DIGITAL JOURNALISM FOR COMMUNITIES



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Digital Journalism for Communities

A Practical Guide to Local Storytelling in the Digital Age

Remixed Textbook with Introductions by Michael Humphrey

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

Introduction

1: Defining Community Journalism

- 1.1: News
- 1.2: Journalism
- 1.3: Audiences
- 1.4: Journalistic Activities
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain

- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?
- 2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence
- 2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

3: Journalism As a Method

- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
  - 3.1.1: Reporting
  - 3.1.2: Writing the News Story
- 3.2: Developing a Beat

4: Research Basics

- 4.1: Story Ideas
- 4.2: News Sources
- 4.3: Identifying Appropriate Sources
- 4.4: Contacting Sources and Arranging Interviews

5: Interviewing Basics

- 5.1: Conducting Interviews
- 5.2: Generating Good Interview Questions
- 5.3: Verifying Information

6: Writing Basics

- 6.1: Leads and Nut Grafs
- 6.2: Story Structures
- 6.3: Quotes and Attribution

7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

9: Beyond the Basics - Writing to be Read

- 9.1: Outlining
- 9.2: Writing it Out
- 9.3: Writing with Anecdotes
- 9.4: Writing the Lede
- 9.5: Crafting the Nut
- 9.6: Body Building
- 9.7: Writing to the End
- 9.8: The Touch Test
- 9.9: Spotlight on- Ted Conover

10: Revising and Being Read

- 10.1: To See Again
- 10.2: Editors
- 10.3: Time for Tips

11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist

- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics
- 11.2: News Media and Ethics
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

- 12.1: Journalism Law
  - 12.1.1: The First Amendment
  - 12.1.2: Access, Anonymity, and Privacy
  - 12.1.3: Censorship, Copyright, and Incitement
  - 12.1.4: Libel

13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs

- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording
- 13.3: Voice-overs
- 13.4: On-camera Standup

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Detailed Licensing

Licensing

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

Introduction

Welcome to Digital Journalism for Communities!

This textbook is unconventional, which I hope will be beneficial for anyone who seeks to achieve four key goals:

1. Learn the basics of journalism, including its traditional applications and its evolution in a digital world.
2. Develop a community-focused mindset for journalism, whether that community is geographic (e.g., Overland Park, Kan.) or interest-based (e.g., enthusiasts of video games).
3. Grasp how these principles are applied through the craft of clean, descriptive, and declarative prose.
4. Recognize how excellent reporting bolsters the craft of journalistic writing.

Why writing? It's a fair question. While the odds of entering the professional world of journalism and *only* write are slim, the chances of *never* writing are equally small.

Writing permeates all media, from videos and podcasts to TikTok reels. It is difficult to imagine an effective communicator who cannot write at all, even if their work is not traditionally accepted as "good writing." By "good writing," I mean the ability to convey clear ideas and images to readers/listeners through the use of precise language. We will use examples from across all media types, reflecting how media functions today. Everything we learn can be applied to the reporting and writing in any medium, with the necessary adjustments for each type.

To summarize, we will think globally (across all media and places) but act locally (focusing on text-based coverage of specific communities).

This is a remix of a textbook

One of the most exciting aspects of this book is its multiple voice. While I contribute, only a minority of the text is mine. You will read chapters and sections from various authors and watch videos from other journalists. This approach is a "remix," much like a lot of modern music, and I believe this diversity is highly beneficial.

If you are reading a print edition, those videos and key links will be accessible via QR codes throughout.

Finally, you may have noticed this book is offered at the cost of free. This is because my institution, and many others represented here, are committed to affordable college learning. The technical term for a book like this is an Open Educational Resource (OER), meaning anyone who wants it can access it. Consequently, this book's production process differs slightly from a typical textbook. If you notice mistakes, have questions, or think something needs updating, please don't hesitate to contact me at mhumph18@jccc.edu.

Let's get started.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Defining Community Journalism

Introduction

You probably have a good idea of what it means when you hear, "journalism." The same is true for, "community." But when you look at words more closely, something strange can happen. All of the sudden, what you thought you already knew so clearly can blur. It might even become a source of debate to look at words more closely. Does it *really* mean what thought you meant?

So let's start by being clear. I looked up and chose the closest definitions for "journalism" and "community" from the Oxford English Dictionary for our purposes.

Definition: Journalism (noun)

The occupation or profession of a journalist; journalistic writing; newspapers and periodicals collectively.

Does that sound about right to you? The Oxford English Dictionary keeps this definition very simple and offers no other options for what the word might mean in modern times. That does not mean the conversation is over. As a class, it would be a good idea to see if there are any additions or subtractions from this simple definition that would make it more relevant to the world we live in today.

Now get ready, because it will get a little more complicated with the next word.

Definition: Community (noun)

I.2.b. A body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity. Hence: a place where a particular body of people lives.

I.6. The civic body to which all belong; the public; society.

I.8. An online facility, such as an electronic bulletin board, forum, or chat room, where users can share information or discuss topics of mutual interest.

II.9.a. Life in association with others; the social state. Frequently as "in community."

II.9.b. Social cohesion; mutual support and affinity such as is derived from living in a community.

II.12. The fact of being in communion; social intercourse; fellowship, amity.

See what I mean? Even more definitions could have fit, but this is enough to make the point: When we talk about community, it can mean many different things to different people. When you modify "journalism" with "community," it gets even trickier.

In this chapter, we are going to read two different sources. First, let's take a look at the core concepts of journalism as they have been practiced over the past century through the *Handbook of American Journalism*.

1.1: News

1.2: Journalism

1.3: Audiences

1.4: Journalistic Activities

1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

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1.1: News

Introduction

News refers to *novel information about recent affairs*.

News has been a part of human societies for as long as we've been able to communicate complex ideas. Going back to our early times, you can think of travelers, priests, and soldiers as individuals who would learn something about a recent affair — such as the outcome of a battle or the emergence of a plague nearby — and would share that news with others. Perhaps you have even heard about the 'town criers' who would learn some news — perhaps an official decree from the king — and share it with a public audience.

News is the lifeblood of journalism. And, in the context of journalism, news usually entails novel information about recent affairs *that is in the public interest*. This emphasis on 'public interest' is influenced by Enlightenment principles, which emphasize objectivity and rationality in order to engage with social problems in a fruitful way. Moreover, this view considers *newsgathering* to be an important activity within a democratic society. That activity involves having individuals (news gatherers) *systematically collect* novel information about recent affairs and convey that information in a way that allows citizens to engage productively in debates about matters that impact the public.

That interpretation of newsgathering is similar to what we tend to call *reporting* today. However, if we were to require news gatherers to be hired and dedicated reporters — basically, limit them to people who get paid to report the news — then we would find that there was fairly little newsgathering until the 1800s, and only in a few places around the world. Put another way, our current imagining of newsgathering (or reporting) as a distinct, semi-professionalized activity is a historically recent development.

News and The News

While we can define "news" in these more-academic terms, it's important to keep in mind that it also has a colloquial meaning, and also to distinguish between "news" and "*the* news." It is not uncommon to hear "news" be used colloquially in reference to *a particular way of conveying* novel information about recent affairs, and "*the* news" as some monolithic aggregation of it. For example, the phrase, "What's 'the news' today?" implies that there is one relatively small group of news stories, drawn from a much-larger pool of possible news stories, that a large group of people would accept as being particularly important at that moment in time.

It is thus important to recognize that "news" and "*the* news" are modern cultural constructs that reflect particular understandings of what is news and what is *newsworthy*. Those understandings, in turn, are shaped by the histories and cultures of particular places and peoples. Put another way, "news" and "*the* news" are *not* natural things but rather things a group of people collectively agree to accept as "news" and "*the* news."

For example, a news story is rarely understood to mean a simple chronological listing of observations. You wouldn't expect the lead news story in *The New York Times* to read that Dr. Zamith woke up, went to his office, ate lunch, stubbed his toe, and found the cure for dementia. Instead, most people expect "news" to resemble a particular format. In the United States, you would likely expect a journalistic account of that news to start with the fact that Dr. Zamith found the cure to dementia — and probably not even mention the fact that he ate lunch that day. Moreover, given the prevalence of dementia in the United States and the significance of the discovery, such a story would likely be considered a part of "*the* news" for that day.

The News and Newsworthiness

What is understood as "*the* news" varies considerably across and within places because it reflects not only different ways of thinking about what "news" should look or sound like but also who has the authority to define what "news" is, as well as what is *newsworthy*. Some stories tend to have more universal appeal — for example, dementia is a serious concern in much of the world, and not just the U.S. — but other stories (e.g., stories about violence against transgender people) may be treated as more newsworthy in some societies.

Returning to that earlier question, "What's *the* news today?" we must therefore recognize that there is a finite space for "news" — because, after all, we only have so much *time* to consume news and newsgatherers can only follow up on so many stories — and that "*the* news" consequently requires someone (or, more accurately, some group of people) to define what matters, both in terms of what news is important as well as what is important about that news.

While "news" can be understood as simply being novel information about recent affairs, it can therefore also be understood more broadly as *a form of knowledge* about the world we live in. Consequently, those who are recognized as the primary definers of "*the* news" — be they journalists, some other group of people, or a mix thereof — are granted power in shaping how we understand the societies we live in as well as those we've never seen ourselves.

Key Takeaways

- Within the context of journalism, the term "news" usually refers to novel information about recent affairs that is in the public interest.

- While news has long been traded by different people, the notion of newsgathering as a distinct professional activity is a historically recent development.
- "News" is an evolving cultural object. It is rarely just a chronological listing of observations. Instead, it reflects local ways of thinking about things like presentation formats and ways of organizing information.
- There is also the notion of "the news," which suggests that there is a collection of particularly important news. Those who are recognized as the primary definers of "the news" have power in shaping societal priorities and what is particularly important about emerging developments.
- News can be understood as more than just a collection of information. It is also a form of knowledge.

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1.2: Journalism

Introduction

The term "journalism" can mean very different things to different people. As such, you will often get a wide range of responses when you ask a group of people to define "journalism."

For example, you can define "journalism" as a *product*. Under this view, an investigative news story about the mayor taking bribes might be treated as "journalism" because the product (an online article) contains certain things thought to be journalistic, like a clear headline and quotes from multiple interviewees. Similarly, that story might be treated as "journalism" because it appears on a television show that looks a certain way — maybe it has someone dressed professionally sitting behind a long table describing the incident — or follows certain linguistic patterns.

"Journalism" can also be defined in terms of the *people* who are involved in the creation of a news product. If something is produced by a certain kind of person, perhaps someone with a college degree in Journalism or some related form of professional training, then some people might treat their work as "journalism." In some countries, people have to be recognized (or certified) by the government in order to legally produce "journalism" or receive certain legal protections.

Similarly, "journalism" can be defined in terms of the *institutions* that create such products. If something is produced by a particular kind of organization, such as *The New York Times* or BBC News, then some people will treat that product as a form of "journalism."

More broadly, "journalism" can be thought about as a *set of activities* through which news is collected, organized, presented, and circulated. For example, someone might believe something to be "journalism" only if it involved first-hand observation by the would-be journalist, or interviews with multiple witnesses. That person may also require all accounts to be subjected to verification practices by the would-be journalist.

Even more broadly yet, "journalism" can be understood as a *service* that is guided by certain goals and values, such as identifying issues that are important to a community and holding elected officials to account, or connecting citizens with opportunities for civic engagement. From this perspective, "journalism" is less about what the product looks like, who made it, or how they made it, but rather about what one hoped to accomplish through their endeavor.

Finally, "journalism" can also be understood as an *occupation* that is bound together by a particular ideology spanning different elements of product, people, practice, and service. For example, in the United States, this might entail values like seeking to provide a public service to citizens; striving to be objective, fair, and trustworthy; working independently from governmental officials; being committed to an approach that emphasizes gathering first-hand accounts of events in a timely fashion; and deferring to a shared, professional sense of ethics. In other contexts, that ideology might be different. For example, the ideology may instead seek to promote societal stability by having journalists be more deferential to government authorities and less critical of the status quo. Those who act in line with the dominant occupational values of journalism within a society — whatever that may look like — may thus be seen as practicing "journalism."

Why Definitions Matter

As we can see, there are many ways to define "journalism." Not only do different places and different groups of people within those places often understand the term differently, but those same places and groups have also understood it differently through history.

What this tells us is that *journalism is a fluid and contested thing*. Changing social, cultural, economic, political, and technological conditions change how people understand journalism. For example, technological advances have made it possible for a kindergarten teacher to regularly blog about their city's public Board of Health meetings to a large online audience — in effect, arguably allowing that teacher to perform *acts of journalism* in ways that were not previously possible.

This matters because the way journalism is broadly understood within a society impacts how *symbolic resources* are translated into *material rewards*. For example, think about a press conference or a trial that has limited seating. Some of those seats may be reserved for those who practice journalism. To determine who is eligible for those seats, someone has to first define what "journalism" is.

Definitions and Expectations

In many societies, journalism also receives a special social status as being the *authority* on "news." You can see evidence of this in the way journalism is enshrined in foundational documents and legal protections of some countries. For example, in the United States, the First Amendment protects a "free press" because of its presumed importance to a well-informed democracy.

With such status comes expectation, and perhaps even deference, from individual citizens and the broader public. For example, if someone considers *The New York Times* to engage in journalism but does not consider Fox News to do so, then they will typically hold *The New York Times* to a higher

standard when the *Times* makes a mistake. At the same time, they will be more likely to give the *Times* the benefit of the doubt when that someone can't independently verify some reported information themselves. Put another way, that someone is effectively granting *The New York Times* a degree of legitimacy that they are not granting Fox News because of how that someone understands journalism.

The consequence of this is that it grants the individuals and organizations that are perceived to be legitimate brokers of journalism considerable power as they are deemed to be authoritative by some group of people. That, in turn, allows those organizations to become the primary definers of "news" for that group. This is why different news organizations, commentators, and public figures expend so much energy casting some things as journalism and other things as not-journalism (sometimes with disparaging labels like "fake news").

Journalism as Plural

Although we have talked about "journalism" in the singular form, it is important to recognize that journalism is not some monolithic thing. Thus, one could very easily talk about *journalisms* — that is, journalism in a pluralized sense.

For example, we often hear about "sports journalism," "data journalism," and "advocacy journalism." These prefixes refer to more than just genres or technologies. They recognize that there is something substantively different about that particular rendition of "journalism," whether in its purpose, people, processes, or products. Those differences, in turn, result in distinct symbolic associations, material rewards, and social expectations within that area of journalism. Put another way, what is considered to be desirable practice within one area of journalism — like adopting a neutral tone or using an inverted pyramid story structure — may be considered undesirable in another. As such, there is no one "right way" to do journalism, but certain ways are privileged over others in particular contexts.

These definitional challenges and considerations thus help us to appreciate that "journalism" is actually a very dynamic and multifaceted thing.

Key Takeaways

- Journalism can be defined in many ways, which means that "journalism" is a contested term that means different things to different people.
- In the U.S. and many liberal democracies, journalism is associated with certain occupational values that stress a public service orientation, objectivity, independence, immediacy, and professional ethics.
- How journalism is generally understood within a society matters because it affects how symbolic resources are translated into material rewards and expectations.
- There is a plurality of journalisms (e.g., "data journalism" and "advocacy journalism"), each with distinct norms, values, and processes. This points to a recognition that journalism is not a single, monolithic entity.

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1.3: Audiences

Introduction

The term *audience* refers to the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of. Within the space of journalism, this would typically be the readers, listeners, viewers, and so on that a journalistic outlet seeks to serve.

News audiences in particular are sometimes interchangeably called "the public" or *citizens*. Those designations typically imply a civic objective: they are individuals that journalists should seek to inform *so that they may participate intelligently in democratic processes*. However, audiences may also be referred to as news *consumers*, which sometimes implies a more commercial logic — after all, the consumption of a product is what is highlighted — and thus emphasizes the organization's economic objectives over its social ones. More recently, the term "news *users*" has received attention because it moves away from the passive connotation of consumption and instead offers audiences more *agency* by suggesting that they can actively participate in media use.

Although these terms differ, they all orient themselves toward something we can call "news audiences."

News Audiences Over Time

Although journalistic outlets often depend on their audiences for their financial success — whether directly through subscriptions or indirectly through advertisements — the newsrooms within those organizations have historically wanted little to do with their audiences.

News audiences have historically been treated in a fairly passive sense, as recipients of media or commodities. Put another way, they were often thought about as just people who consumed the work of journalists, and with whom the journalists rarely ever interacted — save for the occasional letter or phone call that a journalist might receive.

Going back to the 1930s, much of the thinking about mass media (which includes journalism) was oriented around a hypodermic needle model wherein 'the audience' was seen as a passive, monolithic group that simply accepted media messages as intended by the sender — in this case, the journalist. This view became progressively less influential throughout the 1950s.

Today, audiences are typically seen as having more agency in how they encounter and interpret media messages. Put another way, they are seen as being more able to determine how they find news, being more able to participate in how news is produced and distributed, and having greater ability to interpret news through their own filters, which in turn are shaped by their individual background and beliefs. This has profoundly changed how news audiences are thought about, both professionally and academically.

Additionally, there are now greater commercial pressures on journalists and journalistic outlets to think about their audiences as potential active participants in news production and distribution, and to enlist their help in order to lower news production costs and increase the organization's reach. As advertising revenue declined for many traditional media sectors and in many parts of the world, commercial journalistic outlets have begun relying more on audience subscription revenue, which generally increase when audiences feel more engaged (and thus see greater value in a subscription). Even among state-supported and non-profit journalistic outlets, audience engagement is becoming an increasingly important marker for legitimizing those outlets' requests for funding.

News Audiences and Participation

However, just because audiences *can* participate does *not* mean that news producers will seek or even want their participation.

It has been argued that part of what gives a journalist a professional sense of identity is that they have a 'sixth-sense' for news, and the training needed to produce it well. Journalists have thus historically rejected high degrees of audience participation in news production because they perceived such participation to be an affront to their independence and expertise, and thus to the quality of the news content they produced.

In recent years, however, there has been a cultural shift within the industry toward welcoming participation — and doing so in ways that are not simply optimized toward economic benefits. Journalists today are generally more open to the idea of co-production with audiences since they have seen first-hand the quality of the work that citizen journalists have been able to produce. They also now have access to technological actants that make it easier to enlist the help of audiences to engage in certain tasks, like reviewing large troves of public documents released by whistleblowers and activists. Furthermore, there is greater acceptance of the idea that audiences have more to offer journalism — whether through story ideas or their own social networks — than they have been able to contribute in the past.

However, just because audience participation is welcomed does *not* mean that audiences will themselves want to participate. This is especially true if there is no incentive for participation, or if they're treated as an appendix of sorts in the broad scheme of things. Put differently, audiences are attune to *exploitation* — such as being asked to simply do grunt work for free — and participatory forms of journalism are therefore most successful

when the relationships are perceived as being reciprocal, with both journalists and audiences feeling like they have gained something as a result. As such, discussions about "participatory journalism" now also include terms like "reciprocal journalism."

Fragmentation of News Audiences

Today's media ecology has also complicated ideas about audiences and the experiences they have. For one, the rapid growth of media choices people have and the ease with which they may access those choices has resulted in the *fragmentation of news audiences*. No longer do tens of millions of people in the U.S. tune in to see a single news broadcast at the same time, as was the case for CBS Evening News in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, news audiences are no longer bound to the handful of channels their TV or radio antennas might pick up, to the delivery zones of their local newspapers, or even to the cultural tastes of the owners of local stores that distribute magazines.

Instead, news audiences today can easily navigate their way to the *New York Times*' website for national news, the *Boston Globe*'s website for regional news, ESPN's website for sports news, and SCOTUSblog for news about the Supreme Court. If they want to stream local news from the National Public Radio member station in Minneapolis in the morning, and then download a recorded broadcast from its Miami affiliate in the evening, they can do that, too. If they want to see how the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, covered a particular issue, they can likely find that on YouTube or the BBC's website.

In short, news audiences have access to far more news content, and far more sources, than ever before — and the cost of switching between journalistic outlets, in terms of both money and convenience, is also lower than ever before in many regards. This makes it difficult for a single journalistic outlet to gain a near-monopoly on audiences. However, it has resulted in a media ecosystem wherein a few large organizations are able to capture fairly large audiences due to brand recognition, followed by a steep drop-off to a long tail made up of tens of thousands of journalistic outlets that can only capture niche audiences and are, in many cases, deemed to be interchangeable by users.

Furthermore, not only do audiences now have access to more options for *news* but they also have more options for *other media*. This includes entertainment media, such as a popular show on Netflix or a streamer on Twitch. Such media compete with news for a finite amount of audience time and attention. That, in turn, can further fragment audiences as they turn to many different organizations to satisfy particular media desires instead of relying on a single source, like CBS or NBC, to single-handedly satisfy their want for news, culture, and entertainment.

Technological Actants and Audiences

Although news audiences now have more agency, it is also important to be aware that technological actants play an important role in *mediating the interactions* between news audiences and journalistic actors, including journalistic outlets. For example, when an individual searches for news about a recent event on YouTube, algorithms developed by engineers at YouTube decide how to order the presentation of the search results. Crucially, those algorithms are optimized to promote certain kinds of content, including provocative or controversial content that will keep users on the platform longer. Thus, news audiences are sometimes given a false sense of control, as the search algorithms work invisibly to promote certain kinds of content while deliberately obfuscating alternatives.

Similarly, the experiences that news audiences have may be personalized in small but important ways. Consider the following example: Dr. Zamith goes to the *New York Times*' website and finds that the first opinion piece listed is about climate change, an issue he cares deeply about. Other users might be shown a different opinion piece, but Dr. Zamith is shown one about climate change because a technological actant's analysis of his past browsing behavior estimated that he's interested in that particular topic. When Dr. Zamith clicks on that opinion piece, he finds that the third paragraph of the story is tailored to describe the average highs and lows over the past few decades in Amherst. That's because a different technological actant guessed Dr. Zamith's location based on his IP address, and yet another actant looked up the climate information in that area and generated a paragraph of text describing it. Then, as Dr. Zamith scrolls to the middle of the article, he encounters an image of a map-based data visualization that is automatically zoomed into Amherst. That's because yet another technological actant determined that Dr. Zamith is using his phone to access the story. Had he used a device with a larger screen, like a laptop, Dr. Zamith would have been shown an interactive map of the entire United States, which casts a broader lens on the issue.

Throughout that example, a series of technological actants intervened in Dr. Zamith's news experience in fairly invisible ways. These interventions may be seen as positive. By personalizing the news experience, the story may feel more engaging to Dr. Zamith and get him to care more about the issue. However, such personalization can be highly problematic if the technological actants are used to mediate experiences by offering audiences highly different stories based on characteristics like political ideology, race and ethnicity, or economic status. In the extreme, such interventions would make it harder for a *public* to have a shared sense of reality — something that scholars have argued is important for democratic deliberation.

Technological actants have also altered the way news audiences and journalistic actors communicate with one another, and thus the kinds of relationships they tend to develop. For example, audience members are now more likely to give feedback on a story through brief, immediate, public exchanges directed at the journalist using a platform like Twitter, as opposed to longer, slower, private exchanges like a letter or e-mail. This can result in more meaningful and direct audience participation. However, it can likewise promote negative forms of participation, such as 'brigading' and strategic harassment of journalists.

Key Takeaways

- Audiences are the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of.
- Historically, journalistic audiences have generally been thought about as passive recipients of media or commodities. In more recent times, journalistic audiences have gained greater ability (and recognition) as active participants in media production and distribution.
- Just because audiences can participate does not mean that producers will want or seek their participation, or that audiences will themselves want to participate.
- Today's diffuse media ecology permits greater news audience fragmentation, as audiences not only have more choices but also tend to consume different kinds of news from different journalistic outlets. Additionally, journalistic media are competing with even more (non-journalistic) media than ever before for a finite amount of time and attention.
- The relationships between journalistic actors and audiences are mediated to a great extent today by technological actants.

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1.4: Journalistic Activities

Introduction

Journalistic activities refer to the *routinized practices* that help shape both news media messages and the ways they are distributed and consumed.

The phrase "routinized practices" underscores that journalistic activities tend to follow certain routines, or ways of doing things. They're often deeply influenced by long-standing institutional logics, processes, and cultural values that make it possible for different kinds of social actors and technological actants to not only *work together* but also *work efficiently* across the multi-stage process of producing journalism.

Although journalistic activities are influenced by their past, they are not static or unchangeable. In fact, they frequently iterate as new configurations of social actors, technological actants, and audiences emerge as a result of social, political, economic, and technological changes within media industries and society at large.

For example, journalism was historically a more insular practice, with journalists often writing for an audience they knew relatively little about and received relatively little input from. Put another way, after the journalist identified a story *they* perhaps thought was important, the journalist would report it and write it in a way that would help answer questions they thought their audiences probably had. After the editors and production staff processed the journalist's story, it would appear on somebody's doorstep. That was often the end of that story's lifecycle.

In contrast, that same journalist is today more likely to be looking at social media trends to identify story ideas, put out open calls to solicit help in running down a tip, and even receive frequent audience feedback about their story after it has been published. Moreover, that journalist may go on to respond to questions about the story on social media and later tweet small updates to the story based on audience interest. Journalistic activities today are thus more social and less insular.

From Production to Consumption

We can broadly place many of the most consequential journalistic activities into five distinct stages: *access and observation*, *selection and filtering*, *processing and editing*, *distribution*, and *interpretation*.

Access and Observation

Access and observation pertains to the information gathering stage of news production. This involves gathering source material, like attending a press conference, being present at a protest, or gaining access to confidential government reports. It also involves identifying patterns in those source materials, like the members of Congress who routinely receive more political donations from certain industries. Regular citizens are now far more likely to participate in this stage than in times past because they can easily serve as observers by streaming events or capturing incidents that professional journalists may not be able to observe first-hand themselves. For example, a Minneapolis teenager received a special citation by the Pulitzer Board in 2021 for filming the murder of George Floyd. That video was crucial to journalistic coverage of that incident, and it helped generate a great deal of media attention to the issue of police violence against people of color in the summer of 2020.

Selection and Filtering

Selection and filtering pertains to the stage wherein gathered information is winnowed down to its most interesting and/or important parts. This involves looking at all potential stories that might emerge from an event, like a protest, and deciding what to include in a news product and where to include it. For example, a journalist may choose to focus the story on the size of the turnout at a protest, on the police response to the protesters, on the history of the issue that is being protested against, on the potential solutions to the issue, and so on. Even if the journalist has the time or space to cover every one of those angles — and they often do not — they still need to decide which aspect of the issue to the lead the news story with.

Processing and Editing

Processing and editing pertains to the stage wherein the gathered and filtered information is turned into a news product, often by following certain stylistic guidelines. For example, the journalist may be expected to organize the information using the inverted pyramid schema, wherein the most timely and important information is placed near the very top of the story, followed by decreasingly important details until you get to the non-essential background information at the end. The journalist may also be expected to generally use non-emotive language, like claiming a policy proposal was "dismissed" instead of "lambasted" in order to signal their neutrality. Within this stage, there may be multiple individuals (from the supervising editor to a copy editor to the layout or web editor) modifying the news product as it moves through the news production chain.

Distribution

Distribution pertains to the stage wherein news products are disseminated to audiences, such as by broadcasting a news story on a television show or trying to place it on a user's social media feed. Historically, newsroom personnel had a limited role to play in this stage as organizations had a dedicated group of people to handle these activities. For example, dedicated print workers would set up the printing press, print thousands of copies, and stash them in bunches at a delivery dock. Delivery

workers would then pick up and drop off individual copies at subscribers' homes. Today, however, newsroom personnel often participate directly in the distribution process by linking to their own stories on social media and sometimes even trying to draw attention to the stories by engaging in online communities where would-be audiences might congregate. Additionally, audiences themselves now play a crucial role in distribution: They're often the ones driving attention to a story by sharing it, helping some news products go viral.

Interpretation

Interpretation pertains to the discussion around the distributed news product, and more broadly about how it becomes widely understood and accepted by the general population. Journalists can certainly influence the interpretation of a news product based on the specific words and story angles they use in describing an issue or event, and editors can similarly play a major role based on the headline they write for the story and the pictures they choose to accompany it. However, audiences also play a crucial role in this process based on how they talk about the product in associated 'comments' sections, the contexts within which they share the stories on social media, and the rebuttals they may choose to issue themselves via blogging platforms and the like.

Changing Nature of Activities

At the heart of these examples are human actors. This is because journalistic activities have historically been human-led, with technological actants acting largely in a support role to help enact the human-led objectives more efficiently. For example, content management systems made it possible for journalists to quickly write their stories — perhaps with some automated spell- and grammar-checking help — and easily move it up the chain to a human editor. However, human beings were still doing much of the core labor.

This is changing, however. In some instances, the roles are now outright inverted, with the human social actor playing the support role and the technological actant taking the primary journalistic role, and sometimes acting with a remarkable degree of *independence*. For example, newswriting algorithms are already able to take in large numbers of electronic financial reports, identify the most interesting changes from the previous financial quarter, and write thousands of news stories that look very similar to what a human journalist might have produced. Another algorithm may then take those stories and post them to an organization's website — with a clever headline and all — and automatically promote it on social media. All of this can be done with limited human intervention, beyond the work that goes into setting up the algorithm.

While algorithmically led user-facing activities are still the exception within the *general* space of journalism, they have become central in some sectors. For example, *The Associated Press* publishes tens of thousands of algorithmically written news stories about finance and sports each year, and a major journalistic media chain in Sweden employs algorithms to automatically organize news stories on their homepages using a mixture of personalization and algorithmic editorial judgment.

Thus, while journalistic activities are often organized around predictable routines shaped by history, they're also continually iterating before our eyes.

Key Takeaways

- Journalistic activities refer to the routinized practices that help shape news messages as well as their distribution and consumption.
- Journalistic activities are often governed by long-standing principles, values, and ways of doing things. However, they also evolve to accommodate new arrangements of social actors, technological actants, and audiences.
- When it comes to journalism, we can broadly place the most consequential activities within five stages: access and observation, selection and filtering, processing and editing, distribution, and interpretation.
- While technological actants have historically been used to support human actors, in some cases they are now able to work fairly independently from them.

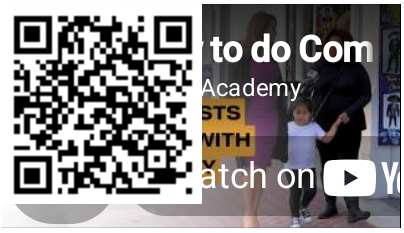
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1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

Now we are going to head over to another website to consider a slightly different version of how journalism can work, the community part of community journalism. There is even variation here, but you see and hear similarities as well.

1) Start with this video:



To Watch on Your Phone:

2) Now read this article, "**Reimagining Journalism: taking a community-centered approach**" to finish this chapter.

To read on your phone:

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain

Introduction - What Isn't Digital Today?

These days "Digital Journalism" means almost all journalism. According to **Pew Research Center**:

> When asked which of these platforms they prefer to get news on, 58% of Americans say they prefer a digital device, far higher than the share who prefer TV (32%). Relatively few Americans prefer radio (6%) or print (4%).

That means the majority of U.S. adults already rely on digital journalism. But for 20 years, many journalism brands have treated smartphones, computer, tablets like were just another form or newspaper, magazine, television, or radio. So many consumers have moved on from those platforms. From Pew:

> News websites or apps are also the most preferred source for news. About a quarter of U.S. adults (23%) say they prefer to get their news this way, compared with 18% who prefer social media, 12% who prefer search and 5% who prefer podcasts. The share of Americans who prefer social media has increased by 6 percentage points since 2023.

Professional Journalism in Social Media

In **a recent study**, Pew found, "About half of TikTok users (52%) – equivalent to 17% of all U.S. adults – say they regularly get news on the site. ... But many TikTok users appear **not to be actively following journalists or news media outlets** on the site. In fact, **fewer than 1%** of all the TikTok accounts that Americans follow belong to these types of institutional news sources."

Why does this matter? What is replacing these traditional sources of news? Influencers. A lot of them. And that might be okay, but an influencer does not always live by the standards of a professional journalist. **Watch this excellent TikTok explainer**(opens in new window) (QR code below) from Washington Post reporter Dylan Wells to help us understand some of those differences.

Looking at broad trends is not enough to understand digital media consumption. **Explore this chart from Pew(opens in new window)** (QR code below). Your age and your political affiliation play a large role of what media you consume and how much you trust it. Somehow, professional journalists need to navigate a host of platforms, media types, presentation styles for audiences across age ranges and ideologies. If being a journalist were not so important to society, it might not even be worth the effort. But it is important.

Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

I have tested multiple AI tools and I do not like any of their writing styles. Why? None of them "sounds" like me. That could change. In fact, it will change, because AI is built to look for patterns and when I say "sounds like me," that is a pattern of sorts. So a tool that "sounds" like my writing is in my near future. So we are not going to ignore AI in this book about journalism, we are going to face it head on. And to start, I have three questions:

1. How much writing do you need to do yourself before you have a "sounds like me" style?
2. What would it mean for AI to write your work for you totally? If I were your boss, why would I hire you instead of that bot?
3. How much do we actually know about AI at this point?

The first two questions are worth pondering as we start to answer the third with some sections from writing teacher Anna Mills.

2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?

2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?

2.4: Fighting Misinformation

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2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?

This video (QR code below) focuses on a specific news topic, but it broadly demonstrates the way social media has changed journalism, likely forever.



1. What do you see here?
2. Compare the reporter/commentator who is narrating the video (Blair Best) and the "influencers" she is reporting on the for her story.
3. What are the differences? What is the same?
4. Do you agree with Lars Larson that the term, "influencer" is a pejorative or a way to diminish social media-based reporters/commentators?

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2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

Now, let's move to AI and journalism, starting with this video primer (QR code below).



1. What parts of this discussion gave you hope? Which made you worry about the future of journalism as an industry?
2. Can you imagine AI being your main source of journalism someday? If so, how do you imagine it would do the reporting?
3. How will you use AI in your journalism work?

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2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?

Writing helps us form and communicate thoughts. It helps us make decisions about what actions to take in the world. The point of writing classes was never to churn out essays that follow rules and sound like other people's essays. Yes, writing in Standard English can help us come across as educated in academic and professional settings. And yes, AI may help us edit text into Standard English. But it doesn't remove the need to learn to write and practice writing as a way to clarify our thinking.

An idea can seem clear in our minds, but when we sit down to write, we struggle. To express the idea, we have to think harder. But that moves us toward insight.

If we ask AI to write something, it will produce. But there's no reason to think it will say the thing that needs to be said. AI does not "know" what we mean to say. Only we can make that judgment.

Writing answers so many questions in personal, civic, academic, and professional contexts. What career should I choose? Who should I vote for? What should the care plan be for this patient? How should I organize my business? A chatbot may answer one way. If you ask it again, it may answer in a completely contradictory but equally plausible way. Even if the answers are consistent, they're not ours. The chatbot can't know what we will come to on our own if we spend the time to read, research, brainstorm, revise, and talk it through. If we skip the writing process, we're skipping thinking that would help us improve our own understanding and judgment.

Writing skills are important even if chatbots get more sophisticated and we do end up integrating them into our writing processes. Prompting AI means describing what we want and then analyzing, critiquing, and revising what the AI gives us.

So no matter how sophisticated AI text generators get, we will still need experience seeing our ideas come into focus as we find the words to express what we mean. Learning to write in college will continue to be essential.

I've made my case, but are you convinced?

- What's your reaction to this argument? Does it resonate with your ways of thinking about writing? Do you find yourself questioning any part of it?
- Have your teachers described the purpose of writing differently than this article does? How have they talked about AI text generators in relation to writing?
- How do you feel about the process of writing - brainstorming, drafting, and revising? Has this process ever helped you clarify your thinking? Have you ever used it to help you make a decision?
- How do you feel about the role of writing in your own education and future career? Do you have any unresolved questions about AI and writing?

