010. The advice that follows was inspired by his column.

Who ...

... was most affected by the weather?

What ...

... was the main impact?

... were the medical effects? (Did anybody get hurt? Die?)

... comes next? (What's the forecast?)

When ...

... did the weather happen? (When did the extreme conditions start? How long have they been going on?) Where ...

... were the effects felt?

... can people get help?

Why ...

... did it happen? (What conditions led to the extremes?)

How ...

... extreme was it? (What temperature? How many inches of snow?)

Building a weather story

Unless the weather has been extremely unusual -- a killer tornado, say -- the job of writing the weather story will often fall to one of the newest reporters.

Lede

Writing about yesterday's weather has an obvious challenge. If the job of journalism, and particularly of a lede, is to tell the audience something they don't already know, how do you respond when everybody already knows it was icy yesterday?

Two approaches work most of the time, and they depend on the answer to "What was the main impact?"

If the weather caused serious problems -- if several people died of heat stroke, if blowing snow led to a 35-car pileup -- lede with that. Don't waste time getting to the point.

If the main effect was that people sweated a lot or kids enjoyed a snow day off from school, try an colorful lede. Leccesse highlighted this scene-setter from the Lowell Sun:

> Today's forecast for the roof of Michael's Pub & Grill calls for a high of 178 degrees with a zero percent chance of shade.
>
> Same as yesterday.
>
> Yet, somehow, John Manetta, an HVAC technician, and Mike Field, an electrician, who were installing a refrigeration unit in the Tyngsboro restaurant, were able to smile and joke yesterday about spending three days exposed to excessive heat and humidity.

As that lede indicates, writing a weather story generally requires the reporter to go out into the weather. Avoid weather ledes that rely instead on cliches or generic descriptions.

Second paragraph

Well, second or third or whatever comes after your lede anecdote: Provide real numbers. This is where you answer the "how extreme" question, and sometimes the when and where. Most often you can get the numbers from the National Weather Service.

This is also the place to tell your audience what's coming next, briefly.

Rest of the story

If you've started with a hard-news lede about injuries or such, you should fill in those details quickly. If you went the color route instead, there are several elements you need to get in, but the order can vary. This is a good structure for beginners, though:

Bad news: If the bad news wasn't bad enough to go in the lede, it's probably still worth mentioning soon. Did hospitals report cases of frostbite? Were a few people flooded out of their homes? Did schools close? (Don't laugh. That is bad news to some people.)

Assistance: If you've got bad news, follow with how those affected can get relief: how to find a community shelter, what doctors advise to stay warm, and so on.

Benefits: For example, are hardware stores selling a lot of snow shovels? Did the only restaurant still with power have its best night ever?

Color: Scenes, anecdotes and quotes go down here, after you've gotten actual information out of the way.

Be very selective. Charles Dudley Warner, a pal of Mark Twain, wrote and said variations of this: "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." Since Warner was a journalist, I'm surprised he didn't instead say, "Everybody talks about the weather, but almost no one has anything interesting to say about it."

Don't swamp your audience with lots of repetitive, unoriginal quotes. When you do use quotes, put them in context -- for example, by showing the audience where the person was. Leccesse cites this from the Boston Globe:

> In Jamaica Plain, Jacqueline Giang, 27, sought the sanctuary of a library, where she studied for medical school exams.
>
> "The humidity is killing me," she said. "I just feel so dirty constantly."

Forecast: In the second graf you gave the audience a hint of what's ahead. At the end you can fill in the details.

Criminal acts

Covering crime can involve trend stories, court proceedings and much more. In this section, let's focus on only one aspect: Stories that report the commission of a crime.

Who ...

... is suspected of committing the crime?

... was victimized?

... reported the crime? (Who were the witnesses?) ... is managing the case?

What ...

... was done?

... comes next?

When ...

... was the crime committed?

... was the suspect arrested?

Where ...

... was the crime committed?

... was the arrest made?

... is the suspect now?

Why ...

... is the suspect suspected?

... was the crime committed?

How ...

... was the crime committed?

... was the suspect found?

That's a hefty list of questions. Good news: You can eliminate some of them depending on the state of the case -- if no one's been arrested, for example. Bad news: These are general questions. You will want to get more specific, tailoring questions to the nature of the crime. A theft? What items were stolen? Assault? What were the injuries? What condition is the victim in?

The answers won't be clear. Witnesses may disagree about what they saw. Police reports may have gaps or contradictions. The jargon police use may confuse you. Some facts won't be known by anyone you talk to, but that won't necessarily stop them from providing answers.

Getting it wrong can be costly. Any factual errors cost journalists credibility. Factual errors in crime stories can cost them and their employers money, too. Misidentify someone as a suspect, or write your story in such a way that you appear to be declaring a suspect guilty before trial, and you are asking for a libel lawsuit.

Even getting it right can draw criticism.

- Stories usually identify the victims of a crime by name ... but not in cases of sexual assault.
- Stories usually identify the locations of crimes ... but if someone's home was burglarized, does printing the specific address invite others to do the same?
- Stories usually identify sources ... but will naming witnesses open them to harassment?
- Stories usually name people arrested ... but what if they're under 18? What if the police have named a suspect but not charged anyone yet?
- Stories usually provide descriptions of suspects so the public can help ... but what if the description is so vague that it covers a lot of people?

Building a crime story

Presuming you're now scared enough to triple-check your facts, we can consider structure. Specifically, we'll explain a structure first recognized and named by Roy Peter Clark, a writing coach then at the Poynter Institute. Clark called the formula the "hourglass," to describe the way it takes two standard approaches -- the inverted pyramid and the chronology -- and connects them with a short transition, like the neck of an hourglass connects two large reservoirs.

Lede

The top of the hourglass is in inverted pyramid format, so you start with a summary lede. That means short, declarative sentences covering the most important and interesting information. Remembering the warnings about getting things wrong, you have to think hard about whether the lede needs attribution, too. The existence of a police report is not proof that a crime was committed.

> Six garages on Main Street burned to the ground Monday. Investigators said they suspect arson.

You should be able to independently verify that the garages burned down; that part doesn't need attribution. Whether the fires were caused by arson requires attribution.

> A Shaker Heights woman was arrested Thursday after crashing a van with her son inside into her ex-husband's car, police said.

That a woman was arrested is verifiable and would not need attribution. However, the sentence continues, declaring that she crashed a car into someone else's. That accuses her of a crime, and must be attributed.

Note the sentence is in passive voice -- a woman was arrested, not police arrested a woman. Not ideal, but it was done to get the arrest at the top. You could try another way:

> A Shaker Heights woman crashed a van with her son inside into her ex-husband's car, leading to her arrest, police said.

Sometimes passive voice is useful to avoid assigning blame or going beyond what you know to be true. For example, you might know that someone was injured while riding a bike, but not be able to confirm whether the bike rider was struck or ran into something.

> A 15-year-old boy is in serious condition after he was involved in a crash with a truck in Mayfield Heights, police said.

"Was involved in a crash" provides some information in the lede without committing to either version.

Top of the story

Following the lede, the next few paragraphs will fill in details, as in any inverted pyramid story. This is from the story about the Shaker Heights woman:

> A Shaker Heights woman was arrested Thursday after crashing a van with her son inside into her ex-husband's car, police said.
>
> They charged Carrie Jones with assault and child endangerment after the collision that happened around 2 p.m. near Golden Gate Plaza, according to a police report.
>
> The woman's 20-month-old son was uninjured, a police spokesman said.

These paragraphs answer the basic questions, naming the suspect, detailing the charges, saying where and when the incident occurred.

The turn

With such information out of the way, the story turns to a chronological, or narrative, of the incident. In Clark's description of the hourglass, the narrative is set up by a short sentence, such as one of these two:

> Police and neighbors gave this account of the incident.
>
> After talking to witnesses, police described the shooting this way.

The point of the turn is to avoid having to insert attribution in every sentence. Instead, the turn sentence serves as general attribution for what follows. You can read more about this "block attribution"(opens in new window) in the Quotes chapter.

Bottom of the story

The rest of the article walks through the incident step by step. Even though the turn provided overall attribution, more detailed attribution may be provided for specific steps, particularly if they are especially controversial.

> A Shaker Heights woman was arrested Thursday after crashing a van with her son inside into her ex-husband's car, police said.
>
> They charged Carrie Jones with assault and child endangerment after the collision that happened around 2 p.m. near Golden Gate Plaza, according to a police report.
>
> The woman's 20-month-old son was uninjured, a police spokesman said.
>
> According to the police report and interviews with witnesses, this is what happened:
>
> Jones had asked her ex-husband, Arthur Clarke, to pay for a vacation trip to Florida for her and their son, he told police. When he brought the child to the shopping center to hand him over after visitation, he said, he told Jones he would pay only for his son's plane ticket.
>
> He drove away. Seconds later, Jones' Nissan Quest screeched out of its parking space and speeded erratically out of the parking lot, narrowly missing several cars.
>
> By the time she got to the exit, Clarke's Honda Civic was about 500 feet south on Mayfield Road, stopped at a traffic light with other vehicles in front and behind.
>
> Jones drove the wrong way down the left-hand lanes as cars and trucks swerved out of her way. She turned abruptly and T-boned Clarke's car, witnesses said. Her airbags deployed.
>
> Moments later she got out, ran toward Clark's Civic and began punching him through the shattered drivers-side window. By the time police arrived, several other drivers had pulled her away and were sitting on her to keep her from fleeing.

The turn sentence for this attributes the account generally to police and witnesses. Specific attribution is provided for Clarke's contribution, because there were only two witnesses to that encounter and one, Jones, was not talking. "Witnesses said" is also

added when the story gets to the crucial act, the apparently deliberate ramming of Clarke's car.

The basic hourglass focuses on one series of actions or events. The story ends when the chronology ends, although the very last paragraph may be a telling quote or a twist of some sort. The concept can be the basis of more complex stories, too. After the chronology of the main event, the story might flashback to events that led up to it or otherwise add background and detail.

In another variation, short crime stories often follow a similar approach with an inverted pyramid followed by a chronology but skip the turn. The bus crash story from the Inverted Pyramid chapter is an example. In that one, it was simpler and shorter to attribute each element to its specific source rather than spend a sentence characterizing them.

Because crime stories are so potentially damaging, reporting is key. Liz Navratil, who covered crime for a Pittsburgh newspaper, says in this video that the police report was only the start of her reporting process.



Video 9.2.1: Liz Navratil: How to report a crime story | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

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9.3: Chapter Review

Chapter Review

You should be able to explain and use the key elements of several types of news stories.

Event Previews

- Your goal is to help the readers decide if they want to attend the event.
- Don’t start by telling them that an event is going to happen; tell them what’s going to happen at the event that might make it interesting to them.
- Formal titles of events, names of sponsors and other details can go in the second paragraph or below. Tell the readers how they can take part: Where is it? When? Is there a cost? Where do they get tickets?

Speeches and panel discussions

- The lede should not simply tell readers that someone spoke about a topic.
- Select a key point that a speaker made. Paraphrase it in the lede, which should also include some description of the audience (or location) and the speaker. Do not use the speaker’s name in the lede unless it’s someone familiar to the audience.
- The second graf should contain a direct quote supporting, but not merely repeating, what was in the lede. The third graf should fill in any basic information not already provided.

Contests and elections

- The primary goal of a story is to tell the audience who won.
- If the name of the winner is not in the lede, it should be in the second graf.
- By the third paragraph, the reader should have all the basic information.
- Don’t waste the readers’ time with quotes that only say the winner is happy to win.

Other planned events

- The mere fact that an event happened is not worth a story.
- You should be able to briefly explain each of these approaches to an event story:
  - Results
  - Reporting opportunity
  - Through the eyes
  - Images
  - Anecdotes
- Use 20th adds -- background material written in advance -- to make writing on deadline easier.

Government meetings

- Use research to prepare for a meeting
- Focus the lede on the consequences of what happened, not just that the meeting was held or a vote was taken.
- Keep the lede simply; don't try to fit all the meeting's actions into one paragraph.
- Be prepared to shift if something unusual happens

Game stories

- The lede should include basic facts: Who won, who lost, and one or two reasons why.
- Offer analysis, not opinion: Explanations, not your idea of what the coach should have done.
- Don't mention every single play. Even when compiling a chronological section, stick to highlights.
- Avoid cliches in your writing and the quotes you choose.
- Leave room for creativity.

Polls and surveys

- Evaluate the poll. Was it done properly? Does it have a bias? Start with the information most relevant to your readers.

Obituaries

- An obituary should include basic information about the person and the funeral arrangements, as well as some description of the person's life.
- The lede should establish that the person's dead.
- Always use the person's name in the lede, whether it's someone familiar to the audience or not.

Weather

- If the weather caused serious damages or injuries, lede with that. If not, consider a colorful lede.

Criminal acts

- Stories about crimes often follow the hourglass format -- an inverted pyramid on top of a chronology. Never convict someone of a crime without a trial. Attribute descriptions of criminal acts and accusations.

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9.4: Optional Exercises

Exercise 9.4.1

Select a Ted Talk or TedX Talk available on YouTube. Look for ones that include transcripts (they usually do). Pick ones that aren't too long; 10-15 minutes is enough.

Watch and listen to the talk, taking notes as you go on what you consider the most important elements. If you can't write fast enough to capture whole quotes, at least get the starting several words so you can look it up in the transcript later.

Write a short story based on your notes, following the formula provided in this chapter for speeches. For the event, just write that it was a Ted Talk or TedX talk. For the date, just select a recent day rather than the original date of the video.

Exercise 9.4.2

The examples in this chapter are only some of the types of news stories that lend themselves to formulas. Can you think of other common stories you see in your student media?

What about your school's enrollment? Universities usually release those figures at least once a year. Look for examples of enrollment stories from previous years. Then analyze them. What are the common elements? Which seem to be the most interesting? The easiest to understand? Which leave you feeling like something's missing?

Of course, the interest in an enrollment story will depend in large part on what the news is. If enrollment soared or crashed, the story is likely to be more interesting even if the writing isn't great. But try to look beyond that.

Now put together a formula for the next enrollment story. Figure out the 5 W's you'll need (and any "why"). What should go in the first paragraph, the second and so on.

Remember that a formula needs to be flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances. Must the first paragraph always focus on the overall enrollment, or could it pick out some element that was especially noteworthy that year, such as a big swing in enrollment of students from other countries?

Exercise 9.4.3

Event coverage is a common element of student media. Select an event that's at least a week away on your campus or nearby.

Using the guidelines in this chapter, write a short preview story. Remember the key points:

- The goal is not to encourage people to attend the event, but only to help them decide whether they want to.
- The lede should focus on the key elements most readers are likely to use to make that decision.
- Avoid less important factors, such as the name of the sponsoring group or the precise time and location.
- Arrange the rest of the story by first working through other factors potential attendees might consider.
- Save background for the bottom.

Having submitted that story, attend the event. Using the guidelines in this chapter, write a story about what happened.

- Before you go, decide on a couple of potential approaches drawn from the suggestions here.
- Don't use any variation of the words "hold" or "host" in the lede.
- For every sentence you write, ask yourself: Why would readers care about this after the fact?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Scenes

10.1: Scenes
10.2: Chapter Review
10.3: Optional Exercises

Why scenes matter

A lot of journalism, including most of the types of stories described in this book, consists of piling one fact on top of another. We report on a speech: Here's what the person said. We preview a concert: Here's who will play and what they'll play.

But most of the stories we tell each other about our lives are different. We tell our friends what happened: I saw an eagle. It swooped down into my yard. It grabbed a squirrel in its talons. It started to fly away, but I threw a stone at it. It dropped the squirrel, then wheeled around and flew straight at me. I shrieked!

Think about how plays and movies and TV shows work. Small parts of the story may be told in voiceovers, but most of it takes place right in front of our eyes as people do things. In other words, the story is made up of one or more scenes. Think of some of the simplest stories there are, the ones we tell children. The story of the tortoise and the hare would be pretty darn boring if we told it this way:

> A tortoise and a hare had a race. The tortoise won because the hare was overconfident.

That's the gist, right? And professional communicators are supposed to be concise, right? But they're also supposed to capture and hold the audience's interest, just as storytellers have since the days of Aesop and before. Doing that requires making scenes come to life.

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10.1: Scenes

What's a scene?

Sneakily, some other chapters in this book have introduced the concepts that make up good scenes. In discussing news values, for example, we mentioned building up characters(opens in new window). In other chapters, we stressed the importance of details(opens in new window). When we talked about covering an event(opens in new window) through images or anecdotes, we were really talking about observing and recreating scenes, just not using that word.

In storytelling terms, a scene (usually) is a description of continuous action or dialogue that happens in one location, at a specific time. Let's break that down:

Continuous: The scene has no gaps. Two characters in a snowbound mountain cabin talk in front of a fireplace for 15 minutes. They go to sleep. The story then takes up eight hours later when they wake up. That's the start of a second scene, because there was a break in time.

Action or dialogue: Or both, of course. The basic idea is that something happens. If you just describe what a place looks like -- freezing that observation like a photograph -- you haven't created a scene.

In one location: The storyteller has some flexibility here. Say you describe the conversation between those two people in the cabin. Instead of going to bed, they continue their conversation as they walk out of the cabin to collect firewood. Is that a new scene? Some would say yes, but others -- noting that the main action, the conversation, remains continuous -- would disagree.

At a specific time: If your description starts with a phrase such as "Every day, Barbara pours herself a cup of coffee," you're not writing a scene. You're describing an action, but not narrowing it down to one specific time that Barbara had a particular sip.

The idea of having a beginning, middle and end is often included in the definition of a scene. But don't take that to mean that the scene must be self-contained -- that what happens can be fully understood without context, that any issues that arise within it, such as disagreements, have to be resolved by the end of the scene. Instead, "beginning, middle and end" is another way of saying that something happens.

For journalists, an important factor is that **scenes are selections from real life**. We don't make up scenes, even if doing so would make for a more interesting story.

Think of the scenes in your writing as open windows, allowing the audience to observe events directly. Of course, that's an illusion. Even when you stick solely to the facts, you choose which to reveal and which to conceal. Every act of journalism is a choice: what to describe, where to point the camera and when to turn it on and off. Still, creating that illusion of an open window, done ethically and with an awareness of your own biases, improves your storytelling.

How scenes fit into a story

Plays, movies, TV shows and novels are generally constructed of a set of scenes with little or no other content. Some information may be provided to help the audience keep track of where and when they are. That could be as simple as text on screen that says "the next day" or "at police headquarters," or a bit of dialogue, or a closeup of a clock with the hour hand whizzing around to show the passage of time. Using scenes alone challenges the audience to take part in the storytelling themselves, figuring out how one scene relates to the ones before and after. That interactivity is a big part of compelling storytelling.

The type of journalistic stories called "narrative" come close to matching the scene-by-scene nature of fiction. But because journalists are constrained to only what they know to be true, and because they are concerned with ensuring the audience understands everything, it's relatively rare that a story would consist only of scenes. Instead, scenes are integrated with other elements.

Even a single scene adds something to a story. In the chapter on inverted pyramids, we mentioned writing about a traffic accident. Some of the story was basic facts -- how may died, how many were injured, etc. But the story also included a narrative piece, a short description of what happened. It had a beginning, middle and end. It described continuous action in a specific time and place:

> Morgan's bus was near the start of its run and had only eight passengers, the Kent City School District reported.
>
> A motorist just behind Swanson's Hastings Dairy truck said its brake lights flashed briefly as it reached a deep puddle.

"Then the front of the truck swung hard to the left," Aaron Gold of Kent said, "and the back end drifted right. It looked like the driver tried to fight it back onto the right side, but it swung over again just before the intersection."

The bus itself may have skidded through the turn and ended up slightly on the wrong side of the road, several neighbors said.

This is a scene. It doesn't have a lot of detail. No character comes to life. It's cluttered with attribution. But it's a scene that paints a picture in the minds of the audience.

What scenes do

Whether we're writing fiction or fact, we should use scenes for a purpose. A scene that doesn't contribute anything to the storytelling wastes the audience's time.

Understanding

Some scenes, like the one of the traffic accident, help the audience envision occurrences. These scenes make events come alive.

Writing about a bank robbery, you might use interviews with witnesses to reconstruct what happened from when the robbers entered through when they ran away.

Illustration

Weak writers lean heavily on adjectives and adverbs. They say the main character is brave and speaks angrily. Better writers use scenes that illustrate these concepts.

If you're writing a profile of a professor who won a teaching award, a scene of her in the classroom, filling the whiteboard with notes and cracking jokes with students, will do more to show her qualities than any number of adjectives.

Insight

One of the 5 W's is "why." But often the "why" is invisible; it lies in the minds of the characters. Journalists can't pretend to be mindreaders. But they can use scenes to provide evidence that the audience may use to make its own assumptions.

In our discussion of speech stories, we cautioned against mindreading as well. Instead of writing "Everyone loved the speech," we said, use something such as "Deafening applause, cheers and foot-stamping continued for several minutes after the speech." That brief description might be called a "protoscene" -- not a fully formed one, but a first step.

Engagement

We're psychologically wired to react more when we see something happening to a specific person than when we hear about it happening to hundreds. It's easier to feel empathy for a person we know, even slightly, than for an anonymous group.

A story about hunger in the United States can cite dire statistics. Journalists use those numbers to prove that the problem is real and widespread. But they can make readers more viscerally engage with the issue by zooming in on a scene showing a family of six splitting a single can of beans for dinner.

Plot advancement

In fiction, the series of scenes builds up the whole story. Basic news stories, especially about breaking news, don't have the space to let everything unfold in scenes. And readers may not have the patience.

But when a big event happens, it isn't just newsworthy for one day. Consider a plane crash. In the immediate aftermath, journalists will work quickly to provide basic information. They may include a brief scene or two, but they won't have enough information to tell the whole story that way.

At some point in the future, though, they will have multiple witness accounts, flight recordings, results of investigations. A scene-by-scene story makes the story fresh.

Building a scene

Let's return to the traffic accident. You read the version that a reporter would produce, necessarily flawed by circumstances. To illustrate what a complete scene involves, let's rewrite that as a fiction writer would, making up stuff to improve the storytelling:

Erin Morgan's bus had left the depot 10 minutes earlier. In between sips of her Starbucks latte, the young driver had picked up her first eight passengers. The Kowalski twins had been late to the stop so the bus was running slightly behind schedule. The rain, which had been a light shower when she started, turned into a downpour. The windshield wipers drove waves of water with every swish. Morgan leaned forward without realizing it, trying to peer through the drops. She blindly put her latte down, missing the cupholder. The cup hit the floor, tipped over and rolled toward the steps down to the door. She didn't even notice. Gripping the wheel tightly, she swung left off Ravenna Road onto Route 43.

Ed Swanson tapped at his phone screen, checking text messages. His fantasy football team had finished dead last after the weekend games, and his buddies weren't letting him forget it. On top of that, the rain was getting heavier. He silently cursed himself for not bothering to bring along his rain slicker. The Giant Eagle manager at his next stop insisted on him parking far from the back door and it would be a long, wet walk. Five more years of this before he could retire.

Cresting a small hill, he looked up sleepy-eyed and saw a deep puddle just before the intersection with Ravenna Road. Swanson tapped his brakes and held the steering wheel steady. But the truck slid sideways, the front crossing the line as the rear swung toward the shoulder. Training overcoming instinct, he steered into the turn. The tires caught traction. He turned back to his side of the road. Just as it was about to cross completely over to the right side, the tires lost hold again. Through his windshield he saw a school bus directly ahead, so close that he could see the driver's eyes widen.

"Hold on!" Morgan shouted. Even as the words came out of her mouth, the bus collided with the truck.

The added detail, the lack of attribution, the glimpse inside the driver's mind -- all of those things make for a richer, more involving scene. That's what you're aiming for.

Elements of a scene

A compete scene has many pieces. As a journalist, you may not be able to fit all of them in, but you should know what you're aiming for.

Character

Most scenes have people, or people substitutes like the tortoise and the hare. They personalize the events.

To be effective, a character needs to be more than a generic stick figure. Good characters have names and personalities.

In the journalistic version of the traffic accident, Morgan and Swanson were just names. In the fictionalized version, they are more rounded. They have feelings. Morgan is young. Swanson is a few years from retirement.

When you're using just one short scene in a news story, it's a challenge to make your characters rounded. And much of the information that makes them real people in the fictional version would be unavailable to a news reporter right after the accident. But you can start with the basics:

- Use full names. Don't just refer to "a driver." Not only will the name make the person more real, it will add credibility to your account.
- Use what information you have to flesh out the reader's mental picture. Someone's age, or the color of their hair, may be irrelevant in a basic news story. But as part of a scene, they make the character less generic.
- Use what the person does and says in the scene to make them come alive.

Action

Something has to happen in a scene; something has to change. Even if a scene consists only of two characters sitting under a tree and talking while they wait for someone who never shows up, it can contain action in this sense: The characters argue, or come to agreement, or just illustrate the essential meaninglessness of life.

The central action of a scene can be physical, as with the bus and truck crashing on a slippery road. Or it could exist only in dialogue, or just in the minds of the characters.

Of course, a scene can contain many incidental acts, such as Morgan dropping her coffee or Swanson tapping his cellphone. Those acts contribute to the storytelling too. But without some central action, they aren't enough. If we used all the description from the fictional account of the accident, but left out the accident itself -- if the bus and truck were on different roads and both continued on their merry way -- the scene doesn't accomplish much; it lacks drama.

This is a big reason why fictional accounts are usually made up of a set of scenes rather than one long, continuous one. The storytellers leave out the boring times when nothing much happened.

The important lesson for journalists is to be very selective about the scenes you use. Don't include a scene just because you were there or otherwise are able to fully describe it.

What if you wanted to write about what goes on over 24 hours in a giant store like a Costco? You might focus on a few workers and managers, following them around. You could make a scene showing a worker going aisle by aisle replacing products that customers had moved around, showing that keeping the place looking clean and orderly is a never-ending task. You could make a scene showing some workers chatting on their lunch break, revealing details about their personal lives. But those would only be a few snatches out of the full 24 hours. Is there a scene in a clerk standing at a register for 15 minutes without customers? A manager taking a nap? You might mention that those things happened, but it's not worth the effort to add all the elements that go into a scene.

Setting

Scenes take place somewhere at some time. The same as using full names, this information makes the story more real and more credible.

Think broadly about what "where" and "when" mean; choose facts that contribute to the storytelling. In the fictional accident, we know the basic where: at the intersection of two roads. We know a rough when: early morning, because the bus has just started picking up students at their homes. We also know that it's a particular kind of morning: It's raining, hard. That leads to a more specific where: Those roads are wet; there's a big puddle.

If a journalist knows anything about a scene, the basic "where" and "when" are usually part of that. But getting specific enough can be hard. You know two people had a conversation in a campus building two days ago. Do you know where in the building? Were they behind a closed door or in a corridor filled with students? Was this during a break, or was one of them playing hooky from a class?

It is worth the effort to try to figure this out. That's another reason why, as we wrote in the chapter about interviewing, you need to get off your butt and go. Even if you weren't there when the scene happened, going to the location could allow you to observe things that make it specific. Narrative journalists go to great lengths to do this. They'll visit the places their scenes happened at the same time of day, even same season and month if they can, to be able to recreate the setting as faithfully as possible. Why the same time of day and season? Because there's a difference in the strength and direction of sunlight between noon and dusk; a difference in ambient noises of a building between lunchtime and quitting time.

Detail

Details are so important to journalism that we stressed them way back in the chapter on reporting essentials. In scenes, details such as the fact that the driver's coffee was specifically Starbucks lift the story from the hazy concept that "something like this happened" to the clear reality of "this exact thing happened."

Narrative journalist Lauren Kessler wrote a story about a dying man who chose euthanasia to achieve "death with dignity." Here's part of one scene:

> David Bradley was sitting up in bed dressed in a thick, scarlet-colored robe, his dog Scooter napping at his feet, the bottle of Nembutal on the night table.

In a later series on Niemanstoryboard.org, Kessler explained one of the choices that produced that line:

> There is no physical description of the man. Of course, I had this in my notes, but I chose instead to describe what he was wearing -- the thick, richly colored bathrobe. To me, this one detail caught the softness, the hominess of his death at home.

Notice that she had other details in her notes. Only when it came to writing the story did she decide which ones would best serve her purpose. That's the important lesson: **To produce good scenes, you must collect all the details you can.** Don't be picky. Don't narrow the options you'll have when you craft the story.

Dialogue

Journalists are used to dealing with quotes. When building scenes, though, we need to talk about the difference between the usual quotes we use, from interviews, and the ones that work best in narrative. "Dialogue" involves people talking as part of the scene.

In the journalistic version of the traffic accident story, Aaron Gold is quoted describing what he saw as he was driving behind the truck. His quote was clearly obtained afterward; he's looking back on the events. While his description gives the audience a better picture of what happened, it also takes them out of the moment. It's a reminder that this is a reconstruction, filtered through a witness and a reporter.

In the fictional version, the only quote is dialogue: "Hold on!" This isn't someone talking to a reporter after the fact; this is what you would have heard if you were in the bus at that moment. (Technically, dialogue must involve a two or more people; the "di" at the start means "two." But you can have a scene where only one character is present and talking out loud; that's still dialogue in a sense.)

The use of dialogue in journalism comes with some controversy. Sure, if the reporter was present, they can write down what was said. Or if they can get access to a recording. But what about when neither of those is true? Can and should a reporter reconstruct dialogue by relying on the memories of one or more participants in a conversation?

Interior monologue

In the fictional version of the accident, the writer was able to peer into the thoughts of the two characters, telling us that Morgan didn't notice the coffee spilling and Swanson was angry at himself for not bringing his rain slicker. Those thoughts wouldn't have been apparent to an observer. They don't come from anything the two said in the moment. Instead, they indicate the writer has tapped into the characters' interior monologues.

Fiction writers can do that. It makes their scenes richer and injects the readers even deeper into the scene. What about journalists? We're not supposed to be mindreaders, so are interior monologues forever closed to us?

We can, of course, ask people what they were thinking. But can we use that when we can't verify it, when we have only their word?

One approach is to quote what they said. As with the use of any after-the-fact quote, this takes the audience out of the moment. But a reporter may consider that loss balanced by the added richness. There's a reason "how did you feel?" is a common interview question.

Another, riskier solution is to describe their thoughts just as the fiction writer does, relying on some alternative form of attribution to make it ethical. The scene may be preceded by an acknowledgement that some parts of it are based on the memories of the characters. Or a note may be attached to the story detailing all the ways information was obtained, leaving it to the reader to figure out that a character must have talked later about how they felt.

Attribution

That brings us to the main conflict between classic journalism and narrative: How do you stay in the moment while upholding the idea that we must provide attribution for anything we didn't see ourselves, that's not a plain fact?

In the reported version of the traffic accident, even facts as simple as where Morgan was in her run and how many students were on the bus came with "the Kent City School District reported."

It's the same dilemma as with internal dialogue, and the potential approaches are the same. One frequently used when inserting a scene into an otherwise standard story is a kind of block attribution(opens in new window): "The accident happened this way, police and other officials said:" The scene would then be written without other attribution.

Point of view

A narrative story has one or more points of view. Think of them as the people who are telling the story. If the story of the traffic accident were told through the point of view of Swanson, the truck driver, the scene could include anything he saw, heard or thought; he has access to all those. But it couldn't tell us what happened on the bus; he wasn't in there. In the fictional version above, the point of view shifts from Morgan to Swanson and back again.

Another choice is an omniscient (all knowing) point of view. The narrator knows everything, including stuff not known by any of the characters. That allows the writer to include information from outside the scene. They can tell us that this was the 13th accident at that location in the last year, or that distracted driving is a common cause of fatalities.

Adopting the omniscient POV allows the writer to present a more complete picture of events and set them in context. That has a natural appeal for journalists; being complete and adding context is part of what we do.

Let's say that in the traffic accident story, a police investigation reveals that the truck's tires were bald due to poor maintenance practices by the dairy. Swanson didn't know that, somehow, so it couldn't be mentioned during the scene if we were restricted to the point of views of just the two drivers. In fiction, withholding such information could add drama; maybe there's a scene later where the police discover it.

Long-form narrative nonfiction may withhold information in the same way, to same ultimate goal: drama. But if a scene is used inside an inverted pyramid story, withholding information violates the principle of giving away the punchline.

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10.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- A scene consists of continuous action or dialogue that takes in one specific place at the same specific time.
- Journalists can only build scenes from real life; they must be able to verify everything they include.
- Scenes should contribute to the purpose of the story.
- You should be able to explain these ways a scene can contribute to a story:
  - Understanding
  - Illustration
  - Insight
  - Engagement
  - Plot advancement
- You should be able to explain these elements of a scene:
  - Character
  - Action
  - Setting
  - Detail
  - Dialogue
  - Interior monologue
  - Attribution
  - Point of view

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10.3: Optional Exercises

? Exercise 10.3.1

Select a story -- fact or fiction -- that has narrative elements. Using the information in this chapter, analyze its elements.

Identify individual scenes that show continuous action or dialogue in a specific place and time.

Within each scene, identify:

- Characters
- Action
- Setting
- Details
- Dialogue
- Interior monologue
- Attribution (if any)
- Point of view

Briefly explain what each scene contributes to the story overall.

? Exercise 10.3.2

Select a TV show episode or a movie. Within that show, select a scene that lasts at least a few minutes.

Write the scene as if you were an author. Don't try to include every movement or every word of dialogue, but capture the essentials. Look for details -- objects, facial expressions, tone of voice.

Read you description aloud in class, perhaps within a small group. Have the other students critique your work: What parts stood out? Did they get a feeling anything was missing?

In this exercise, you have an advantage over real life: The director and film editor have already used their skills to select a key scene and focus on key elements. But you still have to translate those things from the screen to the page.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: Alternative Ledes and Endings

11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings

11.2: Chapter Review

11.3: Optional Exercises

Why Alternatives Matter

The summary lede and its variations are all based on the idea of immediately revealing a story's key facts. This is especially useful when writing about breaking news.

But there are other kinds of stories, such as personality profiles or trend stories. For those, summary ledes can be awkward. In a personality profile, you're trying to explain what kind of person the subject is. What could a summary lede be?

Even on straight news stories, alternative ledes can often work well. And the lede is crucial in grabbing an audience's attention.

An inverted pyramid story doesn't have to have a satisfying ending; it can just stop. But think about the last movie you watched. Did it just stop somewhere along the line, or did it give you a sense of closure? Think of all the movies, TV shows and novels that have famous endings. What makes them famous? The ending of a story is the last chance to leave an impression on an audience. A good one resonates.

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11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings

Alternative ledes

Asha Glover lives for ledes that grab the readers.



Video 11.1.1: Asha Glover: The lede | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Summary ledes try to grab readers, but their primary goal is to tell the story. Alternative ledes (some also call them "delayed ledes") lean the other way.

Alternative ledes can be split into two broad categories: narrative and statement. Within both categories we can describe several variations. These are not silos, each completely separate. Ledes can straddle two or more variations. But the variations providing a good starting point for thinking about how to begin a story.

Narrative ledes

These ledes are like parts of a movie or play.

Scene-setter

Imagine you've gone to see a play. As you sit down, the curtain is closed. Then it opens to reveal the stage, full of props and scenery. Maybe some actors are milling about, but at first nothing of consequence is happening; you're given time to acclimate to the scene.

That's what a scene-setter lede does. It shows you the place where something happens, through description. Like this:

> On Jefferson Avenue, a three-story brick house with green trim nestles into the edge of downtown Columbus, Ohio. Inside, antique lights illuminate the interior still decorated in early 20th century style that was in place when the man the house was named for lived here.
>
> Right inside the door, a circle of high school-aged teens sit in a circle, most with laptops or notebooks in their laps. One by one, they share a story, a poem, an idea, and then they discuss.
>
> Every other Tuesday evening, you can find Meg Brown, the director of education for Thurber House, hovering in the doorway or putting more of her famous brownies out for break.

In that lede, written by a student like you, nothing much happens. But it shows the reader what it looks like inside Thurber House. The story explains that Thurber House is something called a literary center. It goes on to talk about literary centers in general and what they bring to their communities.

Scene-setter ledes work best when the scene sets a mood for the story. They require an eye for detail.

Anecdotal

An “anecdote” is a very short story, generally limited to one incident. An anecdotal lede uses a short story – no more than a few paragraphs, the shorter the better. Unlike scene-setters, anecdotal ledes contain some action significant to the main point of the story.

> Cal Dilley heaved the 40-pound sandbag over to the next man in line and swung back to catch another. The Mississippi roared past on the other side of the makeshift plug in the levee’s foundation.
>
> Dilley, whose Coleville farm was 5 miles away on higher ground, came to help because that’s what people in Natchitoches County do, he said.
>
> He’d been at it for six hours, with scant breaks, sometimes in the middle of the sandbag brigade, sometimes at the front, hoisting the bags into position. He was three or four spots away from the front when the crest of a wave overtopped the levee.

The story underneath that lede doesn’t have to be just about Dilley. Instead, it could open up into the whole story of the flood, or focus on the resilience of a farming community, or explain why the levee failed.

Anecdotal ledes are designed to intrigue readers by providing a short illustration of a broader issue, or putting a human face on statistics.

Things to keep in mind with anecdotal ledes:

- Does it illustrate the theme? If you use an anecdotal lede on a profile, does the anecdote reflect a key aspect of your subject’s personality, or is it just a funny story? If you’re writing about a trend, is the anecdote an accurate representation, or are there aspects that make it not quite fit? (For example, you’re writing about how teens are adopting fancier clothes, but your anecdote is about a 21-year-old.)
- Will the anecdote’s characters disappear? It’s a form of exploitation to describe an incident in an anecdotal lede and then never refer to it or the people involved again.
- Is the anecdote as short as possible? Remember that your story is not about the anecdote; it’s about something broader. You want to get to that as quickly as possible.
- Is the anecdote true? Of course, you know you shouldn’t lie. But if you don’t have a real-life anecdote that ts your story, you may be tempted to create a hypothetical. That’s not unethical, as long as you let the reader know it’s not real. But it undermines your theme, by suggesting that the only evidence you have is fictional.

Chronological

If your article is a narrative – that is, it tells a story from beginning to end, unfolding over time – you can simply begin at the beginning.

The trick is deciding where the beginning is. If you’re writing about how a vaccine for polio was found, where would you start: At the start of the researcher’s first experiment? At the researcher’s birth? Even further back, when Edward Jenner inoculated people with cowpox?

> When John Smith was growing up in Mobile, Alabama, his house was the only one on the block without a child afflicted by polio.

The best chronological ledes will, like all the best alternative ledes, at least hint at the overall theme of the story. And they should start a narrative timeline that is relatively condensed. If you start in 1796 with Edward Jenner, but then jump a century or more to catch up with the modern-day researcher, your readers may suffer from the verbal equivalent of jet lag. Such a leap could work, but your writing will have to make the readers' trip smooth.

A common misunderstanding is that a "chronological lede" means telling the whole story, beginning to end, in a few paragraphs. No! It's just the very start; the rest of your article will provide the rest of the story.

In medias res

Another way to start a narrative is “in the middle of things” – *in medias res*, in Latin. That doesn’t just mean starting anywhere in the middle of the narrative; it means selecting a key moment, usually one with dramatic tension.

> The hairs on the back of Smith's neck prickled as he pressed his fingers to the bungalow's front door. Damn Jackson and his charity cases, he thought. But the door swung open easily, without a sound. At least that was something.
>
> He stepped into the house. The living room was empty. Not just no-one-there empty, empty-empty – no furniture, no rugs. Even the rusty chandelier in the ceiling was missing its bulbs. Smith relaxed. For once, Jackson had gotten them a simple foreclosure.
>
> Then the sudden pain.

Detective stories often start out in medias res – with bullets flying, or an attack that comes out of nowhere – before abruptly jumping to the actual beginning of the story, hours or days before.

You see the same thing in some TV shows, which open with a dramatic moment and come back from commercial with a subtitle reading "12 hours earlier ..."

In media res ledes have key differences from plain anecdotal ledes:

- They begin without context. Anecdotal ledes, while concise, are complete stories. The audience knows who they're reading about and what they're doing. With an in medias res lede, the audience is launched into the action without knowing much of anything. The action unfolds while the audience tries to figure out what's going on and why.
- They end without full resolution. Anecdotal ledes come to a conclusion. In medias res ledes end in mid-air, making the audience wonder what will come next. A cliche ending for an in medias res lede about a private detective in the middle of a fight, for example, is the detective suddenly feeling a thud on the back of his head and blacking out.

To keep the tension high, the story will then jump back to the beginning of the chronology. The audience knows that fight is coming; they know the detective will get knocked out -- but when? How?

These four kinds of narrative ledes are most often seen on stories that follow the narrative approach -- for example, a biography that takes us from someone's birth to death. But the first two -- the scene-setter and the anecdote -- can be used atop other types of structures as well.

Similarly, the ledes that follow are most often found on structures other than the narrative, but can be adapted in some cases.

Statement ledes

Statement ledes are short, straightforward statements.

Theme

A theme lede bridges the gap between summary ledes and alternatives. Like the summary lede, it gets to the point quickly. But like alternatives, it doesn't focus on "what just happened."

> Poetry lives in clapboard houses and fluorescent-lit rooms across the country, where writers from grade schoolers to geriatrics gather in literary centers to wrestle their thoughts and feelings into words.

The theme lede gets the reader to the core of the story -- here, the role of literary centers in communities. They're not always as colorful as the one above. But the example shows they're never as dull as "This is a story about literary centers."

Startle

The startle lede is designed to make readers gasp, at least metaphorically.

> One in every 6 Ohio children live in "food insecure" homes – places where the family can't be sure if there will be anything to eat at the next meal.

The story was not about Ohio alone; the state was used because it would connect with local readers. The story was not about hunger in general; it focused on how hunger leads to poor academic performance, and what people are trying to do about that. The lede, however, focused on one statistic that (hopefully) shocks readers and makes them want to find out more.

Some students have difficulty understanding the concept here. Told to use a startle lede on a second-day story about the shootings on the Kent State University campus on May 4, 1970, they produce something like this:

> Four young people died and six were injured in Monday's shooting.

Yes, that's shocking. But those facts are central to the story. **A startle lede avoids the main news of a story to find meaning in smaller details**, like this:

> In 13 seconds, Ohio National Guardsmen fired 67 shots.

Teaser

An anecdote that leaves the reader hanging.

> John Smith started the day in his usual uniform: white lab coat, white sneakers, white pants. By the end of the day, there wasn't a part of his clothes light enough to charitably be called gray.

For this to work, of course, the next graf must offer no explanation for what happened to Smith's clothes. It's the mystery that, the writer hopes, will keep the reader going.

Teasers don't even have to include anecdotes, but the shorter they get, the more gimmicky they become.

> Two-fifths of an inch was all that stood between Mary Jones and death.

Or even:

> Two-fifths of an inch.

Teasers are great when they work – and awful when they don't.

Question

A risky choice. The idea behind a question lede is that it will hook the reader into making a guess, then reading on to find out the correct answer. Here's a good example, because the question can't be answered with just a "yes" or "no."

> You're driving along an icy road when the front of your car begins to slide to the right. Which way do you turn the wheel?

This one is less effective:

> If you're like most college students, you survive Finals Week on a diet of caffeine and fingernails. Is there a better way?

On the one hand, it asks a question that the reader may not know the answer to. But on the other hand, the basic answer -- "yes" -- is obvious.

There are many potential problems with question ledes. The readers may not care about the answer. They may simply answer "no" and walk away, especially when the question is interrogating them rather than quizzing on a fact:

> BAD: Have you ever wondered why Kent State is in Kent and not in Streetsboro?
> BETTER (slightly): Why is Kent State in Kent and not in Streetsboro?

Or the audience may resent the obvious attempt to hook them. The question approach to attracting interest is so common that its use in online headlines led to Betteridge's Law. It's named after a British technology journalist who, in criticizing the flaws of tech coverage, wrote, "Any headline that ends in a question mark can be answered by the word no."

> Could this new technology mean the end of the eight-hour day?

The principle -- which is much older than Ian Betteridge and the internet -- is that journalists use question headlines or question ledes to avoid as long as possible revealing to their audiences that something that sounds super exciting isn't that great or isn't close to fruition. It's a way of using a lie as a lede while still claiming that technically you didn't fib: "I was only asking a question!"

Switchback

One of the harder alternatives to describe, the switchback lede (also called a "contrast" or "pivot") starts in one direction and makes a 180-degree turn by the end. The first part says things are going great; the second suggests doom. The first describes someone being the first to break the tape at the end of a race; the second shows them sobbing in despair.

> Born in a mansion on Nashville's East Side and raised in luxury, Emmanuel Kanst died Thursday dressed in rags in a downtown alley.

The theory is that this seeming contradiction will entice readers into going further to figure out how to reconcile the two elements.

One story, 9 ledes

After Kent State University announced the purchase of a property that included a Starbucks, a student dug into the shop’s history. She wrote about its former life as Brady’s, a locally-owned cafe, and the attachment many alumni felt for its place in their lives. The story could have begun with any of the alternative ledes. They're not all equally strong; every story will work better with some alternatives than others. Which do you think would work best?

Table 12.1.1 Alternative starts for a single story

https://human.libretexts.org/@go/page/382358

Type	Words	Explanation
Scene-setter	The tables were plain. None of the chairs matched. The place smelled of coffee and corned beef. Throughout the day students crowded in, waiting for tables to open up. But those who got the coveted spots didn't give them up for hours at a time. It was the Brady, and it was a kind of home away from home.	Nothing special happens in this lede, and it doesn't describe a specific moment. But it gives a sense of place, of Brady's as it once was.
Anecdotal	The coffee mugs filled a shelf on the wall again. "Brady rolls," cinnamon nutrolls steamed with butter, sent a mouth-watering aroma around the tables and floating up to the balcony. Sally Carfan settled into her spot, the same one she'd used for her Brady-sitting through four years at Kent State. The same cook, Emma Setlock, flipped a Reuben onto the grill just like she used to. "The Brady is back, and we're all glad," Carfan said. "More than that, the Brady spirit is back. And Kent will be better for it."	This anecdote comes from a story about the cafe's reopening about 30 years earlier. Atop a new story, it would be followed by a nut graf,(opens in new window) possibly saying that the future of the Brady spirit is in question again. Unlike the scene-setter, this anecdotal lede focuses on a particular moment.
Chronological	The Donaghy brothers wanted a bigger stake in Kent's future, and a corner lot near the college campus looked like a prime spot for a restaurant, a school supply store and a post office. Unlike a lot of bets made in 1929, theirs paid off.	This begins with the first restaurant in Starbucks' spot, the Robin Hood Inn. It moved kitty-corner to the northeast corner a few years after it opened, to be replaced by Brady's.
In medias res	Kent Mayor Jerry Fiala cupped his hands over a steaming latte and sat back. "it's too often in this modern world," he said, "we don't have anything to understand where we came from."	The story of a cafe doesn't lend itself to the classic slam-bang form of in medias res. However, it can be adapted. Here, the lede still launches the reader into the middle of a scene without explaining a lot. Why's the mayor cradling a coffee? What's he talking about?
Theme	Kent State students have been gossiping and flirting over cups of coffee at the corner of Main and Franklin streets since the 1930s.	Theme ledes are close relatives of summary ledes; they state the basic idea of the story. But, as shown here, creative writing can keep them from being bland.
Startle	The first Kent State students who sat down to study over a cup of coffee at the corner of Main and Franklin are turning 100 about now, if they still live.	Big numbers can be startling.
Teaser	Every three hours put Loris Troyer $1.05 closer to his dream.	Teasers pique the audience's curiosity. What's this about? Troyer worked as a janitor at Brady's in the 1930s. He made 35 cents an hour, working

Type	Words	Explanation
		three hours a day. That went toward his journalism school tuition ($25 a quarter in 1935, when Kent State became a university.).
Question	What does the fate of yet another Starbucks shop have to do with 80+ years of Kent State tradition?	This avoids one of the traps of question ledes: It can't be answered with just "yes" or "no." Still, it's not the strongest entry here.
Switchback	The coffee shop at Franklin and Main has survived name changes, management turnover, two closings and a criticized switch to corporate ownership over close to 90 years. Whether it makes it to the century mark is now up to Kent State.	The first sentence emphasizes the longevity of the location. The second does a 180, suggesting that longevity is in doubt.

Bad ledes

As you move beyond the summary lede, the possibilities for screw-ups increase.

Dull scene-setter

The lede provides no details.

> BAD: As the first day of the Democratic National Convention began to wind down, downtown Philadelphia's nightlife along and around East Broad Street filled with regulars and delegates alike.

People were in a place. That's all this lede says. What was unusual about it? What stood out? An alternative:

> BETTER: The one-block walk along East Broad Street took 20 minutes last night, through a wall-to-wall crowd of delegates, diners, gawkers and media.

Theme: I'm bored

The lede suggests that whatever it's talking about isn't new, interesting or in any other way worth reading.

> BAD: An inevitable factor of hosting an event as large as the Democratic National Convention is the seemingly endless array of pro and anti candidate merchandise.

This lede has no details, but it doubles down by declaring its topic to be "inevitable." Don't sell yourself or your story short. Given the theme, a scene-setter was a better choice.

> BETTER: Step outside the Democratic National Convention and you can outfit yourself from head ("I'm with her" plastic boater, $15) to toe (Hillary Heels in red, white and blue pleather, $85) and even get something for in between (Clinton whoopee cushion, $18.95).

Overpromising

In other classes, you may have been urged to make your first paragraph bold and sweeping. That's great -- if you have the reporting to back it up. If not, you get something like this:

> BAD: The loss of a coffee shop on the corner of Main and Franklin streets would mean the death of Kent State's soul.

Hyperbole isn't the only problem. Any lede that takes the reader in one direction when the story goes in another is bad.

This can happen if you write your lede based on what you *thought* the story would say, and don't revisit it after you're done and the story turned out to be something else.

Bottle caps

When you grab a bottle of soda, it's got a cap on top. Twist off the cap and throw it away; you've still got a bottle of soda.

Bottle cap ledes work the same way: You could throw them away and still have a story.

> BAD: Powerful ideas and inspiring stories will fill the Student Center next month.
>
> The Undergraduate Student Government announced the speakers for its JOEz conference, scheduled for March 23. Topics will include housing, the economy and foreign affairs.

You can recognize the first sentence as a bottle cap lede because:

- It's vague, so it doesn't help the audience decide whether to go on.
- It has to be followed by what looks exactly like a bland summary lede.

Some bottle cap ledes have a third trait: The same words could be placed atop almost any story.

A columnist having a bad day once wrote the mother of all bottle cap ledes on her column, and the student intern on the copy desk got in trouble for daring to change it. The boss was right; columnists get their jobs based on their writing, and should be consulted before it's changed. But the intern was right, too: This is a stinky lede.

> BAD: People.
>
> People are funny.
>
> People do funny things. And that's why ...

We've forgotten what "funny" thing it was she got around to mentioning, but that's the point. Her lede was so generic, so detail-free, that it contained no clue to the topic of the column.

Bottle cap ledes often show up on news stories when writers realize their summary lede is dull. But fixing that with a bottle cap is like putting lipstick on a pig.

The summary lede hiding underneath the USG bottle cap above is truly dull.

> BAD: The Undergraduate Student Government announced the speakers for its JOEz conference, scheduled for March 23. Topics will include housing, the economy and foreign affairs.

The solution isn't to cover it up; it's to dig for something better. The story from which that lede was adapted had neat details underneath that could have been turned into this:

> BETTER: An 11-year-old who's already created two apps and a library professor who's an expert on Harry Potter fans will join 16 other speakers for our school's first JOEz conference Feb. 18 in the Student Center Ballroom.

That's the kind of lede you won't want to throw away.

Nut grafs

So you've put an alternative lede on your story, and the readers are hooked. But you've got a problem: They still don't know what the story's about.

That's where the "nut graf" comes in. Some say it's the part that tells the readers why they should care.

Some stories don't need nut grafs. But in most cases where you're using an alternative lede, it's a good idea to include one.

Remember the scene-setter lede about the Thurber House in Columbus? It was followed by a nut graf (yes, it's two paragraphs long). From the top:

> On Jefferson Avenue, a three-story brick house with green trim nestles into the edge of downtown Columbus, Ohio. Inside, antique lights illuminate the interior still decorated in early 20th century style that was in place when the man the house was named for lived here.
>
> Right inside the door, a circle of high school-aged teens sit in a circle, most with laptops or notebooks in their laps. One by one, they share a story, a poem, an idea, and then they discuss.

> *Every other Tuesday evening, you can find Meg Brown, the director of education for Thurber House, hovering in the doorway or putting more of her famous brownies out for break. Thurber House is one example of literary centers that are active in the arts and education. Wick Poetry Center in the May Prentice House at Kent State University also has programs as well as outreach and creative writing classes taught through the university.*
>
> *Literary centers like Thurber House and the Wick Poetry Center play many roles in the community. Both centers bring children out of the community into their creative writing and arts programs through summer camp programs.*

Like almost every good nut graf, this one makes a turn from the specific to the broad: It starts by connecting to the lede (mentioning Thurber House) and then expands to reveal the full scope of the story (literary centers in general) and the theme (their roles in the community).

No matter what kind of alternative lede you begin with, the basic nut graf structure remains the same. Consider the startle lede about food insecurity. This is a possible nut graf:

> One in every 6 Ohio children live in "**food insecure**" homes – places where the family can't be sure if there will be anything to eat at the next meal.
>
> *While **food insecurity** affects everyone in a household, the impact on children is especially severe because its impact can change the course of their lives. Studies show that children who go to school hungry get lower grades, drop out sooner and earn less over time than other students.*

Note how similar wording -- "food insecure" and "food insecurity" -- creates a transition from the lede to the nut graf. Then the rest of the nut graf expands to the broader topic of the story as a whole.

Composing solid nut grafs is a struggle for some students, so let's talk about the principles some more: Think of your story as a chain.

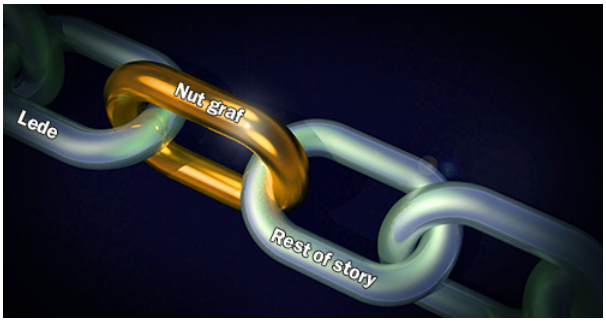


Image 11.1.1: Image by PIRO from Pixabay

The nut graf links the alternative lede to the rest of the story. It has to connect to both the lede and the rest of the story to keep the chain from falling apart.

Don't neglect either connection. Skipping a transition from the lede sets the reader adrift, wondering if they've floated into a different story than the one they started. Skipping the expansion to the broader theme, just plowing right into the story, can confuse them.

Lane DeGregory, an award-winning feature writer we met during a writing conference, said this to Chip Scanlan, writing for Nieman Storyboard, about the concept of a nut graf:

> It's a way to get readers invested in continuing to immerse themselves in the story — a foreshadowing of what they can expect, and, maybe most importantly, why it matters.

However, we must note that the main them of Scanlan's article was that nut grafs aren't always needed, or always needed so early. DeGregory herself wrote one story that started with 1,600 words before it got to the nut graf.

Does that mean you can skip the nut graf? Sure ... if you're as talented and experienced as DeGregory was when she wrote "Lincoln's Shot." Our guess is, if you're reading this textbook, you're not there yet. Use the nut graf with alternative ledes to keep your chain in one piece.

Alternative endings

A classic inverted pyramid story does not have an ending, since the form was invented to make it easy to cut off the bottom of the story at any point. Inverted pyramid stories don't have endings; they just ... stop.

We've said the inverted pyramid form has many critics; this is another reason why. Endings can be at least as important as beginnings, if they're done well.

Did you ever see "Gone With the Wind"? In one scene, Scarlett O'Hara rushes down a staircase, trying to stop Rhett Butler from leaving.

"Rhett!" she cries. "Rhett! Rhett, if you go, where shall I go? What shall I do?"

Butler stares at her a second.

"Frankly, my dear," he says, "I don't give a damn."

And he turns around and walks into the mist, leaving behind one of the most famous lines in cinema history.

If he'd stuck around for a minute, giving her instructions for watering the potted geranium he'd left with her, the line would have had less impact.

That's the end of Butler's story line. The movie itself ends quickly after that with another impactful line. O'Hara decides she'll find a way to get him back.

"After all," she says, "tomorrow is another day."

Bam.

Like those, a good story ending should not only indicate something's over but also echo in the reader's mind. You want an end (also called a "kicker" or a "walk-off") that reverberates.

Ideally, the ending encapsulates what you want them to learn from the story. Even if you can't do that, you should at least make it memorable enough to keep the story in their memory.

Which ending is right for you? That depends on what you've got available.

Lede-related

Some endings pair with the way the stories began.

Bookends

These endings complete their stories' beginnings.

If your story began with an anecdote, did you head into the nut graf before finishing the anecdote? Leaving the reader hanging can be an effective start, and it give you a natural ending: finish the anecdote.

> LEDE: Cal Dilley heaved the 40-pound sandbag over to the next man in line and swung back to catch another. The Mississippi roared past on the other side of the makeshift plug in the levee's foundation.
>
> Dilley, whose Coleville farm was 5 miles away on higher ground, came to help because that's what people in Natchitoches County do, he said. He'd been at it for six hours, with scant breaks, sometimes in the middle of the sandbag brigade, sometimes at the front, hoisting the bags into position. He was three or four spots away from the front when the crest of a wave overtopped the levee.
>
> ENDING: The Natchitoches levee was the first to give way, at 10:32 a.m. Dilley, the Coleville farmer, and the others closest to the break were knocked off their feet by the rush of water.
>
> Before they could stand up, the makeshift plug exploded, sending a wall of wet sand over the men.
>
> Community members paid for the funerals and burials of all 12 men who died. Because that's what people do in Natchitoches County.

The story could have ended with “all 12 men who died.” Writers would debate the value of adding that last explicit echo of the lede in the last sentence -- some saying it adds emotional impact, others saying it’s too obvious. We think it works.

But don’t think you *have* to end like this. Trying to force a moral onto the end of your story is worse than settling for one that’s slightly weak.

An advantage of splitting an anecdote up to use as both lede and ending: As you write the rest of the story, you know where you’re going. Many a fiction writer has said their process involves starting with the ending, so they always know where they're going as they write the story.

Callbacks

A callback -- echoing the lede, especially in tone -- often works with quirky ledes.

A student writing about the phenomenon of “ghosting” had this lede:

> Boy meets Girl. Boy and Girl text every day. Boy gets fewer messages from Girl. Boy never hears from Girl again.
>
> Boy has been ghosted – like most of his fellow millennials. Dating service Plenty of Fish reported almost 80% of millennials have been ghosted at least once while dating.

That was a fun way to get into the topic. But after discussing the phenomenon, using one frequent victim and a psychology professor as sources, the student was stumped for an ending. Nothing seemed right. She asked for ideas.

We suggested a callback. She delivered.

> While ghosting saves the person who is leaving, it can be worse for the one who has no closure.
>
> “The ones who get ghosted have a conflict with themselves, because they’ve had no resolution on the situation. [Being ghosted] eats away at them and they’re left wondering what they did wrong and where they stand with that person,” the professor said.
>
> So, Girl, stop playing games and text Boy back!

A callback could work with a scene-setter lede, returning the readers to the initial scene and describing it in a different way, or showing them a similar scene someplace else.

Time-related

These choices use time in some way.

Even an inverted pyramid story can borrow chronology’s strength. In the bus crash story back in the Inverted Pyramid chapter, the storied tailed off with three disconnected paragraphs. But they were in rough chronological order: The road was already reopened (past); the schools would open as usual the next day (immediate future) and the police hadn’t decided about charges yet (uncertain future).

End of narrative

If you’ve chosen to tell the whole story from start to finish, the ending is simple. The story ends where the narrative ends.

> LEDE: When John Smith was growing up in Mobile, Alabama, his house was the only one on the block without a child afflicted by polio.
>
> ENDING: Smith retired in 2014 after a 60-year career.

If you can make the ending of a narrative also a callback, that’s a bonus..

> Smith retired in 2014, the last polio researcher left who had been born before the Salk vaccine was released.

Present tense

A story about past events, naturally written in the past tense, can shift to present tense at the end.

A series by Anne Hull of the (then) St. Petersburg Times followed a Tampa, Florida, police officer named Lisa Bishop who had been attacked by a man nicknamed Eugene. The final story ended with past-tense updates (see later in this section) of key

characters, but the last paragraph shifted to present tense.

> Lisa rarely thinks of Eugene, although she refuses to leave her back exposed, even while having dinner at a restaurant. Her back is always against a wall.

Future tense

Jump the timeline into the future, giving the story a conclusion that hasn't happened yet.

Imagine a story about a teen girl who spent a year laid up by an auto accident and spent the time searching the internet to find her birth father, who didn't know she existed. She finds him, they meet, her injuries heal. Happy ending. You want to wrap up all the pieces in one scene, and none like that are in your reporting. But you know one's coming up.

You don't have to wait for it; you can make it your ending anyway.

> Next month, Mary Elizabeth Mastrontonio will walk up to the stage of Madonna High School to accept her high school diploma. And her father will be in the audience.

What's next

Also set in the future, the "what's next" ending doesn't offer a conclusion, but rather the next turning point. It warns the readers to be alert for what's coming.

Say you wrote about two high school students who accused their coach of cheating. The state athletic association is considering the case, but tends to dawdle. The school district has been avoiding it. How can you give readers a sense of closure in a story that's still open?

> The Patawha school board will next meet Aug. 6. Karlsen's contract is on the agenda. Harry, Tom and their parents plan to be there.

Hammers

These endings slam the story closed with drama.

Quote

A direct quote from an informed source can sum up the story, provide a twist or a laugh. A quote can be a way for the writer to provide a moral to a story without injecting his or her own opinion.

> Jones does not regret abandoning his research to work in palliative care.
>
> "I'll never find a cure for cancer," he said. "But in the here and now, these people don't need hope. They need peace."

Note: **If you decide to end with a quote, end with the quote -- not the attribution.**

"He said" is a weak walk-off. Move the attribution to somewhere in the middle of the quote.

Some criticize quote endings, but that's because they're overused, not because they have inherent flaws.

Making a quote the end of your story puts a lot of pressure on someone else's words. The quote's weaknesses will show up in harsh light: awkward wording, dullness, wishy-washy conclusions.