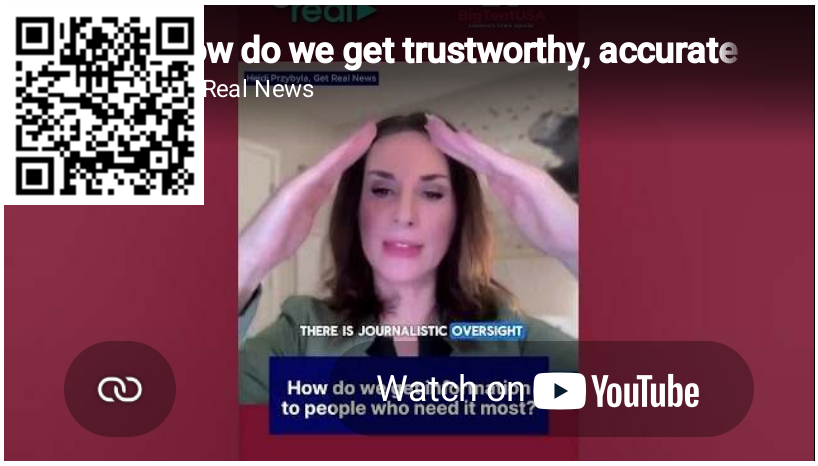
If you'd like to read more about writing as a way to improve thinking, see the introduction to *How Arguments Work: A Guide to Writing and Analyzing Texts in College*.

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2.4: Fighting Misinformation

Finally, let's put the two modes of technology we have been reading about in this chapter -- Social Media and Artificial Intelligence -- and discuss one of the most troubling outcomes: Misinformation. Here is a quick primer:



1. What do you think about this as a solution?
2. Do you think it's possible to train and use influencers to help make news and information trustable? Why or why not?
3. How do you avoid being misinformed right now?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Journalism As a Method

Journalism, both professional and citizen-based, is trustable when it has a clear method, and this chapter takes us through the standardized methods found in a typical newsroom. Here is a list of typical article types that you would find on a news site today:

What we will learn in this book can be applies to:

- **News Articles:** Fact-based reports on current events, typically using the inverted pyramid structure (most important info first).
- **Feature Articles:** Longer-form, in-depth narratives that explore human interest stories, trends, or specific topics with more creativity and detailed analysis than a standard news report.
- **Interviews:** Q&A formats or narratives based on conversations with a person of interest, providing insight into their experiences, expertise, or perspective.
- **How-to Articles/Service Pieces:** Informational, fact-driven pieces that provide practical instructions or advice to readers on a specific task or topic.
  Profiles: In-depth articles focusing on a specific person, detailing their life, career, or personality.
- **Curation (also known as Aggregation):** It is the process of collecting news, information, and data from multiple published sources, organizing it, and presenting it in a single, centralized location. While pure aggregation simply collects everything, curation (often seen as "aggregation 2.0") involves selecting only the *most relevant* or valuable content and adding context or commentary to it.

Other article types we will not address in this book:

- **Opinion Pieces (Editorials/Columns/Op-Eds):** Articles that express the personal viewpoints and perspectives of the writer or the publication itself. Unlike news articles, they are subjective and aim to persuade the reader on a particular issue.
- **Reviews:** Provide a formal or informal assessment and opinion on products, media (movies, books, music), services, or performances.
- **Explainers/Analysis:** Dig deeper into a topic or event to provide context, background, and analysis, helping readers understand complex issues.

3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life

3.1.1: Reporting

3.1.2: Writing the News Story

3.2: Developing a Beat

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3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life

Take a look at this article(opens in new window) (QR code below) and think about how the reporter pulled all that information together. In one sense, the magic of what makes a good reporter is a little mystifying. The nose for news is not the same skill as encouraging sources to talk on record. And the ability to connect the dots on a big story is not the same as writing or recording in an engaging way. Most journalists have a serious toolbox of skills. They also work hard, which is why originally reported journalism is so valuable (i.e. expensive).

The good news is that the process can be learned and the structure of doing good journalism can be pretty straightforward, especially for those all-important news stories that show up on our phones, tablets and PCs on a daily basis. Let's take a look with a little more detail the key steps within the roadmap to a news story, courtesy of the book Journalism 101, which was written more than 10 years ago now. Read carefully and decide for yourself—how much of this guidance is still useful? Obviously, I think a lot of it is or I would not waste your time. But see if you notice any steps, advice, even language, that might not be relevant any more.

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3.1.1: Reporting

> "*The three most important words in journalism: accuracy, accuracy, accuracy.*"
>
> - Attributed to Joseph Pulitzer

Here's how to report a story:

Formulate an Angle

When you come up with a story idea, or when your editor assigns one, you must figure out what aspect of the story you'll focus on. That's called the **angle**. So if a massive fire breaks out at a polar fleece factory in your city, for example, you might be assigned to cover the fire itself in a news story that includes how it started, how it grew out of control, and how it was fought. Another reporter might cover the story from a different angle, perhaps reporting on how much damage was done, how the polar fleece industry will be affected, and how the closing will lead to local unemployment woes.

The next day, you could do a folo news story on the fire itself, with the latest information on exactly what happened. Or you could write a feature story on how the employees are coping with their livelihood having gone up in flames, or a feature about polar fleece itself—how it's made, why it's so warm and soft, how everyone loves to walk and hike and grocery shop in it, how quickly it has become a hugely important textile. A month later you could take up the subject again in a folo feature story to see if the factory's running yet, and if not, what's going on with the workers. These are all different angles for writing about one fire.

The most important angle of every story: people. Who are they? How does this story affect them?

The angle of a hard news story is usually straightforward and dictated by events. Your task is to find out what happened at a certain time and place, and to answer all the W and H questions: what happened, where, when, how, who is involved, why it matters. And rest assured, figuring out why it matters does not mean you are interpreting events. On the contrary, it means you are making sense of the facts you've gathered.

The definition of a hard news story is a "response to an event," and the angle is generally fairly straightforward: this just happened. A feature story, by contrast, is defined as a "response to an idea," so the angle is dictated only by the reporter's or editor's creativity. Some people can rattle off feature ideas non-stop; others struggle to come up with angles that aren't oversimplified or cliché. One of my favorite journalism teachers in all the land is Melissa Wantz, from Foothill Technology High School in Ventura, California—where she also advises *The Foothill Dragon Press*. Among her brilliant creations is the following brainstorm guide, to help you come up with story ideas:

Story Brainstorming Tips by Melissa Wantz[1]

- Do not ask: "What are some good story ideas?" or "How do I find story ideas?"
- Instead ask:
  - What big-ticket item am I going to buy soon? Chances are others may be, too, and a little research can yield good consumer reporting.
  - What have I been worrying about lately?
  - What has made me angry lately?
  - Whom would I like to know more about? (No, not the cute kid in algebra, but still...)
  - What do I wish I knew more about?
  - What was the last thing I looked up online?
- Skeptical? A veteran journalism adviser says this: "'What has made me angry lately?' I once had a student laughingly say, 'I'm mad at my sister because she wore my sweater today without asking, but that's not a story.' Oh, yeah? The staff brainstormed a bit and ended up with one about dealing with siblings without fighting, complete with a great interview with a local family therapist. Another time, a freshman was angry about having to pay adult rate at the movies but [not being able to] get into an R-rated show he wanted to see. That became a good feature on how the local theaters choose movies and what ratings have to do with it."
- Sometimes, it takes a little work—brainstorming, narrowing the focus, broadening the scope, thinking of ways to localize, and finding good local primary sources to interview—but it's always worked.

Identify the Stakeholders

Stakeholders in a story are the people—or governments, businesses, or organizations—with a significant interest in the story, who are in some way involved with or affected by it. Often, the stakeholders in a story are obvious, but sometimes, figuring out who they are takes a bit of legwork itself.

Once you make a list of stakeholders, make a real effort to interview them. It is lousy work to write that so-and-so—who is important to your story and who will care very much what it says—"could not be reached for comment." Reach people. If the residents of a housing complex accuse their landlord of gross neglect, you need to talk to the landlord. If 500 people spent the night on the floor of Logan airport after their flights were canceled by Air France, you really have to call Air France. If a third grade class, inspired by Brangelina, collected a bazillion pennies to send to an impoverished school in Africa, put Brad and Angelina right on your stakeholder list. You might not reach them for an interview, but if you want a decent story, you had better call their agent and at least give it a try. Indeed, you must always pursue the stakeholders and never shy away just because they're busy or famous or, for that matter, scary. Even if you know a stakeholder is likely to blow your head off in a shrieking tirade, you owe the maniac a call.

Note: Keep in mind that stakeholders by definition have an interest in your story and therefore likely also have a bias. If you ask them for more than just a comment—if you ask them for information—then you're asking them to be your sources. And just as you would with any other source, you must evaluate their credibility and reliability. You do this by thinking through why they are talking to you, what they have to gain, or what they risk. This will help you figure out what their bias may be, so you aren't manipulated or deceived.

Now, consider a moment in history when the American media *was* manipulated by a single stakeholder—the U.S. government. Watch the beginning of *Buying the War*, a PBS documentary about the compliant press in the lead-up to the Iraq War.

Figure **3.1.1.1**: Beware of becoming manipulated into serving as the mouthpiece of certain stakeholders in your story.

Gather Information from Sources

Legwork

Your first source should be, of course, yourself, as you go tearing out the door to unearth the story. There is no substitute for being there at the scene of a story and seeing things with your own eyes. This is how you get the facts right, and this is how you get the atmospherics that make a story come alive.

But before you fling yourself out there, you need to understand that journalists, like all other citizens, must follow the law. Journalists may go to public places—but not to private places—without permission. They may listen to a conversation in the street and report it, but they may not tape that conversation without the speakers' consent; they may go to a crime scene, but they may not necessarily be allowed past the yellow tape (note the phrase "not necessarily"). Journalists do have the right to be at a crime scene, but they can't impede rescue attempts or put themselves or others in danger. For a full list of your rights as a journalist, read and keep as a reference this Student Media Guide to News Gathering from the Student Press Law Center (SPLC), a non-profit organization devoted to the protection of scholastic press rights.

Figure **3.1.1.2**: Reporters interviewing an officer at a crime scene from outside the yellow tape.

Documents

Documents are great sources because they're usually straight with you: once you copy them or take their picture, you've got what you need. Of course they can be forged or doctored, but unless you think a stakeholder would resort to that, you can assume a document is a reliable source. The trick for success with documents is knowing which ones exist and which of those are legally available to the press. The Society of Professional Journalists has compiled an extensive list of public documents, called "The Journalist's Toolbox: Public Records Archives" for you to examine.

If your request for a public document is denied, don't be stopped in your tracks. Keep reporting by submitting a request for the document under the Freedom of Information Act. In the old days, submitting a request under FOI took forever! Journalists were on endless hold, waiting for the government to supply information that sometimes took weeks and months and, truth be told, years to be released. But the process is far more streamlined now, and FOI requests truly work.

The Media

Another source of information for reporters is the media itself. No newspaper wants to get its information secondhand, but neither can any newspaper afford to have a correspondent everywhere. Thus newspapers pay for subscriptions to wire services such as AP, UPI, and Reuters. They also rely on reports from other newspapers and from television and the web. Good newspapers will independently verify information from other media sources, especially when the information is breaking news. Never forget that it is quite easy to get information from other media that turns out to be untrue.

People

Most of the time, your sources will be people, and the way you approach them and engage with them will make all the difference in how well you do your job. When I am in the car with my kid, and a great song comes on, she often says, "Will you stop singing? And—(she sighs)—stop moving your head." So, this is one method of communicating with me. Later in the day, the same child will sidle up to and say, "Ma…mee... (smile, snuggle) Can I take the car?" So in the morning, this child is a bit cranky, while in the afternoon, she is a sweet angel, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that in the afternoon, she wants something from me.

And you are going to want something from your sources—information—and therefore you are going to be very charming with them, as well you should be. But you also need to be professional with your sources and absolutely straight with them, so you do not mislead them or put yourself in a position to be misled.

Set the Ground Rules

When you meet sources, tell them *right away* you're a reporter for a newspaper so that they don't start talking before they know who you are and what you're doing. And if you call them on the phone, also tell them right away who you are, and that you're putting together a story and want to speak to them about it. Ask if they mind your asking a few questions.

Then establish whether you are talking on the record, off the record, or not for attribution. Be aware that these terms mean different things to different people, so be sure you get the ground rules straight with your source before you start asking questions.

- **On the record** – This means you will print what they say and use their name.
- **Not for attribution** – This means you will print what they say, but you won't use their name. This can be dangerous, as you must protect their identity.
- **Off the record/On background** – This means you are seeking to be informed about a situation. You won't use direct quotes or the source's name. You'll use the information to get more information from another source.

Remember that ethically, it is your responsibility to protect your sources based on the arrangement you made together. If you agree not to name them in your story, then you can't reveal who they are to anyone—except, perhaps, your editor, who may demand to know, depending on how serious the story is and how much he trusts your ability to evaluate sources. If you go ahead with an anonymous source, and the story provokes a court case, you will face a dilemma. If a judge orders you to name your source, you'll either have to do so or risk being put in jail for contempt. This is what happened in the case of Judith Miller (who revealed in her news story the name of an undercover CIA operative) and her source Scooter Libby (the White House official who leaked the name to her), and it raises very difficult questions about whether journalists should have special protection under the law to pursue their work. Should reporters be shielded from the courts' requiring them to name their sources?

In fact our justice system recognizes that journalists may have a claim to special protection under the law because they have a special job to do on behalf of the people as they go about gathering facts and information for their stories. These are called shield laws or reporter's privilege, and they vary state by state: you can look up your state at the previous link.

To see a terrific documentary on the case of Judith Miller and Scooter Libby, you should watch this special on PBS's Frontline, titled *News War*.

Conduct the Interview

Here is the first rule of interviewing: The source should be talking, and you should be taking notes.

This seems self-evident, but it's surprisingly easy to forget. The source, after all, is someone else, while you are you, the epicenter of the universe as you know it, the one who's come up with clever questions, the one who'll have a byline, the one who, frankly, has

gained so much knowledge while preparing for this interview that the interviewee is going to be mightily impressed if he'd just shut up and listen. But he's not supposed to be listening, he's supposed to be talking, and even if you know the answers to your clever questions, you're not the one who should answer them. If you simply can't put yourself in such a powerless position, remember that once the interview's over, it's your show again and your story. How well you stifled your ego during the interview may well determine how well your story turns out in the end. What you want to do is get the source talking.

You should prepare for the interview by writing down your questions and reading them to yourself several times before you meet your source. If you're looking strictly for information for a hard news story, then ask your questions and keep asking until you receive solid answers. (Note the superb interviewing techniques on display in *News War* by *Frontline* correspondent Lowell Bergman.) Try to not let the source get away with generalizations or evasions. If you want to know how much money your city is spending on a new park, you should get a number for an answer, not a disquisition on the benefits of greenery. Before you head back to the newsroom, check your written list of questions and be sure you asked them all. Also be sure you have the source's name spelled correctly and an email or phone number so that you can contact him again should you realize, in the middle of writing your story on deadline, that you've forgotten a crucial fact (not that this has happened to me, ever).

If you're working on a feature story, you don't want to grill your source—you want to have what feels like a conversation. Ask a few questions from your list, and then stop thinking about the list and, instead, just listen closely to what your source is saying. Pay attention to her mood and body language, get a sense of how she feels, and ask your follow-up questions based on what she's saying. Before you say goodbye, go back and look at the list of questions you wrote up in advance. Chances are you will have asked them all because you looked them over carefully before the interview started, so they were on your mind and thus you likely found a way to bring them into the "conversation."

The second rule of interviewing is this: Get details, details, details.

A kid wearing a white shirt and slacks to his after-school job as a janitor is less interesting than a kid wearing a white shirt and slacks his mom ironed that morning. Details, details, details. And write them down or you'll forget them. Use five spiral notebooks, if you must.

Here's the third rule: Take notes.

If you meet a source in person, take notes in one of those cool reporter's notebooks, and you might want to use your cell phone to record the conversation as well, but only if you ask the source for permission to use it; it's illegal to tape someone without her permission. If you talk to a source on the phone, write or type as you listen. You can also tape the conversation, to be sure you have the quotes down properly, but, again, only if the source gives you permission.

Figure **3.1.1.3**: A journalist taking notes in a reporter's notebook and making use of a tape recorder during an interview with a source.

Try to get the source's words down exactly so you'll have direct quotes in your notebook, and if you can't write as fast as he's talking, ask him to repeat what he said. If you get the direct quote, put quotation marks around it. If your source says something's off the record, write "OFF" beside it. Be sure you're careful with these things so you don't get back to the newsroom and find you can't decipher which words are the source's and which are yours, and which ones were off the record. That would be a stomach-sinking kind of moment for you, especially if the source is now on a plane to Shanghai and unable to help you sort through your mess.

Verify Your Information

"The three most important words in journalism: accuracy, accuracy, accuracy." So said Joseph Pulitzer, and since you have already read a whole section in this book about the cost to a society of mistakes in a newspaper, you don't need a big explanation here. Just remember that after you gather information for your story, you need to "stand the story up," which is newspaper lingo for saying that you need to be sure everything in your story is right. How do you do that? More legwork. More going to the hockey rink.

No, I'm kidding. You might not need to go back there. Plus, you'll never find a parking spot. So you can do a lot of this work from your desk. But you *do* need to do it—you need to retrace your steps—because you are only human, and it's possible you made a tiny mistake, such as writing "OFF" in the middle of a notebook page filled with quotations and then later, having suffered a cramp in your hand or maybe a brain cramp, you wrote "OTR" and now have no idea what you were trying to tell yourself. OFF the

record again? ON the record now? Or *what*? Not that this has happened to me. But in the heat of reporting a story, you get cranked up and busy, with an editor looming over your shoulder, and it becomes easier than you might think to make an honest mistake.

Furthermore, even without the pressure of a deadline, it's easier than you might think to make a dishonest mistake—that is, a mistake that's not really a mistake but actually your character coming unglued. This happens, for example, when you must call a stakeholder in a story, not a really important character but one who deserves a call, and whom you really do *not* want to talk to, so you procrastinate until you're sure the guy won't be in his office anymore, and his home phone's unlisted. This sort of lame maneuver is not going to work, by the way—I'm only guessing here—because the editor from hell will tell you to reach the guy at home. And you'll say the number's unlisted and he won't even say one word. He will look you square in the eye. And off you'll have to drive, fast, to the guy's house, and if he's not home you'll have to find out where he is, etc., etc. And now you really *are* on deadline.

But getting back to the point here: Before you give your article to the editor, you must be sure everything in the story is right—people's names are spelled correctly, the budget numbers are accurate, the information you received from one source has been verified by a second source, quotations are attributed to the people who said them and they've been transcribed accurately from your notebook to your computer screen, etc. and so on—until every piece of material in your story stands up. The best way to do this, I think, is to follow this accuracy checklist from David Yarnold, executive editor of the *San Jose Mercury News*:

Accuracy Checklist from the San Jose Mercury News

- Is the lead of the story sufficiently supported?
- Has someone double-checked, called, or visited all the phone numbers, addresses, or web addresses in the story? What about the names and titles?
- Is the background material required to understand the story complete?
- Are all the stakeholders in the story identified, and have representatives from that side been contacted and given a choice to talk?
- Does the story pick sides or make subtle value judgments? Will some people like this story more than they should?
- Is something missing?
- Are all the quotes accurate and properly attributed, and do they capture what the person really meant?

After you have done all of this, you may send your article to the editor. He will read it, frowning. He will then call you over to say, "This is wrong," about some small thing, and he will be right. He will not be smiling. Or else your story will be perfect! And he will not say one word.

Exercises

1. Deconstruct a story in order to re-trace the reporter's steps and determine what information he or she received from what sources. Select an article and read it carefully. In 10 words or less, describe the angle. Make a list of the stakeholders. Underline each attribution. (You should find that nearly every piece of information and every quotation is accompanied by an attribution.) Identify information that is *not* attributed, and determine the source of information and why the passage does not require attribution. (A reporter doesn't need to provide attribution for information that is common knowledge or that he or she saw firsthand.)
2. Can you go there? Before you set out to report a story, you need to know where the press is legally allowed to go. You shouldn't be intimidated by people who don't want you around, but you also shouldn't break the law or endanger anyone. (If you didn't take a careful look at the SPLC's Student Media Guide to News Gathering as you were reading above, now is the time.) Explain how you would go about covering a story at the following places:
    - A public school board meeting
    - A restaurant downtown
    - The scene of a car accident
    - An amusement park
    - Your local mall (pick an actual mall and do your research!)
    - Your school

3. A tiger that escaped from a local zoo has been caught and returned to its cage. What is your angle? Who are the stakeholders? Who should be your sources? What questions will you ask? What is your bias? How do you keep it out of your story?
4. The director of a popular charity in your city has just been arrested, charged with stealing funds from the charity. What is your angle? Who are the stakeholders? Who should be your sources? What questions will you ask? What is your bias? How do you keep it out of your story? What court records are available to you? How about records from the charity?

[1] docs.google.com/file/d/0B7O-IvVsX7nNcFpXb202ZmF3b28/

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3.1.2: Writing the News Story

"*There is but one art—to omit.*"

- Robert Louis Stevenson

By now I bet you're in no mood to read a lot from me about how to write for a newspaper. You're impatient. You've done your reporting, you're on deadline, and you'd like me to tell you what I have to say and shut up so you can work. Good. This is how your readers feel when they pick up your newspaper or call it up on their computer—they're smart and in a hurry and want you to tell them what you know so they can learn the news and move on.

So how do you write for a newspaper? Clearly and succinctly. With hard news, you write short, declarative sentences that give lots of information coherently so the reader understands them effortlessly and they seem to have been effortless to produce, even simple.

But, of course, it's not *simple* to write clearly and succinctly! Pascal said he could make his writing shorter but he didn't have the time. The first paragraph of a newspaper article is called the **lead**, in newspaper lingo spelled "**lede**," because newspaper type used to be set in lead and editors didn't want to mix up the two words. The way to write a lede is sit at the keyboard until small drops of blood form on your forehead. That's the old joke—and not all that funny, believe me. Some people can write up a snazzy newspaper lede instantly, but most of us flail away hideously, banging out a sentence, erasing it, writing it again, cutting it apart, and stitching it together until it reads like it's been in an accident. Eventually, though, we place the right words in the right order to say what we mean precisely, and that's when we newspaper hacks are just like any artist who makes something super hard look easy. We are like Picasso, or Roger Federer, or that athlete playing the Sugar Plum Fairy, and just as they did, we sweated it out.

But now because you are so clever, you are looking at the clock (and not just at the clock but at the calendar), and you are thinking you'd better learn how to make good writing look easy in a big hurry, because you don't have time to write and erase, write and erase until the cows come home and Middlebury accepts someone else. Thus, you are eager for some inside tips on how to learn news writing quickly. I have two of them: the first simple, the second complex.

The simple tip is this: Practice. You get good at doing this sort of writing by doing it over and over, getting the hang of it, the rhythm of it. It takes a while to quit writing too many words or too many complex sentence structures.

The more complex tip is this: You need to adopt a professional attitude that says *I'm* not important here—the *story* is what's important here, and my writing is not about *me*—it's about the story.

If you adopt this professional attitude, your mind will soon be preoccupied with relevant data only, such as: What am I trying to say in this newspaper article? And thus your mind will not go meandering down the time-consuming and pointless psychological roads our minds generally travel when we write for an audience, roads really more like halls than like roads, specifically like halls of mirrors, in front of which we pause in admiration, or in horror. This is a fabulous sentence, we think as we bang out a sentence, and we are so clever to have thought of it, and before we've strung together two independent clauses joined by a conjunction, we've already decided we're as good as Hemingway and better than John Grisham, whom we could write exactly like if we weren't aiming so much higher. Time meanwhile is passing, and the sentences aren't that good, believe me. This is because we always love our most overwritten sentences, because we think they show us off—how nifty we are, how clever with words, how sophisticated, whatever. We love ourselves, we love our dramas, we love our most dramatic sentences. But, hey!—newspaper readers are not interested in us right now. They want to know the news.

So the hall of mirrors is a bad place to hang out when you think you're writing well, and it's even worse when you think you're writing badly. There you are, struggling with a lede. You keep writing the same exact sentence over and over (REDRUM), in the mirror you look like a hideous wreck, and you know you're a fraud and a loser; plus there's a Dali clock dripping down the wall. When you are writing on deadline, you don't need this distraction, believe me.

The bottom line: Just be professional, even when the writing's hard, even when you're too exhausted or frustrated to bother sweating blood. Just stay calm and remember you have the one gift you need in order to write well, and the newspaper's given it to you—you have something to say.

Here's how to do it:

Style

- News writers get to the point and get out. So write simple, declarative sentences. Try to avoid dependent clauses.
- One line of typewritten 12-point type is two or more lines in a newspaper column; two-line computer sentences are four lines in a newspaper—and all of this is getting too long for your reader. Try to keep your sentences to 1.5 computer lines on average.
- If you want your prose to have power, use lots of nifty verbs. Think in verbs. Deliberately use action verbs and take time to select them.
- Use the active, not passive, voice. Know the difference between the two. (The active voice puts the subject first: "Sally ran," or "John hit the wall." The passive voice puts the subject last: "The wall was hit by John." Or, if the subject is not important, leave it out: "The rodents were trapped," and who cares by whom! But consider what happens if the subject actually is important, but the passive voice construction omits it—then you get a sentence like this: "The CIA agent's name was leaked," or "During the protest, shots were fired." Well, okay, but who leaked? Who fired? The passive voice is dangerous; it allows facts to disappear.)
- Be repulsed by clichés.
- The opening paragraphs (or **grafs**) of a hard news story, along with the sentences themselves, are likely to feel like puzzles whose pieces you must fit together, or like very fine gold necklaces that tangle easily. If you start to come unglued, relax and think about how you would tell this news story to a friend. You would get to the point immediately with the most important thing first (a squirrel attacked the English teacher!) and take it from there in the next graf, giving the next bit of information that your friend would logically want to know. Keep the sentences short, keep the paragraphs short, and after those first few grafs, the story will write itself.

Tone

- The tone of a news story should be neutral (just the facts, ma'am), and while ordinarily that tone can be stiff or dull, in a news story it's exactly right for two crucial reasons. First of all, tone carries meaning. If your tone is emphatic, angry, melancholy, low-brow, high-brow, laid-back, critical, or, really, anything but neutral, that tone conveys an opinion. But you don't want your opinion seeping into a hard news story. Secondly, a neutral tone is appropriate because the information being delivered—not the language it's delivered in—carries the sentence's energy. To wit: "The President today pardoned a staff member for lying to a jury about the Vice President's participation in a campaign against an FBI agent's reputation." This sentence has a neutral tone, but it's a bomb all right.
- Don't use inflated or sensational tone to create meaning where none exists.
- Don't select sources with only a specific point of view and then use neutral language to disguise this bias.
- Be sensitive to the denotation and connotation of words (remember Helen Keller...).

The Lede

- As the first paragraph of a story, the lede gives the most important information. Readers often simply glance at the lede, so above all, write it clearly. Do not confuse the reader!
- The lede must be supported by the content of the story. If your story doesn't end up supporting your lede, change the lede or spike the story.
- A **direct lede**, also known as a summary lede, gives a summary of the story's main facts and will emphasize what is important of the WWWWWH list: who, what, when, where, why, how. It should be one sentence long, 30 words or less.
- A **blind lede** is a lede that refers to people but saves their names for a later paragraph.
- A **nut graf** is a paragraph that follows the lede and fills in crucial information.

To learn the craft of writing ledes and nut grafs, practice, practice, practice. You can copy ledes from your newspaper verbatim—that's actually a useful way to get the hang of them—or you can hide the lede of an article, read the rest of the story, and then go back and try to write the lede. Compare it to the published lede, and you'll see how quickly you're learning. And if you aren't learning so quickly, not to worry. Join the crowd. Soon you'll understand the little saying about beads of blood on your forehead.

To wit: Let's say you're writing an article about a high school band holding a fundraiser for one of the musicians whose family lost their house in a fire. The first time you write the lede, you're likely to write something like: "The Tallant Marching Band will hold a fundraising carnival to raise money for the band's trumpet player whose family lost all their posessions after a fire broke out in their home and destroyed all the home's contents." That's not a hideous lede by any means. But it's not good, either. Well, actually, it's a bit hideous, because it is so repetitive. You should give your reader information once and that's enough; then get on with the next

bit of information. Here's a better lede for that story: "The Tallant Marching Band will hold a fundraiser next week for their trumpet player whose family lost their house in a fire." Now, you're probably thinking that sentence is not a glorious piece of prose. It's sort of bland, no big deal. And in some ways you're right—it's no big deal. But it's a good, solid lede, and it was not easy to craft.

The Inverted Pyramid

- The **inverted pyramid** is the basic structure for a breaking news story. It begins with a direct lede. The second paragraph (nut graf) tries to answer questions a reader would naturally ask after reading the lede. The next most important facts follow in the next paragraph, and so on, so if readers don't have time to finish your article or don't feel like it, they'll get the most important ideas up high. You add quotes along the way, not before crucial information, but soon enough to add a human voice to a hard news story.
- Each paragraph should be one sentence long or two at most.
- There are several other structures for newspaper stories, but they are most effective with feature stories, and they're described in section 2.3 of this book. For now, practice the inverted pyramid for hard news stories. The inverted pyramid gets the job done.

 Figure **3.1.2.1**: A diagram of the inverted pyramid structure.

Quotes

- Quotes must be verbatim or else edited in such a way that they accurately (that's ACCURATELY, not "adequately") convey the speakers meaning *and* intention. If you cut words from a quote, you indicate you've done so with ellipsis: "...". If you replace words in a quote, you indicate this with square brackets around [your replacement].
- Individual words or phrases from a quote shouldn't be inserted into your prose, as you would do with quotations from a work of literature. Instead, keep a source's quote intact. Either precede it, or follow it, with the source's name.
- Quotes should add color to your story or offer information in a rich way. Don't use quotes simply to deliver information that you might just as easily present in prose, unless, of course, the person giving the information is also significant to the story. For example, if the President of the United States said, "The law should be voted on this afternoon at 4 p.m.," you might offer that as a direct quote. It reveals something about the President's attention to this issue; it's giving the readers something more than simply the time of the vote. If one of his aides said the exact same thing, you would present the information in prose, not in the form of a direct quote.
- If you get a good quote from a source, just write it up. Don't precede the quote with a sentence about what it says. Your reader can figure that out for herself.
- Really terrific quotes are called "money quotes"—as in: Ka-ching, I got it on the record.

Attribution

- If you see something with your own eyes, if the information is common knowledge, or if you can learn it from three printed sources, you can present it as fact.
- You must attribute everything else to a source.
- Try to place one source's information in successive sentences, so you only need to attribute the information once per graf.
- Otherwise, each sentence must contain an attribution.
- Use "he said" and "she said" when reporting what a source says to you. Do not use "claimed," "announced," "admitted," "replied," "shouted," "retorted," "argued," "insisted," or any other synonym for "said." All other synonyms carry shades of meaning and thus editorialize the news story. But news stories do not contain opinion. Just use "said."
- Use "according to" if your source is a document or report or if the source is offering you information but not quotes.
- On first reference, use a person's full name and title. Some titles precede the name (e.g. President Barack Obama, Justice Ruth Ginsberg), but most often a title will come after a name (e.g. Jennifer Jones, Superintendent of Schools).
- After a first reference, use a person's last name only, preceded by Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss (depending on the stylebook).
- Newspapers use a **stylebook**, such as *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* or *The Associated Press Stylebook*, to keep these and other style rules consistent.

Elements of Structure and Balance

- Use a quotation early in the story to bring in a human voice.
- Provide background after the breaking news.

- Go through the accuracy checklist from David Yarnold, Executive Editor of the *San Jose Mercury News*:

  Accuracy Checklist from the *San Jose Mercury News*

  - Is the lede of the story sufficiently supported?
  - Has someone double-checked, called, or visited all the phone numbers, addresses, or web addresses in the story? What about the names and titles?
  - Is the background material required to understand the story complete?
  - Are all the stakeholders in the story identified, and have representatives from that side been contacted and given a chance to talk?
  - Does the story pick sides or make subtle value judgments? Will some people like this story more than they should?
  - Is anything missing?
  - Are all the quotes accurate and properly attributed, and do they capture what the person really meant?
- Read the story once more before you turn it in, checking that you do not editorialize or shade the story by your word choice or sentence structure, the arrangement of paragraphs, or the inclusion or exclusion of material. (More on this in the "Ethics and the Law" chapter of this book.)

Exercises

1. With a sticky note, cover up the first graf of a news story. Read the rest of the story, and then write an original lede. Compare your lede to the printed version.
2. Take one page of a newspaper, and read each story on the page. Write a tweet (140 characters or less) that describes the essence of each story. Looking only at your tweets, decide on the verb that belongs in each lede.
3. Take a hard news story and deconstruct it into a bullet-pointed list of facts or pieces of information, with no prose. Then reconstruct it back into an article in the inverted pyramid structure.
4. Take the same news story notes and reconstruct the article again, this time with a different story structure.

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3.2: Developing a Beat

Learning about "beats" is critical when thinking about community journalism. So first, let's define what a journalism beat is.

Definition: Journalism Beat

Beat reporting refers to thematic specialization and routines (places to go, people to see) in journalism. The term reflects the distinction between general assignment reporters and specialized (beat) reporters covering a specific area (beat) as well as the subject-matter or geographic divisions between areas of reporting by which media organizations seek to structure the social environment they cover. (Source: Oxford Research Encyclopedias)

In many cases, beats are defined by communities. Two examples:

- A large news agency that covers New York City might have a Westchester County beat, where a reporter finds stories significant to the larger metro area that begin or heavily effect Westchester County, a suburban area just outside of NYC.
- A video games beat might cover their developers, the people who play and love games, the financial aspects of the industry, etc.

So beats can be highly versatile forms of community journalism, but developing a beat has many commonalities across all focus areas. This video breaks it down for us:



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Research Basics

We have explored the field and the basics of what it takes to be a journalist. Now we are going to get into the nitty gritty of developing a story from start to finish. In today's journalism, that story that could take many different forms: a written article, a two to five-minute TV news report, a mini documentary, an Instagram or TikTok story, a podcast episode, etc.

What will be helpful, though, is to think about this story as one unit, as opposed to a whole podcast season. Why? Because learning how to shape something into a single, focused story is an important part of journalism, especially today. We will focus on a larger project later in the book, one that might take weeks to complete. For now, imagine you have one day (or even just an hour) to complete these steps. Most journalists will have this experience at some point, even if they ultimately do longer work for most of their career.

Think back to Chapter 3. We are going focus on five steps of that process (Research, Reporting, Telling/Writing, Editing, Spreading).

And we will start with getting the story framed up before we head out and report on it, which we will call Research, courtesy of the American Journalism Handbook.

When you are assigned (or find) a news story, the time range that you have to research the story before your first interview can be very wide. Sometimes you might be running out the door to the scene of a news event (a historic building is on fire) just moments after you have heard about it. Other times, you might have hours or even days to get ready for the first interview (a story about fire prevention in historic building). Whenever it is possible, a community journalist wants to do her homework before those interviews. One of the great advantages of a community journalist is we don't "parachute" into a place or group and just cover it when something has gone wrong.

As you read the next few chapters, you will see how interwoven three key steps to doing journalism are: researching the story to get started, finding and interviewing key resources, and writing the story.

4.1: Story Ideas

4.2: News Sources

4.3: Identifying Appropriate Sources

4.4: Contacting Sources and Arranging Interviews

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4.1: Story Ideas

Introduction

One of the most important — and consistently underrated — skills a journalist must have is the ability to find and pitch compelling story ideas. This is an advanced journalistic skill that takes time and instincts to develop. Journalists who have good story ideas quickly distinguish themselves from newsroom peers who do not. While editors might suggest or assign story ideas to a reporter when the reporter is beginning their journalistic career, that reporter will be expected to eventually find and develop their own story ideas.

When it comes to finding story ideas, journalists benefit from the fact that they are human beings with their own lives and interests and often exist within the same cultures and places as their sources and audiences. By sharing some of the same experiences and reality as the people who consume their work, journalists develop instincts over time about the communities they cover and serve. They come to understand what those people value, what interests them, and what their information needs are. And, the more they understand their audience, the better their story ideas will be.

Identifying Story Ideas

It is not uncommon for aspiring journalists to wonder: Where do story ideas come from?

The answer is, for good and bad, that story ideas come from absolutely everywhere. Journalists develop story ideas through a huge variety of means and sources. However, most of these methods are a result of following one's curiosity and establishing relationships with key people and topics. Journalists also use their professional instincts and their shared understanding of journalistic news values to decide when a story idea is a good one that will serve the needs and wants of the communities they cover. Indeed, part of what defines many journalists' sense of professional identity is the 'sixth sense' they develop about knowing how to find (and then report) a good news story.

Such a sixth sense takes time to develop, though. Here are a few tips for helping aspiring journalists find good journalistic story ideas.

Encourage Your Curiosity

Ask questions. Ask more questions. And then when you're done, ask a few more questions.

Don't be afraid to unleash your curiosity, even when you're in social situations outside of your professional life. If you see an interesting flyer on a wall outside your favorite coffee shop, check it out. If you notice a hole in a story your friend just told you, ask about it. If you don't understand how a process works, find out.

Some of the best story ideas arise organically from reporters noticing holes, gaps, or problems in the world around them and then following up on those gaps. If you have questions, there's a good chance other people out there do, too. Don't be afraid to ask questions and doggedly pursue answers. Your future audiences will be glad you did.

Keep Your Ears Open

Always listen to the people around you: in real life, on social media, and through your own news consumption. By keeping your ears open, engaging with the people and world around you and learning new things, you will become exposed to new ideas and information that could help you find story ideas (in addition to becoming a more well-rounded person). A potential story idea could come from a stranger's post in a Facebook group you belong to, from an overheard conversation at the grocery store, or from an anecdote a friend shares at a party. Over time, you will hone your instincts and become more quick and comfortable recognizing story ideas in even the most unexpected places.

Develop a Niche

Another good way to develop story ideas over time is to dedicate yourself, in part, to a specific topic or community. If you like music, do you have a favorite genre? If you follow local politics, is there a specific movement or topic you find to be under-served? If you like sports, is there a specific team or fandom that you follow?

Going deep on a particular person, topic, or beat can help you familiarize yourself with (and develop relationships with) the key stakeholders pertaining to that beat. Once you have identified a niche, continue to follow it and learn more about it. For example, you might follow a hashtag related to that topic, join a Facebook group about that topic, go to a lecture or reading about that topic, read books about that topic, or go to a performance about that topic. By becoming an expert on that beat, you can ensure that you are able to stay on top of the latest trends and questions, and that you are sufficiently informed to write something insightful about it.

Consume Journalism

This cannot be overstated: consume journalism! (This is doubly true if you cover a beat. See what other journalists are covering, and how they are covering it.) Consuming journalism will not only help you become more knowledgeable of current events but it will also help you become a more versatile news producer. For example, it can help you learn about different journalistic story structures and stylistic norms.

You can also get great story ideas from consuming journalism. For example, you may come across an interesting story that focuses on the national level, leaving the local angle wide open for you to report on. You may also find that you have some questions after consuming a news piece. Focus your reporting on answering those questions or addressing gaps in the story. (Again, chances are other people will have similar questions.) Oftentimes, an existing news story offers the needed spark for a follow-up that extends or builds upon existing coverage of a topic or issue.

Trust your instincts. Chances are that if you are interested by an idea, your audience (whom you'll come to know over time as a journalist) will be interested as well. Once you have identified a story idea, think about the news values your idea might fulfill and how the idea might inform and interest audiences. Use that information to form the basis for the next step in the life cycle of a story idea: pitching it to your editor.

Key Takeaways

- While editors may assign story ideas to a journalist during the early stages of the journalist's career, that journalist will be expected to find and develop their own story ideas over time.
- Ideas can come from many places. You are surrounded by them. Some helpful strategies are to encourage your curiosity, keep your ears open, develop a niche, and consume lots of journalism.
- Trust your instincts. If you are interested by an idea, there is a good chance that there is an audience out there for it.

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4.2: News Sources

Introduction

The term 'news source' refers to *any person, organization, document, or object that provides information to journalists*. This may include the spokesperson for an international aid group, an academic, or a regular citizen who witnessed an event. It may also include press releases, court filings, reports published by interest groups, or datasets produced by government agencies.

Sources are crucial to journalism for several reasons. First, journalists cannot observe everything first-hand. For example, they may be asked to write a story about an individual killed by an on-duty police officer, even though the journalist did not witness the shooting. As such, the journalist must seek out individuals who may have seen the shooting and triangulate their accounts to approximate the truth about what happened. Second, journalists lack expertise in certain matters, and they must therefore speak with an expert source (e.g., a climate scientist) in order to better inform news audiences. Third, sources are sometimes the center of a story, as with the head of a government agency who is alleged to have engaged in corrupt acts and should be given a chance to respond to the allegations.

However, the relationship is not unidirectional. Sources also need journalists. First, sources often depend on journalists to spread their views. Without the support of international media, for example, a climatologist's research findings may not receive a great deal of attention or impact policymakers around the globe. Second, sources gain legitimacy by being featured in respected news media. For example, a rebel leader in Kyrgyzstan may be seen as important (and possibly legitimate) if they're deemed worthy of being profiled by *The New York Times*. And, third, sources often have agendas of their own and seek to promote them by gaining media attention. For example, the head of an agency may play up international tensions for a news story in order to secure more funding for their agency.

Sourcing is particularly important because some scholars have argued that what a source is quoted as saying can be even more important than what the journalist writes. That is, news audiences may view the source as being more knowledgeable than the journalist, and thus view the quote as more authoritative than the surrounding context offered by the journalist. (Conversely, audiences may also view the source as more self-interested, especially if they already have low trust in that kind of source.) Moreover, even when they are not quoted, sources often influence how journalists think about a development and consequently produce news about it.

Sourcing, Power, and Authority

Given that both journalists and sources often have something to gain and lose in their exchanges, *the practice of sourcing can also be thought about as an exchange of power*. The journalist-source relationship can be adversarial as well as mutually beneficial. For example, a journalist may benefit from having frequent access to a high-ranking official, who in turn benefits from having a sympathetic ear during times of distress. Conversely, a journalist may receive public acclaim for producing a story that details a previous source's dishonesty.

This negotiation of power is further implicated by notions of *reputation* and *authority*. Journalists are more likely to receive access to sources and cooperation from them if the journalist (or the organization they work for) is perceived to be prestigious, or if they have access to an audience of interest to the source. For example, a highly partisan commentator on YouTube may get an exclusive interview with a high-profile politician because the politician is trying to increase their outreach with younger members of their base. There is considerable inequity in who is able to draw on specific information sources, and often in ways that favor high-profile, mainstream journalistic outlets or news media with desirable niche audiences.

In a similar vein, *sources are themselves more likely to be selected by journalists if they are located prominently within a power structure*. Put another way, the closer a source is to the locus of power, the more likely it is that a journalist will believe that they are worthy of being interviewed. This is because cultures of journalism often treat those with power as being particularly worthy of attention (given their ability to influence society or some development), and because their position of power is often seen as an indicator of some measure of 'legitimacy' (at minimum to some group of people).

Scholars have found that *individuals who occupy positions of authority are more likely to have their versions of 'truth' be more readily accepted* both by journalists and news audiences. Conversely, those who are seen or treated as 'outsiders' or 'underdogs' are

typically not taken as seriously. For example, journalists have historically been more deferential to a police officer's account of an officer-involved shooting than the victim's.

Growing polarization has challenged this, however, especially when it comes to political actors. In such cases, powerful individuals are simultaneously more likely to have their version of 'truth' readily accepted by one group and readily rejected by another. Nevertheless, the apparent existence of a hierarchy of credibility points to a journalistic bias to be more deferential to institutional sources like police officers, military commanders, and other government officials — even in cases where journalists do not fully trust them.

While deference to sources in positions of power (or produced by people or organizations in positions of power) is a common finding across countries, scholars have also found that journalistic trust in institutional structures can vary considerably across countries. For example, journalists in some countries (e.g., Estonia and the United Arab Emirates) express a relatively high degree of trust in the police, while those in others (e.g., Argentina and Tanzania) express low trust. Journalists in the U.S. tend to have relatively low levels of trust in the institutions they cover. Put another way, most U.S. journalists approach claims with a healthy skepticism, even if they're coming from powerful institutions like the U.S. government or the military.

Congruence and Availability

Sourcing practices aren't defined solely by power structures, though. Journalists and their sources are human beings, and they are thus subject to a range of human biases.

One particularly important bias is homophily, or *the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with people who are similar to them*. In the context of journalist-source relations, it produces a phenomenon wherein journalists are *more likely* to interview people who share their characteristics. Put another way, male journalists are more likely to interview male sources while female journalists are more likely to interview female sources. Similarly, journalists of color are more likely to interview sources of color, and so on.

There is less and less-clear evidence about how this phenomenon impacts how sources respond to journalists — that is, if it impacts their willingness to speak to a journalist who does not share their characteristics. However, there is enough evidence from psychology and sociology to presume that sources would be less willing to open up to someone who appears to be a stranger. This, in turn, raises important concerns about the historic over-representation of white, male journalists both domestically (in the case of the U.S.) and internationally (as foreign correspondents reporting on developments around the globe).

Another important consideration has to do with the simple availability of sources. Reporters typically operate on deadlines, be it a fixed deadline in the case of traditional media or a continuous, ASAP deadline in the case of many online media. Because of this deadline pressure, journalists are drawn to sources who are predictable and responsive.

Put another way, *journalists will often turn to sources who respond often and quickly*. They maintain address books with recurring sources, which in turn increases the likelihood of the same sources being interviewed. This is especially the case for public information officers or press agents, or public relations professionals whose job it is to respond to media requests and whose training allows them to promote perspectives favorable to their employer.

The growing resource constraints and inequities within journalism has thus resulted in an even greater reliance on sources who are readily available, since journalists continue to be pressed to do more work with fewer resources (and the same, if not quicker, time restrictions). That, in turn, benefits official and privileged sources who have the resources to respond often, quickly, and with a well-managed message. Indeed, empirical studies of news coverage — both domestic and international — routinely find an over-representation of government sources and spokespeople.

Key Takeaways

- News sources refer to people, organizations, documents, or objects that provide information to journalists. This may include a spokesperson or a report produced by an agency.
- News sourcing involves exchanges of power, with both journalists and sources having something at stake. Additionally, both journalists and sources are more likely to be interacted with if they are located in high places within their respective power structures.
- Journalists are more likely to interview sources who share important visible characteristics with them. Additionally, sources who are more readily accessible are usually more likely to be interviewed by journalists.

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4.3: Identifying Appropriate Sources

Introduction

Every journalistic story includes information from a variety of different sources. It is thus important to consider how a source will contribute to particular elements of a story, and how that source might fit within a mix of multiple sources to make that story well-rounded. This requires the journalist to ask themselves: How can this source's experience or knowledge be used to improve the story or the storytelling? What will one source bring to the table that another cannot? What perspectives are missing from the story?

In order to address these questions, the journalist must have a general sense of the objective of their news story. For example, the journalist may have a story in mind that addresses a new initiative proposed by a mayor to reduce carbon emissions. The journalist may thus surmise that they need to interview: (1) the mayor, who is leading the initiative; (2) a scientist who studies carbon emissions and can comment on whether the initiative is likely to have a meaningful impact on the city's emissions; and (3) stakeholders from impacted groups, such as local businesses that may be impacted by new regulations or advocacy groups that are pushing for emissions reductions.

Once the journalist has identified the right kinds of sources and source mix, they will need to do some research to find the right individuals. This requires actively searching the internet, calling experts and asking for recommendations, and tapping into social media. It is important to recall that journalists must avoid *potential* conflicts of interest, whether real or perceived. Put another way, a journalist should not interview someone with whom they have a personal relationship (e.g., a friend or even their lawyer) or with whom there are intersecting interests (e.g., a company in which they own substantial stock). Sources should be able to offer independent insight and not feel any pressure due to their relationship with the journalist.

News Sources and Expertise

Sources are often featured in news stories because they have some form of *expertise* that is of relevance to the story. Expertise simply refers to *skill or knowledge in a particular area*.

Although "expertise" is sometimes thought about as a special form of knowledge — something that only exceptional individuals can possess — it turns out that most people are actually experts of some kind. For example, I am an expert on the intersection of journalism and technology as a result of my extensive academic study in that area. However, I am also an expert on what it is like to watch the Arsenal football team over the past decade, seeing as I've rarely missed a game. I'm also an expert on what my neighborhood sounds like at night, seeing as I've regularly slept there for the past few years.

While I may be an expert on those three things, I am certainly *not* an expert on many other things. For example, my fashion sense is limited at best, and I would certainly have little to offer a journalist producing a story about the latest fashion trends. Similarly, while I am certainly knowledgeable about what it is like to *watch* soccer, my expertise on how to *dribble effectively in a game* is lacking (by many accounts).

This way of thinking helps journalists recognize that expertise is *neither* universal nor something only held by a certain kind of person (i.e., someone with a specific background or education). Rather, *expertise is contingent on the subject matter at hand* and *may be possessed by a range of different potential sources*.

Thinking About the Source Mix

News stories tend to have multiple sources, and they typically draw upon *multiple forms of expertise* as well as *expertise in different areas*. Thus, it is helpful to think about the main purpose of the story and the *mix of sources* necessary to flesh out that purpose.

For example, in 2019, the *Chicago Tribune* and ProPublica Illinois collaborated on an investigative story titled "The Quiet Rooms" that examined the disciplinary practice of secluding (and isolating) unruly students in public schools around Illinois. The story was rooted in a comprehensive analysis of a database of reports about incidents that resulted in a child being sent into an isolation room. However, in order to answer the questions of 'why' (does this happen?), 'how' (does this get overlooked?), and 'what' (is the impact of these practices?), the story also drew upon sources with expertise that the database cannot offer. It sourced information from scientific experts who study educational practices and could assess the effectiveness of tactics like social seclusion. It included information from advocates who have expertise on the prevalence of the issue and the challenges to addressing it. It sourced

information from school district officials, who have expertise in the day-to-day activities of running a school system and dealing with an array of disciplinary issues. And, it included quotes from schoolchildren who experienced seclusion, and thus have expertise in what it feels like to be isolated.

In short, that story was able to paint a very comprehensive picture of the practice of seclusion in Illinois because it drew on multiple sources, each of whom could contribute something different to a story. While the number of sources for that story was exceptional (ProPublica and the *Chicago Tribune* spoke with more than 120 sources), the emphasis on seeking out a diversified mix of sources is common to both in-depth investigative journalism and day-to-day general assignment reporting.

When writing a story, journalists must thus think about the central question(s) they are aiming to address with their story. Then, they should seek out the sources that have the expertise necessary to address each of those questions from different vantage points.

Throughout this process, the journalist should frequently ask themselves: *Why is this person qualified to answer this question?* Perhaps, it is because they have extensively studied that phenomenon. Perhaps, it is because they hold a position that makes them the ultimate decision-making authority. Perhaps, it is because they have lived experience with that issue.

Additionally, journalists often strive to offer contrasting opinions in their stories in order to introduce competing ideas (and reduce the impacts of the journalist's own biases on the story). Thus, journalists rarely settle for a single source in any one area. Instead, they typically talk to many. (Oftentimes, sources are interviewed but never included in the story because a different source can articulate a point better.) Put another way, good journalists challenge themselves to actively seek out a diversity of voices, perspectives, and identities. They seek out individuals with different backgrounds, life experiences, and areas of expertise.

Following a strategy of interviewing people who can offer different perspectives can help produce a more well-rounded story. However, journalists should take care to avoid false balance — or the portrayal of opposing viewpoints as equally legitimate, even when one is more grounded in evidence or better corroborated by other trustworthy sources. (For example, journalists should not seek out a climate change denier simply to offer an alternative — and discredited — perspective.) Indeed, journalists sometimes end up promoting misinformation in the search for balance, which effectively goes against their purpose as journalists.

Sourcing is ultimately a highly consequential act, but by focusing on the expertise of individual sources and incorporating a diverse mix of sources, journalists can produce better, more informative stories.

Key Takeaways

- Journalistic stories tend to incorporate the expertise and perspectives of multiple sources. It is important to consider what each source contributes to different aspects of the story, and how that source fits into a broader source mix.
- Expertise simply refers to skill or knowledge in a particular area. Expertise comes from many things, such as extensive schooling and practice as well as lived experience within a context. However, expertise is contingent on the subject matter at hand; an individual may be an expert on one thing but not many others.
- Journalists should strive to draw on multiple forms of expertise as well as expertise in different areas when writing their stories. In particular, they should seek out contrasting opinions — while being careful to not fall into the trap of false balance — and a diversity of voices.

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4.4: Contacting Sources and Arranging Interviews

Introduction

When a journalist has identified a few potential sources for the story they are reporting, the next step is to reach out to those sources to request an interview. When journalists request an interview from a source, they are requesting the source's time: time away from their work, their families, and their hobbies or responsibilities. Thus, it is important that journalists approach sources thoughtfully and with a clear objective. The former increases the likelihood that the source will agree to give you their time; the latter helps ensure that you use their time thoughtfully.

Here is some advice for effectively contacting sources and securing a contribution to your story.

The Initial Contact

You can request an interview with a potential source in a variety of different ways. The primary ways are in person, over the phone, and via email.

Regardless of how you reach out, always be polite and professional and include all of the essential information that a source would need to know about you and your story. In a friendly and polite phone call or email, *briefly* introduce yourself, the topic of your story, and the angle of your interview. Give the interview source your name and title, and tell them about the outlet you are reporting for. If you are writing for a publication or for a class project, make that clear. Explain whether the eventual story will be published, and if so, where. (It is good to assume that all stories will eventually be published. Even if you are just doing a class project, you might stumble into a great story that interests local, regional, and national media. You might be surprised by how often that happens.)

Then, give the source an overview of your story and the topic of the interview you hope to conduct with them. Provide them with your best *estimate* of the amount of their time that you are asking for. (This should be based on the amount of information you are hoping to get from this interview, as well as how many questions you plan to ask this source. Some interviews are much longer, or shorter, than others.) Be sure to let your source know how you intend to conduct the interview: in person, over the phone, over video chat, and so on. It is helpful to give them options instead of dictating the medium.

It is usually best to interview sources in person because doing so helps you get to know the source a bit better, pick up on body language and other non-verbal cues, and foster a stronger relationship with the source. When an in-person interview is not possible, perhaps because you and the source live thousands of miles apart, a video or phone interview is an appropriate substitution. Email interviews are almost never a good method for interviewing a source, in large part because communicating via email makes follow-up questions difficult and allows interview sources to practice or prepare canned responses. Put another way, *use email as a last resort for conducting the interview*.

Once you have made all of this information clear, try to schedule the interview. Provide a time frame by which you hope to speak to this source, and suggest a few potential dates and times for your interview. Be flexible with timing, though. Because you are asking for your source's time, it is always best to be open-ended with your own schedule to accommodate theirs. Finally, politely thank the source for their time and provide multiple ways for them to contact you with a response, such as your phone number and email address.

If you are contacting a source via email, the tone of your entire email should be respectful and professional. Call your source by their name or title, depending on their profession. Use professional language, and avoid slang. Do not be overly personal. If you send an email request, *it is crucial that you offer a clear and concise subject line*, such as "Media Request: Interview for a story about climate change." Remember that you are asking this person for the favor of their time, and you must craft an email that makes clear how their time will be used and why they should give you that time. With emails in particular, try to keep them as short as possible while including all of these crucial details. A long email may seem intimidating (especially on a busy day) and is thus more likely to be ignored.

Finally, your interview request is just that: a request. Sources might respond to your request to ask for more information or detail about the interview. If they do so, share that with them. But an interview request is not an interview itself. If a source asks you to provide them with a list of the interview questions that you plan to ask, or if they ask you for a draft of the story you are planning to

write, *always say no*. It is poor practice to allow sources prior review of your journalism. It also complicates your reporting process, as sources may seek to tweak or edit aspects of your draft, or adjust their own answers based on what you have written. Allowing your source to review a list of interview questions before the interview provides the source an opportunity to practice their responses, create memorized answers, or prepare a way to avoid answering your questions. If your source requests these things, it is best to just say no and move on to someone else.

The Value of Persistence

Ideally, your interview sources will be happy to speak with you, but this isn't always the case. Some sources may be nervous about being interviewed and reluctant to accept an interview request. Your sources may also be busy or difficult to get in touch with in the first place. Just because they did not immediately respond to your request for an interview does not mean that you should give up on interviewing them.

To be a strong journalist is to be a persistent one. You might have to reach out to a potential source multiple times in order to get a response to your interview request, and you should do so politely and creatively. Instead of simply sending the same request over and over (and potentially annoy your source and make them even less likely to participate), try contacting that source through different mediums (e.g., voicemail, email, text message, and in person). Use all of the contact methods you have available, such as both their work email address and a personal email address. Explain to this source why it is important that you speak with them, and why you selected *them* as a key interview source. If this explanation doesn't motivate the source to say yes, try again with a different angle. Remember that you chose this source because they can provide important information or perspective to your story. Keep in mind that you are doing this to serve your audience, so don't be afraid to be politely persistent.

At the same time, don't rely too heavily on a single source. Always have back-up sources in mind, such as a second expert whose research, while perhaps not as closely tied to the story as your first-choice expert, is still relevant to a story you intend to write. If your first-choice sources don't respond in a timely fashion, start reaching out to your back-up sources *even as you continue to reach out to the first-choice sources*. Waiting too long for your ideal response can cause you to miss your deadline.

A Note About Respect

Before you reach out to a potential source, do your research on that person, their experience, and their expertise. Get to know everything you can about them and what makes that person relevant to your story. Apply that knowledge to your interview request, and be respectful to your source throughout the entire interview process. Sources can tell when you have done your homework, and they invariably respond in a more positive and helpful way when you know a bit about them.

The way you arrange and conduct an interview has an impact on the results of that interview. If you are rude or unprofessional, or if you clearly did not do your research, your sources may become uncomfortable with you, limit the amount of information they share with you, abruptly end an interview, or refuse to speak to you again. Additionally, it is helpful to think about each interview source as a potentially recurring source of information that you might return to throughout your journalistic career. Treat them in a way that fosters a long-term professional relationship.

Key Takeaways

- When requesting an interview, briefly introduce yourself, your outlet, your story, and the medium and time estimate for your interview. Be clear, direct, succinct, and professional.
- Sometimes, sources are busy, tough to contact, or averse to doing interviews. Be persistent, and follow up creatively and politely to explain why a source is key to your reporting.
- Do your homework. Before you ever reach out to a potential source, learn what you can about that person and what makes them relevant to your story.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Interviewing Basics

So you have your story, you know as much background as you can, and you are ready to do the interview. For many journalists, that first interview is hard to forget. The butterflies some of us felt, the excitement of being able to say, "I'm a reporter for the [fill in the blank]," the mistakes and the triumphs we experienced. Interviewing is the lifeblood of sourced journalism and becoming good at it is a ticket to success. We have already read about interviewing a little bit, and we are going to read about it again -- that is just how important this skill is. For this chapter, here are some more basics for masterting your interview skills, again courtesy of the American Journalism Handbook.

5.1: Conducting Interviews

5.2: Generating Good Interview Questions

5.3: Verifying Information

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5.1: Conducting Interviews

Introduction

Asking good questions is the most important part of a journalistic interview, but there's much more to the art of the interview. Successful interviews often require a good amount of preparation and etiquette behind the scenes. Journalists who take the time to select a good interview setting, remember to check their equipment, and know how to use silence to their advantage tend to elicit better interviews.

Here are some things to consider as you prepare for and conduct your journalistic interviews.

Select a Good Interview Setting

A good interview setting can make a big difference to your source's comfort level and the quality of your interview. If you are conducting an in-person interview, select a comfortable, quiet interview setting that is private enough for your source to feel comfortable talking openly. Avoid background noises, such as coffee machines brewing or cars honking, and steer clear high-foot-traffic places such as playgrounds or malls. Your setting should also be a place accessible to both you and your source and in which you can use whatever equipment you need to conduct your interview. (For example, if you need to plug in a device to a power source during the interview, don't meet at a public park.)

Consider asking your source to suggest an interview location where they feel comfortable. They may suggest their office because it is convenient for them, but they may also prefer to go elsewhere where they can speak more privately. Don't be afraid to politely request small changes, such as turning off background music or moving a pet to another room. That will reduce distractions and increase the quality of your recording, should you choose to make one.

Check Your Equipment

As a journalist, you are in charge of making sure your interview goes smoothly. This starts by ensuring you look the part — so dress for the occasion. Often, it also means making sure your technology is your friend. Before you begin (or leave for) an interview, make sure that you have everything you need — your notepad, pen, recording device, interview questions, and so on — and that everything is in good working order. Are your devices fully charged? Did you pack the charging cable for your phone or recorder? Is your recorder or phone app set up with your preferred settings? Do you have a back-up battery? If you are video recording the interview, are the camera settings set to the right defaults?

Don't start an interview until you are ready. Many journalists have lost important details because they forgot to toggle a setting on their recorder, or had to fumble their way through an interview because they forgot their notes in the office. Taking the time to prepare and double-check your equipment will thus keep you from embarrassing yourself or losing access to information during an interview. (In fact, some junior journalists will keep a pre-interview checklist to make sure they don't forget anything.)

Make Your Sources Comfortable

Sources may get nervous when they are being interviewed — especially when that interview is being recorded. (Many journalists don't like being interviewed themselves!)

Take a minute or two at the start of an interview to make your sources more comfortable with the interview process. Re-introduce yourself and the topic of the interview. Walk them through the trajectory of your interview questions, briefly mentioning the different topics you plan to touch on over the course of the interview. Explain how your recording equipment works. Start with simpler questions that are easy for your source to answer. If it's helpful, consider starting with a creative practice question such as, "What did you eat for breakfast?" to set the source at ease. Or, if you had a funny or interesting thing happen to you that morning, you can share that anecdote to humanize yourself and make the source feel more at ease.

Establish the Attribution Parameters

Journalists and their sources should negotiate a clear understanding of what may be quoted and how the source may be identified in a story. This is called *attribution*, or the descriptor the journalist uses to identify the source of a quote or piece of information

featured in a story. There are four main levels of attribution for journalistic interviews: *on-the-record*, *on background*, *on deep background*, and *off-the-record*.

On-the-record means that you can freely quote or reference anything the source says and attribute it directly to them by name and title. You should try to keep as much of the interview on-the-record as you can because it allows audiences to see or hear the source's exact words. Complete identification also allows audiences to have a better sense of where a source get their expertise from, as well as the potential biases they're likely to have.

On background (also called 'not for attribution') means that you may quote the source directly but you may not attribute the statements to the source by name. Usually, journalists will provide a general description that gives audiences a sense of the source's position but makes it difficult to positively identify them. An example of such a description is: "according to a senior military officer with direct knowledge of the program." This level also includes quoted statements that have no attribution, such as: "according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity."

On deep background means that you may not quote a source directly or identify them in any way. An example of such a description is: "The *Times* has learned that … ." This is a seldom-used level of attribution, and is usually reserved for sensitive affairs.

Finally, off-the-record is a fuzzy term that often means a different thing to different sources. Usually, it is used to refer to an on-background arrangement, where the information can be used but not be attributed (i.e., an anonymous quote). However, the term is also often used to describe information that journalists cannot use in their story or directly reference in conversations with other sources. For example, a source may tell you, off-the-record, that a state actor hacked the servers handling the e-mails for a political party. While you cannot publish that information right away, you can start chasing other leads. For example, you might want to ping an Information Technology administrator who works with that political party and see if you can get them to bring up the hack. Additionally, even if you can't publish the off-the-record information, the information may prove useful for understanding a different story (e.g., why party officials suddenly proposed new legislation pertaining to cyber security).

Once an interview has begun, your source is speaking on-the-record *unless you and they have agreed in advance that the interview should be carried under a different level of attribution*. Put another way, the 'default' mode is on-the-record. However, it is good practice to be clear about the level of attribution you intend to abide by.

Sources may ask to change the level of attribution at different points of the interview. It is often okay to give the source the opportunity to go on-background or off-the-record at any point. However, if the source says something particularly interesting, try to come back to it in an on-the-record exchange. It is often helpful to explain to the source why it is important for your audiences to know that information, and who shared it. (Moreover, it is possible that the source will start to trust you more as you demonstrate your aptitude as an interviewer.)

Ask for Permission to Record

Recording an interview is generally regarded as a best practice because it allows journalists to accurately transcribe full quotes and to return to the interview to check some details after the fact. (For example, was a key phrase expressed in a sarcastic tone? Or, what was the context around a particular quote again?) It also helps provide corroborating evidence for the journalist's account, especially for stories in which conflict is a key news value.

However, in many states, such as Massachusetts, you are legally required to gain the source's consent before you can start recording the exchange. (Asking for permission is a good, ethical practice in every state.) So, before you begin an interview, ask your source for permission to record it — either through audio or video, depending on the medium through which you plan to tell your story. Sources will typically agree to be recorded, especially if you explain to them that the purpose of the recording is to make sure you're quoting them accurately.

If you can, try to take interview notes even if there is a recording. Recordings sometimes fail and the notes prove essential. Additionally, you often don't have time to listen to an entire recording again before publishing a story. Notes help highlight the key points from an interview, and can be essential to keeping your head straight when you're conducting multiple interviews in a short span of time. When your source says something that you anticipate you'll quote, note the rough timestamp of the recording so you can quickly return to it when it's time to write.

Pay Attention to Your Source

Strong interviews involve a good deal of preparation, and it can be tempting to look over your questions and interview notes during the interview itself. Try not to get too distracted.

Stay focused on your interview subject throughout the interview process, and engage with them and their answers. Make direct eye contact, and provide clear non-verbal cues to show your source that you are paying attention. For example, when they make a key point, you might nod or even give a thumbs-up if the situation warrants it. If they share a humorous story, you might smile. If they're describing a difficult time in their life, you might frown. By using your facial expressions and body language to indicate that you are following and understanding what your source is saying, you are showing them that you are engaged and encouraging them to keep going.

Avoid using verbal cues, such as, "mmm-hmmm" or "gotcha," though. Speaking out loud might accidentally interrupt your source's train of thought or create an interference in your audio recording that will make it harder for you to understand it later on. (This is especially true if you intend to publish a portion of that recording.)

Also, remember: You are here to get the source's expertise and perspective, not to share your own. Avoid interrupting your source unless it is absolutely necessary. And, don't interject your own opinions or editorialize with your own thoughts. Doing so uses time you could be dedicating to gathering new information. It may also influence the source to agree with you or provide a response they believe you would like. Again, the interview should not be about you.

Stay in Control

As the journalist, you should be in control of the focus, content, and direction of an interview.

Don't allow your source to take control of an interview, either accidentally on purpose, by changing the subject, going off topic, asking you questions, or dedicating too much time to a particular topic. As needed, politely redirect the interview to the next key topic or return to a skipped-over topic. Although you want to avoid interrupting your sources, you may occasionally need to do so in order to regain control of an interview. Key phrases that might help you redirect an interview include: "I'd like to return to X," "I want to make sure we fully discuss Y," and "Your response has me thinking about Z." (Remember, sources often have their own agendas and reasons for speaking with you, and they may thus try to take control of the interview to maximize their interests. Don't let them succeed.)

Use Silence

One of the most valuable tools a journalistic interviewer has is silence.

When a conversation lapses and the speakers are silent, people generally feel nervous and are compelled to start talking again in order to break the silence. Use that habit to your advantage. If a source doesn't answer your question, or if they answer a question too briefly, don't immediately continue on to the next question. Stay silent for a bit to encourage your source to continue speaking or elaborate on an answer. (If silence makes you feel uncomfortable, start counting to eight in your head when the feeling of discomfort sets in.)

Check, Check, and Double-Check

When you reach the end of your interview, double-check your questions and notes to make sure asked everything you needed to. It is okay to politely ask for a moment to do that. Before you leave the premises, check your recording itself. Did the recording capture the entire interview? Is the audio quality good?

It is important to do double-check everything because you may not be able to interview that source again before your deadline. Thus, you might be saving yourself a headache by just taking an extra couple of minutes to make sure everything is as you expect them to be.

Finally, never leave an interview without asking your source to provide critical attribution information. This includes the spelling and pronunciation of their name, their full professional title (or other descriptive information about their credentials, in the context of the story), and any contact information you need to get in touch with that person again. At the end of the interview, consider asking your source to recommend additional sources that might provide additional information for this story or topic, such as another knowledgeable person or a relevant document.

Key Takeaways

- Before starting an interview, make sure you are looking professional and that you are prepared. Check to make sure you have everything you need, such as notepad and back-up batteries, and verify that all of your equipment is working properly.
- Select a quiet interview location that makes both you and your source comfortable. Avoid background noises and highly trafficked areas where other people and sounds could interrupt your interview or distract the source.
- Pay attention to your source throughout the entire interview process. To show that you are engaged and on the same page as your subject, use non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions.
- Stay in control of the interview, and focus on the source. Avoid editorializing or sharing your own perspective and opinions, which could influence an interview subject to share thoughts that simply mirror your own.

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5.2: Generating Good Interview Questions

Introduction

When a journalist has identified an appropriate interview source and scheduled the interview, the next step is to prepare their interview questions.

The best interview questions are often simple, clear, and well-informed. Think of your interview as a two-way street: Although the journalist should be in control of the interview, its content, and its aims, the journalist and their source will need to get to know about each other, and perhaps even to trust each other, over the course of the interview process. A journalistic interview should feature a well-structured but flexible series of questions in which both the journalist and their source play equally important roles.

Here are some tips to help you craft strong interview questions that can elicit useful information for a news story.

Do Your Homework

Before you interview a source, you should always research them, their experience, and their expertise.

Start with a simple Google search, and then continue with a more strategic search based on the information you need for your story. For example, if you were interviewing me, a professor of journalism, you might begin by reading my faculty biography on the UMass website and skimming my course descriptions and published research on my personal website. If I have conducted a study that is relevant to the story, you might even read through its Abstract, or summary. You may even want to look through my public social media accounts and search for recent interviews I have given. If I'm the centerpiece of your story, you might even talk to other people who know me before speaking to me.

There are several reasons why it's useful to research someone before talking to them. First, you want to make sure this potential source is the right person to interview for your story. Second, you want to prepare yourself for interviewing them. Researching a source will help you develop interview questions that are well-informed and specific — and much stronger than the vague, general questions that you could ask anyone. This research will also help you to use your interview time more strategically by avoiding questions that are easily answered through cursory research, as well as questions that your source may have been asked many times already. Finally, your source will notice, based on your questions, that you did your homework. Sources always appreciate that and are consequently more likely offer you both more of their time and better responses.

Ask Clear Questions

As you begin to write interview questions, ask yourself: Is this question easy to understand? Could I answer it?

Chances are that if you have to re-read a question to understand it, your source won't have an easy time with that question either. The strongest interview questions have a clear focus on one specific topic, and they are phrased with simple, easy-to-understand wording. Interview questions should also be short and direct. They should be something this particular source can answer based on their own expertise, experience, and/or position.