End with a quote if you've got a great quote to use, not just because you couldn't think of anything else.

Anecdote

We've talked about starting with an anecdote and about splitting one between the lede and the ending. The obvious next step: ending with a standalone anecdote.

A closing anecdote should use characters already introduced in the story. Bringing in a new name in the last grafs of a story confuses readers.

Avoid the movie cliche of a "riding into the sunset" ending anecdote. In story terms, that means an anecdote where the only thing that happens is a literal ending: someone closes a book, a whistle blows to end the workday. An ending anecdote needs more emotional weight.

Your anecdotal ending doesn't have to come from the chronological end of your story. Chip Scanlan wrote about "Schwab endings" -- essentially, flashbacks. The example he gives is a story about a competitive fisherman who died young. The reporter's original ending showed his family scattering his ashes -- the literal end of the man's existence.

The editor, Gary Schwab, challenged the writer to find something less obvious. The result: A two-paragraph scene in which the man's family gathers to watch an old home movie of him as a boy, fishing rod in hand.

> A tiny catfish pops out of the water, hooked. Bryan's first fish. It is all over in just a few seconds. (His father) rewinds the film so they can watch again.

Fact

Much like a startle lede, but harder to pull off. A startle lede has the advantage of assuming readers don't know much about the story's topic. The fact ending builds off what they've been told. A story about a medical team working to save epidemic victims might end like this:

> In an average year, six viral infections will develop into epidemics across the world. So far this year, there have been 32.

Reversal

The podcast "Love + Radio" has a knack for storytelling that leads listeners along what seems to be a clear, well-marked path, only to discover at the end that it ends in a place they didn't see coming.

For example, "Relevant Questions" introduces you to Doug Williams. He starts out learning to run polygraph (lie detector) tests for his police department. When he realizes the tests can easily be fooled, he turns into a crusader against them. He even helps persuade Congress to ban their use by private employers.

Along the way, the listener might be puzzled by one thing. Sometimes Williams' voice is clearly recorded; other times it sounds as if he's talking by phone. It doesn't make sense; why not record it all in person?

Then a seemingly random, out-of-context voice robotically announces, "This call is from a federal prison." The story soon comes to a sting operation federal agents set up against Williams and other anti-polygraph activists. He's convicted and in prison.

For a more literary reference, author O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) became famous for twists at the end of his classic short stories such as "The Gift of the Magi." Look it up; we don't want to spoil it.

Reversal endings require holding something back from the readers, so they go against some journalistic impulses. Done well, they force the readers to suddenly reinterpret everything that came before. That mental effort will burn the story into their memory.

Cinematic

Movie directors, like writers, want endings that will resonate. Thinking about common film endings should help you understand these possibilities.

Zoom out

The last line is spoken. Instead of lingering on the characters, the camera pulls back ... back ... back. The viewer sees the characters shrink back into the broader tapestry of life and the world.

Most of the 1947 film "12 Angry Men" takes place in a cramped jury room, a place deliberately shut off from everything else. At the end, after the jury delivers its verdict, the 12 men who have been cooped up arguing with each other for so long are released. The camera watches from across the street as the men leave the building and walk down a long, wide staircase. Each goes his own way, disappearing into the swirls of pedestrians filling the New York street. The shot not only establishes that the story -- the jury's deliberations -- is over, but also suggests broader messages about how the jury system brings together disparate people who do their civic duty and then go back to their regular lives.

Achieve the same effect in your writing by ending a story with a description of its place in a broader context. It's almost as if the whole story was an anecdotal lede, and you're ending with the nut graf.

For example, you might write about a Fashion School student's struggle to create a successful portfolio of designs. Her entire college career has come down to this. With weeks to go, she suffers a mental crisis and walks away.

Plenty of drama. But what does it mean? A zoom-out ending could remind readers she's not alone.

> Jones was one of 20 seniors who dropped out of the program. That's about average for the program. Incoming freshman classes have about 800 students; the program graduates about 100 a year.

Zoom in

One of the best journalism movies ends with one of the most iconic scenes. If you haven't seen "Citizen Kane," SPOILER ALERT!

Charles Foster Kane is dead. The camera comes to his vast warehouse of personal belongings. It starts out with a wide shot, acres of space filled with statues, furniture, artwork and more. Steadily, the camera zooms in on a furnace, men tossing the less valuable stuff into the roaring flames. The camera gets closer. Closer. You see an object nestled in the inferno. The fire licks away the varnish, revealing ...

Well, no, we won't spoil it all the way. The point is the technique, zooming in from the sum total of a man's life, as told in objects, to one single item that sums him up.

In writing, that means ending with a single detail.

Remember the story about Brady's, the coffee shop that's now a Starbucks? The reporter ran across an autobiography by Loris Troyer, who worked at Brady's as a student. Suppose the reporter worked Troyer into the story somewhere. That could set up a detail ending like this:

> The coffee shop went through remodeling with every new owner. The shelf that used to hold customers' personal mugs is gone. The walls have gotten several coats of paint.
>
> But in a workroom to the side of the counter, where customers can't see, a wooden beam crosses the ceiling. It's covered in generations of lacquer, but you can still make out some carved graffiti: "Troyer, '39."

Update

As we've mentioned, "Animal House" is a landmark of the cinematic art. It ends with short clips of the main characters while text provides terse explanations of each one's future: "Barbara Sue Jansen -- Tour guide, Universal Studios, Hollywood."

The update combines different elements of chronological endings. Like the "end of narrative," it's the natural finish to arcs within the story. But that ending ts naturally with the progression of events. Like "what's next," the update leaves a gap between the bulk of the story and the end.

A natural ending for a story about the 25th anniversary of a championship football season might end like this:

> Smithson coached four more years before leaving for Princeton, where he won six Ivy League championships and retired in 2013.
>
> Cole played two more seasons but was plagued by injuries. He never got more than 300 yards rushing in either season, and no pro teams were interested. He continued at Kent State, earned a master's in education and became a high school teacher and coach.
>
> Barnes was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers, played eight seasons and moved smoothly into the team's front office.
>
> After another season as a backup quarterback, Luckowski switched to basketball. He never got off the bench for that team, either.

Endings to avoid

"All happy families are alike," Leo Tolstoy wrote. "Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

For story endings, it works the other way around. Each great ending is great in its own way; all bad endings are alike -- or at least fall into just a few categories of badness.

Restatement

In a five-paragraph essay for English class, the ending deliberately repeats what the start said, even attempting to echo the same language. In journalism, this means repeating what was in the nut graf.

But one of the essentials of journalistic writing is the avoidance of repetition. Whether you use the same words or different ones, simply repeating your central point makes for a disappointing ending.

Many rules have exceptions, and it's possible to come up with a restatement that works, particularly if it involves clever wordplay. But you can probably do better.

Opinion

The pressure to produce an ending that can resonate with readers often makes students forget that they're not supposed to express their opinions in news writing. No one in the story said quite what they needed, so they step up.

That's not a writer's role. Don't tell the readers what to think.

A student wrote about "unassigned assigned seating" -- the way students return to the same seats in a particular class, even though they could sit anywhere any day.

> BAD: Although a student like Harnocz may be too shy to say something to somebody who takes her seat, others may speak up. Next time you're about to take an unassigned assigned seat, think about how you would feel if someone stole the seat where you feel comfortable.

You are not the expert. Don't act like one in your writing.

Moral

If you've heard of Aesop's fables, you know they each end with a moral – a summing up of the lesson to be learned.

> BAD: Looking for a job can be hard work, but getting the right job pays off.

These endings may fall short of telling readers what to think, but they still have the writer stepping into the role of expert. And they're often trite, like that one.

Truism

A truism is a statement obvious on its face, providing no new information. Desperate writers reach out for them because they seem to offer closure. But they're weak, and readers know it.

> BAD: While Mazzolini said he's feeling better, only time will tell if he can return to the team.
> BAD: Someday, the rain will stop.

Closely related are endings that are true only because they make no commitment.

> BAD: Maybe Ortega will be the next top model. She hopes so, anyway.

Why endings go bad

Some bad endings are the result of bad habits. You're using techniques you learned in English class, or you haven't learned to stop injecting your opinion into your writing.

Other times, it's a matter of time. By the time you get around to considering an ending, deadline's approaching or you're just tired.

If you're having a consistent problem with endings, try writing them first, not last. That's right: Write the ending before even the lede. Not only will you be fresh, but having an ending in mind can help keep the story on track.

At the least, have one or more ending possibilities selected before you start writing. Take note of quotes, facts, details or anecdotes that might work. You may think of something even better by the time you get to the end. But if not, you won't be starting from scratch.

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11.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Alternatives to summary ledes focus more on grabbing the readers' interest than on giving away the news.
- You should be able to describe and create examples of these alternative ledes:
  - Anecdotal
  - Scene-setter
  - Chronological
  - In medias res
  - Startle
  - Teaser
  - Theme
  - Question
- The nut graf, some say, is the part that tells the readers why they should care.
- Nut grafs, which in some ways are like summary ledes, should link alternative ledes to the stories that follow. They begin with some connection to the lede and go one to put the lede in the (usually) broader context of the story.
- Endings can be at least as important as beginnings, if they're done well.
- You should be able to describe and create examples of these alternative endings.
  - End of anecdote
  - What's next
  - Callback
  - Quote
  - End of narrative
  - Anecdote
  - Present tense
  - Future tense
  - Fact
  - Reversal
  - Zoom out
  - Zoom in
  - Update
- You should also be able to describe these types of bad endings and explain why they're troublesome.
  - Restatement
  - Moral
  - Truisms
  - Opinion

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11.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 11.3.1

Pick one or two of the narrative lede structures described in this chapter. Find at least one movie that begins like each of your choices.

Describe that opening to your classmates -- without using any names or specific details that would give away the movie. Can they identify the movie?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

12: Writing About People

12.1: Writing About People

12.2: Chapter Review

12.3: Optional Exercises

Why Writing About People Matters

One of the greatest services journalism can provide is to introduce our audience to someone they don't already know, or to help them know someone better.

It's one thing to toss a quote or two from a source into a story. It's quite another to create a true picture of what someone is like.

While profiles or "day in the life" stories are not simple formulas, they are often found in student media. And they give you a chance to experiment with alternative ledes and endings.

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12.1: Writing About People

Profiles

A profile is a story focused one a person (occasionally, a group). Although it may be tied to the news -- you may be profiling this person because they just won an award or got a new job -- **the profile isn't ABOUT the news; it's about the person**. It's a mini biography. Your goal is to tell the audience what makes your subject unique.

Often, a profile will mostly follow a chronological approach, the way most biographies do. The chronology may not start with the person's birth; instead, you may choose some significant later event as your beginning point. But you'll march through the person's life in the order it happened.

That's not always the case, but it's the easiest format to do when you're starting out, and the easiest for the audience to follow. So let's assume that's what we're doing.

Building a profile

The overriding goal of a profile is to show what sets this person apart from everyone else.

There's an old saying used to deflate people perceived as special: "He puts his pants on one leg at a time." The idea is that everyone does that. It was a popular expression of coaches who wanted to suggest their opponents weren't unbeatable gods. Sure, they played well and won a lot, but, you know, they were just people.

It's true, of course: No matter who you're writing about, much of their life will probably be the same as most people's, and a lot of it is very mundane. Your job is to focus not on how they put on their pants, but on how they do the things that make them stand out.

Ledes

Profiles are not breaking news, so they don't use summary ledes. Instead, you want a strong alternative lede, such as an anecdote. We wrote a lot more about alternative ledes(opens in new window) in another chapter. For now, a quick summary: These are ledes that don't tell the whole story in one paragraph. They do tell at least part of the story; they should in some way relate to the main themes. But they put the most emphasis on being interesting and intriguing to hook the readers.

In writing a profile, you're aiming for more than listing stuff that happened to someone; this isn't a history exam where you're challenging your audience to remember dates. You're trying to tell them what the person is like. What makes this person most interesting? What will make me curious about them? What makes them someone I want to know?

Imagine writing a profile of Shirley Chisholm, the first black person and first woman to run for the Democratic nomination for president.

You might choose a chronological lede, one that starts where the key parts of the person's life story starts. For Chisholm, that may mean starting in 1929 when, about 5 years old, she and two sisters left New York on a boat bound for her grandparents in Barbados because her parents were working too much to give them adequate care. That interlude -- she spent about five years on the island before returning -- helped form her identity. As she later said, "Granny gave me strength, dignity, and love. I learned from an early age that I was somebody. I didn't need the black revolution to tell me that."

Alternatively, you might begin in media res (in the middle of things; pulling an exciting bit from the middle of the life story):

> "I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud," the woman said, her face barely rising above the bank of microphones.
>
> "I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman and equally proud of that. I am the candidate of the people and my presence before you symbolizes a new era in American political history."

That was a defining moment in her life; certainly worth considering as a lede.

Quotes

Of course, your audience wants to hear from your subject in their own words. But avoid using quotes from them to carry the narrative. You're the storyteller here.

That means avoiding quotes in which the subject takes over your job:

> "I was born in 1924," Chisholm once said. "My mother came from Barbados; my father was raised in Guinea."

Instead, most of your quotes should fall into two categories:

Commentary: Use quotes to allow your subject to reflect on their lives (as in the Chisholm comment about her grandmother above) or their thoughts.

Examples: Use quotes that show your subject living their life -- making speeches (as in the Chisholm example in the lede above), conversing with others. This is what we called "dialogue(opens in new window)" in the chapter about scenes.

Sources

One of the most common mistakes new writers make in profiles is relying solely, or almost solely, on interviewing their subject. Yes, a well-done interview can reveal a lot about a person. But a profile aims for a complete picture, and few of us are so honest and self-aware that we can provide that for ourselves.

Take a 360-degree approach to interviewing. Who knows them best? Who was there when things happened? Who will disagree with them?

Try not to limit yourself to sources who have some motive to say only nice things. Certainly, you may want to interview your subject's spouse, other family, employees, etc. But remember: none of us are perfect, but our moms often think we are. You need sources who are a bit less biased.

Because of this need for multiple sources, profiles are reporting-intensive. If you propose to profile someone, be prepared to commit a lot of time.

Show, don't tell

One reason history classes sometimes get a bad rap is that some history textbooks take a boring approach. They tell you what happened, but they don't show you. They're filled with sentences like this: "In 1492, Columbus led three ships -- the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria -- across the Atlantic. He claimed the lands he found in the name of the Spanish monarchy. Later, he would ..."

Lots of facts there. But that's about all. Good history, like good profiles, contains scenes: depictions of things as they happened.

Think of the beginning of each Star Wars movie, when blocks of text scroll up the screen. That's telling. Now imagine if a whole movie was just like that. You never saw the Death Star explode; you never saw Han (spoiler alert!) die. You were just told that stuff happened. Not nearly as interesting.

In your profiles, avoid flatly telling us your subject is bold or cautious, sloppy or neat. Show us, by writing a scene in which that part of their personality is clear. It doesn't even have to be an entire scene; just an illustrative sentence. If you use metaphor, it's even OK to apply the label, as long as the evidence quickly follows: "He is so painstaking about accuracy that he does not rely on the National Weather Service's list of sunrises and sunsets; he sets an alarm for 10 minutes before each so he can go outside and check for himself."

Details

Because we're advising you to include scenes, we're bringing in all the elements we covered in the Scenes chapter. The importance of detail is another aspect of the mantra of "show, don't tell." It's one thing to write, as Tom Wolfe does in a landmark Esquire article about California's car culture, that designer George Barris looks like the artist Picasso. It's another to expand on that:

> When he’s working, which is most of the time, he wears a heavy white T-style shirt, faded off-white pants cut full with pleats in the manner of Picasso walking along a Mediterranean bluff in the wind at Rapallo, and crepe-sole slipper-style shoes, also off-white.

Details matter. As a writer, you face the difficult task of not only getting the audience to create pictures in their heads, but to try to ensure that those pictures are as accurate as possible. Details matter. Barris doesn't just wear soft shoes, he wears "crepe-sole slipper-style shoes, also off-white." Details matter. Is the little statue on your subject's bookshelf just a mouse, or Mickey Mouse, or Mickey's obscure rival Mortimer?

One small caution: Remember Chekhov's Gun. The Russian author and playwright is supposed to have said, "If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act." In other words, don't introduce tantalizing details randomly. Select details that add to the storytelling: They make some aspect of the subject's personality clear. Barris designs and remodels cars. Working with automobiles is often a dirty job, with mechanics in dingy gray overalls dappled with oil stains. Wolfe wants you to see that Barris is not a motor guy, but an artist.

Be there

It should be obvious, but capturing such detail takes work. In your interviews, you will have to frequently push for specifics: What brand of cigarettes was he smoking? How far was it from his house to the grocery store?

Nothing substitutes for actually seeing and hearing and even smelling for yourself, though. The best profiles depend on being there. Visit your subject in their home and their office. Watch them in action, doing whatever it is they do. This is Tom Wolfe visiting his first customized cars event:

> Inside, two things hit you. The first is a huge platform a good seven feet off the ground with a hully-gully band — everything is electrified, the bass, the guitars, the saxophones — and (two) behind the band, on the platform, about two hundred kids are doing frantic dances called the hully-gully, the bird, and the shampoo. ... The boys and girls don’t touch, not even with their hands. They just ricochet around. Then you notice that all the girls are dressed exactly alike. They have bouffant hairdos — all of them — and slacks that are, well, skintight does not get the idea across; it’s more the conformation than how tight the slacks are. It’s as if some lecherous old tailor with a gluteus-maximus fixation designed them, striation by striation.

This gets harder when the scenes you're trying to describe are in the past. Harder, but not impossible. If you can't be there when it happens, you might at least get into the room where it happened later on. Nowadays, it's more and more likely that you can even find details without leaving your house, by finding photos or videos online or getting them from your sources.

A day in the life

A profile is an attempt to show someone completely, so very often profiles encompass most or all of the subject's life. Not always; you can limit your profile to a few months, or even break out of the chronological structure and just show snatches of their personality.

A "day in the life" story, on the other hand, doesn't try to show someone's full personality (though it may sometimes end up doing so). These stories are more about what someone does than who they are. And they don't even have to be about a person. A reporter working for us did a day in the life of a 24-hour big box store, showing the audience what happened behind the scenes.

Let's go even further: a "day in the life" story doesn't have to be just a single day. Richard Read of the the Portland Oregonian won a Pulitzer Prize for a series that was, at heart, a kind of day in the life that stretched over months and focused not on a person, but on a frozen french fry. He tracked it from its beginning in Oregon:

> At the start of the french fry trail, strong Hutterite women in long dresses sliced seed potatoes and tipped their bonnets to tradition, dusting modern farm machinery with goose wings.

... to a ship carrying those potatoes across the Pacific but running into mechanical problems:

> Fountain unpacked a small tool case. Suddenly the whole show -- the towering ship, the thousands of containers, the ship's staggering operating cost, the Hutterite french fries bound for Singapore -- all came down to a green-handled screwdriver.

... to their final destination at a fast-food outlet in Asia:

> Every week or so, grandparents drop by, and -- in a faint echo of better times -- 6-year-old Savina gets to go to McDonald's for her favorite fries.

Read's story goes far beyond a simple chronology and the fate of a few spuds. He uses that as a scaffolding to support reporting on the food chain overall and the competition between American and Asian economies.

Building a 'day in the life' story

Planning a "day in the life" story is risky. What if nothing happens? Think carefully about the potential events before you jump into one.

Categories

"Day in the life" stories all share the concept of a step-by-step approach to narrative. A profile can do that, but it can also jump over big sections of the timeline to focus only on significant events.

With that common factor, we can split "day in the life" stories into two categories, depending on the point of view of the observer. Think of that as how the camera works in a film.

In one category, the camera follows the subject -- say, a student in the ROTC program. We see her getting up in the morning, getting into uniform and rushing to training, changing and going to regular classes, having lunch, and so on. Read's potato story was like that,.

The other category uses a camera fixed in place. People and things come into and leave the frame. The story we mentioned about a big-box store was like that. A student reporter might do the same thing by camping out in the library during Finals Week.

Specific day

The first big mistake new writers make in approaching a "day in the life" story: They don't use a real day.

Instead, they ask their subject to describe a "typical" day. That kills their storytelling in several ways. It cuts out a lot of opportunities for specific details. It leads to a lot of sentences that distance the audience from the story: Instead of "Smith opened the door," we get "Smith usually opens the door."

The most effective "day in the life" stories are built on an actual day, with all its idiosyncrasies. Maybe this day, it's raining when our ROTC student goes to training, making the three-mile march even more miserable than usual. That's real.

You can always explain how your specific day has an atypical moment. Or explain that Tuesdays and Thursdays have a slightly different routine than the Monday you're focusing on. But using a real day as the core of the story is crucial.

Be there

The second big mistake for new writers: They don't experience the day first-hand. We explained in the profile section above the importance of being there to see and hear and smell for yourself. A "day in the life" story doesn't have the excuse that you're trying to reconstruct incidents in the past. You get to choose the day you focus on; pick one that you can be there for.

Ideally, that means spending the whole day reporting. If you're focusing on a person, you want to be there first thing in the morning, stick with them throughout the day, leaving only when they turn out the lights at night.

At least, you have to be with them at key points; you have to see each place where you'll set a scene.

Research

The third big mistake: The reporter doesn't research enough before selecting a day.

There is no such thing as a typical day, but some days are more typical than others. If you're writing about ROTC student's school day, you don't want to pick a weekend, of course. But you also don't want to pick a day when they're planning to skip some classes to celebrate a friend's birthday, or one when their usual morning training will be replaced by a lecture from a visiting general.

If you're doing a fixed-camera story about the library during Finals Week, you have to talk to the librarians first. You don't want so much a "typical" day as you do one where the most interesting things are likely to happen. Is the library more crowded during the first days of the week or at the end?

Your research involves not only which day, but what parts of the day are most likely to yield good scenes, and what those scenes are likely to be. If you can't follow your ROTC student from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., you want to know how to get the most out of the time you will have. Is their 10 a.m. class a two-hour lecture? Not much is likely to happen then. But if at lunch they meet a group of non-ROTC friends and often have arguments about the military, that's a good possibility. Consider the library: Is there a particular time of day when something happens? (In our college, there was a regular social break around 8:30 p.m. or so, when most people would stop studying briefly to gather in the library stairwells and chat. Yes, we went to a very nerdy college.) Is there a section of the library that has something special -- say, there's a corner of the third floor where all the math geeks congregate and swap equations for fun?

Reporting

Once you've picked your day and you're in place, you're ready to report. **A good "day in the life" story is built on recording far more than will end up in the story.** You need that so you can be selective, choosing only those details and incidents that are most interesting and central to the focus.

Take lots of notes -- and remember to record exact times. You may not end up writing "At 3:13 p.m., Jones walked through ..." But it's better to record more detail than you need. And some forms of "day in the life" do use exact times, forming a kind of diary of the day. Our reporter's story about the big-box store was built that way. By using the timestamps to separate sections of the story, he could skip writing transitions.

Consider actually recording, too -- audio or video. The risk here is that you end up with six hours of recording, say -- an overwhelming amount. Even in that case, if you've been taking notes with times marked, you could skip to the good parts.

Recordings would come in most useful in accurately reproducing dialogue. Even a few lines of back-and-forth bring special life to a story, because we rarely get that in journalism. Most of our quotes are things spoken to the reporter, not pieces of real life.

Don't think your reporting is done once the day ends. Your value as a reporter depends on delivering more than something mechanical like a camera could. When you've recorded the day, the next step is to figure out what it all means and how typical it was. You may have done some of this during the day by talking to your source, but you'll always end up with questions later. Is that instructor always so shouty? Why don't the librarians try to shush those geeky mathematicians?

Last reporting note: You're there to observe, not participate. If your subject gets into a conversation with someone, don't join in. They may, of course, want to introduce you, and their friend may be curious. Keep that interaction as brief as possible; encourage them to act as if you weren't there.

Moments

"Day in the life" stories share the same basic purpose as all journalism: to tell the audience something they don't already know. So, when you're assembling your story, keep in mind how the day you're describing differs from what your audience is used to.

Spend most of your words showing the audience those moments and details. If you're giving us a day in the life of a Muslim student in a school where students are overwhelmingly Christian, your story should let us see that student at prayer, or, say, making careful selections at dinner to ensure they're eating halal.

Don't only show those moments, though. "Othering" means focusing so much on the differences that you present someone as only an outsider. Your Muslim student attends classes like all your audience, has silly conversations about Netflix shows, gets tired and wants to take a nap in the middle of the day. Show that, too.

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12.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Profiles focus on a person, but they're more than just that person's account of themselves. Use multiple sources to portray the person from different angles.
- Avoid quotes in which the person just narrates the events of their life. Instead, use quotes to allow them to comment on those events, or capture dialogue from real life.
- Use detail and construct scenes so you're showing, not telling. That means, as much as possible, being at the scene in person.
- "Day in the life" stories use a step-by-step, minute-by-minute structure to introduce the audience to a place or type of person they don't know. This may be done either by following the subject as it moves from place to place, or by staying in one place and watching different scenes unfold in front of you.
- You should be able to explain these common mistakes and how to avoid them:
  - Not using a real day
  - Not being there
  - Picking the wrong day
- Record more material than you could possibly use in the final story, so you can select the best moments. Continue reporting afterward to understand what you've seen. Give the audience a complete picture, showing not only what makes your subject unfamiliar but also what the subject and your audience have in common.

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12.3: Optional Exercises

? Exercise 12.3.1

The writer Gay Talese's long story for Esquire magazine, "Frank Sinatra has a cold," has been called one of the greatest celebrity profiles ever. It is also a hallmark of "New Journalism," a mixture of journalistic reporting with literary writing style.

We're not suggesting you should be writing stories like this for now. But sometimes it's useful to have a very outstanding example to inspire you with the possibilities.

So click the link and read the story. When you're done, discuss it. Some points to consider:

- Select a key scene you think is particularly interesting. What happens in it? How do details add to the storytelling?
- Look at elements that contain action but don't encompass full scenes, such as a line about Sinatra throwing a bottle of catsup because he doesn't like that condiment on his hot dogs. Find more of those. Do you think they're fair? Do they support Talese's analysis of who Sinatra is?
- Talese, writing in a magazine, uses a style different from the more basic things we've talked about in this textbook. Paragraphs are longer; he uses the first person. But aside from such things, does this seem like journalism to you? Why or why not?

? Exercise 12.3.2

Select someone you know well; this could be a family member or friend. Think about what you know of their life: What kind of person they are, what their most notable personality characteristics are, what events they've lived through.

If you were going to profile them in a chronological structure, when would the story begin? Why?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

13: Structure Essentials

13.1: Structure Essentials

13.2: Chapter Review

13.3: Optional Exercises

Why Structure Matters

The most important thing to know about structure is that every story should have one. Facts should be arranged deliberately by the writer with the needs of the reader in mind.

Disorganized stories are harder to read, use more words and tend to omit some important information. Think of a library. If the books on its shelves were arranged in order of when they were purchased, rather than by topic and alphabetical order, it would be much harder for patrons to find what they're looking for. Multiple copies of the same book would be scattered through the stacks. Figuring out whether the library has a good selection of, say, books about dinosaurs would be impossible.

Chapters on summary ledes and story formulas covered structures that are rigid and apply to particular kinds of stories. As writers get better, they need to look beyond those.

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13.1: Structure Essentials

Structure choices

In other chapters, you've encountered several types of structures.

Inverted pyramid: Facts are arranged in order of importance or interest, from most important to least. This works best with short stories. In longer stories, the form can be adapted by grouping related paragraphs together, then arranging those groupings in order of importance.

Chronology (also called Narrative): Events are arranged generally in the order they occurred. This is the most natural way of telling a tale.

Hourglass: A combination of pyramid and chronology. The beginning of a story summarizes the most important facts in several paragraphs, followed by a transition paragraph introducing a start-to-finish chronology.

List: An introduction leads into a collection of items of roughly equal weight, with some visible structural element such as bullet points, boldface lead-ins or subheds. Much of this textbook is written in the list structure.

If you move beyond simple breaking news stories, you'll face stories that don't fit those structures.

We can't cover all the possibilities, but we can introduce you to basic concepts that can be a foundation as you explore more complex stories.

Middles

Understand that the structure of your story is often independent of the choices you make for the lede and ending. While the inverted pyramid is tied to the summary lede and narratives maintain that form from beginning to end, other structures can work with a variety of openings and closings.

It's understandable to agonize over ledes and endings; they pack a lot of impact into a few words. The middle? That's much longer, and it's just there. Except it's more. Writer Paul O'Neil is credited with this advice:

> Always grab the reader by the throat in the first paragraph, sink your thumbs into his windpipe in the second, and hold him against the wall until the tag line.

Anyone can take readers by surprise and grab them by the throat. To hold a squirming, impatient, even irate reader against the wall for 10, 20, 100 inches of text? That takes supreme effort and skill.

Even a story that is essentially chronological may require flashbacks (jumps to previous times), long digressions explaining particular points or other breaks from the simple this-then-that progression.

Chunking facts

Sometimes readers get a vague sense that something's off in a story, but they can't explain why. They just get confused or bored and drift off to something else. Experienced editors learn to diagnose story problems by recognizing symptoms. Common symptoms of a disorganized story:

- A paragraph that starts out talking about one point suddenly switches to another.
- The same information bobs up in several places in the story.

The writer didn't chunk their information.

The longer an article is, the greater the need to assemble it in chunks – collections of sentences and paragraphs about the same subtopic.

You've already seen chunking. We chunked related sentences together into paragraphs. In the inverted pyramid bus crash story(opens in new window), we chunked the two grafs about deaths and medical updates together, on after another. We chunked the several grafs of detailed chronology together.

The process continues, combining smaller chunks into bigger groupings, all the way up to deciding what gets chunked into the story overall and what gets chucked out.

We can often spot stories that need better “like with like” grouping when we notice the repetition of facts. When a sentence or graf is cut adrift from the chunk it should belong to, you may not realize it consciously. But you will repeat facts you already provided because you see a need to provide the same context over and over.

How do you fix that?

Topics, not sources

You talked to three people and got information from two academic journal articles. That’s how your notes are arranged. When you sit down to write, that’s how your story is organized.

But the reader doesn’t care about your reporting methods; the reader wants to understand a story.

If two of those interviewees and one of those articles covered the same topic, all those contributions should be in one chunk. In other words, instead of this:

BAD:

1. Interviewee A (talking about a problem, how it began, what its consequences are)
2. Interviewee B (talking about how it began)
3. Interviewee C (the problem, consequences)
4. Article 1 (consequences)
5. Article 2 (the problem, how it began)

... you reshuffle the deck.

BETTER:

1. The problem (Interviewee A, B, Article 2)
2. How it began (Article 2, Interviewee C, A)
3. Consequences (Interviewee A, Article 1, Interviewee C)

Topics, not interviews

A similar problem occurs when you allow the order of the questions you asked in interviews to determine the order of information in the article. It doesn’t matter whether you asked about Topic A before Topic B, or whether the source chose to talk about Topic A before B. What matters is what will make sense for the reader.

This should sound familiar. In discussing the formula for speech and panel discussion stories(opens in new window), we warned you not to rely on the order in which points were made in the speech to determine the order in which you mention them in your story.

It’s a basic rule: **The writer controls the story.**

It doesn’t matter where you got your information or in what order. The reader doesn’t care, and you shouldn’t either. Each quote, each statistic, each fact is an ingredient. You decide which to include and in what order.

Logical sequences

Before you can figure out how to chunk your paragraphs, you need a basic structure. Your story’s facts and ideas can form several intersecting sets of relationships. The basic structure tells you which relationships are most important.

Structures can be complex. They can be based on metaphors. We profiled a piano teacher with decades of experience. The structure was based on the five-part form of a piano sonata.

Our experience with student reporters, however, has taught us that three structures -- all logical sequences that should help the story make sense to readers -- cover much of what you’ll write.

First this, then that

Even if you’re not writing a chronological narrative, sequencing by time may work.

For example, you're telling readers that networking -- meeting people -- is important to getting a good job in public relations. You have several tips and anecdotes from sources. One possible organization:

1. Why networking is important
2. Networking opportunities on campus
3. Networking opportunities off campus, while in school
4. Networking opportunities after graduation
5. Tips for making the most of networking opportunities

Step 1 is the "why the reader should care" section, and needs to be at the beginning. Once you've explained that, Steps 2 through 4 form a logical, time-based sequence, and they're the core of this structure. You start off in classes, become experienced enough to intern, and finally get a job.

We put the tips for all networking opportunities at the bottom; they could go second, or be a sidebar. The basic this-then-that structure would remain.

Problem, consequences, solution

This one has echoes of chronology, too. First a problem occurs, then its consequences spread, and finally it's solved.

A student wrote a story explaining the lasting effects of poverty on academic performance and job prospects. She had solid reporting, but her first draft blunted its impact by jumping back and forth, with frequent repetition.

Once we suggested the "problem, consequences, solution" model, she was able to see a logical path.

1. Many children live in poverty (Problem).
2. Children who live in poverty do poorly in elementary and high school (Consequences).
3. If they do make it to college, they often do well (Solution).

Most common to least common

Students often produce stories rounding up reactions or advice. These often fall victim to organizing by source rather than topic. When pushed to do better, they can't figure out what goes first.

One student ran into something like this when writing about careers in photography. She figured out a clear top-level structure:

1. The advantages of a career in photography.
2. How to become a professional photographer.
3. Prospects for the future.

The logic: You have to know why you might want to be a photographer before you consider how to aim for that goal and what your chances are.

But within the first point, she had a problem. Her sources offered several things they liked about the job. Should she just put them in random order?

When we talked about this, she realized all three main sources had mentioned liking to work with people as one advantage. That was the most common factor, so it made sense to put that first and devote the most space to it. After that, she could list bits of advice that had two sources, and finally individual bits.

Outlines

A common problem with story structure for students: They didn't have one to begin with.

The longer your stories get, the more important it is to go in with a plan, or outline. This forces you to consider the pieces and parts you have individually and figure out how they could t into the whole.

Writing without an outline, you may lose track of where you are. Even if you had a general idea for a structure, you'll get lost in the details.

In the previous section we showed you a simple, three-point structure for a story about food insecurity. An outline would expand that by at least one level.

1. Many children who live in poverty do poorly in elementary and high school (Consequences).
    - Children in poverty lack educational resources at home.
    - Schools in poor neighborhoods tend to be ill-funded, reducing opportunities.
    - Even when poor children go to schools in better neighborhoods, they struggle.
    - Because poor children struggle in elementary and high school, they usually don't make it to college.
    - College has become the gateway to career success.
2. If they do make it to college, they often do well (Solution).
    - Poor students have nontraditional skills that can help them if recognized and fostered.
    - Poor students can persevere if they have personal guidance.
    - Poor students can do better if they and their schools get more resources.

By including subpoints, the writer had to think about her reporting as a collection of facts, not of interviews. She could have gone further, with sub-subpoints listing specific quotes or data that supported the subpoints.

As your outline expands from broad points to more specific subpoints, keep looking for logical structures. In the "consequences" section here, the five subpoints follow a roughly chronological order themselves -- from home to elementary school to high school to college.

One semester, we asked a class to interview professors and students around campus about Blackboard, the online course management system. Specifically, they asked about professors who refused to use the system or used it sparingly.

We pooled all the interviews, giving each student the chance to write a story based on dozens of sources. Many first drafts were hodgepodges, bouncing from quote to quote without any structure. Working with students, we first helped them recognize a basic "problem, consequences, solution" model.

1. Some professors avoid Blackboard (Problem).
2. That makes it harder for students to gauge how they're doing or keep track of assignment (Consequences).
3. The university offers help to understand the system (Solution).

The students looked again at the pool of quotes and sorted them into subpoints.

1. Some professors avoid Blackboard.
    - They don't understand it.
    - They think it takes too much time.
2. That makes it harder for students to gauge how they're doing or keep track of assignments.
    - Without Blackboard, students can't calculate their overall grade during the semester.
    - Without Blackboard, students may not get their assignments or tests back, so they can't see what they did wrong.
    - Without Blackboard, students can lose track of when assignments are due.
3. The university offers help to understand the system.
    - Using Blackboard helps professors, too.
    - The basics aren't hard to understand.

The subpoints were organized by most to least common.

Students who got that far still had some problems; the quotes backing up the subpoints were thrown in randomly. Their outlines needed one more level.

1. Some professors avoid Blackboard.
    - They don't understand it
        - Student quotes
        - Professor quotes
    - They think it takes too much time.
2. That makes it harder for students to gauge how they're doing or keep track of assignments.
    - Without Blackboard, students can't calculate their overall grade during the semester.

        - Student quotes
        - Professor quotes
    - Without Blackboard, students may not get their assignments or tests back, so they can't see what they did wrong.
        - Student quotes
        - Professor quotes
    - Without Blackboard, students can lose track of when assignments are due.
3. The university offers help to understand the system.
    - Using Blackboard helps professors, too.
    - The basics aren't hard to understand.

For subpoints supported by multiple quotes, organizing them into student and professor chunks completed a clear, sturdy structure.

Transitions

Even after you arrange your information in the proper order, you still have to ensure that the reader follows along when you shift from one fact to another, one topic to another.

Transition methods

Because journalism paragraphs are short, journalists avoid transition sentences that serve only to connect one paragraph to another. Instead, they rely mostly on three methods:

Natural flow

In some cases, no transition is needed. The facts of one paragraph naturally lead to those of the next.

This passage from a Pulitzer-winning story by Gene Weingarten for the Washington Post is an example:

> Bell's a heartthrob. Tall and handsome, he's got a Donny Osmond-like dose of the cutes, and, onstage, cute elides into hottie. ... That cute Beatles-style mop top is also a strategic asset: Because his technique is full of body -- athletic and passionate -- he's almost dancing with the instrument, and his hair flies.
>
> He's single and straight, a fact not lost on some of his fans. In Boston, as he performed Max Bruch's dour Violin Concerto in G Minor, the very few young women in the audience nearly disappeared in the deep sea of silver heads. But seemingly every single one of them -- a distillate of the young and pretty -- coalesced at the stage door after the performance, seeking an autograph. It's like that always, with Bell.

Rephrasing

An element of the first paragraph is repeated early in the second, but without using the same words. For example, a person is named fully in one paragraph, then referred to by last name only in the second.

> The six masked men ran out of the bank and into a waiting van. Officer Erin Moran, who had been talking to a bodega owner a few doors away, drew her gun and raced toward them. The van pulled away from the curb. Moran stepped in front of it and raised her weapon.
>
> That decision put her in violation of department policy.

"That decision" refers to the action in the last sentence of the preceding graf, creating a strong link.

Transitional words

The connection between two paragraphs is indicated by the use of a particular word. For example, this sentence starts with "for example," indicating it will provide an illustration of what was previously discussed.

> Martenson claims to be the first person to climb Mt. Everest while walking on his hands.
>
> **However**, he doesn't explain that he did it in a simulator, not on the real mountain.

Transitional words do not have to be the first words of the paragraph, but to be effective they should appear early in the first sentence.

Martenson was the first person to climb Mt. Everest while walking on his hands.

He got married **around the same time**.

Common transitional words and phrases:

Table 13.1.1 Transitional words and phrases

https://human.libretexts.org/@go/page/382361

Type of transition	Words
Example	• For example • For instance • Specifically
Further example	• Also • As well • Furthermore • Likewise • In addition • In the same way • Similarly • Too
Cause and effect	• As a result • Because • Therefore
Sequence	• First, second, third • Next, finally • Again
Time	• After • Around the same time • Before • During • Earlier • Eventually • Later • Meanwhile • More recently • Then
Location	• Above • Below • Elsewhere • Near • Next to • There
Emphasis	• Even more • More importantly • Naturally • Surprisingly • Certainly • Of course
Contrast	• Although • But • Despite • Even so • Even though • However • Instead • Yet

Type of transition	Words
	• Nevertheless

Gold coins

Writing coach Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute said “gold coins” refers to anything – a quote, a funny line, a thrilling plot turn, a beautiful word-picture – that gives readers unexpected value or enjoyment.

He talked about scattering gold coins through your story. The idea is that if the reader comes upon one gold coin, he or she will be motivated to keep going in hopes of finding another, and another.

One thing the gold coin principle means is that you shouldn’t hoard all your best lines for the beginning and end. If the story drags in the middle, the reader will squirm away, leaving you leaning up against a wall, empty-handed.

Many movie trailers use quick cuts to cram together all the stuff that might attract an audience: jokes, explosions, embraces, punches. When you see the whole movie, those moments are scattered throughout the film. They’re the director’s gold coins. They’re paced deliberately to keep you sitting through the dull exposition and plodding dialogue parts.

Remember, film faces the same problem as writing: How do you hold an audience in an era of short attention spans? Screenwriter William Martell put it somewhat crudely:

> Our job as screenwriters is to rupture bladders.

In other words, to make people put off urgent trips to the bathroom because they don’t want to miss something interesting or exciting.

Thankfully, as writers we don’t have to worry. Audiences can take our work along with them to the toilet. But we still have to fight that battle.

However you’ve organized your story, if you read through it and realize it’s dragging, look through your notes or rack your brain for a gold coin you can put there.

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13.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- We can often spot stories that need better “like with like” grouping when we notice the repetition of facts at several points.
- Scan your stories for such repetition and fix it by chunking -- collecting sentences or paragraphs about a similar topic in one spot.
- The reader doesn’t care about your reporting methods; the reader wants to understand a story.
- Don’t chunk by collecting all the facts you got from one source together; focus on topics.
- Each quote, each statistic, each fact is an ingredient. You decide which to include and in what order.
- Take control of the information. One way to do this is to put each quote, fact or description on a separate notecard (noting the source on each card), then shuffling them and finally rearranging them in topical order.
- Three structures cover much of what you’ll write.
- You should be able to explain and apply these methods:
  - First this, then that
  - Problem, consequences, solution
  - Most common to least common
  - The longer your stories get, the more important it is to go in with a plan, or outline.
- Journalists avoid transition sentences that serve only to connect one paragraph to another.
- Transitions generally do not add information, so try to keep them as succinct as possible. You should be able to describe and apply these methods:
  - Natural flow
  - Rephrasing
  - Transitional words
- Don’t hoard all your best lines for the beginning and end.
- Scatter “gold coins” throughout your story -- quotes, descriptions, facts -- to keep readers interested.

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13.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 13.3.1

Select a story -- one of your own, if you have some, or one from student media.

Outline its structure. Start with just the key points, then drill down to subpoints and, if possible, sub-subpoints.

This practice is important on its own. Can you take it further? Look over the outline. Do you see any repetition? Sections that seem out of place? If so, revise the outline to suggest improvements.

Exercise 13.3.1

In this chapter, we describe an assignment in which students conducted interviews regarding professors' use of a learning management system called Blackboard. Every student interviewed at least one prof and one student. All the interviews were compiled. Then each student wrote their own version of a story using whatever they wanted from the list.

As a class, discuss and choose a topic that could be approached in the same way. Figure out what the angle will be; plan some common questions. Keep this simple; you only want a few questions so you won't have lots of long transcripts to wade through.

When your interviews are done, submit the transcripts. Then use the compilation to get quotes for your own story. Think about the guidelines described in this chapter to organize the middle of the story. And use the advice in the chapter on alternative ledes and endings to bookend it.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

14: Alternative Story Forms

14.1: Alternative Story Forms

14.2: Specialized online reporting forms

14.3: Chapter Review

14.4: Optional Exercises

Why alternative story forms matter

Most print news stories, news releases and even novels are composed of standard sentences, with all the appurtenances associated with those: nouns, verbs, articles, prepositions, punctuation, etc. But that's not the only way to convey information. In many cases, it's not even the best. Consider:



Figure 14.1: Graphic illustration of alternative traffic signs. (CC BY-NC-ND; John Kroll)

All these signs provide the same message. Which would you want to encounter when you're driving 65 mph?

Traffic signs forgo grammatical and punctuation rules – and even words entirely – in the interest of providing information in the most efficient and effective way. So, too, alternative story forms give writers different ways to deliver messages.

Today's and tomorrow's journalists must not only understand how to create stories in a variety of forms; they must also know how to judge which tools are best to tell which stories. More and more, stories are told not just in one form, be it standard writing, video or whatever. Instead, the story is turned into a package -- a combination of tools, each contributing a piece of the complete picture.

In this video, Doug Lesmerises says that only fuddy-duddies think words are always the best way to tell stories.



Video 14.1: Doug Lesmerises: Digital tools in journalism | https://youtu.be/bZxOoDg7Ouw | Transcript

Until relatively recently, reporters wouldn't have been expected to know much about these alternative methods. Reporters wrote stories. Other people in the newsroom provided the photos, graphics and other elements. The "word" people -- reporters and editors -- might refer to these additions dismissively as "arting up" a story.

By the 1980s, designers and other visual journalists were having success in making the case that the words weren't the only thing that mattered. A Northwestern University professor, Buck Ryan, then developed the Maestro concept, which led to opening discussions of stories in development to more than just the writer and editor. Maestro editors used checklists of elements -- like the formats covered in this chapter -- to figure out how to create complete news packages.

With the shrinking of newsrooms and the move to online journalism, many journalists are put in the position of being maestro and reporter, all in one. It is more important than ever to understand how to use all the tools available to tell all the elements of a story.

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14.1: Alternative Story Forms

The parts of a story package

To figure out which tools to use, you need to understand the parts of a story package. There are different ways to do that, but we'll work with these seven elements:

Facts: The basic information. This is what happened, or is happening, or is going to happen. President Kennedy was shot. The Guardians won the pennant. Most hard news stories consist mostly of the facts -- the classic 5 W's.

Narrative: This happened, and then that happened, and then the next thing happened. It may be difficult to sort out the difference between this category and the previous one, but it's a worthwhile distinction in this case.

Think back to the discussion of the inverted pyramid. You learned that in that structure, the chronological order of events could be scrambled. The facts of the story were considered in isolation.

Now think about a movie you've seen. Events -- the facts of the movie -- moved forward chronologically. There may have been flashbacks or flash-forwards, but even within those, time moved in its normal direction. The more a movie departs from straightforward chronology, the harder it is to understand.

Journalists use the word "narrative" in several ways. For this discussion, we'll define it as a series of events told chronologically.

Context: The Kennedy assassination was a specific event. To put it in context is to explain things such as the political climate (JFK was unpopular with conservatives), the history of assassination attempts on presidents, and so on. This information is not part of the facts of the event itself, but it provides background and helps the audience understand more about the significance of an event and why it might have happened.

Examples: Evidence for some point. A story about the Guardians winning a pennant might refer to the team's success in close games. Short summaries of several come-from-behind ninth-inning wins would illustrate that point.

Comparisons: Examples that show similarities and differences. This is different enough from "illustrations" to merit separate consideration.

Those short summaries of the Guardians' close wins were used as evidence to support a single point. Comparisons, on the other hand, are themselves the point. That same story about the Guardians might include comparisons of this season's team to some great Cleveland teams of the past: What were each team's strengths? Weaknesses? Star players?

Explanations: How something works. The story about the Guardians might mention that a particular player raised his batting average 70 points from the year before. A diagram of changes in that player's swing would explain *how* that happened.

Interaction: Reading or watching the news tends to be a passive experience. Digital journalism allows us to change that. Instead of a set list of restaurant reviews with ratings designated by a media outlet's critic, an online list might allow the audience to add its own ratings, juggling the rankings. Anything that allows the audience to direct the storytelling increases interest and provides another way to absorb information.

Common elements

No matter what form your story package takes, it should address these elements in some way.

Attribution: Just as you must attribute direct quotes and some other material in plain text stories, you must do the same with alternative story forms.

Rather than requiring "according to so-and-so" attached to every fact, though, most alternative forms have more concise alternatives. Often, a plain list of sources used is provided at the bottom of the piece. In addition, if your piece runs online, links should be embedded to the original source when possible.

Credit: Some alternative forms are so short that crediting the journalists responsible is unneeded. But don't forget that visual journalists -- photographers, videographers, artists -- are journalists, too, and deserve the same respect as text reporters.

Headline: Headlines help the audience quickly understand what a piece is about. Online, they also provide SEO(opens in new window). Even though you may not see a headline at the start of a video, for example, you'd want the online post of the video to include a headline.

Follow the same headline guidelines provided elsewhere in this book(opens in new window). The main difference: Label heds -- short titles without verbs -- may be appropriate, especially for smaller alternative story forms.

Explanation: Ideally, alternative story forms should be understandable at a glance. However, that's not always the case. Statistics may have exceptions the audience needs to know about. Pieces not packaged with the other elements of a package may need introductions that provide context.

Alternative forms

Don't let the term "alternative" fool you. These ways of telling a story are just as valid as writing paragraph after paragraph.

Paragraphs with a twist

Some alternative forms look very much like regular stories; they rely on text and may have lede paragraphs. Instead of written transitions from one paragraph to another, though, they use labeling or numbering to indicate a change of topic. That makes the structure more visible to the audience, which can aid in understanding. They may be so much like a skeleton -- a body reduced to its inner structure -- that they omit paragraphs and even sentences.

List

Table 14.1.1 Basic list structure

Words	Category	Explanation
Most Emmy wins for best comedy	Headline	Unlike story headlines, lists usually get short labels rather than complete sentences.
“Modern Family” (5) “Frasier” (5) “All in the Family” (4) “30 Rock” (3) “Taxi” (3) “Mary Tyler Moore Show” (3) “Dick Van Dyke Show” (3) “Phil Silvers Show” (3)	Content	Basic lists provide only essential information, as concisely as possible.
Source: Emmys.com	Source	Attribution is usually provided by a source line at the bottom, often in smaller type.

Lists are the simplest alternative forms. They can provide context or examples. The list above could be used to provide context for a news story reporting that “Modern Family” had won its fifth Emmy. Rather than construct several sentences in the story to explain how other shows did, the list provides a quick summary.

Because lists are so skeletal, it’s important to be sure readers can understand what they’re seeing. The headline must be clear.

Listicle

Table 14.1.2 Basic listicle structure

Content	Category	Explanation
6 comedies to binge right now	Headline	As with plain lists, listicle headlines are usually labels. They often use the number of items and/or an adjective such as "best."
Sunday’s Best Comedy Emmy win for “Modern Family” tied it for the most by any series.	Intro	Anything from one sentence to a few paragraphs. Introductions, much like lede paragraphs, set up the rest of the content. This is also the place to include any explanation needed for the content, to avoid cluttering the rest of the listicle with footnotes.
"Modern Family"	Subhead	Each item in the listicle gets its own subhead, a simple label.
 Image **14.1.1**: Cast of "Modern Family." (CC BY-ND 2.0; ABC/Walt D'Amico/Walt Disney Television)	Photo	Listicles often include a photo with every item. Sometimes, the photo is the only content, but professional communicators usually use listicles to provide more information.
Emmys: 5 (2010-14) **Network:** ABC **Stars:** Ed O’Neill, Sonia Vergara, Julie Bowen, Ty Burrell, Jesse Tyler Ferguson **On air:** 2009-present (renewed for next season)	Content	The text under each item should be parallel -- similar in content and size -- to make it easy for the audiend to make comparisons. A good way to make the text a faster read is to use bold-face lead-ins, such as "Emmys" and "Network" here. Use the same subcategories for every item. Here, the subcategories each fit with very brief bits of information. You can use this style in other ways. "Quote" could lead in to a quote from a relevant person; "Reviews" to snippets of what others have had to say.
(Repeat elements from subhead through content as needed)	More content	Listicles should have at least three items. The only upper limit is practical: How long can you hold the audience's attention? How big can the page get before it crashes browsers?
Source: Emmys.com, networks	Source	A listicle may have several sources. Because the purpose of attribution is to help the audience decide whether to trust the information, you don't always need to list every one individually. Here, "networks"

Content	Category	Explanation
		covers all the TV networks whose shows would be included.

Listicles (from “lists” + “articles”) take the basic idea and add more information. You’re probably familiar with them, even if you hadn’t heard the name before. Ever read some online post with a headline such as “10 awesome classes you can take at Your School Name Here”? That’s a listicle.

They can include photos or videos; those may be the main element of each item. Each item could be broken down into categories, as in the example here, or be one or more regular paragraphs.

Listicles in which text is minimal will often have the same kind of source lines as plain lists. Wordier listicles may embed attribution in the intro or in each item.

Because they can vary so much, listicles can fill any part of a story package except interaction. While simple lists may be embedded within full stories, listicles more often stand on their own and most often take regular bylines. They can be as short as a few items or as long as you want.

Listicles are sometimes criticized as dumbing down journalism, but the content can be as frivolous or serious as desired; the research as deep or superficial. They’re less like candy (sweet but bad for you) than popcorn (tasty and with some nutritional value). Like a handful of popcorn, a listicle is a collection of small items that add up to something more. And, like popcorn, you can serve them plain or drenched in butter or caramel.

The key to a good listicle: reporting. Some bad listicles are based only on the writer's top-of-the-head opinion. The readers have their own opinions; why do they need yours? Other bad listicles have just a single, easily accessible source. If the audience could get the same information just as easily, you haven't provided value.

Opinion-based listicles can be good if the writer has special knowledge. For example, if you taste-test every food item at a local festival, you're doing reporting; your reviews have value. Look for ways to add even more value, though. Can you get nutrition information for each item? Provide a sentence or two of background about each vendor?

Biobox

Table 14.1.3 Basic biobox structure

Content	Explanation
John Kasich	Bioboxes are small; the headline can be just a basic label.
Title: Governor (Ohio) **Born:** May 13, 1952, McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania **Spouses:** Mary Lee Griffith (1975-80; divorced); Karen Waldbillig (1997-present; twin daughters Emma, Reese) **Political party:** Republican **Political career:** State senator, 1978-83. U.S. representative, 1983-2001. Governor, 2011-present.	Biobox information is concise. Use boldface lead-ins.
Quote: "I wasn't involved in the inner workings of Lehman. ... That's like, it's sort of like being a car dealer in Zanesville and being blamed for the collapse of GM."	In addition to basic information, a biobox might include extras such as quotes or quirky categories such as hobbies.

Bioboxes, which can be about people or organizations, add context and provide a way to keep basic but dull facts from cluttering the main story. They are often embedded in main stories.

When several bioboxes are used together, it’s best to keep the main categories consistent. Extra categories -- hobbies, favorite movies, or other light questions -- may vary, with the writer choosing the most interesting answers for each individual.

Because the information in a biobox is mostly basic, they often don’t need source lines.

Glossary

A list of words and definitions. They provide some measure of explanation, but mostly help readers navigate technical subjects. For example, this textbook has a glossary(opens in new window) in the back.

Glossaries usually take a simple label hed such as “Glossary” or “Important words.” Introductions aren’t needed. Highlight the terms; boldfacing and using hanging indents (where the first line of a paragraph is flush against the left margin and all others are indented) are common. Arrange terms in alphabetical order.

Keep definitions as short as possible. And keep them simple: Readers shouldn't need a glossary to understand your glossary.

Chronology

A series of events arranged in chronological order, providing context. To distinguish between two common types, we’ll use the term “chronology” to refer only to those that are text-based, and in which the distance between two items does not reflect the amount of time between them. In a later section we’ll use “timeline” to refer to visually oriented versions.

Table 14.1.4 Basic chronology structure

Content	Explanation
Kent State history	Headline: Usually a short label
1910: Ohio State Normal College at Kent approved by governor **1911:** Name changed to Kent State Normal School **1913:** First classes begin on Kent campus **1915:** Renamed Kent State Normal College with addition of four-year degrees **1929:** Renamed Kent State College as it expands beyond teacher education **1935:** Becomes Kent State University as state adds graduate programs **1946:** First regional campus opened in Canton **1961:** First black squirrels released on campus **1970:** Four killed during protest against escalation of Vietnam war	Content: Items are brief; may not be full sentences. Each item begins with a time element, which may be just a year, a day, a specific time or a span. Boldfacing and other typographical formats, such as hanging indents, make it easier for readers to scan.
Sources: Kent State, Ohio government	Simplified sourcing is common, and often shows up only at the bottom in smaller type.

Chronologies rarely take bylines, and usually don’t need introductions.

FAQ

The same format you’ve encountered on the “support” sections of websites for software or hardware. Basic information is presented as questions and answers.

The questions may be actual queries from the audience or the writer may make them up as a device to organize the information. In either case, the FAQ is a way to collect context in one place. Online, an FAQ allows the writers of updates to focus mostly on the newest information and refer readers to the FAQ for full background. For complicated stories, FAQs can provide explanations.

The line between FAQs and listicles can be blurry. The difference between “7 things you need to know about the campus measles outbreak” and “Answers to common questions about the campus measles outbreak” would probably only be one of presentation, not content.

In a FAQ, questions and answers should be presented in contrasting type -- for example, bold for questions and regular for answers.

Individual answers include attribution as needed; they’re usually written in standard sentences.

Q&A

A whole interview or excerpts, presented with little or no editing.

Q&As are a clumsy way to provide the main facts of a story, but they can add narrative or context. Most important, they create the illusion of interaction.

How? Because transcripts are made up mostly of a source's words, readers feel they are getting information unfiltered by reporters and editors. That draws them into the story and gives them a sense of control.

It's an illusion because the questions were chosen and their order determined by the writer. However, if you follow journalism principles, accurately reporting your questions and truthfully reporting the answers, a transcript does give readers a more direct connection to a source's voice.

Readers may have a hard time finding the important parts in a transcript, so writers often use them as supplements to regular stories that cut to the chase. Another common form begins with an introduction written like a regular story before transitioning to the transcript -- something like the "hourglass" structure shifts from inverted pyramid to narrative.

Table 14.1.5 Basic Q&A structure

Content	Explanation
Kent State will offer free enrollment to Earth's alien invaders, President Beverly Warren said.	The start of a Q&A is often a classic summary lede. Much like the lede on a speech story, it focuses on a key point. Avoid boring openings that just say someone was interviewed.
"As a university committed to diversity," Warren said Monday, "we open our arms and our classrooms to our chitinous protectors." The university is removing potentially offensive material, such as bug spray, from its inventory, she said. The May 4 museum is preparing an installation honoring the victims of Sept. 23, 2014, when maintenance personnel committed an act of genocide that wiped out untold thousands of ants in Merrill Hall.	The rest of the opening section should be relatively short -- no more than a few paragraphs. It can showcase highlights from the interview and provide any needed context.
Warren's comments came in an exclusive interview with KentWired. The transcript below has been edited only for length.	The opening ends with a brief transition setting up the interview.
Q. What's your reaction to the arrival of the aliens from Planet Zenothon? **A.** I, for one, welcome our new insect overlords.	Different news outlets use different formats. Some may use "Q" and "A"; others, the names of the interviewer and sources. Boldfacing, italics or other typographical formats may be used to make it easier to scan.
Q. Have they contacted you yet? **A.** Not directly. We have heard through government channels that they regret the unfortunate loss of life when one of their craft landed on Franklin Hall, but ... mistakes will happen.	No quotation marks are needed. However, any alterations should be indicated with square brackets or ellipses, as with any direct quotation.

If you intend to turn your interview into a Q&A, pay extra attention to your questions. Work on the wording in advance. Ideally, your questions should provide all the context readers will need to understand the answers that follow. If not, you'll have to clutter up the answers with parenthetical explanations, which makes it harder for the audience to feel a direct connection with the source. And it's dangerous to use a differently worded question than you actually asked; it could put the answers in the wrong light.

For similar reasons, edit the answers very lightly. The direct quotes you put into regular stories should be short, and you should select only the best. In a Q&A, give the readers as much of the source's words as possible. But keep the reader's interests in mind. Your interview may have lasted 30 minutes, but the reader's patience probably won't last that long. Be selective.

Not all interviews make good transcripts. They're best used when the source is someone in a position of authority (so their precise wording is important to readers they have power over) or when it's someone readers would want to get to know.

Student writers may rely too much on the Q&A format because it gets around much of the hard work of writing a story. Instead of having to figure out a lede, and ending and the organization of the rest of the story, instead of having to choose the best quotes and to paraphase other parts, the reporter mostly just copies and pastes a transcript.

We discourage this for several reasons.

- It puts an extra burden on the audience. Instead of the reporter sorting through an interview to figure out the most important things and put them in logical order, the audience has to do that work.
- It tends to produce stories much longer than they need to be. When people respond in interviews, they aren't monitoring their words for conciseness. They're wordy and repetitious.
- It doesn't help the reporter learn to be better. At this point in your education, what you need most is practice. Skipping over a big part of the reporting process denies you a learning opportunity.

Bits and pieces

Other text-based forms depart even further from traditional paragraph structures.

Grid

Example 14.1.1

Smartphone choices

Battery time based on continuous use for phone or image-heavy web browsing.

Comparison of smartphones based on price, OS, battery time and quality

Phone	Price	OS	Battery time (hours)	Rating
Apple iPhone 6	$695	iOS 12.2	12 talk, 8 data	★★★★★
Samsung Galaxy 9	$439	Android 8.3	20 talk, 14 data	★★★★★
Google Listener III	$225	Android 9.1	18 talk, 14 data	★★★
Motorola Buzz	$274	Linux 32.43	22 talk, 10 data	★★★★

Source: Manufacturers

A collection of facts organized by item and category. Have you ever gone to a shopping website where you can select several items and compare them? You get a grid with the individual items you selected running along one axis and various categories of comparison on the other.

Grids are an excellent way to provide comparisons. They also offer limited interaction. The audience can navigate the grid in any direction, and often may find connections that the author didn't realize. Grids presented online may allow readers to reorder the items by their chosen category, adding even more interaction.

The example above uses stars for the ratings. The introductory text provided here is sparse, but in a real grid you'd also want an explanation of how the ratings were created.

Along with stars, many other visual elements can be included -- other symbols, photos, small maps. The text here is very brief, but grids can also include things such as a paragraph of commentary about each main item.

Quiz

Questions posed to the reader, with answers hidden in some way but available to the audience. Quizzes can be pure entertainment, but they can also be a way to sneak facts into the audience's heads while adding interactivity to a story package.

They often have challenging headlines ("What do you know about the history of terrorism?). The best quizzes don't just tell you which multiple choice was correct; they add explanations, with appropriate attribution.

Quote stream

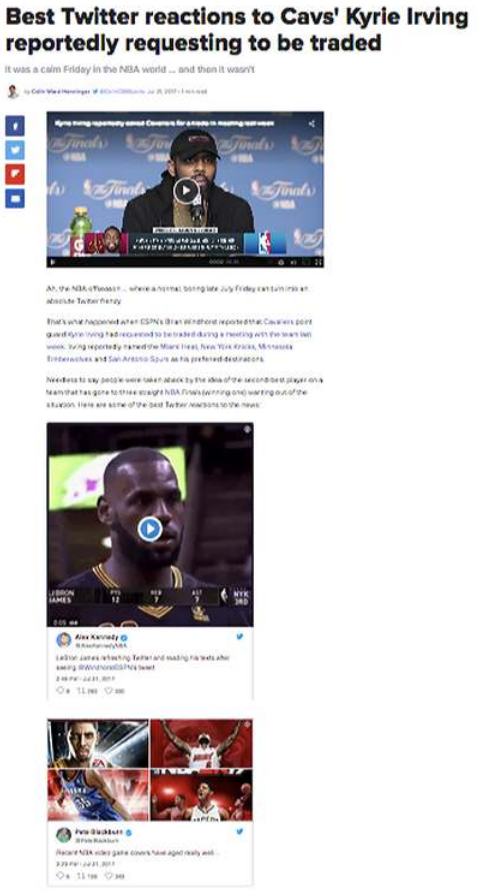


Image 14.1.2: An example quote stream

A set of direct quotes from one or more people. For example, a story about crime in a particular neighborhood might be accompanied by a string of quotes (not already used in the main story) from neighbors. Nowadays, journalists often turn to Twitter and compile reactions there into a quote stream.

When quote streams run in print, they often have no headlines at all. Online, they need a basic headline and a short introduction to provide context for the quotes. Attribution is attached to each quote.

These streams are of limited news value. If the quotes are chosen wisely, they can provide context or provide illustrations of common reactions.

However, they can also be overused and poorly done. Ask yourself: What is the audience going to get out of this package? Am I quoting people who have particular familiarity with the story or very interesting things to say -- or am I just filling up the space with random comments? Am I representing a true range of opinions, or selecting the most outrageous posts to sensationalize the story?

Be selective. Online, the lack of space restraints can encourage journalists to continue adding to quote streams endlessly. The attention span of the online audience, though, is even lower than for print.

Poll

One or more questions posed to the audience, with no “correct” answers. It is important to understand that **these have only entertainment value**. Unless the respondents to a poll are scientifically selected to be representative of the audience as a whole, surveys are subject to an astounding variety of biases.

They can add interactivity if used responsibly. That’s best done with stories of little consequence. Unscientific polls on major controversies encourage partisans to game the system by creating software bots or otherwise flooding the poll with phony

responses. Do not make the mistake of treating the results of an online poll as news itself.

Documents

Where possible, responsible journalists link to relevant documents. It's even better if you can embed them in your story. First, that gives a stronger visual clue; second, it keeps the audience on your site.

As of the time this textbook was compiled, DocumentCloud.org offered hosting services to journalists and news organizations that registered and verified their status. Once posted on DocumentCloud, the document can be embedded. Other hosting services exist.

Annotation

In several places in this textbook, we show you an example of a story and explain it through by highlighting certain parts and pointing from them to further notes. That’s annotation. It can be done with footnotes (the audience has to match a symbol in the original with that same symbol in a separate list of explanations), call-out boxes (arrows or other pointing devices connect parts of the original to explanations that run around the outside) or pop-ups (small windows of explanation that appear when an online user clicks or rolls over parts of the original).

Annotations are an extremely effective way to provide context or explanations. When set up with pop-ups online, they also add a measure of interactivity.

You can annotate:

- **Documents.** If one celebrity sues another, the lawsuit could be annotated to highlight important charges, explain legal terms and so on. DocumentCloud, mentioned above, allows users to add annotations to documents.
- **Transcripts.** Similarly, news organizations often follow major political speeches with annotated versions that fact-check and add background.
- **Images.** A photo of a crime scene is more informative if call-out boxes point out clues. These can be created in image-editing programs or through web coding.
- **Maps.** There’s more about this below.
- **Video.** Video editing software can add captions or other types of labels. For one of the most creative and fun versions of annotated video, search online for VH-1 Pop Up Videos.

Visual storytelling

Visual journalists may (and should) bristle at dismissing their work as "alternatives" to text. It’s quite possible humans told stories with cave drawings before they were capable of speech. But in the context of a textbook mostly about writing, images are an alternative.

Photos



Image 14.1.3: Young trainees practice canal jousting in Sete, France. By freezing action, photographs allow audience members to inspect a scene, drawing them into the story. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll

Well, you know what this is. But consider how much well-selected photos can add to a story package.

Like any act of journalism, taking a photo is making a choice: Show this side of the street, not that one. Choose this angle, not that one. The photos chosen to publish are usually only a small subset of those taken -- another set of choices. Even so, photos seem to put the audience at a shorter distance from places, sources and events than when those are filtered through a reporter's words. Every good news photo is its own act of journalism.

News photos can add many elements to your package. At their most basic, they provide facts: This is what it looked like. By showing the scene of an event, they provide context. Multiple photos of, say, urban graffiti serve as examples or comparisons. Because the audience can explore photos in depth, they even provide a measure of interaction.

Thanks to the ubiquity of smartphones, news-related photos fill social media. It's become common for news outlets to reach out to social media users asking permission to use those photos. If you're considering that, keep some things in mind:

- Copyright lodges with the person who takes the photo, so you must have their permission to use the photo. You may read elsewhere that there are exceptions for breaking news, or that posting a photo on social media makes it public property. Regardless of the intricacies of the law, journalists should never take photos without seeking permission.
- When you see a photo online that purports to show breaking news, use one of the image search engines (Google has one; TinEye is another) to check if there are other versions of it. Often, trolls will grab old photos and claim they're new, or grab an image from the originator's feed. Using the search engines, you can see if the image was posted earlier than the one you found.
- It's easier and easier to fake images. Do whatever you can to verify images you find on social media or get from user submissions. This textbook can't hope to keep up with the methods being developed to police AI; consult with your professor or editor about the best available tools.

Photostory

Take several photos and arrange them in a specific sequence, often with textual explanations (i.e., captions) and the power of the image multiplies. Photostories can be complete packages on their own or add narrative to other content.

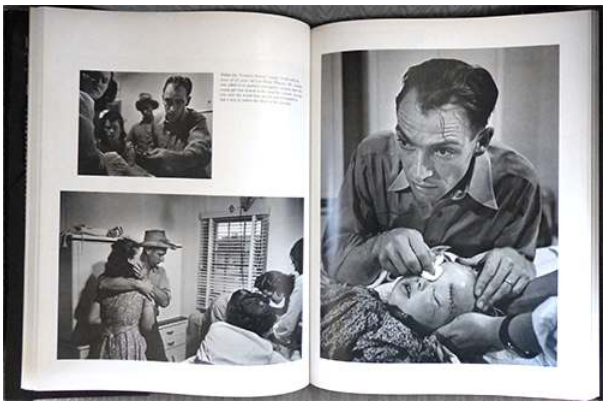


Image 14.1.4: One of the great examples of the power of photostories is the essay "Country Doctor" by W. Eugene Smith for Life magazine.

Unfortunately, most online news sites cannot accommodate the design possibilities that came with print journalism. Your alternative online may only be to use a slideshow, displaying one image at a time. But there still can be much value in using multiple photos to tell a complete story.

Video

Video is especially powerful for narrative, and can be used to offer explanations of things that are too complicated or have too much in motion to be clearly explained in graphics. And, like photostories, video can be complete package unto itself.

In common with all other kinds of alternative story forms, video loses its effectiveness when it only duplicates what's covered in another part of the same package. If your video shows excerpts of a speech along with narration describing the day's events, but it's packaged with a text story that includes the same quotes and similar descriptions, neither form is being used well. Each part of a story package should be complementary, telling its own piece of the whole.

This video from al.com is a good example of what video can contribute.



Video 14.1.1: Tuscumbia Makeup Artist by al.com | Watch on YouTube(opens in new window) [www.youtube.com] | No transcript available

Raw video

When we talked about video above, we meant assembling many clips and, often, adding narration. Online, news outlets have found an audience appetite for a simpler method that many call “raw video.”

Think of raw video as like a photo, only with motion. Instead of many clips, it’s many fewer, sometimes only one. Raw video often runs no more than 20 or 30 seconds. It’s mainly used to let the audience see through the journalist’s eyes, providing facts or examples. For example, if you’re at the scene of a house fire while firefighters are still battling, you may not be able to find out much about what’s going on. There may be no spokesperson available to answer your questions. You’ll get those later. But at the scene, you can slowly pan your camera to show the audience the chaos. Embedded with the fully reported story, that 20-second clip adds context.

Short interview clips can also be considered raw video, if they’re presented without narration and used to supplement other coverage.

Raw video may also be contributed by members of the public. The same concerns and guidelines mentioned about about user-submitted photos or those found on social media apply.

Animated GIF



Image 14.1.5: Action from water jousting in Sete, France. | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll

A silent, low-quality video. Unlike actual video, though, animated GIFs (a series of still images that play one after the other) don’t require special software and generally don’t take as long to download. They’re terrific for showing short clips, such as key plays from a game. They can provide examples or simply be a way to embed short video clips.

Animation

Software to create animation is rapidly reaching the point where anyone can put together something that, even if somewhat crudely drawn, has enough sophistication to tell a story.

Just as video illustrates some things better than still photos, animation can add an extra dimension to graphics.

These cautions should be considered:

- Do you, or your newsroom, have the tools and skills needed to produce animation of suitable quality?
- Does the animation suit the story? Some sites provide cartoony avatars you can animate simply, adding somewhat robotic voices. That may be good enough for a humorous story, but would you use that to illustrate serious news?
- The intersection of animation and has already reached the point where you could put words in the mouths of newsmakers, making it appear they said things they never did. It should go without saying, but this would be a major ethical disaster for a news outlet. **Any time you use artificial means to make something, it should be clear to the user that it's not real.** Merely adding a disclaimer in tiny type is not enough.

Maps and charts

Finally, text and images come together in these forms. Creating them usually requires specialized software, and in most cases doing them well requires specialized knowledge and skill. However, online tools, often free, have become increasingly powerful and easy to use. They change and improve so quickly that it's pointless to try to explain how to use any of them in this textbook. We encourage you to explore and experiment for yourself.

Timeline

A chronology is a plain text form. It's most suitable when the emphasis is on the sequence of events and not how close or far apart they were. A timeline is a graphic version, with events physically separated in proportion to their separation in time. That helps readers grasp more information at a glance for context or narrative. Online tools make it easy to add photos and video as well as allowing for some degree of interactivity.

As with so many things, online timeline tools come and go, morph and evolve. It's beyond the scope of this textbook to explain how to use any particular tool. A simple search such as "create interactive timeline" will produce many results. Experimentation will show you which ones are easiest to use and work best with your site.

Diagrams

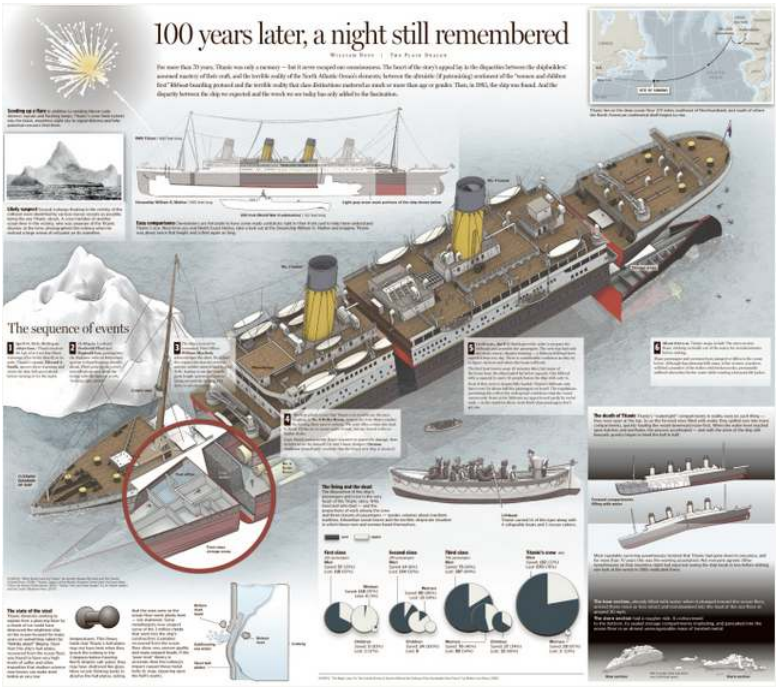


Image **14.1.6**: Titanic graphic by William Neff(opens in new window) | Used with permission

A visual explanation, such as this William Neff diagram of the Titanic. Diagrams can be as complex as this, combining many elements including maps, charts and text to be a complete package, or as simple (relatively speaking) as a single frame from an

Ikea instructions booklet.

Creating powerful, informative graphics such as this requires both artistic ability and all the other skills any journalist needs. If you're lucky enough to work in a newsroom that still employs such talented people, we strongly encourage you to take advantage of that.

Chart

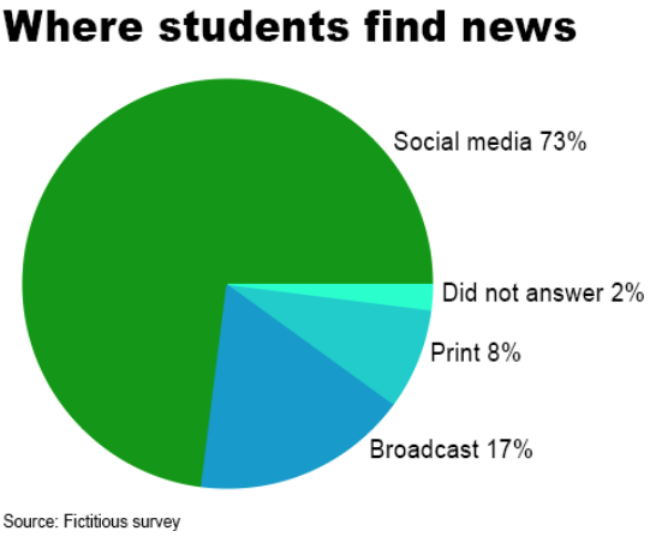


Image **14.1.7**: Example of a basic pie chart | CC BY 4.0 John Kroll

A visual display of quantitative information, such as a fever chart, pie chart of bar chart. Charts can provide context or add facts. They can be flat, non-interactive images, like the one here, or interactive elements. For example, this one displays the pie and labels; an interactive version might allow readers to roll over the slices to see more detail about each one.

Many sites, including Google, offer free tools to create graphics that can be directly posted on other sites or embedded using code.

How to use graphics properly is a subject that fills its own books. If you have a strong interest in these, we highly recommend the work of Edward Tufte, including his classic, "The Visual Display of Quantitative Information." If you're not quite that interested, we offer these brief guidelines:

- Charts are only as good as the information they're based on. Verify and proofread all data. Mistakes are common. So are quirks. We once worked with a reporter who used a police database of property crimes as a basis for a story. For online, we wanted to create an interactive map. As we built it, we noticed a bizarrely large number of crimes at the same address. The reporter, using the data to look at broader trends, hadn't noticed that. Upon further investigation, the address was the headquarters of the local public schools. It was school and police policy to use that address for any crime reported at any school.
- Different types of charts work best with different types of data. For example, bar charts may be best for making comparisons; think a list of car models with bars representing each one's fuel economy. Line or fever charts work well to show change over time, and so on.
- Charts provide information. As with other alternative story forms, their advantages over text include the ability to convey that information clearly and concisely. Don't give up those advantages by adorning your charts with unneeded decoration.

Charticle

A collection of charts, diagrams and other visual elements on a single topic, usually organized into a vertical format especially suited to blogs. Charticles often supplement the visual information with an introduction and text that provide transitions and context. Here’s one we did about a corrupt politician’s impending dietary changes.

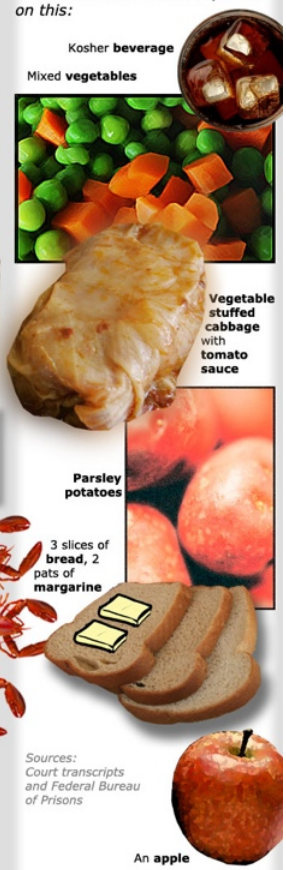
Dimora's dinners: Change of diet

One of the revelations in Jimmy Dimora's racketeering trial was how much the disgraced former Cuyahoga County commissioner and county Democratic Party chief loves to eat and drink. But Dimora is headed for federal prison, where the **cuisine** isn't as fancy as he's used to, the **portions** are smaller and **whiskey** is never an option.

*On a Monday evening in 2008, Dimora and pals feasted at a **Las Vegas steakhouse** as FBI agents secretly noted what was ordered:*



*On a Monday evening in 2011, according to menus published by the **Federal Bureau of Prisons**, inmates across the country dined on this:*



Sources: Court transcripts and Federal Bureau of Prisons

https://human.libretexts.org/@go/page/382367

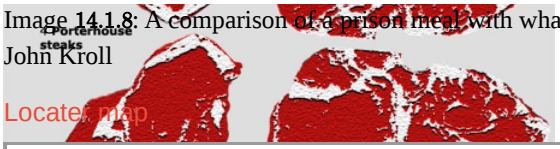


Image 14.1.8: A comparison of a prison meal with what a convicted politician had during a lavish meal before. | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
John Kroll

Locate, map

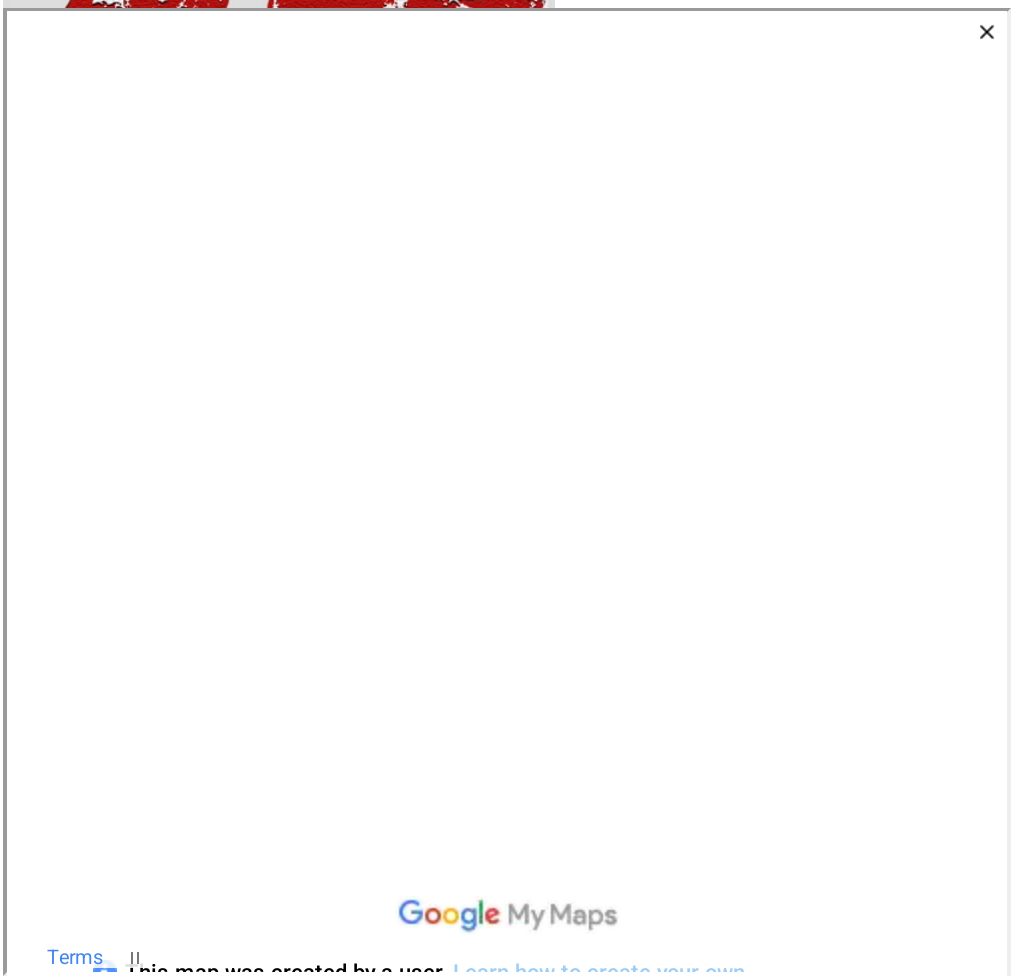


Image 14.1.9: Google map. Blue pointers were added by the creator; other icons were automatically generated by Google.

A map that provides minimal information, usually about just one location: a basic fact. The map above locates Franklin Hall and its parking lot on the campus of Kent State University. The advantage of online publication is that maps -- like this one -- can be interactive, rather than just flat images. You can zoom in and out, move the map around in the window, etc.

While a map such as this is easy to create, consider how much value it has. Even if this map were not interactive -- if you couldn't click on the icons or zoom around -- how much more helpful is it to the user than a long written description, or using just an address?

Annotated map

As with other annotations, explanatory material is provided through footnotes, call-out boxes or pop-ups. Annotated maps can be narrative tools, particularly when combined with the functions of a chronology.

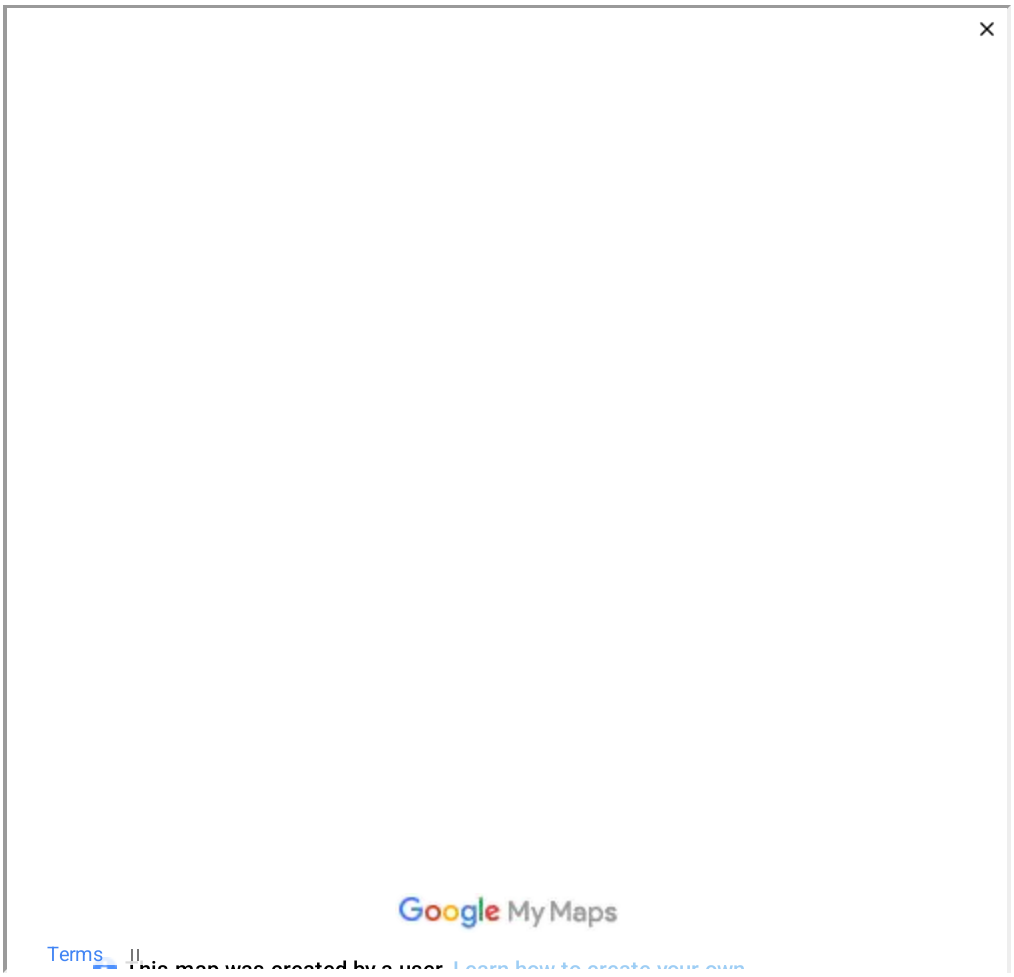


Image 14.1.10: Google Map.

The map above locates all Kent State campuses. Clicking on each square pops up a box with more information.

The “My Maps” feature in Google (at least at the time this was made) allows you to use a variety of icons or create your own, to add text and images to the popup boxes, and to draw paths or outline areas (such as Congressional districts).

This page titled 14.1: Alternative Story Forms is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by John Kroll and Kent State University.

14.2: Specialized online reporting forms

Online reporting

No one's invented a truly new way of reporting the news in ages. However, the ability to combine text and immediacy online has spread the use of two forms -- live posting and aggregation -- that weren't as common before. Unlike the alternative story forms described in another part of this chapter, these forms may be used not as a supplement to other stories, but as the sole way of covering a topic.

Live posting

Moving from print to online news forced newsrooms to go toe-to-toe with the TV and radio journalists who had spent decades learning how best to report news as it happens. But reporters and editors used to print developed a new form of text-based live reporting. Whether it's live use of social media or live blogging on your newsroom's site, this kind of instant coverage is more challenging (when done correctly) than taking time to assemble a complete story. But in some ways it's also more forgiving. Usually, there's less concern about following AP style, and even the grammar may be looser.

Live posting news does have some rules and guidelines, though.

Audience needs

A key difference between journalism and other forms of writing is the size of the audience and the attention you have to pay to it. Online, your potential audience is the entire world. The audience you have to think about is smaller, though, and should be considered as a collection of audiences.

In most cases, the target audience for live posting is a combination of your existing followers and other users who care about the topic.

We can break that target audience down further into these groups:

Followers who don’t care: On social media, you may have followers who aren't interested in this particular story. You want to avoid irritating them by suddenly flooding their feed with posts they don't care about.

Play-by-play audience: They aren’t watching the event themselves; they want to live vicariously through your posts. You want to give them the highlights.

Popcorn eaters: They’re watching along with you, but they’re also watching social media or websites to take note of highlights, get background or just see what everyone else is saying. This is called the “second screen” experience. You need to provide context and other add-on information.

Riffers: They’re watching but also want to comment themselves. Maybe they’re making jokes; maybe they’re asking you questions. Depending on your role as a journalist, you may be able to joke back and forth with them. If you’re supposed to be objective, you won’t do that. But you can retweet smart comments and answer questions -- or ask them.

Putting together a live report

Jamie Turner, who was a journalist with cleveland.com, was the best live blogger we know. He said preparation is the key to success. You can’t just show up at an event (or sit down in front of a TV) and start covering something live. You won’t be able to keep up with all the things you should be doing. Here’s what you need to do in the days before you plan to live post:

Warn & promote: Part of your audience is made up of followers who don’t care. Warn them in advance that your feed will be swamped during the event. You also want to entice those followers who do care -- and the rest of the social media users. Well-worded posts announcing your plans can do both. Similarly, your website should be letting the users know well in advance that they can come there for live coverage.

Research participants: Look up the social media accounts of people expected at the event. Use those when you quote them, rather than just their names.

Find out more about the participants. When live-blogging a football game, Turner would assemble stats on key players. He’d also look for key narratives -- a player coming back from injury, a play that hadn’t been working -- and make notes he could turn into

informed comments later.

Get links: As you're doing your research, also list online pages that could provide background. Turner would have links for pages listing stats on key players, recent columns and feature stories about the team, etc.

Test your equipment: Don't get caught short. Make sure devices are fully charged and you have chargers at hand. Get any needed software updates out of the way long before the event starts. Log in to needed online accounts at least several minutes ahead of time.

If you plan to use software for the first time -- say you're trying out an app to help you manage all the feeds you want to monitor -- work with it extensively in advance. You'll have no time during the event to troubleshoot.

Attend to any other needed business: Plan not to get up from your seat during the event. Want snacks? Put them at arm's length. Have notifications set for emails or other not-work-related events? Turn them off. And, as your parents always said, if you have to go, go now. It's going to be a long ride and there should be no rest stops.

Elements of a live report

Variety is the spice of live reporting. Using a mix of types of items makes your posts more interesting.

Intro: Announce yourself and your intentions. That can be as simple as "For the next hour, I'll be live-tweeting the governor's speech." Or you can slip it into the start of your coverage: "Fireworks have started at Acme Arena, where I'll be live-blogging the Tiddlywinks national championship tonight."

Quotes: The same rules about quoting accurately apply on social media as in regular writing. If you put something in quotation marks, it should be accurate. Use ellipses (...) to indicate when you leave things out.

Always provide attribution for quotes. This is very important, because members of the audience may see one of your quotes out of context. They won't know who's talking unless you tell them. Keep it simple. For example, X uses the @ symbol to turn a user's handle into a link to that user's posts. If you're using X in live coverage, you could take advantage of that attributing to the handle rather than writing out the person's full name:

> @jkrolldigital: "This is exactly what happened."
>
> "This is what happened." -- @jkrolldigital
>
> @jkrolldigital said, "This happened."

Make sure the meaning and context of each quote is clear. Remember, the audience may not be watching along with you. If you quote someone as saying "This is the best thing ever," does your audience know what "this" is?

Paraphrases: If you can't use the exact words, paraphrase. Be extra careful to make the attribution clear. Without quotation marks, your audience is likely to think the ideas are yours. As with quotes, provide any needed meaning and context.

Descriptions: For audience members who aren't watching along with you, be their eyes, not just their ears. Describe the scene, actions, reactions, facial expressions -- anything that looks interesting and will provide verbal pictures.

Be smart about this. If you post "@jkrolldigital tells joke about cows; audience laughs," you're taunting, not informing. Either include the joke or don't mention it.

Don't post what you don't know. "The audience laughed loudly" is a good description, if accurate. "The audience was moved by his speech"? No. You can't read the minds of everyone there.

Links: Use the links you researched, tying them in with what's going on. (If you were using social media on behalf of a website, you'd want to be sure to link to your own site a few times, too.)

Analysis: Pay attention to what's going on; don't just transcribe quotes or describe things flatly. You don't want to reveal your opinions (unless that's your newsroom job), but you can go beyond the basic facts. Did you notice a speaker is repeating the same words over and over? Mention that. Did a joke bomb? Say so.

Multimedia: Whenever you can, add photos and video from the scene. If you're watching online, you might at least be able to screenshot a key moment.

Reposts: Keep an eye on what others are saying. You're looking for two kinds of posts in particular. The first are those that are especially smart, funny or otherwise notable. The second fill in the gaps in your own coverage. Did you miss something while you were writing a post? See if you can repost someone else.

Responses: Is anyone asking you questions? Try to reply as quickly as possible.

Outro: Just as you announced the start of your live posting, announce the end so your audience knows it's over.

Post-game analysis

Are you exhausted yet? Live posting can be a mad scramble. Remember to breathe. Take time to think about what you're seeing and hearing ... and posting.

You're telling a story in your posts. When you tell a story to your friends, you probably skip a lot of unimportant details. You say, "I walked to the store," not, "I took one step onto the sidewalk, which had a few narrow cracks. A bird, I think it was a robin, landed on a nearby branch. I took another step. Then I ..." Don't do the equivalent while live tweeting. Pick the highlights.

How can you tell what the highlights are? This is where news values come in. Are there quotes that tug at the heartstrings? Did someone mention big numbers?

Also, rely on your research. What are key issues? What's happening that's new?

Here's another way to think about your posts: as notes for a story. That's not just an analogy. You may be asked to write a story very quickly after an event you've live-posted. You won't possibly have time to live posted while also taking separate notes on what's going on. Instead, veteran live-posters put their notes into their posts. When the event is over, they pull up their posts and have most, if not all, they need to write a story.

Example 14.2.1

Here's the end of a live blog Jamie Turner put together during a Republican convention in Cleveland. We've removed the links, some of which had vanished, but left the text in blue to show where they were.

> **9:52 p.m.:** Plenty of fireworks rumbling downtown Cleveland. Probably making a few people a little nervous.
>
> **10:19 p.m.:** Wrapping up the day before the RNC's first big day, here's what cleveland.com's Stephen Koff saw:
>
> "Donald Trump wasn't here Sunday. But he's coming, and Cleveland was ready -- for Trump, for the delegates who want a Republican in the White House, for the critics who said his presidency would be a disaster, and for everyone else who helped kick off one of the biggest events this city has ever seen. By most accounts, the out-of-towners were wowed."
>
> **10:32 p.m.:** If you're planning on being downtown during the RNC and expect Uber or taxis will allow you to get around sufficiently, you may be mistaken. There are reports tonight that reporters and conventioneers have been waiting a while -- and this is a "quiet" night without 20,000 people at The Q.
>
> Just sayin'.
>
> But if you're determined to give it a go, here's a good guide by The Plain Dealer's Ginger Christ.
>
> **10:51 p.m.:** About 11,000 GOP delegates and supporters jammed the Rock Hall Sunday night and continued what has been a day of compliments for Cleveland.
>
> "David Gilbert, president, and CEO of the host committee, said the host committee tried to plan an event that would give the best first impression of Cleveland possible.
>
> "'If we were going to try to show off Cleveland, we figured this was it,' Gilbert said. 'The way this has gone is just beyond what we would have expected. People are saying, I can't believe this is Cleveland.'
>
> "Part of the West Shoreway was closed during the event for security reasons."
>
> **11 p.m.:** We're wrapping up for the night and thank you for checking out the live blog. Cleveland.com will pick up our live coverage at 7 a.m., running throughout the day.

> Compare that with the list of potential live posts. Turner describes the fireworks. He links to new stories as well as a guide to downtown Cleveland posted earlier. He even ends by saying goodnight and promoting the next day's post.

One of the best ways to learn about writing is to read good writing. To become more familiar with live coverage, when you hear of a big international news story, go to theguardian.com. That's the American site of the London-based Guardian newspaper. Its journalists are among the best around at live-blogging breaking news.

Aggregation

Aggregation means writing stories based mostly or entirely on summarizing news from other outlets rather than doing original reporting. The author Nick Davies called some uses of this "churnalism." The word carries a sarcastic edge.

There is no substitute for original reporting. If every news outlet relied on aggregation, there would be no stories to aggregate. The worst aggregation is indistinguishable from plagiarism. Even short of that, it can be unethical, stealing traffic from those who did the heavy lifting.

However, some sites seek large audiences by posting in volume. Aggregation helps feed the beast. Also, many sites hope to become many users' first stop on the internet for news. Only a few, such as the New York Times, can come close to covering the world by themselves. And even the Times uses aggregation.

If you're going to do it, do it ethically.

Responsible aggregation

Attribution: All sources used, whether online or not, should be mentioned by name in the body of the post.

Linking: Whenever possible, the body of the post must contain links to original sources. Preferably these links go to the specific pages used.

How that link is made varies. The outside sites will gain the most if the links are attached to relevant keywords, thus giving the sites a boost in search algorithms. It is common, however, to instead attach the link to the name of the site or author instead.

Summarizing: Reproducing another site's content in total is a copyright violation. How much you can reproduce legally is difficult to say. In general, you will not violate the law if what you directly reproduce is only a small fraction of the original work. Also, the facts of a news event cannot be copyrighted, only the words or images used to describe that event.

No clear industry-wide consensus exists, however, on the ethical constraints of aggregation. This is not a new problem. Even in the days of print, newspapers might rely on facts reported in a rival, without attribution, when they could not or chose not to do their own reporting.

One possible ethical guideline is based on the idea that online, clicks – user visits – are currency. **If your summary of another site's story is so complete that your user has no reason to click to the original, you are effectively stealing that site's traffic.**

Quoting: Any content reproduced in its original form must be clearly indicated as such. To do otherwise is to plagiarize. It is common online to indicate direct quotes from another site by indenting the passage. Different blog formats use different styles in addition to indenting – oversized quotation marks, italic or grayed type, etc.

Image use: Under U.S. law, the creator of an image automatically holds its copyright, and that control extends for decades. Violating copyright is a civil infraction that can be costly. What this means: You can't grab something from another site, or from a Google search (which amounts to the same thing), download it and then upload it to your site.

However, exceptions exist.

- **Creative Commons licenses.** Creative Commons is the most well-known public copyright licensing system. Creators who attach a CC license to their work are providing general guidelines for its use. Standard CC terms include "attribution," which requires anyone who uses the work to attach attribution to the creator; "no derivative works," which forbids any use of the work that alters it in any way; and "non-commercial," which forbids its use in for-profit applications. (Does that forbid the work's use in the context of a news report if the site on which the report appears also hosts advertising? That's not clear.) CC license users may also attach more specific guidelines to their work, so no CC-licensed images should be used unless you have tracked down the original version and determined exactly what rules apply.

- **Out-of-copyright (Public domain).** Very old historical images or those created under the aegis of many government bodies are available for all uses.
- **Provided images.** Companies, agencies or individuals may post images specifically for media use. Often, these will be in a section of their sites along with news releases. Don't grab an image from elsewhere on a corporate website and assume you're free to use it, however.
- **Breaking news.** Some sites consider copyright irrelevant when images have exceptional news value. For example, such news organizations may copy high school yearbook photos of suspected terrorists, or take images from their social media pages. In theory, those images are the property of the original photographers, and their reproduction in a yearbook or online does not change that. But sites that take such images argue the value of reporting the news trumps copyright. Some sites have chosen to extend this exception to images of news events posted on social media -- for example, a photo on Twitter from someone who saw a plane crash. In some prominent cases, however, this practice has resulted in payment of significant damages. Legal issues aside, consider the ethics of image use from the creator's side. A photo of a major news event can generate much interest, and photo agencies charge high prices for such exclusives. Should a nonprofessional photographer who is unaware of licensing practice lose out?
- **Embedding.** Every image – still or video – on a web page is actually a separate file somewhere else online. For example, a typical blog site structure will include a folder in which images are stored. When one of those images is used on a page, the page's code only references the URL of the image inside the folder. Essentially, the code is opening a window inside the page. The URL doesn't have to be part of the same site as the web page that displays it. In that way, you can embed images or video in your page without violating copyright. No copy of the image exists on your site; you are only opening a window to it. Some sites invite such embedding. Many online videos provide embed codes, often hidden behind "share" links. The video creators encourage embedding because each view of the video, no matter where it appears online, generates a view for the originating site. Other sites, however, specifically forbid embedding and even create software blocks to prevent it. One reason a site might do that: Each click on an image takes a tiny bit of bandwidth. Sites that don't normally get much traffic may be overwhelmed if images they host are embedded in much more popular sites. The ethics of embedding without permission is murky. The safest thing is to embed images only when the code to do so is provided publicly alongside the image.

Single-source aggregation

As traditional news organizations adapted to online journalism, they developed the concept of being a "hub" -- a central point that not only provided original reporting but also directed the audience to anything they might be interested in elsewhere online. The task of finding that other stuff and linking to it became known as "curation," and its practitioners "curators."

Even the most traditional and prestigious of American newspapers, the New York Times, gave over part of its online homepage to curation in 2014. Although the mix of outside and home-grown stories has changed, the Times still valued what curating the internet provided its audience.

A typical curated item on the Times' homepage:

> In a much-watched case, a Miami judge ruled that Bitcoin is not real money. Proponents of the digital currency believe the decision will encourage more people to use it. (Miami Herald)

The Times deliberately made these items very short, so readers with any interest would very likely click through to the original story.

At cleveland.com, we filled a need for fresh posts early in the morning by having a reporter aggregate items from news outlets around the area as well as our own posts from overnight. Rather than create individual posts for one- or two-sentence items, we put them all in a single post.

The logic behind a single-source aggregation: This may have some interest for our audience, but we can't or won't report it on our own. We may aggregate it because we have to prioritize and don't have the staff to report every story, or because the potential interest of our audience doesn't seem high enough to justify the effort, or because the the other site has an exclusive we couldn't match, or because our reporter is working the story for later but we want to get the news out now.

Imagine you're working for student media. These are types of stories you might consider posting as single-source aggregation rather than reporting directly:

- A student at a nearby university is kidnapped from campus.
- A professor from your school is quoted in the New York Times, commenting on a presidential campaign.
- On a Saturday, when corporate offices are closed, a local news site reports that Ikea plans to build a store near your campus.
- A local comedian posts a YouTube video featuring stereotypes of students from your state's largest universities.

Multi-source aggregation

Creating a whole post just by borrowing (i.e., stealing) reporting from single other source is ethically questionable. That didn't stop the Huffington Post from building its early success on such posts.

A more ethical alternative is to build a story out of bits and pieces from two or more news outlets. More often news outlets will create posts combining their employees' original writing with selections of the original stories.

Table 14.2.1 Basic aggregation structure

Words	Category	Explanation
An 18-year-old Kent State University freshman was kidnapped Thursday, **police reported**.	Public information	Things you can source directly from public records, such as police reports, can be attributed directly to the source.
Theodosia Ellerton, from Chardon, was 2alking to an early-morning philosophy class when a black van drove across a lawn and cut her off, **witnesses told the Akron Beacon-Journal:**	Other information	Anything you do not find directly must be attributed to the news operation where you found it. That may require a double attribution, as here -- to the news site and to the source(s) that site used.
Two men dressed in camouflage fatigues jumped out one side of the van, grabbed Ellerton and pulled her back in with them. The van sped off with several students in pursuit. The pursuers gave up after a few blocks. Police said there has been no word from the kidnappers, and they have no apparent motive.	Blockquote	When quoting the words of another newsroom, it's convention to indent those paragraphs or use whatever other format your site designates for blockquotes. Note that the paragraph above indicates the source of the blockquote. Keep your use of direct quotes from other news sites to a minimum. It's unethical to quote so much that your story is essentially stealing all the original reporting.
"We appeal to the community to be on the lookout," **Kent police spokesman Lt. Art Metrano said**. "Theo is a diabetic, and we believe she carried only a day's worth of insulin with her. Without access to more, she may be in medical danger." One of Ellerton's friends told TV station WKYC that she had seemed on edge recently, but they had ascribed that to the normal pressure of exams.	Quotes from video	If you can find a video of a news conference or other public event, you can quote directly from what the people in that video said without having to cite the site or TV channel on which you saw the video. However, if the video is of a reporter's one-on-one interview rather than a public statement, it's ethical to note that, such as "told WKYC."
(Video of TV report embedded here)	Video	If a news site provides a way to embed its video, you may place that code into your report. Because of the way embedding works, the original site will still be able to count anyone who watches the video on your site as a visitor to theirs as well.

Aggregation roundups

Once you grasp the basic concept of ethical aggregation, you can apply those principles to larger stories. A roundup uses several outside posts combined with original writing to create a broad overview of a story or issue.

Cliff Pinckard, a reporter for cleveland.com, worked the overnight shift just in case news broke out. On the days when it didn't, he developed a format called "A Closer Look." It used aggregation to give the audience a deep dive into complicated topics, such as the death penalty. These stories had links to previous cleveland.com stories as well as other media, with paragraphs from Pinckard tying them together into a coherent narrative.

Aggregation roundups can also be used to help the audience catch up on a developing story. When several women who had been held captive for years in a Cleveland house finally broke free, new elements of the story kept breaking throughout the next several days. While cleveland.com reporters did well at keeping up with the developments online, those reports were scattered over many posts. To give readers coming home from work a simple way to catch up, we produced a daily post with a headline such as "7 things we learned about the missing women."

Online tools

The forms we've just covered are basic; they don't require any special tools. But the internet is constantly spawning new ways to package news coverage, even if the principles behind them aren't so new. We're in favor of anything that helps journalists do their jobs.

But this section is short because the kinds of online tools useful for journalists are many but most have the lifespan of fruit flies. They die quickly, or disappear behind paywalls, or morph so drastically that they no longer work they way they used to or perform the same functions. An early draft of this book had a whole section on using a tool called Storify; just a week before the book was finished, Storify shut down.

Meanwhile, the line between reporting tools and social media has disappeared. X, Instagram and Snapchat began as peer-to-peer social media, but journalists have found ways to use them to present the news.

In class, you may discuss specific tools. Here, we'll focus on general advice.

Go where the audience is: If you're using social media as reporting tools, use those your audience already likes. If college students abandon Snapchat, it would be time for your student media to do the same.

The simplest way to decide what's hot is to think about what you and your friends are using.

Look at what others are doing: Whether you're considering social media or a specific tool, seek out the accounts of media outlets or individual reporters. If you see something you like and you don't know how to do it, track down contact information and ask.

Search online for tips. "How to use (tool) for journalism" typed into a search engine can produce good results.

Learn by doing: When you start playing a video game, how do you figure out what you're supposed to do or what will earn the most points? Are you one of those people who won't start a game unless you have a walkthrough available? If so, you can check the site of a particular online tool for how-to instructions or search online.

But most of you probably jump into games and learn first by your mistakes and happy accidents. Approach online reporting tools the same way. Mess around with them, trying out each button and command to see what they do. (Try to keep the results private until you've gained some skills, of course.)

Experiment: So much of what you encounter in college involves being told what to do and how to do it. In this course alone, you're told to follow AP style, use summary ledes and inverted pyramids, obey specific guidelines for aggregation. There are far fewer rules for online tools, because many of them are too new and they're continually evolving.

Take advantage of that. Pick an online tool and invent your own way of applying it to reporting the news.

Use a feedback loop: Maybe you create something for your site with an online tool, only to find out that it won't work for tablet users. Or you put together a half-hour live-streaming event, but traffic figures show your audience left after just a few minutes. Don't give up.

At least for the first several times you use some new tool, or use an old tool in a new way, follow up with a review. What worked? What didn't? How did the audience react? How did the sources react? What were the most difficult elements? Consider all those questions before you try again.

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14.3: Chapter Review

Key points

- Seven categories of story package elements were listed. The names aren't important, but you should be able to describe how each element of your package contributes to storytelling, and these categories offer a vocabulary to do that.
  - Facts
  - Narrative
  - Examples
  - Comparisons
  - Context
  - Explanations
  - Interaction
- Some alternative forms look very much like regular stories; they rely on text and may have lede paragraphs.
- You should be able to describe and create each of these.
  - List
  - Chronology
  - Glossary
  - Listicle
  - Biobox
- Other text-based forms depart even further from traditional paragraph structures.
- You should be able to describe and create each of these:
  - Grid
  - Quote stream
  - Quiz
  - Poll
- Images, still or moving, complement text stories or replace them.
- You should be able to describe each of these and create at least some of them.
  - Photo
  - Video
  - Raw video
  - Image-based story
- Finally, informational graphics marry visuals and text.
- You should be able to describe each of these and create at least some of them.
  - Timeline
  - Chart
  - Charticle
  - Diagram
  - FAQ
  - Transcript
  - Annotation
  - Animated GIF
  - Animation
  - Locater map
  - Annotated map
  - Document
- You should be able to describe these elements of live reporting.
  - Intro

- Quotes
- Paraphrases
- Descriptions
- Links
- Analysis
- Multimedia
- Reposts
- Responses
- Outro

- Aggregation from other sources should always link to those sources.
- Responsible aggregation serves your audience by providing information, but does not reproduce so much from the original sources that your audience has no reason to click through to them.
- Using photos and videos from other sources should be done only after considering ethical issues and copyright law.

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14.4: Optional Exercises

? Exercise 14.4.1

In a small group, select a current ongoing news story. Using the list of alternative story forms, discuss whether each one could contribute to coverage of the story. Be specific: What information would be in the element? What would it contribute to the storytelling? What information would you need to create the element? Where could you find it?

This is the kind of discussion that happens in the maestro concept mentioned in the chapter.

? Exercise 14.4.2

Create one of the alternative story forms, either individually or as a small group project. These are good choices:

Grid: Choose a topic. It could be serious -- comparing several candidates in a local election -- or not so -- comparing a standard pepperoni pizza at six local restaurants. Decide what factors your readers would want to consider in making choices. Talk about ways to replace text explanations of some of those factors with numbers, icons or other visual elements.

FAQ: Pick an ongoing news story. Decide what questions would be most common. You don't have to just guess; you can check social media or ask your friends. Research the answers, honing them to be as concise as possible.

Annotated map: Spend some time getting familiar with the My Maps feature of Google. Then pick a topic. Consider something that could be of long-lasting usefulness, such as all the schools in your athletic conference. Create a map that locates each item, adding relevant information, which can include images.

? Exercise 14.4.3

Live posting can be a high-wire act, risky and requiring close attention. But practicing it will test your news judgment.

One way is to pick a televised live event, such as a political speech, and use an actual social media account. You might want to create a separate account just for this purpose, though, rather than bombarding your regular followers and cluttering up your feed. Follow all the steps we advise, including doing research beforehand. If your whole class is covering the same event, you can create a list of all those accounts and use them as we suggest to share items that you missed while you were typing up something else.

Another choice is to do your posting on a Word or Google doc. Your class might watch a YouTube video of a Ted Talk. Try it with just the video playing, then compare what you produced with the full transcript: Did you get all the important bits? Were your quotes accurate?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

15: Photography Essentials

15.1: Photography
15.2: Chapter Review
15.3: Optional Exercises

Why photography is important

One goal of journalism is to take the audience to places it wouldn't otherwise be. Descriptive writing can do part of that. It worked for centuries in print; it continues to work in radio.

But images remove some of the filters that exist when the audience has to interpret the reporter's words. Although every photo is a choice – what to point at, what to have in focus – pictures offer a step closer to letting the audience see for itself.

In the beginning of pictorial journalism, photographers were specialists. In large part that was a technological classification; cameras were big, sensitive and complicated. Over time, photojournalists developed another reason for being the only ones with the cameras: because they were the best at it.

Consistently great photography does take skill and talent. But newsrooms are less and less likely to see the value.

At the same time, the push for photos with every story is strong, driven by studies that show they attract eyeballs. So reporters and PR pros who trained on words are more and more likely to be tasked with making photos as well.

Again, consistently great photography takes skill and talent. But good photography is within the grasp of anyone who learns some basic principles. And thanks to technology, that's all that stands between you and doing well these days. You don't need a big, heavy camera bristling with buttons and knobs; you've got a good camera in your pocket.

This chapter is not a replacement for taking courses devoted solely to photography. But no one is just a word journalist anymore, so this guidance is worth knowing.

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15.1: Photography

Photography for non-photographers

You've grown up in the most visually recorded society in human history. More than likely your phone is stuffed with pictures -- selfies, friends, family, food, and whatever that blurry green thing with pink spots is. Taking a photo is second nature.

But taking a good photo, one that tells a story by itself or contributes to storytelling, isn't that easy.

Content

Today’s smartphones and basic cameras can handle many of the technical details that used to make photography tricky. They can focus and set the exposure. But they still rely on a human to point them in the right direction.

People

Example 15.1.1

Faces -- especially faces showing strong expressions -- draw the viewer and encourage them to imagine stories about what's going on. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll)



We’re preprogrammed to notice faces. Indeed, our brains are so eager to find them that they’ll assign the category “face” to all sorts of images that aren’t even close, such as American electrical outlets with their two vertical slots for eyes and round ground hole for a mouth. This peculiarity of our minds is called “pareidolia.”

Logically, then, if you want to attract your audience to a photo, having a real face in it helps. (Faces are the best, but anything that says “human being” – even a silhouette – will tap into some of this energy.) People are more interesting than buildings or signs or empty spaces.

Action

Example 15.1.2

Capturing action in a still photo triggers the viewer's brain to imagine what happens next, as with these images from a form of bullfighting in southern France. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll)





You could get a lot of faces into a photo just by making a bunch of people stand together and stare at the camera. But that's dull. The image is static, unmoving.

You may be saying, wait, it's a photograph. Of course it's unmoving. It's not a video!

However, when we look at a photo, we engage the part of our brains that processes our regular vision of a living world. That part is doing more than taking in image by image. It's predicting what comes next. Think about a baseball batter facing a 100 mph fastball. The batter's brain is tracking the ball and pulling at muscles to make contact. Everything happens too fast to be consciously decided.

One of the shortcuts the brain uses is to calculate not just where the ball was when it was spotted, but where it's likely to go next – so that, by the time the signals from the eyes have been processed and the signals to the muscles have been received, bat can meet ball.

If your photo simply shows six people sitting at a table, staring at the camera, the brain doesn't have to figure out what comes next. But if the photo shows someone taking a step, or with a hammer in midswing, that still image captured by the camera triggers the brain's motion processing. The photo becomes more attractive because the brain constructs extra information about what probably came next.

The more your photo hints at action, the more it engages the audience. The famous photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson made an image of a man traversing a flooded cityscape. The man's nothing but a silhouette. He's blurred by motion. But Cartier-Bresson captured a moment when the man had stepped off a ladder lying on the ground that had allowed him to keep out of the water. Both his feet are in the air. The heel of his front foot is just a moment away from landing in the water with a splash. This "decisive moment" – Cartier-Bresson's phrase for his goal in photography – plays out in the viewer's brain like a mini movie.

Candids

Example 15.1.3

Candid photos capture real life, like these three images of people going about their regular lives in France. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll)





Another problem with those stand-and-stare lineup photos is that they're obviously posed. If a goal of journalism is to show the audience the world as it is, photos with subjects told how to pose and where to look defeat that purpose.

There is some room for posed shots in journalism, especially if it's clear that's what happened. Never ask a subject to pose "as if" they were doing something; that's lying. We'll talk about some acceptable uses of poses later in this chapter.

You may run into problems trying to get candid photos. Sometimes, your subjects try too hard to be helpful. Instead of going about their usual business, they'll ask you what you want them to do, where you want them to stand.

It may take a while for the subject to forget the camera's there and just act naturally. One of the advantages of the old days when a reporter and a photographer would team up on a story was that the reporter could draw the source's attention with questions in an interview, allowing the photographer to capture unposed expressions. That's hard when those two roles are rolled into one person.

Still, if you want better photos, you want candid moments.

Framing

Once you've got the camera pointed at the right kind of content, you've got good odds of getting a photo that will attract the audience and tell a story. But, just as in writing, details matter too. You can have all the right facts in a story, but if the structure's a jumble, the reader will miss the point. You can have all the right content in a photo, but without thinking about how things are arranged, you may not be telling the story you think you are.

Rule of thirds

Example 15.1.4

Aligning key points of images along the lines or at the intersections of an imaginary grid can create interesting compositions, as in these three photos from around Paris. In the first, the woman using her cellphone lines up along the right gridline and her head is at the upper right intersection. In the second, the surface the couple is sitting on lines up with the bottom gridline and the man is roughly aligned with the right one. In the third, the face of the horn player is centered on the right gridline.(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll)





This is classic photography advice – so classic that many of today's cameras provide visual guides so you can see how it applies to your shots before you take them.

Start with the whole image your camera will capture – usually a rectangle whose sides have a ratio of 4:3 (horizontal) or 3:4 (vertical). Your instinct may be to put the part of the image you want to emphasize dead center.

The rule of thirds tells you to offset it instead. Imagine (or set your camera to display) vertical and horizontal lines – one a third of the way across the frame horizontally, one two-thirds, and the same thing vertically. It should look like a tic-tac-toe grid. You have four lines, two up and down and two across, and four points where those lines intersect.

In theory, if you put the key element of your photo at one of those intersections, it will draw the viewer's attention more than if it was dead center. If you place a strong line, such as the horizon, along one of the thirds, the photo will appear more pleasing.

Let's be honest: This rule was first set out in the 1700s, before things such as eye-tracking could put any science into the equation, and it's survived since then mostly because it seems to work a lot. But while the asymmetry of the rule of thirds can be defended on several grounds, we've seen a lot of photos with perfect symmetry that are pleasing, too.

Think of the rule of thirds as a visual equivalent of the formula we laid out for writing speech stories in another chapter: It's not the only way to do things, and isn't even always the best. But when you're starting out – or when, in this case, photography isn't your (ahem) focus – following the rule can help you structure things reasonably well.

Fill the frame

Example 15.1.5

Filling as much of the space of a photo as possible with interesting content -- either by shooting it that way in camera or, as in this case, by cropping afterward -- results in images more like what our brains process from the world around us. In the first image, the central action is de-emphasized by the distracting lamppost and the back of the man's head. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll)





This is another case where you have to take how the brain works into account.

Stop reading now and look straight ahead. What do you see? Maybe you'll say "the screen," or "a picture on the wall" or "my roommate." But is that all you see? Even without moving your head or your eyes, other things are in your field of view, aren't they?

Yet our brain is taking shortcuts again. The eyes are sending it a full, ovalish picture, but the brain isn't sending all of it into your conscious – at least until something on the periphery moves or otherwise demands attention.

When you look through the viewfinder of a camera, or at the screen of your smartphone, your brain may be doing much the same thing – sending to your attention only part of what's there.

When the image you capture is translated into a print or on screen, though, things change. The image may be a small enough part of your field of view that the brain takes it all in. Or, at least, it's static, so the brain will send the eyes around the whole image.

What this means for you, the photographer:

Parts of the image without useful content are dull. A cloudless blue sky, a blank wall – these take up space without providing information.

The blank areas take attention (and space) away from the things you want the viewers to notice. You may have captured a great expression on your subject's face, but if that face is only a handful of pixels lost in an image with thousands, the viewers can't appreciate it.

Photos can be too busy – cluttered with so many points of interest that the viewer doesn't know where to look. But filling the frame is more about being thoughtful about what to include and exclude, which means forcing your brain to notice everything in the frame before you take the photo.

Another important reason to do this: avoiding awkward elements. Let's say you see a friend of yours across the street. Your brain will sort of blur out the surroundings to bring the friend's face into prominence in your conscious. But if you take a photo and look at it later, you might laugh as you see that it looks as if a tree was growing out of the friend's head. You just didn't notice it at the time.

When you take photos, look at the whole frame.

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15.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Three elements contribute to the most interesting photo content: including people, showing action and taking candid (rather than posed) shots.
- You should be able to demonstrate the application of these guidelines in your photos:
  - Rule of thirds
  - Fill the frame
  - Diagonals and vanishing points
  - Alternative viewpoints
  - Frames within frames
  - Selective focus
- You should be able to describe these types of photographs and apply them in your work:
  - Headshot
  - Environmental portrait
  - Overall
  - Detail
  - Interaction
  - Reaction
  - Sequence

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15.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 15.3.1

More so than words on a page, photography offers the illusion of unfiltered information. This increases the responsibility of the journalist to make that illusion into reality. We've already told you that it's considered unethical to add or subtract anything from a photo artificially, or to use AI to create photos that don't exist.

But every click of a camera is a choice -- not just where to point, but when to click. Just as a reporter should not take quotes out of context, a photojournalist should ensure that their photos provide a fair image. Ah, but what's fair? Consider these two photos. They were taken just a few minutes apart while a folk singer was entertaining in an ecological tourist attraction in Cornwall. In one, the youthful audience looks bored and distracted. In the other, the singer is drawing an enthusiastic reaction. Which would you use? How would you decide?





Exercise 15.3.2

Select a public event or public space near you. Choose one that's most likely to have a variety of things going on, such as an outdoor festival or an amusement park.

Draw up a list of possible photos, using the guidelines in this chapter. What kind of detail shots would you expect to find? What interactions? Discuss your list, revising it in response to suggestions.

Now, go out and shoot, using your list. You don't need anything more than your smartphone. A lot of other people will be taking photos with their phones, too, so you shouldn't need to feel self-conscious. Experiment with different viewpoints. Is there a way to get up above the main action? Can you find ways to create a frame within a frame?

Select one of your photos in each category and display them along with those of your classmates. Which ones work best? Why?

Exercise 15.3.3

Your teacher will put a variety of photos on the classroom whiteboard, drawn from student media or another non-professional source. Each student should go up and put a mark by their three favorites -- just the ones they find the most interesting or appealing.

> Review the results. What the the top votegetters have in common? How could the others have been improved?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

16: Multimedia Essentials

16.1: Multimedia Essentials
16.2: Chapter Review
16.3: Optional Exercises

Why Multimedia Matters

While photography and writing involve different skill sets, those functions have been paired for a long time. At smaller newspapers, it wasn't uncommon for reporters to be handed cameras and expected to do double duty, even before the financial squeeze of recent years.

Audio and video, though, were fenced off. You can't listen to a printed page, after all.

As print newsrooms shifted to online, some journalists were quite happy to maintain that separation. Others, though, saw opportunities. Stories can be told well with just text and still photos. But it's like using a small box of 12 crayons. Adding audio and video (as well as interactive forms) means moving up to the huge 128-crayon box with the built-in sharpener.

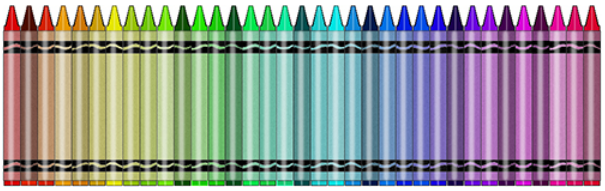


Image **16.1**: Using multimedia expands your storytelling capabilities. \ CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 John Kroll

Whatever kind of professional communications you end up doing, there's a good chance you'll need to participate in some form of multimedia.

As with photography, audio and video can't be properly taught in a single textbook chapter or a couple of days in class. But we can try to help you avoid the most common mistakes and make you better able to coordinate with coworkers who have multimedia skills.

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16.1: Multimedia Essentials

Common ground with text

Storytelling has common elements, no matter what platform you use. You already know more about how to tell stories with audio and video than you may realize.

Audience

In all forms of professional communication, we must be aware of who we're targeting: a general audience? just students? experts? Just as in print, multimedia presentations should be geared to whom you're trying to reach. Don't use a lot of technical jargon when aiming a regular folks; don't avoid all those terms when aiming at an audience that's used to using them.

Style

Look at advice in textbooks or online about writing for multimedia and you'll often be told to be "conversational." What's weird to us is that this advice is that it's treated as if it's not what professional communicators should be doing in the first place. What does it mean to be conversational? You might be told it means to use contractions such as "can't" or "won't." While stuffy academics (and some clueless journalism textbook writers) may find those vulgar, no professional communicator should avoid them. Or you may be told to start sentences with conjunctions such as "and," "but," or ... "or." Again, that's nothing special.

So, yes, write conversationally. But all that means is: Write like a person, not a robot.

Reporting

Everything you have learned about finding stories and sources and conducting interviews applies to audio and video reporting as well. So does journalism ethics: You must stick to the truth. Facts must be attributed.

Multimedia reporters may have to work harder than their print colleagues to get their reporting, though. Did you run out of battery on your recorder? As a print reporter, that just means you have to be more careful taking notes. If you don’t have sound or video for multimedia, you don’t have much of a story.