Avoid asking your source to speak for an entire group or population, rather than answering for themselves. For example, it would not be fruitful to ask me, a single journalism professor, a question like: "Are all journalism professors socially awkward?" (In addition to being rude, that question asks me to make a generalized statement about a big group of people that I am not qualified to answer.)

Don't ask your sources compound, or double-barreled, questions, either. These are confusing and long questions that usually pack two or more questions into one, such as: "Do you support building a new elementary school and increasing teachers' salaries?" Compound questions can be tricky for sources, who will usually only remember to answer one branch of the question. Instead, break these questions out into multiple, simplified and focused questions, such as: "Do you support building a new elementary school?" and "Do you support increasing teachers' salaries?"

Ask Open-Ended Questions

There are two main types of questions that you'll ask your sources: *open-ended questions* and *close-ended questions*.

Open-ended questions are those that invite a source to elaborate on their response. For example, you might ask your source: "Why do you support the Minnesota Vikings?" In order to respond to that question, a source will usually feel the need to construct full sentences that establish and explain their perspective. Open-ended questions thus tend to generate more complete and more thoughtful responses.

On the other hand are close-ended questions, such as yes-or-no questions. Close-ended questions compel sources to respond with short, undetailed responses (such as a simple "yes" or "no"). For example, a yes-or-no question might simply ask, "Do you support the Minnesota Vikings?" A source could answer that by just saying, "yes," which is neither very informative nor a good quote. That question might be okay to set up an open-ended follow-up, such as the aforementioned "Why do you support them?" question. However, they're usually insufficient on their own.

Similarly, you will often want to avoid leading questions, or questions that lead a source toward a specific response. Leading questions can cue sources to answer in the specific way that they believe the interviewer wants them to. This thus influences them to mirror your thinking instead of contributing their own. An example of a leading question might be: "Do you agree that the Minnesota Vikings are the best team in the NFL?" If you are a Green Bay Packers fan, you might no longer feel comfortable being interviewed because you may start to worry about how you might be depicted in the story. There are times, though, when a leading question can be used as a signal to your source. For example, to illustrate that you understand their pain after they've described a harrowing incident, you may ask: "That must have felt awful. What was running through your mind when you received such terrible news?" However, those instances where a leading question is appropriate are relatively uncommon.

Order Your Questions

Although you might write your list of interview questions down in the order in which you think of them, take some time after brainstorming those questions to put them in the best order in which to ask them.

It is generally helpful to start with some simple, introductory questions that help to ease the source into the interview and make them comfortable with both you and the process. After that, group all questions that pertain to a specific topic or aspect of the story together, and complete an entire topic before transitioning to the next set of questions. Structure your interview in a way that guarantees you will get all the information you need while, ideally, sticking to the time estimate you provided for the interview.

If you have a particularly difficult or uncomfortable question, put it further down on your list — even if it breaches your topical organization. You don't want that difficult question to be so low that you may run out of time before getting to it, but you also don't want to risk the source abruptly ending an interview before you have gotten at least some useful information from them.

Be Flexible

Although you did your research and wrote a list of informed, clear, and well-organized questions, you may find that, during the interview, unanticipated questions start popping into your head.

Do not panic! These follow-up questions are natural, and they often provide some of the best information and quotes. Good follow-up questions usually request additional context or explanation and begin with "why" or "how." It is important to *listen carefully when your source is talking* so that you can catch and write down potential follow-up questions. You also need to be flexible enough to know when to introduce those follow-up questions. Often, it is best to do so immediately. However, sometimes, it makes sense to return to them a little later in the interview. It is thus useful to both record an interview and take notes while the source is responding. This way, you can write down follow-up questions and other key information without worrying about missing the exact phrasing for a quote.

If a source's response does not fully answer the question you asked, don't hesitate to ask that same question in a new way. Sometimes, the non-response is due to a misunderstanding of the question. Other times, it is because the initial question gave them room to wiggle out of a full response. Be persistent, and keep asking until you get a satisfactory answer.

Additionally, a source's response might create a better opportunity to follow up with a question you intended to ask later in the interview. Thus, although you might have planned to ask a source about the Green Bay Packers with your fifth question, they may bring up the Packers in their answer to your second question. If that is the case, reorder your questions on the spot to keep a good flow for your interview. If they have fully addressed a question you intended to ask them later on, do not ask the question again. That tells the source you weren't listening.

Ask for Clarity

One of the best parts of being a journalist is that you get to learn and produce stories about many different subjects. Journalists do this by researching new topics and interviewing expert sources about those topics. However, at the end of the day, it is the sources who are the foremost experts — not you.

If you find yourself confused or unsure about a key fact or piece of information during the course of your interview, always, always clarify that information with your source. Ask for an explanation or a simplification. One good way to do this is by summarizing a key point and asking your source if you got the information correct. For example, you might ask: "So, you are saying that if I need to clarify information during an interview, I should take some time to do that with the source. Is that correct?"

Nobody likes feeling dumb or revealing that they don't fully understand something. But not fully understanding something is normal for journalists, especially when they are tackling new topics or digging deep into a particular topic. Sources will often appreciate your honesty and feel more confident that you will accurately portray their perspective if you ask for clarifications. Moreover, even in a pessimistic scenario, it is far better to look 'dumb' to one person than to the potentially large audiences who will come across your work (and who you would be misinforming as a result).

Ask the Concluding Question

Once you have asked all the questions you brainstormed — and all the follow-up and clarifying questions that arose during the course of the interview — try to end with a final open-ended question that allows your source to share anything else they think you ought to know about the topic. This gives the source a chance to bring up something you or they may have forgotten, or simply to contribute information that may be outside of the scope of your questions.

A couple of examples of this type of question are: "Is there anything you'd like to add?" and "Is there anything else I didn't ask you about that is important for me to know?" Oftentimes, the source will say "no" but will nevertheless feel empowered (and thus end the interview on a good note). However, some of the best scoops and story ideas have come from giving sources a chance to tell the journalist information that the journalist didn't even think to ask the source about.

Thank Your Source

By the end of your interview, the source will have shared something precious with you: their time. Thank them for it! This wraps up your exchange in a polite way and lets your sources know you appreciate their time, information, and perspective. This is also a good moment to ask the source for additional contact information, such as an email address or phone number at which you can reach the source should you need to ask a last-minute question or follow up in some manner.

If they were a central source in your story, or if they are the sort of person who does not often get interviewed, you may even opt to send them a copy of your story after it is published. This might make them feel even better about choosing to speak with you, and the extra attention might even make them more likely to respond to you in the future. There's a decent chance another story will come around that requires you to speak to that source, so it is good to treat every source as a potentially recurring one.

Key Takeaways

- The best interview questions are simple, clear, and focused on one specific topic. Use open-ended questions to encourage your source to respond completely to your questions and perhaps to even go beyond your preconceptions.
- Follow-up and clarifying questions will arise during the course of your interview. Good follow-up questions usually request additional context or explanation and begin with "why" or "how." Be flexible in order to catch and write down potential follow-up questions as you listen to your source's responses.
- Be polite yet persistent. If a source is not fully answering your question, ask that question again in a different way. Sometimes, they simply didn't get the gist of the question the first time around.
- End your interview with an open-ended concluding question and thank the source. This gives your source an opportunity to share information about the topic that you might not have cued with your interview questions.

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5.3: Verifying Information

Introduction

According to former journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, "the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification." As such, verification is absolutely central to journalism — or, at the very least, 'good' journalism.

Verification refers to *the act of establishing or testing the truth or correctness of a fact, theory, statement, etc., by means of special investigation or comparison of data*. Put another way, it is the act of seeking out corroborating evidence that would give us greater confidence that *something* is in fact true.

The Value of Verification

Verification is necessary to ensure that journalists get what happened down correctly. Truth ultimately demands accuracy, and the process of verification can serve as a means for sorting through different perceived realities by identifying inaccuracies and approximating truth through corroboration.

Within newsrooms, it is not uncommon to hear the cliché, "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." This isn't just because journalists have a great degree of self-loathing and significant trust issues. It's because skepticism lies at the heart of the journalistic cultures in many places, including the U.S. Journalists understand that sources often have agendas, and thus a purpose for speaking to a journalist (i.e., to get favorable coverage for something they care about). Even if the source is not acting in a self-interested way, the source might simply misremember a piece of information or recall seeing something that never actually happened. Even documents might have mistakes in them that a journalist will not want to repeat in their reporting.

In a selfish way, verification is also important because journalists trade on their social currency. Put another way, journalists who are seen as being credible are more likely to have their work taken seriously, and sources will be more likely to divulge information to credible journalists. A big part of establishing that credibility is demonstrating the ability to consistently and rigorously vet information.

There is no single way to verify information, but here are some helpful strategies and tools that you can master to quickly evaluate the quality and veracity of different information.

Interrogate Your 'Facts'

One strategy is to commit to interrogating all of your 'facts' as you would a suspect. Those 'facts' may have come from your own research or from something a source said.

Start by jotting down all of the assertions and factual information you might include in your story. Then, ask yourself: How do we know this fact? Why is this assertion true? What are the assumptions underlying this statement? At the heart of your interrogation should be the question: *Why should the reader, viewer, or listener believe this*?

The goal of your interrogation should be to *triangulate* information, or find multiple sources that say or show the same thing (or at least highly similar things). This might involve asking multiple people questions about the same thing and seeing if the information they give you is consistent. For example, if three people describe an incident in the same way, you can have greater confidence that the description captures the truth of what happened.

Your interrogation should focus on getting as close as possible to the primary (original) sources of information. For example, if a spokesperson for the police department says that crime dropped by five percent, ask them for a copy of the data. If a source tells you the bar across the street is owned by an anti-alcohol advocate, pull the property record for the bar and research the owner. In general, presume that any single source is wrong and make it your job to check if they might actually be right.

Use Websites and Tools

The single most useful general tool for verifying information is a search engine. Modern journalists must become masters at knowing which search terms to use and how to make effective use of the 'advanced search' functionality of most search engines. For example, if a journalist was trying to determine if I still work at UMass, they could use the advanced search functionality in Google (or DuckDuckGo, if you like your privacy!) to limit results to the "umass.edu" domain. Alternatively, if they're looking for

any results about a journalism professor with my name, they could wrap my name in quotation marks ("Rodrigo Zamith") to denote that the terms "Rodrigo" and "Zamith" should appear alongside each other (and in that order), and then add "journalism" as the end (i.e., search for '"Rodrigo Zamith" journalism').

For verifying identities, the websites AnyWho and Spokeo are useful tools that allow you to look up a person's name, age, and address based on public records. They also offer additional information through their paid features.

For verifying pictures that you might have come across on social media, the websites TinEye and Google Image Search are very helpful. They allow you to upload an image and the sites then show the many web pages where that image has appeared. This is especially helpful when a picture is alleged to represent a recent event — an assertion that can be easily debunked if it appeared online prior to the event. Moreover, the website FotoForensics and the program JPEGSnoop can help you use computer algorithms to detect whether an image has been altered by tools like Photoshop.

For verifying whether something actually happened at a particular location, it can be useful to double-check details from the photo with satellite imagery or a simple Google Maps search. For example, if you come across tweets saying a police officer was shot at a White Castle in Boston, you could easily debunk that by searching if White Castle has any locations in Boston. (They don't, and that's okay.) Similarly, Google Maps' street view can sometimes be used to double-check details about a setting. You could even check if the weather conditions in a photo are corroborated by weather records about the location where the event allegedly took place.

Finally, fact-checking websites like Snopes can be immensely useful when a rumor starts to pick up speed. Such websites will often quickly identify and debunk misinformation, disinformation, and simple hoaxes spreading on the web. Quite often, a new rumor (and supposedly corroborating evidence) is just a rehash of a previously debunked piece of misinformation or disinformation.

Bookmark Reliable Information Sources

Local, state, and federal governments are major producers of factual information, as are academic institutions, non-profit interest groups, and supranational governmental bodies (e.g., the United Nations). Familiarizing yourself with their websites and the kinds of information those institutions produce can be a useful time-saver.

For example, if you are looking to double-check unemployment statistics in the United States, a good first stop would be the Bureau of Labor Statistics' website, which compiles monthly unemployment reports. If you want to double-check crime rates in the United States, a good first stop would be the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program (or, for more recent local information, a local police agency's website). If you want to double-check whether the United States has a higher per-capita death rate than Brazil for an infectious disease, a good first stop would be the World Health Organization's website.

There are many useful directories for finding the right websites for certain kinds of information — so many that I cannot possibly list them all here. However, the key is come up with an effective system for bookmarking useful sources of information and organizing them in a way that allows you to quickly find the right bookmarks. For example, many journalists will use tags in conjunction with their bookmarks. That way, if they're ever looking to double-check any 'health' information, they can quickly find the right subset of websites. To that end, it is helpful to master your preferred browser's bookmaking functionality or to use advanced bookmark managers (e.g., Raindrop and Memex).

Keep an Accuracy Checklist

Once you have finished writing your article, it is also helpful to use an accuracy checklist. For example, your accuracy checklist may involve double-checking:

- The spelling for all names, companies, titles, and place names that are featured in the story.
- All of the statistics featured in the story, taking special care to ensure you are using the right scale (e.g., "million" vs. "billion").
- All references to times, distances, and dates.
- All of the quotations in the story, ensuring that they match any recordings you may have of those statements.
- All arguments or narratives that depend on a fact, ensuring that they are logically consistent with that fact.

To apply that checklist rigorously, it can be helpful to print a copy of the story (e.g., article or voice-over script), go through every sentence, and circle every fact or assertion in it. If you can attribute all those red circles to an authoritative source or to multiple sources, then you can feel good about filing your story.

Key Takeaways

- Verification refers to the act of establishing or testing the truth or correctness of a fact, theory, statement, etc., by means of special investigation or comparison of data. It is an essential component of 'good' journalism.
- Verification helps protect a journalist's credibility, which is a key form of social currency for journalists.
- There is no single way to engage in verification but there are a number of resources that can help you verify information quickly. Moreover, it is helpful to learn best practices like keeping an accuracy checklist so that, over time, verifying information can become second nature.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Writing Basics

Just like with interviewing, we are going to keep talking about writing throughout this book. You already read some and there will be more to come. Here, we are going to talk about the key components of article writing in a the classic journalism style. Before we do, however, I have spent 30 years working with writers and I think one things is often overlooked. Like we read in Chapter 3, the most important lesson about journalistic writing is to keep it clear, concise, accurate, timely and active. It boils down to a simple charge: Stick to declarative sentences. What does that mean, exactly? Well, simple enough: It means declaring something. This *is* that, like, "This apple is red." This *did* that, like, "He ate the apple."

If all sentences were written that way, we would be boring readers pretty quickly. But a basic structure that keeps sentences active is the foundation on which all writing can rest. When you break that rule, it is for reasons that readers can understand or feel. Here are three steps to think about when learning to write this way:

1) Move the actor and action "left."

A simple way to think about this structure is to remove the language or grammar and replace it with a simple formula. So Subject, verb, object becomes ...

Actor > Action > Result or Target

The closer you place action (verb) to the actor (subject), the more active and efficient the sentence becomes. The more efficiently you describe the result or target of the actor's action, the tighter the sentence becomes. Good sentence work is good writing in the making.

Take this sentence: **The report was looked over by the committee.**

Where is the actor? At the end of the sentence. Where is the verb? In the middle of the sentence, which often means it will be include the "to-be" verb (am/was, is/was, are/were). In this case, "was" is used to bolster the action of "looked over."

So move the actor left: **The committee or Committee members**

What happens to the "was?" It disappears.

The committee looked over the report.

2) Make the verb clear

What do I mean? Try to picture "looked over," what are you seeing in your mind's eye? Pretty vague, right? A more accurate verb, one that likely conveys a clearer image, might be "reviewed."

Committee members reviewed the report.

3) Only add words that clarify.

The sentence just above is active and short. Perhaps that is good enough, but what committee and what report? The line I use here is: Make every word carry its own weight. It is okay to write a longer sentence if every word you choose is doing something valuable.

Members of the Police Oversight Committee reviewed the September crime report with the Chief Ronald Wilson on Tuesday.

That is a much longer sentence, but I tried to keep every where relevant to the goal of the sentence.

Now, let's look at the American Journalism Handbook again to see its suggestions.

6.1: Leads and Nut Grafs

6.2: Story Structures

6.3: Quotes and Attribution

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6.1: Leads and Nut Grafs

Introduction

The term *lead* (also spelled as 'lede') refers to *the first paragraph of a journalistic story*, or first two paragraphs, in the case of an *extended lead*. In the case of a broadcast newscast, the term can be used to refer to either the first story of the newscast (opening segment) or to the way the individual broadcast story begins.

Leads carry the critical responsibilities of drawing in audiences' attention and interest while informing them of the key elements of a story, and effectively 'leading' audiences into the rest of an article. Both of these goals are equally important.

Leads are particularly instrumental in giving news consumers a brief glimpse into the story before they have to commit fully to reading it, listening to it, or watching it. Put another way, a lead should make your audiences either want to continue reading beyond the first paragraph or feel sufficiently informed that they'll get the gist of the story even if they move on before reaching the conclusion.

The 5 W's and H

The typical news lead aims to first and foremost inform news audiences. It does this by *including the most essential information about the story right at the beginning*, namely by addressing the so-called "5 W's and H" of a story. These are the essential questions journalists must answer about any topic: Who? What? When? Where? Why? And, of course, How?

For example, a journalist might make clear in the first paragraph of a story that Candidate X (who) won an election (what) in Amherst (where) last night (when) because 67 percent of voters cast their ballots for them (why).

This kind of lead is called a *summary lead*. It is highly descriptive and is a hallmark of so-called "hard news" stories written in a "straight news" style. Audiences will often encounter these in breaking news coverage or in stories written by newswire services.

The Nut Graf

News leads are typically short (two to three sentences in length) and get to the point of an article quickly so as not to lose the audience's attention. Because of this short length, it is sometimes impossible to answer all 5 W's and H in a single lead paragraph — especially if the lead is crafted to draw the audience in.

When that is the case, journalists generally provide the second-most important information, or answer the critical questions they could not address in the lead, in the *nut graf* (also spelled "nut graph" or "nutgraph"). The nut graf is usually the second paragraph of an article, or the paragraph immediately following an extended lead.

The responsibility of a nut graf is *to contextualize the most important facts of an article and provide audiences with a clear understanding of that article's angle*. (The angle is the lens through the journalist approaches the central issue or topic examined in the story. For example, when a journalist decides to write a story about a new town zoning ordinance, they could focus on the potential impact of the change on the town's 'character,' or on the individuals who stand to gain or lose most from the change.) The nut graf tells audiences why the story is important and timely. It helps explain where the story is coming from, where it is going, and what is at stake.

This traditional news combination of a strong lead and a clear nut graf right at the beginning of a news story follows the inverted pyramid style of newswriting. Under that style, journalists organize news stories so that they begin with the most essential or important information at the top, and continue with successively less important facts and context.

Other Types of Leads

The aforementioned approach, which packs information quickly at the very beginning of a story with a no-nonsense writing style, reflects just one kind of introduction to a journalistic story. There are several other kinds of leads, especially in stories produced by non-traditional news outlets; longer, in-depth (*long-form*) stories; and in certain genres of journalism (e.g., Arts & Culture journalism).

Anecdotal Lead

One particularly common alternative is the *anecdotal lead*. This is a type of lead in which a journalist begins a story with an anecdote, or illustrative story, to depict a scene or event that guides audiences into the broader context. For example, while covering that same local election, a reporter writing an anecdotal lead might choose to describe the moment Candidate X learned they had won the election — for example, while on the phone with their partner in a room full of exuberant supporters who were about to be showered in red, white, and blue balloons. A similar variant involves starting the story with a powerful quote or a startling statement that immediately grabs the audience's attention.

Analysis Lead

In an *analysis lead*, a journalist synthesizes and analyzes important information in a more contextual introduction to a story. This type of lead helps put current events into perspective for audiences. Using the same local election story as an example, a reporter writing an analysis lead might choose to begin the story with a focus on Candidate X's legislative priorities and how their election has the potential to change the city and impact its citizens in the coming years.

The Blind Lead

With a *blind lead*, the journalist sets a scene or tells a story without immediately making clear the Who or What of a story, in order to build tension, establish a tone, or pique audience interest. In the aforementioned example, the story might begin with details about the supporters' sense of euphoria and surprise before going on to introduce Candidate X.

Selecting a Lead

There are several more types of leads, though. Notably, different types of leads pair better with different topics, and even different tones (e.g., serious, humorous, melancholic, and so on). So, after reporting all the necessary information to produce a good piece of journalism, you'll need to consider what type of lead is the best fit for it.

No matter what type of lead you choose to begin your story, you must inform audiences and interest them in your larger story. As journalist Chip Scanlan put it: "An effective lead makes a promise to the reader or viewer: I have something important, something interesting, to tell you. A good lead beckons and invites. It informs, attracts, and entices."

When deciding how to start your story, take stock of what its strongest element is. This may be a strong anecdote that gives a face to your story and establishes a connection with the audience. Or, it might be an eye-popping statistic that shocks the audience and makes them want to read on. Or, if you are producing a shorter news brief or breaking news story, the strongest element may simply be a succinct summary of what happened.

Example: Worker's Compensation

For example, in 2015, journalists from ProPublica and NPR found that people living in different U.S. states could receive drastically different worker's compensation benefits for the same injuries. They crunched some more numbers, talked to several experts and victims, and wrote a story titled, "How Much Is Your Arm Worth? Depends On Where You Work."

Using data from different states, the journalists were able to assign a maximum dollar amount to a number of different body parts. There was a fair bit of data behind the story, and it is easy to imagine a lead that simply pointed to the disparity.

However, these journalists had a different idea. They chose to lead with extended anecdotes involving two men: They were of similar age, lived just 75 miles apart, were married to a spouse and had two kids, and had lost a portion of their left arm in a machinery accident at work in an industrial plant. However, the fourth paragraph hits us with a major discrepancy: One of those men received just $45,000 in workers' compensation for the loss of his arm. The other was awarded benefits that could surpass $740,000 over his lifetime. Then, in the fifth paragraph, we finally get to the nut graf: These experiences illustrate the vast gaps in the workers' comp benefits offered by different states. The rest of the story goes on to describe other differences in workers' comp benefits across states, and the reasons for them.

What ProPublica does well here is to suck the reader in with a story about two similar people who were forced into two very different paths when they had comparable problems. The strength of their anecdotes, and in particular the discrepancy in their outcomes, outweighed any other potential opener.

Example: Refugees in Europe

As a contrast, consider a 2016 story from *The Guardian* titled, "Quarter of child refugees arriving in EU traveled without parents." In that case, the strongest element in the story is the observation that almost 100,000 child refugees who arrived in Europe the previous year came without their parents.

This is a staggering figure whose magnitude is likely to shock the audience. It is thus an apt choice to serve as the centerpiece to a summary lead: "A quarter of all child refugees who arrived in Europe last year — almost 100,000 under-18s — traveled without parents or guardians and are now 'geographically orphaned,' presenting a huge challenge to authorities in their adopted countries."

From there, the story goes on to highlight other interesting bits of data from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. While that story is also a prime candidate for a strong, compelling anecdote, it is quite possible that the journalist was unable to speak to a child refugee before their deadline. Thus, the statistic was likely the strongest element the journalist had to work with — and so they led with it.

Ultimately, it is crucial that you think strategically about your lead and its goals. Use that short space as an opportunity to draw in audiences, and avoid things that could distract or turn them away, such as clichéd language, rambling sentences, irrelevant or unimportant information, or direct questions. The best leads are succinct and introduce audiences either to new information, a captivating incident, or a striking statistic. And, a successful lead will linger in the minds of audiences long after they have consumed it.

Key Takeaways

- The most common type of journalism lead — the summary lead — addresses the classic "5 W's and H" of journalism: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? It is often paired with a nut graf, which contextualizes the most important facts of a news story and provides audiences with a clear understanding of that story's angle.
- There are other leads beyond the summary lead. These include the anecdotal lead, the analysis lead, and the blind lead. Different types of leads pair better with certain topics and the desired tone of writing.
- Regardless of which lead you choose, the goal is to quickly inform audiences and interest them in your larger story. Audiences who are not engaged by a lead will often not go beyond it.

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6.2: Story Structures

Introduction

Although news stories are sometimes demeaned as being formulaic, that doesn't have to be the case. Journalists are sometimes allowed to exercise a considerable amount of creativity in their writing. In fact, this is increasingly becoming the case as journalistic outlets find themselves in an ever more competitive information environment and fighting for audiences' attention. Put another way, strict, traditional forms of journalistic writing are becoming more flexible, and in some instances have given way to more inventive and engaging forms.

One way in which journalists can express that creative license is in developing a story structure, or *the structural framework that underlies the order and manner in which information and/or a narrative is presented to audiences*. Before doing so, however, it is helpful for the journalist to first take stock of the pieces (i.e., information and anecdotes) they have. Then, they can proceed to seeing how those pieces fit together best.

Below is some advice for how you can organize your pieces and select an appropriate story structure for them.

Taking Stock of the Pieces

Before you start writing a news story, take some time to revisit all of your interview notes in order to refresh your memory. If you notice any gaps in your notes, fill them in as best you can. If those gaps are especially important, conduct supplemental interviews with individuals who can address the gaps.

Second, try to categorize the information in your notes. Start by filling in the 5 W's (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) and H (How) of the story. However, you can also start to categorize the information into themes that could potentially stand as distinct subsections of a story. For example, in the case of a story about police shootings, the themes might include: "Police Training", "Community Anger," "Police Feeling Unsupported," and "Legislative Responses Being Considered."

Third, start to match your quotes with your factual information. In an ideal scenario, every major fact in the story should have a corroborating or exemplifying quote — though this is seldom the case in practice. Quotes are sometimes the most powerful parts of a story, and most news stories include a quote after every few grafs (paragraphs).

Fourth, prioritize the information. Which facts are most newsworthy? Which quotes are most interesting? Use a system to denote which categories of information, and what information within each category, are most important. It can be helpful to color-code the information in order to make it easier to drop information into a story and to have a better sense of what can be cut later on.

Finally, write a quick statement that you feel best encapsulates the story. You can imagine this exercise as how you would tell the story to a friend during a short elevator ride. This can serve as the basis for either your lead or nut graf.

Once you are ready to start writing, you'll want to select a story structure that helps you tell your story in a compelling and informative way. This will make the actual writing process much easier and help you produce a story that flows well (and is thus more enjoyable to consume).

Different Story Structures

The *most common* story structure in U.S. journalism is the "inverted pyramid." However, it is not always the best choice, and it is generally best reserved for breaking news stories and short- to regular-length "straight news" stories. Feature stories, investigative stories, and most long-form pieces of journalism are more likely to use alternative structures that allow the journalist to intersperse anecdotes, facts, and quantitative information in more interesting ways.

Common journalistic story structures include the *inverted pyramid*, the *martini glass*, the *kebab*, the *accordion*, and the *pyramid*.

The Inverted Pyramid

The inverted pyramid is characterized by having *the most important, substantial, and interesting information at the beginning of the story*. Then, *with each successive paragraph, the information becomes less important or relevant*. The final few paragraphs of the story will typically include background information or other general context.

For example, an inverted pyramid story might begin with the following lead: *Members of an Amherst church* (who) *wrote a letter to the Select Board Monday* (when) *arguing that a marijuana dispensary* (what) *under construction on Belchertown Road* (where) *will compromise safety in the neighborhood and represents an attack on their religious values* (why). The next couple of paragraphs might detail the objection, and the paragraphs after that might describe the dispensary's position and perhaps any crime mitigation efforts they plan to support. Then, the tail end of the story might cover when the business license was issued and provide some context about the number of dispensaries in the region.

The key advantage of this structure is that it condenses information efficiently and allows the audience to get the key points of a story even if they stop reading after the first few paragraphs. However, this structure can get rather repetitive and dull, and that may result in the story failing to stand out among its competitors.

The Martini Glass

A related structure is the "martini glass." Like the inverted pyramid, the martini glass will begin with the most important, substantial, and interesting information at the top — often through the use of a summary lead.

However, once the lead and nut graf have been presented, the story will transition to a chronological format, with *the most recent information being followed by continually less recent information*. As with the inverted pyramid, the story would then end with some general or contextual information, or a good "kicker" (a quote or anecdote that effectively encapsulates the story or wraps it up in an aesthetically or emotionally pleasing way).

This structure works best for a sequential news event, such as a crime or disaster story where the journalist needs to explain what happened from beginning to end. However, the temporal approach can be limiting, especially if the issue is multifaceted.

The Kebab

Feature stories will often use a more creative structure like the "kebab" (or the "circle"). This structure typically *begins with an anecdote about someone who is affected* by a trend, issue, or event. Then, it quickly transitions to the nut graf, which describes either the five W's and H or summarizes the broader phenomenon.

Following the nut graf, the structure continues by *adding detailed analyses of different aspects of the trend, issue, or event*. These are the 'meat' parts of the kebab, with each aspect representing a different piece of meat, and the journalist moving quickly from one piece to the next. The kebab ends with a closing anecdote, often about the same person featured in the lead, effectively bringing the story "full circle."

This structure works best when the journalist has access to an illustrative anecdote that aptly encapsulates the big takeaway from a story.

The Accordion

A remix of the kebab is the "accordion" structure. Like the kebab, the structure begins with a strong anecdote or quote that represents the main topic of a story and quickly transitions to a nut graf.

However, unlike the kebab, this structure follows a 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' pattern that uses a compelling central figure (or small cast) to illustrate multiple aspects of a story *throughout the story*. In the 'zooming in' phases, the journalist uses different anecdotes from the central figure (e.g., aspects of their experience with the issue) to illustrate and personalize an aspect of the story. In the 'zooming out' phases, the journalist contextualizes the experience by focusing on the 'big picture,' or how representative the anecdote is, often by incorporating side characters (e.g., subject experts). This structure will typically end in similar fashion to the kebab, with a closing anecdote from the central character.

This structure is especially useful when the journalist has a compelling central character that can effectively encapsulate the issue through their lived experience. It can also work when the journalist has a cadre of characters who collectively encapsulate the issue through their lived experiences, as the journalist can insert a different character during each 'zooming in' phase.

The accordion structure is also particularly useful for data-driven stories, as it makes it easy for the journalist to oscillate between data analysis and anecdote, thereby keeping the reader well-informed and engaged.

The Pyramid

A less common storytelling structure in journalism is the "pyramid." It is, as you may have guessed, roughly the opposite of the inverted pyramid structure.

This structure, which is more often used in long-form feature writing or journalistic non-fiction books, builds *up* to the most interesting information. It is more akin to storytelling in a novel, where information of increasing importance is revealed as the narrative develops in order to build up tension and conflict. It is only near the end that the reader is exposed to the full depth and breadth of the story, which serves as a form of (or immediate antecedent to) resolution.

Selecting a Structure

No one story structure is inherently better than another. However, structures like the inverted pyramid are better suited for shorter or breaking news stories. By contrast, structures like the accordion are better suited to longer stories with compelling characters.

When selecting your story structure, try to be mindful of the purpose of your story (e.g., to quickly inform or to entertain), the amount of space you have to work with (e.g., a shorter story is usually better suited to a simple structure), the range of themes you have (e.g., a story with many themes may require a kebab-like structure), and the quality and appeal of the evidence and experiences you have uncovered through your reporting (e.g., several captivating anecdotes may benefit from a more creative structure). Moreover, you'll generally want to be aware of your target outlet's writing style in order to produce content that is aligned with those audiences' expectations.

Key Takeaways

- Before you start writing, take stock of the information you have. This will help you organize your information thoughtfully and subsequently select an appropriate story structure.
- Common journalistic story structures include the inverted pyramid, the martini glass, the kebab, the accordion, and the pyramid.
- When selecting your story structure, try to be mindful of the purpose of your story, the amount of space you have to work with, and the quality and appeal of the evidence and experiences you have uncovered through your reporting.

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6.3: Quotes and Attribution

Introduction

Good quotes are essential to turning a story from being *good* to being *great*. They play an important role in breaking up the journalist's writing, transitioning from one fact or sub-issue to the next, giving authoritative heft to a story, and conveying the richness of the human experience. Put another way, quotes are useful in both substantive and stylistic ways.

However, quotes are also a representation of the individuals featured in a story. They must thus be conveyed accurately and clearly. This can present a challenge as journalists simply lack the space to fully quote everything their sources said during the course of interviewing several people. And, even if they had the space, fully quoting everyone would surely result in a story that is an incoherent mess.

Quoting sources in a story thus involves a process of *selection* and *placement*, and often requires journalists to move between *direct quotes* and *paraphrased statements*.

Below are some tips to help you choose who and what to quote, and to successfully employ quoting and attribution styles that are commonly used in U.S. journalism.

Direct Quotes

Direct quotes are *statements that reflect the exact words used by the source*. They are always placed in between quotation marks to make clear that they are the source's words, and not the journalist's.

Direct quotes are most useful for conveying emotions, opinions, and personal experiences. Quoting dry, basic facts (or descriptions that you can easily observe with your own eyes) is generally neither interesting nor a good use of space (as you can typically convey those facts more succinctly yourself). Instead, listen for quotes that tell you *how people feel or think about the subject*. An ideal quote will exemplify or elaborate upon a fact.

When using direct quotes, it is important that you change things as little as possible. Most interviewees are able to express themselves coherently — especially since many public figures and experts now receive media training — so you typically only have to 'tidy up' a quote.

Tidying up typically involves largely mechanical tasks like removing 'ums' and 'ers' or correcting a tense (e.g., using "have" when the correct syntax calls for "had"). However, you should never change the *meaning* of a quote. It is not your job as a journalist to make an interviewee sound "smarter" — nor should you try to make them sound "dumber." Your job as a journalist is to accurately convey the source's intended meaning (as best you can).

What journalists can do, however, is *patch* quotes. Patching allows you to link one sentence from an interview with another sentence from earlier or later on in that interview. This is particularly useful if you have an inexperienced interviewee or a fast thinker who jumps around a lot during an interview. For example, consider the following portion of a hypothetical interview: "Arsenal are one of the most storied clubs in England. I mean, last weekend was a pretty poor showing, but they're typically quite good. Still, they remain the only English team to complete a top-flight season undefeated. And, they have won 13 top-flight titles, which is pretty darn impressive."

We could easily patch that interview segment by writing: "Arsenal are one of the most storied clubs in England," Zamith said. "They remain the only English team to complete a top-flight season undefeated."

Patching is critical for ensuring good flow for a story, and journalists therefore frequently use that technique. Direct quotes are *typically* between one and three sentences in length. Unless they are particularly compelling, longer quotes will often slow down a story.

Here are a few other things to keep in mind when quoting a source:

- Every quote should be clearly attributed so audiences know exactly who said what.
- When you quote a person for the first time, introduce them. The introduction typically includes the person's full name and title. For example, in the aforementioned quote, you might write: "said Rodrigo Zamith, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Massachusetts Amherst."

- With subsequent quotes, use the source's last name. If there are two sources with the same last name in the story, use their full name.
- If there are several paragraphs between a source's previous quote and their next one, remind the audience of the source's qualifications. For example, you might later write, "said Zamith, the journalism professor."
- It is perfectly fine to use the word "said" repeatedly in your story to transition between the quote and the attribution. This is a neutral term that does not ascribe motivations that you cannot ascertain to your source. Most publications will stick to the past tense (as the interview already took place), though "says" is permissible at some outlets.
- You should typically use the "[NAME] said" construction when quoting sources. However, you may invert this when an explanatory clause (or attribution) is added. Here's an example of such an inversion: "said Zamith, who has watched nearly every game over the past decade."
- Single or multi-sentence quotes are usually given their own paragraph in a story. This helps draw attention to the quote. Partial quotes (i.e., a sentence fragment) or short quotes may be incorporated into a paragraph containing the journalist's own words.
- When using multi-sentence quotes, insert the attribution after the first sentence. Do *not* add it to the very end of a multi-sentence quote.
- In *feature writing*, you may break up a single sentence into multiple segments for effect. For example: "Last weekend was a poor showing," Zamith said, shaking his head. "They're typically quite good."
- In the United States, punctuation (e.g., commas and periods) typically appears *within* the quotation marks.