Story elements

No matter in what format stories are told, they have similar building blocks.

Start strong

Just as writers sweat over their ledes and aim to make them engage readers, those creating audio and video news reports need compelling beginnings.

We use Photoshop a lot. It’s a complicated piece of software. When we’re trying to use a new tool within it, we’ll often go to the internet for help. Alas, most often the first offering from a search engine will be a how-to video. Desperately we scroll down, looking for text instruction instead.

Why? Because too many of those how-to videos are made by folks who know a lot about the technology but very little about communicating what they know. The first indication of that is how those videos start: Several seconds of flashy animated title sequences. The instructor shows up and greets us. Describes their background. Explains what they’re going to talk about. Encourages us to explore more … STOP, we scream internally, as we click away. Just get to the point!

Those same techies may make the same kinds of mistakes when they write out instructions. See: the life stories that sit atop recipe pages online. But with text, we can quickly scroll down to find the stuff we want. With video and audio, we feel trapped.

Get to it: As you watch TV shows (or even many movies), notice how often they begin with what’s called a “cold open.” The show begins immediately with action. Only after a few seconds or minutes of action do you get the title sequence and opening credits. Storytelling podcasts such as “Criminal” by Phoebe Judge and Lauren Spohrer use the same technique.

Be creative: In writing, summary ledes get to the point quickly, making them best suited for breaking news. Alternative ledes, such as anecdotes, put more focus on grabbing the audience’s interest.

Audio and video reporting work much the same way. Some stories are so short that they are almost nothing but the usual contents of a summary lede. This is especially true when the stories are part of a newscast, in which many news items have to be squeezed into a small amount of time. Others, especially pieces meant to stand on their own online or as part of longer shows like “This American Life” or “60 Minutes,” use alternative approaches.

As you construct your multimedia pieces, think about the same kinds of approaches we talked about for text, such as teasers and in media res.

Quotes

Good quotes make for good stories. But when you use a quote in print, you can make it easier to understand by taking some words or sounds out and putting others in, as long as you let the readers know what you’re doing. (See more about this in the chapter on quotes.) Editing quotes – called soundbites – in multimedia is a bit trickier.

An “NPR edit,” called that because of the technique’s frequent use in public radio, involves editing audio to remove ums, ers, pauses, loud breathing and other “distracting” sounds. It may even be used to stitch together sentences or phrases that were spoken at different points in the interview.

Print reporters who do similar things will use typographical conventions to let the readers see the seams – an ellipsis (…) to show something’s been cut; parentheses or square brackets to indicate words were added. There’s no aural equivalent, so the extent of NPR edits, or their use at all, can be controversial.

Video reporters have an even bigger burden. On the one hand, when they edit an interviewee’s response to remove something, the viewer can get a visual notice. They’ll see an abrupt, if subtle, shift in the picture where the cut occurred. That provides the transparency of print, but at the cost of making the video look herky-jerky. (There are ways to hide that.)

Scenes

No surprise, since scenes have been part of storytelling since the very beginning when it was all oral, and are the way movies are put together: Scenes are a natural part of audio and video reporting as well.

The balance in crafting scenes shifts toward multimedia. Print reporters have to use just their words to paint pictures in the audience’s minds. Audio reporters can immerse their listeners in true-to-life sounds. Video reporters can literally show the whole scene as a picture.

Grammar and style

Nitpicking audience members can be just as critical of audio and video reporters who fumble conventional grammar as they are of print ones. At least writers don’t have to worry about audiences criticizing their accents or accusing them of crimes against diction such as “vocal fry.”

While AP style doesn’t apply to spoken words, multimedia reporters have their own sets of guidelines. When stories are based on scripts, they need to follow style rules designed to make it easier to read those scripts aloud quickly and clearly.

Conciseness and clarity

All the reasons that print reporters strive to use fewer words and make them as clear as possible apply in multimedia, only more so.

We have urged you to eliminate stumbling blocks in your writing that could make readers pause, even have to reread. That’s the best writing. But the ability of readers to set their own pace and jump around in text does give writers a safety net.

In audio and video, words must be understood immediately. By the time the listener has puzzled out a confusing phrase, the story’s already moved on.

Formulas

Writers use the inverted pyramid and other formulas that provide a basic structure for what goes where. Audio and video reporting use different formulas adapted to their formats, but the concept is the same: Follow the formula to save time and match the audience’s wants and needs.

In this chapter, we’ll focus on one formula in particular, used often in TV news.

Common multimedia elements

In addition to what you already know about good professional writing, putting together multimedia requires new twists.

Writing for the ear

While basic principles of good professional writing are much the same across all forms of media, some things are more important when your audience can only hear your words, not see them. In many places in this textbook, we caution against things that might make your readers stumble, such as unclear antecedents for pronouns or ambiguous wordings. But if readers are determined, they can overcome those obstacles, by rereading or pausing to think. The spoken word doesn't work that way, so being clear is even more important.

As a result, some of these tips repeat what we've already urged, just with more urgency.

Simple sentences

Write in short, uncomplicated sentences: One fact = one sentence. Avoid clauses as much as possible; replace commas with periods. Use basic subject-verb-object structure, avoid passive voice. Redouble your efforts to eliminate wordiness.

The goal is to let the audience absorb the information directly, without having to deconstruct your sentences to puzzle out the meaning.

Simple words

Avoid jargon. Use shorter words rather than their long Latin-derived synonyms. Instead of using a source's formal title, tell us what they do in plain English.

BAD: Barnaby Miller, the Charles E. Braithwaite Chair in Global Macroeconomics in the James P. Kellogg School of Business at Enormous State University ...
BETTER: Barnaby Miller, who teaches economics at Enormous State ...

Don't use a lot of numbers. Round off those you do use.

BAD: thirty-four point zero three two percent
BETTER: thirty-four percent
BEST: About a third

Signposts

Use aural clues to help the audience follow along.

- Warn them when they need to pay special attention:
  - "This was the most important clue"
  - "The story gets complicated here"
- Vary your voice. Add stress to the most essential words in a sentence. Get louder or softer. (This not only helps comprehension but makes your narration less monotonous.)
- Use pauses to let what you've just said sink in or make the audience's ears perk up for what comes next.

Speakers

When you add someone else's voice, identify the new speaker immediately before or after their "soundbite." (Note: If you're paraphrasing or quoting their words in your own voice, always put the attribution first so the listener isn't confused.)

Avoid having too many different voices in a short span of time.

Both of these allow the audience to keep track of who's talking.

Setups

In a chapter devoted entirely to using quotes, we cover many ways to set up a quote in text -- in other words, to prepare the reader to understand the quote that's coming. All our advice in that chapter can be applied to setting up soundbites as well.

Audio and video reporting have another task that text doesn't: Setting up (or explaining afterward) sounds and images that aren't speech.

On the one hand, the ability to add sound or images to storytelling means multimedia reporters can create pictures in their audiences' minds without having to write everything out. But on the other hand, those sounds and images don't always speak for themselves.

Public radio reporter Amanda Rabinowitz opened a story about mental health issues among prisoners by this way:

"There's a heavy door along a long all in the Summit County Jail." [Ambient sound begins: a metallic crunch as that heavy door is opened]

"Above it, black bold letters read, 'One D.' [Ambient sound: The door slams shut.]

Without those sounds, the narration wouldn't be as strong. Without that narration, those sounds would have little meaning.

In video, reporters talking about "writing to video." That means coordinating their words with the pictures so that the two complement but not duplicate. This is sometimes expressed as "see dog, say dog." In other words, if the video is showing a dog running through a field, the reporter's voiceover should be related to what that dog's doing, not to a City Council dispute over water rates. However, the voiceover shouldn't be telling the audience what it can already see: "A dog runs through a field ..."

Sound it out

A lot of writers hear their words in their heads automatically as they type. We've been writing so long that we use that internal voice as our built-in grammar checker; sometimes what we write just doesn't "sound right" as we're typing.

When writing for the ear, it's absolutely important that you listen to your own words. Your internal voice may not be enough. Read what you've written out loud. Did you stumble over a word? Did two words seem to clash? Reading out loud helps in two ways. First, it ensures that you'll be able to read the script properly, enunciating the words, pausing in the right places. Second, it helps you find spots where the audience might hear something amiss.

Jargon

Multimedia journalists often use a special language. Among the terms you may encounter:

Ad-lib: To speak off the cuff, without using a script.

Ambient sound: Natural sounds of an environment, whether that's the soft chirping of birds in a park or the thudding of a steam press in a factory.

Bed: Background music

Intro: An introduction to a story or a standard beginning such as the ID of the program.

Nat sound: Another term for ambient sound. Basically, anything you record that isn't being used as a soundbite.

Outro: Like an intro, but at the end.

SFX: Sound effects. Can be used to indicate ambient sounds.

SOT: Sound on tape. A clip from an interview.

Soundbite: Another word for an SOT.

VO: Voiceover. When the reporter is talking over video or sound.

Scripts

Given what we've told you so far about writing for the ear, it should be obvious that speaking off the cuff isn't likely to get everything right. You'll want to write out what you have to say and plot out where you'll add other elements, either soundbites, other sounds or other video.

Two-column script

A common way to accomplish this is to create a two-column script. What goes in each column varies; the examples here are just a couple of possibilities.

Table 16.1.1 Example video script

Video	Audio
Reporter standing in front of abandoned building.	ONCE THIS APARTMENT BUILDING ON NEW BETHLEHEM'S WEST SIDE WAS FILLED WITH FAMILIES.
B-Roll: Rats crawling over ruined furniture, roaches filling kitchen sink.	TODAY, THOSE FAMILIES ARE GONE. IN THEIR PLACE: RATS AND ROACHES.
B-Roll: Faded demolition order on front door, list of abandoned buildings	THIS BUILDING WAS SUPPOSED TO BE DEMOLISHED THREE YEARS AGO. BUT IT'S ONE OF ABOUT 40 THE CITY HASN'T TOUCHED.
Lower-thirds: Janette Malcom, New Bethlehem Mayor	"Our budget is tight. Our first priority has to be preserving the housing that is still usable."

Table 16.1.2 Example audio script

Source	Audio
SFX	(Crowd chanting "Ole, Ole" 0:03)
ANNOUNCER	EVERY BUSINESS IN BARCELONA IS SHUT DOWN TODAY. IT SEEMS AS IF EVERYONE IS IN THE STREETS.
STREET INTERVIEW (fades to TRANSLATOR)	(Spanish 0:06) "Football is everything to us. To win the Champions League, we all celebrate!"
ANNOUNCER	BARCELONA HAS WON THE EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP FOR THE FIRST TIME IN TEN YEARS.

Notice the common features:

- The reporter's script is on one side, commonly the right.
- The reporter's words are in ALL CAPS. As with other elements, you will encounter variations, but this seems to be popular.
- The text intended to be read is double-spaced.
- The two columns are in sync. In the video script, for example, the left side tells an editor which clips to use at what point in the report.

Caution

Another good reason to prepare a script for multimedia is to avoid saying the wrong thing: using obscenities, insulting your audience, etc.

Broadcasts on TV and radio must follow FCC rules; your station could be fined if your obscenity goes over the air. Cable and online platforms don't have that worry, but saying the wrong thing can still be very embarassing and could get you fired.

Don't think this just applies to live broadcasts and streaming, either. Yes, your mistakes *could* get edited out. But if you were sloppy enough to make those mistakes, can you really depend on someone else not being sloppy enough to skip over them?

We tell print and online writers never to type anything into a story that they wouldn't want their readers to see. The same applies to audio and video. Don't assume you'll be saved by editing. Don't assume that your mic is no longer "hot" (recording) when you've finished your report. Save your snarky comments for after work.

Style

Because scripts are designed to be read aloud, they differ from AP print style in ways designed to avoid stumbles.

Numbers: Spell out small numbers (some say one through eleven). Use digits from there to either 99 or 999 (advice varies). From there, combine numbers and words: 4-HUNDRED, 9-THOUSAND, 2-MILLION

Pronunciation: For unfamiliar words or names, use phonetic spelling either in place of or in addition to the actual word: STEVE BARTCZYSZYN (bar-CHIZ-in)

Spacing: To make it easier to read script, especially when it's scrolling past on a monitor, lines have extra spacing. And, as with old-school typewriting, two spaces are used after a period to indicate a slightly longer pause than a comma.

Mark up

Above, we encouraged you to use pauses, stress and changes in volume to add color to your speech and help the readers pick out the important stuff. Especially with longer scripts, you may use extra marks to remind you where to do that.'

Emphasis: Underlining or boldfacing will remind you to put an extra spin on a word. Which words? One way to think about is to imagine that the listener is only half paying attention. What words would be most important for them to get the gist of what you're saying?

Pauses: In short broadcast scripts, regular punctuation may do. For longer narration, consider using slashes to indicate pauses. More slashes means a longer pause.

Speed: If you want to remember to talk a bit slower or faster at certain points, use small backward or forward arrows.

Using sound

Even if you're reporting on video, with all its visual possibilities, sound is an essential part of getting your message across. It's useful to consider the various types of sound you can use.

Your voice

It's a universal human reaction to think your voice sounds bad when you hear it played back. Part of that seems to have to do with the difference between how we experience our own voice naturally, as a mix of sound waves through the air and through bone conduction, and hearing it only through the air.

It is true that some voices are more melodic, some more soothing, etc. But we believe anyone's voice, properly modulated using tips like those above, can work just fine. Don't be self-conscious. Concentrate on content.

On the technical side, experiment with your equipment to get the best possible quality. Microphone placement is important, and different mics have different requirements. If you're recording your voiceovers in a studio, you may use devices such as a pop filter -- a thin mesh of cloth or other material placed between your lips and the mic. When you pronounce consonants such as P or B, you quickly expel air that could create a "pop" sound when it hits the mic; the filter blocks that.

Soundbites

Don't worry about whether your sources have "radio voices," either. What matters is what they contribute to the story.

If you're recording them in the studio, the same type of equipment can serve both you and your source.

Often, though, you'll be conducting interviews in the field. Capturing voices properly outside a studio brings a lot of extra concerns.

Even quiet rooms often have some background noise, such as the hum of air conditioning or the subtle buzz of fluorescent lights. You can make it easier to edit those distractions out later by briefly recording just the background noise, which you can use as a sample in the editing process.

- If feasible, have the interview in as quiet a place as possible. If you're interviewing someone in an open office filled the the sounds of clacking computer keyboards and background conversation, ask if there's an empty room you can use. If you're outside, try to move away from crowds and out of the wind. (Have you seen reporters holding microphones that look like giant puffballs? They're using fuzzy covers that deaden the sound of wind whistling against the mic.)

- Pay attention to microphone type and placement. A mic that works great in the studio may not be the best choice for a crowded bar. We won't get into all the technical details here, but if you're going to regularly record audio, it's worth consulting an expert or reading up on the subject.
- Wear headphones connected to your recording device so you hear what you're recording, not what you think you're recording. Our brains do a marvelous job of helping us focus by screening out many distracting elements. If you've ever lived in a house with ticking clocks, you know that at some point your brain activates its own editing process and you're no longer aware of the ticks. We grew up with a clock that loudly chimed every 15 minutes, but days could go by without our ever noticing them. That's great for living a more peaceful life, but not good if you think you're recording a clear voice only to discover in editing that the voice was all but overwhelmed by background noise.

Background sound

While you want to work with voice recordings that are as clear as possible, having some environmental sounds in the background can add to the color of the reporting. If you're talking to a cafeteria worker, for example, hearing in the background the clatter of dishes adds context. The key is to have control over the volume of both the voice and the background. You do that by recording them separately. In editing, you can fade the clatter up to establish the scene and down when you insert the soundbite. Is this ethical? Yes, most journalists would say, as long as the background recording is authentic and from the same location.

Storytelling sound

In the Amanda Rabinowitz piece mentioned above, the sounds she used weren't just background noise; they were part of setting the scene. Say you're reporting about how the local bus system accommodates people in wheelchairs. To make your piece come alive, you'll want to include familiar sounds: The shwoosh of air brakes, the clack of a platform coming down to sidewalk level, the vroom as the bus takes off. Again, you want to be able to manipulate each of those individually to place them where you want in your finished piece. So you want to record them separately. This often means moving around a lot -- crouching down close to the bus as it comes to a stop, for example, to catch the swish of the tires. You'll need to plan ahead to figure out what kinds of sounds you need, and you many need a few trips to get all of them.

Music

Music can set the mood for a piece, as it does in so many films and TV shows. It can fill longer gaps between content, as if indicating a new chapter. But using music in journalism isn't without controversy. Some argue that anything other than natural sounds and voices is manipulation. The Poynter media institute collected some professional guidelines about music in news reporting back in 2009; they're still relevant.

> Pre-recorded scoring music is used sparingly, when it contributes to the effectiveness of a story without editorializing. (New York Times)
>
> Light music that fits the tone of a feature story can enhance a video ethically. Using music for dramatic effect in a serious drama may be manipulative or emotional in an inappropriate way. (American Press Institute)
>
> When you add music to a story, the audience must understand you have added the sounds. Music, especially, has the ability to send complex and profound editorial messages. (Radio-Television News Directors Association)

The simplest news stories have simple audio: just the reporter's voice, perhaps one or two short soundbites. But using sound in other ways deepens your storytelling. We encourage you to experiment.

Editing voices

Above, we mentioned the "NPR edit" -- reworking recording speech until it's crystalline, free of stumbles, coughs, filler ums and ers. Cleaning up speech can be painstakingly time consuming. But you don't have to go to extremes to get benefits from judicious after-the-recording editing.

Is this ethical? For your own narration, almost certainly. After all, reportings writing for print or online edit their work, and have others edit it more for them, to make it clearer, more grammatical, more interesting. While you'll want to do as much as you can before you record, by editing your script, it would be unusual if you were so perfect that you could get through every script without messing something up.

What about editing your sources' speech? In our chapter on quotes, we have a section devoted to what we call surgery -- trimming, adding to or otherwise altering quotes. The general principles that apply to text apply to recorded speech:

- Don't alter the meaning of what people say. Don't, for example, remove a "not" that could change entirely someone's opinion.
- Don't overcorrect. In speech, even moreso than in printed quotes, your audience will not notice minor grammatical errors.
- Feel free to eliminate elements that don't contribute meaning. An "um" or an "er," even (some would say) a "like" or "you know" can be just filler. In the interest of tightening the soundbite and not distracting the listeners, slicing out those can be acceptable. Ditto for long pauses while someone thinks of the next thing to say.

Because you can't indicate simply in audio where you've cut out part of someone's quote, we generally advise against cutting out things in the middle of a soundbite, even if you would do so in print. If your source rambles or repeats themselves, an option is to cut the soundbite into two parts and use each on its own.

On the other hand, the way a person talks -- whether they pause or speed up, whether they stutter in shock or stumble over their words in sorrow -- can add to the storytelling. As with so many things about using what other people say in professional communications, these are judgment calls. There are no absolutes.

Video

Because video reporting isn't just about sound, it has its own extra elements.

Jargon

Anchor VO: An anchor is the main host of a news show. Often, very brief news stories are presented not by a reporter, but rather by the anchor reading a short script while video plays on the screen -- a voiceover. When a voiceover is combined with a short soundbite, or SOT, from a source, it's a VOSOT.

A-roll: The main video elements of a report. This includes the reporter's standup and interviewees, but also other shots that are essential to the storytelling.

B-roll: Other video elements, which can be fresh or taken from previous footage. In general, B-roll consists of short clips related to the story but not showing important action. For example, if you're reporting that a local school is being closed, the A-roll could be the reporter's standup, the school superintendent at a news conference and a parent criticizing the decision. B-roll, shown while the reporter talks over it, could be empty school corridors, students walking out at the end of a school day and the school's sign at the entrance to its driveway.

Chyron: Text or graphics superimposed on video. (Chyron was the company that originated a way to do this.) The abbreviation "CG," for character generator, the generic name, may be used in scripts.

Clip: A short video shot.

Lower-thirds: Instead of announcing the names of sources, video reporters usually put a person's name and identifier (such as their job) on the screen in text (chyron). The lower third of the frame is a common location.

Sequence: A combination of clips.

Standup: A reporter, usually in the field, speaking.

Shooting video

Doing a video news story originally meant sending out at least two people -- a reporter to appear on camera and a videographer to operate the massive camera, set up lighting if needed and check sound levels. Over time, video cameras got smaller and smaller. Today, even a smartphone can produce usable video, and often reporters are turned into MMJs (multimedia journalists) who go out on their own.

So, just as with photography, journalists who planned to concentrate on reporting may find themselves tasked with taking video as well. So every reporter should understand some of the basics.

Camera basics

These tips will make it much more likely that your clips can be turned into a useable story.

Keep it steady: If your camera jiggles during a shot, the resulting video can be annoying to watch. True, some creative types deliberately get shaky hand-held shots, such as in TV shows or movies that want to resemble "reality." And software now can steady the jiggles. But it's best to get shots steady in the camera. Use a tripod if you can. Other strategies: Brace the camera against a solid object, such as a post or the top of a fence. Brace your arms against your body if you're holding the camera in your hands, rather than stretching them out.

Keep it straight: Some cinematographers and photographers delight in using a "Dutch angle" -- deliberately tilting the camera so one side is higher than the other. Just as in writing we set some rules that we've told you may be broken if you're doing more advanced work later, here we're telling you not to try to be too artsy. Keep the camera level.

Keep it smooth: Some teachers admonish students new to video to never pan the camera (move it up and down or side to side during a clip). We understand why: Moving the camera multiples the number of ways you can mess up the shot. But unless your instructor has adopted that rule, you may want to pan to show more of a scene. So here's how to avoid the most common errors:

- Pan smoothly. Don't stop and start and stop and start.
- Watch your speed. Pan too quickly and the viewer can't keep up with what you're showing. Too slowly and it gets boring.
- Pan with purpose. Don't pan just because you can. If you can achieve the same goal simply by standing further back from your subject, do so.

Frame carefully: In our Photography Essentials chapter, we talked about paying attention to the whole frame, not just your main subject. The same applies to video. Watch out for distracting elements.

Count to 10: Each of your clips should be at least 10 seconds long, even if it's just a shot pointing straight and steady at a sign. This takes into account what will get lost when you merge clips into a sequence, for example by fading in and out. And it ensures you'll have enough time for the viewers to recognize what's on the screen.

Know your shadows: Especially if you're shooting outside on a sunny day, your camera can have problems coping with the contrast between light and dark areas. A subject wearing a hat may have half their facial features rendered invisible. (On the other hand, a subject forced to stare directly into the sun may squint, making them look foolish.)

Know your camera: Being on location is no time to realize your camera's low on battery or you don't know which buttons to push. Never take equipment on a shoot until you've had a chance to test it out, charge all batteries and bring along extra chargers.

Horizontal or vertical?

For many years as a newsroom trainer and in the classroom, we despaired of ever getting everyone to remember to hold their smartphones horizontally to capture video. Joke's on us; now some news outlets specifically produce vertical video designed to be watched on smartphones.

So, yes, you can shoot vertically if that's the market you're aiming for; horizontally if you're shooting mainly for broadcast/cable TV.

But be consistent. If you mix horizontal and vertical clips, merging them into a sequence will be a visual mess.

B-roll

When students new to video reporting turn in their first pieces, the most common problem area we see is in B-roll. Even if a student does their standup and interviews well, B-roll issues can pull down the quality of their work a lot. These recommendations can help you do better.

Shoot a lot. Get many more clips than you think you'll need, because you'll need many more than you think you do. Say you're aiming for a 3-minute report. Maybe, if you're lucky, you can fill up a minute with your standup and interviews. That leaves 2 minutes. We've told you to try to get clips of at least 10 seconds, so some quick math says you'll need 12 clips to fill 2 minutes, right? Wrong. While your original clips may be 10 seconds long, you'll only want to use 3-5 seconds of each clip. (Remember, we said the 10 seconds allowed for trimming some.) Now you're looking at 24-48 clips. You also have to figure not all your clips are

good enough. Bottom line? For someone new to this, shooting 4 to 6 times as much B-roll as you have time to fill is a good plan. To get 2 minutes of useful B-roll, you might need to spend about 10 minutes collecting it.

Shoot in different ways. Even when students get a fair amount of B-roll, their work may fall short if the result is repetitive. Pros talk about a "five-shot method." That refers to varying the type of shots. Three are about how you frame the shot: wide (showing a lot of the scene), closeup (up tight against your subject) and medium (in between). Two are about what you look at: action (showing movement) and detail (picking out one element).

Vary your targets. Plunking the camera in one spot and shooting one each of the five methods still only give you five shots; you need a lot more. Move around.

Keep it relevant. Just because something is visible at the place you're reporting the story doesn't mean it will contribute to the final report. Think about the content of your piece. If it's about a new playground, clips panning the buildings across the street won't help unless those buildings are going to be mentioned in the report.

Think about sequences. You can put any random collection of clips together and call it a sequence. But the best sequences tell a story of their own because they're connected. For example, if you're reporting about a minute clinic opening in your town, think about typical interactions that might occur there. What would be the steps? Something like this:

1. Customer walks in
2. Greeted by clerk
3. Fills out form asking for vaccination
4. Is shown to treatment room
5. Rolls up sleeve
6. Nurse tests hypodermic
7. Gives shot
8. Bandages site
9. Gives customer a piece of candy

Now think of mixing that list with the five-shot method. Which would work best as wide shots? As details? What static elements could you work into the sequence: The outside of the store? The sign announcing the new clinic?

Think ahead. Students without a lot of free time try to be more efficient by doing their interviews and shooting B-roll in one visit. But if you've never been to a place before, how do you know what it looks like or what kinds of things happen there? And if you've already taken up your source's time with an interview, will they be open to you following them around for longer?

At the least, scope out locations before you shoot if you can, so you can plan your shots better. We'd argue for doing the interview first, then coming back a second time for B-roll. Why? Well, we had one student who interviewed a retired local radio personality for a half-hour and then spent almost as long shooting B-roll in the person's home. But when the student got down to editing the interview, they realized the most interesting part of the intervew involved an award their subject had won. And to illustrate that, they had exactly one clip of the microphone-shaped award.

TV news

Video reporting produced directly for online use should be designed to stand on its own and tell a complete story. Your audience may come straight to the video without seeing any context, so the video should make it clear who's talking and what they work for.

Video produced to first appear as part of a TV news program, however, can work differently. The report exists within the context of the news program. Because TV news packs a lot of stories into a relatively short amount of time, most video reports are not as complete as standalone video. With only about a half-dozen sentences, about half a minute, a common type of video report can only hit the highlights.

Formula

That increases pressure on the journalist to figure out the key elements of the story and explain them clearly and concisely. Broadcast journalists use a tight formula. Different experts will have slightly different versions, but here's a typical one for a VO -- a short story that would be read by an anchor over related video.

Lead: One simple, straightforward sentence. These look a lot like the summary leads used in print. For "hard news," such as crimes, they'll stick to the basic facts; for stories that aren't as urgent, they'll tend to focus on what it means to the viewer.

It's tradition that broadcast leads are in the present tense for hard news. The journalist has to find a way to tell the viewers what's happened RIGHT NOW, as they're speaking, even if the main event happened hours ago. Softer stories may use future tense, telling viewers what's coming.

What happened: One sentence that supports the lead and adds information, usually that main event in the past.

What it means: The consequences of the main event.

Why: What led up to the main event; what caused it.

What's next: If possible, something pointing toward the future. If not, the conclusion of the story.

Variations

Not all stories have the kind of information to fit all of those categories. If you're writing about a bank robbery, you may not have a "why." If you're missing an element, provide more information under another category.

If someone obtained SOT -- sound on tape, a soundbite from an interview or news conference or such -- that can be added into the formula at an appropriate spot. The VO becomes a VOSOT.

While VOs and VOSOTs are designed to be self-contained anchor pieces, reporters in the field will often use a similar formula when doing their live or taped reports. Usually, a studio anchor will introduce the report, often giving what amounts to the lead, then "throw" to the reporter for the rest. In those cases, the reporter's segment will most often end with them naming themselves and their affiliation: "I'm Casey Stengel for Eyewitness 7 News."

Example 16.1.1

This example of a VOSOT was created by Gretchen Hoak, a Kent State professor with TV news background.

Table 16.1.3 Example VOSOT script

Production	Anchor
Lead -----TAKE VO-----	TWO CLEVELAND MEN ARE RECOVERING THIS MORNING AFTER SPENDING SEVERAL HOURS IN LAKE ERIE LAST NIGHT. -----TAKE VO-----
What happened	20-YEAR OLD TERRY RESTON AND 21-YEAR OLD WILL BENDIX WERE FISHING OFF EDGEWATER PARK IN CLEVELAND WHEN THEIR BOAT CAPSIZED.
What it means	THE COAST GUARD RESCUED THE TWO MEN AFTER THEY SPENT 4 HOURS IN THE WATER.
Why	THE COAST GUARD SAYS THE WINDS PICKED UP CREATING SOME BIG WAVES THAT OVERWHELMED THE BOAT.
-----SOT----- CG/ TERRY RESTON / VICTIM -----CONT VO-----	-----SOT----- *“It was really scary. The waves just picked up out of nowhere and we didn’t know what to do. I honestly thought we were going to die.”* -----CONT VO-----
What's next	RESTON AND BENDIX WERE TAKEN TO METRO HEALTH MEDICAL CENTER IN CLEVELAND… THEY ARE IN GOOD CONDITION.

Things to note about this script:

Lead: The audience would see the anchor on screen reading this. Note that it starts with what's happening RIGHT NOW (the men are recovering) before starting to look back.

TAKE VO: The anchor's face is replaced by relevant video; the anchor continues speaking (a voiceover).

What happened: The bare details of the original incident.

What it means: For hard news, "what it means" is often loosely interpreted. Here, it's mostly further details of what happened.

Why: The reason the men ended up in the water.

SOT: Sound on tape; indicates a clip of someone else will be inserted here while the anchor shuts up. Note that the contents of the SOT are shown, but in italics and not all caps, to prevent the anchor from absentmindedly reading this on air.

CG / TERRY RESTON / VICTIM: While the video shows Reston talking, type will be superimposed on the screen identifying him by name and as "victim."

CONT VO: The SOT ends; more related video shows as the anchor speaks again.

What's next: The story concludes and updates the men's health. Because they're in good condition, there's nothing else to add about future events.

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16.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Audio and video presentations have a lot in common with all professional communications:
  - Know your audience
  - Follow proper style
  - Get the facts
- In whatever format stories are told, similar principles apply:
  - Start strong with a good opening
  - Use solid quotes
  - Build scenes
  - Pay attention to grammar
  - Be clear and concise
  - Some of the adaptations for multimedia apply to both audio and video.
- Write for the ear:
  - Simple sentences
  - Simple words
  - Variation in tone, pauses and other tools to help the audience follow along
  - ID speakers just before or after their soundbite, and always before their paraphrases
  - Set up sounds and images so the audience knows what's happening
  - Listen to yourself
- You should be able to explain common jargon:
  - Ad-lib
  - Ambient sound
  - Bed
  - Intro
  - Nat sound
  - Outro
  - SFX
  - SOT
  - Soundbit
  - VO
- You should be able to write a script in two-column format.
- You should be able to describe some of the techniques needed to record and use properly your own voice, your interviewees' voices, ambient and storytelling sound and music.
- You should be able to expain common video jargon:
  - Anchor VO
  - A-roll
  - B-roll
  - Chyron
  - Clip
  - Lower-thirds
  - Sequence
  - Standup
- You should be able to describe techniques needed to record useful video, including B-roll
- A typical anchor VO has this basic structure:
  - Lead

- What happened
- What it means
- Why
- What's next

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16.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 16.3.1

Select a simple breaking news story from professional or student media.

Using the formula described in this chapter, write an anchor VO story: About five sentences, arranging the facts in the proper order, using present tense in the lede to tell the audience what's happening right now.

Exercise 16.3.2

Select something you do most days, such as walking your dog, riding a bus to class or making a meal.

Record five-10 short clips of storytelling sound. For example, if you're making a sandwich, the sounds might include opening the fridge, unscrewing a jar, cutting something, etc. Think about the sounds you hear every day that are so familiar you don't even notice them any more, like the ding or bong when an elevator gets to your floor.

Use whatever equipment you have; even your smartphone is enough. But experiment to get the clearest sounds; don't forget to get the mic close to what you're recording.

If you've been shown how, edit the clips into one file, with a short pause between each. If not, have them all lined up in proper order so you can play them one after another.

Play your recording for the class or a group. If you've selected the right sounds and recorded them well, the other students should be able to identify what's going on without any hints.

Exercise 16.3.3

Add exercises text here.

Answer

Add texts here. Do not delete this text first.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

17: Headlines

17.1: Headlines
17.2: Chapter Review
17.3: Optional Exercises

Why headlines matter

A headline, as you probably already know, is the title of a journalism story -- the bigger type at the top. In print newspapers, headlines were born to make it easy for readers to scan a page and pick out individual items from the sea of small gray type. They evolved into different sizes and typefaces to provide a rough guide to the news value of individual stories.

Although the industry is moving away from print, headlines still make sense. On a site's homepage, they provide a quick index to the day's news. Atop each individual story, they give the audience a brief introduction. More than all that, they can be used to pull an audience to the site in the first place.

Because headlines are generally short -- by necessity, in print, because a page is only so big, and by convention and convenience, online -- they force journalists to find a sharp focus for each story. Even in the days when newsrooms had corps of copy editors doing the headline writing, reporters were encouraged to try to think of a headline as a way to figure out what their stories were really about. Today, more and more, reporters actually write the headlines, so knowing how to do that well is even more important.

However, what a "good headline" means has become more complicated. Guidelines for traditional print headlines had become regularized over time. Then news stories went online, and it appeared that what worked right on top of a story in print was not the same as performed best on a site's homepage. Next, search engines swayed more and more eyeballs, and writing to please their algorithms became important. Social media muscled in, with its own quirks. Now AI is pushing a lot of traffic (or stealing a lot, some would say), and that brings its own set of tips. Meanwhile, back at the ranch -- which is to say the diminishing pages of print journalism -- some are arguing for overturning a lot of those old rules as well.

Some newsrooms have tried to cope with this confusing environment by asking journalists to write several headlines for a single story, each designed for a specific use. Some journalists and PR professionals have proposed new sets of rigid guidelines guaranteed to bring an audience to a post. And a lot of desperate communications pros have turned to ethically questionable tactics playing on human weaknesses. It's a mess.

As a result, we've reworked this section a lot from the earliest versions of this book. We'll try to provide some basic advice that should work across all platforms, while also providing specific tips -- some of which, we admit, may be mostly of historical interest by the time you read this.

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17.1: Headlines

Headline rules

Although headlines sit atop stories, they come with their own set of standards.

General guidelines

These apply whether you write a headline for print or aim at search engines, social media or artifical intelligence.

Style

Tense: News headlines are generally written in present tense.

> Local man wins Nobel prize for medicine

When writing about something in the future, use “to.”

> President to visit France

Numbers: Ignore AP style about writing out small numbers; use digits.

> 3-headed calf born

Capitalization: Most publications and websites have abandoned “title case” -- capitalizing most words -- in favor of capitalizing only those words that would be capitalized in a normal sentence.

If your employer does use title case, use these rules for what gets capitalized and what's in lowercase:

- Capitalize the first word of the headline, no matter what it is
- Lowercase almost any other words that are conjunctions (and, but, etc.) or prepositions (to, for, etc.). We say "almost any" because most outlets will have some cutoff -- say, four letters -- and say that any word longer than that, even if it's a conjunction or preposition, should be capitalized.

Periods: Do NOT end headlines with periods. (Rare exceptions exist.)

Content

We recommend these principles.

Relevance: The headline should be directly relevant to the story, and usually to its main point. Straight news stories should get straightforward headlines; don't play word games with death and disease. And, of course, don't lie.

Names: Apply the same guideline you'd use to decide if a name should be put into a summary lede. Unless it adds news value because it's already familiar to the audience, it's usually best to keep it out. For people well known to your audience, it's usually OK to use just the name they're most known by (so "DiCaprio" for the actor, but "LeBron" for the basketball player).

Length: Be concise. We can't tell you exactly where the cutoff is, but apply common sense. The longer a headline gets, the more likely a reader (or some search engine's algorithm) will stop reading and move on. It's also possible the last words of a long headline will be cut off when displayed in search results or social media. Is the limit a dozen words? Fifteen? Experts disagree, but that's a reasonable upper limit.

Sentences: "Label" headlines -- those without a verb -- are flat and much less likely to serve the audience. Use complete sentences. Corollary: Provide specific information when possible.

> BAD: City Council agenda
> BETTER: City Council sets ambitious agenda
> BEST: City Council to discuss widening Main Street

Print guidelines

Rules for print headlines evolved in the late 19th and early 18th centuries as newspaper design changed. They then stayed the same for decades. But as newsrooms sought ways to stem the loss of circulation, things are changing again.

Traditional style

These extra guidelines were standard for more than a century.

Quotation marks: Single quotation marks are used in headlines, in all cases.

> BAD: “Friends” wins Emmy
> BETTER: ‘Friends’ wins Emmy

Articles: "A," "an" and "the" were often deleted.

> ACCEPTABLE: Man scales Empire State Building

Conjunctional comma: A comma may take the place of “and.”

> ACCEPTABLE: Local man wins Nobel prize, Soapbox Derby

To be: Forms of "to be" can often be deleted

> ACCEPTABLE: 3-headed calf born

Evolving style

The traditional style elements listed above were established when everyone who read a news story read it in some form of print. Headlines had to fit into the width and depth of the space allotted, at the size of type assigned. Skipping "the" or something as trivial as using a single quotation mark instead of two left more room to tell the story.

Those size limitations are still true for print. However, the artificial restrictions that print imposed don't exist online, so the logic of still making those nips and tucks became questionable. Why not write headlines like real sentences, instead of expecting readers to learn how to decrypt headlinese? While some news outlets may stick to the old standards on their websites, others -- especially those that never had print counterparts -- shifted toward plainer wording.

Writing those old print headlines, making them fit exactly into the space allotted, was a special skill. Writing headlines was one of the unique tasks of copy editors. But newsrooms have cut most copy editing jobs, throwing the job of writing headlines onto reporters or editors. Those folks may never have learned the special rules. And, in shrinking newsrooms, they've got a lot of other things to worry about.

For all those reasons and others, some newsrooms are adopting a looser standard for print headlines, dropping some or all of the traditional styles. For example, we've heard of one newsroom that's bringing periods back to headlines in some cases.

For students, our best advice is to concentrate on writing headlines that follow the general guidelines. Apply the traditional rules only if your professor or employer tells you to.

SEO guidelines

As search engines became more and more significant generators of website traffic, headlines had to change -- slightly -- to become SEO tools. Mostly, this meant abandoning a few of the old print tricks, such as writing teaser headlines that hinted at a story's content without actually revealing it. Search engine algorithms do not take kindly to teasing; they want cold, hard facts.

Style

It doesn't appear that any style issues have a substantial positive or negative effect on SEO performance. If anything, writing headlines like standard sentences, rather than skipping "a" and "the," may make them more understandable to the algorithms and to the users seeing them in the search results.

Do use the general guidelines we provided, such as using verbs.

Key words

Good SEO headlines are all about using the right key words in the right place. Think about the most significant elements of your story, in terms of proper nouns: people, places, organizations, events. Those are generally the best key words, because those are generally what people type into search engines.

When sites are trying to draw searchers from the whole internet, they want the most obvious key words in headlines. A story about the Chicago Bears that doesn't include those words in the headline, for example, is going to do poorly in SEO. Indeed, any story that takes place in the city of Chicago would often want that city's name in the headline.

It's also a good idea to use key words that are specific to your story, that separate it from the many others that come from the same place or involve the same person. "Chicago Bears draft picks" would be better SEO -- for a story actually about those picks -- than one that just had "Chicago Bears" in the headline.

The best SEO is somewhat subtler, however. Consider a breaking news story -- that is, a story about something that just happened -- referring to a massive explosion of stored fertilizer in Beirut, Lebanon. "Beirut" is a solid, specific key word referring to a place. "Fertilizer" narrows it down.

But this news has just happened. How likely is it that the people searching for it already know exactly where it was and what kind of explosion happened? "Lebanon explosion" might be a better choice for early stories.

Of course, this ties in with advice that goes way back to print days about whether to use someone's name in a lede or headline: Don't do it unless the name is already familiar to your audience. If your school selects Frieda Sportsperson as its new head football coach, and she isn't already a big name, "Sportsperson named football coach" isn't as good -- for readers or SEO -- as something such as "Woman becomes head football coach, cracking glass ceiling."

It's also worth considering how much competition for searchers any given story is likely to have. Consider a reporter working for student media at Gigantic State University. Almost every story that student writes is about GSU, so almost every headline could put the school's name in the headline.

But ... most of the stories the student writes will not be of much interest to people who don't already have some connection to GSU; many won't matter much to anyone but other GSU students. And because the student media website already contains the phrase "Gigantic State University" thousands of times, it has plenty of what some call "Google juice." That means that Google's algorithm automatically gives a lot of weight to any story on the site whenever someone uses the school's name as a search term.

So when you're writing for student media, you can focus your key words to be more specific to each story. Instead of "Gigantic State University increases tuition 10%," you can try "Tuition jumps 10% to record high," or "Tuition jumps 10% for GSU freshmen." Another advantage to those variations is that they work better in print -- if you still have a print product -- where you wouldn't want to have the school's name in every headline on every page.

Finally, when you use key words in headlines, they get more weight with SEO if they're at or close to the start of the headline.

There's a lot more to say about key words. Look for that in the chapter on online optimization(opens in new window).

Content

When you write a headline to suit a search engine's algorithm, you're ultimately writing to appeal to the users who are typing words into that search engine to find information. As a result, some of the general guidelines are even more important.

Relevance: The user should be able to figure out at a glance that your story is likely to provide the information they're looking for. Teasers that hint at answers but don't provide them will send users away. Word plays that obscure the point of the story will be skipped. SEO headlines should be clear and complete.

Length: Advice on this has evolved, and different SEO experts have different rules. In the past, experts said headlines of fewer than five words were unlikely to do well. Whether that's still true is questionable. And as explained above, one longer than a dozen words or so may end up being cut short in the display of search results, or the last words might be ignored by the algorithm.

Social media guidelines

Search engines are still a big part of audience draw. SEO headlines are the easiest to convert to print use, if that's needed. And, with their emphasis on delivering the facts clearly and concisely, they're a great fit for breaking news.

But Google and its colleagues have steadily given ground to social media as a source of site traffic. More and more, we find stories by clicking links in Facebook, X or whatever else it is you kids today are into. The differences between what builds SEO and what makes for good SMO (social media optimization) are so wide that many sites put two different headlines on each story -- one visible to search engines, one that shows up when someone shares a link on social media.

Style

As with SEO, minor style points don't matter much for social media. If anything, those platforms are more open to bad grammar (as long as it's understandable).

Content

While SEO headlines are almost a science now, SMO still has a lot of art. Even so, we can offer some tips if you're trying to attract clicks by having your headlines appear in social media. Most are based on psychological tricks.

Lists: "15 ways to beat the blues" and similar headlines do well. Using a number seems to promise thoroughness, especially when it's not a "standard" number such as five or 10. Using seven or 11 may suggest that instead of arbitrarily cutting off your list, you've included every possible item. While often used for lighter reporting, this trick can work in news too: "11 things that happened in Congress Monday."

Superlatives: If you don't use a number with a list in your headline, "best" or "most effective" or similar words can have much the same effect. Note some conflict with standard journalism advice to avoid superlatives because they're hard to verify.

Promises: "What to pack for back-to-school" or "How to survive college without going into debt" tell the audience why they want to read the story -- because they'll learn something. In general, question words -- the old 5 W's -- are good ways to start an SMO headline. Again, used carefully, these can boost some news stories: "What President Trump's new tax plan covers."

Personal: "How the latest tax cut will affect you" is aimed squarely at displaying your story's relevance to readers.

FOMO: That's "fear of missing out," an anxiety multiplied by the way social media floods us with information about all the cool things our friends and family are doing. SMO headlines can latch onto that:

> What you need to know about the new campus WiFi policy
>
> It's almost too late to find an apartment for next semester

Teasers: To the dismay of some traditional journalists, headlines that stop short of actually telling you the news often do well, especially when juiced with tantalizing words:

> Cleveland Browns make surprising announcement about home opener

Traditionalists say a headline should tell you the news; SMO experts shrug and say don't knock it if it works. But even a lot of SMO advocates would draw the line at the kind of over-the-top teasing in headlines such as "Browns hire coach, and you won't believe what happened next."

Short: The best length for an SMO headline is harder to calculate than for SEO. A good way to describe it: long enough to make the topic clear but not so long that it will get cut off when shared.

Although traditionalists may snarl about SMO headlines -- and the kinds of stories they often sit atop -- not being "real" journalism, there's nothing inherently unethical about them. And print newspapers evolved tools, such as huge front-page headlines, deliberately aimed at catching the eye of people passing a newsstand.

Whether you're writing a traditional print headline or aiming for SEO or SMO, journalism ethics apply. Don't lie. Don't exaggerate or bend the truth.

AI guidelines

Much about working with AI is evolving as this book is being compiled. One question is whether professional communicators should even want their work to be swallowed by AI, only to be regurgitated in possibly warped form, potentially without attribution. But some search engines, besides using AI to generate their own responses, also use it to put together links. That target could be worth aiming at.

For example, when you Google something now, in addition to getting an AI summary at the top, you may see a list of suggested other questions you could have asked. Each of those will have a summary and short link to another site. It appears that one way to get into that list is to use headlines or subheads that mimic the format. In other words, use questions such as "How did the Browns beat the Ravens?"

Story page vs. homepage vs. URL

As we mentioned above, some newsrooms require multiple headlines on stories, each aimed at a specific platform. Even within the site itself, though, a story may have different heads for different purposes.

Story page: In the simplest websites, the headline on the story is also the headline that's served to search engines and that shows up when people share your story on social media. But coding can separate all those. The headline on the story page may be visible only there. In that case, the situation is most like print. The reader's already there; the top of the story, at least, is already visible.

This opens up more room for creativity -- headlines that put the emphasis solely on pushing the reader into the story. The head doesn't have to summarize the whole thing; it just needs to be true.

Homepage: Depending on elements of a website's design, a story that appears on its homepage may display as a headline, an image and one or more paragraphs; just a headline and an image; or even just a headline. Those last two create an extra need for the headline to do a big selling job.

Good homepage headlines have a lot in common with good SMO headlines. They're competing for your attention with all the other headlines on the page.

URL: The URL, or address, of the individual story page was an afterthought in most early news site designs. It might be a jumble of numbers, or a truncated version of the headline. What difference did it make? It wasn't as if anyone was going to see it, right?

One of the first hints of a problem with this approach showed up at sites where the page URL was fixed as soon as a headline was written and saved, even if the story wasn't posted publicly yet. Maybe the person creating the post just typed in something like "Put a headline here." Or they wrote a real headline, but the facts changed and the head got rewritten while the URL didn't change. Or, despite the longstanding journalism rule to **Never Write Anything You Wouldn't Want the Readers to See**, someone typed in a joke headline just to hold space.

Then the story got posted, and darn it, somebody did see that URL. Maybe they were among the minority who actually look at the URL at the top of the web page. Or the site coding made it show up in search results. In any case, it was bad.

So it became apparent the URL did matter. And at the same time, it appeared the words in the URL might have an impact on SEO performance as well. So some sites now make writing part of the URL an extra task. Not much to be said about this except: **DON'T LIE!**

One other bit of advice: If you do write the URL words separately, use key words.

Last note: Although almost everyone using this textbook will have come of age getting news from the internet, some of you may be still be most familiar with headlines in print -- or you may have had an instructor who was, and stuck to those principles. While, again, a lot can carry over, you must remember one important difference. Online, most people will see your story on its own, not in the context of a newspaper or magazine page; they will first see your headline on its own, not sitting atop the entire package of related stories.

In print, you might find a beautiful photostory with the headline "The sea is a goddess." That head could work well to evoke an emotion, when you see it surrounded by those photos. But if you just saw it among a list of two dozen headlines on the site's homepage, why would you click on it?

Similarly, a print page might contain three or four stories all about the same general news item. The headline writer will try to avoid using the same words in every headline, relying on the fact that they're packaged together to help the reader figure out that they're all about, say, the latest Chicago Bears game. Online, consider each headline as if it were on its own.

Creativity

The sections above are about the basics of headline writing. In a few places, we even caution against wordplay. Sounds dull? No room for humor?

Consider it a challenge, instead. Headline writing has always been a dance between following the rules and being creative. In the old days, when a lot of the rules were about squeezing words into a tight space, the result could be almost poetry.

At the Detroit Free Press one night in 1982, a copy editor named Paul Ziemer was given a story about a changeover in Saudi Arabia. The king, Khaled, had just died. For the last seven years, Crown Prince Fahd Ibn Abdel Aziz had been the country's leader

in all but title because of his father's heart troubles. Now he would finally take the throne. A lot to explain. But the person designing the page made it harder: The headline had to be only two lines long, and each line could only fit about 10 to 12 letters. The result?

Fahd ruled,
now he reigns

No matter what kinds of rules lie in the future for headlines, there will always be room for human creativity to produce lines that sing.

Example 17.1.1

One of the best headline writers we know, Skip Hall, works on the Cleveland Plain Dealer's print edition. His headlines show that there's always a place for creativity in our work.

SUMMER'S GRAND FINALE

Chicken a la Fling and more at The Great Geauga County Fair



Bob Raglin, left, gives Brewster the barn all title shower with a toilet plunger, and also bursts from the mail box in the flying chicken contest at The Great Geauga County Fair on opening day. Raglin is a past president of the fair, which runs through Monday. The fair, in Burton, has 450 acres of animals, displays, food, competitions, and rides. *Photos by Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer*

Fall armyworms have their munching orders: Your lawn

Storms blow destructive southern critters into the area, where they're turning lawns brown.

Peter Krouse *pkrouse@cleveland.com*

An invader from the South has arrived on the wind and is threatening one of suburbia's most iconic symbols — the green lawn.

The undesirable visitor is a caterpillar known as the fall armyworm, and it can turn a lawn brown in a day or two.

Reports of its destructive powers are mostly coming in from downstate, but Ohio State Extension Service agents say the insects are starting to cause trouble in the Cleveland area.

Alec McClennan, owner of Good Nature Organic Lawn Care, based in Independence, said his company has received maybe 100 calls about the fall armyworm, but most have come from the Columbus area. He believes the population will start booming in Northeast Ohio in the coming days.

The moth that begets the caterpillar, which is native to the South, has been blown north by recent weather patterns that include Hurricane Ida, said Margaret Rivera, extension educator for agricultural and natural resources for Cuyahoga County.

After the moth mates, the eggs evolve into caterpillars that emerge to chomp on green blades of grass, causing what remains to turn brown. The feast can go on for four to five weeks.

"They are like a moving marching front," said Ashley Kulhanek, extension educator for agriculture and natural resources for Medina County. "... It really does happen very quickly."

The hairless caterpillars have green and black stripes and can be an inch or longer depending on how much they get to feed. They are a different species than the common armyworm that is native to Northeast Ohio and they make an appearance in pockets every four or five years, Rivera said.

McClennan said the infestation is unlike he's seen in last 20 years.

SEE ARMYWORMS, A3



Fall armyworms, named for their migration behavior after depleting a previous food source, have made their way to Ohio, causing damage to crops along their way. *Curtis Young, OSU Extension*

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17.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- In print or online, headlines are important to attracting an audience.
- Search engines feed traffic to websites, so headlines often are designed to show up at or near the top of search results. The two elements to consider are the use of key words and certain content characteristics.
- Key words are single words or phrases that people are likely to type into search engines when looking for stories like yours. Most often, these are proper nouns: names, places, events, organizations.
- SEO headlines seem to work best when they are 5-15 words long, have important key words near the beginning and contain a verb.
- Social media, such as X, are increasingly important in generating traffic to a site. You should be able to explain and apply these potential variations of SMO headlines:
  - Lists
  - Personal
  - Superlatives
  - FOMO
  - Promises
  - Teasers
- Headlines traditionally had special style rules that violate some of AP's rules for stories. You should be able to explain and apply the guidelines for these topics:
  - Tenses
  - Articles
  - Conjunctional commas
  - Forms of "to be"
  - Names
  - Capitalization
  - Periods
  - Quotation marks
- Headlines aimed at search engines should be straightforward. Headlines aimed at social media have slightly different rules, but clarity is still important. While some of the formats that work in social media are prone to abuse, you should be able to describe and apply the formats for "numbers" and "answered questions."
- Using headlines or subheds that are questions may play into the way AI assembles search results.
- While certain formulas work best for online optimization, there's still a place for creativity.

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17.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 17.3.1

Find a news outlet that produces both a print product and a website. Find stories that appeared in both forms and compare the headlines. What differences do you notice?

At the time this textbook was compiled, the New York Times homepage included a link to that day's print edition. There, you could find a PDF of the printed page as well as links to each of those stories on the website, making it easy to compare headlines.

Exercise 17.3.2

Pick a story from student media, online or in print. Write separate headlines of your own for print, the story's page online, a website's homepage, SEO and SMO. You should be able to explain why you chose different versions.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

18: Online Optimization

18.1: Online Optimization

18.2: Chapter Review

18.3: Optional Exercises

Why Digital Journalism Matters

There is no difference between writing for online and, um, writing.

The news is delivered online in the terse, strict language of AP style as well as loose, anything-goes prose. Online news videos may sound like network news shows or some guy awed by a double rainbow.

What you've already learned about summary ledes and the inverted pyramid is the best training for getting a job as a digital reporter. The short attention span of the online audience has given new life to a story form known for getting to the point quickly. What you've already learned about AP style is also good preparation. Even less-than-traditional outlets often use the AP Stylebook as a base. And the persnicketiness of online commenters makes good grammar important so you can avoid (some) criticism.

However, digital journalism has its own set of skills. Because essentially all journalism is digital these days, you've encountered some information about it in other chapters. But there's more.

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18.1: Online Optimization

Search engines

The first news websites were launched with the idea that users would come back to the same site day after day, like subscribers getting that day's newspaper. But, for several reasons, relying on that kind of traffic turned out to be limiting. Instead, sites found that many people got to their stories by following a link from the results of a search on a site like Google.

Watching how search-based traffic developed, site developers saw that the real boosts in traffic came when a particular story showed up at or near the very top of the first page of search results. Few people even scroll down to the bottom of that first page, let alone continue to further pages.

That discovery launched an industry.

Search-engine optimization (SEO)

Search engines try to present users with links that answer their questions quickly and clearly. In a word, links that are most relevant. The way they figure that out is constantly evolving. Sites such as Google use algorithms -- sets of criteria -- to try to mathematically determine what makes one site more useful to searchers than another.

The use of algorithms in online search started a dance with site developers, who tried to figure out what went into those formulas and adjust their pages to make them fit. That's SEO. Unfortunately, instead of trying to actually make pages more useful, some SEO practitioners just focused on gaming the system. Did Google give preference to a page that had a lot of hidden tags with words relevant to the search terms? Then sites would cram dozens, even hundreds of tags into their code, even if the key words had nothing to do with a particular page's content.

In response, Google and other search sites adjusted their algorithms. And the SEO folks gamed the new rules. So the search sites adjusted again. And so on.

Today, search site algorithms are generally closely guarded secrets. Companies hire SEO experts to try to reverse engineer the rules. If you've ever wondered about the unusual nature of some pages -- for example, the way recipe sites often tack tons of photos and miles of rambling writing on top of the actual recipe you want to try -- SEO is likely behind them.

But responsible news sites strike a balance between trying to deliver the kinds of pages search engines find attractive and trying to serve the needs of the audience efficiently.

Much of this work goes on behind the scenes, in the way sites are structured and in the code buried behind what you see on the screen. Individual reporters, however, can also help boost the SEO attractiveness of their stories.

Basic concepts

Because search engines are just software, they can't read a story like a human could and judge its value. They rely on things they can count and measure. We can split those things into two catgories: Key words and content characteristics.

Key words: Rather than judge a story as a whole, search engines break it down into individual words or phrases and compare those with the terms a user typed into the search box. If you type "Chicago Bears" into the box, the algorithm looks for pages that contain that phrase, generally giving more weight to pages that use the phrase more often. It may also have "learned" over time that the pages most often clicked on by people searching "Chicago Bears" also contained other words or phrases, such as "football."

Much of SEO involves figuring out which key words are most likely to be typed into search boxes by users looking for a certain kind of story, and then trying to use those key words frequently, and in the right places.

So, for example, if I'm a sportswriter, I'll be encouraged to include the name of the team I'm writing about in the lede of my story -- and to use the actual name, not a nickname like "Monsters of the Midway."

Content characteristics: Similarly, by keeping track of what searchers click on, whether they quickly come back to the search list again and other factors, algorithms and algorithm makers have determined factors that make one page more popular than another.

Pages with images -- photos or graphics -- are considered more likely to please searchers than those without. Pages that are connected to the rest of the internet -- by having links out to other relevant content, in part -- are better than those that are dead

ends. Stories that are too short may be scorned because they're not likely to have enough information to satisfy searchers.

Key words

We introduced this concept in the "Headlines" chapter. Because we're now talking about the whole page of a post, let's go into more depth.

Proper nouns: Key words tend to involve the names of people, places, locations, events, organizations.

Full names: In most cases, use the complete names of people, events and groups: John Kroll, not just Kroll. Of course, for people such as Rihanna who are known just by one name, that's all you use. There are also people for whom one name suffices to identify them – LeBron, Obama. For them, you may use the single word in some cases, the full name in others.

Just because names are in your story, however, doesn't mean you should use them as key words. If a person's name is not well-known, few folks are likely to search for it.

Alternatives: If you're writing about Ohio State football, what's the best term: OSU football, Buckeyes football or Ohio State football? Google.com/trends allows you to compare the relative frequency of different keywords over time. (In the search bar, type the words or phrases you want to compare, separated by commas.) Ohio State football is a much more popular search term than the others.

That doesn't mean you won't ever use the other terms. A significant number of people search for Buckeyes football, and you don't want to miss out on those. However, you'll give the greatest emphasis to the most popular term.

Combinations: In the example just above, proper nouns were combined with another word, football. That's a common way to appeal to specific searches. They work well for topics such as Ohio State football, which will come up again and again in searches.

For breaking news, it's not as easy. The best advice is to select one or two likely search terms and use them steadily, at least until better information is available. Newsrooms that are very serious about SEO employ people who use digital tools to figure out the most-used terms even as news is breaking.

Consistency: It will often be more important to be consistent in your use of search terms than to have selected the very best ones. In the wake of the terrorist attack on Paris in 2015, people looking for news might have typed in Paris attacks, Paris shootings, Paris terrorism, etc. Or they might have chosen attacks in paris, ISIS Paris attacks, ISIS Paris, and so on. (As it turns out, variations on "attacks" were the strongest.)

If each of a site's stories on the event used different terms, one of them might be a perfect match for a given search – but Google looks not only at individual pages but also at the site overall. With your site's bets spread all around the roulette table, your chances of winning on one bet are higher, but the payoff will be much better if you limit yourself to just a few.

Limits: To find the best fit for given search terms, algorithms have to try to screen out attempts to game the system. One game some sites tried, early on, was to overload their pages with key words – dozens of variations of Paris and attacks and shootings and ISIS and on and on. With so many options, the key words couldn't be stuffed into the story. Instead, they were stacked into an HTML pocket, usually labeled "keywords" or "tags," often invisible to regular users.

Algorithms began to ignore the overload, or even rate pages lower because of them. Bloggers still use the "keywords" or "tags" HTML category, but more wisely. For now, 10 key words is about the limit.

Using key words

The locations listed below should all be considered when you're producing an online story. SEO specialists have identified them as important. However, professional communicators must balance the advice of SEO experts with the need to deliver an interesting, informative package.

Must you, for example, include key words in every lede? That would tend to favor summary ledes. But we've already explained why those aren't the best choice for every story.

Write the best story you can, then examine it for SEO. If it's lacking in one area and you can fix it easily, do so. But don't throw away a perfectly good lede just to match this list.

Headlines: We covered this in its own chapter.

Ledes: Google's algorithm pays special attention to the first paragraph of a story, so you want at least one of your key words there.

Rest of the story: If you have key words you haven't gotten into the lede, work them in as close to the top as possible. It also helps to repeat key words throughout the story. For journalists, however, the best advice is to care most about writing an interesting, informative story, and only a little about making changes to increase the number of times key words are mentioned.

A word about story length: For several years, SEO experts recommended 250 words as a minimum length, based in part on the belief that Google would not consider shorter articles in the Google News results. More recently, Google has said length is not a factor. However, the shorter a story, the fewer opportunities to embed key words -- and the less satisfaction for an audience that wants the news. Several online sources now recommend a minimum length of 80 words.

Keyword/tag lists: Most blog-based platforms allow writers to type a list of words and phrases into a box labeled "keywords" or "tags." These may not be visible to the public, but they are presented to search engines.

Captions: If you have an image embedded in your post – and generally you should – it should include a caption that contains some relevant key words.

Image file names and alt tags: Google can't (yet) reliably determine the content of an image on sight. (Well, that's our guess. But technology is advancing scary fast.) It relies on the words attached to the image. The caption is one way of doing that, but it's not enough.

The name of the image file itself should contain one or more key words. (Some platforms will allow you to change this after you upload, but it's good practice to rename the files first.) IMG_435231.jpg means nothing to search engines; president-kennedy-shot.jpg does.

Online images can also have an alt tag, which will be invisible to site users unless the image fails to load or they're using a browser designed for the blind. Using key words in the alt tag not only improves SEO but is more likely to produce a more understandable description.

Internal links: If you're linking from one story on your site to another – and you should – you can increase the value of that link by attaching the link to a key word. For example, rather than "Click here for an interview with President Kennedy's bodyguard" (with "click here" being the linking words), "President Kennedy's bodyguard **describes the shooting**" is better.

Subheads: Algorithms may give slightly more attention to words in boldface or italics, on the assumption they're being emphasized for a reason. Rather than speckle your story with boldface, you may use subheads.

That's as simple as writing a short headline – regular type, but boldface – in the middle of the article. Different platforms and different site designs may have you use other coding for the same purpose.

Don't bother with subheads in short stories, though. Even in longer ones, they won't contribute a lot to the SEO potential of the post.

Links

Studies show most web users prefer pages that aren't dead ends. We've gotten used to being able to follow a story as deeply as we wish, linking from one story to another.

Search algorithms take that into account. Stories that link to further information will tend to do better than those that don't.

We talk about two kinds of links.

Internal ones point to pages on the same site. These add something to SEO; they tell the algorithm that the site has more to offer. They're also important for another reason: You want to keep users on your site as long as possible. More time on site means more exposure to ads, if you have them, and a greater likelihood the user will return.

External links point elsewhere. In the ancient days of print, some publications refused to mention their rivals by name. That attitude carried over to online, and news media thought linking to outside sites meant losing users.

However, if web users want more information and they can't find it on your site, they're going to go looking for it anyway. You would rather have them believe that if they start with you, they'll be guided to everything they need.

Specific pages: If you've written a story about a new academic department your university has added, link to the new department's home page. Linking instead to the university's home page will frustrate users.

Original sources: Take advantage of the ability to link users to the sources you used: news releases, research reports, arrest warrants, etc. Few users may click to read them, but that's not their only value. Just by showing your sources, you're subtly telling readers that you are confident you have interpreted those sources correctly.

How many? You may hear about formulas that require so many internal links, so many external ones, so many subheads for a "correct" online story. Here's a secret: Those formulas are only useful for keeping reporters, or students, in line. A correct online story should have as many internal and external links or subheads as it needs to serve the readers. If you have relevant articles on your site, link to them. If not, don't.

Avoid giving your articles measles, though. That's when almost every other word is attached to a link. It's distracting at best. At worst, it intimidates the readers and sends them away.

Using links

This is a typical URL for a specific web page: ...www.niemanlab.org/2016/07/how-3-publishers-plan-to-use-snap-chat-memories-to-improve-the-quality-and-shelf-life-of-their-output/

Just try cramming all that into your story without confusing the reader.

In general, you should never show the full URL to your audience. Instead, links should be coded into one or more words of your story. You've already seen plenty of these "embedded links" in this book.

The process for embedding links will differ depending on the software you're using to write your story. In Microsoft Word, you select the word or phrase, then right-click, select "Hyperlink" from the available commands and fill in the appropriate boxes.

Once you figure out the right process, the only other consideration is which words to use for the link. Forget the SEO considerations at this point; keep the audience in mind. You want to make it as obvious as possible to them what they'll get if they click the link. Take this sentence:

> Two men were shot Thursday in downtown Kent, police said; it was the second shooting there in two weeks.

You have two links to embed. One's a PDF of the police report about the Thursday shooting; the other's a story about the earlier one.

Embedding the PDF link in "Two men were shot" is OK. Embedding it in "police said" is better, because it hints at the source of the link. "Second shooting" would work for the older story.

Images

Photos, graphics or videos add value for your readers (presuming they're relevant). They also pay off in SEO.

Images embedded in a post will give the page a little extra boost in search algorithms. Even more important, they give you two more ways to hook users: A search engine may embed a thumbnail of the image in its regular results for keywords, or users may look specifically for images.

The presence of an image is far more important than details such as size or shape.

Some sites that fetishize images use a variety of stock photos – crime tape, police badges, etc. Whether you'll be expected to do that is up to your bosses. What we can say is that images specific to your story are better than generic ones.

Generative engine optimization

While SEO targets traditional search engine algorithms and SMO targets users on social media, GEO tries to take advantage of the quirks of artificial intelligence. AI can drive traffic, either through its use as an overlay on search engine results or through stories generated with AI that link to the sources it copied from.

Just as with SEO and SMO, legitimate questions can be asked about how far a news organization should go in altering its writing practices. But here, we'll just lay out some of the principles that people who study these things say produce stories that are more attractive to AI.

Keywords: What works for SEO works for GEO. Stories that contain words most commonly related to a topic will get more attention. Just don't go overboard. An article from Forbes recommended a "keyword density" of 1-2%.

Structure: "Schema" seems to be the way the cool kids talk about this for GEO. Part of this concept is about what's under the hood of your stories – coding, invisible to readers, that can label words as dates, locations and so on. But it's also being used to refer to what this textbook calls alternative story forms, such as FAQs or listicles, that break information up into chunks and use subheads or questions to make their purpose clear.

Have you see stories online that have just a short introduction but then use long subheads on each topic, rather than trying to transition smoothly from one to the next? That may be aimed at the way Google, at least, will place near the top of search results a box showing questions similar to the thing you actually searched for. Those are generated by AI, and carving a story up can make it easier for AI to identify chunks that could fit its format.

Similarly, using a bulleted list clarifies the structure of your information for AI and makes it simpler to borrow.

Authority: SEO depended on rough measures of how authoritative a web page was to determine its value: how many other pages linked to it, how much content on the overall site was relevant, and so on. AI also tries to rank authority, but may use more tools.

The Forbes article said this: "Instead of saying, 'Some people think exercise is good,' you might change it to, 'Experts strongly recommend exercise for a healthy lifestyle.' The second one sounds more authoritative and makes people trust the information more."

To a journalist, neither of those sentences would be completely satisfactory. Even if you use the word "experts," you're being vague. In this case, good GEO practice aligns with good journalism: Use reputable sources and clearly identify them. Use statistics and show where they come from.

Language: Most advice about GEO again aligns with good journalism: Be clear and concise. Use conversational language and mostly short sentences. But you have to balance this with the notion that more specific, often technical terms may fit what AI's looking for better. A key here is to keep in mind your intended audience. If you're writing about a topic that uses a glossary of technical terms, but you're aiming at a general audience, provide simple definitions of the words in your stories.

Over the years since the original material for this textbook was created, advice about how to craft stories to get more eyes has evolved. AI wasn't even a consideration at first; this section is a very recent addition. It's inevitable that this advice will continue to evolve as technology and audience behavior changes. While we've tried to make our advice as current and accurate as possible, we must also encourage you to be open to new advice.

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18.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Google users go past the first page less than 10 percent of the time.
- The strategies used to improve a page's rank in search results are collectively called "search engine optimization."
- You have to try to guess what people looking for stories like yours are most likely to ask Google.
- Key words -- which can be single words or phrases -- are the terms you think potential readers will type into the search bar. Proper nouns -- people, places, events and organizations -- are the most common keywords.
- You should be able to list these spots on a page where a reporter should try to insert keywords:
  - Headlines
  - Ledes
  - Rest of story
  - Image names
  - Alt tags
  - Captions
  - Tag lists
  - Internal links
  - Subheds
- Stories that link to further information will tend to do better than those that don't.
- Links should be relevant to the story and take readers to the specific page you're referring to. When possible, link to original sources.
- Images embedded in a post will give the page a little extra boost in search algorithms.
- Aggregation helps feed the beast.
- As with any news reporting, live coverage must pay attention to the audiences you're trying to reach.
- Some of your audience will know about the event only through your coverage; provide detail and description for them. Some are watching themselves; make yourself valuable by adding context and additional information. When possible, respond to those who want a conversation.
- Good live coverage starts long before the event.
- You must research your topic beforehand. Come prepared with links and information; know what's expected to happen and who will be involved.
- Provide comprehensive coverage.
- Your live reporting should provide a complete picture of the event -- complete enough to be used as notes for a story. Strong reporting will include all these elements. You should recognize and be able to describe them.

Intro	Links	Retweets
Quotes	Analysis	Responses
Paraphrases	Multimedia	Outro
Descriptions		

"Aggregation" refers to stories based mostly or solely on secondary sources -- what others have reported. You should be able to explain these elements of ethical aggregation:

Attribution	Image use	Linking
Summarizing		Quoting

- Single-source aggregation links to one outside source. The aggregation may consist of just one sentence. Multi-source aggregation compiles a variety of sources to tell a complete story.

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18.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 18.3.1

Select a topic that's in the news recently. Just using what you already know about the topic, compose two or three search questions or phrases that you think would get you relevant stories. Put those into your favorite search engine. Examine the results (not counting sponsored results/advertising).

Are they relevant? Looking back at what you put into the search engine, how are the key words in your queries displayed in the stories you were linked to?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

19: Social and Parasocial Media

19.1: Social Media

19.2: Parasocial media

19.3: Chapter Review

19.4: Optional Exercises

Why social media matter

Across all age groups, Americans get their news on digital devices far more than any other medium, according to a 2025 Pew Research Center survey. The younger someone is, the more likely they are to be using those devices to look at social media for their news.

Once upon a time, journalists had it easy. They knew audiences would come to them -- buy their newspapers, listen to their radio shows, watch their TV broadcasts. Now, journalists must go to the audiences.

Public relations professionals have always had to seek out audiences, but most often they could focus on a well-defined, easy-to-find group of journalists. The internet and social media have put the “public” in public relations more than ever before. PR pros, too, have to go where the public is.

These changes have pushed communications professionals into entanglements with the public that are fraught with complications. This chapter tries to prepare you for surviving those.

As the internet has made it easy for anyone to set up their own blog or podcast, many students are using those formats. They may be eager to use their voices, trying to make up for not having other published work, or exploring a topic they care about. While these formats may not create as direct a contact with the public as social media, they can involve "parasocial" relationships, in which members of the audience feel a close but one-sided connection.

Blogging and podcasting require some technical knowledge that we won't try to cover, but we can explain some basic principles.

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19.1: Social Media

Social media

Each form of social media has its own set of best practices, which shift and morph swiftly as technology changes and audiences evolve. Because this is a writing class, we'll be concerned mostly with using text.

Before we begin, a warning: Social media use rapidly evolves. Facebook was once the place to be; it got overtaken by Twitter (now X). Even more recently, especially among younger potential audiences, TikTok took over.

When this chapter was first compiled, hashtags were an important way to get traffic on Twitter. Now, according to the students in our classes, that's outdated. Hashtags are a big thing on TikTok and Instagram, but they're not just topic labels – they're commentary as well.

We won't try to keep up with all the ups and downs of particular platforms, so this advice is mostly general.

Uses of social media

In a traditional newsroom, journalists just produced news. It was up to other departments, such as circulation and marketing, to figure out how to get people to look at the news product. Individual reporters were invisible to the public in journalism's early years. It wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that the first regular reporting bylines appeared in the United Stated, and not until about a century later that they became the norm on stories.

Today, for many reasons, having a personal following could be important for reporters. For that reason, or because of pressure from their employers, they turn into promoters as well.

Building a brand

If you're using social media to report news (or promote yourself), you want to reach as many people as possible. The best way to do that is to build an army of followers, which you do one post at a time.

Post consistently. Accounts that are active regularly are more likely to attract followers. This is one reason it's a good idea to focus on just one or two platforms.

Use links. In most cases, a main goal of using social media will be to push people to your newsroom's site. In addition, some studies have shown that tweets with links, for one example, are much more likely to be retweeted.

Use (interesting) images. Several studies have shown higher engagement for tweets with attached images -- as long as those images were relevant (not just your news outlet's logo) and nongeneric (not just a stock shot of a gavel for a story about a court case). And, of course, platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are image-focused.

Provide real content. Posting in full sentences (subject, verb, object) seems to get more response than just labels or phrases. Similarly, a TikTok that's just a tease to a story, without providing actual information, is less likely to pull in readers.

Selling a story

Posting consistently means providing variety -- some reporting news as it happens, some pointing to news that others have broken. Part of the idea of building a big social media following, however, is about using that following to increase traffic to your employer's website.

Best practices when posting to promote a specific story:

Don't beg: "Please read my latest story ..." is wasting words and sounds unprofessional. (Some social media experts do advise, however, using a "command" word such as "read" -- "Read what happened at ...")

Don't just copy your headline (or just read off your lede): The point of a promotional post is to intrigue the audience enough to click a link. Sometimes a headline can do that, but not always. Be open to alternatives, such as selecting an enticing quote (with attribution), or using a tease that hints at the story without giving away as much as your headline does. Writing for video, such as TikTok, is different in some ways than writing for print, too. It's more conversational, for one thing.

Don't shout: We assume you know not to type in ALL CAPS. Exclamation points can be almost as bad. Some students slap them onto every sentence in their tweets. **No dull sentence was made exciting by punctuation.** Nor -- for straight news -- should you try to jazz up your TikTok videos with literal shouting or flashy special effects. For stories that you want the audience to take seriously, your presentation should be serious.

Keep it concise: People know how links works. You don't have to spell things out. Say the main content of your post is this sentence: "Proposed law could change the way OurTown residents commute to work." You want to include a link, too. That can be as simple as pasting the link in right after the sentence. Or you might add a short command, such as "Read more at," in front of the link. What you don't need to do is get more verbose: "You can read the full story at ..."

Promote the story, not the event: Remember, you're a journalist. It's not your job to draw more people to the Autumn Festival or cheer on the school team. "Festival starts at 8 p.m. today; be there!" promotes the event. "Full schedule of tonight's festival" promotes your story.

Telling a story

You won't build much of a brand if you don't have original reporting to promote. Social media can be used to deliver that reporting, not just promote it.

- In another chapter(opens in new window), we discuss live posting, which can be done on a social media platform or a website.
- In some coverage areas, especially sports, social media are often used to post the first bits of news, even before there's a story on a site to link to. For example, ESPN's Adam Schefter is known for breaking stories on X. The rush to be the first can be risky, tempting reporters to disregard traditional safeguards such as having multiple sources.
- Some journalists have explored innovative ways to use social media to deliver the news, such as spreading a story out over multiple posts.

The ugly side of social media

Social media, including comments below stories on sites that allow them, let professional communicators truly communicate with the public. Reporters who pay attention to social media discover story ideas, find out about errors they've made and figure out which parts of their stories made sense and which were confusing. Public relations people gain new ways to reach consumers, fix problems before they balloon out of control and respond to false stories.

We think social media improve journalism and public relations. However, we've also spent time in the trenches, battling trolls and keyboard commandos. Were we called a communist? Check. Fascist? Check. Too stupid? Too condescending? Story is too confusing? Story is too simplistic? All of those at once.

It will happen to you. Even if you choose not to engage with your audience in social media, people will talk about you and your work there. Learn from our experience.

3 Don'ts

Let's start with the things you absolutely want to avoid.

Don't respond to ragers

Set some boundaries. You do not have to respond to those who cross the line. Maybe your boundaries rule out curses, or name-calling, or any attacks on you personally rather than your work. All those are reasonable limits.

Professional communicators should engage their audiences, but they do not have to engage with those who want to fight rather than talk civilly.

Don't fight fire with fire

If you set your boundaries loosely, letting in those who rant and rage, don't respond in kind. You're giving them what they want. Their goal is not to have a rational discussion; it's to bait you into screaming. Some do it just for kicks. Others are setting you up; they'll save your worst moments to use against you later.

Don't give a third chance

A common trolling technique is to ask the same question over and over. They will ignore your responses, pretend to misinterpret them or insist that some minor element you didn't mention means you're not answering. They'll subtly reword without changing the actual thing being asked.

The confusion can be legitimate, but even if it is, the discussion will quickly become unproductive and annoy others in the audience. Answer questions within your boundaries once or twice from the same user. If it seems the user won't give up, you might allow a third with a response that adds some concluding note: "I've answered your question as well as I can. Anything else?"

4 Dos

Now, here's how to approach it the right way.

Respond to the audience, not the poster

Trolls want to make things personal, to get right in your face (or screen). The more you respond to them directly, the angrier you'll get and the worse you'll look to everyone else.

Whenever you respond to someone on social media, talk past the user to the whole audience. Rather than "you already know," say "As we've reported." Rather than "you should go to," "those with similar problems can go to."

While it's polite and friendly to mention a user's name in a response, even that can lead you down a slippery slope. Distancing can help.

> BAD: @crappybadboy, the race of the suspect wasn't relevant in this story.
> BETTER: @crappybadboy, thanks for the question. The Bugle doesn't identify the race of suspects unless ...

Be safe

Think about how much you want your professional audience to know about your personal life. Do you want readers who follow you on Facebook to know what your children look like and where they go to school? Do you want readers who follow you on X to know where you've gone on vacation and when you've got the flu?

If you still want to use social media to connect with friends and family, set up separate accounts and keep your private ones private. You might also learn from professionals such as doctors, nurses and teachers, who often use pseudonyms for their personal accounts so they can't be found through searches.

Be polite

Thanking readers for their questions, even complimenting them, builds good will. Don't be robotic about it; vary your responses and write what seems natural to you.

Because it can be hard to perceive the emotion behind words on a screen, take time to reread before you post. For example, addressing the user by name may be polite, but it could come across as aggressive.

Stay in your lane

If you're a news reporter, respond as one. Don't express opinions. If you're the spokesperson for a company, respond as that. Don't take criticism personally or drag your politics into your work.

In this video, sports reporter Tony Jones talks about the plusses and minuses of social media use. This video was recorded years ago, before Twitter was X and when having 12,000 followers while covering an NBA team was solid. He's moved on since then, and has almost 70,000 followers on X. (Somethings don't change that much. X, even more than when it was Twitter, can still be a cesspool.)



Video 19.1.1: Tony Jones: Social media and reporting | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript

Clean your past

Have you used any form of social media before? Not just the big ones, but anything where you shared your thoughts with others online? Consider everything, including theoretically anonymous platforms such as Yik Yak.

Even if you posted anonymously or used a pseudonym, someone may be able to connect you to those old posts. If you're going to be a professional communicator, you'll be in the public eye to some extent. That means someone will probably try to dig into your past.

Is it fair to hold an adult to account for something dumb they posted when they were 13? Good question, but not the right one to ask. Fair or not, if someone is angry at you, your reporting or your employer, they very well may dredge up those dumb posts.

Our advice? Be proactive. Go in now and wipe out those old posts. Kill old accounts. And promise yourself that, going forward, you will post only content you'd be willing to be held to account for publicly.

Are we overreacting? Consider the case of Alexi McCammond.

In 2021, when she was 27 years old, she was selected to be the editor of Teen Vogue, then known for being a strong platform for political news aimed at girls and young women. In the few years since she'd graduated from college, she had rapidly made a name for herself as a political reporter. Being selected as Teen Vogue's editor so young just added to her already strong resume.

She never got to actually be editor, though. Quickly after her appointment was announced, Teen Vogue staff and others petitioned for her to be rejected. Her critics pointed to admittedly racist social media posts she had made 10 years early, in her mid teens. For example, she had complained about a grade she got on a school assignment and blamed it on a "stupid Asian T.A. [teaching assistant]." Such posts, her opponents said, made her unfit for Teen Vogue's ethos.

But not only were these tweets a decade old, not only were they from when she was in her teens, she had already apologized publicly for them in 2019. That didn't stop someone from reposting them all in 2021 and implying they reflected her current opinions.

McCammond, under pressure, gave up her job.

Maybe, someday, society will adjust to the way people are now online starting early in life, and how anything posted online can be around forever. But that someday is not today.

We are not defending comments that suggest one group is "less than" another because of skin color, ethnic origin or any other irrelevant factor. But, having come of age in a time where almost nothing we did ever went into any kind of permanent record, we sympathize with those who have outgrown their youthful indiscretions but can't escape the online evidence. So we urge you: Purge your past. Let your online history began now, when you're more like the person you will be for the rest of your life.

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19.2: Parasocial media

Parasocial media

Using social media such as TikTok usually means wading directly into contact with your audience. Social media users will expect you to respond to them. And you may feel compelled to get at least a little personal in your posts, because that's what most of the users around you are doing.

Blogging and podcasting are a step away. Instead of the many-to-many nature of social media, these are mostly one-to-many. Feedback is possible through comments, if you allow them, and email, if you give it out, but it's not as direct a conversation.

Should you self-publish?

Anyone can start a blog. Some online platforms make it free and easy, shielding you from the coding behind the scenes. Setting up a podcast is more complicated, but again there are platforms offering free space and easy tools. So why wouldn't you put yourself out there?

Do you want to?

If your only reason to start a blog is that it seems as if everyone else in your class is doing that, you're just responding to peer pressure. While a blog or podcast can be useful when you're marketing yourself to employers, they're not necessities. And while those platforms can be built into financially sustaining endeavors, not everyone is cut out to be an entrepreneur.

Do you need an editor?

If you're going to start on your own, you may not have anyone reviewing your posts or episodes before they go live. Your writing flaws, verbal stumbles and editing mistakes will be on display for the world. Are you ready for that?

Up to now, the audience for your work has likely been limited. Only your instructors and editors saw your raw product. Readers, viewers and listeners, if you had any others, probably got versions that had been edited.

While many people may be more forgiving of flaws in new blogs or podcasts not coming from mainstream outlets, going online also exposes you to hypercritical people and out-and-out trolls.

Do you want potential employers to see this?

When we were applying for journalism jobs, we assembled "clips" -- a few samples of the best stories we'd had published -- to send to potential employers. That's all they had to judge us by. You don't have the luxury of having control over which of your work employers can find. They can and will search online.

If you believe you can create a blog or podcast you'd be proud to have those employers find, great! But that will take effort. Don't start a blog or podcast if you're not committed, and just post any old thing. Remember, online, things last forever.

Parasocial for pay

The questions above assumed you were going into this venture on your own. But newsrooms and public relations departments create blogs and podcasts, too. As one of the youngest people in the building, your bosses may assume you know all about these "new" media, so you'll get tapped. Or you may volunteer as a way to carve out a place for yourself and get noticed.

The advice that follows applies to everyone trying parasocial media, whether on their own or for an employer. The main difference: If you're doing this on someone else's dime, you should be even more careful to take the right steps. Start your own blog and give up after a few weeks and hardly anyone will notice. You can delete your posts and go on with life. Do the same thing as a PR person working for, say, a retailer, and you've flopped much more publicly.

Getting serious

If blogging or podcasting will just be an experiment, go right ahead. But if you want your project to be more, if you want to build an audience, it's smart to take the right steps.

Pick a topic

In ancient days when people read newspapers, many young journalists aspired to be general columnists, with the freedom to write about whatever they wished. Having a dedicated space on a regular schedule, columnists could attract readers who just liked their style or their opinions.

We've heard students talk about blogging or podcasting in the same way, as just a platform for them to show off their overall talent. But newspaper columnists had the advantage of their surroundings. With their dedicated space on the same page on the same days every week, they'd have easy access to building readership.

In the vast sea of blogs and podcasts, such launching pads don't exist. The substitute is fame. If people already know you from radio or TV or the movies, if you had a following as a comedian or a politician, you have a built-in base of support for whatever you want to talk about.

You, starting out on your own in the vast sea of blogs and podcasts, have no easy way to attract and hold the attention of anyone beyond your immediate circle of friends and family. Just being a good writer or storyteller won't be enough. You need a niche, a purpose you can sum up in a short phrase. One of our favorite podcasts, "Sawbones," uses the slogan "A marital tour of misguided medicine." That summed up its original focus: A doctor and her husband discussing the dumb things done under the guise of medicine before science got involved. The show has evolved; its discussions range more widely across medical topics now. But when it was beginning, having that clear mission meant potential listeners could quickly understand what it was about and what they'd get week after week.

Research the market

You should know your competition. Search for existing content similar to your plans. This will be easier for podcasts than blogs, because you can go to Apple Podcasts, Spotify or similar apps and search by keyword. Finding blogs will take more effort, combining general searches with more creative investigation, such as following the social media of key influencers to see what they link to.

One goal is to find an empty niche: A particular spin on your topic that no one else is covering.

Set goals

Your chances of building a following will be higher if your potential audience knows what to expect -- how often you'll post new content, for example. Consistency builds loyalty. Think about elements like these:

- How long will each piece of content be? Will your podcast be 10 minutes long or an hour? Will your blog posts be about 250 words or 1,000? No one answer fits all.
    - Don't commit yourself to a hour-long weekly podcast unless you can be sure you'll have the time and resources to fill it with interesting content. Think about your audience, too. Podcasts of about a half-hour seem to do well because they fit into the length of commutes to work, for example. If your audience is college students, they may not have that kind of guaranteed time in isolation.
    - Some advice online will tell you 1,500 to 2,500 words is best for blog posts. Yikes! That's like a six- to 10-page term paper. Others recommended under 500 words. What do we say? Again, it depends mostly on what you can consistently produce and what your audience will accept. We'd lean toward the shorter end if you're doing this as a side project.
- How often will you post? Once a week is a good starting point -- and the same day every week. You could try an every-other-week schedule for a podcast, but we wouldn't go much longer than that.
- How long will you post? Remember that it usually takes time to build an audience. If you plan a blog series or podcast that will only last five or 10 episodes, it may be over before your potential audience even knows it exists. Once you've gotten experience and a reputation, limited runs could be fine. Starting out, plan to keep going indefinitely.
- What kind of language will you use? Think about your potential audience. Do you want parents to listen to your podcast along with their children? Then you don't want your show tagged with an "adult content" label because you work blue. Are you aiming for an audience of professionals in a given field? Then you want to use technical terms that show you're one of them.

Build a backlog

We weren't assigned our first class to teach until a week before it began. With two 90-minute sessions every week, we were scrambling just to keep up. All too often, we'd be desperately trying to think up things to cover while we were driving to school. Teaching became much easier (and, we think, much better for the students) once we had more advance notice and more material to reuse. Having several weeks' worth of lectures and in-class assignments planned before the course even began was so, soooo much better.

You will be in the same predicament as we were during that first course, if you don't do something about it. Don't launch your blog or podcast until you have at least three or four weeks' worth of content already prepared. Push yourself to keep that far ahead.

Yes, you can always scramble one week to do something timely. Or you can give yourself a one-week break if you get the flu. And maybe you'll get good enough that you can reliably get out one episode a week, always on deadline. But in the beginning, give yourself a break.

Promote!

Amid the hundreds of thousands of active podcasts, and the far more blogs, yours will be lost in the crowd unless you find ways to make people notice it.

If you're doing this for an employer, of course, you'll have help, including promotion through their existing content. But at the very least, they'll want you to particpate in some way. Some ways you can get the word out:

Social media: In the first part of this chapter, we discussed how to build a following on social media(opens in new window). Again, if you've got an employer, you can take advantage of their social media accounts. If you're doing this on your own, spend some time trying to build a following **before** you launch your blog or podcast.

- Also use social media to make contacts. Follow people who are already posting on your topic. Engage with them. Just don't be a noodge, a pest. Don't bombard them with links to your work. If you have an episode that's directly relevant to something they're posting about, that's OK.
- Use psychology. Asking someone for a favor is often a better way to draw them close than offering to do a favor for them, oddly enough. Consider writing to some of the people you follow and asking for advice.
- Be equally circumspect about leveraging online communities such as subreddits or Facebook groups. If you just show up to push your content, you'll make more enemies than friends.
- Adapt your main content to social media. For example, create short TikToks sampling a bit of your latest blog or podcast.

Connections: Even if you mostly produce content with just your voice, look for ways to bring in guests occasionally. They'll be likely to do some promotion for you by telling their followers about it.

Encouragement: If you've spent much time on YouTube, you've seen videos with the hosts encouraging you to smash that "like" button and subscribe. It's often done so often and so crudely that it's a joke. But such calls to action do wake up some of the audience. Use whatever tools your blog or podcast software allows to give the audience ways to ensure they'll be alerted to new content, and let the audience know those exist.

Engage: We've warned you about the dangers of social media(opens in new window), including responding to online comments. In addition to worrying about nasty trolls, as the manager of your own comment section you'll have to worry about spammers filling it up with job scams and such. Fortunately, software tools exist to help you fence some out; learn what your software provides and use it.

It's work, but it's worth it. Especially in the early days, when your audience is small, responding to online comments or email will build loyalty. And loyal readers or listeners are likely to tell others.

Advertising? You'll likely start getting solicitations as soon as you start posting to buy ads or other ways to push your content to an audience. Our advice? Move those to your trash. The potential benefits for a new blogger or podcaster aren't worth it.

Podcasting particulars

Besides all the elements above, consider a few other things before you launch a podcast.

Learn and practice

Social media users are somewhat forgiving of low production values. But if you want someone to subscribe to your podcast, the audio must be clear. That requires good mics and editing software, along with the know-how to use them. You'll want to keep background noise to a minimum, so having a reasonably soundproof recording space will help (some people start out in a closet).

Even if your podcast sounds great to you when played back on your computer, it may surprise you when you upload it to hosting platforms, which may automatically apply some audio editing.

We encourage you to take at least one relevant class to prepare yourself. Learning how audio works best and practicing recording and editing will save you a lot of headaches when you start putting podcast episodes together.

What kind of 'cast?

Most blogs are solo efforts, and the blogger just ... writes. Podcasts come in many flavors. Which would work best for your resources and topic? Some choices:

Interview: Even if you know a lot about your topic, hearing just your opinions and your voice may not be enough. Bringing in a guest for every episode expands the information you provide your audience.

To make an interview podcast work, of course, first you need guests. If you've experienced obstacles just getting an interview for a news story, multiply that when you're asking them to appear on a podcast. Where will you interview them? If you do it in the field, can you find a suitable quiet location and set up your mics? If you do it by phone or online, how will you get good audio? One solution is to have them use the recording function on their phone and then send you the file, but that means mixing it with the audio of your side of the conversation.

"Death, Sex and Money" with Anna Sale is a good example of a podcast that usually relies on one-on-one interviews.

Conversation: Podcasts without guests often rely on multiple hosts to provide a variety of voices. Even though it should *sound* like a conversation, though, some scripting is still needed so you know how you'll split up the story.

Just know that sometimes, 1+1 can equal zero. In other words: If neither host has done reporting or research, a conversation between two people who don't really know what they're talking about isn't interesting.

"Stuff You Should Know" with Josh Clark and Chuck Bryant has been going strong since 2008 as a conversational podcast.

Storytelling: Podcasts can simply provide great audio reporting using any or all of the techniques covered in the Multimedia Essentials chapter. Combining narration, soundbites, music and other sounds to tell a story, either complete in one episode or spread out over several, will help you improve your reporting skills.

This kind of podcast takes much more preparation, scripting and editing than the others, but the end result can be much richer.

The first season of the "Serial" podcast, which ignited a trend in audio storytelling, remains a great example. For continuing excellence, "Criminal" with Phoebe Judge is worth a listen.

Identity

When you set up a blog, you'll create a template that each new post uses. It will show the name of the blog and other common elements. For your podcasts, you should have a similarly consistent identity package, but it will have to be added to each new episode.

At a minimum, this should include the name of the podcast and your name. Other elements to consider:

- A slogan that sums up what the podcast is about.
- A short music clip that's the theme for your podcast. (Be mindful of copyright!)
- A list of credits if other people also work on the podcast.
- A blurb telling people where they can find and subscribe.
- Contact information, such as an email address.
- A closing thank you to the audience for listening.

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19.3: Chapter Review

Key points

- Consistent posting on a set schedule is the best way to get loyal followers.
- Images and links multiply your audience.
- Posts with those elements are more likely to be reposted.
- Don't just copy-and-paste your story's headline into social media; craft posts to match each platform's characteristics.
- Your social media behavior will affect the audience's opinion of you and your employer.
- Don't get into online fights. Talk past your critics, aiming at the whole audience. Stay in your lane: If you're a news reporter, don't post opinions. If you're a public relations representative, remember you're speaking for the whole organization, not yourself.
- As you establish your professional online presence, clear your history of posts from your past.
- Before you start a blog or podcast, answer these questions:
  - Are you doing this because you have something to say, or just because your peers are?
  - Are you ready to post content you will be proud to let future employers see?
  - Do you have a specific topic in mind?
  - Do you know how your content will fit with what's already out there?
- Build a backlog of content before you start posting.
- Work at promoting your content; don't just wait for followers to find you.
- If you choose to do a podcast, make sure you are technically ready.

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19.4: Optional Exercises

Exercise 19.4.1

Your instructor will introduce you to a blogging platform, explaining the elements of a post.

Following those instructions, create a blog post. Use the information from throughout this textbook to fill in all the spots, such as a headline and a list of key words (which may be called "tags" or something else). Add a photo, keeping in mind the guidelines about alt text. d

Exercise 19.4.2

Using appropriate terms in a search engine, find social media users with large followings. Selecting two or three from that list, analyze their posting history over the last six months or so.

Compare what you find to the guidelines in this chapter. How frequently do they post? How would you describe their content? How do they interact with their followers?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

20: Grammar Essentials

20.1: Grammar Essentials
20.2: Chapter Review
20.3: Optional Exercises

Why grammar matters

Writing well requires proficiency at three levels. First, you must know and be able to apply standard American English rules governing such things as correct spelling, the proper use of commas and when to choose “who” vs. “whom.” These rules are the same in all, or almost all, collections of writing styles -- APA, MLA, Associated Press, etc. Second, you must learn the specific rules of AP style, which may be different from those you’ve learned for other writing. Finally, you must write with the reader in mind -- being concise and clear, putting the most interesting or important information first, using quotes well.

You may think you already know basic grammar. Most of you are taking this course at least in part because you’ve done well in English classes or teachers have praised your writing. However, those teachers may not have been as concerned with grammatical precision as this course's professors and your future employers are. Even if your grammar skills are strong, you probably have one or two bad habits.

The quality of your grammar and spelling affects the credibility of your writing. As the comments sections on news sites have taught us, readers are quick to spot errors and likely to see them as signs of laziness, sloppiness or incompetence in general.

In short: Good writing matters.

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20.1: Grammar Essentials

Grammar

In France, the Académie Française officially rules over the French language. It determines what words are proper or improper and how grammar works. Those who study linguistics know that language doesn't really work that way. And, indeed, the way French people talk can vary a lot from what the academy considers proper.

In the United States, we don't even have an official language, let alone an official academy devoted to telling us how to use that language. So how can we advise you on proper grammar? In this textbook, we divvy it up three ways -- basic grammar, AP style and advice about writing gracefully.

In this chapter, we cover guidelines that are generally agreed -- by most style guides, by most textbooks, by most editors, by most teachers. It's a baseline for professional communication. We're not trying to tell you how to talk or text your friends.

Punctuation

Some people think paying attention to periods, commas and the like is so unimportant that they refer to marking such errors as “flyspecking.” Professional communicators want to be precise.

Quotation marks

American English has double quotation marks in primary uses and single quotation marks in secondary ones. In other words, if you want to set off one or more words -- direct quotations (word for word what someone said or wrote), song titles, unfamiliar words or so on -- they should be wrapped in double quotes “like this.”

Single quotation marks are only used when you nest one thing inside another. See the difference in these two examples:

> His favorite poem is “Chicago” by Carl Sandburg.
>
> “My favorite poem is ‘Chicago’ by Carl Sandburg,” he said.

This principle applies no matter why you’re using quotation marks: double quotes first; single quotes only if the word or phrase is already inside a set of double quotes.

Periods, commas & quotation marks

When a word or phrase in quotes ends with a period or comma, that punctuation must always come before the closing quotation mark.

> BAD: “My favorite poet is Carl Sandburg”, he said.
> BAD: He said his favorite poet is “Carl Sandburg”.
> BAD: “My favorite poem is ‘Chicago’,” he said. (The comma does come before the double quotation marks, but not before the additional one around the name of the poem.)
> BETTER: “My favorite poet is Carl Sandburg,” he said.
> BETTER: He said his favorite poet is “Carl Sandburg.”
> BETTER: “My favorite poem is ‘Chicago,’” he said.

Attribution

“Attribution” is how journalists refer to the part of a sentence that tells you where the information came from. In the sentence “He said his horse lost a shoe,” the words “he said” are the attribution.

The punctuation rules governing attribution depend on where the attribution appears in the sentence.

At the end: If attribution comes at the end of the sentence, it must always be preceded by a comma and followed by a period.

> The horse lost a shoe, he said.
>
> “My horse lost a shoe,” he said.
>
> “My horse lost a shoe,” he said. “Now it can’t gallop.”

Note in the last example, the attribution comes in the middle of the entire quote, but at the end of the quote's first sentence. Thus, it takes a comma before and a period after. (How can you tell if the attribution is at the end of a sentence or in the middle? That's covered in the section below titled "Compound sentences.")

Middle: If attribution comes in the middle of a sentence, it always takes commas on either side.

> The horse lost a shoe, he said, and cannot gallop.
>
> "My horse lost a shoe," he said, "and cannot gallop."

The second comma is important because some sentences can have different meanings depending on its presence or absence. Compare these two:

> His horse lost a shoe, he said, in a panicked gallop.
>
> His horse lost a shoe, he said in a panicked gallop.

In the first sentence, the horse was running wild when it lost a shoe. In the second, the equestrian spoke as he or his words were racing past the listener.

Beginning: Finally, if attribution comes at the beginning of a sentence, punctuation depends on whether what follows is a direct quote (word for word what the speaker said, remember?) or a paraphrase. Before a direct quote, use a comma; before a paraphrase, no punctuation.

> He said, "My horse lost a shoe."
>
> He said his horse lost a shoe.

Redundancy: Whether attribution comes at the beginning, middle or end, every direct quote (anything from a short phrase to one or more paragraphs) should have one and only one attribution directly attached to it. (This rule changes when you're quoting dialogue -- a back-and-forth conversation.)

> BAD: "I am ready to go."
> BAD: "I am ready to go," Smith said. "The car is gassed up," he said.

Although there are two sentences here, they form one complete quotation. Only one attribution is correct.

> BETTER: "I am ready to go," he said.
> BETTER: "I am ready to go," Smith said. "The car is gassed up."

Combos: When you combine a direct quote and a paraphrase in the same paragraph, attribution can be awkward.

> BAD: "I am ready to go." He said the car was gassed up.
> BAD: He said the car was gassed up. "I am ready to go."
> BETTER, but: "I am ready to go," he said, and the car was gassed up.
> BETTER, but: He said the car was gassed up and he was "ready to go."

In the first "better, but" example, it's unclear whether the attribution applies to the paraphrase as well as the direct quote. In the second, the grammar is fine, but the direct quote is chopped down to a small fragment. The most elegant solution is to commit to either a complete direct quotation or write it all as a paraphrase.

> BEST: "I am ready to go," he said. "The car is gassed up."
> BEST: He said he was ready to go and the car was gassed up.

Caboose: One last bad example: Call it the "caboose quote." That's when you tack a direct quote onto the end of a sentence, joining them with a comma.

> BAD: He said he was ready to go, "The car is gassed up."
> BAD: He likes many kinds of fruit, "Orange is my favorite."

Even though the first example includes the word "said," it doesn't count as attribution for the quote that follows because "he was ready to go" is a complete sentence that must end with a period. The best way to fix a caboose quotation is to split the sentences apart. (Sneak preview of a later chapter: When you use a direct quote, put it in its own paragraph.)

BETTER: He said he was ready to go.
"The car is gassed up," he said.

BETTER: He likes many kinds of fruit.
"Orange is my favorite," he said.

Compound sentences

A compound sentence hitches two (or more) sentence units together. (An English teacher may have referred to the sentence units as "independent clauses." Same difference.) For example, "Ed cried" contains a subject (Ed) and a verb (cried), which is all that's required for a complete sentence. "Mary laughed" is also a complete sentence. You could keep them separate:

Ed cried. Mary laughed.

Sometimes, though, you want to show a close relationship between such sentences. You can tie them together into a compound sentence:

Ed cried, and Mary laughed.

Ed cried; Mary laughed.

The first example uses what's called a "coordinating conjunction" -- "and," in this case -- to make the connection. There are only seven coordinating conjunctions. And that's the last time this book will use the term. Instead, let's call them FANBOYS, because that mnemonic helps us remember the seven:

For
And
Nor
But
Or
Yet
So

If you use one of the FANBOYS to form a compound sentence, it must* be preceded by a comma.

Haki went to the store, but Kesha stayed home.

You may go home, or you may come with me.

The comma and the FANBOYS member must go together. Using just one or the other is wrong.

BAD: Haki went to the store but Kesha stayed home.
BAD: Haki went to the store, Kesha stayed home.

The other way to join two complete sentences into a compound sentence is to use a semicolon. In that case, you cannot use one of the FANBOYS.

BETTER: Haki went to the store; Kesha stayed home.
BETTER: The Democrats lost the election; their criticism of the Republican Congress did not sway voters.

Earlier in this chapter, you were told attribution in the middle of a quote is punctuated differently depending on whether the attribution comes in between two complete sentences or in the middle of a single sentence. The existence of compound sentences may confuse you about how to apply that rule. In general, if attribution comes in between two sentences joined with one of the FANBOYS, treat it as a single compound sentence. If the FANBOYS aren't used, treat it as two discrete sentences.

"Haki went to the store," he said, "but Kesha stayed home."

"Haki went to the store," he said. "Kesha stayed home."

Keep in mind that the FANBOYS are the only words that allow you to use the comma-conjunction link. A common mistake is to try to apply the rule with other words:

BAD: Haki went to the store, however, Kesha stayed home.
BETTER: Haki went to the store; however, Kesha stayed home.

Compound sentences should be used only when the individual elements are closely related. Even then, keeping the two sentences separate is fine. Compound sentences are commonly overused. The longer you make a sentence, the more likely you are to lose track of what you're writing and commit grammar and punctuation errors.

Finally, be aware of the distinction between compound sentences, in which both units have at least a subject and a verb of their own, and other forms where two or more clauses share a subject or both a subject and a verb.

Haki went to the store and bought a pie.

Haki ate a biscuit and a muffin.

In the first example, "Haki" is the subject of both verbs. In the second, "a biscuit" and "a muffin" are both objects of "Haki ate." You should be able to see the difference between those sentences and these:

Haki went to the store, and Kesha bought a pie.

Haki ate a biscuit, and Kesha ate a pie.

* Many writers consider it acceptable to skip the comma before one of the FANBOYS if the two sentence units being joined are both very short, so "Ed cried and Mary laughed" would be OK. Using the comma in that case, though, is never wrong.

Appositive phrases

Rather than try to explain in grammatical terms what an appositive phrase is, look at these examples and figure it out.

The president of the club, Edie Longfellow, gavelled the meeting to order.

The car, a Ford Fiesta, was severely damaged.

Mikal Thompson, the first contestant, rapped about final exams.

Ohio's governor, John Kasich, did poorly in the GOP presidential primaries.

In every sentence, the start of the sentence contains a pair of appositives -- nouns or noun phrases that refer to the same thing.

He instead gave the trophy to **the runner-up, Kristal Olesen.**

The top gainer in the stock market was **Apple, the computer maker.**

The thieves stole **the athlete's shoes, a pair of Nikes.**

In the examples above, the appositives come at the end of the sentence; the same principle applies. Either one of the pair of appositives could be deleted while leaving behind a complete, grammatically correct sentence.

The punctuation rule for appositives is simple: The second member of the pair must be surrounded by punctuation -- either two commas or a comma before and a period after.

One tricky part is distinguishing an appositive pair from a noun preceded by a title. Look at the sentences below and try to figure out why some use commas and others don't.

Sheriff Thom McAn arrested the alleged thieves.

The sheriff, Thom McAn, arrested the alleged thieves.

Franklin County Sheriff Thom McAn arrested the alleged thieves.

Franklin County's sheriff, Thom McAn, arrested the alleged thieves.

Kent State University President Beverly Warren played volleyball last week.

Kent State University's president, Beverly Warren, played volleyball last week.

The Kent State University president, Beverly Warren, played volleyball last week.

Political science major Andrew Nowak was named valedictorian.

A political science major, Andrew Nowak, was named valedictorian.

When an article (a, the, that, etc.) or a possessive begins the first phrase, you've got appositives. Without those, it's a title plus a noun, and you skip the commas

The other distinction comes into play when one of the phrases is more specific than the other, but there's no article at the start. Consider a woman who has two brothers, Abe and Zeno, and one sister, Ione. "My sister" and "Ione" both refer to the same person. "My brother," though, could mean either Abe or Zeno. The punctuation is different. This is a tricky one; it requires some knowledge of relationships.

"**My brother Abe** is older than I am," she said. "**My brother Zeno** is younger."

"**My sister, Ione,** is a year younger," she said.

Another example: Donald Trump has been married three times, to Ivana, Marla and, currently, Melania. He has several children, but only one of them is from his current marriage. Thus:

Trump's ex-wife Marla has stayed out of the public eye.

Trump's wife, Melania, stayed in New York with their son, Barron.

That/which

Professional writing maintains (at least for now) a distinction between "that" and "which" to introduce clauses. The difference will be discussed later in this chapter. For punctuation purposes, you only need to know this: Put a comma before "which"; no comma before "that."

He sold the dog that barked all night.

He sold the dog, which barked all night.

Comma chaos

Pity the comma. No other piece of punctuation is so abused, both underused and overused. Some writing instructors have given up trying to teach the rules of comma use; they tell students to put a comma wherever they would pause when reading a sentence aloud. That is not (so far) the standard for professional writing.

Much of this section has already been taken up with rules for comma use in common situations. To finish the discussion of punctuation, let's look at more cases where writers either skip needed commas or add them unnecessarily.

City and state: As you'll be told in the next chapter, AP style requires the use of a state name after the names of most towns and smaller cities. The state name must be surrounded by punctuation.

BAD: He went from Ottumwa, Iowa to Chicago.
BETTER: He went from Ottumwa, Iowa, to Chicago.
Also proper: He went from Chicago to Ottumwa, Iowa.

Date and year: A similar rule applies when a specific date, such as Oct. 4, is followed by a year.

BAD: On July 3, 2014 the company broke ground on its new plant.
BETTER: On July 3, 2014, the company broke ground on its new plant.

Direct address: When people or things being spoken to are called out in a sentence, the reference to them is surrounded by punctuation. (Where the direct address comes at the start of the sentence, the period ending the preceding sentence serves as one bookend.)

"Dad, you're the greatest," she said.

People, we have got to get our act together.

Rover, come here!

Here, boy.

"Yes, officer, I know I was speeding," he said.

Introductory phrases: In most cases, a comma is needed after an introductory clause for clarity. (This does NOT apply when using one of the FANBOYS conjunctions at the start of a sentence.)

Yes, we have no bananas.

However, he sailed twice yesterday.

During the last four years, the club never had more than 10 members.

If/then: Many writing guides agree that an if/then sentence requires a comma between the two parts, even if the word “then” isn’t used.

If he comes home, then I will leave.

If it rains tomorrow, we won’t play baseball.

Unneeded commas: It’s impossible to list all the places commas aren’t needed, of course. But such errors often fall into common categories. For example, a comma should never be placed directly between a subject and a verb.

BAD: The obvious problem, was that the ship was leaking.

Another example: Commas are not needed before what AP calls “essential phrases” and others call “restrictive clauses.”

The idea is that these phrases/clauses limit the meaning of the sentence. In the examples below, note how the final phrase takes the sentence from a general statement (He gave a lecture) to a limited one (a lecture about biology).

BAD: He gave a lecture, about biology.
BETTER: He gave a lecture about biology.

BAD: He went to town, during the rainstorm.
BETTER: He went to town during the rainstorm.

BAD: She wrote the letter, to demand a raise.
BETTER: She wrote the letter to demand a raise.

Style guides differ about the use of commas in a simple series (more about that in the AP style chapter), but standard English rules agree no comma is needed in a two-item series.

BAD: He bought a few things -- candy, and soda.
BETTER: He bought a few things -- candy and soda.

BAD: She will buy milk, or orange juice.
BETTER: She will buy milk or orange juice.

Finally, in most cases the FANBOYS words should not be followed by a comma.

BAD: He ate a pickle, but, he said it was too sour.
BETTER: He ate a pickle, but he said it was too sour.

BAD: And, he never came back.
BETTER: And he never came back.

The main exceptions to that last rule involve sentences with extra clauses.

BAD: He ate a pickle, and even though he smiled he said it was sour.
BETTER: He ate a pickle, and, even though he smiled, he said it was sour.

Note that "however" is not part of FANBOYS. It generally is followed by a comma:

He was 18; however, he felt much older.

Words

Just by speaking English every day, you’ve acquired many basic grammar rules. That’s one reason we recommend reading your writing aloud; you can often hear when it sounds wrong. However, informal spoken English is not the same as professional writing, so these errors are common in student work.

Who/whom

If there's something strange in your neighborhood, who you gonna call? A good editor, one hopes.

Professional writing maintains the distinction between "who" and "whom." It's simple: "Who" asks questions that can be answered with "he" or "she"; "whom" asks questions that can be answered with "him" or "her."

> Whom are you going to call? I am going to call him.
> Who ate the pie? He ate the pie.

This principle applies even if the "who" or "whom" is part of a clause rather than a question.

> The trophy will be awarded to **whoever** eats the most pie. Who ate the most pie? He did.
>
> The trophy will be awarded to **whomever** we decide is most deserving. Whom did we decide on? Him.
>
> The man **who** won the trophy was Jack. Who won the trophy? He did.
>
> The man to **whom** the trophy was given is named Jack. To whom was the trophy given? Him.

That/which

What's the difference in meaning between these two sentences?

> The toy that exploded was made by Konner.
>
> The toy, which exploded, was made by Konner.

In the first, "that exploded" is key to identifying the particular toy. No, not the toy that melted, not the toy that collapsed, not all the toys that remained undamaged. We're talking about the one toy that exploded. The implication: If we didn't mention the explosion, the reader wouldn't know which toy we were writing about.

In the second, "which exploded" is not necessary to identify the toy. The implication: Even if we removed that phrase, the reader would still know which one we were writing about.

Because "which exploded" is not crucial to the understanding of the sentence, it's wrapped in punctuation. That's a way American English indicates a clause is less important.

People, things & what's in between

Our language maintains a distinction between people and everything else.

> The boy who ate the pie is now sick.
>
> Hera Clarke, who won the race, accepted the trophy.
>
> The students, who arrived at 9 a.m., are sleepy this afternoon.
>
> Ford Motor Co., which announced record profits yesterday, was rewarded by the stock market.
>
> The toy that exploded was made by Kenner.
>
> The club that raised the most money got a trophy.

People get "who." That's true whether you use a specific name (Hera Clarke) or a noun referring to people (the boy, the students). Things that aren't people get "that" or "which." That's true even if the noun refers to an organization made up of people (Ford, the club).

Animals inhabit a middle ground. They're not people, but we sometimes treat them as if they are (especially if they're pets). We hesitate to declare one commonly accepted way of dealing with that. AP style has its own way of compromising, which we'll explain in that chapter.

Noun-pronoun agreement

Singular nouns, such as "Jake Jones," should be followed by singular pronouns, such as he, him, his. Plural nouns, such as "the students," should be followed by plural pronouns, such as they, them, their. Of course, you know that. But you may habitually get it wrong because of some tricky situations.

Organizations: Companies, clubs, labor unions and the like are made up of bunches of people. However, as we said just a few paragraphs above, professional writing treats them as individual objects, not clumps of humans. So Ford Motor Co. is a singular noun, not a plural.

BAD: Ford Motor Co. announced their profits.
BETTER: Ford Motor Co. announced its profits.

BAD: The Department of Motor Vehicles stopped their licensing services.
BETTER: The Department of Motor Vehicles stopped its licensing services.

BAD: The Boy Scouts named their first female president.
BETTER: The Boy Scouts named its first female president.

The last example shows how tricky this can get. As an organization, the Boy Scouts is a singular object that happens to end in S. It still gets a singular pronoun. On the other hand, if you wrote about boys who belong to that organization, you could put it this way:

Six Boy Scouts left for their first out-of-state trip.

The good news: Not many cases are so difficult.

What about when you refer to an organization but don't use a specific name? For example: the team, the club, the union. The rule here should make all of those singular. But that can lead to some awkward results. When in doubt, rewrite.

ACCEPTABLE, but not preferred: The team accepted its individual medals.
BETTER: The team members accepted their individual medals.

Indefinite pronouns: That's the grammatical term for pronouns without antecedents. (An antecedent is the noun a regular pronoun can substitute for. In "John Smith put on his shoes," "John Smith" is the antecedent for "his.") Here are some indefinite pronouns: anyone, everyone, anybody, everybody, nobody. Which are singular and which plural? When they refer to people, those beginning with "every" are plural; the others are singular.

Everybody picked up their tools.

But if "anybody" is singular, what singular pronouns do you use with it? Traditionally, the masculine pronouns (he, him, his) were used by default. A more equitable but also more awkward alternative was a combination pronoun: he or she, him or her, his or hers. More recently, the "singular their" has been accepted even by the Associated Press. All those choices have flaws. A good solution: Rewrite the sentence to avoid the pronoun.

ACCEPTABLE, but not preferred: Anybody who dropped their tool should pick it up.
BETTER: Anybody who dropped a tool should pick it up.
ACCEPTABLE, but not preferred: No one can be forgiven for his or her sins.
BETTER: No one can be forgiven for sinning.

"Either," "neither" and "each" also take singular pronouns, even in a sentence like this:

Either of the girls can give her bucket to the gatekeeper.

Note: Because the gender is clear, we can use "her" rather than writing around it.

See the "Gender" section in the AP style chapter for more about the use of the singular "they."

Some other indefinite pronouns shift between singular and plural, depending on whether they refer to things that can be counted (people, coins, etc.) or stuff that can't (grass, sky, metal).

All the soldiers dropped their weapons.

All the metal lost its shine.

Some students cheated on their test.

Some wood failed its inspection.

"None" best falls under that rule. AP disagrees; it draws a distinction that seems to be based more on whim than logic, however. Unless your professor or editor disagrees, go with our guidance and make your calls based on context.

Subject-verb agreement

The advice given above about noun-pronoun agreement carries over to subject-verb agreement. If a word or phrase should take a singular pronoun, it should also take a singular verb.

Let's consider instead other situations that often lead to student errors.

And: When a sentence has a compound subject (formed by "and"), it's treated as plural.

> BAD: Leia and Estelle is going to the zoo.
> BETTER: Leia and Estelle are going to the zoo.

Or: Two items connected by "or" do not form a compound subject. The number of the verb is determined by the word or phrase closest to the verb.

> BAD: Bob or Ted are going to the zoo.
> BETTER: Bob or Ted is going to the zoo.
>
> BAD: Bob or the twins is going to the zoo.
> BETTER: Bob or the twins are going to the zoo.
>
> BAD: The twins or Bob are going to the zoo.
> BETTER: The twins or Bob is going to the zoo.

If that last pair sounds incorrect to you, you're not alone. While many standard grammars and AP style insist on this form, it doesn't match what most people would say, in our experience. Rewriting -- flipping the two terms around to match the middle pair -- would solve that problem.

Impostor conjunctions: "And" is a member of the FANBOYS club, which makes it special. Several phrases pretend to be like "and," but they're not in the club. They don't form compound subjects.

> BAD: The king, along with his subjects, are waiting for the verdict.
> BETTER: The king, along with his subjects, is waiting for the verdict.
>
> BAD: The queen, together with her court, are dressed in satin and lace.
> BETTER: The queen, together with her court, is dressed in satin and lace.

Other impostors include "as well as" and "not to mention." Note that these impostors show up in phrases that are surrounded by commas, as if to wall them off from the main part of the sentence.

Of: Here's where it gets ugly. What do you do when the subject of a sentence is a singular noun that is modified by a prepositional phrase: a stack of books, a group of soldiers, a collection of coins?

We'd like to tell you it's simple: Ignore the prepositional phrase. There's a clear, consistent logic to that advice. Stack, group, collection, all singular.

Alas, not all bastions of professional writing standards agree. For example, the Associated Press wants you to consider each sentence individually and decide whether the emphasis is on the whole or its parts. In other words, you might write "A group of tourists were walking up the hill" but also "A different group of tourists is assigned to each bus." Or something like that; it's not clear.

At the risk of getting you into trouble with some future editor, our guidance is this: If you're writing about inanimate objects, ignore the preposition.

> The pile of leaves was blown around by the wind.
>
> The collection of coins was donated to a local historical society.

If you're writing about people (and, we suppose, animals), use your best judgment.

Its/it's

The English-speaking world is divided into two groups: those who consistently use "its" and "it's" correctly and the people who hate them.

If you're in the second group, this is an invitation to join the few, the smug, the grammatically correct.

Any time you confront the choice, think about two rules you do know and follow: Contractions are formed with an apostrophe: he's, she's, we're, they're, can't, doesn't. "It's" is a contraction of "it is." Possessive pronouns are formed without an apostrophe: his, hers, yours. "Its" is a possessive pronoun. It's easy to remember the difference when you know its secret.

Parallelism

A classic bit on the children's TV show "Sesame Street" presents a group of objects as someone sings: "One of these things is not like the others. One of these things just doesn't belong." Examine which element in each of these sentences is not like the others.

BAD: She wore a hat, scarf and ate a piece of cake.
BAD: She like hiking, fishing and to swim in the ocean.
BAD: I want dancing, to have a good time and entertainment.
BAD: He wore a red coat, sported a neon orange scarf and bright blue suspenders.

In each sentence, two items in a series are in the same form (e.g., the nouns "hat" and "scarf") while one is different (the verb "ate"). Such discrepancies violate the rule of parallelism. The rule applies even when there are only two items in the series.

BAD: He prefers math and to solve science problems.
BETTER: He prefers doing math and solving science problems.

BAD: Tomas Mazaran, a literature professor and in charge of the student center, was arrested last night.
BETTER: Tomas Mazaran, a literature professor who is in charge of the student center, was arrested last night.

These examples are relatively easy to spot (but still representative of errors seen in student papers). Lack of parallelism becomes harder to avoid as your sentences become longer and you lose track of how you began the series. That's another reason to keep sentences short and simple.

For

Prepositional phrases used properly at the start of sentences will also be correct at the end:

In the classroom, he gave a lecture.

He gave a lecture in the classroom.

This principle eludes some student writers for certain uses of "for."

BAD: For Lucy Szponder, she thinks cabbage is delicious.
BETTER: Lucy Szponder thinks cabbage is delicious.

BAD: For the bursar's office, it advises students to file the FAFSA earlier than usual this year.
BETTER: The bursar's office advises students to file the FAFSA earlier than usual this year.

"For" can be used properly at the start of a sentence, but only if the same phrase would work at the end.

For Lucy Szponder, cabbage is a daily requirement.

Cabbage is a daily requirement for Lucy Szponder.

For the bursar's office, helping students avoid problems is the top priority.

Helping students avoid problems is the top priority for the bursar's office.

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20.2: Chapter Review

Key points

You should know, understand and apply all the rules in this chapter. These are some of those most frequently broken by students:

- Use double quotation marks in almost all cases; use single quotation marks only when one quoted item is nested inside another.
- Periods and commas ALWAYS go inside all closing quotation marks.
- When two phrases that could stand alone as complete sentences are joined into one sentence, only two connections are proper:
  - A semicolon (used when the two phrases are very closely connected)
  - A coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS) preceded by a comma.
- When an appositive phrase is used, the second element must be surrounded by punctuation (two commas or a comma and a period).
- When a city-state pair is used, the state name must be surrounded by punctuation.
- When a full date -- month, day, year -- is used, the year must be surrounded by punctuation.
- Use "who" when referring to people; "that" or "which" for everything else.
- Companies and organizations are singular entitities; they should take singular verbs and pronouns.
- In a list of two or more items, each element in the list should be of the same form.

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20.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 20.3.1

Write an essay of about 150-200 words, deliberately breaking some of the rules listed in this chapter.

In pairs or small groups, share your essay with your partners. Challenge them to find the errors while they do the same.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

21: AP Style Essentials

21.1: AP Style Essentials

21.2: Chapter Review

21.3: Optional Exercises

Why AP Style Matters

The Associated Press Stylebook is the bible for many writing and reporting courses. Students who encounter the AP Stylebook for the first time generally have two reactions:

Why can't I use the style I already know? Most sets of style rules used in college -- APA, MLA, Chicago Manual -- were created to work with academic research papers. The AP Stylebook was created for journalism (and has been adopted by public relations professionals as well). The AP rules are a better fit for the type of writing you'll do in this course, and are the same rules used in many print and online newsrooms.

Do I have to know all this stuff? We try to avoid "back in our day" moaning, but ... back in our day, journalists were expected to memorize much of the book, and to know exactly where in it to find things they hadn't memorized. These days, if you need the stylebook on the job, you may have access to an always-updated digital version. The only reason to demand that you memorize most of the book now is to do it as a form of hazing. Let's not do that.

Instead, you should come out of this course understanding and being able to consistently apply a relatively small subset of AP rules. In addition, you should be familiar enough with the range of AP rules to have a pretty good idea how to find those you don't know by heart.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Some AP rules, such as the ban on italics, may be especially confounding. We can't fix that, but we can explain why they exist.

The Associated Press is what's called a wire service. In its earliest days, it literally used wires -- telegraph wires -- to transmit stories to member newspapers. Before the AP and services like it, newspapers got their out-of-town news by mail, either through copies of other papers or letters that subscribers wrote from their travels. With the telegraph, sharing news among papers became much more efficient, and a service such as the AP could grow big enough to supplement that sharing with stories written by its own reporting staff.

While the telegraph gave way to other means of transmission, each change of technology brought technical quirks. Certain characters created problems because the machines read them as part of their programming code. Devices were unable to produce italic or bold-faced type. Even though technology has improved, the AP keeps many of the rules banning these trouble-making typographical styles. (In its defense, the AP is an international news agency, and it may well have papers somewhere still using 1950s machinery.)

Many newsrooms work with two stylebooks -- the AP as a base, and a separate in-house collection of rules. While most in-house style rules may involve local needs, such as a complete list of the formal names of regional hospitals, the in-house books also list exceptions to AP rules. Some of the stodgier AP rules are dispensed with. That's especially true with online newsrooms.

However, the AP has to ensure that its copy (another word for the text of stories) is compatible with the least-advanced newsroom it serves. In addition, it has to have a massive set of rules because it has hundreds of reporters and pulls stories from many newsrooms. To ensure consistency -- that Beijing is called Beijing in every story, and not Peking or Pekin -- it tries to cover every contingency in its stylebook.

In recent years, the AP has changed its rules much faster than in the past. To the dismay of some older journalists, it's adapting many grammar rules to reflect actual usage rather than old English textbook dictates. Maybe, someday soon, the AP may even recognize italics.

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21.1: AP Style Essentials

AP style

In another chapter, we covered grammar essentials that are generally agreed upon in the United States. This chapter focuses on areas where different stylebooks may offer different advice. These guidelines are based on the AP Stylebook as of late 2025.

Punctuation

These rules are often the ones that trip up the most students, because they involve tiny marks on the page. In most cases, punctuation that varies from AP style won't affect meaning. But true professionals care about even the smallest details.

Oxford comma

Consider this sentence:

> I ate oranges, bananas and apples.

The last four words comprise a series. Standard American English dictates that in any such series of three or more items, commas separate the initial items while a conjunction (and, or, nor) comes before the final item. But a grammatical war continues to rage over whether that final conjunction should be preceded by a comma or (as in the example above), not.

The comma-before-and, as in “apples, bananas, and apples,” is called an Oxford comma because its use was standard at the Oxford University Press in England. While it’s not quite true that the Revolutionary War was fought to free us from such punctuation tyranny, it is true that AP rules tell you to avoid the Oxford comma.

> BAD: He will either go to school, get a retail job, or join the Army.
> BETTER: He will either go to school, get a retail job or join the Army.