Paraphrased Statements

Journalistic stories also make frequent use of paraphrased statements, which are sometimes also called indirect quotes. These refer to *statements attributed to a source that are conveyed through the journalist's choice of words*.

For example, rather dedicating space to an extended quote, you might simply write: According to Zamith, Arsenal have won 13 top-flight titles in England.

Paraphrased statements are important for adding authority and connective tissue to a story. They allow you to attribute a range of information — which adds heft to your story by highlighting that the information is not just your opinion or feeling — and make it easier to introduce transitions to the story by interchanging your words with those of your sources. They are also useful when a source clearly intends to express a specific idea but does so in a clumsy way. In such an instance, you are not simply helping the source look "smarter"; you are helping the audience more easily understand the point.

Paraphrased statements are particularly useful *for conveying purely factual information* since facts, in isolation, are typically not very exciting and can be conveyed succinctly. If there's nothing unusual, interesting, or newsworthy about the exact wording of a statement, it is typically better expressed via paraphrasing.

For example, consider the following quote: "The new Journalism building will house eight lab spaces and two lecture halls," Zamith said. "These classrooms will offer seating capacity for 480 students. It will open next fall."

There is nothing particularly interesting about that expression. Instead, it would be better to paraphrase it as: Zamith said the new building, due to open next fall, will seat up to 480 students across eight lab spaces and two lecture halls.

Because the journalist has greater control over the word choice of a paraphrased statement, it is even more crucial that they take care to accurately capture the source's meaning and intent. For example, a source may intentionally use the word "good" to refer to an above-average instance of something. By using the word "great" or "outstanding" in the paraphrasing, the journalist may end up conveying a greater sense of pleasure than the source actually feels. It is thus wise to stick closely to the source's language, even when paraphrasing.

Similarly, journalists should be careful with the attribution terms they use. For example, the word "claims" can raise undue skepticism about a statement. Instead, it is best to use the following neutral descriptors: "said," "stated," "according to," and "added."

The LQTQ Format

One structural approach to newswriting that highlights the value of quotes is the *LQTQ Format*, with the acronym standing for Lead-Quote-Transition-Quote.

The approach begins with a strong lead (e.g., an anecdotal lead or a summary lead) that conveys the essence of the story or hooks audiences in.

Then, in the second full paragraph, important information not found in the lead is offered to help further contextualize the story (i.e., the nut graf). This second paragraph ends with a transition or set-up for the first extended quote in the story.

The third paragraph consists of a direct quote that helps to illustrate or elaborate upon the information provided in that second paragraph. As this is the generally the first direct quote, it typically includes complete attribution information for the source.

Subsequent paragraphs follow the Transition-Quote model. For example, the fourth and fifth paragraphs become linked thusly: The fourth paragraph introduces the next major fact or important piece of information, all the while transitioning the *previous direct quote* to the *next direct quote* — which comprises the fifth paragraph. That subsequent quote should elaborate on the transition, offer an expert opinion, or illustrate the issue via an individual's experience or emotion. Transitions may include paraphrased statements (by the same source or a different one), original facts uncovered by the journalist, or contextual information.

A transition does not have to be a single paragraph in length; it can cover two and even three paragraphs. The idea is that direct quotes are appearing frequently in the story, ensuring that audiences are able to regularly hear from someone other than the journalist.

This process continues until the end, with the story concluding with a *kicker quote* that aptly encapsulates the story, points to what is to come, or otherwise leaves the audience with a satisfying conclusion. (Don't just summarize the story in the concluding paragraph. Your audience will have just consumed the story, so they don't need to be reminded of it. Try to end it with something interesting instead.)

Choosing Who and What to Quote

Journalists will frequently speak with far more sources than they end up quoting or paraphrasing. Put another way, *it is perfectly fine to speak with a source and not quote them in the story*. If another source is able to express something in a more informative or compelling way, refer only to that other source. (However, it can be helpful to include multiple sources to illustrate that a particular opinion or belief is shared.) Similarly, if your source says something that is inaccurate or offensive, you can choose to omit that information or exclude the source altogether (so as to not misinform your audience). In short, *be selective with what and who you quote*.

You should also be mindful of the source's authoritativeness on a particular subject matter. For example, a quote from a company's CEO will typically carry more weight than a quote from that company's media spokesperson. (Keep in mind, though, that many quotes in press releases are effectively written by spokespeople.) In general, you should seek to attribute information to the most authoritative sources you were able to interview.

Moreover, if your story angle changes over the course of reporting it, you should simply drop the now-superfluous material. While quotes can be highly useful, they can also be detrimental when used improperly (or overused). There are better uses for space than a tangential quote. (Journalists are often temped to include a particularly juicy quote in a story even though there's no apparent place for it. Resist that temptation and keep your story focused.)

Finally, as a rule of thumb, *journalists should paraphrase dry facts, but directly quote emotions, opinions, and newsworthy expressions voiced by sources*. As suggested by the LQTQ Format, direct quotes should be placed throughout the story — generally, at least after every few paragraphs — regardless of the story structure.

Key Takeaways

- Quoting sources in a story involves a process of selection and placement, and often requires journalists to move between direct quotes and paraphrased statements.
- Direct quotes are statements that reflect the exact words used by the source. Paraphrased statements are those that are attributed to a source but are conveyed through the journalist's choice of words. Try to include a direct quote after every few paragraphs, and use paraphrasing to help with transitions.
- It is perfectly fine to speak with a source and not quote them in the story. Try to attribute information to the most authoritative and interesting sources you interviewed.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

Introduction

Many (most, really) of the elements of journalism you just read about in the last three chapters are still really useful parts of the profession. At the same time, just by adding "digital," we are forced to address the elephant in the room: Journalism done in the traditional way is good, important, expensive, and does not always get the audience it deserves. We live in a media system where **attention** is the key resource. Attention leads to revenue and revenue almost always fuels journalism in the United States.

Imagine this: There is a flash flood in your town.

The local news website sends a reporter near the scene and she spends four to five hours working on a story, going through all of the steps we just read about in the last three chapters, as well as taking videos, posting them on social media site, and once she is done with the reporting and writing process, she posts a news story ... and between the social media and website coverage, her work gets 20,000 views. Not terrible at all.

Now imagine if someone spends less than five minutes uploading an Instagram post about the flood (perhaps someone who had to evacuate their home) and 10,000 people see it. Surely, what the professional reporter has developed is deeper and broader, filled more context, and ultimately more useful for a fully engaged consumer. On the other hand, the Instagram post is more immediate, perhaps more timely, creates an emotional experience of almost "being there." This is the world in which we live—we are trying to compare apples and oranges, because digital attention often cares less about the label and more about the immediate experience of consuming the information.

Both are important, but one is much more expensive to produce, the journalists', and the work is a pathway to a career because they go everywhere news is happening.

Depending on how large the staff is for that local news website, the reporter could be doing multiple tasks at the same time: regularly posting live updates from officials and eyewitnesses on both the website and social media channels, taking photos and videos for the same platforms, getting to the bottom of rumors and false reports to clarify what is true, interviewing people to find compelling stories to tell both in real-time and after the fact, writing an evolving news article that is based on time now, but will be reworked in inverted pyramid style later.

Digital journalism looks traditional in many ways, but it is faster, juggles more skills, and it will show up on a variety of channels to help consumers understand what is happening. If you want to learn how to communicate is multiple ways, for multiple reasons, and never want two days to look the same, modern journalism might be for you.

For this week's chapter, you are going to do some of your own digital research. First, we are going to look at a modern newsroom close to where this book is being remixed, *The Kansas City Star.* Then we are going to look at a guide for career seekers and see what it has to say about journalism today. We are going to explore the many roles of the newspaper.

The Kansas City Star Staff Listings

The Kansas City Star has been published since 1880, and has had a long, rich, and impressive history, but the last 20 years have been some of its most tumultuous. The Internet slowly eroded many of the key revenue sources of the paper, even as it gained readership online. Still, the journalists who covered the city with much larger staffs continued to produce important work throughout the massive changes in the newsroom. Now, *The Star* has blended many of the time-proven roles with new job types to address the changing needs from a print-only daily publication to a multi-media website expected to cover news 24 hours a day.

'News Analysts, Reporters, and Journalists'

O*Net is a tool to help people explore potential careers. Years ago, if you wanted to learn more about being a journalist, O*Net would have like sent you to a page called, "Reporters and Correspondents." Today, you will find a page called "News Analysts,

Reporters, and Journalists." This is a much broader set of terms. Why do you think that is? The probability is high that digital life has changed journalism jobs in permanent and significant ways, just like we discussed in the introduction.

The O*Net offers this general description of what you might do as a journalist:

> Narrate or write news stories, reviews, or commentary for print, broadcast, or other communications media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, or television. May collect and analyze information through interview, investigation, or observation.

We are going to explore the many different types of tasks, skills, opportunities, interests, values, and more than come with the field through the O*Net

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8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

We have covered the basics to this point — most of what a journalist does on a daily basis is in your head now. But there are also times when the skills we have learned demand a deeper diver and that is where we are going to focus for the next few chapters.

This kind of journalism takes on many names and functions, some of which crossover into each other—long-form journalism, feature writing, enterprise reporter, perhaps investigative journalism, etc. What we are focused on here is telling more than just what happened today, but finding the underlying currents of a community to tell a deeper story about who we are. Let's just call it journalism for deeper narratives.

Now, to be clear, we are not going to learn how to do everything in these chapters. You are learning the basics of some advanced methods. And everything we have learned so far is relevant—in fact, some of what you read here will feel repetitious and that is okay. The fundamentals of journalism hold, and should be reviewed, in all advanced reporting as well.

In my career, these techniques were largely used for feature writing. And in developing my own style of resarch, reporting and writing, I became interested in the role of listening. So I am going to share some of my writing about that, something I call "storylistening."

Storylistening

The Oxford English Dictionary takes no position on the possible meanings of "storylistening," jumping silently from “storyless” to “storyteller.” So since there is no one existing definition, it is important to define what I mean when I us the term, especially for a journalism student.

First, what I do *not* mean.

Picture an audience from any age. Sitting in the theater, nose in a book, ear glued to the radio, eyes riveted to the television set, or the movie screen, or the VR headset. The pinnacle of such an experience is narrative transportation, when an audience member experiences immersion, character identification, a lost sense of time and space, evoked by the power of a well-told narrative arc. That audience member is not what I mean when I say, “storylistener.”

Or picture algorithmic code, watching the numerous digital spaces where we are prompted to post our, “Stories.” It notes the number of likes, comments, shares, use of language, interest of topics, around a single post as well as the accumulation of posts around a single user. The compilation creates an identity to target for more use and for advertising. The pinnacle of such accumulation is to predict future posts’ success, to resurface popular “memories” in the name of attention, and to understand the identity’s wishes and needs. This code is also not what I mean when I say, “storylistener.”

What I do mean begins with how human beings develop an inner identity. How our bodies and mind interact with the many stimuli of the world, especially other people, and from those interactions how we develop a system of organic memories. Memories, at times, look like story arcs, but mostly are a mess of routines, vignettes, images, scraps. When retrieved they are placed into a larger context of place, time, need, and mood, which change regularly. That implies multiple versions of the self, which are in dialogue with each other to create a coherent “I” in the mind(opens in new window). What we remember shapes who we are.

Within the particular contexts of our lives, we construct themes about ourselves. We may see this self as a discrete unit facing the world, or we may see ourselves as part of a larger whole. We may see our stories as redemptive(opens in new window), moving from bad times to good, or we may see them as contaminated, moving from good to bad. How we frame our memories shapes who we are.

Our minds do not begin at neatly congruent sets of episodes, like a long-lasting sitcom or drama. That congruence you sense when you think of yourself is a complex system at work. The network of thoughts, interactions, cultural influences, experiences, identities, and themes, is constantly creating and maintaining a “storied self.”(opens in new window) It is this notion of story that my definition of storylisteners relies upon:

Definition: Storylistening

Storylistening uses narrative know-how to actively engage in a relationship of understanding about the life journey of another.

Through presence and practice, someone storylistening might help people find their storied selves, even if they are not natural storytellers. Or help people break out of their instinctual and well-worn scripts if they are. For journalists, storylistening is a way of understanding the "who" of a source (the person behind the opinions, the expertise, the specific experience) rather than just the "what" (their name, their title, their age, their race, etc.)

Strategies for Storylistening

A few years ago, I created a video (QR code below) for a community education project where I went through the basic strategies for storylistening. Almost all of it is still relevant for journalists who are conducting deeper interviews, especially for profiles, news analysis, investigations, etc. Here it is:

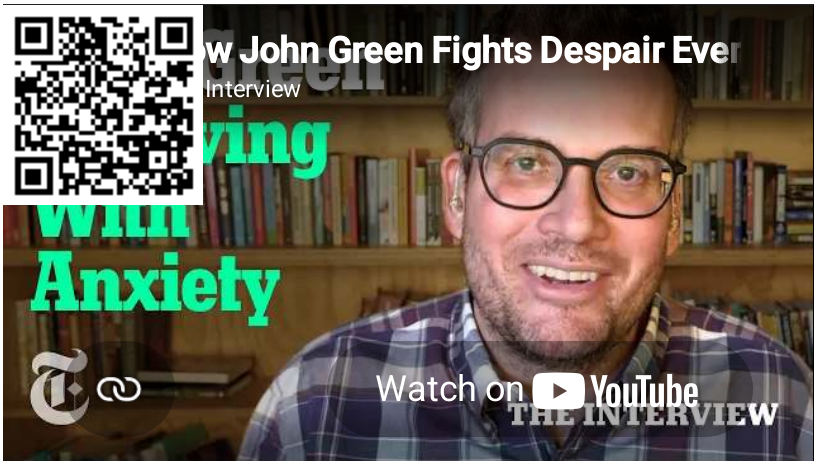


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8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview

Later in the semester, we will watch some non-traditional forms of media that are worth discussing. For now, watch this more traditional long-form interview, using techniques that are more formal and one-directional.

- Is the interviewer using storylistening techniques?
- What works in this interview?
- Did you learn enough to tell a whole story with this interview?
- What else did you want to know?



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8.2: Beyond the Traditional

The future of journalism, just like the present, will use every medium possible. After placing much of our focus on text, it is worth spending some time to think about video and the role that interviewing plays in that. And what you see in TV journalism looks less and less like what you see on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. What does all of this mean for the future of video journalism? I suspect we should listen to young creators about what they are doing and why to spark the conversation around this question.

As you watch the video below, think about everything we have learned up to this point about reporting and telling stories:

1) What are the key differences between what you are seeing and hearing in this video and what we have learned this semester?

2) What is the same?

3) What worries you about the way this creator is telling stories about the world?

4) What is exciting about it for you?

5) What is the economic reality behind how journalism is changing?

(QR code below)



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Beyond the Basics - Writing to be Read

Now we are going to read another perspective on how to write stories in a journalistic style. Writing to be Read, by Nicole Kraft, focuses on writing feature stories, pieces that are less concerned about timeliness and more about going deeper into a relevant story. Again, some of what Kraft writes will echo what we read earlier, but you will also find strategies specific to a longer, more involved, style of article. After writing, she takes us into a deep dive about editing for the next chapter.

9.1: Outlining
9.2: Writing it Out
9.3: Writing with Anecdotes
9.4: Writing the Lede
9.5: Crafting the Nut
9.6: Body Building
9.7: Writing to the End
9.8: The Touch Test
9.9: Spotlight on- Ted Conover

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9.1: Outlining

"The first sentence can't be written until the final sentence is written."
Joyce Carol Oates

How you begin to write your article is a personal preference for most writers, and there are a variety of styles from which to choose.

Adam Jardy of the Columbus Dispatch recalls a seventh-grade English teacher who insisted every paper that he wrote include an outline.

And he hated it.

"I didn't even consider myself much of a writer at that point but that just burned me to my core," said Jardy. "When I sat down to write things, that was not how my brain comprehended things"

To outline or not outline is a continuing debate among writers, and there is truly not a correct answer. For some, it is a limiting exercise. For others it is as important as a skeleton, providing organization and structure.

In truth, every writer organizes in some way. My style is to organize through transcription — as I put the notes into publishable form, I add subheads to categorize subjects. I then move those subjects around in the order I see them in the story.

Jardy said he seeks more ambiguity as he lets the story unfold, then as he writes it, it starts to take shape and makes more sense to him.

"I feel like I'm always thinking about [the structure], especially when I'm working on a really big story or feature that I'm really interested in," he said. "There's a flow to it and the more you do it the more it makes sense."

Jardy recalled writing a story about how Ohio State basketball preps for a game. He watched film with the coaches, at least two practices, a shoot-around and how they played a game He estimates he spent 20 to 30 hours gathering all the information. And the whole time he was formulating in his head how to write the story.

"It's always turning over in my brain somehow," he said. "By the time I sit down to write, I generally feel like by then I have a handle on what I'm doing. Something has bubbled its way to the top of my brain as far as 'This is the most interesting thing, this is the big picture, this is how I get into the story, this is the lede.'

"You have to believe in the reporting that you've done, the work that you've done, the interviewing that you've done. You've got to have all that in front of you and believe that you can connect all the dots, and from that, you can draw what's important, what are you writing, what are you not writing."

Jardy admitted every writer has his or her own process, but he said he just sits down and starts writing.

"Staring at a blank screen doesn't help you," he said. "There's nothing wrong with putting something down and having to go back and change it later. Sometimes just getting a couple of words out it just starts the process then the brain starts working because creativity comes out and it takes over. But just getting started sometimes, getting those first couple of sentences, it just picks up steam from there."

Many writers — and I am among them — must have a lede in place before they can begin to structure the remainder of the story. That does not mean the lede will stand through until publication, but it does open the door for me to walk through as the writer, so I can see and craft the nut graph and structure a body that comes off of that nut graph.

"I can't do anything till I have my lede or something that will end up being close to my lede," Zack Meisel of The Athletic confirms. "I'll just get something down, then go from beginning to finish and outline it, then write through it a million times until I'm satisfied."

Abby Vesoulis of Time said that after reporting she organizes her notes and then seeks out the lede.

"I love anecdotal ledes that start with a person who talks about this problem that they had, and then you pivot from that and say something like 'She's not alone, as 130 million Americans also face this problem and after years of it being ignored this is why it has become a hot issue.' Then you get into the tension that has prevented it from becoming enacted at this point.

“The lede is a snapshot of the problem and the nut graph said why we’re doing this story right now, the tension that prevents it from getting accomplished and then a 20,000-feet perspective of saying what has to get accomplished to make this a reality.”

Other writers will structure the nut graph first, and others may tackle the conclusion before anything.

Outlining your story may be the way to go for you, which would mean identifying the nut graph and then ordering the body by subject matter, so you can see how the parts and pieces fit together.

Misti Crane at Ohio State advocated creating an outline based on the themes of this story, which she said will provide a useful framework for what could be notebooks filled with reporting.

“A lot of it comes back to the [five-paragraph essay] sort of framework,” she said. “What are the key points you are making? If you have three notebooks full of notes for a 1,500-word feature and you just start going through your notebook, you are screwed. You have to figure out that the outline format of key points and being really disciplined about only adding details and dialogue that fit strictly into the framework of the story is one way of doing it.”

Mike Wagner of The Dispatch said he writes down in a Word document the five or six themes he wants to represent in an article.

“You are going to highlight those impact things and then write around those,” he said. “You add your information.”

Just as many reporters outline in their head, said Wagner’s investigative reporting partner, Lucas Sullivan.

“Coming back from an interview, I always go through what were the highlights,” he said. “If I was going to tell anyone about what I just experienced, I say, ‘OK, what would I tell them.’

“You have to be able to tell yourself, your editor, your roommate or whatever what was the top few things that you take away from that interview. What would you use? I think that helps you write your lede and is the crux of a good article. You have to have that mental conversation of OK if someone would ask me what is the top moment I took away from that interview, what is it? Then everything sort of falls into place after that.”

I similarly gather all of my notes in written (transcribed) form and then organize them based on the subject matter. I will use headers like “History” and “Early Days” and “Conclusion” and then get narrower.

By moving all the quotes on those subjects together, I can see how the anecdotes and facts begin to flow from one to the other, and see if the structure makes logical sense before I begin too much writing.

Then I start turning fact-based quotes into paraphrases and anecdotes and structuring the quotes I need to support them.

When I see the anecdote I want for the lede, I move it to the top of my document. The concluding anecdote or quote then gets placed at the end of the document.


Melissa Hoppert

Melissa Hoppert of the New York Times takes a similar approach. She tapes every interaction — in person or on the phone — and then types out all of her quotes “to see what I have.” As she goes through the tapes, she will bold the elements that seem to “jump out.”

“I will have thousands of things bolded,” she said. “The things that stuck out in my mind from the start of the story, I put those at the top of the file. That way, as I start to write I know what I want to include. At the end of the process, I’ll have maybe 10 things I want to get in. As I start to write, I keep writing from my list. It’s almost like building a puzzle.”

That doesn’t mean, however, that outlining is for everyone, and linear writing may not be the best approach. Steve Rushin of Sports Illustrated said he has never made an outline and instead puts the notes as he organizes them in the chronological way he wants the story to be told.

“I was always told to make a formal outline, but that’s drudgery and a straitjacket to me,” Rushin said. “Don’t feel like you have to start at the start. That’s the tyranny of the cursor looking at you. Write anything. Write the end, then write the middle. Write a sentence. If you know you have a quote you want to use, put that down.”

Michael Farber of Sports Illustrated suggests young writers go even a step further by approaching not a 3,000-word article but instead writing three 1,000-word pieces or six 500-word pieces, each tying into each other.

“Maybe start with a scene that lends insight into whoever you’re writing about,” he suggested. “Break into blocks if that is what will make you comfortable with. One will flow into the next.

You can write several 400-500 word pieces. They don’t have to be equal chunks.”

To Outline or Not?

“When I was writing one story, I left my notebooks [unopened]. Then I sat down and forced myself to try to write the story from memory the way I would tell the story to a friend. Then I would get the notebooks to find the quotes I wanted and put them in. I know a lot of people who record and transcribe, and then you have everything in all this detail, and that can be really helpful but it also can be detrimental to good storytelling. Pull yourself away from what the notes say and think about what the important parts of the story are.”
Mike Wagner, Columbus Dispatch

“I write out all the quotes, transcribe everything, then kind of review that. In your mind, I think you start to build the story into maybe four or five sections if you’re doing a 4,000-5,000 word story. Then I start to think of, how am I going to tell this? Chronological? Is it going to be a flashback, is it going to be back and forth? Usually, it becomes fairly apparent through the interview process I think. Once you’ve written so many of these longer features it kind of falls into a couple of different categories; you have experience on what has worked well in the past and what doesn’t work. I think you mentally start to compartmentalize things. That’s why for me it’s important to write out quotes, then I’ll almost know what section what is going to go in. Sometimes it changes, sometimes you write and you think ‘no this needs to be moved up,’ but I think for the most part you have a mental outline.”
Tom Reed

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9.2: Writing it Out

"I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn."
Anne Frank

To embrace feature writing is to abandon the rules that governed us in news: write short and tight, keep vocabulary simple. Feature writing still relies on facts, but now they are wrapped in more detail and narrative, the storytelling that brings in readers and keeps them reading.

Consider how you might approach a breaking news story, like a shooting outside a campus-area McDonald's. The first story presents the facts: "A man is in critical condition after being shot in the parking lot of a campus-area McDonald's early Sunday morning." The story would give facts, with quotes from police and witnesses.

A follow-up feature, however, might tackle the story from the student's point of view, describing in the lede how Joe Smith had stopped by the McDonald's after a night out with friends.

Smith was just stepping up to the counter to place his order of a Big Mac and large fries when he heard it — pop, pop pop, like fireworks.

Only he knew it wasn't fireworks.

And it wasn't a backfiring car.

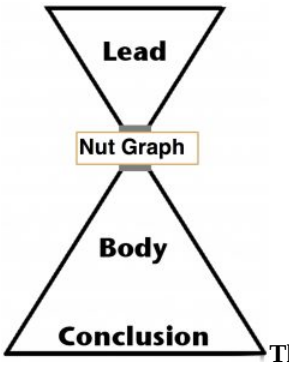
It was gunshots. And they were right outside.

We would follow with the who, what, when, where and how of this story — namely that 24 hours after a shooting near campus, students are still shaken by the crack in their perception of campus as a safe environment.

Notice that the writer will have central characters who we get to know and care about. This is feature writing.

The writing hourglass

Unlike news articles, in which the most important information is told first, followed by the next most important info, then the next most important information, all the way down to the least important information, features are written to be read from beginning to end.



The Writing Hourglass

To do that, we have to write differently. And so we craft the feature writing hourglass.

The top of the hourglass is a narrative lede, pouring information and emotion toward a focused point that tells us what the article is about, which we call the nut graph.

Once the story passes through that nut graph juncture, it is clarified and focused and the body that follows (the bottom of the hourglass) supports the nut graph through examples and sources and anecdotes. The strong base of the hourglass holds up the story, providing a broad and fulfilling finish that is often a quote or anecdote.

The key to this structure is understanding how all aspects of the story are tied together and contained within the hourglass framework.

We can’t get into the story without a smooth flow of the lede toward and through the nut graph, which serves as the connector between the lede and the body. The body must then allow the ideas presented in the nut graph to broaden, but they have to stay connected to what is presented in the nut graph. No sand can flow outside of the hourglass, and no ideas can leave the framework presented in the nut graph.

The conclusion then lets the whole enterprise settle to completion and holds up the feeling of the story as being complete.

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9.3: Writing with Anecdotes

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."
Anton Chekhov

Anecdotes are by definition short, compelling or entertaining stories about real incidents or real people, that help a subject become more relatable and true to life.

We share stories about our day, illustrate situations in our lives and try to connect with others through moments that can be shared.

Anecdotes are also the stories that make your articles come to life, illustrating your main point so the reader can see what the story will be about.

Consider a story is about the challenges of back-to-school clothes shopping. You could say Jeanette Burns' daughter wanted to go buy new clothes, but economics meant they ended up at the Volunteers of America Thrift Store where their money would go much further.

But I see it better if you show me:

Jeanette Burns pushes the hangers from left to right, her eye scanning first the color and style, then the price and finally the label to confirm the size. The sound of hangers scraping along the metal pole is hypnotic.

Three feet away by the empty cart, 12-year-old Naveah stands with her arms crossed, lips in a tight horizontal line, her eyes narrow. School was five days away, and her four-inch summer growth spurt had cost Neveah her favorite outfits. Now she watched as her mother pawed through other people's hand-me-downs, waiting to see which ones would soon fill her closet.

That, my friends, is an anecdote.

We use them every day to help people see and experience the world as we do.

There are really only two ways to uncover true anecdotes for your articles:

1. Get someone to describe them.
2. Experience them yourself.

Much of what we write about has already happened, so we are beholden to those who experienced the situation to describe for us what happened. To do that, though, they need to be asked in ways that will help pull out the story.

- "Give me an example of that."
- "Describe when that happened."
- "Walk me through."

In class, we often use the example of the roommate from hell — which it seems is consistent among college students.

Let's say the nut graph of our story for a feature is how to cope with the college roommate from hell. To fully understand the nut graph, we need to see an example. So we interview students who have had bad roommates and ask them to share what exactly that experience was like.

Let's say a source said of his roommate, "He was dirty."

We could leave it to our imagination what dirty means, or we could ask more questions to get more specifics.

That led one student to relate that his roommate, who he thinks only bathed twice in the entire semester, used to cut his facial hair and fingernails — and leave the clippings in the kitchen sink.

Now I understand dirty.

I once interviewed a mother four years after her son had died. She was the last person to see him alive and found him unresponsive in his hotel bed. Blurting out a question like, "What happened when you found your son's body?" would not get me nearly the information I needed and it would be terribly bad form. We had to work up to that with a variety of probing questions that allowed her to walk me through her night — what did she eat, where did she sit, what did they talk about, where was he standing when he said goodnight. What did she say and do.

In my mind, I basically had a paint-by-numbers outline of the anecdote, but I had to ask her every question I could so she would provide the paint to fill in and fill out the images.

I also hoped she would surprise me, so my picture had even more personality and color, like when she described how she stood next to him (on his right) while he sat at a restaurant table, running her hand up and down his back three times.

She recalled almost as an afterthought: “It was the last time I touched him.”

Being a writer means exploring the world around you, and getting first-person anecdotes is an invaluable part of your reporting.

Writing a story on a new hotel project in town? Instead of calling up the neighbor whose house will be dwarfed by a parking garage, go out to his house and see for yourself what is his view now and how will it be affected.

If you are profiling a musician, don’t just ask them what their preshow routine is like. Spend the day — or a few days — going to rehearsal, eating lunch, shopping for clothes, doing soundcheck. Get the dialogue that comes when he or she interacts with someone else.

Suppose we were writing a story about the airlines’ new push to strictly enforce carry-on bag sizes, and we found ourselves at the airport. Taking notice of the different size bags passengers wheeled around the concourse could help with details, as could what exactly happens when you are in line for the flight.

Take note of the United Airlines representative stopping a female traveler with what appears to be an oversized roller bag and asking her to put it in the measurement box situated near the gate. What happens? Does she get on with it or need to check her bag? How does the passenger behave? How about the airline employee?

Listen to both talking about their experience, and even go into interview mode:

1. Identify yourself as a writer working on an article on this topic.
2. Ask the passenger her name and where she is going.
3. How does she feel about the policy?
4. What was she feeling when approached about the bag and while measuring?
5. What were her thoughts when packing the bag (did she realize it would be oversized, etc.)?
6. How does she feel about the push for pay bags?

Notice all of these are “open-ended” questions, meaning they cannot be answered with a “yes,” “no” or single-word answer. We need to get people to describe their feelings, emotions and experiences to bring others into their stories.

Nothing is hypothetical

The one way NOT to get anecdotes is the lazy way: creating your own hypothetical from what you think might happen or from a few stories you may have heard from others.

“Imagine you are walking down the sidewalk and you come across a homeless person seeking change…”

“A mother and daughter are shopping for a prom dress…”

“Bringing home a new puppy and not sure where it should sleep?”

Imagine how much more effective real people with real names could be sharing their real stories.

‘An Incredible Journey’ with Aaron Portzline of The Athletic

Aaron Portzline of The Athletic set out to write a profile on NHL forward Artemi Panarin, who had been extraordinary on the ice but elusive to the media. Here is his anecdotal lede:

The 8-year-old boy stood shaking and scared in the middle of a bus station in Chelyabinsk, Russia, tears gathering in his eyes and dripping off his cheeks. His panicked hands rifled through the same pockets over and over for the bus ticket he could not afford to lose.

At the previous stop, he’d reached into a secret pocket on the inside of his pants — to the left of the zipper, just behind the waist — to buy a snack for the 25-mile trip from Korkino to Chelyabinsk. The ticket must have been left at the counter when he reached for his money.

His grandmother didn't just put the rubles in that pocket, she sewed that pocket into his jeans, too, hoping robbers wouldn't find it when they patted him down. This was more than 900 miles east of Moscow and just eight years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Poverty was a permanent cloud in the Chelyabinsk region, and crime was rampant. Even kids weren't safe.

The boy stood trembling at the world's mercy. Most mistook him for a 5- or 6-year-old, a golden mop of hair on top of a frail 65-pounder, all ribs and elbows and knees.

Two men emerged from the swirl of legs and luggage. "Where are your parents? Why are you crying? Are you lost?"

They looked around the station for an adult accomplice, fearing a ruse. One gave the boy the money in exchange for a promise that he'd spend it on a bus ticket. Even kids couldn't be trusted.

The tears dried. A natural smile returned. Deep breaths.

Artemi Panarin remembers this as one of the scariest days of his young life. He bought a new ticket and boarded a bus back home to Korkino, but his remarkable journey from isolation and poverty to NHL stardom and immense wealth was just getting started.

Blue Jackets fans have been treated to numerous Panarin highlights this season — the puck dangling, the passing, the scoring. But few in North America know what Panarin has survived to make it this far, how he emerged from an almost hopeless part of the world to become one of the best hockey players of his generation.

From: An Incredible Journey: Artemi Panarin's path from poverty to NHL stardom / The Athletic

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9.4: Writing the Lede

"The difference between the almost right word and the right word is … the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."
Mark Twain

The quest for the lede begins as soon as reporting begins, and like a detective, a feature writer is constantly striving to find the best way to bring readers into his or her story.

Steve Rushin of Sports Illustrated recalls a story he did on the Bass Master Class, which he called "the Super Bowl of bass fishing." Fish were weighed at the Birmingham Convention Center, and all-day anglers would swagger in wearing NASCAR-style suits and their biggest catch of the day with a sold-out crowd cheering them on.

Outside the convention center stands a statue of legendary college football coach Bear Bryant, arguably Alabama's most famous sports figure — and no one paid any attention to it, including the high school fishing teams outside cheering on the competitors.

"I didn't even know there were high school fishing teams," Rushin said. "And here is the icon of Bear Bryant in Alabama, representing a sport that dominates the state, being ignored by these high school fishing teams cheering these fish weigh-ins. All week long that image lingered with me, and I knew that was going to be the lede."

As you do the reporting, you can hear the lede. You can see where the piece is going to start. Somebody might say something that surprises you. How they say it, maybe that's a good place to start. If you attune yourself to it, you can hear ledes.

Unlike a news story, the lede in features is not just the first graph. It might be several paragraphs. It can be several hundred words if they are constructed properly.

I often think about a feature article like a house and the lede is the door we use to get inside.

That means the door has to connect to the house. It should also be ornate enough to be welcoming but not garish enough to repel. When I walk through it, I better feel welcome and have a good idea of where I am heading, or I am just as inclined to go back outside.

A news-writing lede for an inverted pyramid story is often painfully straightforward: who, what, when, where, why and how.

After reading that, I know the facts, but I am not going to care to get into the story nearly as much as I would if I am drawn in by some personal tale or experience — some character to which I can relate — before learning those six key facts.

A personal anecdote, description, narrative or scenario is more often than not the best way to pull a reader into a story — no matter what the topic.

Consider these examples of different feature ledes:

Descriptive

Moving around the big yellow kitchen lined with stainless steel ovens, prep tables, stacks of King Arthur flour, blocks of Cabot's butter, and bowls piled with chunks of rich, dark, Callebaut chocolate, 43-year-old Vermont chef, farmer and foodie entrepreneur Abbey Duke inhaled the rich buttery smell of holiday cookies cooling on the racks beside her and broke into a smile.

Cookies for Goodi, The Saturday Evening Post, Nov. 1, 2013

Narration

The beat-up black BMW sputtered to a stop, and Harold Stonier stepped out onto the New Bedford waterfront. The sky was overcast, with gulls wheeling in circles overhead. Their cackling grew to a din as Harold walked through the parking lot, past trucks painted with the name "Tempest Fisheries." A cold breeze, carrying with it the stench of dead fish and brine, blew off the water as he climbed the concrete steps to a rusty, steel-sided building.

The desolate waterfront must have looked perfect to Harold, who was a fan of mob movies and TV shows like "The Sopranos." It must have been exactly the type of place he had in mind when he logged onto Mafia.com to search for a hitman.

The name he'd found was Frank "Bruno" Moniz, a bodybuilder and right-hand man to South Coast mob lord Timothy Mello. Moniz was working as a truck driver at Tempest Fisheries while awaiting trial on charges including racketeering, drug trafficking and illegal gambling. If Harold had any second thoughts about hiring Moniz, he must have pushed them aside. As he entered the office, the secretary saw a tall, well-dressed man with a boyish face and neatly trimmed hair parted to one side.

"Is Frank here?" Harold asked. The secretary told him no. Harold had come prepared for this. He took a white envelope out of his coat and handed it over. "Just tell Frank this is from Alan Parker and that I'll call him," he said. The secretary dutifully printed on the envelope "Alan Parker. He'll call you," in cramped letters.

"A Murder Story," by Michael Blanding, Boston Feature, September 2004

Scene Setting

The tantrums were "epic" remembers Brianne DeRosa. The Cranston, Rhode Island, mom admits that her 5-year-old son, Patrick, is still sometimes challenging. But when he was a toddler, he had rage-filled episodes at daycare and couldn't be calmed. The center wanted Patrick to be evaluated for mood disorders, sensory problems, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). DeRosa wasn't convinced. Since his behavior improved over the weekends, she wondered whether the packaged snacks served at daycare could be the culprit.

When she asked for the labels and combed through the ingredients, she kept spotting synthetic food dyes. She asked the teacher to stop giving him the colored snacks, and his tantrums disappeared after a couple of days. "Within a few weeks, it was like nothing was wrong," says DeRosa.

"The Food Dye Blues," by Sally Kuzemchak, Parents Feature, June 2014

First-person

My husband and I decided to be a one-child family long before our son Oliver was born. With several years of reproductive-health scares behind me, conceiving a child felt like a Powerball win; I didn't need another chance at the jackpot. Scott thought we could avoid the inevitable slings and arrows of sibling warfare. We both hail from large families, in which continuation of the family name is assured through siblings and cousins. We were content with our decision, and our families took it well, too. A few months after Oliver was born, I bagged up my maternity clothes for a tag sale, and Scott started researching permanent birth-control options.

Is One Child Enough? by Diana Burrell, Parenting,com

Notice what these ledes are not a summary of the story (like the inverted pyramid), nor are they an introductory paragraph (like an academic paper).

Lucas Sullivan of The Dispatch shared one of the best tips he received about lede writing: "If you were talking about a story like a game you just watched, whatever is the first thing you would tell your friend, spouse, partner, that is your lede."

"Find what excites you most about the story and tell that," Sullivan said. "I'll do that if I don't know how to find my way into a story. I'll be like what is the thing that excited me the most. I will write that and then I'll finish the rest of the feature around it."

The goal of the feature lede is to pique the reader's interest, grab their attention, introduce the characters and set the article's direction.

Part of setting that direction is to ensure that the lede takes us toward the nut graph of the story.

Let's consider this lede from Wired Feature:

Marathon swimmer Mike Spalding was 10 hours into an epic 33-mile voyage between Maui and the Big Island when his escort boat lost sight of him. Being the middle of the night and all, the captain was forced to fire up his lights to reestablish contact with the kayaker at Spalding's side. This, ironically enough, is the absolute last resort when you get lost swimming in the darkness. With the kayak's light now blazing as well, the creatures of the nighttime sea began to take notice. Squid amassed around Spalding as he slogged on, forming a slowly moving bait ball. He took a hit from one, and then another and another. After the fourth bump, Spalding felt a sharp pain in his chest.

It was the first bite, albeit just a nibble. The 62-year-old (that's not a typo) Spalding broke for the kayak.

“As I was eggbeatering to get into the kayak with my legs perpendicular to the surface of the water, I felt this sharp hit on my leg,” he told WIRED. “It wasn’t painful, but it was like you got punched or something. And so I ran my fingers down my calf and I felt this hole.

“It’s a big-ass hole.”

And see how it takes us to this nut graph:

Spalding had earned the dubious title of first living human confirmed to have been attacked by a cookiecutter shark, which gored a 3-inch-wide crater in his leg. At no more than two feet long, this diminutive terror nevertheless packs a set of teeth that are bigger than any other shark relative to body size, according to George Burgess, an ichthyologist and director of the Florida Program for Shark Research at the Florida Museum of Natural History. It’s a glow-in-the-dark evolutionary marvel of the open ocean that takes on beasts hundreds of times its size, including submarines. And it almost always wins.

You have no doubt after reading the lede that the story is taking us in the direction revealed in the nut graph. The story told in the lede shows us clearly where we are heading and how we will get there.

Michael Farber of Sports Illustrated said he started his career with scene ledes — “Here they are in the dressing room or having dinner” — but as he became more comfortable in the work environment, he realized that sometimes features “start where they start.”

“I did a piece on Erik Karlsson in 2016, and the piece starts with how the NHL deals with injury and the secrecy around the injury,” he recalled. “It leads to Karlsson not saying exactly what was wrong with him. It just starts where it starts. A scene lede may not the best place but it’s rarely a bad place to start.”

Listen for the ding

Listening is a key part of interviewing, and one reason for that is to hear the lede and conclusion when they present themselves.

I feel like a virtual bell goes off in my head when I hear my sources provide either the anecdote or quote that will be shaped into the bookend beginning and end of my articles. When I hear the bells, I know to mark those parts with an “L” for lede or “C” for the conclusion.

Conversely, if I don’t hear the dings in my head, I know I need to keep asking questions until I do.

It happened when I was interviewing Columbus (Ohio) Police Chief Kim Jacobs for a profile when I asked her about when she first thought about becoming a police officer. Notice this is a different question than “How did you become a police officer.” Turns out she was sitting with her family in a Pizza Hut when a police officer walked by and noticed how athletic she was (Jacobs was a college track star), and asked her point-blank, “Have you ever thought of becoming a police officer?”

As soon as I heard her say it, I knew I needed that anecdote for my lede.

Conversely, when I wrote about the rise of home births, I knew I wanted my lede to be what it was like for a woman having a birth at home, so I had to get as clear a description as a family feature would print.

In that case, I knew the anecdote I needed; I just needed to ask the questions that would pull it out.

After interviewing one couple, I had great material, but I still couldn’t see it, so I asked them to “walk me through it,” by visiting their bedroom and sharing the experience with them — after the fact.

Here is what we came up with:

The avocado-colored walls of Erin and Ben Johnson’s Clintonville bedroom provide a soothing backdrop for the couple’s queen-size bed. It rests on a fluffy white rug in front of a south-facing window bank. On a lazy summer afternoon, it appears the perfect spot for reading while sipping ice tea under the slowly circulating ceiling fan, or even drifting off for a nap before dinner.

But for Erin Johnson, it was the perfect place to have her baby.

Johnson was neither caught off guard by rapid labor nor trapped by a snowstorm. The birth of her son, August, went exactly as planned using the latest (controversial) trend to sweep the childbirth industry throughout the country and in Greater Columbus — a pre-arranged home birth.

A self-proclaimed homebody, Johnson never had been to a hospital and isn't particularly fond of doctors — two reasons that led her to consider giving birth in her house. It was a decision her husband, Ben, deputy director of communications at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, fully supported.

"It seemed like the most natural choice in all the research I did," she says. "I'm a personal trainer. My background is in science. The more I read about natural birth and how things happen, the more I realized unnecessary intervention in a hospital setting happens more than it needs to. But our bodies are capable of this. They have been doing it for thousands and thousands of years."

Johnson admits she hedged her bet. She continued to visit an obstetrician simultaneous to her meetings with midwives at CHOICE — the Center for Humane Options in Childbirth Experiences, an organization in Worthington that assists with many of Central Ohio's home births.

Whether to birth at home was a "game-time decision," she says. "Using the midwives was my first choice. But I also knew if something went wrong … I could get to the hospital and call the doctor and say, 'Hey, I'm here.' "

While most women pack a hospital bag around the 37th week of pregnancy that includes comfortable clothes, a toothbrush and family photos, the Johnsons instead prepared a birthing box they stored in the basement, which included super-absorbent Chux pads, sheets they didn't mind throwing away and a bowl to catch the placenta.

Erin awoke at 3:30 am on July 22, 2010, with her first contractions, although they were manageable enough for her to handle a few personal training clients that morning at Move Your Mind in Upper Arlington. By 11 am, things were serious enough to head home.

Her water broke at 1 pm while she was lying on her bed, and she labored alone in the shower until Ben and the midwives arrived about a half-hour later. They took one look at her, Ben recalls, and said, "It's time to set up!"
"It wasn't necessarily painful," Erin says. "I think they just heard the rise and fall of my moans."

By the time Ben had changed out of his work clothes and gathered the supplies, Erin was dried off and in full-blown labor.

August Dylan was born at 2:56 pm, weighing 10 pounds and measuring 21 inches.

Ledes to Avoid

Direct Address

What is it: Talks directly to the reader, using "you" and starting with a verb of command.

Example: You are walking down the street, trying to decide where to eat when suddenly the smell of fresh-baked bread catches your senses.

The problem: This is a lazy way to try and manufacture an anecdotal feel, but it is not an anecdote. There is also no guarantee that readers feel as you do, and it's a quick way to alienate them before the article has even begun.

Quote

What is it: You use a quote from a source, or even worse a Bartlett's famous quotation, to start the story.

Example: "The times they are a-changing," wrote Bob Dylan, and that is certainly the truth on High Street, just north of campus.

The problem: At best, this is cliché. At worst, you are using your best quotes before you have even pulled readers into the story. Besides, quotes are intended to support facts. You haven't presented any facts yet to support.

Question

What is it: Asks readers a question in the hopes of engaging them to find out the answer.

Example: What do a college freshman and a new puppy have in common?

The problem: Readers want answers, not questions. And you are either asking readers a question to which they know the answer (so they are already bored) or one for which they do not have the answer (so they feel stupid). Neither circumstance can benefit you as

the writer.

Finding the Lede

The anecdotes needed for your lede — and your body — come in your interviews, and that means you must ask questions that pull out the information you need.

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9.5: Crafting the Nut

"First, find out what your hero wants, then just follow him."
Ray Bradbury

While news structure uses the lede of the inverted pyramid to show readers the main focus of the story, features have a new way of presenting the fulcrum of an article —the central focus that tells readers, "This is what the story will be about."

We call it the nut graph.

It is the point of the story "in a nutshell" and its goal is to tell the reader what the story is about. It contains the who, what, when, where, why and how, as well as the feature or value — is it timely, tug at human interest, have proximity to the reader, etc. The nut tells us why this article is for these readers in this publication at this time. Admittedly, it is a lot of work for something that is usually (and often most effectively) a single paragraph, and that is why crafting it well is crucial to an article's success.

It is from the nut graph that the entire story gets its structure and shape, and the key elements represented in the nut graph should be in evidence throughout the body.

Conversely, if you have not set out a specific idea in your nut graph, it should not appear in the body. And if it does, you need to think about rewriting your nut graph.

"It's easy to overwrite the feature," Melissa Hoppert of the New York Times said. "You get caught up in the moment and use big, sweeping words. You have to rein yourself in. You don't want to be so simple that you can't put someone in the scene and story, but it's a balancing act. You can be so observant and write down everything but miss the conversation, and you can't be so caught up in the interview that you don't really see the experience. Listen to what they say but write down the scene and the colors. Make sure to ask enough to ask questions."

The style and structure of the nut graph are fairly simple:

- One paragraph of one or two sentences.
- It comes after the lede and the lede must take us toward the body.
- Contains the main facts: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Consider this story pitched to the Ohio State Alumni magazine about Dr. Brian Scansen, a vet at the Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center who is using human medical techniques to treat animals in a program called Interventional Medicine. The goal is to reduce invasive procedures and improve quality of life.

When I finally wrote the story, "Big Dog, New Tricks," here was the nut graph:

The patient in this surgery was Maxwell, a 5-year-old Bullmastiff, and he was just one of the numerous animals to benefit from the Interventional Medicine program at the Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center. Led by Dr. Brian Scansen, the program utilizes the latest techniques from human medicine to provide minimally invasive procedures for animal patients suffering medical issues that involve the heart, lungs, vascular and urologic systems, and cancer.

Notice how it provides the key facts:

- Who (Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center)
- What (offers interventional medicine)
- How (utilizes the latest techniques from human medicine on animals)
- Why (provide minimally invasive procedures)
- The when is implied as now
- The where is the same as the who.

One of the biggest challenges is crafting a lede that takes us to the nut graph.

Consider this example from a writing class.

The story idea was about why Chinese students often adopt American names when they come to study in the United States. The first draft of the article came in like this:

***Lede** : Wenxin Xia, was sitting in kindergarten beginning to learn English for the first time when her teacher randomly assigned her the name Sally.*

***Nut graph** : Many international students at Ohio State use English names while studying abroad in the United States. Xia, a fourth-year journalism major. . .*

Can you spot the challenge?

Sally got the name in a kindergarten class, not college. And we don't see her selecting her name; we see it being assigned.

On revision, we looked to focus on the facts we knew that would take us to the nut graph we sought.

Lede: *When Sally Xia first introduces herself, she is often greeted with a quizzical look.*

Xia, a native of China, knows her Americanized first name can throw others for a loop, but it is a whole lot easier to say than her real first name of Wenxin (pronounced wen-sheen).

Nut graph: *Xia is one of many Chinese students who have adopted European-style names while studying in the United States. Many say it makes communication with native-born classmates easier while they manage to maintain their Chinese culture.*

Xia, who was first dubbed Sally in her Chinese English language class in kindergarten, said the name has made her feel more accepted.

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9.6: Body Building

"The secret to being a writer is that you have to write. It's not enough to think about writing or to study literature or plan a future life as an author. You really have to lock yourself away, alone, and get to work."
Augusten Burroughs

If you have gathered enough information and have a strong enough nut graph, the body of the article is the easiest part to write, as the whole goal of your body is to prove the nut graph of the article to be true.

I wrote a story about Columbus, Ohio, school board member who had seven unsuccessful attempts to join the city school board, and was finally elected through the ineptitude of other candidates (they failed to get enough signatures). He was a high school dropout who wore Hawaiian shirts, was missing most of his teeth and had a braided plait midway down his back (all of which I showed in the lede). The nut graph of the article was this:

Now two years later it would seem easy to dismiss Wiles as an accidental school board member who is only around until a more qualified candidate comes around during the next election. But a funny thing happened during his stint at the board table: The ultimate outsider is starting to earn some respect, aligning himself with Stephanie Groce, the board's strongest critic of the district administration. And with Groce not seeking reelection this November, Wiles most likely will take over as the public voice of dissent on the board.

The responsibility of the body became to show the reader Wiles' personal path to get where he is today. It must truly address three main questions:

1. What is happening now?
2. How did we get where we are?
3. What will happen next?

For this story, some key areas tracked by the body include:

1. How Wiles ended up a dropout and yet got immersed in public education.
2. Showing what exactly makes him such an outsider.
3. Showing the efforts he has taken to get on the board.
4. Showing what has he done now that he is on the board.
5. Describing where he expects to go next.

To support the nut graph, the body must begin where the story begins, and the direction and content depend on the goals of the story.

For a profile, we start where the subject story begins, and where his or her experiences begin to support the nut graph.

For a general interest piece or coverage of an event, we make sure the reader knows where the story begins by providing some historical perspective and then let the sources take us through the experience with their anecdotes.

"There can be an inclination to when you don't have a lot of experience with it to throw everything into the story," Misti Crane of Ohio State research said. "When I became a more careful feature writer, I realized I needed to identify the kind of details that were important and that brought meaning to the story and to leave the rest in my notebook. If you are trying to paint a picture of the ocean, you don't also put the forest in just because you know what the forest looks like."

When crafting the body, remember that the broad borders of the feature writing hourglass give you the latitude to explore all facets of the story and incorporate tons of sources, examples and anecdotes.

But everything they say has to somehow be reflected in the single nut graph paragraph.

Show Don't Tell

The three words for a feature writer to live by are "Show, Don't Tell."

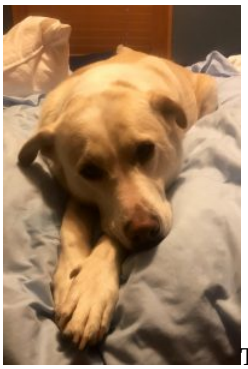
You can tell the reader the weather is "hot," but they will fill in what that means from their own experience unless you show them exactly what you mean.

Adjectives, or “telling,” are a sign of lazy writing.

Instead, describe sensations, emotions and scenes so we can see it for ourselves.

“I think about the way documentaries describe things, the way books describe things,” Mitch Hooper of (614) Magazine said. “That’s kind of what we want to be doing it, too.

“If you are in a room and the walls are white, we can say that, but what kind of white? What does it feel like? What impact do the white walls have?”

**Tanner Kraft**

Imagine you are describing a dog to someone who does not have sight. If I said he has was a tan Lab mix with four legs and a fluffy tail, with brown eyes, floppy ears and chubby cheeks, do you think they would know exactly what he looks like?

Is he fat or thin? What is fat or thin exactly?

Is he tan like khaki? All one color?

Does his tail curl or go straight out?

Are his eyes brown like chocolate milk or semisweet chips, or like a mahogany desk?

Show, don’t tell.

Is this the dog you saw? I hope so; it’s my puppy, Tanner!

Transition

If the nut graph is the “so what” part of your article, telling readers what the piece is about, transitions tell them how to navigate from one idea to the next in a logical and flowing way.

Without them, your article is choppy and disjointed, and feels like there are just a bunch of facts or anecdotes plopped on top of each other.

Good article organization has to show the relationships constructed between the parts.

Some often-used transition words include “first,” “however,” “furthermore” while repeating words and phrases is also an effective way to link and transition:

Let’s check out this article written for Columbus CEO:

“Natalie always keeps the business and the business goals in mind, and makes sure it’s something practical people can walk away from and use. … She makes it work in terms of results.”

Crede, a Chicago native, learned practicality while studying human relations at St. Petersburg College in Florida, where she took a job as a personnel clerk for a small company selling products over the radio. That business, the Home Shopping Network, quickly exploded, and Crede spent the next decade keeping up with its expanding needs.

See how using the root word, “practical” from the quote ties it to the next paragraph?

Esquire excerpted Mark Herzlich’s book, What It Takes: Fighting For My Life and My Love of the Game, in its June 9 issue, and included these paragraphs:

Four doctors in white lab coats came into the small exam room. I didn't know what was happening, but I knew four doctors couldn't be good. One of them took two MRI results and jammed them in the top of the lightbox, then turned it on. Images of the two longest bones in my body — my left femur, or thighbone, and my right femur — were lit up. But the two bones looked completely different. It was as if they came from different bodies or even different species. I knew that couldn't be good, either.

The doctor got right to it. He explained that I almost certainly had an extremely rare disease that affects fewer than two out of every million people in the world. Only two hundred and fifty or so cases of the disease are reported each year. Depending on further tests, my chances of surviving the disease could be as low as ten percent.

You can see how the use of similar words tie us to the ideas that come first and next.

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9.7: Writing to the End

"If you want to change the world, pick up your pen and write."
Martin Luther

For most writers, the ending is easy.

News writers end an inverted pyramid story when they run out of information.

Academic writers end their articles with a conclusion that wraps up the main focus of the piece.

For feature writers, the ending is anything but easy, as some would argue it is the most important part of the piece.

"The ending is your final chance to nail the point of the story to the readers so it will echo there for years," writer Bruce DaSilva wrote in "Telling True Stories: A nonfiction writer's guide from the Nieman Foundation."

Simplistically, the ending signifies to the reader that the story is done. But more than that, it needs to let the reader feel fulfilled like they have completed a journey with you, and they sigh with satisfaction.

It needs to leave the reader with something that resonates and clings to the edge of their mind after the page has been turned, and that can be a tie back to the lede, a reflective moment or a twisting surprise.

Many of the best endings tie back to something reflected in the lede, like this example from Esquire on Jon Stewart:

***Lede** : They gather under the tall Jon Stewart. They gather under the Jon Stewart who takes up the whole side of a building on Eleventh Avenue in Manhattan and is about three stories high. They gather under the Jon Stewart who has his hands clasped, his chin lifted, his eyes narrowed, his lips drawn in a tight line. They gather under the Jon Stewart who is professionally skeptical and won't take any bullshit. They gather under the Jon Stewart who is imitating a self-serious news anchor and who, while imitating a self-serious news anchor, has this message: "For Larry Flynt's Hustler Club, go one block down and take a right." They gather under the Jon Stewart who is funny and who, with his dark backswept hair set off by graying temples, is a few years younger than the Jon Stewart of today.*

Conclusion: *Jon Stewart has made a career of avoiding "Whooo" humor. He has flattered the prejudices of his audience, but he has always been funny, and he has always made them laugh. At the Juan Williams taping, however, at least half of Stewart's jokes elicited the sound of Whooo! instead of the sound of laughter. He's been able to concentrate his comedy into a kind of shorthand — a pause, or a raised eyebrow, is often all that is necessary now — but a stranger not cued to laugh could be forgiven for not laughing, indeed for thinking that what was going on in front of him was not comedy at all but rather high-toned journalism with a sense of humor. Which might be how Jon Stewart wants it by now. But outside the building, there's still a giant version of him standing with clasped hands, and he looks ready to take the piss out of anyone, including the gray-haired man inside, talking seriously to a Fox News analyst about starting a network something like Fox, without the laughs.*

The ending of your article, much like the lede, often reveals itself in the course of your interviewing. For the lede you are listening to moments a source shares that can best pull your readers into the nut graph, but with the conclusion, you want the moment that the story comes to a resolution or a lesson is learned, or experience is completed.

The goal, however, is not to wrap the story up in the conventional sense. We need the reader to feel like they have come full circle like you have finished telling a story over a cup of coffee, and at the end, they set that mug down, sit back in their chair and go, "Wow."

A popular and often effective ending device is to use a quote from one of your most significant sources. It means giving a source the last word, which some writers don't support.

Sometimes, however, they say it best, like this article, "Art of the Steal: On the Trail of World's Most Ingenious Thief (Wired)"

Conclusion: *The judge had a similar thought during Blanchard's plea hearing. The banks "should hire him and pay him a million dollars a year," he said. And right before sentencing, the judge turned directly to Blanchard.*

"I think that you have a great future ahead of you if you wish to pursue an honest style of life," he said. "Although I'm not prepared to sign a letter of reference."

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9.8: The Touch Test

"If I waited for perfection, I would never write a word."
Margaret Atwood

As we have mentioned, the nut graph is the touchstone for every other paragraph in the body. If you have a strong nut graph that is supported by the body, you will find evidence of that nut in every single paragraph you read in the article.

To test this theory, close your eyes and stick out your index finger.

Now put it down on a random paragraph in your article. Do you see evidence of the nut graph? Do it a few more times. Still seeing the nut graph?

If you see evidence of the nut everywhere you touch, great! You have a strong nut graph and body.

If you see it in most places but not all, you may need to edit, refine or delete those paragraphs.

If you rarely find it but all your paragraphs seem tied to each other, you may need to change the nut graph.

If your paragraphs are not connected and you can't find your nut graph, it's time to take a long, hard look at your article.

Alumni Example

Here is a story from the Ohio State Alumni Magazine about the Security and Intelligence major offered through the Department of International Studies. They were revisiting the major, established in 2015, because of the renewed look at national security after the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013.

Here is the lede and nut graph:

Lede: *In the months after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, thousands of Americans sought to heal themselves and serve their wounded nation by joining the military and intelligence branches that protect the home shores.*

At Ohio State, one such seed of patriotism grew, by 2005, into the Security and Intelligence major offered through the Department of International Studies. Its goal: to create and educate the next generation of security-minded citizens within the framework of a liberal arts education.

Nut graph: *Eight years later, America is once again bruised from violence at the Boston Marathon — but it is far from broken. And the Security and Intelligence major is still going strong, with expanding offerings to confront the ever-changing ways our national and individual security may be compromised.*

The major concepts in the nut graph relate to:

1. America being impacted by terrorism
2. The major itself
3. Why it's offered and what students might gain from it.

Here are the remaining 12 paragraphs from the body. Do they all relate back to those ideas? Try the finger test.

1. *"After 9/11, it became apparent there was a demand among students for this kind of course work — based on patriotism — to help the country and to get a job," said International Studies Director Anthony Mughan. "The challenge was creating a major that had high academic integrity and at the same time stronger vocational content than a lot of social science majors."*
2. *The program Mughan and his team developed focuses on understanding the components of terrorism, which he defined as "violence against citizens for political ends." Those components include recognizing threats to national security and how governments work to counter those threats.*
3. *The most noteworthy threat is a conventional war, Mughan said, adding that course work includes much about war's history, economics and intelligence. Other topics provide an ever more comprehensive view of world security, including bioterrorism, organized crime, food security, cybersecurity, transportation, and even the basic concepts of job and personal security.*
4. *"Security means many different things to different people," Mughan, a Liverpool native, said. "Yes, there is terrorism, but immigration is also a matter of security. How about water security? The Middle East is all about water."*
5. *"We are not just protecting ourselves from guns and terrorists. We focus on security in an increasingly insecure world."*

6. *Senior lecturer Jeffrey Lewis, Ph.D., who helped establish the major, said at least 10 percent of the students have some connection to the military, as a veteran, reservist or member of ROTC, and the vast majority of students in the major view it as a means to a career.*
7. *That co-mingling of the military-minded and "regular undergraduates" help both sides see the issues clearer, said Lewis.*
8. *"Terrorism by nature is prone to exaggeration and hysteria," said Lewis, who last year published the book "The Business of Martyrdom: A History of Suicide Bombing." "It is a public service to educate students, so people who are working in the field approach it in a disciplined and informed manner."*
9. *Mughan said one of the most appealing aspects of the major is its interdisciplinary structure, with programs like Communication, Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, History, Earth Sciences and Geography all contributing courses. The specific selections make it more vocationally focused, making the sum greater than its parts when it comes to a post-graduate job search, Mughan said.*
10. *To even better serve that search, the major in 2012 began mandating a language minor, including French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Somali, Spanish or Swahili, with "critical" languages like Arabic, Chinese and Farsi strongly encouraged.*
11. *Mughan said he hopes to offer a professional master's degree in Security and Intelligence within the next three years, but his more immediate goal is to improve the curriculum so it continues to produce the next generation of security experts to serve a frightening, but ever-growing, need.*
12. *"Americans think everyone wants to be American," Mughan said. "That is part of the myth of the Great Society. But we are now seeing foreign-born [people] perpetrate terrorist acts on American soil. That is a new reality that runs counter to deeply held cultural myths. We have to be ready for that."*

Use the hourglass as a guide to ensure your anecdotal lede gets you to the nut graph and your body flows exclusively from that nut graph, before coming to rest.

Details, Details

It's the details that make the story. The detail illuminates the subject. They are what tells you something. Whether it's a physical description or a place, then the details show what makes it worthwhile. It advances the characterization.

Think about if it's quirky enough that it's worth noting. Is it significant that Mr. Jones is wearing a red tie? Probably not unless he is trying to dress like Donald Trump. In that case, the tie hanging below the belt might be more significant.

Consider if you are illuminating your subject or are you just cluttering up your. Students need to self-edit. Take a machete to it. You do not want to slow the reader down.

One trick is dialogue. Try writing the back and forth between subjects — people like it. Showing the way they speak is the way to change the pace of the story.

Open your eyes.

Everybody has one great story they tell at a party. There is one cool thing that has happened to everybody. Make sure your eyes are open and thinking about what people can tell you. Being observant will help you see stories others may not.

"Tim Layden did a piece on the 40th anniversary of a football team and they had a player who kicked a 28-yard winning field goal," Michael Farber of Sports Illustrated said. "I called him up and asked was it a straight-on or soccer-style kick. This was in the 1970s, so it got me thinking: Who was the last straight-on kicker who made his mark mostly in the NFL. One sentence got me thinking about things. What makes you curious? What do you want to know more about?"

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9.9: Spotlight on- Ted Conover

Journalism education teaches a formal way of learning things, which when it comes to living people, involves the interview, hopefully in person.

A formal Q&A is really important for lots of kinds of journalism. For other kinds, you can get somewhere by thinking of this encounter, not as a news-gathering expedition but a personal experience — something you are going to appreciate at multiple levels.

It's not just asking questions and writing down the answer. It's making yourself fully present.

This is immersion writing.

In an interview, you can notice a football player seems stiff or tired. You can notice a fast-food worker is wary. But putting yourself in the article as a participant or as using a fly-on-the-wall perspective can bring writing to life in a way that makes the reader feel and live the experience with you.

**Ted Conover**

Ted Conover is one of the world's best-know participatory journalist and has written books on riding the rails as a "hobo" in "Rolling Nowhere" (1984), living and working among Mexican migrants in "Coyotes" (1987), chronicling Aspen's celebrity culture as a local cab driver and reporter at the Aspen Times in "Whiteout" (1991), and documenting what it's like to be a guard at Sing Sing prison in "Newjack"(2000).

In his book, Immersion: A Writer's Guide to Going Deep, he talks about gaining access, turning the experience into a story, undercover reporting, and the ethical issues around this type of long-form nonfiction.

Nicole Kraft sat down with Conover, a legend in immersive writing experience to get his take on the practice and how journalism students can make it part of their writing repertoire.

***

My idea with immersion writing is to try and move beyond the formal roles of being either a questioner or an answerer. Get into a place where you are getting to know somebody.

Ask "Can we go back to X," and this time I'm going to go back to what they are telling me. It takes more time.

To get to know somebody is a different thing than asking them questions. The product also can be different. If you are simply asking questions, you are preparing for a news story. Having a conversation, paying attention to the room, and opening up all your senses. Now you are preparing to write a feature.

More and more features are first-person. Describing a place or a situation, sharing with a person you are writing about. Be with a policewoman at the doughnut shop on her five-minute break. That scene is interesting to write about. It's more than a quote. Be with a person at a moment of their life. It's a more nuanced and humankind of reporting than classical just-the-facts interviewing.

Trying to make a connection with someone, capturing them in higher definition. There is more to people than the fact that they are a quarterback, or a record holder, or a felon.

I got involved in immersion because I wanted to write about the experiences I've had — whether it be crossing the country on my bicycle or working in a factory in Spain. I liked writing and I liked the idea that some of those skills could be used to write about

my own experiences. Historically, our own experiences have not qualified as journalism. They have been memoirs or personal essays. In articles and books I've written, I thought about how I could use my personal experience as journalism. If I could only find an experience that matters as news.

So I got a job as a corrections officer at Sing Sing. Prisons were in the news and they were hard to learn about from the perspective of a staff member."

Quotes

A good exercise in capturing dialogue is to record some of it and transcribe that and see what it looks like on the page. Often it does not resemble the kind we read in fiction or nonfiction books. With all speech, we tend to clean it up even when we are reporting it. In a press conference, a police chief will be saying something ungrammatical and we fix it. This is not always a literal exercise.

There are decisions that have to be made when you are putting speech on the page.

The journalistic standard is, if I have a quotation in an article, I can also find it in my notes or playback part of the recording. If I am rendering a conversation between me and a prisoner, as part of my work on the job, I may not be able to take notes about it.

That said, 95 percent of what a conversation might be is not something you want to take notes on anyway. It's mundane, normal or boring. Taking notes in that situation, depending on what was being discussed, may not be useful.

If I thought there was something, I'd record the quote in my mind. Then I'd get out of sight as quickly as possible to write it down. Often exchanges were very brief, so I could do that.

I was in the visiting room at Sing Sing, and I remember being moved by the sight of tough prisoners who tried to scare me all day being hugged by little kids and kissed by their wives, being revealed to be a different person.

I said to a guard with me, "Doesn't it get to you seeing guys with their families." And he said, "It's a regular hallmark card." I liked that because it was funny. He's not sentimental. He was saving that for somebody else.

It was super easy to remember — "It's a regular hallmark card." If you work at it you can remember longer things. Be absolutely the best recorder you can be.

Journalism is changing fast. Be open to the possibilities. There are situations where immersion can be about getting out of your comfort zone.

A lot of students are not very confident in talking with strangers. This is a whole profession around talking to strangers. You have to be willing to ask a question of someone you don't know and act like you have every right to ask a question and you deserve the answer.

Act like it's the most natural thing. People are looking for cues when a stranger approaches. If you are confident and expect answers, it increases the chance you will get one. Walk into a room with your tail wagging.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Revising and Being Read

10.1: To See Again
10.2: Editors
10.3: Time for Tips

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10.1: To See Again

"When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be.
Stephen King

In French, "revision" means to see again, and that is exactly what we hope to do with every article after it has been completed, but before it has been submitted to an editor.

We aim to take a fresh, critical perspective on the piece — to tighten it, reorganize, fill in weak spots and catch anything that might be missing.

This is editing, as opposed to proofreading, although we will be going over word by word, line by line, to make sure we have spelled everything correctly — especially names, titles, proper nouns, etc.

This might be even more challenging than your original writing, because everything you have written is some precious little gem to you, your baby. But as Stephen King wrote in "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft," "Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings."

When and how to revise is personal to each writer, and the process may change over time and with more experiences.


Jason Schreier

Gaming journalist Jason Schreier said he likes to edit as he goes, polishing his material on the page as he goes, instead of just first getting a full draft done, but he admits it may not work for everyone.

"I think people should just do what works best for them because some people can just get fixated on a single sentence and that can be a really bad technique if you are one of those types of people," he said.

Melissa Hoppert acknowledges she is one of those people. When she started in journalism, Hoppert was a copy editor, which prompted her to tweak her writing as she went with a copy editor's eye.

As she got more comfortable writing, she worked longer and longer before starting to revise.

"I try to get about a third of the way through before I start editing," she said. "Or when I get stuck, I reread and tweak it, and keep going. I basically edit in thirds and at the end, I reread it one more time and then I revise."

Many writers believe revision requires a "cooling off" period, which means my students' common practice of writing up until the moment something is due is rarely the best approach. Instead, give yourself an artificial deadline so you can put it aside and come back with fresh eyes.

"In a daily newspaper situation that break may be again is just get up and go walk around the building or go grab a cup of coffee or whatever," Misti Crane said. "Then come back, print it out and review it. I know that that seems sort of old-fashioned but there is something about printing out what you have written and taking a pen and making notes as you go through, rather than getting sucked back into rewriting while you are at your desk with the computer, that I have found beneficial."

Among the changes Crane is looking to make — cutting, cutting and more cutting. That includes cutting out words that do not contribute to the real meaning of the story and entire paragraphs that may seem redundant or unnecessary.

“It may mean getting rid of some things you really enjoyed experiencing, but you have to be in the service of your reader rather than in the service of yourself as a writer,” she said.

Some questions to ask amid the macro view of revision:

- Are you pulled in by the lede?
- Can you find the nut graph?
- Does the nut graph hold up in the body?
- Is your article balanced?
- Do you smoothly transition throughout the body?
- Do you have enough sources? Too many?
- Are the quotes advancing the story or should you paraphrase more?
- Are you showing or telling?
- Is your conclusion ending with a sigh or is it just flopping?
- How is your sentence variety? Is it keeping readers engaged or lulling them to sleep?

In this exercise, you truly are the article’s first reader, so notice if there are spots you skip over, or you simply want to stop reading. If you are bored, the reader will be, too.

Look for places you are stumbling or it’s confusing. It helps often to read out loud since you won’t be able to skip over any words or phrases like you can with silent reading. If it does not sound right to your ear, that’s an area to mark for rewriting.

“Some of the worst moments are when you have a brilliant quote, but you just can’t fit it into the story and you cut it out,” Alison Lukan of The Athletic said. “Or you have a brilliant little piece but it really adds nothing to the story.

Zack Meisel of The Athletic admits that as a younger writer he was “over-the-top wordy.” He later realized that to serve the reader he needed to put down the thesaurus and write what feels natural.

“It’s such a turn-off to have these big words that nobody knows what they mean or just unnecessary or too much describing and you’re not actually getting to the root of what’s happening,” he said. “I think you just learn over time, you just want to avoid that because it’s secondary to what you’re actually writing about.