Hyphens

A hyphen is a short, horizontal line (-). The basic AP rule is that single hyphens have no spaces on either side: the pea-green sea. The only exception: something called a “suspended hyphen.”

> The bank offers 15- and 30-year mortgages.

That sentence is also an example of “compound modifiers” -- adjectives composed of two or more words. AP style on how to punctuate compound modifiers has waffled in recent years. What follows is our best understanding of the principles it follows.

Generally use hyphens with:

Compound modifiers of three or more words.

> He hit back-to-back, inside-the-park home runs.

Compound modifiers with "well" as the first word, but only when they appear directly in front of the noun they modify.

> The well-known politician lost her last election.

> The politician is well known for long speeches.

Compound modifiers that cannot stand on their own as nouns.

> The less-qualified applicant got the job. ("Less qualified" is not a noun.)

Compound modifiers that could be ambiguous without the hyphen.

> The small-business owner cooked the books.

(Because you could be referring to either the owner of a small business or a business owner who happened to be short.)

Generally don't use hyphens when:

The compound modifier could stand on its own as a noun.

> The accident victim is in the intensive care unit. ("Intensive care" can be used as a noun: He was sent to intensive care.)

The first word of the compound is "very" or ends in -ly.

> The very rich landowner ended up bankrupt.
>
> He gave an easily disproven alibi.

The modifier appears after the noun.

> The movie was first rate.
>
> The backdrop, a pale yellow, hid the teardrops.
>
> The plumber works part time.

That's not a perfect solution. If you follow these rules outside the classroom, you may run into a persnickety editor who wants hyphens in some of those sentences. However, even if you follow AP's vague rules exactly, you'll probably still run into editors who have their own quirky exceptions. So, for now, let's just work with the rules given above. The important thing is to learn to follow style rules in general; you can always pick up the differences of your employer as you go along.

Dashes

A dash is a longer horizontal (–). Because standard keyboards don't include a dash, it can be replaced by two hyphens back-to-back (--), and many versions of writing software will automatically reformat that to a dash.

AP offers guidance about when to use dashes, but let's not worry about that now. Some writers never use them. If you're prone to dash-ing through your stories, check the stylebook entry. The rest of you just need to remember two things:

- Never use a single hyphen when the situation calls for a dash.
- Always leave a space like this -- on either side of the dash.

Ellipses

An ellipsis (plural: ellipses) in punctuation is a series of three periods (...). In AP style, the ellipsis is mainly used to indicate when one or more words have been removed from a direct quote. (More about that in the Quotes chapter.) Here, we'll focus on the typographical conventions AP uses.

> "I am ... ready to go," he said.
>
> "I am fired up, ... fully prepared and ready to go," he said.
>
> "I am fired up. ... Let's do this," he said.

In every example, the ellipsis consists of three periods with no spaces in between them, but with a space at either end. The ellipsis does not substitute for other punctuation, so if the quotation needs a comma, period or other punctuation mark at the break, that punctuation goes at the end of the first part and the ellipsis follows.

Parentheses

Just as with ellipses, parentheses do not substitute for other punctuation. In many cases, that means punctuation goes outside the parentheses

> The boat (called My Sharona), the car and the house were repossessed.

But when the parenthetical content is a complete sentence, put the period inside.

> He said he was ready. (He found out only later that he was wrong.)

You may be wondering why that second sentence is in parentheses to begin with. This is not a question of grammar, but of writing style.

AP style requires parentheses when inserting material in direct quotes.

> "I am (ready) to go," the boy said.

However, that rule comes from the limitations of AP's transmission methods. Many news organizations prefer to use square brackets for this, reserving parentheses for insertions outside of direct quotes. Either may be acceptable to your professor; check

first.

> “I am [ready] to go,” the boy said.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used only to form possessives (Maria’s shoes) or contractions (can’t). Contractions include cases where digits, not letters, are removed.

> He is from the class of 1970; she is from ‘76.

There is only one exception to the above rule.

> The student got nothing but A’s and B’s.

In AP style, the apostrophe is used to form plurals for single letters. It is not used to form plurals for multiple letters or numbers.

> The student knows her ABCs.
>
> He likes music from the 1970s.
>
> The radio station played hits from the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s.

Symbols

In addition to standard punctuation, writing makes use of symbols such as ¢ and %. Some of these are forbidden in AP style.

> BAD: He earned 10¢ for every toy he made.
> BETTER: He earned 10 cents for every toy he made.

Others are acceptable acceptable only in certain uses.

> He works for Procter & Gamble.
>
> BAD: He wanted some rest & recreation.
> BETTER: He wanted some rest and recreation.
> BETTER: He wanted some R&R.

The ampersand can be used if it’s part of an organization’s formal name or in some accepted abbreviations; it cannot be used casually.

Finally, some common symbols are used normally.

> BAD: He earned 5 dollars for every toy he made.
> BAD: He earned $5 dollars for every toy he made.
> BETTER: He earned $5 for every toy he made.
>
> BAD: His tweet ended with (hashtag)GetErDone.
> BETTER: His tweet ended with #GetErDone.

Note: The percent sign (%) was banned until 2019. Now, it is preferred.

> BAD: She got a 5 percent raise.
> BETTER: She got a 5% raise.

Composition titles

This category fits into the punctuation section because AP bans italics and underlining. Instead, quotation marks are used around the titles of creative works (books, movies, songs, individual articles, speeches, paintings, etc.).

> Bocaccio’s “Decameron”
>
> “Help,” by the Beatles

Exceptions when you would not use quotation marks around creative works:

> Foundational documents of religions: the Bible, the Koran

Reference works. This includes encylopedias, guidebooks, dictionaries, etc.: Webster's New Seventh International Dictionary

Do not use quotation marks around the names of newspapers, magazines or online publications. However, do follow the same rules of capitalization as above. Note: Lowercase the word "magazine" unless it is part of the publication's formal name -- how it refers to itself.

Cleveland Plain Dealer

Salon

Time magazine

Harper's Magazine

One other note related to composition titles: In creative works, capitalize all words except very short (three letters or less) articles, prepositions and conjunctions. Even those are capitalized if they are the first or last words of the title.

"The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich"

"Of Mice and Men"

Quotations

Consider some quirks of AP style related to the punctuation of direct quotes. First, the placement of question marks and exclamation points.

BAD: "Did you read 'Of Mice and Men?'" he asked.
BAD: "Did you read 'Of Mice and Men'"? he asked.
BETTER: "Did you read 'Of Mice and Men'?" he asked.

BAD: My 2-year-old read "Of Mice and Men!"
BETTER: My 2-year-old read "Of Mice and Men"!

BAD: His favorite song by Shania Twain is "Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under"?
BETTER: His favorite song by Shania Twain is "Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under?"

BAD: He asked, "Do you believe in miracles"?
BETTER: He asked, "Do you believe in miracles?"

BAD: Did he say, "The ocean is murky?"
BETTER: Did he say, "The ocean is murky"?

In the Grammar Essentials chapter, you were told periods and commas always appeared before the closing quotation mark, while colons and semi-colons always appeared after the closing quotes. Those are standard rules. For question marks and exclamation points, AP requires you to make a choice. If the question mark or exclamation point is part of the quoted material, it goes inside. If not, it goes outside.

When attribution follows a quote ending in an exclamation point or question mark, no comma is needed.

BAD: "I'm about to explode!", he said.
BETTER: "I'm about to explode!" he said.

BAD: "Where are you going?," he asked.
BAD: "Where are you going," he asked.
BETTER: "Where are you going?" he asked.

Colons

When attribution precedes a direct quote that contains two or more sentences, use a colon instead of a comma. (Note: We generally advise not putting the attribution in front of any quote, of course.)

BAD: He said, "I am going to the store. Don't wait up for me."
BETTER: He said: "I am going to the store. Don't wait up for me."

Big numbers

When using numbers between 1,000 and 999,999, put a comma between the thousands and hundreds.

Names

You should know by now to be very, very careful about the spelling of someone's name. Just as most people are sensitive about how their names are spelled, some are picky about other elements of how they're addressed. Following AP style strictly may tick off a professor you quote who insists on being referred to as "Dr. Jones" because she has a Ph.D., while AP sneers at the idea. No surprise that some of the rules in this section are ones that are most likely to be changed depending on what organization you work for. But here, we're sticking with AP.

First reference

The first time you mention someone's name in a story is called the "first reference." The second time you mention a person by name in a story is called -- you can see where this is going -- "second reference." So, obviously, the third time you use someone's name in a story is called ... "second reference." The 44th time you use the same person's name in a story is called "Don't you have any other sources?" It's also called "second reference."

On first reference, you must use the person's full name. Generally, these days, that means the first and last names, not the middle initials.

AP allows a middle initial if the person you're writing about prefers to use one. It recommends using them if you're providing a list of casualties or writing about someone accused of a crime, where confusion about who's who could have unfortunate results.

Second reference

On second reference, you should not use the full name. What you use instead depends on the person's age.

- **18 and older:** Use only the last name on second reference.
- **15 and younger:** Use only the first name on second reference, unless that would be inappropriate. Don't call a 12-year- old accused of murder "Sally."
- **16 or 17 years old:** Use the last name on second reference for most stories, but first name is acceptable in "light" articles. Whichever choice you make, stick with it. Don't swing back and forth between first and last name for the same person, and don't ever use the full name on second reference.

Well, with one exception. If your story includes two adults with the same last name, or two children with the same first name, use the full names on second reference when needed to assure clarity.

Related note: Never use "boy" or "girl" to refer to anyone 18 or older.

Note

The rule of using only the last name on second reference for adults looks simple on paper, but it gets more complicated in practice.

Two or more people with the same last name: How do you distinguish on second reference when your sources include Ed Jones and Keisha Jones? The AP Stylebook says to "generally" use their first and last names on all references. That would certainly remove confusion, but if those sources appear a lot in the story, it would look clunky.

One alternative is to use descriptors as substitutes or appositive phrases. Say Ed Jones is a chemist and Keisha Jones is a police officer. You might use "the chemist" or "Jones, the chemist" when you're referring to that one.

That can still get clunky in some cases. If one of the similarly named sources dominates in the story, you might choose to refer that person by their last name consistently and use an alternative for the other. For example, if you're profiling Karla Smith, an athlete, they could be just "Smith" on all second references. When you brought in their mother briefly, "their mother" might be all you need for one or two second references.

Feature stories: Many magazines depart from AP style in some ways, especially if they want to avoid sounding like stuffy news accounts. A common departure is to use first names on second reference. News outlets may choose to adopt that system

with softer "feature" stories.

Courtesy titles

If you refer to someone as Mrs. Smith, that's a courtesy title. It doesn't indicate the person's job; it's just a sign of respect. AP has no respect. Hence: Never use Mr., Miss, Mrs. or Ms.

When you refer to someone with a Ph.D. degree as a doctor, it's also just a sign of respect. AP has no respect. So never refer to someone as, say, "Dr. Anne Gable" unless that person is a medical doctor (in which case it becomes a formal title).

Formal titles

Formal titles don't indicate respect (because AP has no respect); they indicate a person holds a job with some measure of authority. The full AP definition of what constitutes a formal title is more complicated, and we'll get into some exceptions below. However, if you use the general guide "Could this person order someone beneath them to do something?" you'll be right almost all the time.

The only reason you want to distinguish between formal titles and informal titles is to determine capitalization. Even that is not a big deal, because you capitalize someone's formal title only in one specific circumstance. Can you figure out what that is from these examples?

> He gave the award to President Barack Obama.
>
> He gave the award to the president, Barack Obama.
>
> He gave the award to Barack Obama, the president.

That's right. A formal title is capitalized only when it's used directly in front of someone's full name, and no comma intervenes. (Another way of saying that second part: Don't capitalize titles in appositive phrases.)

Under this rule, though, you'd have to refer to someone as Deputy Assistant Director for Finance and Government Compliance Helen Hayes. Thankfully, even AP thinks that's ridiculous. Its advice: Don't use long titles in front of a name; make them appositive phrases. (What's a long title? One guideline: If it contains one or more prepositions, it's long.)

> The award went to the deputy assistant director for finance and government compliance, Helen Hayes.

Abbreviations: Some formal titles, mostly for elected officials, members of the military or top-ranking police, should be abbreviated.

> U.S. Sen. Rob Portman (senator)
>
> Ohio Rep. Wilson Mills (representative)
>
> Gov. John Kasich (governor)
>
> Lt. Gov. Arianna Huffington (lieutenant governor)
>
> Dr. Marguerite McCourt (doctor -- if it's a medical degree, as noted above)
>
> Gen. Harcourt Mudd (general)

Ranks: Almost every military rank is abbreviated. See the full AP Stylebook entry for "military titles" to check for the proper abbreviation of the title you need. The same abbreviations for military ranks work for police titles.

While even the lowest ranks of the military get formal titles (Pvt. Erin O'Reilly, Seaman Carole Kane), the same may not apply to police. Even though it's common to call the cop on the beat a police officer, "Officer" may not be a formal title. How do you know? AP says it depends on police department policy. Gee, thanks for the help, AP.

Elected officials: Any elected governmental office merits a formal title. By analogy, the same generally applies to those who, through election, hold similar titles outside of government, such as the presidents of student government or fraternities and sororities.

Senior government officials: Top cabinet members such as the secretary of state and the attorney general have a lot of authority and therefore get formal titles: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Attorney General Loretta Lynn (not Attorney Gen.).

The AP Stylebook is unclear about how far down the pyramid of government authority this would apply. However, since it also advises avoiding long titles directly in front of names, and government titles tend to get very long, it's best to use appositive phrases for them anyway.

Judges: Of course, "judge" or "justice" are formal titles; people with those titles can order folks around. We mention them here only to note you shouldn't just refer to someone as "Judge Roy Bean." The title in most cases includes a reference to which branch of the judiciary the person's in: U.S. District Judge Elly Reiner, Criminal Court Judge Hassan Hodges. Again, there are so many variations that we can only refer you to the full AP Stylebook (entries for "judge," "court names" and "judicial branch").

Academic titles: Titles specific to particular jobs are capitalized: Dean John Smith, President John Smith. However, "professor" is not capitalized, even if the university itself does so. As we said, AP has no respect, even for those of us who are so deserving.

Second reference: Even those who get formal titles on first reference lose them on second reference.

> President Barack Obama accepted the award.
> Obama accepted the award.

> Dr. Jayne Meadows practices at Willoughby Hospital.
> Meadows practices at Willoughby Hospital.

Informal titles

Job descriptions and other stuff that may appear in front of a name are informal titles, and thus never capitalized.

> Last month, astronaut Milly Helper made a space walk.

> English department secretary Ernest Tubbs was absent yesterday.

> Grammy award-winning singer Aretha Franklin is afraid to fly.

> Noted philatelist Red Grange died last year.

Note

Seems clear: If a position includes the authority to order others around, it's a capitalized formal title. Ah, as Vizzini said in "The Princess Bride," you fell victim to one of the classic blunders! The most famous of which is, "Never get involved in a land war in Asia," but only slightly less well-known is this: "Never assume an AP style rule is consistent!"

For some reason, AP says the sports terms "coach," "manager" and "general manager" are simply job descriptions, no more worthy of capitalization than "quarterback," "astronaut" or "professor." (And, yes, we're still bitter about that last one.)

Companies & organizations

Full name on first reference, a shortened version (if one exists) or synonym on second reference.

> Ford Motor Co. announced first-quarter earnings. The automaker said it lost $4 million. Ford blamed the loss on weak truck sales.

The same principle applies to names of government agencies (U.S. Agency for International Development on first reference; USAID or the agency on second reference) and schools (Ohio State University first reference; Ohio State, OSU, the university, etc. second).

Exceptions are made for very familiar shortened versions; FBI and CIA are OK on every reference.

For departments, subsidiary educational units and other things, use of the full formal name is usually optional. Your school may formally refer to the Department of Political Science, with capitalization and a respectful tone of voice, but you can just call it "the political science department" on first reference.

Capitalization: Capitalize full formal names, following the same rule as for composition titles (lowercase articles, prepositions and conjunctions of three letters or fewer, except when at the start or end of the name).

> The university's School of Media and Journalism

Kent State University’s journalism school

As you’ve seen in these examples, words such as “university,” “school” or “department” are capitalized only when used as part of the a formal name.

Once you go below the top level of an organization, AP style suggests using lowercase as long as you’re using a name that’s generic and widely understood.

Northwestern University’s board of trustees.

The university’s bursar’s office.

Different media organizations will draw that line in different places. If you're writing for student media, consult your outlet's style book for departures from AP guidelines. (If you're an editor of student media, please, please make sure your outlet *has* a style book.)

The: Showing its media bias, AP style allows publications to insist on an uppercased “The” in front of their names:

It was published by The Huntsville Times.

However, almost every other organization can take its capital T’s and stick them where the sun don’t shine. Sorry, (not The) Ohio State University.

Acronyms and abbreviations: AP no longer puts acronyms or abbreviations in parentheses after the names of organizations. Don’t use an acronym or abbreviation at all unless it would be clear on second reference without any hint.

BAD: The Office of Price Management (OPM) recommended against the policy.
BETTER: The Office of Price Management recommended against the policy. The OPM said the change would harm consumers.
BETTER: The Office of Price Management recommended against the policy. The agency said the change would harm consumers.

We pause here to drive this point home. Please excuse the shouting: DON'T PUT ACRONYMS OR ABBREVIATIONS IN PARENTHESES AFTER THE NAMES OF ORGANIZATIONS! Sorry, but AP dropped that format ages ago, yet it somehow lives on in many students' minds. We suspect a covert organization of parentheses-loving high school teachers.

AP's decision to drop the use of the parenthetical acronym or abbreviation, while it does clear up some clutter, forces writers to decide whether the shorter versions are familiar to readers. Individual publications or websites will often help out by creating their own style rules regarding this.

An alternative, to be used rarely, can help when you're not quite sure what to do, but you know you don't want to keep repeating the long name.

The United Kingdom's foreign intelligence service, commonly called MI6, ...

"Commonly called" could be replaced by similar phrases, such as "also known as" or "for short."

Don't jump to this alternative often. The main goal is to avoid burying the audience in abbreviations and acronyms that turn a story into something not to simply read, but to decipher.

As the examples indicate, most acronyms and abbreviations do not need periods after each letter. Most two-letter acronyms (such as U.S., U.K.) are exceptions.

Time

The shift from print journalism to digital has made some aspects of referring to time, especially days, trickier. A newspaper story was unlikely to be read much beyond the day it was printed; it was mostly fixed in time. Online stories can live forever. And even though they often carry a timestamp indicating when they were published, a lot of the audience won't notice. For now, though, AP is holding firm on these guidelines.

Hours

Use digits for all times of day except noon and midnight: 2:30 p.m., 3 a.m. (not 3:00 a.m.). Never refer to 12 a.m. or 12 p.m.; use midnight and noon instead.

Note the form of the the examples above: a.m. and p.m., with a space in front. Never use A.M., AM or other variations.

Days

Country singer Willie Nelson wrote (and k.d. lang sang) about three days to dread, “Three days that I hate to be alive. Three days filled with tears and sorrow. Yesterday, today and tomorrow.”

The AP Stylebook knows exactly how he felt.

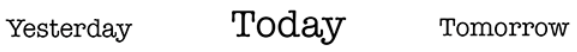


Figure 21.1.1: Words to avoid. (CC BY-NC-ND John Kroll)

Yesterday, today and tomorrow do not exist in AP land. Similarly, AP never speaks of last night or this afternoon. While broadcasters and the rest of the known world may acknowledge those time periods, AP exists outside of time, in a fourth dimension where you’re never certain what “now” is.

The less metaphysical explanation is that a story written one day may be read on another, and a reference such as “today” may have shifted its meaning. So while “last year” and “next month” are generally acceptable, presuming the year or month aren’t just about to change, more immediate time references must be more definite.

If you are referring to an event that occurred seven days or less before or will occur within a similar band after the day you expect most readers to encounter the story, use the day of the week. So, for example, if you’re writing a story that will go online on a Sunday, you could write:

> The city council met Monday to consider the bill. (This means the preceding Monday)
> The city council will meet Saturday to consider the bill. (This means the following Saturday)
> The city council meets Sunday to consider the bill. (This means now.)

In the first two examples, the tense of the verb (met vs. will meet) helps the reader understand which day you’re referring to. Avoid “last Tuesday,” “next Wednesday” and similar formulations; the verbs should carry the load. If the event you’re writing about is further in the past or the future, use the date instead of the day.

Months

Never abbreviate months with short names: March, April, May, June, July. Do not abbreviate the other months *unless* they are used with a specific date.

> He left in October.
>
> In January 2010, the boat was launched
>
> She gave her deposition on Aug. 4.
>
> The ship was launched on Nov. 3, 1961.

Note the form of the dates: Aug. 4, not Aug. 4th; Nov. 3, not Nov. 3rd.

Seasons

Lowercase spring, summer, winter, fall and autumn, unless part of a formal name: the Spring Formal.

Decades

Use digits: 1920s, ‘30s. AP insists on it even when you’re referring to nicknamed periods such as the Roaring ‘20s.

Years

Digits, again. In most cases, don’t use the year with a specific month or date if it’s the same as the current year. So, if you were reading this in 2027:

> BAD: He died April 3, 2027.
> BETTER: He died April 3.

One other thing about years: They're the only exception to AP's rule about not starting a sentence with digits.

> ACCEPTABLE: 1776 was a momentous year for the North American continent.

Places

We won't even try to offer logical explanations for AP's rules in this category. They just are.

Buildings

Capitalize the formal names of buildings: Franklin Hall, the Student Center. Lowercase when using informal names: the journalism building.

Side note: "Room" is capitalized when referring to a specific one:

> The meeting will be held in Room 114.

Streets

Because only some months are abbreviated, and then only when used with specific dates, it shouldn’t surprise you to learn that similar rules apply to words such as “street” and “road.” Buckle up: This gets confusing.

Only three names for roads are abbreviated (avenue, street, boulevard), and **only when used with a specific address**. If you’re referring to more than one road of the same type, lowercase the type.

> He lives at 1414 Snyder Ave.
>
> He lives at 1414 Snyder St.
>
> He lives at 1414 Snyder Blvd.
>
> He lives at 1414 Snyder Road.
>
> He lives at 1414 Snyder Court.
>
> He lives at 1414 Snyder Circle.
>
> He lives on Snyder Avenue.
>
> He lives on Snyder Street.
>
> He lives on Snyder Boulevard.
>
> He lives near the intersection of Snyder and Main streets.

When compass directions are used to indicate where a street is located, use the same principle.

> He lives at 1414 E. Snyder Ave.
>
> He lives on East Snyder Avenue.

AP’s rules for highways are a bit loosey-goosey. Stick to these styles based on the highway's designation:

> He crashed on U.S. Route 1.
>
> He crashed on state Route 1.
>
> He crashed on Route 1.

He crashed on Interstate 80.

“Route 1” can be used by itself, without the U.S. or state designation, if it won’t confuse the reader. “Interstate 80” must be used on first reference, but switch to “I-80” on second reference.

Spell out ordinal street names from First through Ninth; use digits for others.

Neighborhoods

AP distinguishes between designations that are merely geographic, and lowercased, and those “widely recognized” as neighborhood names.

He lives on the east side of Kent.

He lives in Chicago’s South Side.

He lives downtown.

The New Yorker lives in SoHo.

Good luck figuring out which is which.

Cities

For once, the rule about capitalization is easy: Capitalize the names of cities and towns, and use the full name (or a synonym such as “the city,” of course) in all references.

The rule on abbreviations isn’t much more complex: Use the form preferred by the city government. Occasionally you’ll have to check: Is it St. Petersburg or Saint Petersburg? (Abbreviate for the Florida city; spell it out for the one in Russia).

That leaves only one concern: Do you write about “Chicago, Illinois” or just “Chicago”?

The guiding principle is to avoid confusing the reader. Skip the state name if the reader doesn’t need the hint to figure out what place you’re talking about; use it otherwise.

- Chicago
- Cincinnati
- Detroit
- Atlanta
- Ottumwa, Iowa
- Peshtigo, Wisconsin

AP has a list (in the “datelines” entry) of 30 American cities it considers big enough that readers don’t need a state name hint. The list may have some logic behind it, but what that is seems unclear. Our experience has been that many, if not most, media organizations play it by ear. If the city is fairly large and the name is recognizable, don’t use a state name.

Exceptions to that rule are made when the name of a big city is shared by others. The exception’s not absolute -- Cleveland (Ohio) gets by without the state name even though there’s a Cleveland, Tennessee -- but one city’s definitely an exception: Columbus. When AP reporters write about Ohio’s state capital, they include the state name even though Columbus is larger than several other cities that get to stand alone. Blame Columbus, Georgia.

Does that mean you should always use Columbus, Ohio, on first reference? Well, there’s another rule to consider.

If you’re writing for a publication with a limited geographic scope -- a newspaper based in Cleveland rather than a magazine that distributes nationally -- you can assume your readers are familiar with the cities and towns of your state. So, if you’re writing for an Ohio school's student media, you don’t need to refer to Kent, Ohio, or Toledo, Ohio; they’re just Kent and Toledo. (The AP rule on this involves the story’s dateline rather than the state of publication, but local publications tend to extend the rule in this way.)

Does that mean that Ohio-based journalists can just refer to Columbus on first reference? Well, there’s one last thing to consider. (No one said AP style was easy.)

Actually, it’s the first thing we discussed: Avoid confusing the reader. Make a judgment call. If you think your likely readers will understand which city you're talking about, skip the state name. If you think there’s room for confusion, err on the side of including

the state.

States

When you use the name of a state inside a story -- either on its own or connected to a city name -- spell out the whole name. Don't abbreviate.

(AP does abbreviate state names in datelines.)

Numbers

The chief concern with numbers: Do you use digits or spell them out?

Start with whole numbers (3, not 3.5 or 3 1⁄2). AP groups these into three sections.

- **Zero through nine:** spelled out.
- **10 through 999,999:** digits only
- **1 million and higher:** Combination in most cases (AP prefers 1.3 million or 2.54 million, rounded off to no more than two digits after the decimal point. If a more precise figure is needed, use all digits: 12,342,465.)

For 10 and higher, the only time you spell them out is at the start of a sentence.

> BAD: 14 students left class early.
> BETTER: Fourteen students left class early.

If these rules give you the idea AP prefers digits over spelling out numerals, you're on the right track. The preference is so strong that there are several exceptions to the rule about spelling out zero through nine. And when we say "several," we mean a frustratingly large number.

Ages

Use digits.

> The 8-year-old boy ran home.
>
> Several 8-year-olds played ball.
>
> The boy is 8 years old.

One thing about that trio might be confusing if you remember the previous rules about compound modifiers: what's with the hyphens? AP style is fickle. Follow these guidelines:

- If the age is used as a noun, use hyphens: The 8-year-old walked home.
- If the age is used as an adjective directly in front of the noun it modifies, use hyphens: The 8-year-old boy walked home.
- If it's used as an adjective but is not directly in the front of the noun, skip the hyphens: The boy is 8 years old.

Percentages

Use digits.

> About 30% of all dentists agree.
> He earned 0.3% of the vote.
> He used a 4% solution of the drug.

When percentages are less than one, use a decimal with a zero in front. Note, as mentioned above, that AP now sanctions use of % rather than spelling out "percent." Never put a hyphen or space between the number and the percent sign.

Votes, scores & ratios

Use digits.

> The court voted 5-4 to overturn the ruling.
> He said 1 in 4 doctors agree.

Money

Use digits.

> $400
> 34 cents (not $0.34)

Hyphenate between the number and the word “cents” when used as an adjective: The 5-cent candy was sold out.

What about when a dollar figure begins a sentence? AP's advice: Rewrite.

> BAD: $73 million of the donation went toward tuition grants.
> BETTER: Seventy-three million dollars of the donation went toward tuition grants.
> BEST: Tuition grants accounted for $73 million of the donation.

Measurements

Use digits for units of dimension, weight, distance, speed.

> 9 feet by 12 feet
>
> the 5-foot-6 man
>
> He is 5 feet 6 inches tall
>
> 1 pound, 6 ounces
>
> 4 miles
>
> 55 mph

Temperature

Use digits, except for zero.

> It was 32 degrees.
>
> The temperature hit zero.

For temperatures below zero, AP throws in another curveball: Use a word.

> BAD: It was -3.
> BETTER: It was 3 below zero.
> BETTER: It was minus 3.

Fractions

Spell out under one, but use digits above that.

> He ate two-thirds of the pie.
>
> He ran 3 1/2 miles.
>
> He ran 3½ miles. (If your software allows you to use that fractional character.)
>
> He ran 3.5 miles

AP allows the use of fractions with digits, as in the second and third examples. If you type out each digit, put a space between the whole number and the fraction, using a slash to separate the digits of the fraction.

You may also use fractional characters if your publication’s software accepts them. In that case, don’t put a space in between the whole number and the fraction.

AP’s guidelines urge you, though, to convert to decimals when practical.

Casual use

Spell out when you’re not referring to a specific amount.

Thanks a million.

I'll get a hundred bucks for this knife, easy.

There must be thousands of dollars here.

AP oddities

A few situations that don't fit elsewhere but often trip up students.

Animals

General grammar rules for American English tell us to use "who" when referring to people and "that" when referring to other things -- organizations and inanimate objects. But what about animate objects that aren't human?

AP generally draws the line sharply between humans and everything else. With one exception: animals that have individual names.

So if your story just mentions a cow, that's a that:

The cow that started the fire escaped injury.

But if the story mentions that the cow is named Elsie, she becomes a who on later references:

The cow who started the fire escaped injury.

Sports teams

British English treats sports teams as plurals, no matter what. When the national team won a World Cup in football, a tabloid newspaper exulted in huge type: "Brave England Do It!" Not "does it," "do it."

AP often seems to take the attitude that we Americans fought a whole war or two to defeat British spelling, punctuation and grammar. Its rule for referring to sports teams: If you use just the location/school as the noun, it's singular:

Northwestern defeats Ohio State 49-0

Chicago stops New York in 12 innings

If you use the team name or mascot, it's plural:

Wildcats defeat Ohio State 49-0

Cubs stop Mets in 12 innings

Same goes if you use them together:

Northwestern Wildcats defeat Ohio State 49-0

Chicago Cubs stop New York Mets in 12 innings

Sounds simple. Locations and school names are singular; those mascots are plural. But what about when the team name isn't plural, such as the Orlando Magic or Miami Heat, in cities where it's so hot that people tire easily and can't make it to the final S? After what we can only imagine was a heated debate that included a pitched battle of flyig copies of Strunk and White's wretched "The Elements of Style," AP decided that those should be treated as plurals, too.

Heat burn Bulls, 101-84

Orlando Magic stop Cleveland Cavaliers, 98-95

Bands

If figuring out how to decide if team names were plural or singular led to a battle, doing the same for musical groups apparently became so violent that AP's gurus declared an armistice without reaching a conclusion.

Part of this is simple: Collective nouns by themselves are singular, taking singular verbs and pronouns: team, band, orchestra, family, jury. Even though each is composed of several people, the collective unit is one thing.

The team is ready to play.

The band played its first song.

You've just read about how AP deals with naming an specific team. What about a specific musical group? Part of that's simple: Plural band names are treated as plurals.

The Beatles are getting back together even though two of them are dead, thanks to CGI.

But what of Coldplay? Rage Against the Machine? Coldplay is or Coldplay are?

Coldplay is, AP declared -- not in its full stylebook, but in a section of the related website where it answers questions about style uncertainties. So, that's done and dusted, then, is it? Singular band names take singular verbs and pronouns. Cool. Except the AP response only said "many" singular band names taken the singular, implying some are plural. When asked to explain, an anonymous AP authority just said that it depends on what "looks right." On behalf of puzzled journalism students everywhere, we posted a followup question on the site asking for some better advice. We're still waiting for that response ... nine years later, so far.

Sorry to leave you hanging, but our best advice for singular band names as of now is, we guess, to trust your ears.

Race

In 2020, the Associated Press revised its stylebook to address changing attitudes regarding race and culture, while retaining some rules from the past.

Identifying race: Don't refer to a person's race or ethnicity unless it's relevant to the story.

Adjectives: Do not use "white" or "black" as *nouns* to refer to people. "Six Black men were arrested," not "Six blacks were arrested."

Black: When used as an adjective, capitalize: Black culture, Black person. The term will be most often applied to people whose roots extend to central or southern Africa, although their heritage may have extended through other areas such as the Caribbean.

Hyphens: AP no longer uses hyphens in terms such as Polish American or Asian American. ("African American" is still acceptable for reference to Black Americans in many uses, but note that some -- such as people with Caribbean heritage -- may object. Where possible, be specific and use the individual's preference.)

Latinx: Use only if the group or person being referred to has requested it, and provide a short explanation saying that. Otherwise, use Latino for men or in general; Latina for women.

People of Color: May be used to refer to a group of non-white people in the U.S. Avoid the abbreviation "POC," however.

White: Do not capitalize. The AP's argument is that Black people, especially Black Americans, form a distinct identity, while those we refer to as white are much more diverse.

Gender and sexuality

You might think or wish grammar and writing style had nothing to do with politics. As far as AP style is concerned, they don't.

Pronouns

The AP has adjusted its style in part to reflect the concerns of those who do not fit into the traditional he/she binary as well as to try to keep its language from reinforcing stereotypes about male and female roles. Acknowledging that this issue is more complex includes realizing that no set of rules can cover every possible situation. For things not mentioned below, the two main principles to follow are first, to avoid confusing the audience, and second, to try within that restriction to follow each individual's preferences.

Singular they: The English language has a long history of accepting the use of "they" and its other forms as references to individuals. However, standard grammar rules -- and the AP Stylebook -- frowned on that. The AP's guidance has now shifted, but it tries to strike a compromise between clarity and lack of bias.

In short: You can use "they" to refer to a single person, but you should try to find other ways to write the sentence if possible.

This is especially true when using "they" to avoid clunky "he or she."

- BAD: Each candidate must give his answer.
- AWKWARD: Each candidate must give his or her answer.

• BETTER: Each candidate must give their answer.
• BEST: Each candidate must answer.

Plural pronouns for individuals: Some people prefer to use plural pronouns, such as "they" and "them," instead of the traditional masculine "he/his" and feminine "she/her."

Because this can be confusing, it may be possible simply to avoid using any pronoun. If not possible -- as will especially be the case if the person is mentioned frequently in the article -- it's recommended that you make the person's preference explicit at the start. For example, "Pat Jones, who prefers to be referred to as 'they," or "Pat Jones, who uses gender-neutral pronouns."

The guiding principle, again, is to avoid confusing the audience. If a sentence could be interpreted as being about more than one person when it's really just about an individual, that's confusing. Find some way to make it clear.

New words: As of the time this textbook was compiled, the AP does not accept uncommon alternative pronouns such as "ze."

Transgender individuals: Those whose gender identity does not match the one assigned at birth should be referred to by their preferred identity in AP style. This is true whether or not the person has had surgery to alter their physical appearance.

When referring to such a person by name, use the name they prefer. Use their birth name only if relevant to the article.

Note

Many transgender people take offense at being referred to by their birth names, which they instead call "deadnames." While it's impossible in today's society to avoid controversy over this issue, AP's guideline is much the same as regarding other choices people make to use something other than their birth names: John Wayne was John Wayne, not (as at birth) Marion Morrison. U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz is Ted Cruz, not Rafael Cruz.

Sexuality

The language used to describe a person's sexuality is too complicated and too quickly changing to try to describe in full here. The AP addresses some words in its "gender and sexuality" entry. Basic principles:

- As with an individual's race or ethnicity, sexuality should not be specified unless it's relevant to the article.
- The audience should not be expected to be aware of all the terms now being used. Where someone prefers to be identified by a less-common word, help the readers out by explaining what it means. Note that the definitions of some terms may not yet be settled. When in doubt, ask the person you're writing about to not only provide a term, but also explain what it means to them.
- Whatever your own opinion is about sexuality, as a reporter your role is to help your sources communicate to your audience. Let their preferences be your best guide to wording.

Acronyms: AP currently accepts LGBT or LGBTQ as comprehensive terms to refer to those who do not fit into the "standard" heterosexual category. Stick to those two unless:

- Another version appears in a direct quote.
- Another version is part of an organization's name.
- Your publication has a different style.

Words

There's using a word correctly, and then there's using a word correctly in AP style.

Spelling

Many words have alternative spellings. AP hates uncertainty. Its preferred spellings for many words are listed in the stylebook. If the word’s not there, you’re supposed to use the first spelling listed in Merriam-Webster. To save you some time, here are some common terms.

adviser (not advisor)

a lot (not alot)

amid (not amidst)

among (not amongst)

Bachelor of Arts (not Bachelor's of Arts; same for other academic levels); **bachelor's degree** (not Bachelor's or bachelor; same for other academic levels)

email (not e-mail)

- But: **e-book, e-reader,** etc.

ensure (not insure when it means "to make certain")

flyer (for the person in a plane or the sheet of paper, not flier)

forward (not forwards)

internet (not uppercase Internet)

nonprofit (not non-profit)

- But: **not-for-profit**

OK (not okay)

protester (not protestor)

toward (not towards)

versus (not vs.)

- But: vs. in short comparisons: man vs. mouse
- But: v. in court decisions: Marbury v. Madison

Death

As we've said, AP has no respect. People don't pass over or pass away; they die. Avoid all euphemisms

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21.2: Chapter Review

Key points

As with the rules in the Grammar Essentials chapter, you should know, understand and be able to apply all the rules in this chapter. These are among those most frequently broken by students:

- Do not use the Oxford comma (a comma before the final conjunction in a list) unless needed to avoid misunderstanding.
- Use no spaces on either side of a hyphen except in the rare case of a suspended hyphen.
- Use hyphens to join compound adjectives when they are used directly in front of the words they modify, but keep in mind the exceptions:
  - The compound modifier could stand on its own as a noun.
  - The first word of the modifier is "very" or ends in -ly.
- Put a blank space in front and behind a dash.
- Put a blank space in front and behind an ellipsis
- Ellipses do not take the place of other needed punctuation
- Use apostrophes only to form contractions or possessives, with one exception: When creating the plural of a single letter.
- Spell out "cents," but use the dollar sign.
- Use quotation marks, not italics or underlining, around the names of creative works such as books or movies.
- Use someone's last name alone in second reference for those 18 or older. Use the first name alone for those 15 and younger, except when the nature of the story would make that inappropriate. Use your judgement for those 16 and 17.
- Do not use courtesy titles.
- Capitalize titles only:
  - When they appear directly in front of the name
  - When they are not part of an appositive phrase
  - When they fit AP's definition of a formal title
- Do not use the title "Dr." unless the person holds a medical degree.
- Do not use any titles on second reference.
- Do not put the abbreviation of an organization in parentheses after the first reference. If the abbreviation is well known or easy to understand, you may use it on second reference. If it's neither, don't use it at all.
- In general, spell out numbers less than 10 and use digits for 10 and higher. But be aware of the many exceptions.
- Do not use the words "yesterday," "today" or "tomorrow," or similar phrases, unless in direct quotes.
- Abbreviate long month names when used with specific dates.
- Do not use digits at the start of a sentence unless it's a year.
- Use the percent sign.
- Use "Black," with a capital B, as an adjective. Do not capitalize "white" in the same mannger.
- Do not refer to race or ethnicity unless it's relevant to the story.
- In general, refer to people by their preferred names and pronouns.
- Do not use phrases such as "passed away." Simply say someone died.

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21.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 21.3.1

Your instructor will distribute packs of cards, each containing a phrase or sentence. Break up into groups of three or four, each group with its own pack of cards.

Going around the group one by one, a student holds up the top card, showing the phrase or sentence to the group. They discuss and vote on whether the example follows AP style. Each card will have a small indicator on the back, such as a red x or green check mark, indicating the correct answer. If the group got it wrong, try to figure out why.

Then pass the deck to the next person and continue with the next card.

If your group cannot figure out why they got an answer wrong, ask your instructor for help.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

22: Wordiness

22.1: Wordiness
22.2: Chapter Review
22.3: Optional Exercises

Why Wordiness Matters

You should have noticed a running theme in this book: brevity. We've talked about writing stories so they can be cut from the bottom. We've stressed short paragraphs of one to three sentences. And we urged you to keep each sentence short and simple, just one fact per sentence.

In this chapter, that passion for brevity comes down to the level of individual words.

Padding your writing with extra words may be the hardest habit to break. So why try? Journalists value concise writing because they care about the audience and the message.

- It's easier to read. The wordier your writing, the harder it is for your audience to untangle your thoughts.
- It's faster to read. Even online, where stories could run on endlessly, tight writing matters. Your audience doesn't have all day.
- It's more efficient. In science and engineering, there's a measure called **signal-to-noise ratio**. In radio, for example, it measures the strength of the signal of the station you're trying to dial in relative to the background noise. Too much noise and you can't make out the songs. Even short of that, excessive noise grinds away at the listeners and tires them out. Wordy writing has a low signal-to-noise ratio, where the signal is the information you're trying to convey, and the noise is all the unneeded verbiage.
- It reduces errors. Clog your writing with unneeded words and you are more likely to get lost in the jungle yourself, losing track of what you were trying to say or letting other grammatical errors slip past.

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22.1: Wordiness

The evil ‘that’

Page ID

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This is a story about “that.” Well, sort of.

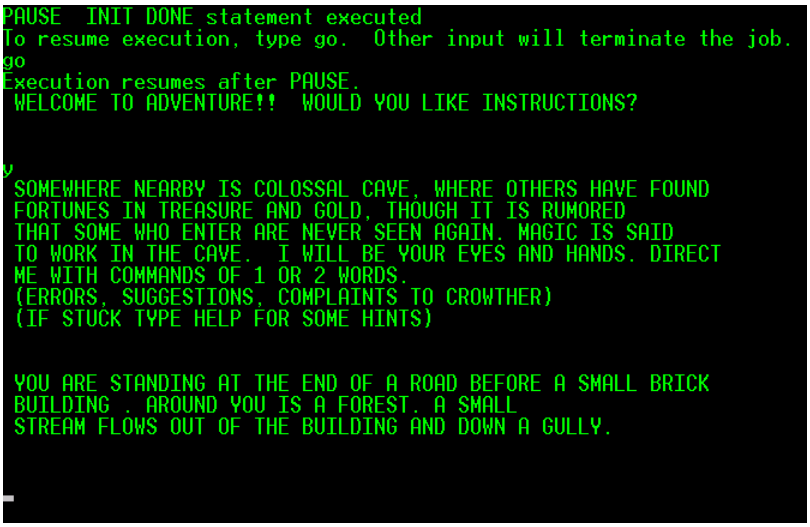


Image 22.1.1: Opening screen of the text-based Adventure computer game | Public domain

In olden times, when computer screens only showed glowing green letters on a black background, there was a game called “Adventure.”

When the game started, these words appeared:

> YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE A SMALL BRICK BUILDING.
>
> AROUND YOU IS A FOREST. A SMALL STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE BUILDING AND DOWN A GULLY.

To proceed, the user typed simple commands.

> *go south*

The computer responded:

> YOU ARE IN A VALLEY IN THE FOREST BESIDE A STREAM TUMBLING ALONG A ROCKY BED.

And so on. The user had a limited number of possible commands, including “take,” “unlock” and “throw.” The goal was to enter a cave and collect treasures while avoiding obstacles such as pits and defeating opponents such as snakes.

To begin, the user collects some objects lying around: keys, a lamp, a cage, a little bird (to put in the cage), a rod. Then the game heads into the cave.

Very quickly the user confronts a snake. Trying to escape is useless. Fighting it barehanded ends in death. Hitting it with the rod ends in death. Everything, it seems, ends in death.

Finally, on your umpteenth attempt to restart the game and get past the snake, you snap. This is ridiculous. Stupid snake! In disgust, you take the bird out of the cage.

> *throw bird*
>
> THE LITTLE BIRD ATTACKS THE GREEN SNAKE, AND IN AN ASTOUNDING FLURRY DRIVES THE SNAKE AWAY.

We first played Adventure in college, while working on assignments for computer programming classes.

Our programs consisted of thick stacks of stiff paper cards with numbers printed across them; we used keypunch machines to poke out some of the numbers. The card were fed into a computer bigger than a classroom, which would translate the holes in each card

into programming language and execute the program.

All this took time, because there was one computer for all the students. While waiting for our results, we could use the few computer terminals provided. Fortified with Diet Mr. Pibb and Doritos, students would grab terminals as soon as they opened up. Our gaming choices were limited to Adventure and chess.

You could tell someone was a newbie at Adventure because you'd hear them cursing when the snake killed them for the 47th time. Often, students would take a few tries and give up, frustrated. But they'd be back another day. The terminals in the Vogelback Computing Center were the closest connection any student could have to a computer. There were no desktop machines, no laptops, certainly no smartphones or tablets.

So students would face the snake, die, but come back another day. Until one day, usually by accident (we experts were careful to avoid spoilers), a student would throw the bird. The snake would perish. And the student would no longer be a newbie.

What does this have to do with "that"? It's about leveling up. Just as knowing the secret to throwing the bird allowed Adventure players to level up and no longer be considered newbies, knowing the trick of eliminating unneeded instances of "that" from your writing will level you up in the eyes of your journalism teachers and editors.

Not all uses of "that" are evil. But the ones that are evil are very evil indeed. They infest your writing like bedbugs.



Image 22.1.2: Bedbug | Public domain

This is a bedbug. Imagine this crawling over your face as you sleep. You don't want bedbugs in your bed, do you? You don't want evil thats in your writing, either.

This is an evil that:

> BAD: He said that he was ready.

Let's hit it with some bug spray:

> BETTER: He said he was ready.

See? It's gone, and you don't miss it. The sentence means the same without it. But, wait! Here's another.

> BAD: I saw the ham that was on the shelf.

Zzzzap!

> BETTER: I saw the ham on the shelf.

And another:

> BAD: Don't disobey the rules that have been established for safety.

> BETTER: Don't disobey the rules established for safety.

The that is gone, but its fetid word droppings remain. Let's clean those up.

> BEST: Don't disobey the safety rules.

They're still coming!

> BAD: He insisted that the shirt was clean.

Quick, Henry, the Flit! (Old advertising slogan for a bug spray.)

> BETTER: He insisted the shirt was clean.

Wait, look:

> BAD: The reason that we left is that we were late.

OMG, now they're coming in pairs. This calls for extreme action.

> BETTER: We left because we were late.

There's a simple rule for identifying most evil thats: **If you can take it out without changing the meaning of the sentence, that's an evil that.** They can be trickier sometimes, as in the last example, but now you should be on guard. Look through your writing for every that. If it's evil, throw that bird ... um, we mean, take out the word.

Other things to watch

Wordiness can infect your writing in many ways that are hard to describe simply, but these examples are easy to look for.

Words to delete

Remember: These words aren't ungrammatical; they're just (sometimes) unneeded.

Prepositions

Three two-letter words like to sneak into phrases, padding your writing.

> BAD: All of the ministers prayed for rain.
> BETTER: All the ministers prayed for rain.
>
> BAD: Two of the students on the trip are from Portugal.
> BETTER: Two students on the trip are from Portugal.
>
> BAD: The cake was stolen on Monday.
> BETTER: The cake was stolen Monday.
>
> BAD: She climbed up the ladder.
> BETTER: She climbed the ladder.
>
> BAD: The president of the company was convicted of corruption.
> BETTER: The company president was convicted of corruption.

Don't be too quick to delete "of," though. In some cases, it adds a subtle distinction. Compare:

> He gave cookies to some of the children in the classroom.
>
> He gave cookies to some children in the classroom.

The first makes it clear some children in the room got cookies while others didn't. The second could mean that, but it could also mean there were some children in the room, all of whom got cookies.

Packing: Some sentences break out with prepositions the way unvaccinated children can break out with measles. This can cause many problems; wordiness is one of them.

> BAD: In Peoria in Illinois at around 6 a.m in the morning on Aug. 4 in the year of 2010, as the dawn was breaking over the fields, a comet fell from the sky onto a farmyard.
> BETTER: A comet fell onto a Peoria, Illinois, farm at dawn Aug. 4, 2010.

Don't spread preposition disease; vaccinate your writing.

In order to

You can usually change "in order to" to "to."

> BAD: In order to enter the convention hall, students had to pass three security checks.
> BETTER: To enter the convention hall, students had to pass three security checks.

Reasons

The word “reason” often attracts unwanted camp followers.

BAD: The reason we fight is because we hate each other.
WORSE: The reason why we fight is because we hate each other.
BETTER: The reason we fight is that we hate each other.
BEST: We fight because we hate each other.

Flabby intensifiers

Adjectives and adverbs are, despite what some misguided writing teachers say, important parts of your language arsenal. However, modifiers that do not describe but only intensify the meaning of other words often serve no good purpose. They form clusters like street gangs and clog up your writing like plaque in an artery. (Look up "mixed metaphors" in Google.)

As with many other tips about wordiness, this one must be applied with caution. Don’t cut until you’re sure the word is loitering, not contributing to the richness of the sentence.

Time: Can the verb do the work on its own?

BAD: He is currently the club president.
BETTER: He is the club president.
BAD: He is now the club president.
BETTER: He is the club president.
BAD: He was formerly the club president for two terms.
BETTER: He was the club president for two terms.

When used to emphasize contrast, these words serve a noble purpose.

He was the club president last year; he is now the secretary.

Even when “now” works, another of the gang may gum up the works.

BAD: I am working right now; I will stop soon.
BETTER: I am working now; I will stop soon.

Verification: “The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” Queen Gertrude says in “Hamlet.” Like Gertie, some sentences are try-hards, tacking on unneeded words such as "really" like an 8-year-old who's bad at lying.

BAD: I am truly sick.
BETTER: I am sick.
BAD: I am literally working now.
BETTER: I am working now.

Again, these work when showing contrast. “Actually” is another member of this gang, but it has its uses.

She said she was going to college, but she was actually mining for gold in Alaska.

Squishiness: Verbal underlining, used mostly when writers don’t have a rich enough vocabulary to say what they really mean.

BAD: He was quite upset.
BETTER: He was angry.

BAD: He was really angry.
BETTER: He was furious.

BAD: He was very hungry.
BETTER: He was ravenous.

BAD: He was pretty tired.
BETTER: He was exhausted.

BAD: He was much in love.
BETTER: He was enamored.

Shock treatment: Some writers wander through their stories in a constant state of shock, amazed by this and stunned by that. Tone it down; don't assume your readers are as easily impressed.

BAD: The incredibly talented singer performed next.
BETTER: The talented singer performed next.

BAD: The stunningly beautiful actress wore Ralph Lauren.
BETTER: The beautiful actress wore Ralph Lauren.

BAD: He won a surprising victory.
BETTER: He won. (If you disagree with this one, we'll concede that some victories actually are surprises, such as the United States knocking off the Soviet Union in the 1980 Winter Olympics or Northwestern University winning any football game back in the dark days when we were an undergrad there. But "surprising" should be used with caution. Northwestern knocking off Penn State nowadays? Not such a shocker.)

Do the "better" examples above seem flat? Perhaps, but on the other hand, how much information is conveyed by merely calling someone "incredibly talented"? We've mentioned elsewhere the writing adage "show, don't tell." In brief, it means that applying a label ("stunningly beautiful") is not nearly as effective as describing the features that led the writer to such a conclusion.

Still, you may sometimes want to trot out an "amazing" or "shocking." Those words will have a much greater impact if you save them for the most extreme moments.

Newspapers, in the days of "hot type," used to each keep a font of massive type. It was called "end of the world" type, because it was held in reserve for only the biggest news. Treat your shock treatment adjectives and adverbs as "end of the world" words.

Flawlessness: In the classic drama "Animal House," Bluto rallies his fraternity:

"Over? Did you say 'over'? Nothing is over until we decide it is! Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor? Hell no!"

"Germans?" Otter whispers to Boon.

"Forget it," Boon says. "He's rolling."

We're sorry to tell you that as professional communicators, you must be Otter. You must be the nerd in the room who says, "Actually ..."

This is why journalists approach words such as "first," "last," "biggest," "smallest" and "best" like they were the Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail": nervously, cautiously, and with the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch close to hand. Only if you're certain the superlative is true should you dare to approach it. That caution also applies when using vaguer intensifiers.

BAD: He ran in a perfectly straight line.
BETTER: He ran in a straight line.
BAD: The barrel was totally full.
BETTER: The barrel was full.
BAD: The team is absolutely ready for the playoffs.
BETTER: The team is ready for the playoffs, the coach said.

As the last two examples indicate, some statements are problematic even without the intensifier. If you don't attach attribution to a sentence, you're vouching for it yourself.

Duh: A small but active gang of adjectives attack plural nouns. They add no meaning.

BAD: He went to various German cities.
BETTER: He went to German cities.

BAD: He sang six different songs.
BETTER: He sang six songs.

BAD: He ate some apples.
BETTER: He ate apples.

Nothing is lost in cutting these words.

Redundancy

Redundant words add no new information to a phrase. The "duh" words above are a special kind of redundant, but there are plenty of others. It's not as easy to spot redundancy as it is to detect the examples above. It depends much more on context.

BAD: We got free gifts.
BETTER: We got gifts.

BAD: It first began in 2010.
BETTER: It began in 2010.

BAD: They are building a new church.
BETTER: They are building a church.

BAD: It was short in length.
BETTER: It was short.

In the examples above, the redundant words run back to back (free / gift, first / began). They don't have to.

BAD: He spoke many languages, including English, German, Spanish and others.
BETTER: He spoke many languages, including English, German and Spanish.

BAD: First, she began by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.
BETTER: First, she recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Including" implies a list is incomplete; "and others" says the same. Similarly, if a person did something first, that's how things began. In such cases, you can remove the redundancy in several ways. Consider these alternatives to the solutions above:

He spoke English, German, Spanish and many other languages.

She began by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Throat clearing

Our language has accumulated a lot of phrases that seem to contribute to sentence structure, but on closer examination are just taking up space. They're so useless that even lawyers -- not known for their conciseness -- are advised against them. We call these "throat-clearing" phrases because they contribute as much to your writing as a quick cough does to your speech.

Clearing these away may be simply a matter of deleting the offending phrase; in other cases, you may need to rewrite the sentence.

BAD: **It is obvious that** the criminal must have had inside information.
BETTER: The criminal must have had inside information.

BAD: **When it comes to** journalism education, Northwestern University has a strong reputation.
BETTER: Northwestern University has a strong reputation for journalism education.

BAD: A**n important point to consider is that** not all apples are red.
BETTER: Not all apples are red.

BAD: Jones **had this to say in regard to the matter**: "I don't care."
BETTER: "I don't care," Jones said.

BAD: **Jones was not the only one** to feel that way. Thomas also hated the movie.
BETTER: Thomas also hated the movie.

The last example is one that often shows up as an attempt at a transition. But note that "also" already takes care of that task.

Sentence-sized clauses

Appositive phrases or adjectives sneakily gain an uneeded verb. Prune them.

> BAD: Reg Gale, who is the senior vice president for finance, will retire in January.
> BETTER: Reg Gale, the senior vice president for finance, will retire in January.
>
> BAD: The llama, which was born in Peru, debuted at the Cincinnati Zoo in June.
> BETTER: The llama, born in Peru, debuted at the Cincinnati Zoo in June.
>
> BAD: The boy who was the most eager jumped on stage.
> BETTER: The most eager boy jumped on stage.

Clause-sized sentences

Sentences that have the structure “X is a Y” usually can be turned into clauses instead.

> BAD: Roger LaRue is deputy chief of police. He believes the suspect is unarmed.
> BETTER: Roger LaRue, deputy chief of police, believes the suspect is unarmed.
>
> BAD: LaJean Herrold was the first person on the scene. “The ground was covered in feathers,” Herrold said.
> BETTER: “The ground was covered in feathers,” said LaJean Herrold, the first person on the scene.

These rewrites not only reduce wordiness but also cut what, for some students, is a bad habit. The impulse to introduce each source before letting them talk is like writing a play in which each actor who enters the stage first steps up to the footlights and talks directly to the audience. “Hello, I’ll be playing Rodrigo, the villain.” Don't stop the play, or the story, to introduce each new character. Let the audience find out who they are in context.

Words to replace

These words and phrases can't be erased without harming the sentence, but you can find shorter alternatives.

To be + ing

Grammatically, we’re talking about what's called the progressive or continuous tense, but let’s not get lost in terminology. Check your writing for forms of the verb “to be” followed by a word ending in -ing. In many cases, you can shorten.

> BAD: The cat was walking on its hind legs.
> BETTER: The cat walked on its hind legs.
> BAD: The cat had been walking on its hind legs.
> BETTER: The cat had walked on its hind legs.
> BAD: The cats were walking on their hind legs.
> BETTER: The cats walked on their hind legs.

Note: There can be sentences in which the progressive tense is needed. And it's a perfectly cromulent tense, grammatically speaking. But it's overused, so be careful.

Long words

English is a mishmash, the linguistic equivalent of having a Ford sedan, a GMC truck, a Porsche sports car and a BMW convertible smash into each other, and then cobbling one vehicle together from the wreckage. Or, as South African author Gugulethu Mhlungu said, "English is not a language; it's three languages wearing a trench coat pretending to be one." Or as Canadian author James D. Nicoll wrote, "On occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary." Or as Mahatma Gandhi said when he wasn't busy prying India away from the British, "The English language is so elastic that you can find another word to say the same thing."

Our language has an surplus of words, is what we're saying. A surfeit. An oversupply. A glut. A superabundance. A superfluity, even.

As a result, the language has a richness of synonyms.

It is tempting -- and sometimes beneficial -- to use as much of that legacy as possible. Professional communicators, however, focus on serving the reader by presenting information plainly and concisely. Thus, a rule: All things being equal, choose the shorter word.

BAD: The store was approximately a mile away.
BETTER: The store was about a mile away.

BAD: The store is adjacent to the library.
BETTER: The store is next to the library.

BAD: He purchased two bottles.
BETTER: He bought two bottles.

BAD: A majority of them died.
BETTER: Most of them died.

BAD: They got an opportunity to ride the sleigh.
BETTER: They got a chance to ride the sleigh.
BETTER: They rode the sleigh.

List lessness

Don't repeat the same words or their equivalents in successive sentences; combine the items into a list.

BAD: He studied journalism in college. He also studied anthropology. And he took several classes in mathematics.
BETTER: He studied journalism, anthropology and mathematics in college.

BAD: He combined flour and water to make a batter. Then he added sugar, salt and yeast. After that, he let the dough rise. Finally, he baked the loaf at 350 degrees for 30 minutes.
BETTER: He mixed a batter of flour, water, sugar, salt and yeast; let the dough rise; and baked the loaf at 350 degrees for 30 minutes.

The more astute among you may notice a contradiction here. In other places in this textbook, we encourage short sentences. Now we seem to be replacing several short sentences with one longer one. Are we hypocritical? Au contraire, Pierre. Note that the single sentence is much shorter than the sum of the original several. Not all long sentences are bad; it depends on how easy they are to understand and what it would take to replace them.

Word substitution

Being able to use six words to say something that could be said in one can be a blessing -- if you're being paid for your writing by the word, or if you're trying to stretch 300 words of information to the 500-word minimum set by your professor. Professional communicators, however, rise above such mundane concerns.

BAD: Did not pay attention to
BETTER: Ignored

BAD: Due to the fact that
BETTER: Because

BAD: In the near future
BETTER: Soon

BAD: A small number of
BETTER: A few

BAD: An extended amount of time
BETTER: A long time

Repetition

"I don't chew my cabbage twice" means "I don't repeat myself." By avoiding remastication, you can save a lot of words in your stories.

Repeat performances: Trust the readers; they can remember what you're talking about from the beginning of a sentence to the end, or even from one sentence to another.

BAD: The prosecutor declined to file criminal charges because none of the victims' parents wanted to press criminal charges.

BETTER: The prosecutor declined to file criminal charges because the victims' parents didn't want to.

BAD: Before undocumented immigrants can attend college, they must declare themselves undocumented, putting those undocumented immigrants at risk of rejection.
BETTER: Before undocumented immigrants can attend college, they must declare their status, putting them at risk of rejection.

Established facts: Once the setting of a story is clear, the reader doesn't need reminders. If your story is clearly about your university, you don't need to add your university's name to the identity of *every* source, as in "a Kent State professor of ..." or "a junior political science major at Kent State."

Disorganization: In the Structure Essentials chapter, you were introduced to the principle of grouping like with like. Failure to do so often results in repetition of information. Even if you don't use the same words each time, repeating a concept throughout a story weighs it down.

Verbs

Just as mitochondria are the powerhouses of the cell, verbs are the powerhouses of the sentence ... or at least they should be.

Lazy verbs

Good verbs are hard workers. Lazy verbs sit back and make extra words do their work.

BAD: He talked to her in a loud, strident voice.
BETTER: He yelled at her.

BAD: He sat in the chair in a defeated manner.
BETTER: He slumped in the chair.

BAD: He drove to the hospital at a high rate of speed.
BETTER: He raced to the hospital.

Note the similarity to the squishiness of some flabby intensifiers.

There, there

There are times when starting a sentence with "there are," "there is" or "it is" (or their analogs in other tenses) can be useful. However, the sentence you just read isn't one of them.

BAD: There are times when starting a sentence with "there are" can be useful.
BETTER: Sometimes starting a sentence with "there are" can be useful.

BAD: There are six cats on the ledge.
BETTER: Six cats are on the ledge.

BAD: There is a kind of cat that barks instead of meows.
BETTER: One kind of cat barks instead of meows.

BAD: It is seldom wise to tug on Superman's cape.
BETTER: Tugging on Superman's cape is seldom wise.

Another reason to avoid "there are" and similar phrases: They use what we call "weak main verbs" -- forms of "to be." Weak main verbs don't always make your sentences longer, but overusing them makes your sentences ungraceful. We talk about that more in the Grace Notes chapter.

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22.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Beware the evil "that."
- Avoid unnecessary prepositions.
- Ditch "flabby intensifiers" that don't add real information. Examples:
  - Time: Currently, now
  - Verification: truly, literally
  - Squishiness: quite, very
  - Shock: incredibly, surprisingly
  - Flawlessness: perfectly, totally
  - Duh: Various, different
- Eliminate redundancy in phrases such as "free gifts."
- Watch out for "throat-clearing" phrases that add no meaning, such as "when it comes to."
- Trim unneeded verbs from appositive phrases and adjectives.
- Reduce "X is a Y" sentences to appositive phrases where possible.
- When possible, replace long words with shorter synonyms.
- Use strong verbs, adjectives or nouns to replace longer phrases.
- Reword sentences that start with some form of "there is."