“Your writing is supposed to make the story easier to read, it’s supposed to make the story come to life but it’s not supposed to overshadow a story. What is most important is still what you’re actually writing about, not the words necessarily that you’re using to describe what happened.”

Mitch Hooper of (614) Magazine said he is helped in revision by reminding himself that his article does not actually represent him, but instead represents the subject.

“At a certain point, the story is not about you even though you were a part of the process of putting the story together,” he said. “You have to understand who your story is for; it’s not for you it’s for the audience, it’s for the subjects, it’s for the people involved in this stuff. You have to turn off how much you love your own stories. You have to fall on your own sword, you’re not perfect.”

In the micro view, start looking at your grammar and word choices.

- Are you ending sentences with prepositions?
- Is your style consistent throughout?
- Are you using enough clichés to sink a battleship?
- Are you overusing adjectives and adverbs?
- Are you properly using the language relevant to this publication or audience?
- How are your tenses and agreements with pronouns?
- Are you using proper punctuation (and avoiding exclamation points!)?

Read Aloud Time with Lucas Sullivan

“I am sure we all look foolish those of us who do this, but I read my articles out loud because when you force yourself to read it out loud you realize shortcuts your brain was making as well as actual punctuation.”

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10.2: Editors

“Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write ‘very;’ your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”
Mark Twain

When I started writing I remember thinking that getting limited or no feedback from my editor was the goal, but I later realized writing growth comes in the reverse. It’s a theme common among the most successful writers.

“When you first start you think you know everything,” Hoppert agreed. “I definitely have changed in that way. You have to trust in your editor and that they know what they are doing. Their job is to be the reader and read as a reader would read it, and to make it easier for the reader. You can’t sweat the small stuff. Put the piece in and let it go. After I file the story, I walk away from it. It belongs to the editor now.”

Seeking and getting feedback on your writing even before the deadline from those who see and massage a lot of copy can help with the writing process as well as the end result.

“You can’t take it personally, even though it feels like it,” Lukan said. “If there are substantial rewrites, take that as an opportunity to learn what you could have done differently. Maybe you don’t change anything next time and you think your editor is full of crap, but just taking the time to learn their perspective will only make your writing better in the future.”

Abby Vesoulis went straight from working for the Ohio State Lantern to an internship at Time magazine and parlayed that into a full-time job. She recognizes how significant Time editors have been to her growth as a writer.

“I’m really lucky where I have editors who like that you come to the table with 1,000-2,000 words more than you need because then they can help you decide what’s important and what’s not important,” Vesoulis said. “I always make suggested cuts but a lot of times they say ‘No I think we should keep this, let’s cut this other part.’”

Adam Jardy recalled that editor involvement in the early revision process for an extensive story on college football recruiting helped him see the story in a light often dimmed by his proximity to the story.

“When you become the expert on a specific topic, you can get a little too focused on the forest for the trees,” he said. “ It helps sometimes to just have another set of eyes on it. It also helps sometimes to write and then come back to it a few hours later and give yourself a chance to just distance yourself from it for a little bit. You go back and maybe you thought you were really clever with this paragraph and then you back and you’re like, ‘Man, I sound like an idiot.’ Those things happen frequently so as long as you have the time, doing things like that can be really beneficial.”

That does not mean, however, that it’s always a positive experience to have work cut or changed, and discussing changes with an editor; even advocating to reverse cuts you strongly oppose can be a good exercise. The key is to make a strong and logical argument that comes from the perspective of the reader, not the writer. And be sure to pick your fights well.

Hoppert recalled profiling the owners of 2014 Kentucky Derby winner California Chrome, the first horse they had ever bred and raced. The couple was racing outsiders and the wife told Hoppert she had obtained her Derby outfit not at a boutique but rather at a Cracker Barrel.

“It was the perfect juxtaposition that they were not Kentucky bluebloods,” she said. “If they would have edited out the Cracker Barrel, I’d have been upset and I would have fought for it. If I argue over every word change or comma placement I am not going to make any friends. Then you can’t argue the big stuff.”

Here is an example of how a revision schedule worked in a package I wrote of eight mini-features, coming in at about 5,000 words.

1. Wrote all of the profiles and put them in a working folder.
2. Put them all away for a week.
3. On the seventh day, I opened the first one and reworked it, taking a macro view, until I was relatively satisfied.
4. Completed that same process with all of them over the next three days.
5. Reread all of them out loud and continued revising sticky areas.
6. Reread all of them and started on a micro view of checking the details.
7. Printed them out and went through them line by line to find any problems (punctuation, misspelling, capitalization).

8. Triple-checked every proper noun, every title, every company name and the spelling of every source name.
9. Turned them in a week before the deadline.

I am sure my editor will have questions and additional revision will take place based on her opinions and desires, but the goal here is to turn in the best, most complete and most accurate story you can.

“The biggest leap is going from nothing to something,” Steve Rushin of Sports Illustrated said. “Just write the damn thing. A second draft can make it better.”

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10.3: Time for Tips

"People say, 'What advice do you have for people who want to be writers?' I say, they don't really need advice, they know they want to be writers, and they're gonna do it. Those people who know that they really want to do this and are cut out for it, they know it."
R.L. Stine

Writers offer these quick tips for getting your feature career started.

Lucas Sullivan

"Whether you are training for a marathon or you want to be the best baseball player or whatever, you have to put in the time. You have to put in the effort, and if you don't, it will certainly come across in your writing. You will know when you sit down and write if you put in the time and the effort to write a good feature story. That is really the secret. The secret is really the time and the effort.

"Another secret is to have a different idea. Go away from the herd instead of following it and you can tell some really outstanding stories that way."

Mike Wagner

"No one becomes a good feature writer by being a good texter or emailer. This is basic as hell, but get your butt out and learn how to have face-to-face conversations, which is a lost art."

Misti Crane

"The secret in feature journalism writing is to be open and to be a sponge — to listen to more than you talk. The best things I have written have been because I just took in the experiences and really thought about them, and I didn't go in with an outline in my head and a goal in mind about the story I wanted to tell. Keeping an open mind and being curious is super important.

"It's so fun too. Keep an open mind and let the story take you where the story will take you. That will take you to where the story is more truthful and meaningful."

Abby Vesoulis

"There's a difference between being a reporter and a writer. When I write 500-word pieces in the inverted pyramid style of this one thing that just happened, I can say "Oh I reported this piece. I had all of the information handed to me because of some news event and then I just wrote it in an easily digestible fashion for people that want to know what that they think they just saw on CNN was." I consider that reporting.

"Writing I consider taking a nuanced problem that nobody really understands, and being the person who puts all of the information that is out there into a storylike format where readers can sit down with it for 30 minutes and digest it.

"To be a good writer, you have to read other good writers. You can kind of borrow from the format they took for features. That's not stealing someone's idea; that's just a format for a feature story. You can take more liberties with it after you have learned 100 times how to do it the way that it's meant to be done."

Zack Meisel

"You need to find your own voice, and that can be tough. That can take some time. The more you do it, the more comfortable you become with it. The big thing is knowing that with feature writing, it's kind of a blank canvas. There's no "This is how you're supposed to do it."

"The greatest part about it is you can let the story dictate kind of how you want to set things up. A lot of times, if I'm writing a story about someone who overcame some tragedy, you probably want to at least tease what the tragedy is in your opening section. Sometimes you get to the absolute, most dramatic moments of this person's life and you make that your lede, and then you pull back a little bit and give more background details and build back up to that point. That's one way. Or sometimes you just have a slow build to what the dramatic moment is.

"There really is no script you have to go by. What makes feature writing so rewarding is that you can choose what works best. That freedom is great."

Alison Lukan

“You have to challenge yourself to never get comfortable to everything that you have access to, because you have access that tons of people would kill for. What in your access are you not sharing with people and where is the story there and is there something you should share with your readers?”

Melissa Hoppert

“The key is to not just focus on what people are saying. Look at the scene around you. Take notes, write down what strikes you. What are the colors, noises, sounds, the feelings you are feeling? How do they react? How do they describe something? Does their face light up? Don’t worry about what they are saying. That’s why you have a recorder. Take in the scene. What is striking them and striking you?”

Steve Rushin

“Write what the people want to hear. When I wrote baseball, I had to think about what people would want to be reading five days from now. I remember when Joe Carter won the 1993 World Series with a walk-off home run. While everyone else was asking about that at-bat an hour later, I was watching as he removed his clothes and someone was putting everything into a mylar bag to take to Hall of Fame. I didn’t have the burden of writing that night so I could tell that story. It’s natural to want to write features and look for some angle on this famous person that has not been done to death.

“The only way to develop is to read as much as you can. Who wants to be a writer if not already a reader? Who wants to be a chef if you are not already around food?”

Michael Farber

“At some point, you have to let it go. Magazines, like life, have deadlines.”

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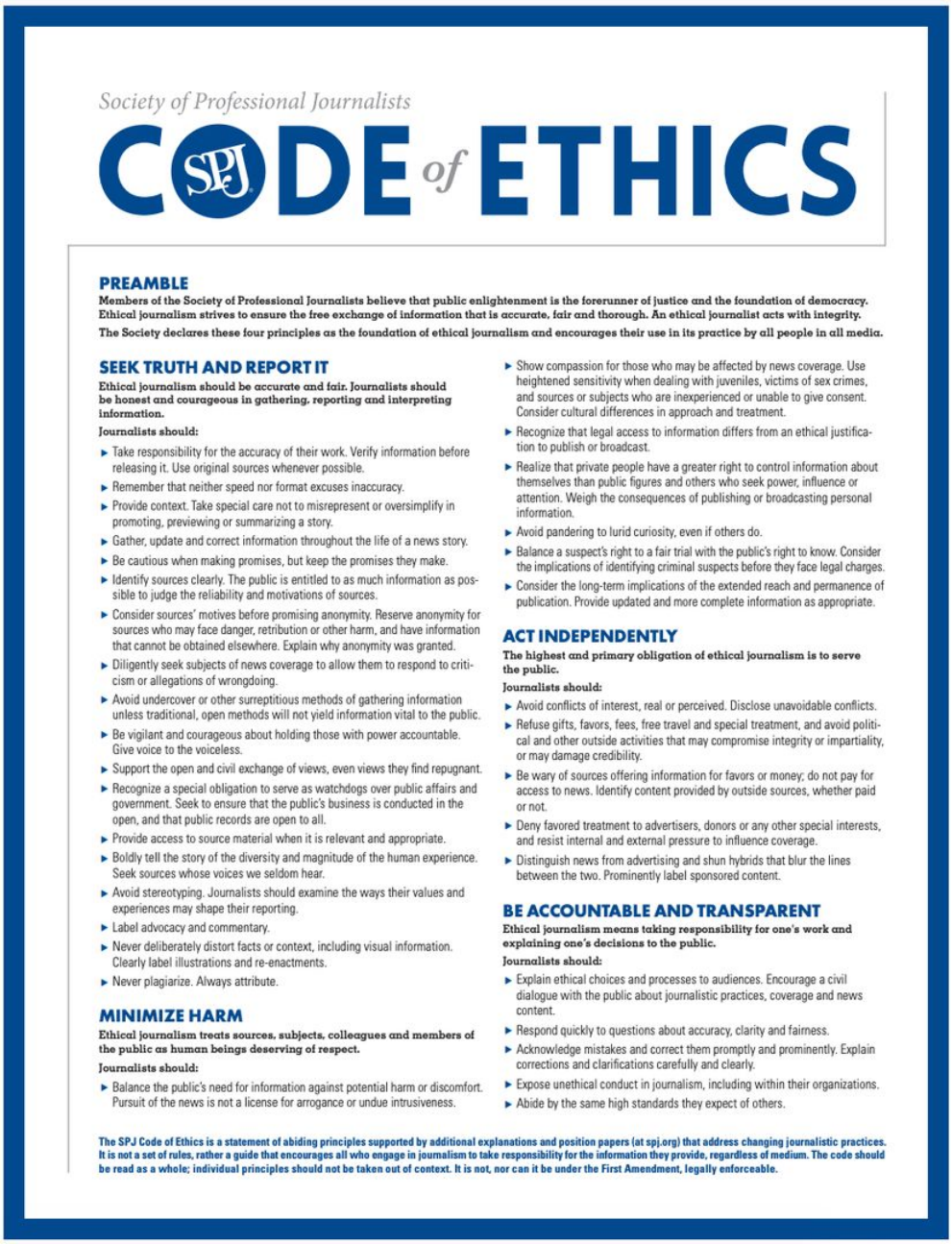
11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist

In this chapter, I draw from several writers to discuss how to think about, and use, ethical thinking as a journalist. To start the discussion of journalism ethics, watch this brief and excellent summary of core values in the field across the world:



Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics

Here in the United States, most journalists are taught the SPJ Code of Ethics, which consists of the following:



Society of Professional Journalists

CODE of ETHICS

PREAMBLE

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.

The Society declares these four principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media.

SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT

Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.
- Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.
- Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.
- Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.
- Be cautious when making promises, but keep the promises they make.
- Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.
- Consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.
- Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.
- Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.
- Provide access to source material when it is relevant and appropriate.
- Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.
- Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.
- Label advocacy and commentary.
- Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information. Clearly label illustrations and re-enactments.
- Never plagiarize. Always attribute.

MINIMIZE HARM

Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.
- Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.
- Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Weigh the consequences of publishing or broadcasting personal information.
- Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.
- Balance a suspect's right to a fair trial with the public's right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.
- Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news. Identify content provided by outside sources, whether paid or not.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content.

BE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

Journalists should:

- Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.
- Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.
- Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.
- Expose unethical conduct in journalism, including within their organizations.
- Abide by the same high standards they expect of others.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is a statement of abiding principles supported by additional explanations and position papers (at spj.org) that address changing journalistic practices. It is not a set of rules, rather a guide that encourages all who engage in journalism to take responsibility for the information they provide, regardless of medium. The code should be read as a whole; individual principles should not be taken out of context. It is not, nor can it be under the First Amendment, legally enforceable.

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11.1: How To Think About Ethics

Ethical thinking is not its most powerful in extreme cases of wrongdoing. The journalism industry decided long ago that plagiarizing from someone else's work is wrong. So is lying about a fact, or making up sources, to create a more sensational story. Though it might take willpower to avoid, wrongdoing does not demand arduous ethical thinking to know *not* do those things.

Ethical thinking is also not particularly helpful when it comes to acts of heroism — if a journalist knowingly risks her or his life to find the truth about something that benefits the world, that is great, but it does not mean all journalists who would *not* risk their lives are unethical. There is, however, an ethical issue that lurks nearby (as you will see below).

Ethics is more useful in the gray areas, when two or more ethically legitimate actions present themselves to a journalist, from which he or she must make a decision.

Examples of Ethical Dilemmas

I asked Google Gemini to give me a list of current, relevant ethical topics for journalists. After a few tries, it developed a pretty good list:

Journalists in 2025 face a range of ethical dilemmas that balance the public's right to know against individual safety, accuracy, and professional integrity.

- **Transparency in AI Usage:** Determining how to clearly label AI-generated content or visuals and deciding when AI automation compromises the human element of reporting.
- **Privacy vs. Public Interest:** Weighing an individual’s right to privacy against the public's need for information, particularly when handling personal data or reporting on private figures involved in news events.
- **Speed vs. Accuracy:** Navigating the pressure of a 24/7 digital news cycle to be "first" while ensuring that facts are thoroughly verified to prevent the spread of misinformation.
- **Protecting Vulnerable Sources:** Managing the risk of harm to whistleblowers, children, or victims of crimes, especially when their identity could lead to physical or digital retaliation.
- **Conflict of Interest with Personal Brands:** Evolving norms regarding journalists acting as "influencers" on social media and whether accepting brand deals or sponsored content undermines their editorial independence.
- **Navigating Political Pressure and Bias:** Maintaining impartiality while reporting in highly polarized environments or under government pressure to present specific narratives.
- **Reporting on Traumatic Events:** Determining how to cover tragedies or conflict zones with empathy for those affected without resorting to exploitative or sensationalist imagery.
- **Sensationalism and Clickbait:** Choosing between generating traffic through provocative headlines and providing nuanced, substantive journalism that may receive less engagement.
- **Self-Censorship for Safety:** Deciding whether to withhold certain truths or stories to avoid physical danger, doxxing, or legal intimidation from powerful entities.
- **Verification of User-Generated Content:** The ethical challenge of using photos or videos from social media without the explicit consent of the poster or thorough verification of the content's context.

How do you work through such issues? First off, it is important to understand the context around ethical journalism. Then it is important to examine your own intentions, actions and values. So let's dive in.

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11.2: News Media and Ethics

Learning Objectives

- Describe the role of media in delivering news to the public.
- Identify the important characteristics of reliable journalism.
- Summarize the effects of bias in news presentations.

Now more than ever, with the presence of online news sources, news delivery is expected to be instantaneous, and journalists and news agencies face pressure to release stories rapidly to keep up with competing media sources. With this added pressure, standards of accuracy and fairness become more difficult to uphold. What wins when ethical responsibility and bottom-line concerns are at odds? Columnist Ellen Goodman notes that there has always been a tension in journalism between being first and being right. She argues, "In today's amphetamine world of news junkies, speed trumps thoughtfulness too often."Ellen Goodman, "Temper 'Instant' News Coverage," *Gainesville (FL) Sun*, February 7, 1993, news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1320&dat=19930207&id=vt4RAAAAIBAJ&sjid=XuoDAAAAIBAJ&pg=5028,1856837. As you read the following sections, decide if you agree with Goodman's assessment of the state of the news media today.

Immediate News Delivery

In 1916, audiences across America tuned in to their radios to hear the first-ever breaking-news coverage of an event as the results of the presidential election between Woodrow Wilson and Charles Evans Hughes were announced from the offices of *The New York American*. Until that broadcast, news was delivered to American homes once per day in the form of a newspaper, and often this coverage lagged a day or more behind the actual incidents it reported. Whereas much of radio news coverage even into the 1930s involved the reading of newspaper stories and news wires on the air, radio offered something that the newspapers could not: live coverage of special events.Gordon Govier, "The Living Room Fixture," The Evolution of Radio News, 2007, http://www.radioscribe.com/formats.html.

For decades, the public turned to the family radio when they wanted to hear the most recent coverage of important news. All of that changed, however, in 1963 with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. CBS correspondent Dan Rather took television audiences live to "the corner window just below the top floor, where the assassin stuck out his 30 caliber rifle," and for the first time, people were able to see an event nearly as it occurred. This was the beginning of round-the-clock television news coverage, and the American public, while still relying on print news for detailed coverage, came to expect greater immediacy of major event reporting through television and radio broadcasts.Jaime Holguin, "Rather Recalls JFK Assassination," *CBS News*, February 28, 2005, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/02/28/eveningnews/main677096.shtml.

Today, with the widespread availability of Internet news, instant coverage is the norm rather than the exception, and the Internet and cell phones have generally replaced television and radio as the source of immediate information. Visitors to ABCNews.com can watch an evening newscast three and a half hours before it airs on television.Patricia Sullivan, "As the Internet Grows Up, the News Industry Is Forever Changed," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2006, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/13/AR2006061300929.html. RSS (which stands for *really simple syndication*, a standard for the easy syndication of online content) feeds, home pages for major news-delivery sites like Yahoo! News and CNN.com, news tickers, live video streams, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and a host of other media outlets ensure that news—and rumors of news—circulates within minutes of its occurrence. Additionally, with smartphone applications like those for *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, people can access the latest news coverage from almost anywhere.

The development of the Internet as a source of free and immediate access to information has forever changed the structure of the news media. Newspaper, television, and radio news programs have all had to adapt and diversify to compete for a share of the market. As Jeffrey Cole, director of the Center for Digital Communication put it, "For the first time in 60 years, newspapers are back in the breaking news business." Online, newspapers can compete with broadcast media for immediate coverage, posting articles on their home pages as soon as the stories are written, and supplementing the articles on their websites with audiovisual content. Gone is the era of single-medium newsrooms with predictable deadlines.USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, "Annual Internet Survey by Center for the Digital Future Finds Large Increases in Use of Online Newspapers," news release, Center for Digital Future, April 2009, http://annenberg.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/090429CDF.aspx.

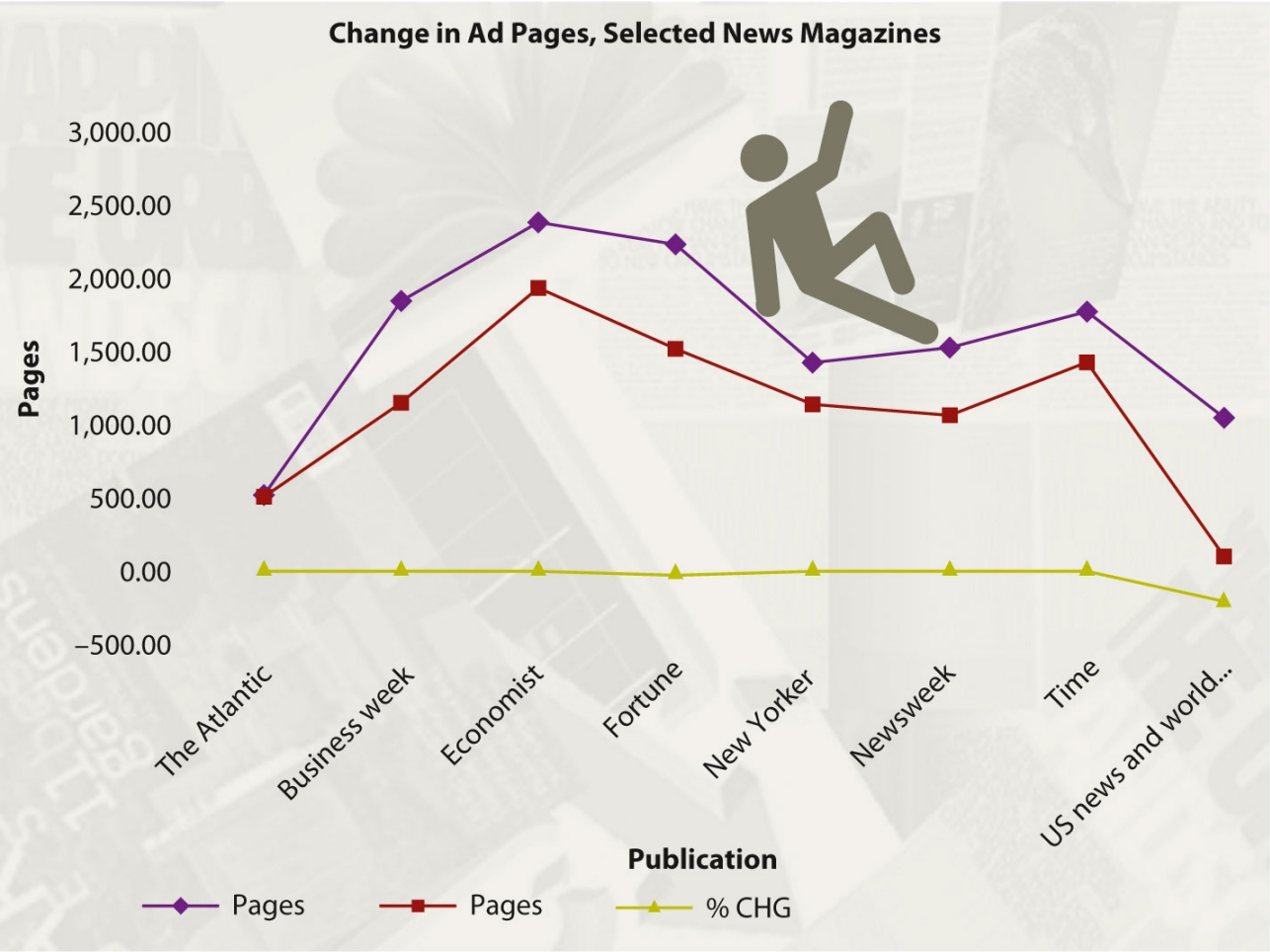
Not only are traditional news media restructuring, but news consumers are also changing the way they access information. Increasingly, audiences want news on demand; they want to get news when they want it, and they want to be able to gather it from a variety of sources. This is having a significant effect on media revenues. News aggregators, websites like Yahoo! News and Google News that compile news headlines from an array of legacy news organizations to display on their pages, have become popular information outlets. Although these websites don't hire reporters to produce news stories themselves, they get about the same amount of online traffic as websites for legacy news organizations like CNN and *The Wall Street Journal*. Moreover, many subscribers to print newspapers and magazines are canceling their subscriptions because they can get more current information online at no cost.Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media 2010*, www.stateofthemedia.org/2010/overview_intro.php. Print advertising is down as well. In 2004, *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported losing $50 million in classified advertising to free online options like Craigslist.Patricia Sullivan, "As the Internet Grows Up, the News Industry Is Forever Changed," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2006, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/13/AR2006061300929.html.

This loss of revenue has become a problem in recent years because while newspapers and magazines generate some income from advertisements on their websites, the money is not enough to compensate for lost readership and print ads. Subscriptions and advertising in traditional print media still account for 90 percent of industry funds, which means with less revenue in these areas, the support base for news organizations is dwindling. Newspapers and magazines across the country have had to restructure and scale down. Newspapers now spend $1.6 billion less annually on reporting and editing than they did 10 years ago.Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media 2010*.

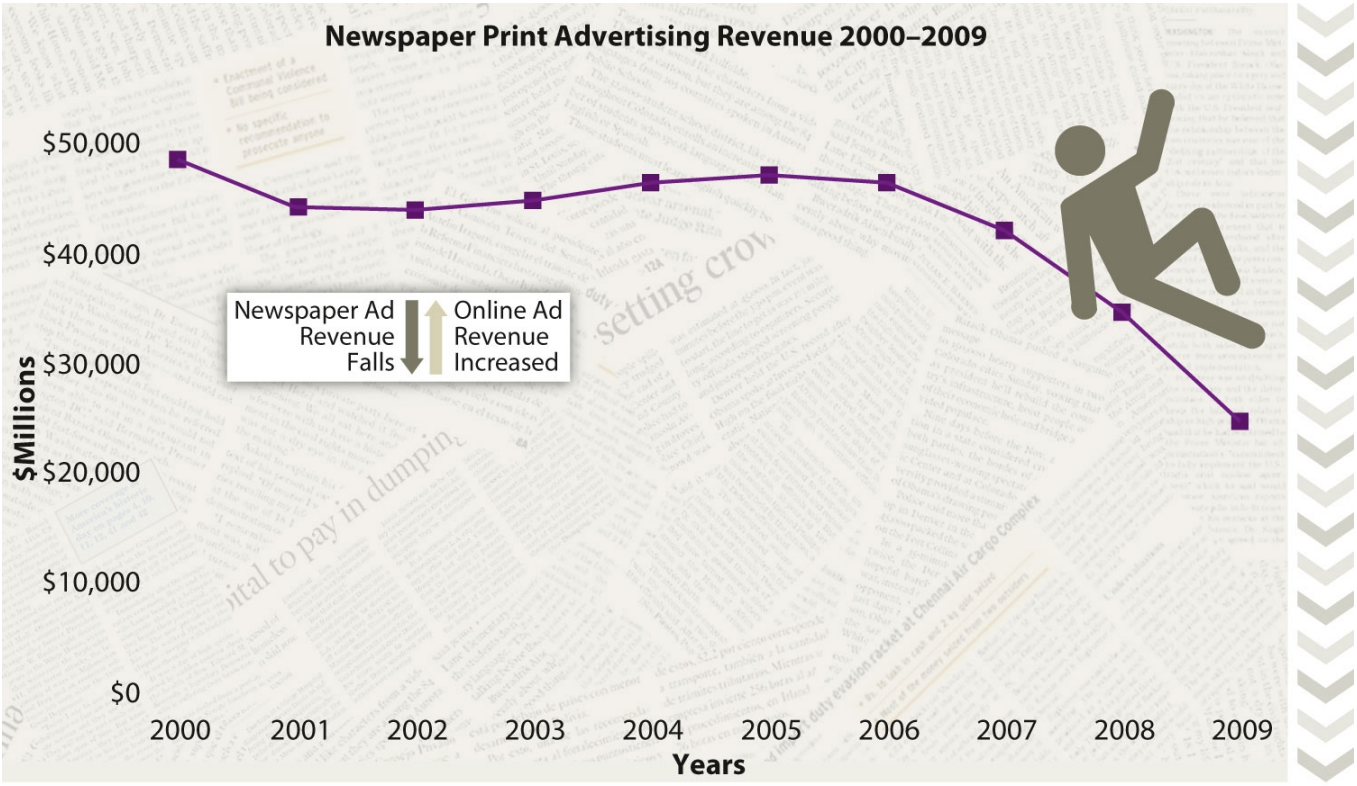
Additionally, reduced budgets combined with greater pressure for immediacy have changed the way information gets reported and disseminated. Newsrooms are asking their staffs to focus on producing first accounts more quickly to feed multiple platforms. This often means that more resources go into distributing information than gathering it. Once news is released online by one source, it spreads rapidly, and other organizations scramble to release accounts, too, in order to keep up, often leaving staff less time for fact-checking and editing. The initial story is then followed quickly by commentary from both professional news organizations and nonprofessional sources on blogs, Twitter, and other social networks.

As a result of this restructuring, certain stories may get distributed, replayed, and commented on almost excessively, while other stories go unnoticed and in-depth coverage that would unearth more facts and context gets neglected. This has led a number of industry professionals to become anxious over the future of the news industry. The Center for Excellence in Journalism has called the news industry today "more reactive than proactive."Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media 2010*. Journalist Patricia Sullivan complains, "Right now, almost no online news sites invest in original, in-depth and scrupulously edited news reporting."Patricia Sullivan, "As the Internet Grows Up, the News Industry Is Forever Changed," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2006, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/13/AR2006061300929.html. While some may disagree with Sullivan, in-depth journalism remains an expensive and time-consuming venture that many online news sites, faced with uncertain revenue streams and a growing consumer demand for real-time news updates, are reluctant to bankroll extensively.

Already strapped for funds, news organizations know they have to cater to public demands, and foremost among these demands is speed. When pop-music icon Michael Jackson died on June 26, 2009, at 2:26 p.m., news of his death hit cyberspace by 2:44 p.m. and soon spread nationwide via Twitter. Perhaps surprisingly, the initial report of Jackson's death was released by celebrity gossip website TMZ. Legacy news sources were slower to publish accounts. The *Los Angeles Times*, wary of the sourcing of the story, waited to confirm the news and didn't publish the story on its website until 3:15 p.m., by which time, thanks to the speed of social media, the star's death was already "old news."Scott Collins and Greg Braxton, "TV Misses Out as Gossip Website TMZ Reports Michael Jackson's Death First," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 2009, http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/26/local/me-jackson-media26.



Source: MPA, The Association of Magazine Media.



Source: Research Dept., Newspaper Association of America

Figure 14.4 American news organizations are losing their audiences to online media and have lost billions in advertising income.

Social Responsibility of News Media

In the preamble to its statement of purpose, the Committee of Concerned Journalists lists as the central purpose of journalism "to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society."Committee of Concerned Journalists, "Statement of Shared Purpose," Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, www.journalism.org/resources/principles. This theory of the social responsibility of the press is often referred to as the vital information premise. Though sometimes worded differently by different organizations, it is widely accepted in the journalism community as the foundation for any principles of media ethics.Jeremy Iggers, *Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and the Public Interest* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 46. What are those specific principles? Here are some that are particularly important for journalists in the current media climate.

Present News Stories That Inform and Serve the Needs of Citizens

If the basis for the principles of ethical news reporting is giving citizens the information they need to function in a democratic society, then that information must be presented accurately. Journalists should be careful to verify the facts before they report them. As the Committee of Concerned Journalists asserts, "Accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built—context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate," so reliable news sources are essential if citizens are to have a clear understanding of the society in which they live.Committee of Concerned Journalists, "Statement of Shared Purpose," Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, www.journalism.org/resources/principles. Furthermore, although news organizations have a professional responsibility toward advertisers and shareholders, their commitment is always to citizens first. This means that journalists must report the facts truthfully and without omission, even if they are not in the best interest of advertisers, shareholders, or friends.

Present Issues Fairly

Reporting issues fairly requires not only factual accuracy, but also lack of favoritism toward any organization, political group, ideology, or other agenda. The Society of Professional Journalists stipulates that journalists should refuse gifts and favors and avoid political involvement or public office if these things compromise journalistic integrity.Society of Professional Journalists, "SPJ Code of Ethics," http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp. Additionally, journalists should avoid inflating stories for sensation and be as

transparent as possible about their sources of information so that the public can investigate the issues further on their own.Committee of Concerned Journalists, “Statement of Shared Purpose,” Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, www.journalism.org/resources/principles.

All sides of an issue should be presented in a news story. Of course, all journalists have a perspective from which they write, but a clear distinction should be made between news reports and editorial content.American Society of News Editors, “ASNE’s Statement of Principles,” August 2009, asne.org/article_view/articleid/325/asnes-statement-of-principles.aspx.

Present Stories in a Way That Addresses Their Complexity

Many issues in the news are layered and highly complex. Developing a thorough understanding of issues requires dedication and a sometimes lengthy investigation, and, especially in a world where rapid reporting is the norm, there can be a temptation to gloss over the finer points of an issue for the sake of efficiency. Additionally, most consumers of news, increasingly busy and overwhelmed by the amount of information available, want stories that can be quickly digested and easily comprehended. However, as the Committee of Concerned Journalists points out, the media must balance what readers want with what they need but cannot anticipate.Committee of Concerned Journalists, “Statement of Shared Purpose,” Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, www.journalism.org/resources/principles. Oversimplifying issues, whether for the sake of a quick story or to satisfy public tastes, becomes a violation of the vital information premise.Society of Professional Journalists, “SPJ Code of Ethics,” http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp.

Present Diverse Perspectives

When discussing what he considers to be one of the key issues in professional journalism, media ethicist Jeremy Iggers points out that because democracy means the widest possible participation of citizens in public life, diversity in journalism is of fundamental importance.Jeremy Iggers, *Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and the Public Interest* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 138. Not only should newsroom staff represent a diversity of gender and races, but journalists should also speak for all groups in society—“not just those with attractive demographics,” as the Committee for Concerned Journalists puts it. Journalists should represent the underrepresented because ignoring citizens is a form of disenfranchisement.Committee of Concerned Journalists, “Statement of Shared Purpose,” Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, www.journalism.org/resources/principles.

Monitor Government and Corporations

When the framers of the U.S. Constitution guaranteed freedom of the press, one of the things they had in mind was the ability of the news media to serve as a watchdog over those in positions of power.Committee of Concerned Journalists, “Statement of Shared Purpose,” Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, www.journalism.org/resources/principles. It is the duty of the press to ensure that business is conducted in the open and that government actions are public. One famous example of the media fulfilling its watchdog role was *The Washington Post*’s investigation of the 1972 Watergate scandal. During Richard Nixon’s presidency, journalists at the *Post* uncovered information linking government agencies and officials to the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex as part of an attempt to sabotage the Democratic campaign and guarantee Nixon’s reelection.Richard M. Flanagan and Louis W. Koenig, “Watergate,” in *Dictionary of American History*, ed. Stanley I. Kutler, 3rd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 8:425. Media coverage of the scandal increased publicity and ultimately put pressure on the government that led to an investigation and the prosecution of many who were involved.“The Government and Watergate,” in *American Decades*, ed. Judith S. Baughman and others (Detroit: Gale, 2001), vol. 8. In the past decade, the media has uncovered incriminating information about various Senators and Congressmen, resulting in charges of corruption, tax evasion, conspiracy, and fraud.

Characteristics of Reliable Journalism

While CNN and other news networks took some criticism for their delay in reporting Michael Jackson’s death in 2009, others commended the news organizations for waiting for official confirmation. For many journalists and members of the public, ensuring accuracy, even when it means delays, is a hallmark of responsible journalism.