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22.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 22.3.1

Your instructor will provide a long list of words and phrases, possible on the classroom whiteboards. One by one, each student should pick one of the items and provide a shorter alternative.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

23: Quotes

23.1: Quotes

23.2: Chapter Review

23.3: Optional Exercises

Why quotes matter

Journalists rely on sources -- people or documents -- to supply most of their information. As a result, news stories include many direct quotes (the exact words of the original speaker or document) and paraphrases (the source's ideas, but in the journalist's own words).

Learning to use quotes and paraphrases correctly, therefore, will greatly improve your news writing. In a previous chapter, we covered punctuation rules for quotes. Here, we dig much deeper.

While journalism and public relations share many principles, they differ on the treatment of quotes. We explain those differences. Use the system your professor prefers.

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23.1: Quotes

Plagiarism

Putting words in quotation marks makes a promise to the reader: This is what my source said or wrote, word for word. Conversely, not using quotation marks indicates you have put the information in your own words. Omitting quotation marks but using all or almost all of your source's original wording is plagiarism.

- It's plagiarism even if you attribute the information to the source. It's worse if you don't attribute, but plagiarism with attribution is still a journalistic and academic sin.
- It's plagiarism even if your source is a news release or an organization's website. You cannot copy word-for-word the description of a club from your university's website, for example, unless you put it in quotation marks and say where you got it.
- It's plagiarism even if your source invites you to borrow the wording. The readers were not party to that agreement. They have a right to know whether your writing is original.

Quotes

Some textbooks seem to treat quotes almost as if they were fungible -- as if one quote was just as good as another. They put more emphasis on rigid formulas about how many quotes a story should have and where they should appear than they do on whether a particular quote is worth using in the first place.

We have seen too many dull or otherwise disappointing quotes in student work as a result. So let's start by talking about quality, not quantity.

Bad direct quotes

Used properly, word-for-word quotes add zest to your story. Used poorly, they bore or befuddle the reader. Beginning writers will improve their work by learning to recognize poor quote choices.

Basic facts

Don't use a direct quotation to provide simple facts. Quotes should be like diamonds in your story; don't use rhinestones. When quotes are simple recitations of boring details, you can write them more concisely in your own words.

> BAD: "The parade will begin at 9 a.m., starting first of all at Main and Franklin streets," the dean said.
> BETTER: The parade will start from Main and Franklin streets at 9 a.m., the dean said.

Fragments

Avoid directly quoting single words, phrases or sentence fragments (what AP calls "fragmentary quotes") unless they are unusual or evocative or the precise wording is important. Most mini quotes are less like finding diamonds in your story and more like discovering a bit of gravel when you bite down on a piece of meat.

> BAD: A story he wrote took much "criticism" from the players and the organization.
> BAD: He said he had been "sprayed" with champagne by players in the locker room.
> BAD: President Obama said he would address the nation "Thursday."
> BETTER: President Obama called Vladimir Putin a "poopy-butt."

Some students habitually use partial quotes. They aren't as bad as quoting single words, but they also don't add much value to the stories. They make a sentence seem choppy. And trying to fit someone's spoken words into the grammar of a written sentence can be tough.

> BAD: Jones advises students who want to become journalists to "think about it." He said they must be "flexible, be a good writer ... accessible."
> BAD: Smartphones can be used "to show what it was like" to be in the protests, to present to people at home "a subjective perspective," journalist Bruno Torturra said. He also said the use of smartphones is "a new way of organizing," through a "new way of communicating."
> BAD: Smith said the student's support meant "the world to me."

Fluff

Stay away from quotes that express obvious, trite or cliched thoughts. (In news releases, your bosses may insist on these. In news writing, a good editor won't.)

> BAD: "Stephanie Smith will be a great addition to our staff, and we hope to have her with us for years to come," the dean said.
> BAD: "I liked the food. It was good," Mary Martin said.
> BAD: "Our team gave 110%. They left it all on the field," the coach said.

Why are those bad? Well, the dean has just hired someone. Do you think she'd say that person will be a drag on the department and she hopes to be rid of her soon? Mary Martin has told you nothing interesting. And the coach is repeating the same things coaches and athletes have said for decades.

As we said in the chapter on interviewing, bad answers are often a sign of poor interviewing.

Definitions

Attribution is not needed for undisputed facts. The meaning of words is generally not in dispute, so you don't need attribution. This presumes, of course, that you are putting the definition in your own words.

> BAD: The Law Dictionary defines the cycle of poverty as "a situation in which poverty can never be removed (endlessly continued). Once a person/entity falls below the line of poverty, a set of different events begin to take place that will prevent them from ever rising above it."
> BETTER: Many who fall below the poverty line may never rise above it, trapped by the problems of being poor that create what's called a "cycle of poverty."

> BAD: She discussed microaggressions, which Psychology Today defines as "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership."
> BETTER: She discussed "microaggressions" -- common language or behaviors that demean people who belong to marginalized groups, whether the other person intends harm or not.

In the examples above, the terms being defined at least are ones not all readers may be familiar with. Quoting definitions becomes even worse when used only to pad a story by defining common words.

Mission statements

It's easy to pick up quotes from a website. Most organizations post some kind of statement about what they do or why they exist. But those statements most often are wordy, stuffy and boring. Having suffered through a few too many meetings about these, we can tell you they're not the creations of skilled writers trying to pass on information. They're a Frankenstein's monster-like mishmash of ideas stitched together by a committee to sound impressive while providing as few concrete details as possible.

> BAD: According to Hillel's website, the organization's mission is to "enrich the lives of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world."

> BAD: According to the NEOMED's website, the market's mission is to "provide the local community the opportunity to purchase fresh, locally grown and prepared items directly from the people farming and producing them."
> BETTER: The market was created to connect local farmers to consumers.

Long passages

Writers for print and online should be as ruthless with quotes as broadcast reporters have to be. There's a reason they call them soundbites, not soundmeals.

> BAD: Taylor Swift, president of Sigma Gamma Rho sorority, said there are many important aspects of multicultural Greek life.
>
> "I think that it is very important to mention," she said, "that multicultural organizations such as ours pride themselves on education first and foremost ... since the true goal is to obtain a degree. Another key principle that these organizations are

> founded on is service; it's important that you give back to the community to make it better for those who come after. Lastly, there is brotherhood and sisterhood. This is important to show each member that no matter where they may go, what they may do, there will always be someone there for them."
>
> BETTER: Taylor, president of Sigma Gamma Rho sorority, listed three key aspects of multicultural Greek life.
>
> "Multicultural organizations such as ours pride themselves on education first and foremost," she said. "... (Also) it's important that you give back to the community to make it better for those who come after. Lastly, there is brotherhood and sisterhood, ... to show each member that no matter where they may go, ... there will always be someone there for them."
>
> AD: SDT's history as a traditionally Jewish sorority may have been a factor in the hesitation.
>
> "That seemed to be people's main concern for some reason, I don't know why but everyone mentioned it after their presentation," said Hera Manner, former member of our university's Panhellenic Council. "I know they presented five times before this final time when they were accepted."
>
> Better: SDT's history as a traditionally Jewish sorority may have been a factor in the hesitation.
>
> "Everyone mentioned it after their presentation," said Hera Manner, former member of Kent's Panhellenic Council. "I know they presented give times before ... they were accepted."

Select the kernel within a quote that best expresses the central thought. Trim the rambling and repetition.

How long is too long? It depends on content. Watch for these warning signs, though.

Repetition: When we talk, we tend to repeat ourselves, right down to using the same words. That can provide emphasis in spoken language. In print, though, it can simply be wordy. In the quote below, notice how impressed the speaker is.

> BAD: "**What's impressed me** is the fulfillment of the theme of the conference, which is Husserl in a New Generation, and to see all the younger people developing this thought and taking it in new directions or developing old directions in **and that's impressive**," said Anthony Steinbock, director of the Phenomenology Research Center at Southern Illinois University. "So it's still kind of a living style of thinking, living style of philosophy, and to see that go on in that way **I think is what's really impressive**."

Throwaway beginnings: When we talk, we use transitions and other phrasing that may be unneeded when a quote is lifted out for a story. In the quote below, the beginning of each sentence is a throwaway.

> BAD: "**As I said,** I've been talking with various people around campus about the kinds of things they're working on. **Right now** my goal is just to gather all that information and talk to as many people as I can to figure out what kinds of additional things we might want to do."

Summary endings: When we talk, we often get to the end of a statement but keep going, fading away into restatements of what we've just said. The example below is from a story about a poetry event. The community poem and erasure (blackout) poems were described earlier in the story as part of the event. The last sentence could be easily cut.

> BAD: "Language shapes the way we perceive the world, and it's a way that we can connect with each other on a really emotional level," Malone said. "And so be it the community poem where you thread different people's expressions and visions of Kent together and then share it in a space where people can think about it and engage with it on their own terms, or if it's just playing with the erasure poems, the blackout poems, to get you thinking about language, it just creates a lot of really more in-depth ways of engaging with the world. **And I think the different things we're trying to offer today are good examples of that.**"

Quote stacks

Some stories consist mostly of a stack of direct quotes alternating with short setup paragraphs. Even if those quotes avoid the problems listed above, such a heavy reliance on direct quotes causes its own problems.

The setup/quote/setup/quote/setup/quote pattern (or even worse, stacking quotes without anything in between) becomes obvious and distracting. In general, readers should not be aware of the structure of your writing; it should be so natural that they don't notice it.

In addition, stacking reduces your contribution to the storytelling. The story loses cohesion. Think of the difference between a dress adorned with diamonds and one made entirely of diamonds. The second one's going to have a lot of gaps.

Break up quote stacks with description, paraphrasing and other types of material.

Good direct quotes

Time for the other side: Quotes that add to a story.

While bad quotes can be sorted into categories like the ones above, good quotes are more varied. We can say this: They provide information in a way you can't do more clearly or concisely in your own words, reveal personality or emotion, or present an opinion.

Here's one from the end of a story about a presentation by two students from Central America to their classmates. They described the customs and language of their homelands. The reporter finished with a quote from a university administrator who organized the event.

> "In discovering the differences," Congar said, "I hope you'll see the things we have in common."

From a story saying few young adults have started saving for retirement:

> "I think I have like $40 in a 401k from a previous job," senior nursing major Laura Sterko said. "I want to pay off my college loans before I even worry about retirement."

Look for quotes that stand out from the background.

Spotlighting

When you have a good quote, let it shine.

For basic news stories, put direct quotes (of one or more complete sentences) in their own paragraphs, with their attribution. Don't bury them underneath other sentences or take away their impact by piling more below.

> BAD: Panel members Keith Campbell and Tom Huang from The Dallas Morning News recalled their first moments in the newsroom during the shootings in July. "It was all hands on deck," Campbell said.
>
> BETTER: Panel members Keith Campbell and Tom Huang from The Dallas Morning News recalled their first moments in the newsroom during the shootings in July.
>
> "It was all hands on deck," Campbell said.

Splitting the quote from the setup makes it stand out. We said earlier that good quotes are like diamonds. You wouldn't hide a diamond in your pocket, would you? Let it shine.

Note: This guidance is best for now, when you're writing relatively short stories in simple forms. In longer articles, especially those that borrow more from literary writing, paragraphs tend to get longer and quotes may be treated differently.

Surgery

Sometimes a quote has potential, but it needs work. You have to cut out words or transplant others to make it more concise or understandable.

Before we go any further, let's repeat an important principle.

Putting words in quotation marks makes a promise to the reader: This is what my source said or wrote, word for word.

Quote surgery is acceptable if you are open about what you've done, by using parentheses/square brackets (to add words or explain them) or ellipses (to show where you've cut).

> ACCEPTABLE: "I give all the credit to [Coach Ed] Gutchek," the linebacker said.
> ACCEPTABLE: "I give all the credit to Beaner [tackle Carl Icahn, known for prodigious farting]," the linebacker said.
> ACCEPTABLE: "Let's get ready to rock their ... socks off," the coach said.

However, you're committing malpractice if you go overboard.

BAD: “[I’ve read] all of [the books] a couple [of] times,” Joyce Jones said. “I like [how] it’s really detailed, and it makes it really good.”
BAD: “I’ve ... read all ... the books a ... couple ... times,” Joyce Jones said.

All those interpolations (words added to a quote) or excisions (what the ellipses replace) jar the readers. They will wonder what the original quote was, taking their attention away from the story.

Note

When you're inserting text in a quote, should you use parentheses or square brackets? As of the time this textbook was prepared, AP was still sticking to parentheses. It argues that some computer systems will not translate square brackets correctly. Of course, this was the same argument the AP used to defend spelling out "percent" instead of using % ... until it finally caved.

It's common to use square brackets for insertions in quotes, in part to make a distinction between insertions and times when a quote -- such as one taken from a news release -- includes a parenthetical aside itself.

Apply these principles to quote surgery:

- Are the changes needed for understanding? Your audience isn’t stupid. If what someone is saying is clear in context, you don’t have to mess with it.
- Can you provide the context in another way? In other words, can you set up the quote, so it stands on its own

  BAD: “I’ve read all of [the Harry Potter books], and Hermione is my favorite [character],” he said.
  BETTER: He’s a fan of the Harry Potter books, and one character in particular.
  “I’ve read all of them, and Hermione is my favorite,” he said.

- Can you rewrite and eliminate the need for changes?

  BAD: Ming Chan refused to attend because “(she) didn’t want to cut into (her) study time.”
  BETTER: Ming Chan refused to attend because she “didn’t want to cut into ... study time.”
  BEST: Ming Chan refused to attend.
  “I didn’t want to cut into my study time,” she said.

- Do you have more than one interpolation or excision in the same quote? If you have to perform major surgery to make a quote work, it’s usually better to let the patient die.

Plastic surgery

There’s surgery to fix a broken leg or replace a damaged heart, and then there’s surgery to give someone a more button-like nose. With quotes, similarly, there’s surgery required to make the sentence understandable, and there’s surgery to make the speaker sound better.

When can you “clean up” a quote? AP and many news organizations are adamant: Never change a grammatical error or replace one word with another. What’s in quotation marks must be exactly what the source said, unless changes are indicated by square brackets or ellipses.

However.

Taken to the extreme, this rule can recklessly make sources sound stupid. Rather than set a rigid rule against any unmarked change in direct quotes, most journalists operate on a sliding scale. For most stories (we’ll note exceptions at the end), journalists would use this to decide.

Hesitations

Take them out. The principle: They’re about the same as pauses or breaths. They’re noises, not language.

BAD: “I will, um, go to the, ah, store,” he said.
BETTER: "I will go to the store,” he said.

Easy enough to understand with hesitations that aren't real words. What about these?

He was, like, ready to go at, like, noon.

She went to the, you know, store, and bought, you know, oranges.

Some writers (we among them) are inclined to take these out, without ellipses, in most uses. Our logic: "Like" as used in the first sentence happens to sound like a word, but it's not truly a lexical unit; it carries no meaning, serves no purpose. It's what linguistics experts call a filler.

What sounds are used as fillers varies from language to language, and even from generation to generation. To insist on including a young adult's "like" fillers while removing an older person's "um" is, we think, bias.

Dialect spellings

Use standard spellings. The principle: Everyone speaks with an accent; no accent is better than another. (Also, this is AP's style.)

BAD: “He’s gonna get that job,” she said.
BAD: “He’s goin’ to get that job,” she said.
BETTER: “He’s going to get that job,” she said.

If this seems wrong to you, consider the “mispronunciations” you make yourself, or you ignore when used by other people. Know anyone from Pittsburgh? No one from there “couldn’t” do something; they “coont” do it. Some folks from Southern Illinois don't do the wash; they do the "warsh."

False starts

If someone starts a sentence, stops and starts over again, you can almost always ignore the false start and pick up the rest of the quote, without ellipses. The principle: Cutting off the beginning or end of a quote, when it does not alter the meaning, is standard news writing.

BAD: “I don’t think -- I mean -- I wouldn’t -- No, the elephant is not a sea creature,” the scientist said.
BETTER: “The elephant is not a sea creature,” the scientist said.

Even the staid New York Times lets reporters “judiciously delete false starts” in the middle of sentences without letting readers in on it, according to a Slate article from 2010. The principle: They can be almost the same as simple hesitations. Cutting them out does not remove content and avoids distracting the reader.

BAD: “The car went over the, the cliff,” he said.
BAD: “The car went over ... the cliff,” he said.
BETTER: "The car went over the cliff,” he said.

Of course, “judiciously” is the hook hidden in the bait. When is it OK and when not? It depends on each quote’s individual context. Are you changing the meaning? It’s certainly wrong then. But are you changing the “feel” of the quote? What if you think the false starts were an indication the speaker was lying, or overcome by emotion?

For students, the best answer is: When in doubt, don’t -- or ask your professor first.

'Broken' English

The Slate article mentioned above mentioned a New York Times story about a Chinese man who inadvertently caused a security crisis at a New Jersey airport.

“I never face this situation before,” Haisong Jiang said.

Standard American English would make that “I never faced,” or perhaps “I’ve never faced.” And, who knows? What the reporter heard, spoken in a Chinese accent, might have been intended by the speaker as one of those.

The Times standard says grammar errors can’t be fixed by plastic surgery, though. The reporter’s other choices were to paraphrase or insert the changes openly. For whatever reason, the reporter and the editors chose instead to let the quote stand.

This is not the way every news organization would handle it, though. A Chicago Tribune editor once defended the paper’s practice of cleaning up a prominent source’s words.

> “White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen, if he were quoted literally, would be all but unintelligible most of the time, because his command of English is minimal,” Don Wycliff wrote. “Is our purpose ... to demonstrate his abilities as a wordsmith or to present his knowledge of the game of baseball?”

The argument for cleaning up quotes when English is not the speaker’s first language is strong. Many Americans can’t even manage one sentence in another language; making multilingual people sound uneducated doesn’t seem fair. On the other hand, making everyone sound like they came from Hometown USA can confuse readers.

Once again, we can't issue a flat ruling here. We would tend to go along with minor changes that could be more about pronunciation than grammar; we would have used "I never faced" in Haisong Jiang's quote. We're leery of wholesale rewriting of the kind Wycliff advocated, in part because that is likely to mean three reporters covering the same press conference could produce very different accounts of what Guillen said. In fact, that's exactly what does happen, and not just to players and coaches who aren't native English speakers; more on that in the next section.

This may be an unpopular opinion, but we wonder if it's not best in cases where the quotes are a jumble to just go with paraphrases.

'Improper' grammar

What about when the source is a native English speaker, but is speaking in a slangier, more intimate register than we expect from those talking to the media, or follows a different set of grammar rules than those considered standard?

Few American news organizations would allow writers to substitute words or alter grammar in a direct quote. At least, they wouldn’t do so knowingly or *admit* to doing so. Rewriting the quotes of exhausted athletes is a tradition in sports writing, for example -- to the extent that one player’s quote might appear in several different forms, depending on how each writer chose to “fix” them.

Our advice? Use the highest standard. Do not secretly change someone’s vocabulary or grammar in a direct quote. As far as what to do instead:

- Would the errors reflect unfairly on the source? The grammar rules in this book, and those preached by other teachers, don’t necessarily reflect everyday language. Readers may not even recognize your source’s words as “wrong.”
- Is the quote necessary? Balance the story’s loss of its color against the desire not to humiliate your sources. Would a paraphrase work? Could you use just a part of the quote?
- How much surgery does the quote need? Would one minor interpolation or excision turn it into “proper” English?

These can sometimes be tough calls. For example, in some parts of the country, "to be" is often omitted in statements such as this: "The fence between my house and the neighbor's needs fixed." To those of us who grew up in other places, that sentence is like fingernails on a chalkboard, and may make the speaker seem uneducated. But do we change it? If so, do we use square brackets to insert the missing words, which might call attention to the usage?

When in doubt, ask your superior. That's why they get the big bucks.

When not to operate

The precise way someone talks can be a key detail. Does he frequently stop to correct himself? Does she use “improper” grammar for emphasis? When writers want to evoke a personality, precise quoting may work better than even the most innocuous surgery.

Another reason to quote verbatim blurs the line between objectivity and subjectivity. Reporters sometimes use precise quoting to make a point.

Long-time Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley had a difficult relationship with the English language. Quoting his answers directly sometimes left readers no more informed than they started, and often far more confused.

> "You're never far apart. When you're far apart you're in good shape, but when you're close then watch out, because when you're far apart, then you can get together."

Journalists may choose to spotlight language choices they believe reveal deliberate choices. Former Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner, for example, is a businessman who went to Yale. Once he hit the campaign trail, reporters noticed something about his speaking style.

> “Much of the reform agenda we’re outlinin’ today has been implemented in other states. The reforms are workin’ so well in those states that they are causing us to become even less competitive. We must avoid slippin’ even further behind other states. ... That means puttin’ more resources directly into classrooms, reformin’ the education bureaucracy.”

The Yale-educated Rauner’s terminal G’s, it turned out, had gotten lost somewhere between the time he first considered running for office (“Yes, it’s what I’m doing,” he told a reporter. “I’m traveling and listening and learning.”) and when he put his hat in the ring. A columnist kept track in one Rauner speech after he took office and found the governor dropping 51% of the G’s.

All journalism involves choices. If you choose to spotlight someone’s language quirks, think first about why you’re doing it.

Public relations

Almost all writing advice in this e-book applies equally to journalism and public relations. That includes many things about how to handle quotes, but there are exceptions.

Looser guidelines

The most significant differences are due to the corporate nature of news releases.

Fluff

Journalists should have a broad definition of what makes a quote “fluff.” They’re focused on keeping the audience interested and delivering news quickly.

News releases, along with other public relations writing, do more. Take a quote from a company CEO praising the qualities of a newly promoted executive. To the journalist, the quote adds little or no information; it’s just what you’d expect a CEO to say. But in public relations, the fact that it’s what a CEO is expected to say is precisely the point. It’s the difference between holding a ceremony to give someone a medal and slipping it to the recipient under the table. Quotes in news releases can be public rituals.

Mission statements

As with obligatory quotes of praise, public relations writing may have to use the wording of mission statements and organizational descriptions, no matter how pompous or bloated. (The horrid writing isn’t the PR pros’ fault; such things are usually written by the worst writer of all: a committee.)

Even worse, in some ways, the writer may be told not to put those statements in quotation marks, but just to add them to the release or story.

Plastic surgery

A news story is a report by a nonparticipant. Journalists avoid cleaning up quotes because much of their role is to be a conduit, accurately delivering information or opinion from source to audience.

Public relations professionals, however, are not passive reporters; they are active participants. They are representatives of and advisers to the people or organizations they work for.

Just as speechwriters come up with words that others say, so too PR pros may themselves create the quotes in a news release. This doesn’t always apply, and anything in a news release will end up a collaboration between writer and sources in some fashion. But it’s a common approach.

Other times, particularly when the quotes are more than pro forma praise, the words will originate with interviews or correspondence with sources. Even then, the news release writer may make changes to grammar or wording, and always the source will have a chance to approve or request changes before the release or other publication goes out.

As a result, news releases and other PR communications do not use square brackets or ellipses to indicate alterations. It’s assumed that the quotes used are polished versions, not the raw spoken words. (Attention, journalists: This is why you shouldn't lift a quote from a news release and simply attribute it to the person with "said." Instead, "said in a news release" provides a subtle hint that the quote was massaged.)

Verbs of attribution

A verb of attribution is simply the word that indicates how the information in a quote or paraphrase was delivered: said, wrote, shouted, explained, etc.

Verb choices

Articles (the, an), prepositions (of, in), qualifiers (may, could) and a host of other "function words" carry little or no meaning themselves, but glue the parts of a sentence together. While a writer may carefully choose each noun, verb, adjective and adverb to convey just the right meaning in just the right way, function words are selected automatically.

Verbs of attribution are very close to being function words. Seldom do they need to do more in a sentence than glue the statement to its source.

Alas, some of your previous instructors may have been wrong about this. Well-meaning but misguided teachers gave you long lists of alternative verbs of attribution, saying they would add color to your writing.

That's what the content of your quotes is for. That's why you should carefully choose direct quotes that add sparkle. In most cases, using alternative verbs can only distract from the quote. Spending time trying to come up with a "better" verb of attribution is no more valuable than trying to come up with a replacement for "the."

Said

The simplest verb of attribution is "to say." Accordingly, news writers will use a form of "to say" for almost all attribution.

Don't worry about using it too often. "Said" sinks into the background; readers don't notice its repetition any more than they take exception to using "the" a lot.

Said where?

In standard English, subjects generally precede the verbs in sentences. Apply that logic when creating attribution.

> BAD: "I like Ike," said Smith.
> BETTER: "I like Ike," Smith said.
>
> BAD: "I like Ike," said President Calvin Coolidge.
> BETTER: "I like Ike," President Calvin Coolidge said.

In other words, put the name first, then the verb. The main exception: when the the name is paired with an appositive phrase. In that case, putting the verb last makes the reader wait too long.

> BAD: "I like Ike," John Smith, the assistant vice president for finance, said.
> BETTER: "I like Ike," said John Smith, the assistant vice president for finance.
>
> BAD: "I like Ike," the assistant vice president for finance, John Smith, said.
> BETTER: "I like Ike," said the assistant vice president for finance, John Smith.

Connotations

One advantage of "said" is its neutrality. Some other verbs of attribution imply judgments about the statement.

Doubt: "Claimed" carries a whiff of suspicion. It's the written equivalent of rolling your eyes.

If you have proof a statement was false, though, "claimed" can make the contrast clearer.

> "I'm not a crook," President Richard Nixon claimed. Less than a year later, he resigned amid evidence he had tried to cover up the Watergate scandal.

Certainty: Conversely, "pointed out" and "noted," among others, imply a statement is irrefutably correct.

> BAD: "The Cleveland Browns couldn't get to the Super Bowl if you spotted them 15 games and a 21-point lead in the fourth quarter of the 16th," the sports writer pointed out.
> BETTER: "The Cleveland Browns couldn't get to the Super Bowl if you spotted them 15 games and a 21-point lead in the fourth quarter of the 16th," the sports writer said.

When referring to surveys or research, be wary of verbs (show, reveal, find, etc.) implying there is no doubt about the conclusion.

BAD: Most Americans hate soccer, the survey showed.
BETTER: Most Americans hate soccer, the survey indicated.
BEST: Most Americans surveyed said they hate soccer.

Secrecy: "Disclosed" (and "revealed," again) imply the information was hitherto unknown to the public, perhaps deliberately.

Motive: Lots of attributive verbs refer to the intentions of the source. They can be useful, but news writers must avoid using them to put a potentially incorrect spin on statements.

BAD: "I support the Second Amendment," he warned his political rival.

"Warned" changes the statement from a declaration of a political stance into a potential threat to the rival's life. Use it only if that meaning was clear in the full context of the statement.

Mental states: Journalists are not mind readers. They can know what a person says, but not what's going on inside the person's head.

BAD: The sheriff thinks the thieves left the county.
BETTER: The sheriff said he thinks the thieves left the county.

BAD: Aliens from the planet ZuZu are living among us, the radio host believes.
BETTER: Aliens from the planet ZuZu are living among us, the radio host said.

BAD: The Cavs can come back from the 3-0 deficit in games, LeBron James thinks.
BETTER: The Cavs can come back from the 3-0 deficit in games, LeBron James said.

Distinctions matter. The sheriff may be lying -- for example, to give the suspects a false sense of security. The radio host may pretend to believe in fantasies to build an audience. James may not believe a comeback's realistic, but also may not want to express doubt in public.

You can use "believe," "think," "feel" and similar words as verbs of attribution occasionally, but be careful.

Formality: Students who flinch at repeating "said" often turn to "stated" as an alternative. But that word has a hint of stuffiness; it's more common in uses such as "The Constitution states that presidents must be at least 35 years old" than "Coach Collins states that basketball is fun." Limit its use to formal documents or words spoken from a prepared script.

Physical impossibilities

Have you ever seen a ventriloquist's dummy talk while the ventriloquist is drinking a glass of water? Sorry if this bursts your bubble of belief, but it's a trick. The ventriloquist is using a trick glass. For example, a glass with very thick walls can be filled to the brim, looking impressive to the audience, while holding only a few teaspoons of liquid. Rather than drinking, the ventriloquist just pours the liquid into the front of the mouth, around the gums, while speaking from the back. Once the speech is over, the ventriloquist swallows quickly.

The point? To the audience, it looks impossible. And it is. Your mouth can't do two things at once. And yet some verbs of attribution imply the opposite.

BAD: "I won't have to take a bath today," she laughed.
BETTER: "I won't have to take a bath today," she said with a laugh.
BETTER: "I won't have to take a bath today," she joked.

According to

"According to" isn't a verb of attribution (it's a preposition), but it can serve the same purpose. Some writing guides say it carries the same whiff of doubt as "claimed," and should be used sparingly for the same reason. Whether "according to" is as dangerous as "claimed" or not, we recommend limiting its use. This may just be a personal bias, but it seems out of place in some uses.

Me, myself and I: Don't use "according to" when quotes contain first-person references.

BAD: “I am ready to go,” according to Bob Smith.
BETTER: “I am ready to go,” Bob Smith said.

Documents: Avoid using “according to” with people in general. It is acceptable when attributing to documents.

Paraphrase: The use of “according to” is more common with paraphrases than with direct quotes.

Syntax errors

“Shared” and “expressed” cannot be used as verbs of attribution. They pair with objects and emotions, not statements.

BAD: “I love oranges,” she expressed.
BETTER: “I love oranges,” she said.
BETTER: She expressed her love for oranges by insisting they be served with every meal.

BAD: “You should be careful,” she shared.
BETTER: “You should be careful,” she said.
BETTER: She shared her fears with the audience.

Grammar errors

In the active voice, “said” cannot take the preposition “by.”

BAD: “Jones is our best receiver,” said by coach Will Smith.
BETTER: “Jones is our best receiver,” coach Will Smith said.

Wordiness

Attribution of paraphrases is improved when the writer gets right to the point.

BAD: He talked about the importance of smiling when greeting customers.
WORSE: He talked about how it’s important to smile when greeting customers.
BETTER: It’s important to smile when greeting customers, he said.

BAD: He talked about how many times he’d visited Atlanta.
BETTER: He’d visited Atlanta five times, he said.

As we used to write again and again on students' first drafts: **Don't tell me what they talked ABOUT; tell me what they SAID.**

Other aspects of attribution

Even when you stick to forms of “to say,” attribution can trip you up.

Tense

Standard print news writing puts all attributive verbs in the past tense. The words must have been spoken in the past, or you couldn’t quote them, logic says. This is the approach we encourage.

“I am an old man,” Harold Stassen said.

Some writers and editors prefer present-tense attribution at least some of the time. If the entire story’s written as if it were unfolding in front of the reader, all verbs should be in present tense.

Since that approach is generally restricted to features, some believe present-tense attribution signals a feature style of writing, even when other types of verbs are past tense. Magazines sometimes adopt this approach.

Finally, broadcast, especially TV, tends to opt for present tense when possible. It goes along with a general desire to emphasize the immediacy of broadcast reporting.

Harold Stassen says the time for revolution has passed.

Whichever you chose, the most important thing is to be consistent. Hopping back and forth distracts the reader. However, some exceptions are necessary.

Even if you're writing for an organization that prefers present tense, past tense is required when other elements in the sentence pinpoint the time or location of the quote.

BAD: "I am an old man," Harold Stassen says Tuesday.
BETTER: "I am an old man," Harold Stassen said Tuesday.

BAD: "I am an old man," Harold Stassen says at a Republican fundraiser.
BETTER: "I am an old man," Harold Stassen said at a Republican fundraiser.

Similarly, even if your organization prefers past tense, present is required when you want to not only indicate that a statement has been made repeatedly, but also imply that it will continue to be made.

"I am an old man," Harold Stassen says during every speech.

Finally, some editors and writers prefer to use present tense when quoting documents (nowadays, that would include websites and videos), on the theory that written words have a permanence that makes them continuously in the act of communicating.

"No container shall be closer than 20 feet to an open flame," the law says.

Some would use present tense when naming the document itself as the source, but past when naming the writer.

"No one lives forever," Leia Soong wrote in her latest book.

AP has waffled on these choices. In the professional world, you'll use whatever your employer prefers. Our advice? Use present tense when the source is the document, past tense when it's a person, unless your professor tells you otherwise.

Placement

Grammatically, attribution can come at the beginning or end of a quote, or at natural breaks in the middle. However, putting attribution in front of a direct quote puts more emphasis on who said it than on what was said. Also, the contents of the quote provide the transition from the preceding paragraph; it's best to show that connection sooner. Finally, a general rule of professional writing is to put the best stuff at the start; attribution is seldom the most interesting thing about a sentence.

For those reasons, news writers should generally put attribution in the middle or at the end of a quote.

BAD: Harold Stassen said, "I am an old man with a weak heart but a strong soul."
BETTER: "I am an old man with a weak heart," Harold Stassen said, "but a strong soul."
BETTER: "I am an old man," Harold Stassen said, "with a weak heart but a strong soul."
BETTER: "I am an old man with a weak heart but a strong soul," Harold Stassen said.

We're not saying you can never put attribution in front of a direct quote, but do so very rarely. It's the same as burying your quote beneath a whole sentence; burying it behind attribution just means you're not putting it 6 feet deep.

A careful reader of the examples above will detect subtle differences in emphasis depending on where the attribution was placed. In the middle of a quote, the attribution acts as an enforced pause. Even when placed in the middle of a sentence instead of between one sentence and another, the attribution makes the reader consider the part of the quote before it as a complete thought, at least for a moment.

No rule can tell you how to decide whether and where to make the reader pause in every quote. However, we can provide some tips.

- Put attribution as close to the start of a direct quote as you can if you are bringing in a source for the first time or if you're quoting a source you last referred to many paragraphs before. Any time readers encounter a direct quote, they will immediately try to figure out who's talking. You don't want to leave them hanging for long if it's not clear.
- Also put attribution close to the start of the quote if you're switching sources. For example, if you quoted or otherwise referred to Source A in one paragraph and then quote Source B, let the reader know about the switch. You don't want to mislead readers.
- With quotes of two or more medium to long sentences, put the attribution no later than the end of the first sentence. Again, you don't want to leave readers hanging.

BAD: "I am an old man with a weak heart but a strong soul. I can't lift more than a coffee cup and it takes me three tries to get out of an armchair. Still, I dare any man to keep me from speaking my mind," Stassen said.

BETTER: “I am an old man with a weak heart but a strong soul,” Stassen said. “I can’t lift more than a coffee cup and it takes me three tries to get out of an armchair. Still, I dare any man to keep me from speaking my mind.”

- Put attribution at the end of a quote if it’s short or there’s no natural break.

  BAD: “I went,” the boy said, “to the store.”
  BETTER: “I went to the store,” the boy said.

- Put attribution somewhere in the middle or even (shudder) at the beginning if you’re using the quote as the last graf of the story. We talked about that in the chapter on beginnings and endings.

Frequency

For clarity's sake, if no other reason, every direct quotation should have attribution directly attached.

BAD: Jose Martinez loves his children.
“I spend an hour with them every day, at least.”
BETTER: Jose Martinez loves his children.
“I spend an hour with them every day, at least,” he said.

Again, this is a guidance that you may begin to discard as you move on to writing longer-form pieces. But it's never wrong to add attribution to every direct quotation, and it helps avoid confusing the audience.

We’ve said attribution should be provided for all potentially disputed facts unless the writer witnessed or verified them. Under that guidance, many facts don’t need attribution. If an event organizer’s posted information lists a starting time, you don’t have to hedge in most cases; there's no dispute.

BAD: The fundraiser begins at 7 p.m., a spokesman said.
BETTER: The fundraiser begins at 7 p.m.

If that makes you nervous, there’s an easy fix.

BEST: The fundraiser is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m.

Some stories have a lot of potentially disputed facts, though. String together enough “he said” attributions and, as with midges, what’s trivial individually becomes annoying in swarms.

BAD: Two men entered the bodega at noon, police said. They pulled a gun on the clerk, police said. They ordered her to hand over the money in the till, police said. When she was slow to respond, they shot her twice, grabbed the money and ran, police said.

Combining sentences may help.

BETTER: Two men entered the bodega at noon, pulled a gun on the clerk and demanded the money in the till, police said. When she was slow to respond, they said, the men shot her twice, grabbed the money and ran.

Alternatively, you can block-attribute the whole thing.

BETTER: Police gave this version of the crime:

Two men entered the bodega at noon, pulled a gun on the clerk and demanded the money in the till. When she was slow to respond, they shot her twice, grabbed the money and ran.

In these examples, attribution is especially important because the statements bear on a crime. Every detail could be important.

Most of your stories won’t have as much at stake. You can sometimes skip attaching attribution directly to a paraphrased statement if it’s clear in context -- for example, the attribution is given elsewhere in the same paragraph -- and the statements, while potentially in dispute, are uncontroversial.

The company picnic lasted until 7 p.m., Liu said. Employees set up a volleyball net and marked out a softball diamond with briefcases used as bases.

Finally, avoid redundant attribution. This is a repeat of advice from the Grammar Essentials(opens in new window) chapter.

BAD: "Every time a solider raised his head, an enemy sniper took a potshot," the lieutenant said. "We stayed under cover for more than two days," he added.
BETTER: "Every time a soldier raised his head, an enemy sniper took a potshot," the lieutentant said. "We stayed under cover for more than two days."

This is true even if the quote runs over more than one paragraph.

BAD: Every time a soldier raised his head, an enemy sniper took a potshot," the lieutentant said. "We stayed under cover for more than two days.

"When we finally emerged," he said, "it turned out the enemy had abandoned his position hours earlier."

BETTER: Every time a soldier raised his head, an enemy sniper took a potshot," the lieutentant said. "We stayed under cover for more than two days.

"When we finally emerged, it turned out the enemy had abandoned his position hours earlier."

When a quote runs over multiple paragraphs, the closing quotation mark is left off all grafs except the last.

Second-hand quotes

Ideally, a reporter gets quotes directly from the sources, whether those are people or documents. When that's not possible, special care must be taken with the attribution. For example, if you rely on a news release or an email for a direct quote, you must indicate that to the reader.

"We have no intention of reducing our production of propane, despite the explosion," company President Ritu Sehgal said in a news release.

"We have no intention of reducing our production of propane, despite the explosion," company President Ritu Sehgal wrote in an email.

Similarly, if you're using a direct quote or paraphrase you didn't hear or find in an original document, but only read in another media outlet's story, say that.

"We have no intention of reducing our production of propane, despite the explosion," company President Ritu Sehgal told CBS News.

The letter to the prosecutor asked her to give the senator's son special consideration, Fox News reported.

Don't confuse the writer of a story with the sources used.

BAD: Teen pregnancies are up 10% this year, Dan Dailey of the New York Times said.
BETTER: A government survey says teen pregnancies are up 10% this year, the New York Times reported.

Note the loss of the reporter's name. Because the point of attribution is to help readers decide how much to trust information, the name of an individual reporter is often unneeded. Also note the other change: The first version implied that the Times itself had come up with the 10% figure. The second make its clear that the Times was repeating information it got from somewhere else.

BEST: Teen pregnancies are up 10 percent this year, a government survey says.

Don't be lazy. If the New York Times reporter could get that survey, you probably can too. Go to the source.

Narrative

Narrative journalism -- nonfiction written in the style of fiction -- is beyond the scope of this textbook. We mention it here only to say that the rules of attribution are significantly different, as you'll learn if you take a class in magazine writing or similar topics.

Quotes in the story

Even the best quotes with great attribution can't be plunked down into a story willy-nilly.

Setups

Most quotes require a setup -- a sentence or more establishing the relevance to the story and providing any needed context. Setups come in many varieties.

Context

Some quotes would need parenthetical explanations if the setups didn't provide backstory or first references. In the examples below, the setup is needed to understand what the quotes are talking about.

> The boy stood on the burning deck.
> "This doesn't look good for our hero," he said.

> The valedictorian singled out her journalism teacher, Martin Frobisher.
> "He inspired me to change my career plans," she said. "I will think of him every time I get laid off by a newspaper."

Significance

Other setups explain the point for which the quote is evidence.

> Many witnesses blamed the clerk for starting the fight.
> "The customer was polite," said Mary Wilson, a sophomore engineering major. "The clerk just exploded out of nowhere."

Authority

A setup can establish the reason a particular source was used or why the words were worth quoting.

> Freshman marketing major Aisha Tyler was one of the first to arrive.
> "The whole room smelled like a sewer," she said. "I knew something was wrong."

> A philosophy professor put it most succinctly.
> "It stinks," Carson Weekly said.

Characterization

It can describe the nature of the quote.

> The senator downplayed the importance of the vote.
> "There are more amendments to be considered," she said. "The fight's not over."

Scene-setting

The setup may provide an image to accompany the words.

> Club president Deela Anwali grabbed the microphone with both hands.
> "Let's tear down the building and start fresh," she said.

Common errors

While there are many ways to use a quote well, most problems in this area fall into just two categories.

Repetition

The most common mistake is repeating ideas, or even exact words, in the setup and the quote.

> BAD: Many witnesses blamed the clerk for starting the fight.
> "I blame the clerk," said Mary Wilson, a sophomore engineering major. "He started it."

> BETTER: Many witnesses agreed on who was at fault.
> "I blame the clerk," said Mary Wilson, a sophomore engineering major. "He started it."

> BETTER: Many witnesses blamed the clerk.
> "He started it," said Mary Wilson, a sophomore engineering major.

> BAD: Vikas Begari, a graduate student in digital science, said he loves when people of other ethnicities take the time to learn about Indian culture.

"I love the Diwali event," he said. "I love to meet diverse groups of people and teach them Indian culture."

BETTER: For Vikas Begari, a graduate student in digital science, the chance to share his background was important.
"I love to meet diverse groups of people and teach them Indian culture," he said.

Even when exact words aren't repeated, a setup and quote can be too similar.

BAD: Dean Halle Berry prefers three-day-a-week classes for freshmen.
"Courses that meet Monday, Wednesday and Friday are the best choice for students in their first year," she said.

The quote doesn't add any information; it just says the same thing in different words. Either the setup should be less specific or the quote should provide more detail.

BETTER: Dean Halle Berry believes freshman have special scheduling requirements.
"Courses that meet Monday, Wednesday and Friday are the best choice," she said.

BETTER: Dean Halle Berry prefers three-day-a-week classes for freshmen.
"It eases the transition from high school to the looser rules of college," she said.

Just don't make a setup too vague.

BAD: Club president Deela Anwali had something to say.
"Let's tear down the building and start fresh," she said.

BETTER: Club president Deela Anwali rejected the compromises.
"Let's tear down the building and start fresh," she said.

Ex post loco

Roughly translated from Latin, "ex post loco" means "after the quote." We use it to refer to a common result of poor quote setups.

BAD: "Quiet, serene -- it's the best time to study," he said about early mornings before his roommate is awake.
BETTER: He treasures early mornings before his roommate is awake.
"Quite, serene -- it's the best time to study," he said.

Ex post loco explanations withhold needed information from readers. At best, readers have been slowed up by having to guess at what a quote means. At worst, they've guessed wrong, and the ex post loco explanation forces them to re-evaluate what they've read.

Good writing permits readers to read without having to stop and reconfigure their conception of the story. Well, that's not always true. Writers may choose to surprise readers with a fact or statement that throws everything that came before into a new light. But that's a deliberate choice in service of the story, not just tardiness with explanations.

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23.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Poorly chosen quotes are worse than no quotes at all. Avoid these problems:
  - Quotes that just provide basic facts
  - Quote fragments
  - Fluff
  - Definitions
  - Mission statements
  - Overly long quotes
- Trim quotes to improve them. Especially watch for these symptoms:
  - Repetition
  - Throwaway beginnings
  - Summary endings
- Avoid repetitive setup-quote-setup-quote stacks.
- Choose quotes that provide information more clearly or concisely than you can, that reveal personality or emotion, or that present an opinion.
- Let good quotes shine by putting them in their own paragraphs.
- Surgery -- adding words inside square brackets or cutting some and replacing them with ellipses -- can help with quotes that need context or need other work, such as eliminating words your publication refuses to print. But be conservative about doing this.
- You may also use surgery to avoid making your sources sound dumb:
- Remove hesitations such as "um" or "er." Consider whether uses of "like" or "you know" meet the same standard.
- Do not attempt dialect spellings such as "gonna."
- Cut false starts, especially at the beginning of quotes.
- If your source does not speak "proper" English, be cautious about your choices.
- Public relations has some different standards. Fluff and mission statements may not be great writing, but may serve other purposes. Surgery on quotes is usually done invisibly.
- Keep verbs of attribution simple; "said" is best in most cases.
- Avoid verbs of attribution that may carry unwanted connotations.
- In print and online, basic journalism usually puts attribution in the past tense.
- Avoid putting attribution at the start of quotes; it's rarely the most interesting part of the sentence.
- For long quotes, it's usually best to put the attribution close to (but not at) the beginning.
- Each direct quote should have its own attribution, directly attached to the quote.
- Avoid setups that repeat the words or meaning of the quote.
- If a quote needs context, put it in the setup or inside the quote, not after it.

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23.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 23.3.1

Select a transcript of a speech or Ted Talk. Within it, pick out a few passages that seem to express the most important points. Each passage should have at least three sentences.

Then apply what you read in this chapter to the quotes. Can you trim repetition, unneeded openings, false starts or other issues? Do you need all the sentences, or would just one or two provide the gist? Where would you put the attribution? Does the quote need context? If so, how and where would you put it?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

24: Grace Notes

24.1: Grace Notes

24.2: Chapter Review

24.3: Optional Exercises

Why Grace Matters

Being correct and concise isn't enough. In journalism and public relations, we should want the audience to focus on our content, not our writing. We should question anything that gets in the way. In calling this chapter "Grace," we're referring to practices that improve the reception of our stories but go beyond hard grammar rules.

The distinction between grammar and grace is lost on some teachers and writers. For example, they may turn advice about how to use passive voice into a crusade to ban it. Personal peeves -- whether passed down from previous generations of pedants or dreamt up fresh -- are declared law. A journalism instructor at another school posted an online list of AP style essentials that falsely used the stylebook's authority to lend weight to the pseudo-rule against ending a sentence with a preposition. That's behavior up with which we will not put.

We believe languages grow and evolve. The English language is not constrained to the meaning and use of words a hundred years ago; much less so to the grammar of the ancient Romans. And we think journalism, in particular, should be written in the language of the people.

However, student writers need guidance. The advice here will add polish to your work.

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24.1: Grace Notes

Grace in practice

This chapter kind of bridges a gap between the ones on grammar and AP essentials, which we presented to you as absolute rules, and the one on wordiness, where we said that things can be grammatical but unneeded.

Writing diseases

Every writer has persistent peccadilloes -- bad habits that show up in every story.

Dash rash

You may rely -- too often -- on one type -- or kind -- of punctuation -- a dash, for example. The dash seems to be the most common offender, but we've seen it with semicolons as well. (Our own bugaboo was parentheses.)

The overuse of these less-common types of punctuation becomes noticeable to readers. That's a bad thing: You want readers to focus on the words, not the flyspecks.

Don't try to defend this problem as being part of your "writing style." In professional communications, the audience comes first. Anything that diverts the audience's attention from the content is not style; it's annoyance.

However, it's true the use of a dash -- specifically one of a length called an "em dash" -- has become commonly cited evidence that a piece of writing was generated by AI. This is an overreaction. Don't avoid dashes when they're useful.

Comma vomit

The Grammar Essentials chapter was filled with comma rules. Comma vomit occurs when students become so confused that they spew commas with the abandon of a toddler who's mixed two quarts of grape juice with a hour on amusement park rides. These effluences end up in the oddest places and stink up the story.

If commas are your bane, force yourself to stop before each one and ask: Why?

Which itch

We're talking about a tendency, which can be hard to avoid, to insert, often out of place, clauses, whether needed or not, in your sentences.

The more clauses you use, the more likely you are to make mistakes. The problem isn't only overuse, though. It's also rearranging clauses to require commas (see, those troublemakers are everywhere).

"After the party, he drove home" is an acceptable sentence. However, you could eliminate the comma by making it "He drove home after the party."

That sentence is so short and simple that it would be hard to mess it up. But longer clauses, out of order, are likely to lead you astray. If you're afflicted with which itch, make it a point to review every draft once just to look for sentences clogged with clauses.

Sesquipedaliamania

Sesquipedalian words are a foot and a half long. That's the Latin translation; metaphorically it applies to long, multi-syllable words.

We also warned about long words in the Wordiness chapter. But sometimes a long or obscure word just fits. By this point in the book, you've probably noticed that we like them -- hence "sesquipedalian," for one.

However, using long or obscure words only works if you know what they mean. Occasionally we'd run into a student who hoped to appear erudite, but was overconfident about their vocabulary. Big words used incorrectly blemish writing. When in doubt, consult a dictionary. Even when not in doubt, consult a dictionary; you may be overconfident.

Confusion

Anything in your story that creates a stumbling block for the reader, however momentary, raises the risk that they'll give up and move on.

False ranges

Phrases such as “from A to Z” are ranges; that’s what the “from” and “to” imply. A range has beginning and ending points: from high to low, from Chicago to Minneapolis, from kindergarten to eighth grade.

False ranges use “from” and “to,” but refer to random items.

> BAD: The toys ranged from balls to dolls.
> BETTER: The toys included balls and dolls.
>
> BAD: He knew everything from mathematics to astronomy.
> BETTER: He knew mathematics, astronomy and other sciences.

Informal English has embraced false ranges. Graceful professional communications should retain the distinction.

Vague numbers

“A number of” and its less wordy synonym, “some,” provide limited information. “Some yachts failed to finish the race” implies others did, but that’s all. When possible, add information and clarity. In order of decreasing size:

- **Most** yachts failed to finish.
- **Many** yachts failed to finish.
- **Several** yachts failed to finish.
- **A few** yachts failed to finish.
- **A couple** yachts failed to finish.

We've seen people argue that "a couple" is no longer limited to its literal meaning of "two." Pshaw!

Endless sentences

Journalism students are often advised to write conversationally. Instructors want them to abandon the stuffy language of academe. The advice can be taken too literally. Unrehearsed spoken language is prone to poor choices. In particular, “and” can lose its lexical value, becoming closer to “um” and “er.”

> BAD: The board met last week, and it decided to vote on the housing bill, and the chairman tried to stop the vote but couldn’t, and the bill passed 6-3.
> BETTER: The board met last week. It decided to vote on the housing bill. The chairman tried to stop the vote but couldn’t. The bill passed 6-3.

No grammar or punctuation rules were violated, but the string of sentence units becomes hard to follow. Even combining just two sentence units with a FANBOYS conjunction can be confusing if the topics aren’t very closely related.

Linking multiple sentence units with “and” also makes it harder for you to spot other problems. In the example above, splitting the units apart reveals the staccato nature of the short sentences. Smooth writing will vary sentence length.

> BEST: Over the chairman’s objections, the board voted on the housing bill at last week’s meeting. It passed 6-3.

Floating prepositions

The English language has relatively few inflections (changes in the form of a word to reflect its grammatical function or attribute). Instead, it relies a lot on the order of words or phrases within a sentence to indicate such things as subject and object.

Simple modifiers, for example, generally go directly in front of the words they modify unless they’re linked by a form of the verb “to be” (the red boat; the boat is red). Prepositional phrases generally go directly after the words they modify. It’s the placement of prepositional phrases that frequently trips student writers.

> BAD: Many students become upset when their seats are taken at our school.
> BETTER: Many students at our school become upset when their seats are taken.
>
> BAD: Property owners will learn more about their own backyards in Burlington, Kentucky, Saturday as wildlife experts conduct how-to sessions.

BETTER: Property owners will learn more about their own backyards Saturday as wildlife experts conduct how-to sessions in Burlington, Kentucky.

In both sets of examples, the first is potentially confusing. Are the backyards in Burlington, or the sessions? The second sentence makes it clear: the sessions.

Showing cause

“Because,” “since,” and “as” all can be used in proper English grammar to express causation. Using them interchangeably, however, may make some sentences confusing and will definitely irk some instructors.

“Since” can refer to causation or time.

He went home since he was tired.

He has been home since last week.

Readers wouldn’t be confused by the different meanings of “since” in those examples. However, that can happen.

BAD: He has been out of work since the bank failed.
BETTER: He has been out of work because the bank failed.
BETTER: He has been out of work ever since the bank failed.

Obviously, you wouldn’t want to use “since” in sentences where it would be confusing. Defining what those sentences are is difficult. We’ve read the AP Stylebook’s explanation many times but still don’t know what it’s trying to say. Rather than teach the ambiguity, many writing instructors ban the use of “since” except when referring to a passage of time.

While “since” has two main uses, “as” has many meanings and functions -- almost two dozen in one common dictionary. Showing cause is low on the list. Even Merriam-Webster, which cites researching showing “as” = “because” is rarely confusing, relegates that definition to seventh out of eight.

Best advice? Don’t use “as” to show a causal connection. The risk of confusion is too great. (And it can sound too formal, almost pompous.) Use “because” in most cases. Avoid “since” entirely if that’s a bugaboo of your instructor or boss.

While we're looking at "as," let's throw in another quirky use, as a kind of conjunction: "He went to the store, as he was hungry." What's the "as" doing there? Does it mean "because" or "while" or something else? Don't make your readers sort it out; avoid using "as" in such constructions.

Precedence

Consider this phrase: "the six pint-sized green wooden toys." Nothing odd about it, right? But then consider this variation: "the wooden green pint-sized six toys." If you're a native English speaker, that phrase will seem a bit off.

That's because English speakers have developed a specific order for how adjectives are ordered when more than one appears in front of a noun. This order, or precedence, is required for phrases to work smoothly in writing. That's not to say you can't deliberately break it, but do so only if you want to put special emphasis on one quality.

Curiously, different sources provide slightly different lists. Here's an amalgam of several:

Table 24.1.1 Order of adjectives

Place in order	Category	Examples
1.	Qualifier	a, an, the, that, those, my, his, our
2.	Number	one, six, 21, first, fourth
3.	Opinion	pretty, ugly, smart, well-bred
4.	Size	huge, tiny, pint-sized
5.	Physical quality	battered, rough, smooth, shiny
6.	Shape	oval, wide, square
7.	Age	old, young, ancient, new
8.	Color	green, red, orange
9.	Proper name (usually country or religion)	American, Jewish
10	Material	wooden, metal, linen
11.	Type	eight-sided, U-shaped
12.	Purpose	cooking, serving, hockey

Repetition

Maybe this has happened to you: You're trying to get to sleep when you become aware of a sound you hadn't noticed before. Tick, tick, tick. There's a clock somewhere. Tick, tick, tick. The repetition isn't soothing; it's annoying. Tick, tick, tick. Repetition in your writing can have the same effect on readers.

Pronouns are your friends

You've already learned that you should use an adult's full name on first reference and only the last name on second reference. But that rule doesn't mean you have to keep using the last name over and over. The English language gifts us with pronouns. Use them at least as often as you use last names.

> BAD: Police accused Edith Galt of shoplifting. Galt stood trial in 2013. Galt was found guilty and sentenced to three years in prison. Galt will be released next month.
> BETTER: Police accused Edith Galt of shoplifting. She stood trial in 2013. Found guilty, Galt was sentenced to three years in prison. She will be released next month.

The same advice applies to the names of organizations. Don't endlessly repeat the shortened version of the name; use "it" and the variants as well.

Synonyms are your friends

The use of pronouns can become repetitious, too. And sometimes the antecedent for a pronoun isn't clear. Use synonyms to add clarity and variety.

> BAD: The Board of Trustees will meet Monday to consider revision of board bylaws. The board last met in June, when the board postponed action because of disagreement over antidiscrimination provisions.
> BETTER: The Board of Trustees will meet Monday to consider revision of its bylaws. The trustees last met in June, when they postponed action because of disagreement over antidiscrimination provisions.

> BAD: Ford Motor Co. recorded a $32 million profit in the second quarter, Ford reported. It was the first profit Ford has made in two years.
> BETTER: Ford Motor Co. recorded a $32 million profit in the second quarter, the company reported. It was the first profit the automaker has made in two years.

Word choice

The English language gives us the possibility of large vocabularies. Use that wisely.

Weak main verbs

These are forms of the verb “to be”: is, are, was, were. Perfectly good English words, in common use. Too commonly used in writing, however.

Good writing often can be made better by replacing some forms of “to be” with stronger verbs. Stronger usually means more specific. Sometimes, that may require more rewriting.

> BAD: George was late.
> BETTER: George arrived late.
>
> BAD: George Clooney was the star of many movies.
> BETTER: George Clooney starred in many movies.
>
> BAD: He was responsible for editing all manuscripts.
> BETTER: He edited all manuscripts.
>
> BAD: Marla is afraid of spiders.
> BETTER: Marla fears spiders.

While "is" and its siblings form the biggest gang of weak verbs, others sap the vitality of sentences as well. Common offenders: has and have.

> BAD: The soup has a tendency to arrive at the table cold.
> BETTER: The soup tends to arrive at the table cold.
>
> BAD: Movies can have an influence on children's thoughts about gender.
> BETTER: Movies can influence children's thoughts about gender.

As those examples show, weak verbs can contribute to wordiness as well. Our advice in the Wordiness chapter to avoid starting sentences with "there is" or similar constructions could also fit here.

Show, don't tell

"Show, don’t tell” is classic writing advice.

> BAD: He reacted angrily.
> BETTER: He threw a chair across the room and howled.
>
> BAD: He is passionate about opera.
> BETTER: He owns 500 recordings of “Nessun Dorma,” has a map on the wall of his room with push-pins marking cities where he’s attended the opera, and dressed as Pavarotti for Halloween.

The “bad” versions tell the readers what someone did, but they don’t provide details. By showing what happened, the “better” versions allow readers to form mental pictures.

A common warning sign of telling rather than showing: a form of the verb "to be" followed by an adjective, as in "He is passionate."

Passive voice

Remember what passive and active mean. A sentence in active voice usually has the structure subject-verb-object. You might also think of it as who did it, what was done, what it was done to.

> I caught the ball.

In passive voice, the order is rearranged to object-verb-subject or what it was done to-what was done-who did it. Sometimes the last part is left out, masking the identity of the perpetrator.

> The ball was caught by me.

Mistakes were made.

Two clues to recognizing passive voice:

- The main verb is accompanied by a helper, a form of the verb “to be” such as “is,” “are,” “was” or “were.”
- If there is a phrase after the main verb, it’s introduced by the word “by.”

BAD: The arrest was made by Sgt. Joan Didion.
BETTER: Sgt. Joan Didion made the arrest.

The passive voice isn’t inherently evil. Sometimes it’s worth spending the extra two words to put emphasis on the the thing acted upon. For example:

A fourth suspect was arrested Monday in connection with the murder of a Stow piano teacher.

If the murder is already familiar to readers, the newsiest part of the story is the expansion of the list of suspects. And since “arrested” implies police were involved, the subject isn’t needed.

However, using the passive voice needlessly or relying on it too often can weaken your story and increase the wordiness significantly.

Problematic words

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in “Alice in Wonderland,” “it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.”

Dumpty’s clearly not a professional communicator. We restrict words to uses that will be understandable *to our audience*. We also are mindful of the expectations of those readers. Writers for one media outlet -- say, Buzzfeed -- may be free to ride the waves of language change. Those working for another -- a mid-sized daily news outlet or a public relations agency, perhaps -- may have to be more conservative.

Some of the distinctions explained here are fading, more or less, in colloquial English. However, retaining them will not make your writing less understandable to anyone, and it will make that writing more acceptable -- and you, more employable.

Affect/effect: “Affect” is more commonly used as a verb:

The rain affected play at the tennis tournament.

“Effect” is more commonly used as a noun:

The rain had an effect on play at the tennis tournament.

Both have rarer alternative meanings. “Affect” as a noun refers to a type of psychological state: People with depression often have a flat affect. “Effect” as a verb means something like “to bring about”: The prisoners effected their escape.

A part/apart: Split when referring to one piece of a whole; one word when referring to separation or to mean "except for."

Earning badges is a part of being a Girl Scout.

They were apart for two years before the reunion.

Apart from Gonzalez, all the women were accountants.

Center: In common speech, “center on” and “center around” mean the same thing. Careful writing avoids the second because it is considered physically illogical.

Compare: Careful writers use “compare with” when considering the pluses and minuses; they reserve “compare to” for declarations of similarity.

Compared with the Apple iPhone, Android devices are cheaper.

He compared her to a drunken walrus.

In the second example, he presumably did not produce a list of similarities and differences or advantages and disadvantages, woman vs. walrus. Rather, he used metaphor or simile: “She crawled vaguely in the direction of her bed like a drunken walrus.”

Comprise/compose: “Comprise” puts the whole before the parts; composed, the opposite.

> The United States comprises 50 states and the District of Columbia.
>
> Fifty states and the District of Columbia compose the United States.

The difference may be hard to remember because the latter is often used in passive voice.

> The United States is composed of 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Criteria: The Latin plural form of the singular “criterion.”

> The main criteria for entrance are grades and community service.
>
> The main criterion for entrance is community service.

Data: The Latin plural form of the singular “datum,” so traditionally it was used only with plural verbs and pronouns. The AP Stylebook, however, says “data” can sometimes be considered a collective noun taking the singular. The distinction: Use the plural when referring to multiple data points; use singular when referring to a unit.

> The data are sorted into categories.
>
> The data is ready for analysis.

In the first example, individual bits of data are manipulated. In the second, the data as a whole will be analyzed.

Due to: Speakers of American English generally treat “due to” and “because of” as synonyms. Particularly picky people and some dictionaries say such usage is informal. They would use “due to” only with forms of the verb "to be" and NEVER use "because of" with those verbs. Another way to think about it: use "due to" when “caused by” or “resulting from” could be used instead.

> Because of ice on the tracks, the train was late.
>
> The delay was due to (caused by) ice on the tracks.
>
> The delay due to (resulting from) icing could have been avoided.

Everyday, every day: As one word, an adjective that's a synonym for "common":

> Drinking coffee is an everyday occurrence for many college students.

As two words, an adverb that's a synonym for "each day":

> Many college students drink coffee every day.

Female, male: Generally restrict to use as an adjective, even when referring to people of varying ages.

> BAD: Sixteen females were sent to prison.
> BETTER: Sixteen women were sent to prison.
> BETTER: Sixteen female prisoners were captured.

Fewer/less: Use “fewer” for things you can count, “less” for those you can’t.

> He had fewer coins in his pocket.
>
> He had less money than before.

If you’re thinking, “But I can count my money,” consider it this way. If you have a pile of coins, you can count one at a time: one coin, two coins, three coins. You can’t count “one money, two monies, three monies.”

Lay/lie: Both refer to one thing resting atop another. The difference is between whether the “thing resting” is the object or subject of the verb.

> I lay the books on the table at the end of every workday.
>
> Gillian Hobart lies on the couch every afternoon.

The trickier part is that “lay” is also the past tense of “lie.”

- I laid the books on the table an hour ago.

- Gillian Hobart lay on the couch last night.

How can you remember the difference? If you're like us, you often can't. Here's where we say again, synonyms are your friends: I put the books on the table, Gillian Hobart rested on the couch.

Lend/loan: AP, and some others, use “lend” as the verb, “loan” only as a noun.

> Will you lend me your book?
>
> I got a loan from the bank.

Literally: This actually happened in this manner. Do not use for metaphorical events.

> BAD: He literally exploded in rage. (Likely only in cartoons.)
> BETTER: He exploded in rage.

Try: Logically, the phrase is “try to,” not “try and.”

> BAD: He’s going to try and beat the grandmaster.
> BETTER: He’s going to try to beat the grandmaster.

Unique: In common speech, “unique” is coming close to meaning just “rare.” In careful writing, maintain the “one of a kind” definition.

> BAD: The jewel is very unique.
> BETTER: The jewel is unique.
>
> BAD: This unique jewel is one of only six like it in the world.
> BETTER: This rare jewel is one of only six like it in the world.
>
> BAD: The song is a little bit unique.
> BETTER: The song is a little bit unusual.

Things can’t be a “little bit” unique any more than someone can be a little bit pregnant.

Verbal: Put into words, which can be spoken or written. Communications by mouth alone are “oral.”

Where: Refers to location.

> BAD: College is a time where one can feel isolated.
> BETTER: College is a time when one can feel isolated.

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24.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- Identify your own bad writing habits, whether that's overuse of commas, excessive clauses or something else, and give them special attention.
- While all the items mentioned in this chapter are good advice, these are the issues most commonly seen in students' writing:
- False ranges: "From" and "to" should only be used when referring to a range that has clear beginning and ending points.
- "And" abuse: Be conservative in using "and" to stitch complete sentences together.
- Floating prepositions: Keep prepositional phrases close to the words they modify; don't always stick them at the end of the sentence.
- Pronouns are your friends: Avoid using someone's last name consistently; mix it up with pronouns.
- Synonyms are your friends: Avoid using the full names of organizations consistently; mix it up with synonyms.
- Weak main verbs: Look for ways to replace forms of "to be" with more specific, stronger verbs.
- You should be able to articulate the difference between these word pairs:
  - affect/effect
  - a part/apart
  - compare with/compare to
  - every day/everday
  - fewer/less
  - lend/loan
- Things center "on" a point, not "around" it.
- The common phrase is "try to" do something, not "try and."
- Use "literally" and "unique" only in their literal meanings.
- Use "where" only to refer to location.

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24.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 24.3.1

Having completed this chapter along with those on grammar and AP essentials as well as wordiness, you should be capable of spotting and fixing the most common errors in student writing.

Your instructor will give you an example of a poorly written story, one deliberately salted with mistakes. Working on your own or in a small group, identify all the issues you find and suggest fixes. Then compare your results with your instructor's rundown.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

25: Quality Control

25.1: Quality Control

25.2: Chapter Review

25.3: Optional Exercises

Why Proofreading Matters

You've written your story. Are you ready to submit it?

WAIT!

"Proofreading" is the practice of reviewing a piece of writing for errors. A "proof" is a quick printing of a story or page. Newspapers once had people whose only job was reading proofs to spot typos, broken type and other mistakes. Those jobs are gone. Increasingly, proofreading is every writer's job.

Having been taught a rule doesn't mean you will always follow it. We make mistkaes ... um, mistakes. (That misspelling wasn't deliberate. It was a typo -- a slip of the finger -- discovered while proofreading this section.)

Word processing software can check your writing for spelling and grammar errors, but it's far from perfect. Learning to proofread your work is your best defense against error.

We already told you readers are quick to pounce on mistakes in your writing. And, presumably, your instructor goes over your stories with a fine-tooth comb. If that's not enough to persuade you to proofread carefully, think about the job market.

Each year, thousands of students just like you graduate with degrees in journalism or public relations or comm studies. Resumes flood every job opening. Employers deal with the deluge by practicing the same kind of satisficing we mentioned in the Story Formulas chapter. Needing to winnow their choices, they look for any excuse to throw out candidates. The jobseekers whose resumes and cover letters are spotless give employers one less reason to cull.

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25.1: Quality Control

Proofreading

Proofreading is not as simple as scrolling back to the start of your story and giving it a quick read.

Fool your brain

It's easy to miss mistakes, especially when you're reading your own work. These tricks can fight back.

Finish writing first

Don’t start proofreading -- looking for typos, misspellings, grammar errors and so on -- until you’re satisfied with the overall organization and the content of each paragraph. Otherwise, you may end up rewriting a lot, which will create new errors and require more proofreading.

Take a break

Have you ever gotten a writing assignment back and found it marked with errors even though you know you proofread it before submitting? Were some of those errors fairly obvious? How could you have missed them?

Blame your brain. Our perception of the world around us is a two-step process. Our sensory organs -- eyes, ears, etc. -- collect and transmit information to the brain. Before that information enters our conscious awareness, however, it’s filtered. To cope with the massive amount of data each of us could have to process every second from all our senses, the filtering part of our brain cheats.

It focuses on a small part of the information and saves time by assuming the rest of it is unchanged. This is why the Invisible Gorilla trick works. That's an illusion in which ... well, we don't want to give it away. If you're curious, search that term.

The brain makes up its own interpretation of reality when reality doesn’t make sense. That’s why people with Capgras syndrome say their family and close friends have been replaced by impostors. It even fills in gaps, which is why you don’t realize your eyes have blind spots -- literally patches where no visual information is collected. As input from your eyes is processed, the brain fills in the gaps with what it guesses should go there.

When you write, your brain knows what you’re trying to say, even if your fingers don’t get it right. If you read your story just after you’ve finished it, your brain is likely to rely on what you *meant* to write rather than what’s actually on the screen.

Always take a break before you proofread. Try for at least 15 minutes. Walk away from the keyboard. Ride your bike. Get a snack.

When you come back, you will be more likely to look at the writing with a fresh eye -- and fewer blind spots.

Go backwards

Another way to force your brain to pay close attention is to read a story backwards -- word by word and sentence by sentence.

When you read it in the normal way, your brain jumps ahead of your eyes, guessing at what the next word is, and the one after that. It will fill in missing words or letters as it goes.

Reading in reverse disengages that kind of mental autocorrect.

Read it aloud

This helps in two ways. First, it’s engaging a different part of your brain than just reading. As with reading backwards, anything that jolts your mind out of its rut increases awareness. Second, good writing should be easy to read. If you stumble over wording as you recite, it likely means the passage needs to be rewritten.

Get help

You may be worried that asking someone else to look over your story is cheating. Not necessarily. Working journalists and PR professionals do this all the time. The important thing is that you're asking them to help you write better, not to write the story for you.

Ask a friend

There is nothing wrong with asking someone else to look at your assignment. Maybe your friend isn't a much better writer than you, though. Don't give up on the idea. Ask your friend to read the story aloud in front of you. Pay attention to the points where he or she stumbles or hesitates. You're not asking them to rewrite it for you; you're asking them to help you spot the parts that need rewriting.

Use technology ... carefully

Your word processing software almost certainly has a spellchecker and a grammar checker built in. We always told students to use them.

Use them prudently, however. Never click the options that let the software automatically correct things. Never accept the corrections it offers without looking at them carefully.

This two-part advice -- use but verify -- has gotten only more important with the increasing use of artificial intelligence. Used carefully and ethically, AI *could be* just the next step up from spell checking. It could not only point out possible spelling and grammar errors, but also suggest ways to tighten your writing and otherwise improve it, like a good editor. However, just as with the old-school spellcheckers, AI is not perfect. It can make dumb suggestions. Frighteningly, AI as it currently exists is given to not just making grammar mistakes but even hallucinating false information. The writer should always review every suggested change rather than letting technology have free rein.

Unfortunately, writers and editors can be too trusting, especially if they don't understand how AI works. Instead of seeing it as flawed software, they treat it as a kind of magic. As of the time this is being written -- early 2026 -- many news organizations are experimenting with ways to use AI to squeeze more content out of their employees and other resources. We don't think the technology is ready for that responsibility. AI is so eager to please that it will make up facts to fill its knowledge gaps, among other fatal weaknesses.

If your name is on a piece of writing, your editor and your audience have a right to assume you stand behind every word.

Caution

Considering how controversial AI is, your school or your instructor may ban its use entirely or put on tight restrictions. We understand the concern. Follow the rules for your course.

Ask your instructor

We've tried to make this textbook comprehensive and understandable. Your instructor tries to make class periods instructive. But what you're challenged to learn in this course is complex and difficult.

If you don't understand something, ask about it. If you're looking at an assignment and you know one part of it seems wrong, but you can't figure out why, ask. We presume your instructor has set some office hours: Use them.

In this video, Asha Glover urges you to go beyond the textbook. This may be a surprise, but we agree.



Video 25.1.1: Asha Glover: Go beyond the textbook | Watch on YouTube [youtu.be] | Transcript(opens in new window)

Checklist manifesto

Do you feel as if writing an error-free assignment is impossible because there are too many rules to remember? Think about flying a plane or doing major surgery. How many things do pilots and surgeons have to remember to get it right?

The consequences of their errors are far more serious than getting a low grade, yet mistakes happen.

Atul Gawande, a surgeon, worried about errors in the operating room and wanted to do better. He studied hospitals that had relatively few errors and doctors with relatively spotless records.

He found two types of errors. *Errors of ignorance* are those made when people don't know enough to get it right. *Errors of ineptitude* are those made because people don't use the knowledge they have.

Most errors in the professional world are the second kind. Knowledge is present, but people don't use it. If you've gotten this far in the book, you know (or should know) how to write clear, clean, concise stories. Why do you still make errors?

Because people forget, especially when possible errors are many and complex.

Flying a plane is pretty safe these days. What are pilots doing right?

In his book "Checklist Manifesto," Gawande tells the story of the Boeing B-17, the "Flying Fortress" of World War II. It was a decisive factor in the air war against Germany. But it almost never got to fight.

In its first test flight, what was then called the Model 299 took off but stalled at only 300 feet, turned on its side and crashed. The Army Air Corps turned to a rival aircraft company.

Study showed the Model 299 didn't have any mechanical failure. It was a complicated machine, though, and the pilot had a lot of things to monitor and adjust. In the confusion, the pilot forgot to release a lock on critical controls.

Some Army test pilots thought the plane deserved a second chance. They developed the first pilot's checklist. It fit on one small piece of paper, listing all the steps to a successful flight. And it worked. After more than a million miles of successful testing, the Army sent more than 12,000 Flying Fortresses to war.

That was the answer: a checklist. Gawande found the same simple tool was already used by people who build skyscrapers. He found hospitals using it and saving lives. He implemented it at his hospital, despite condescending doubts from other surgeons, and it worked.

Checklists work for writers, too. They improve your proofreading. Instead of trying to spot every error at the same time, the checklist makes you focus on one problem at a time. Put together correctly, a checklist zeroes in on the errors you're most prone to commit. That produces the most improvement for the time you spend reviewing. And checklists drill the rules into your head, reducing the likelihood you'll keep making the same mistakes.

Using a checklist

Your instructor may have given you a checklist already, even if it wasn't called that. A list of common student errors or of the types of mistakes that will earn penalties can be your writing checklist. If you did get something like that, you should certainly use it.

A checklist is even more effective if it's custom-made.

Identify your weaknesses

Look over your graded assignments. Tally the number of times each type of error appears.

From your tally, select about a half dozen of the most common error types. Don't make too many choices; be selective.

Another way to find items for your list: Review this textbook's chapters on grammar, AP style, wordiness and grace notes. Did you recognize your own writing in any of our bad examples? Are you infected with which itch?

Make the list

Do you understand what each error was, and how you can fix it? If not, go back to this book and review.

Once you’re confident that you know what you’re looking for and how to fix it, type your 10 items.

The order doesn’t matter much; you’ll go through all 10 every time.

What does matter is the format. It helps to put a box or a circle or an underlined space in front of each item, because you’re literally going to check off each item.

Use the list

When you’re ready to proofread, start with the first item on your list. Read the story carefully. If you find an error, mark it in some way and move on to the rest of the story. When you’re at the end, go back and fix each instance. Now you can check off that item on your list and move on to No. 2.

The key is to tackle one type of error at a time.

Revise the list

Checklists for writers should evolve. After each assignment is graded, compare the corrections with your checklist.

Did you make mistakes that are on your list? Can you figure out why? Do you need to rewrite that item on the list to help you remember what to look for?

Keep using the checklist through all your writing classes, on stories you write for student media and in the professional world. Over time, the items on the list will change. You’ll conquer your worst bad habits, allowing you to add lesser ones to the checklist.

Here’s what a checklist might look like:

- Capitalization of titles
- Too many uses of “that”
- Misspelled names
- Two sentences joined with just a conjunction
- Too many clauses
- Periods and commas not inside closing quotation marks
- Sentences beginning with “there”

Managing your expectations

You're going to make mistakes.

In decades of editing articles from both students and professionals, we can't recall encountering any one longer than a handful of paragraphs that didn't need some editing, even if only to fix a comma somewhere.

It's likely that the writing you do in this course comes back to you with a daunting amount of feedback. You'll make grammar and style errors. You'll be wordy. Your paragraphs will be out of order. This is true no matter how well you may have done in previous courses; we're asking you to take your work to the next level. Indeed, we hope you are blessed with a teacher who returns your work loaded with notes, as long as they give you at least one chance to revise. That's the best way to learn.

We are probably breaking some Journalism Professors' Code in saying this, but: Mistakes are OK.

You are here not to confirm your ability, but to improve. You can learn something about good writing and reporting by reading this textbook, listening to lectures, taking part in other classroom activities. But none of that can completely replace the value of making mistakes and then recognizing them.

Of course, learning requires more than seeing your mistakes pointed out to you. That's the instructor's role. You have to do your part: You have to look at the feedback you get and analyze it. Use the advice earlier in this chapter to do something with that information.

And, also obviously, some mistakes have greater consequences than others, so they need your attention from the very start. As we've noted already, spelling names wrong or getting key facts wrong are cardinal sins. If, as part of this course, you're writing for a website or publication, the consequences of such errors affect more than just you and your grade.

Still, if you're going to make mistakes, it's better you make them now, in school, than out in the real world. It's part of education. Try to avoid mistakes, but if and when you do make them, don't beat yourself up too much. Take feedback seriously, watch for common errors, and vow to do better the next time and the time after that.

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25.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- To effectively proofread your work:
  - Finish writing first.
  - Take a break after finishing the writing.
  - Read the story backwards.
  - Read it aloud.
- Create a checklist of issues that are the most important or most likely to occur in your writing.
  - Start by evaluating the feedback you've gotten. What are your most common mistakes?
  - Write a list of no more than 10 items.
  - Use the list on each story, going through it once for each item.
  - Revise the list as you get better at avoiding your original mistakes.
- Don't beat yourself up over mistakes; everyone makes them. Instead, learn from what you've done wrong.

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25.3: Optional Exercises

Exercise 25.3.1

Build your own writing checklist. Start with a few things that all professional communicators should doublecheck:

- Spelling of names
- Job titles
- Addresses, phone numbers, URLs

Then, once you've gotten feedback on a few of your stories, reread them while looking for repeated errors. Every writer has at least a few flaws. Add yours to your checklist.

Keep the list to about a half-dozen to start. Then, use the list! Use it every time you write a story. Don't try to find every type of error at once. Make a pass through the story once for each item on the list.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

26: News Releases

26.1: News Releases

26.2: Chapter Review

26.3: Optional exercises

Why news releases matter

The structure you've learned to write an inverted pyramid news story is similar to the one used in writing news releases. For public relations majors, the ability to write a standard news release increases your value to an employer. For journalists, it's another way to practice basic writing skills (and possibly an alternative career).

The biggest difference between news stories and news releases isn't in structure. It's in purpose.

- A news story is designed to inform and, possibly, entertain. It is aimed at an audience of consumers.
- A news release is designed to inform and, possibly, persuade. Traditionally it was aimed at an audience of news media members.

A news release, sometimes called a press release, contains information only about -- and usually, only from -- the organization that issues it. For example, the public relations department of a hospital might issue a news release about a surgical technique developed by doctors at the hospital. The people quoted in the release would (usually) be the doctors and other hospital officials.

News stories would include quotes from some of the same people as the release did. But a news story is more likely to also include input from people outside the hospital -- other doctors doing similar work, for example.

Note

Thanks to the internet, the intended audience for news releases has changed.

Previously, the only people who saw releases were journalists. For the news to get to the general public, journalists had to act as middlemen, taking information from the release and rewriting it into a news story.

Now, companies and organizations generally put their news releases online as well as sending them to reporters and editors. As a result, more and more news releases are written with the general public in mind. That ends up bringing them even closer to resembling news stories, and makes a textbook such as this even more relevant to public relations majors.

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26.1: News Releases

Similarities and differences

Format: Both news stories and news releases use formats that specify the placement of required elements. In a news story, those elements often include the byline (the name of the author) and the dateline (the city in which the story was written, usually). The required elements in news releases might include contact information (whom to call to get more details) and boilerplate (standard information about the company or organization, repeated in every one of its releases).

For both news stories and news releases, the specifics of the format will differ from publication to publication, or company to company. One company might require that the main headline on a news release be in ALL CAPS; another might use caps and lowercase, but insist that it be in boldface type.

Style: For both news stories and news releases, the AP Stylebook is the most common basis for style rules. In both cases, individual operations often alter the AP rules in some way or add other rules.

Length: The average length of a news story will vary from outlet to outlet, and many will host stories in a wide variety of lengths, from one-paragraph “briefs” to 5,000-word “takeouts” or even longer pieces. News releases, on the other hand, are usually less than 1,000 words. That’s about two standard pages.

Attribution: In news stories, any facts that are not obvious or witnessed by the reporter must be attributed to someone or something.

News releases include attributed quotes and information. However, they usually also include statements of fact without specific attribution. In a sense, the entire news release is attributed to the organization that releases it. So where a news story might read like this:

> The mitral valve resection was the first ever done using fishing line and Velcro, Acme General Hospital said.

... the news release itself would read like this:

> The mitral valve resection was the first ever done using fishing line and Velcro.

Lede: Most news releases and some news stories use a form of the summary lede. That is, they use ledes that give away the important information up front.

In a news release, though, deciding what’s important involves different measures. Since one purpose of a news release is to persuade -- specifically, to persuade journalists to write stories -- the lede of a release should contain the main selling point. What will catch a reporter’s eye?

Standard news release elements

Each public relations agency, company or organization that issues news releases has its own guidelines. These elements are the most common.

Hed: Straightforward, tells the important information. With increasing emphasis on publishing releases online, headlines are getting somewhat shorter to serve search engine optimization needs. Often includes a secondary headline (or "deck") with additional information.

Dateline: Usually includes the headquarters city of the company and a date. (Note: When releases are distributed by a wire service, that credit may be inserted after the dateline, as with PRNewswire(opens in new window).)

Subheds: To make releases easier for reporters to scan, small headlines are often sprinkled throughout the copy. Generally, they will be simple labels rather than full sentences.

Boilerplate: One or more paragraphs that describe the organization issuing the release. Usually introduced with an “About” subhead. The identical boilerplate is added to the bottom of every release from the organization.

Legal information: Public companies are required by law or regulation to include certain information in most releases, such as a “caution regarding forward-looking statements” – a warning to investors that what the company has promised in the release may

not actually happen.

Contact information: Phone numbers, email addresses or other ways for reporters to reach someone who can answer questions about the release. (This information may not appear on the versions of releases available online, if the company or agency doesn't want to release it to the public.) Note that news releases rarely include a byline or other credit to the writer.

Links: The modern news release is designed with an online audience in mind, whether that is the general public or just reporters. Links to the company's main website and specific pages on it should always be provided.

Multimedia: Providing photos or video increases the likelihood a news release will result in an article.

News release format

If you write news releases professionally, you will be required to follow the official format of the company you work for. This course can't explain all the potential variations; this is a typical format for a print news release.

Words	Category	Explanation
PROFESSOR'S STUDENTS TOLD TO WRITE NEWS RELEASE	Main headline	In ALL CAPS or otherwise highlighted. In full-sentence form, but does not end with a period. Tells the main selling point of the release.
Assignment designed to teach basic format, test ability to follow guidelines	Secondary headline	Not as prominent as main head. Provides extra information not given in main head.
KENT, Ohio, Sept. 27, 2026 --	Dateline	City, state (if needed) and date. Name of the city is in ALL CAPS. City is **headquarters of the organization** sending the release. Date (including year) is the **day the release is issued**. So, for example, if you send out a news release on June 6 about a festival a week later, the date on the release would be June 6, not 13. May be placed on its own line, or at start of first paragraph (in which case it would be separated from the content with a dash).
John Kroll, M.Ed., an adjunct professor at Kent State University, this week will give students in his Writing Across Platforms classes an assignment requiring them to write a news release.	Lede paragraph	Repeats the main selling point given in the main headline, but with more detail and in different words. Note that while news releases generally follow AP style, an organization may have its own changes. Here, the professor's master's degree is indicated, because that's a standard practice in academia.
"The assignment is desgined to give them an introduction to the basic format used in news releases," Kroll said. "It will also test their ability to follow a format -- the use of capitalization, paragraphing and so forth."	Quote	In general, quotes in news releases are subject to editing and revision, unlike those in news stories. Sources usually get a chance to review them and rewrite.
Formats vary	Subhed	Used to break up stretches of text. Often just regular text in boldface, on its own line.
Different organizations may have different formats for releases. However, each organization usually requires every one of its releases to follow the same house format.	Unattributed information	Because the news release is essentially a public statement by the issuing organization, standards for attribution can be different. Rather than directly attribute this to Kroll or some other source, the university itself is making the statement.
About Kent State University	'About' subhed	Traditionally, a news release ended with information about the issuing organization, with a simple subhed.
Since its founding as a teacher-training school in 1910, Kent State has become an engine for economic, cultural and workforce development in the region and	Boilerplate	One paragraph describing the institution that issued the news release. Same paragraph is used in every release by that institu-ion.

Words	Category	Explanation
beyond as a premiere university in Ohio. This Ohio university has also earned acclaim for applying new knowledge to address the needs of the communities it serves and society as a whole through a vast array of continuing education courses and much more. For more information: http://www.kent.edu		Boilerplate graf ends with the **full URL of the main page** of the organization's website. URL is a **hyperlink to the site**.
Media contact: Amy Student, astudent@kent.edu, 330-555-4444	Contact information	Name, email and phone number of **PR person** a reporter can call for additional information or verification. This usually is not the same person the public would call.

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26.2: Chapter Review

Key points

- The purpose of a release is to persuade reporters and editors to write their own news stories about the topic of the release.
- A news release traditionally was aimed only at journalists. While that has changed, the essential goal remains to convince the media to spread your message.
- Both news stories and news releases use specific formats.
- Both usually rely on AP style.
- News stories range widely in length. Most news releases are less than 1,000 words long (two double-spaced pages or less).
- Both require attribution for direct quotes. In a news release, however, facts and opinions not in direct quotes may go without attribution.
- The summary lede is a common news release opening.
- You should be able to recognize and identify the standard elements of a release:
  - Hed
  - Dateline
  - Subheds
  - Boilerplate
  - Legal information
  - Contact information
  - Links
  - Multimedia

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26.3: Optional exercises

Exercise 26.3.1

Your instructor will give you a set of facts. Using the guidelines in this chapter, turn them into a news release using the standard format provided.

Keep in mind that your goal is not the same as a journalist's would be. You are writing this to persuade, and you are writing it on behalf of a client.

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27: Closing Words

You must remember this

After reading this book, you should understand these things:

- **Professional writing is a craft**. You're not simply slinging words around. There are right ways and wrong ways to communicate; you choose the right way.
- **Professional writing is a science.** Psychology explains why certain sentences are more effective than others; linguistics explains why sentences that work in some places aren't acceptable in others.
- **Professional writing is an art.** Leonardo's "Mona Lisa" and Picasso's "Guernica" are both works of art, although one is representational and follows the laws of perspective while the other doesn't. Professional writing must stick to facts and follow standards, but it can still be creative.
- **Professional writing is a job.** To earn its keep, professional writing must communicate efficiently with the desired audience. The most important story ever written is worthless if no one reads it.
- **Professional writing is an adventure.** The goal is to tell the readers something they don't already know. Communications pros, by definition, should know things most people don't (yet). Go where your audience can't; do what your readers don't have time for.

What's next?

This book should be a step in your education in professional communication, not the end. To continue improving, do these things:

- **Write and edit.** Work with words every day. Write fact and write fiction. Write prose and poetry. If you're in school, volunteer for student media or tutor other students.
- **Read and critique.** Reading others' writing is the best way to absorb the nuances of language. When you come across stories you find exceptionally interesting, analyze them. How did the writer handle transitions? What's the structure?
- **Ask for help.** Show your writing to others and ask for feedback -- for a whole story or a troublesome paragraph.

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Index

A

A part
24.1: Grace Notes
Abbreviation
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Academic titles
21.1: AP Style Essentials
According to
23.1: Quotes
Action
10.1: Scenes
Action (in photos)
15.1: Photography
Affect
24.1: Grace Notes
Affiliation
2.1: What Is News?
Age
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Aggregation
18.1: Online Optimization
Agreement (in grammar)
20.1: Grammar Essentials
AI
18.1: Online Optimization
Ambient sound
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Anchor VO
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Anecdotal (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Anecdote (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Anecdotes
9.1: Story formulas for events
Animated GIF
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
animation
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Annotation
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Announcements
4.1: How to Find Stories
Anonymity
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
AP style
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Apart
24.1: Grace Notes
Apostrophe
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Appositive phrase
20.1: Grammar Essentials
archives
4.1: How to Find Stories
Articles (in headlines)
17.1: Headlines
Askophobia
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Attribution
1.4: Anatomy of a News Story
10.1: Scenes
20.1: Grammar Essentials
23.1: Quotes
26.1: News Releases
Attribution (in ledes)
7.1: Summary ledes
Attribution (vs. citation)
6.1: News Writing Essentials
Audience
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
16.1: Multimedia Essentials

B

Baseball metaphor
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Basic needs
2.1: What Is News?
Bed (of music)
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Bias
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Big number
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Big numbers
2.1: What Is News?
Biobox
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Blog
19.2: Parasocial media
Boilerplate
26.1: News Releases
Bookend (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Bottle cap (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Brevity
7.1: Summary ledes
Broken English
23.1: Quotes
Buildings
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Byline
1.4: Anatomy of a News Story

C

Caboose
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Call to action
2.1: What Is News?
Callback (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Candids (in photos)
15.1: Photography
Capitalization
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Caption
18.1: Online Optimization
Center
24.1: Grace Notes
Character
10.1: Scenes
characters
2.1: What Is News?
Chart
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Charticle
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Checklist
25.1: Quality Control
Chronological (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Chronology
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Chunking
13.1: Structure Essentials
Chyron
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Cinematic ending
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
City
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Clip
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Closeness to home
2.1: What Is News?
Closing door
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
Colon
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Comma
21.1: AP Style Essentials
24.1: Grace Notes
Commas
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Comments
19.1: Social Media
Company names
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Compare
24.1: Grace Notes
Competition
2.1: What Is News?
Completeness and closure
2.1: What Is News?
Compose
24.1: Grace Notes
Composition titles
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Compound sentence
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Conjuntional comma (in headlines)
17.1: Headlines
Connotation
23.1: Quotes
Contact information
26.1: News Releases
Contest
9.1: Story formulas for events
context
3.1: Reporting Essentials

Core values
2.1: What Is News?
Courtesy title
21.1: AP Style Essentials
CQ
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Credit line
1.4: Anatomy of a News Story
Crime
9.2: Story Formulas for Other News
Criteria
24.1: Grace Notes
Curiosity
5.1: Interviewing Essentials

D

Dash
21.1: AP Style Essentials
24.1: Grace Notes
Data
24.1: Grace Notes
Dateline
1.4: Anatomy of a News Story
26.1: News Releases
Day in the life
12.1: Writing About People
days
21.1: AP Style Essentials
death
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Definitions (as quotes)
23.1: Quotes
Description
6.1: News Writing Essentials
Detail
10.1: Scenes
Details
12.1: Writing About People
Diagonals
15.1: Photography
Diagram
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Dialect spelling
23.1: Quotes
Dialogue
10.1: Scenes
Direct quote
23.1: Quotes
Disagreement
2.1: What Is News?
Diversity
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Document
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Documents
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Due to
24.1: Grace Notes

E

Effect
24.1: Grace Notes
Elected officials
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Election
9.1: Story formulas for events
Ellipse
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Environmental portrait
15.1: Photography
Event
9.1: Story formulas for events
Every day
24.1: Grace Notes
Everyday
24.1: Grace Notes
Evil "that"
22.1: Wordiness
Ex post loco
23.1: Quotes

F

Fact
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
Fact (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
False range
24.1: Grace Notes
Familiarity
2.1: What Is News?
FANBOYS
20.1: Grammar Essentials
FAQ
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Female
24.1: Grace Notes
Fewer
24.1: Grace Notes
Fill the frame
15.1: Photography
First reference
21.1: AP Style Essentials
First this, then that
13.1: Structure Essentials
First words
7.1: Summary ledes
Flabby intensifier
22.1: Wordiness
Fluff (in quotes)
23.1: Quotes
Formal title
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Fraction
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Fragment (quote)
23.1: Quotes
Framing (in photos)
15.1: Photography
Full names (in SEO)
18.1: Online Optimization
Future tense (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings

G

Game
9.1: Story formulas for events
gender
21.1: AP Style Essentials
GEO
18.1: Online Optimization
Glossary
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Gold coins
13.1: Structure Essentials
Goodbye checklist
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Google
4.1: How to Find Stories
Government meeting
9.1: Story formulas for events
grammar
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Grid
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Group leaders
4.1: How to Find Stories

H

Hammer (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Headline
17.1: Headlines
Headshot
15.1: Photography
Hesitations
23.1: Quotes
Hidden trends
2.1: What Is News?
Hourglass
13.1: Structure Essentials
Hours
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Hyphen
21.1: AP Style Essentials

I

Idea
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
images
9.1: Story formulas for events
Importance
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
In medias res (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Indefinite pronouns
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Informal titles
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Interaction
15.1: Photography
Interior monologue
10.1: Scenes
Internal link
18.1: Online Optimization
Interviewing
5.1: Interviewing Essentials

Intro
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Inverted pyramid
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
Invisible author
6.1: News Writing Essentials
Invisible people
4.1: How to Find Stories
Its/it's
20.1: Grammar Essentials

J

Judges
21.1: AP Style Essentials

K

Key words
17.1: Headlines
18.1: Online Optimization

L

Lay
24.1: Grace Notes
Lazy verbs
22.1: Wordiness
Lede
1.4: Anatomy of a News Story
Lend
24.1: Grace Notes
Less
24.1: Grace Notes
Levels of specificity
7.1: Summary ledes
Lie
24.1: Grace Notes
Link
18.1: Online Optimization
26.1: News Releases
Links
19.1: Social Media
List
13.1: Structure Essentials
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Listicle
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Literally
24.1: Grace Notes
Live posting
18.1: Online Optimization
Loan
24.1: Grace Notes
Locater map
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Logical sequences
13.1: Structure Essentials

M

Male
24.1: Grace Notes
Map
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Measurement
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Middle (of story)
13.1: Structure Essentials
Mission statements
23.1: Quotes
Moments
12.1: Writing About People
Money
21.1: AP Style Essentials
months
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Moral (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Most common to least common
13.1: Structure Essentials
Multiplying values
2.1: What Is News?
Mysteries
2.1: What Is News?

N

Names
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Names (in headlines)
17.1: Headlines
Names (in ledes)
7.1: Summary ledes
Names (verifying)
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Narrative (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Nat sound
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Natural flow
13.1: Structure Essentials
Neighborhood
21.1: AP Style Essentials
News releases
4.1: How to Find Stories
26.1: News Releases
News values
2.1: What Is News?
Newsworthiness
2.1: What Is News?
number
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Nut graf
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings

O

Obituary
9.2: Story Formulas for Other News
Objectivity
6.1: News Writing Essentials
Observation
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Off the record
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Opinion
6.1: News Writing Essentials
Opinion confirmation
2.1: What Is News?
Outcome
9.1: Story formulas for events
outline
13.1: Structure Essentials
Outro
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Overall (photo)
15.1: Photography
Overpromsing
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Oxford comma
21.1: AP Style Essentials

P

Panel discussion
9.1: Story formulas for events
Paragraph
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
Paragraphs
6.1: News Writing Essentials
Parallelism
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Parasocial media
19.2: Parasocial media
Parentheses
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Passive voice
24.1: Grace Notes
People (in photos)
15.1: Photography
Percentage
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Periods
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Periods (in headlines)
17.1: Headlines
Personal brand
19.1: Social Media
Personal essay
6.1: News Writing Essentials
Personal profit and loss
2.1: What Is News?
Photo
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
15.1: Photography
Photostory
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Pitching a story
2.1: What Is News?
Places
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Plagiarism
3.1: Reporting Essentials
23.1: Quotes
Planned event
9.1: Story formulas for events
Plastic surgery (of quotes)
23.1: Quotes
Plurals
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Podcast
19.2: Parasocial media
Point of view
10.1: Scenes

Poll
9.2: Story Formulas for Other News
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Precedence
24.1: Grace Notes
preposition
24.1: Grace Notes
prepositions
22.1: Wordiness
Present tense (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Preview
9.1: Story formulas for events
Prior review
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Problem, consequences, solution
13.1: Structure Essentials
Profile
12.1: Writing About People
Prominence
2.1: What Is News?
pronoun
24.1: Grace Notes
Pronouns (alternatives)
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Proofreading
25.1: Quality Control
Proper nouns (in SEO)
18.1: Online Optimization
psychology
4.1: How to Find Stories
25.1: Quality Control
Public relations
23.1: Quotes
26.1: News Releases
Punctuation
20.1: Grammar Essentials
21.1: AP Style Essentials

Q

Question (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Questions
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Questions in advance
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Quests
2.1: What Is News?
Quiz
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Quotation marks
20.1: Grammar Essentials
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Quotation marks (in headlines)
17.1: Headlines
Quote (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Quote fragment
23.1: Quotes
Quote setups
23.1: Quotes
Quote stacks
23.1: Quotes
Quote stream
14.1: Alternative Story Forms

R

race
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Ranking
9.2: Story Formulas for Other News
Ranks
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Rarity
2.1: What Is News?
Ratio
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Raw video
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Reaction (in photos)
15.1: Photography
Recording
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Recording interviews
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Redundancy
22.1: Wordiness
Referrals
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Repetition
22.1: Wordiness
24.1: Grace Notes
Rephrasing
13.1: Structure Essentials
Reporting opportunity
9.1: Story formulas for events
Restatement (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings

S

Said
23.1: Quotes
scene
12.1: Writing About People
Scenes
10.1: Scenes
Score
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Script
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Search engines
18.1: Online Optimization
Seasons
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Second reference
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Selective focus
15.1: Photography
Senior government officials
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Sentence
8.1: Inverted Pyramid
SEO
17.1: Headlines
18.1: Online Optimization
Sequence
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Sequence (in photos)
15.1: Photography
Sesquipedaliamania
24.1: Grace Notes
Setting
10.1: Scenes
Setups
23.1: Quotes
sexuality
21.1: AP Style Essentials
SFX
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Show, don't tell
12.1: Writing About People
24.1: Grace Notes
Shyness
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Silent affirmation
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Singular they
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Slug
1.4: Anatomy of a News Story
SMO
17.1: Headlines
social media
4.1: How to Find Stories
17.1: Headlines
19.1: Social Media
Sorrow, anger and the warm fuzzies
2.1: What Is News?
SOT
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Soundbite
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Specificity (levels of)
7.1: Summary ledes
Speech
9.1: Story formulas for events
sports
9.1: Story formulas for events
Standup
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Startle (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
State
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Statement lede
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Story pitches
2.1: What Is News?
Streets
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Subhed
26.1: News Releases
Summary (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Summary lede
7.1: Summary ledes
Superlatives
5.1: Interviewing Essentials

Surgery (of quotes)
23.1: Quotes
Survey
9.2: Story Formulas for Other News
Switchback (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Symbols
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Synonym
24.1: Grace Notes

T

Teaser (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
temperature
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Tense (in attribution)
23.1: Quotes
Tense (in ledes)
7.1: Summary ledes
that
22.1: Wordiness
That/which
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Theme (lede)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Thought leaders
4.1: How to Find Stories
Throat clearing
22.1: Wordiness
Through the eyes
9.1: Story formulas for events
Time
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Timeline
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Timeliness
2.1: What Is News?
Times, dates (verifying)
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Tips
4.1: How to Find Stories
Tough questions
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Transcribing
5.1: Interviewing Essentials
Transcript
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Transgender
21.1: AP Style Essentials
Transitional words
13.1: Structure Essentials
Transitions
13.1: Structure Essentials
Trolls
19.1: Social Media
Truism (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Try (to/and)
24.1: Grace Notes

U

Unique
24.1: Grace Notes
Update (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
URL
17.1: Headlines

V

verb
24.1: Grace Notes
verbs
22.1: Wordiness
verification
3.1: Reporting Essentials
Video
14.1: Alternative Story Forms
Viewpoints
15.1: Photography
VO
16.1: Multimedia Essentials
Vote
21.1: AP Style Essentials

W

Weak main verbs
24.1: Grace Notes
weather
9.2: Story Formulas for Other News
Websites (verifying)
3.1: Reporting Essentials
What's next (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Which
24.1: Grace Notes
Who/whom
20.1: Grammar Essentials
Writing for the ear
16.1: Multimedia Essentials

Y

Years
21.1: AP Style Essentials

Z

Zoom in (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings
Zoom out (ending)
11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings

Glossary

5 W's | Who, what, when, where, why (or how). Traditionally, the questions that a news story must answer: Who did something (or had something done to them)? What happened? When did it happen? Where? Why?

Angle | The specifics of a story idea; the things that make it most newsworthy. The subject of a story may be a person, an organization, an event; the angle will be the strongest news value. So your subject may be professor John Doe; your angle could be that he's the oldest prof on campus and says he's been giving the same introductory lecture for 40 years.

Attribution | Identification of the source of a direct quote or paraphrase. In journalism, most facts and all direct quotes must be attributed.

Beat | An area of responsibility assigned to a reporter. Beats can be geographical (a city, a region), organizational (the football team, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.) or topical (health, military affairs).

Block attribution | A single attribution used to cover an extended passage in a story. For example, "Police described the scene this way:" could be used in front of several paragraphs of description. This avoids having to repeat the attribution with every sentence.

Breaking news | Something that just happened, or continues to happen as it is being reported.

Byline | Identification of the author of an article. Usually at the top of the story. May name specific author or authors, list the affiliation ("Plain Dealer Reporter" or "Associated Press") or do both. Sometimes includes email or other contact information.

Chronological order | To tell a story or part of a story from start to finish, in the order in which things happened.

Dateline |

A label inserted at the beginning of a story, listing a location. Originally, a dateline included both location and date, hence the name. That's because it could take days or weeks for news to reach a newspaper's office. The dateline told readers when the news happened. Very few news media use dates in print datelines today, but the practice lives on in news releases and online news.

Different organizations have different rules about datelines. Some use datelines to indicate where the reporter was located, even if that's not the same as where the events took place. Increasingly, however, datelines are used only to identify where the events took place. That is influenced by the desire to do well in search engines, which may favor posts that make the location of a story crystal clear.

Direct quote | The exact words of a source, whether spoken or written. Direct quotes must be enclosed in quotation marks: "like this"

Feature | A story that is not breaking news. The term is used broadly by some. Others prefer to narrow the definition, specifying that a feature is long or focuses on less serious topics. Author Melvin Mencher defines a feature as a "story emphasizing the human or entertaining aspects of a situation." Some differentiate between fluffy features and "news features," which are long but deal with more important issues.

First reference | The first time the name of a person, place or organization is used in a particular story. Most print and online journalism uses full names on first reference.

First-day story | Traditionally, the first report of a particular news event in a publication or broadcast. The first-day story focuses on the immediate news.

Folo/follow/follow-up | Any story that relates to a previous news story, but is not triggered by a specific new development. For example, one story may report that a body is found in a local forest. A folo story might detail the history of the area, or update readers on the search for the body's identity. Traditionally, the folo appeared a day or more after the original news report (compare with "sidebar"). The speed of online reporting has blurred these distinctions.

Graf | Short for "paragraph."

Hard news | Whatever isn't a feature.

Hed/headline |

A headline – the title of an article, appearing above it. Headlines are often written in a terse format that eliminates articles or forms of the verb "to be," and they are generally written in the present tense. A story that reported the United States opened an embassy in Havana for the first time in almost half a century might have a headline that reads "U.S. reopens Cuba embassy after 50 years."

Articles may have more than one headline. There are many terms used to describe the headlines in a stack. In this course, whenever two headlines appear atop an article, we will call the first one the main hed and the other the secondary.

Lede/lead | The first paragraph or paragraphs of a story. In most cases, the lede is a single paragraph. However, feature ledes may consist of two or more paragraphs that share a close connection.

Margin of error | A measure of the likelihood that the results of a poll or survey accurately predict what the results would be if the entire population were surveyed. For example, if you had a student body of 10,000 and asked a question of just 10 students, the poll would have a margin of error of 31% at a 95% confidence level. If half of the 10 people you surveyed said "yes" to a question, you could be fairly confident that if you surveyed the entire student body, "yes" would be somewhere between about 20% or 80% (about 30% in either direction). Increasing the sample size to 100 would reduce the margin of error to 10%; asking 1,000 students would lead to a margin of error of only 3% (all with a 95% confidence level).

Nut graf | In some types of stories, the paragraph that makes it clear what the story is about. Sometimes called the "why am I reading this" paragraph. In many types of feature stories or issue stories, the lede does not explain the overall purpose, so a nut graf comes immediately afterward.

Objectivity | To be objective is to view something without bias, without reference to your personal beliefs. That's as opposed to being subjective. Many would argue that pure objectivity is impossible; we cannot keep our thoughts from being affected by our background and experience. "Journalistic objectivity" accepts that caveat, but says that journalists should avoid conscious bias and examine their work for subconscious influences.

Second reference | Any mentions of a person, place or organization after the first reference. Journalists use a substitute for the full name on second reference. For example, if someone is identified on first reference as John Kroll, a professor of journalism at Kent State University, the second references may be to Kroll, the professor, "he," etc.

Second-day story | An article that appears a day after the original story, or in some cases a day after the news event itself. The main distinction of a second-day story is that the lede can and should assume the reader already knows about the original event. A first-day story might start, "An earthquake leveled downtown Cleveland Monday, killing at least 400 and making thousands homeless." The second-day lede might be, "The death toll from Monday's earthquake climbed over 750 as downtown Cleveland dug itself out of the rubble." Alternatively, a second-day lede can ignore hard news and go for a softer angle: "Mayor Frank Jackson, with rivulets of sweat making dark tracks in the thick layer of dust covering his clothes, declared Tuesday that Cleveland would rise again."

Show | Common writing advice. It is better to describe things than just supply basic labels. Don't write "the proposed bill is important"; describe what its impact would be.

Sidebar | A story that accompanies and complements a main article. For example, a main article about the loss of a downtown building in a fire might be accompanied by a sidebar profiling one person who lost her possessions in the fire, or a sidebar focusing on attempts to discover the cause of the blaze. Unlike a folo story, a sidebar appears at the same time as the original story.

Statistical significance | A measure of the likelihood that the results of a poll or survey reflect actual differences between subgroups or are just due to random chance. Somewhat complex math is used to derive a number, often one called a p-value. What journalists should understand is that a **low** p-value (commonly less than 0.05) means the results is less likely to be just a product of chance. However, they should also be aware that ethically questionable methods called "p-hacking" can be used to distort the results of a survey.

Subhed/subhead | A subhead – a short line inserted in the middle of an article. Do not use "subhed" to refer to a secondary headlines above the article. Subheds may be written in the same style as heds, but they are generally shorter.

Summary | An extremely condensed version of an original article. It is not like a book report; it does not express opinions or refer to the article itself, as in, "This is an article about ..." or "The authors report that ..." Instead, it boils down the information as if the authors had continued to whittle away at their piece until it was only a few sentences long.

Summary lede/lead | A common way to start a news story. The summary lede provides the most important facts (some, but not necessarily all, of the 5 W's). Note the distinction between a summary and a summary lede.

Wire/wire service | A news organization that supplies stories to other organizations rather than directly to the public. The Associated Press does not publish a newspaper or have its own TV channel. Instead, it assembles news (from its own reporters and by taking stories from its media partners) and distributes that to publishers and broadcasters. (Today, the AP does post some of its content on a publicly available website, but its focus remains on serving its media customers.)

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    - 10.1: Scenes - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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    - 11.1: Alternative Ledes and Endings - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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    - 12.1: Writing About People - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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    - 13.1: Structure Essentials - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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- 23.3: Optional Exercises - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

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- 26.2: Chapter Review - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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Transcripts

Transcripts of videos used in this book are stored here.

Video 3.1.1 Asha Glover: Check your own work

When you...when you do fact check, when you write something really quickly and you don't fact check it in school, someone reads over it, gives you a grade and you're like, “Aw, I could have been better.” When you don’t fact check something in the real world, or there's a typo or something, your editor is not your teacher. [Laugh]

Your editor doesn't have the time that your teacher had. And it's up to you to really try to put your best foot forward. Because at the end of the day, no one is going to really blame...well, the reader is not going to blame your editor. The reader is going to come to you. Your editor’s name is not on there.

So yes, editors are great, and they are supposed to catch things that we don't catch, but like it's just so good to try to catch the things that you can, because, I mean, you're not going to catch everything. The other thing is like, you have to be OK, but like, you're not going to go your entire career without a correction.

It's not a real thing. [Laugh] So...but but do your best.

Video 3.1.2 Asha Glover: Talk to everyone

Asha Glover, reporter

If you have longer times to do stories, definitely talk to as many people as you can. Everyone's not going to be that source that you need for the story, but I mean, even speaking on background leads you to the person ... leads you to ask better questions. It leads you to figure out better people to talk to. So don't ... don't rule anyone out.

Use everything as a stepping stone so that you can get the person that you actually need or, you know, sometimes you'll stumble upon something that you didn't even think you needed. And that turned out to be the key source. So.

Video 4.1.1 Mark Puente: Inhabit your beat

Mark Puente, reporter

What I liked about my time in Cleveland was I worked in the Justice Center, which houses the Cleveland police headquarters, the courts, the prosecutors. So a lot of people work their way through that building. I kind of took up shop in a corner of the lobby. I stood there every day drinking coffee, reading the paper. People came to know who I was.

As I knocked out stories that shined a light on bad practices or how the public officials were treating their employees bad, people knew where to find me, and it kind of took off from there. I talked to the janitors. I talked to the maintenance workers. People don't believe that. The cashiers in the Justice Center and the hot dog vendor, they knew everything because the lawyers, the judges, the public, they stood there talking about whatever was happening that day.

And I'd come through here a half an hour later and they’d tell me what judge just said, what was happening, or they had me on speed dial and call me. They trusted me, especially the hot dog vendor who was outside and spoke limited English. He knew who I was when he had something good, but I always went to his stand and bought a hot dog once a week and helped him out.

Video 5.1.1 Mark Puente: I believe in shoe-leather reporting

Be relentless. That's how I am. But I do it, I do it in a professional manner, and I'm just persistent. But I think part of that ... I see a lot of young reporters. I've been to three papers now,. A lot of young reporters give up because they're not persistent. My biggest issue with journalism these days is, granted, it's evolving, it's changing every day, is the young reporters don't go out on the street enough. It's not like the old days where there wasn't Twitter, there wasn't Skype, there wasn't Facebook. The stories don't come from those social media sites. You got to go out on the street and you got to talk to people. I believe in old school reporting, beat reporting, shoe-leather reporting.

Video 5.1.2 Mark Puente: John Caniglia, my hero

But the reporter who had the biggest influence on me is still my favorite reporter. And that’s John Caniglia. I worked in the Lorain County bureau for The Plain Dealer. He sat next to me. I was new to this industry. I came from a different industry, was a little bit

older, but I listened to his approach in talking to people and how he handled himself on the phone.

And everybody jokes that John always apologizes to people when he calls to them. So I started doing that, and I still do it. If people say, you ain't gotta apologize, it's "Well, I'm bugging you, I'm taking time from you." But I picked up on how John does that. And John is my hero as a reporter because, I've never been able to get a federal agent to leak me secret documents.

John Caniglia gets that on a weekly basis if he wants. So I kind of try to emulate that guy.

Video 5.1.4 Doug Lesmerises: Helping a source tell a story

I think people sometimes are shy about that. They want to tell you the details. They just don't realize it. So it's not like prying. I think sometimes people think, well, I don't want to pry. You're reporter. Of course you're prying. They want to tell you what ... they're just bad at telling stories.

People don't even know what the interesting thing is in their story. So they give you the little tidbit. It's OK to ask 20 questions about that. They'll remember things they didn't even realize were part of the story. When they say, you know what? Yea yea yea yea. Now that you ask that, this is how I did that. But you've got to ask it because they're terrible.

They're not just going to give it to you. You've got to pull it out of them. But it doesn't hurt when you pull it out of them. They'll be OK.

Video 5.1.5 Doug Lesmerises: How to frame questions in an interview

I'm definitely going to come up with a list of questions, a list of topics.I'm going to think about again ... I'm big on this. I'm going to think of what they could say. If I ask this, what if they say ...? And of course, my answer is always like a life-changing thing that nobody ever says. But if you can't think of an interesting answer to your question, it's a bad question.

I'm going to come up with the list of questions. I'm going to have sort of topics in mind, but I think you also want to always sort of have an interesting way to try to phrase a very broad question that lets them tell you things that you don't know.

I was at a high school baseball game the other day. State championship baseball games, talking, you know, to the kids who won the games. One kid had a winning hit. One kid was the winning pitcher. And so I tried this with both kids. I said, "You know, this is something you remember for the rest of your life. When you're an old guy like me, how will you tell this story to your friends of how you won the state championship game?"

And I'm hoping that they're going to say, you know, well, 20 years from now, I'm going to remember the way my knees were knocking together. You know, like you're opening a door that is slightly more interesting than, "How do you feel?" which is really boring and puts the onus on them. A lot of these questions, even in one-on-one, too often people put all the onus on the subject.

With such a broad question: "How do you feel? What's it like to be an Ohio State football player?" What the ... What are you supposed to say to that? You could say anything. But if you frame it in a way, you have to help them a little bit because you can ... especially with younger athletes, with younger people, you can feel the pressure on them when you put ... when their answer could go in a thousand different directions.

You know, but I'm trying to frame it. You're an old guy at the bar with your friends when you're 40. Tell me how you start this story when you look back on this day. It's a framing device for them a little bit now. First kid hemmed and hawed for 45 seconds and did not know what to do. So then I said, "Were you nervous?

What were you thinking about when you up there?" You know, the other kid threw out there that he'd been hit in the face with a line drive 90 minutes before the game, when he was taking batting practice, and the ball bounced back and hit him in the face and like, it was like, well, he didn't know if he's going to be able to pitch. Now, I don't know how I would have known that.

But I tried to ask a broad thing and I gave him the chance and he sort of went there. And then I pounced and I asked 10 questions about that right away. How did it happen? What did you think? How much did it hurt? Did it affect you? Did it affect you when you pitched? You know, do you know what it looks like right now?

What did your teammates say? What did your coach say? All these things. Once there's an opening, you pounce with very specific questions.

Video 5.1.6 Doug Lesmerises: Make an interview a conversation

Whether it's a news conference or a one-on-one interview, I think you either want to be a.) making your subject so comfortable it doesn't feel like an interview. It's a conversation. That's the best. If you can do that, if you can develop a conversation that they forget they're being interviewed, and then the other side of that is put them on the spot, make them uncomfortable.

And if you can go back and forth a little bit, that's great. But if it's one on one, I think the idea of a conversation is the most important thing. You can't act like, “OK, well, thank you for your time. Here is my first question. What do ... ?” You've got to relax and talk to them like you would talk to a member of your family or talk to your friend.

And that includes offering some insight on your behalf. It can't just be ... You can provide answers back to them. When they answer, say, “Well, I didn't think of that. I thought you were going to say this. I was all prepared. Oh, I thought you were going to say, you know, we haven't run the ball because the tackles haven't been blocking.

I had no idea that you guys had changed your blocking scheme to a zone blocking scheme. What? When did you do that?”

Make it a conversation. If you can do that one on one, you can be ... you can humble yourself. You can make fun of yourself. You can open them to make fun of you. If you can make it like you're talking to a friend, it's not an interview. If it's one on one, it should not be an interview.

Now, if you're interviewing, you know, the president of North Korea, then it's going to be a little bit different. But if it's sort of like ... if it's not necessarily hard news confrontational interview. If you think conversation, and you don't just do question-answer, question-answer, question-answer back and forth, share about, you should share about yourself. If they say something that reminds you of your life or whatever, throw that in there.

Don't take over, but throw it in. Make it a conversation, and that is going to be a thousand times better than a very stiff back and forth, I'm only asking questions.

Video 5.1.7 Doug Lesmerises: The importance of good questions

Too many people think that just throwing out a topic is going to lead to good answers. Because a good story starts with good information and starts with interesting quotes, you know? And I think people, they don't think about how they want to frame a question. And to me, when I am getting ready to interview someone and a lot of what I do is in a news conference setting ...

But I'm not just thinking about, “I want to ask about, does Urban Meyer think Ohio State should run the ball more?” I want to know exactly how I'm going to phrase it. And I think to myself, what is his possible answer if I ask it this way? If I ask it this way? And I run through all of that in my head and, and I'll be honest, I mean, I think a lot of people on my beat and around journalism that are terrible at it.

It's awful. People are awful at asking questions. And I have been in interview situations when I have asked most of the questions, and then people will say, oh, I'll hear other reporters who were standing there doing nothing and say, “Wow, that was the best that player has ever been.” And it's like, you think so? Do you think maybe how the questions were asked might have mattered?

Video 5.1.8 Doug Lesmerises: Fleshing out stories

The great writers have such details. You think, how did they get that detail? And when someone says, “Oh yeah, I remember, you know, my grandma was actually the one who taught me to play football.” Well, where did she teach you? Was it in your backyard? Was it at a park? Was it a real ball? Was it a Nerf ball?

How old were you? How did she know how to play football? Did you ... did she pass and you catch? Did you ever tackle her? Did you block for her? Did she hand it off to somebody else? What did your grandfather do? Did he not like football? And then all of a sudden, your story is not “Joe Smith's grandmother taught him to play football.”

It's “Fifteen years ago, Nancy Smith walked down the three steps of the back porch into the backyard with an old rag for a football. Her 4-year-old grandson was beside her, wearing a pot on his head as a helmet.” How do you know he had a pot on his head as a helmet? Because you said, “Well, did you wear a helmet when you played with her?”

And then he said, “Oh, actually, we didn't have helmets. I put a pot on my head.”

Video 5.1.9 Doug Lesmerises: Tough questions lead to strong answers

You don't have to think the thing you are asking to ask it. It's not what you believe. It's what's out there. It's what people are ... It's what people are talking about. It's what people want to know about. Maybe you think Ohio State has run the ball great. But there's an issue of some people think they aren't running the ball well enough.

And then the second part of that is if someone yells at you and it's not because you frame the question poorly and like you performed your journalistic duty poorly. But if they yell at you because the the subject of the question makes them angry. That's not a loss for you. That's a win. People are afraid of getting yelled at.

Guess what people are when they're yelling at you? They're interesting. And I guarantee if if you say to Urban Meyer, why can't you run the ball? And if he says, “Anybody who thinks we can't run the ball doesn't know what they're talking about. Watch the film. We can run whenever we want to run. We choose not to.” Guess what you're going to do with that quote?

You're going to use it high in your story. And that's going to be a much better answer than, “Talk about running the ball.” And it's the same subject. But the framing of the question is everything. And people think about it almost zero.

Video 5.1.10 Liz Navratil: Having difficult conversations

I'm approaching them at the worst moment in their life, or one of the worst moments in their life. So for me, I think being human is more important than getting a scoop. And I'm always say, like, for example, if it's a victim family, I'll say, “Hi, I'm so-and-so, I'm here from the paper. I don't want to interrupt you.

I know it's a really tough time. If you're interested in talking about your loved one, that's great. We can do that whenever it's convenient for you. If not, can I just leave my card with you?” And a lot of people seem to appreciate that because some are ... For some of them, it's cathartic to talk. For others, it's like you're the spawn of Satan, showing up in front of them, and you just never know until they react.

So if they start getting hostile or things like that, I usually just put my hands up there saying, “I'm sorry, I'm leaving. Best of luck to you and your family.”

Video 6.1.1 Asha Glover: To write well, read a lot

Looking at other people's work helped me to kind of form the type of work that I wanted to produce. Sometimes I would see something that was written very well and I would be like, “This is great. Why haven't I tried this type of reporting? Why haven't I tried this angle?” And sometimes I would see something that wasn't so good and I'd say, “Let me make sure not to make these mistakes.”

Looking at other people's works, from your peers to even, I mean, reading the newspaper, obviously ... You have to figure out your style, but you can't figure out your style without kind of looking at other people's style. You kind of develop. I developed my style based off of picking out things that I liked about a lot of different people's styles.

Video 9.2.1 Liz Navratil: How to report a crime story

All right. So I have this case. Who touched this case? Who's affected by this case? Who knows someone affected by this case? I always view the police reports as like your first step. It's like it's an official account, but you're going to have many days when the official account is different from the defendant's account, or even sometimes from the victim's account.

So what we're trying to do is ... If these guys are in jail, you're kind of in a tough spot, which is very much the case. And a lot of times you might write to them in jail, you might see if they have an attorney, I might see if they have relatives who want to talk. And I think a lot of reporters get jaded to the kind of like, oh, “He was turning his life around before he was accused of this new crime” story.

But I think some of the key questions I try to ask are, OK, tell me about your life outside of this incident, knowing it's only one part of it. And that kind of puts people at ease, and then say, OK, so tell me about this day, what happened on this day, and let them tell their version first, and then go back and say, well, the police that XYZ or did ... did this, that or the other.

And I think there's so many times when we find the truth is somewhere in the middle of all the perspectives. Sometimes it'll be completely on one end or the other, but very often it's in the middle. So there is a lot of door knocking. There are a lot of times when we go to the wrong addresses, because a lot of these guys move around very quickly.

You just kind of have to get used to having people say no, having them shut the door in your face. And then for every few people who do that, you're going to find somebody who wants to talk. And until you reach out, you have no way of knowing which direction they're going to go. But to me, that's a really important part of telling a story.

Sometimes we'll find that people are like, “Oh no, I told the officers the opposite of what's mentioned in the affidavit.” And that's a really key piece of information to be able to have in your story.

Video 12.1.1 Asha Glover: I love leads

Like, one of my favorite things to write is a lead. I love leads because my whole thing is yes, you can write a straightforward news lead. Or you can suck this reader into this story that probably they would never read, but you get them in that first line, and I don't get to do it as much because I do work in, you know, political journalism.

But it ... I'm looking at other people's leads. That was my, my favorite thing to look at. How do I get people to read things that they probably would never read? How do I get three people to read about, you know, business in Baltimore or, you know, this new lease sale in Baltimore when they don't even care about ... they don't even care about any of this stuff?

How do you get them to read?

Video 14.0.1 Doug Lesmerises: Use digital tools

You know, if you're on the newspaper end where you've been around and maybe, you know, you understand digital -- um, you understand journalistic skills, too many people aren't open to it, aren't open to the idea of that all of this digital stuff is a better way to tell a story. The idea that that we live for however many years as journalists, just writing words, and now we can have supplemental video, we can take photos, we can, you know, present diagrams of plays within the story, all these things.

It's just better. People for some reason, still, some people are still offended by the idea that something other than all words would be the way to to tell a story. And I know that you have a whole great bunch of great adjectives in your pocket. It's not the best way every time. I'm not downplaying writing at all. Writing is awesome, but all these supplemental things I don't ...

And people are offended because they think, well, I'm taking away from my wordsmithing if I have to shoot a video for 20 minutes. And it's like, are you freaking kidding me? Like, get over yourself. Take advantage of these tools.

Video 19.1.1 Tony Jones: Be careful on social media

You know, one of the one things about social media that I had to learn is that, you know, I had to learn how to maximize my conversations on social media. I had to learn, you know, just kind of a general rule of thumb, who to respond to, who not to respond to. I had to learn, you know, I had to learn, how to spot trolls, how not to respond to trolls, how to deal with trolls.

You know, so it's, it's a real, it's a real, you know, social media has been a battle for me, in the past. And, you know, and it still continues to be a battle. You know, because I've always been the type, that I'm not going to back down from a conversation or a confrontation. But at the same time, social media is rewarding because, you know, my case, I have 12,000 followers on Twitter, and my stuff reaches ...

my stuff is far reaching. And, you know, one of my biggest strengths as a reporter is my ability to break news. And you're the first on Twitter. That could be really rewarding for you as well. The one thing that people need to know on social media, you know, young reporters need to know on social media is that, you know, your future job, you know, future bosses, you know, no matter you can you can be, you know, in, in TinyTown, Wisconsin, but there's, ... there's a sports editor in Chicago ...

that has access to your stuff, you know, so always be careful about what you're putting on there, especially if you mix business ... with some of your personal stuff, you know, so, you know, ... it's a thing that, you know. So I think that Twitter especially is a minefield that, you know, ... as a reporter, you try to get through, you know, not even on a daily basis, but on an hourly basis, you know, because Twitter can be informative.

Twitter can be fun. Twitter can be, you know, it can be dynamic. It can be intriguing. But at the same time, Twitter can be a cesspool.

Video 24.1.1 Asha Glover: Go beyond the textbook

I think you you have to take from your J school stuff or your J school classes, like some of the one on one stuff is some of the biggest things. It's not necessarily the things I've learned in class. It's the things I have learned w hen I went to office hours and I was like, this is not reading right?

How can I fix this? Because you have to realize your professors are teaching for an entire class. They're not specifically teaching to you as much as they would want to. You have to be willing to ask questions that expand your knowledge, as opposed to just taking what's in the textbook and thinking that's good enough. Because everyone's reading from the textbook.

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