More than 400 journalistic codes of ethics have been produced by various unions and associations worldwide.Aidan White, *To Tell You the Truth: The Ethical Journalist Initiative* (Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 2008), iii. Where they may differ on specifics, these codes of ethics agree that the news media’s top obligation is to report the truth. When journalists say this, of

course, they don't mean truth in an absolute, philosophical sense; they mean practical truth, the truth that involves reporting the facts as faithfully and accurately as possible. This notion of truth includes an accurate representation of information from reliable sources, but it also includes a complete representation, one that presents multiple perspectives on an issue and does not suppress vital information.

Many codes of ethics stress that the press has a duty to continue its investigation of the facts, even after initially reporting them, and to rectify any inaccuracies that may have occurred in the initial coverage of an issue.Aidan White, *To Tell You the Truth: The Ethical Journalist Initiative* (Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 2008), ii; Committee of Concerned Journalists, "Statement of Shared Purpose," Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, www.journalism.org/resources/principles. One example is *The Huffington Post*, a news website that, with over 2,000 bloggers, has the world's most linked-to blog. Blogging is sometimes criticized by more traditional journalists for the tendency, among some blogs, to include biases, unreliable information, and unfounded opinions—in other words, for instances of violating journalistic codes of ethics. However, *The Huffington Post* requires all of its pass-holding writers to fact-check and to correct any factual errors within 24 hours or lose their privileges.Aidan White, *To Tell You the Truth: The Ethical Journalist Initiative* (Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 2008), 76.

Along with an emphasis on the truth, codes of ethics stress loyalty and duty to citizens as a standard of primary importance. Of course, truth telling is an essential component of this loyalty, but additionally, the concern here is in reminding journalists whom their work serves. Especially in the current environment, in which media outlets face increased financial pressure, there is a tension between responsible journalism and the demands for profit. Aiden White notes that corporate and political influences are of increasing concern in this environment, but he reminds journalists that while they have duties to other constituencies, "media products are not just economic." Journalists must hold the larger public interest above other interests.Aidan White, *To Tell You the Truth: The Ethical Journalist Initiative* (Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 2008), 8.

Another challenge often posed by bottom-line concerns and the pressure for a good story is sensitivity toward, and protection of, those involved in the news. Responsible journalists should strive to balance disclosure of the news with a respect for individual privacy. Finding this balance can sometimes be a challenge. On one hand, journalists should never expose private information that could be harmful to individuals for the sake of sensationalizing a story. Issues like family life, sexual behavior, sexual orientation, or medical conditions, for instance, are generally considered tabloid material that would violate the privacy of those involved.

On the other hand, there are times when the private lives of individuals must be made public in the interests of serving the common good. One example was the 2009 media scandal surrounding South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, who, after media investigations over his weeklong disappearance in June of that year, admitted to flying to Argentina to visit his mistress. After it was revealed that Sanford had used public funds for his private travel, he resigned from his office as the chairman of the Republican Governors' Association.Associated Press, "Sanford Took Personal Trips on Plane," *CBS News*, August 9, 2009, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/08/09/politics/main5228211.shtml. Although the publicity surrounding this private matter was clearly painful for the governor and his family, releasing information about the incident, particularly regarding the misuse of public funds, was in the best interest of the citizens. The International Federation of Journalists offers three factors as a rough guideline in cases where privacy is in danger of being violated: the nature of the individual's place in society, the individual's reputation, and his or her place in public life. Politicians, judges, and others in elected office often must forgo their expectations of privacy for reasons of democracy and accountability—the public's right to know if their elected officials are engaged in unethical or criminal conduct generally trumps an individual's right to privacy.Aidan White, *To Tell You the Truth: The Ethical Journalist Initiative* (Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 2008), 136. These factors, in recent years, have resulted in public scandals surrounding other political leaders—Representative Anthony Weiner, former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, and presidential hopeful John Edwards, to name a few.



Figure 14.5 As shown in the scandal surrounding former South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, drawing the line between exploiting individuals' private lives to sell stories and disclosing information in the public interest is not always clear.

Because the press has a duty to serve the best interests of the citizens in a democracy, it is important that journalists act independently and that they remain neutral in their presentation of information. *Objectivity* was once the common term used to support this notion. More recently, however, there has been wider acceptance of the fact that reporting always occurs through a lens of personal experience, culture, beliefs, and background that ultimately all influence the way any individual subjectively perceives a situation.Howard A. Myrick, "The Search for Objectivity in Journalism," *USA Today* (Society for the Advancement of Education), November 2002, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1272/is_2690_131/ai_94384327/?tag=content;col1. If this were not the case—if there were only one standard way everyone perceived, investigated, and reported on a story—what would be the value of including racial and gender diversity in the newsroom? Nevertheless, responsible journalism requires journalists to avoid favoritism and to present news that is fair and offers a complete picture of the issue.

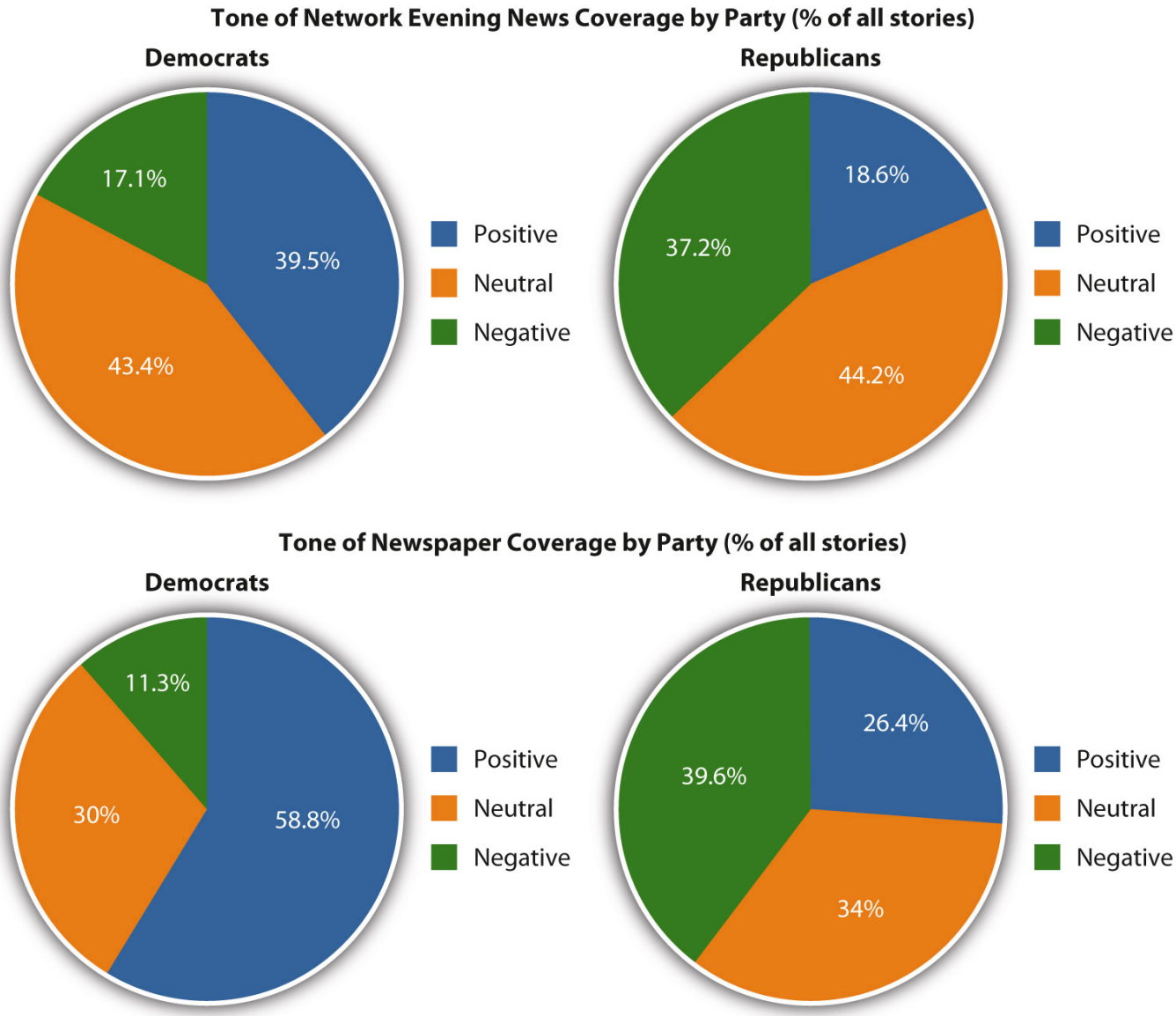
The principle of journalistic independence is an important component of the news media's watchdog role. Journalists should avoid conflicts of interest—financial, political, or otherwise—and, when conflicts of interest are unavoidable, it is a journalist's ethical responsibility to disclose those.Society of Professional Journalists, "SPJ Code of Ethics," http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp. One example involving conflict of interest centers on recent talk of government bailouts for the news media, similar to the bailouts for the auto and banking industries. However, many journalists are concerned that government support of this kind would present a conflict of interest and interfere with the media's watchdog role.David Nicklaus, "Bailing Out Journalism Would Threaten Its Independence," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 8, 2010, http://more.stltoday.com/stltoday/business/columnists.nsf/davidnicklaus/story/7db2f5de844ed63f8625773c000da74b?OpenDocument.

In addition to maintaining independence, the news media should allow for commentary and opposition. Leaving space for citizens to voice concerns about journalistic conduct is an important part of serving the public interest and keeping the public's trust.

The Effects of Bias in News Presentations

While principles of ethical journalism require journalists to remain neutral in their reporting, there is, as previously mentioned, always a degree of bias that will be present in any news reporting due to the element of personal perspective that any journalist will naturally bring to his or her work. A 2005 in-depth study by political scientists at UCLA found that, of 20 media outlets, 18 had a perspective in their news reporting that was left of the national average. Of those 20, only Fox News and *The Washington Times* scored to the right of the average U.S. voter.Meg Sullivan, "Media Bias is Real, Finds UCLA Political Scientist," news release, UCLA, December 14, 2005, http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/Media-Bias-Is-Real-Finds-UCLA-6664.aspx.

What, exactly, does political bias in the media look like? In the UCLA study, news sources were scored based on their sources of information and expert opinion. The news outlets with the most liberal slant—CBS News and *The New York Times*—cited liberal think tanks and policy groups with a much greater frequency than they cited conservative ones.Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, "A Measure of Media Bias," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120, no. 4 (2005), http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/groseclose/pdfs/MediaBias.pdf. Political bias can also be observed by examining which stories a network or newspaper chooses to report. According to media analyst Seth Ackerman, the right-leaning Fox News network reports news stories that favor the Republican Party or show the Democratic Party in a negative light. Additionally, Fox's panels of pundits who offer commentary after the news tend to be politically conservative or moderate far more often than liberal.Seth Ackerman, "The Most Biased Name in the News," *FAIR: Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, July/August 2001, http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1067.



Source: Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

Figure 14.6 Some argue that there is a politically left bias in the news media.

Such biases in news media may have an effect on public opinion. However, while the picture a journalist or particular news outlet creates may not be entirely objective, journalists with integrity will strive to be fair and comprehensive, offering opposing views and citing their sources of information. Members of the public should remember that they also have a responsibility to be active, rather than passive, consumers of information. Good media consumers use critical analysis skills while reading news reports. If a story is presented conscientiously in the news, a reader or viewer will have the resources he or she needs to research an issue further and draw his or her own conclusions. As you continue reading the chapter, keep in mind the ethical obligations of those who work in mass media and the potential consequences of their failure to uphold them.

Key Takeaways

- The Internet has brought about profound and rapid changes in the structuring, delivery, and economics of news media.
  - Immediate news delivery has become the norm.
  - The pressure for immediate delivery increases the tension between factual accuracy and "getting there first" in news reporting.

  - Because people can get instant news for free online, subscriptions to print media are down, and so are advertising revenues.
- Most journalistic codes of ethics are based on the premise that the news media exists to provide citizens with the information they need to function in a free and democratic society. Journalists should conform to several ethical obligations:
  - Present news stories that inform and serve the needs of citizens.
  - Present issues fairly.
  - Present stories in a way that addresses their complexity.
  - Present diverse perspectives.
  - Monitor government and corporations.
- Responsible journalism:
  - Ensures accuracy (even if it means causing delays)
  - Reports the truth
  - Stays loyal to citizens by putting the public interest above all else
  - Is protective and sensitive to those involved in the news
  - Remains objective and presents information in a neutral way
  - Allows for commentary and opposition
- All news stories contain some bias because of the diversity of journalists' perspectives. While the news media is often criticized for representing a political bias in reporting, ethical journalists always strive to present issues in a fair and comprehensive way.

? Exercise 11.2.1

Conduct your own survey of political bias in the news. Choose either a television network or newspaper known for more liberal tendencies, such as CNN or *The New York Times*, and a network or newspaper known for more conservative reporting, such as Fox News or *The Washington Times*. Examine both sources' coverage of the same news story (*not* a column or editorial). Then answer the following short-answer questions. Each response should be one to two paragraphs.

1. What differences do you notice between the two sources' news coverage?
2. What evidence, if any, do you find of political bias? If it does exist, what effect do you think this bias has on readers?
3. Consider the role of the media in delivering news to the public. In your opinion, can both sources' coverage still be characterized as fair and accurate? Why or why not?

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11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

While the public generally accept that mistakes happen, they do not look kindly upon journalists and news media who make repeated ethical mistakes. It is always best to avoid mistakes in the first place. Every time a journalist or news medium makes an ethical mistake, the public lose a little bit of trust in the news media. Therefore, it is essential that all mistakes be acknowledged and rectified immediately. Our audience understand that we are human and will accept genuine apologies. However, if mistakes happen continuously, it is inevitable that you and your organisation will lose the public's trust.

The South African Press Council has a process in place for addressing ethical and other mistakes in the news media. Usually, readers will approach the Press Council with a complaint. There will be an investigation, and if the Press Council finds that a newspaper published a misleading or an inaccurate story, the newspaper will be ordered to rectify the mistake on the same page where the story was published originally. If the story was published on the front page, the correction must also be published on the front page.

Journalists who make major ethical mistakes often need to resign or are dismissed. In the examples shown at the start of this chapter, the journalist who fell in love with a murderer was dismissed, and the journalist who had received money from South African crime intelligence and the three journalists involved in the "rogue unit" story all had to leave their jobs because their reputations were damaged.

In less serious cases, an apology and correction are usually sufficient. Some newsrooms might have internal disciplinary measures when ethical lapses happen often. Some newsrooms might send journalists who make ethical mistakes for additional training to prepare them better so that they can make the right decision. Usually, when an ethical mistake happens, the journalist who reported the story is held liable, not the sub-editor. In many cases, the editor (or editor-in-chief) may also accept responsibility, because editors of news organisations are where "the buck stops". They are the people who need to take final responsibility for everything that is reported in their publication, on their website, or broadcast on various channels.

There can also be legal ramifications and criminal liability for both the journalist and the news organisation in cases where reporting breaks the law. In cases of defamation, journalists who are found guilty may receive fines, or even go to jail. Whenever a journalist breaks a law (for example, POPIA), there may be a court case, and if found guilty, there will be a penalty. News media can also be found guilty as organisations if they contravene POPIA.

Of course, the most serious consequence of unethical journalism is that the public will lose their trust in you and your organisation. It is very hard to regain the public's trust once it has been lost. That is why ethical journalism practices should not happen out of fear for the law or other penalties; ethical journalism should happen because you want to maintain the trust of the public by doing what journalists are supposed to do – report truthfully and accurately about events of the day.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

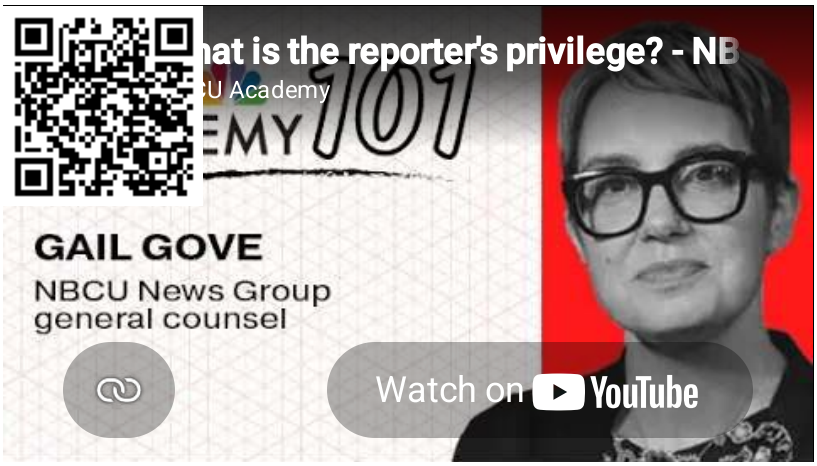
12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

While both ethics and laws share similarities within a society, they are different in important ways. Ethics are moral principles and values that guide an individual's sense of good and bad actions or inactions, often shaped by society but chosen by individuals to enact. Law consists of a system of formal, mandatory rules enforced by an external authority to regulate societal behavior.

Laws are, at times, enforceable mandates of what one cannot do in the society. In an example of American law, for instance, a journalist is not allowed to break-and-enter into a private space to gather news information.

Laws, at other times, are mandates of what one *can* do, or have afforded to them, in the society. The Bill of Rights is a very good example of those mandates.

In this chapter, we will look at the laws that both empower journalists, as well as those that contain journalistic activities to certain set of actions. We will start with the concept of the reporter's privilege and then the American Journalism Handbook will walk us through the details.



12.1: Journalism Law
12.1.1: The First Amendment
12.1.2: Access, Anonymity, and Privacy
12.1.3: Censorship, Copyright, and Incitement
12.1.4: Libel

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SECTION OVERVIEW

12.1: Journalism Law

12.1.1: The First Amendment

12.1.2: Access, Anonymity, and Privacy

12.1.3: Censorship, Copyright, and Incitement

12.1.4: Libel

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12.1.1: The First Amendment

Introduction

The First Amendment is the cornerstone of journalistic freedom in the United States. It states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or *abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press*; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Initially, the First Amendment applied only to laws enacted by Congress. However, over time, the courts have interpreted its provisions more broadly to encompass any form of *government* interference. The First Amendment is relatively distinctive in that few countries offer such unequivocal statements of support for journalistic work within their legal frameworks.

Roots of the First Amendment

Shortly after the U.S. gained independence from Britain, Thomas Jefferson, who was then an ambassador to France, and James Madison corresponded about the need for a Bill of Rights. Madison, in particular, championed the document because he believed it would enable independent courts of justice to protect individual rights and would educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities within the newly formed democratic republic.

It is not an accident that the First Amendment, and its protection of speech and the press, leads the Bill of Rights. Jefferson himself wrote: "Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost." Alongside Jefferson, Madison played a significant role in getting the state of Virginia to adopt its Statute for Religious Freedom, and Madison consistently championed religious and political liberty throughout his life. Notably, Madison pushed to change words like "should" or "ought," which were used in earlier state declarations of rights, with less equivocal language like "shall."

While Madison strongly pushed to have the First Amendment apply to both the federal government and the states, legislators could only agree on a federal application. Thus, it was not until the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 — by which time the American Civil War had taken place and the country's views on federalism had shifted — that the First Amendment would be consistently applied at the state level as well. As such, for much of the first century of the United States' existence, the legal protections offered to journalists on key aspects of libel, prior restraint, and other First Amendment issues varied from state to state.

The First Amendment and the Supreme Court

Despite the First Amendment's unequivocal language, Congress (and state legislatures) have passed a number of laws that abridge the freedom of speech and of the press. Put another way, in trying to promote other ideals, such as national unity and contemporary notions of decency, legislative bodies have adopted many laws that infringe on speech and press freedoms. (Cynics would add that politicians have advanced of those laws for less admirable reasons, such as to protect corrupt public officials from the searching eyes of journalists.)

In instances where the First Amendment clashes with other interests, the U.S. Supreme Court is often the final arbiter over what constitutes an acceptable infringement on speech or the press. Since 1804, there have been nearly 900 major rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court and other courts that directly involve First Amendment freedoms. The 20th century was a particularly busy period for the Supreme Court, and a number of its decisions have expanded speech and press rights.

Some of the First Amendment issues most closely related to journalism that have been tested in court include access to information and places, anonymous speech, protection of sources, copyright, free association, incitement, prior restraint, privacy, and the publication of confidential information. Put another way, much of the guidance about which journalistic activities are legally permissible come not only from laws passed by the United States' legislative branch but also from the interpretations of the First Amendment by its judicial branch.

Protections for Political Expression

A central theme in judicial decisions about the protections and limitations of the First Amendment is that *political expression receives greater legal protection than commercial expression*. Put another way, the courts have long recognized the importance of a so-called 'marketplace of ideas' in the political realm, wherein ideas should be allowed to freely compete with one another. Under the marketplace perspective, the best ideas should emerge victorious from robust competition, which in turn should result in a

better-functioning democracy. In order to permit robust competition, the thinking goes, restrictions on communication — and political communication in particular — should be limited.

While there are significant limitations to that marketplace metaphor — for example, some people effectively have a louder voice than others because of their position in society, and people are not fully rational beings — it has nevertheless resulted in the courts holding public affairs journalism and political opinion pieces in high regard because they see such work as being central to promoting the founding ideals of sovereignty and self-governance. Moreover, U.S. courts have on many occasions explicitly referenced the value and importance of promoting a vibrant journalism ecosystem that can serve as a 'fourth branch' of government and as a watchdog against corruption and public misdeeds. For example, former Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black famously wrote in 1971 that "only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government … and … prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people."

The courts will therefore often weigh the public benefit of a journalistic product (e.g., news article or broadcast segment) against the harms it could cause to an individual (e.g., their privacy) or the country as a whole (e.g., its national security). The First Amendment does not at all grant journalists or journalistic outlets a blanket immunity against legal liability. However, it does tend to offer them greater protection than might be afforded to other forms of communication, such as advertising and entertainment (provided such advertisement or entertainment is not itself political in nature). For example, restrictions on fraudulent advertising are less likely to be seen as violating the First Amendment than restrictions on political editorials that contain false information.

In short, although the First Amendment does *not* forbid legislators from regulating journalists and journalism, it is the cornerstone for most legal defenses of U.S. journalists and their activities. It also grants journalists in the U.S. stronger protections against both government intervention and civil charges from the subjects of their stories than journalists in most other countries. Its placement at the top of the U.S. Bill of Rights also signals that journalism and free expression lie at the heart of the so-called American Experiment.

Key Takeaways

- The ideals behind the First Amendment stand at the core of the founding documents of both the United States of America and its member states.
- The First Amendment is the cornerstone for most legal defenses by journalists against a range of different charges.
- The Supreme Court is often the final arbiter of disputes between the freedom of expression and other national interests.
- The Supreme Court has repeatedly considered expressions about political and public affairs to be particularly worthy of First Amendment protections.

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12.1.2: Access, Anonymity, and Privacy

Introduction

In order to effectively perform their journalistic activities, journalists must be aware of the laws that govern basic practices, such as attending public proceedings and protecting sources. Journalists in the U.S. generally benefit from laws that promote and presume transparency in government as well as from Supreme Court decisions recognizing that journalists have the ability to broadcast documents that are in the public interest even if a third party obtained them illegally.

However, journalists in the U.S. by and large do not receive special protections from the government by virtue of their job. They are generally treated like any other citizen, and laws therefore tend to apply equally to journalists and non-journalists. (There are some laws, including so-called "shield laws," that provide special protections to journalists. However, such laws only apply at the state level, and only in some states, and with several restrictions.) Moreover, journalists must navigate complex legal questions about an individual's reasonable expectation of privacy and must be aware of laws pertaining to the recording of exchanges, such as interviews, that vary from state to state.

Access to Information and Places

The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that journalists and journalistic outlets *do not have special access or rights* to government files or to public property. Put another way, journalists often receive the same access to information or places as any other member of society.

However, the Court has generally promoted permissive (open) access to information produced by the government and to public spaces. This means that journalists have a right to gather news on property that is open to the general public, such as public parks and outside public buildings. It also means that journalists are presumed to have access to public proceedings, such as city council meetings and the meeting minutes that result from them. Additionally, journalists are generally presumed to have access to government data and reports, unless such documents are determined to be protected by narrow exemptions (e.g., privacy or national security). However, the Courts have been unsympathetic to those who try to gather news on private property, including homes and places of business, without the proprietors' consent. In those cases, journalists can be arrested for trespassing, even if their work involves a story that is in the public interest.

At the federal level, journalists' access to *documents produced by the federal government* is largely governed by the *Freedom of Information Act* and journalists' access to *official federal government proceedings and meetings* is largely governed by the *Government in the Sunshine Act*. States also have their own individual open records and open meetings laws, which govern the same things but within the jurisdiction of the state (e.g., local courthouses). Some states, like Florida, have permissive transparency laws that make it easier for journalists to be watchdogs. Other states, like Massachusetts, have more restrictive laws, which make journalists' jobs more difficult.

It is important to note that such laws only apply to government agencies (and, in some instances, private companies acting on behalf of the government). In general, private companies and corporations do *not* have to comply with records requests. Notably, any government rejection of a public records request must be accompanied by a written explanation that includes the statutory reason for why the request was denied. Government employees sometimes do not have a good understanding of the laws themselves, and falls to the journalist to educate them. As such, it is very important that aspiring journalists familiarize themselves with regulations about access to information so that they may trigger the relevant legal requirements when asking government agencies for information (and push back when their request is improperly rejected).

The Supreme Court has also repeatedly ruled in favor of allowing journalists and journalistic outlets to publish confidential information and leaked information *about matters that are in the public interest*. In the case *Bartnicki v. Vopper* (2001), a teacher union's chief negotiator, Gloria Bartnicki, was illegally recorded speaking with the union president about a contentious collective bargaining negotiation with the regional School Board. That intercepted recording was shared by the president of a local taxpayers' association with Fredrick Vopper, a talk radio host, who then played the tape on his show. Bartnicki contended that Vopper broke the law by broadcasting an illegally recorded conversation. In a 6-3 decision, the Court ruled that as long as someone did not violate a law in obtaining information — in this case, Vopper simply received and published the recording and did not illegally

record the conversation himself — then that someone may generally publish the information so long as *it involves a "matter of public concern."*

While the Vopper decision was more recently affirmed in the case *United States v. Stevens* (2010), other recent national security and anti-espionage laws have tested the Court's resolve in this regard. As such, journalists still run a legal risk when publishing leaks and information obtained through illicit means — especially if such information intersects with national security concerns.

Anonymity and Sourcing

The Supreme Court has generally protected anonymity under the First Amendment. However, such rights have been balanced against competing interests in areas of political activity, national security, and campaign finance.

Of particular note is that journalists *can be legally compelled to reveal their anonymous sources*. For example, journalists may be held in contempt of court or face obstruction of justice charges for failing to reveal who a source is during a civil or criminal proceeding against that unnamed source.

A landmark ruling in this area came in the Supreme Court's decision in the case *Branzburg v. Hayes* (1972). Paul Branzburg, a reporter for *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, observed (in the course of his regular reporting duties) people manufacturing and using hashish. He then wrote two stories about drug use in Kentucky. Two of the individuals pictured and featured in the article were granted anonymity by Branzburg because they feared prosecution. However, when the article came to the attention of law-enforcement personnel, Branzburg was subpoenaed before a grand jury for the articles and ordered to name his sources (so they could be prosecuted). Branzburg refused to name the sources, citing First Amendment protections. Branzburg's argument was rejected and he was punished for being in contempt of court. In a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court asserted that the First Amendment's protection of press freedom does not give journalists special privileges in court, and that Branzburg was correctly held for being in contempt of court.

The consequence of this is that journalists in the U.S. can be legally forced to reveal their sources. Journalists who decide not to comply can be imprisoned for obstruction of justice or contempt of court. This is not a hypothetical, either: Multiple journalists in the U.S. have spent time in jail because they believed they had a duty to protect their sources and live up to their promises when granting anonymity. Thus, journalists must be very careful and judicious when promising anonymity, and they must be prepared to face the potential consequences of such promises.

Privacy and Recordings

The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that journalists are free to photograph, film, or record audio in public spaces, as long as they are not getting in the way of the proceedings. This includes recording public officials and law enforcement officials as they carry out their duties in public — regardless of whether they consent to being recorded. For example, it is perfectly legal to record police officers as they marshal a protest on a city street, so long as the journalist is not obstructing the officers and adhering to their safety directives.

What constitutes a 'public space' can get tricky, though. For example, a public state university like the University of Massachusetts Amherst has some spaces that can be considered public forums, such as Haigis Mall and the campus pond, both of which can be accessed by the general public via public pathways. People (including visitors, students, administrators) can be freely recorded in such spaces. In contrast, UMass classroom buildings may be restricted to student use only, and students are likely to have an expectation of privacy within those spaces. As such, recordings in those spaces are only possible with the permission of the students, and in some cases, the university itself. This becomes even trickier when there is an invited speaker giving a lecture in an auditorium: Although that speaker may be speaking at a public institution, UMass officials have the legal authority to restrict any recordings of an event that takes place in UMass space. Conversely, they may choose to make the event completely public, in which case recordings of the speakers *and* attendees may be unrestricted.

At the heart of the Court's interpretations of such incidents is the recorded individual's *expectation of privacy*. In settings where a 'reasonable person' would not expect to be recorded, they may be able to make an *intrusion on seclusion* claim. For example, if a photojournalist positions themselves on a public sidewalk and uses a telephoto lens or a drone to record a person engaging in a private act at home, then the journalist is likely to have intruded on that person's seclusion. Similarly, journalists may run afoul of

the law by publishing private information about someone — such as details about a health condition — especially if that information is not deemed to be in the public interest.

Recording laws are especially relevant to journalists when it comes to interviewing sources. In some jurisdictions, journalists may record private exchanges (e.g., a phone interview) *only if all people being recorded consent to the recording*. Massachusetts is one such state, where so-called 'two-party consent' is required for any recording of private conversations. Put another way, *it is a crime to secretly record people in Massachusetts when there is an expectation of privacy*, as with a phone interview.

Many jurisdictions only require one party to consent to a recording, but it is nevertheless good ethical practice for journalists to request permission from their interviewees before recording the interview. When interviewing people across state lines — as with a long-distance phone call or video chat — it is safest to assume that consent from all parties is required because circumstance-specific legal questions may arise about which state's consent law is most applicable.

Key Takeaways

- Journalists do not have special access to government documents or to public spaces. Laws that apply to regular people also apply to journalists.
- The Freedom of Information Act and the Government in the Sunshine Act govern journalists' access to public records and meetings at the federal level. States have their own separate laws for state records and meetings. Government records and meetings are typically presumed to be open, unless they fit into specific exemptions.
- Journalists can be forced by the courts to reveal their sources under penalty of imprisonment. U.S. journalists have been imprisoned for not revealing anonymous sources.
- In some states, including Massachusetts, interviewees must consent to having an interview recorded. Even when consent is not legally required, it is still good practice to ask for it.

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12.1.3: Censorship, Copyright, and Incitement

Introduction

Journalists in the United States benefit from strong protections against government censorship that are rooted in the Free Press clause of the First Amendment. As such, journalists generally cannot be stopped from publishing even highly problematic information, from falsehoods to highly sensitive government documents. However, although journalists may be free to publish something, they can still face legal risks *after* publishing it.

In a similar vein, the First Amendment allows journalists (and other citizens) to advocate for a range of opinions, ideas, and actions — even those that run afoul of the law. And, the United States legal code permits journalists to make 'fair use' of copyrighted materials in their reporting, allowing them to both show and tell audiences about newsworthy affairs. However, such protections are not unconditional, and journalists must be aware of the legal framework in the U.S. in order to minimize their legal risks before and after publication.

Censorship and Prior Restraint

The Supreme Court has historically demonstrated a very strong *aversion to government censorship of journalism*, and has only permitted it in very limited circumstances. What we typically think of as censorship falls under the legal definition of *prior restraint*, which refers to an official government restriction of speech before it is published.

A landmark decision in this area was the case *Near v. Minnesota* (1931). Jay Near, who was the editor of *The Saturday Press*, had published a series of articles attacking several Minneapolis city officials for dereliction of duty. One of those officials sued *The Saturday Press* for engaging in "malicious, scandalous and defamatory" speech. The Minnesota state court agreed. It decided to ban any further publication of *The Saturday Press* under the Minnesota Public Nuisance Law — thereby effectively shutting down the publication. In a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that Minnesota's law was "the essence of censorship," and further held that the government did not have the power to bar the publication of Jay Near's writings *in advance* because it would constitute an impermissible prior restraint on expression. Such restraints, the court ruled, were only permissible in extreme cases, such as when publishing information would reveal crucial military information that would place troops at risk, when a publication contains obscenity, or when a publication may *directly* incite "acts of violence."

Although such prior restraint wasn't allowed, the court's decision was clear in that it would not stop any individual from suing Jay Near or *The Saturday Press* after publication. Put another way, protection against prior restraint does not extend to protections against other legal risks that may arise from publication. In fact, some charges, such as libel, require a demonstration of harm — which may only be established after publication.

The Near decision was reinforced in another crucial case, *New York Times Co. v. United States* (1971), which is also known as the "Pentagon Papers" case. In that case, Daniel Ellsberg secretly made copies of a large, classified government study of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War and provided the documents to *The New York Times*. After several months of review, the *Times* began publishing a series of stories that included portions of the classified documents. President Richard Nixon's administration, citing national security concerns, obtained a restraining order barring further publication of the Pentagon Papers. Following an emergency hearing, the Supreme Court, in a 6-3 decision, dissolved the restraining order, observing that "any system of prior restraints comes to this Court bearing a heavy presumption against its constitutional validity" and that "the Government thus carries a heavy burden of showing justification for the imposition of such a restraint."

Put another way, the Court ruled that it was up to the Nixon Administration to successfully prove that publication would result in *inevitable, direct, and immediate peril* to the United States — a high standard that it failed to meet when suing the *Times*. While the Pentagon Papers case does not offer journalists blanket permission to publish confidential documents, it did reinforce the high bar that the government must clear in order to stop something from being published in the first place.

It is important to note that these court decisions, and the First Amendment itself, only guard against *government* censorship. The owner of a journalistic outlet, or an editor within it, is well within their rights to refuse to publish a particular story. Similarly, a third-party platform (e.g., Facebook) or moderators within its groups are generally free to ban particular stories from being shared on their platform. Additionally, these decisions offer no obstacle to *self-censorship*, whereby journalists *choose* to not publish

certain material for fear of reprisal. Self-censorship is not uncommon, especially when journalists fear alienating certain sources, and losing access to them, by publishing damaging information about those sources.

Copyright

The Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that copyright and free speech are compatible. In particular, it has ruled that while 'facts' cannot be copyrighted, *the ways in which those facts are expressed can be copyrighted*. For example, it is not possible to copyright the fact that Dr. Zamith gave a lecture about media law on a particular date. However, the exact expression, "Dr. Zamith spoke eloquently in a riveting lecture about media law that was met with great acclaim" may be copyrighted by the author. A practical consequence of this is that journalistic outlets cannot just use someone else's original work without their permission — for example, by copying and pasting a competitor's news story — even if they offer attribution to the original work by stating who produced it, or by linking to the original piece.

However, the Supreme Court has long been open to different 'fair use' doctrines — one of which became codified as law by the Copyright Act of 1976. The current doctrine allows *portions* of copyrighted products (e.g., an exclusive interview published by a competitor) to be published without their consent by someone else (e.g., in a competitor's news article) if it 'passes' a four-part test. The four components of the test are: (1) the purpose and character of the use, including if it is for educational purposes; (2) the nature of the copyrighted work; (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for, or value of, the copyrighted work. There is no codified point system for this test. Instead, courts interpret the facts of a specific case according to this general guidance and issue a determination of whether the use 'passed' the test (and is therefore not in violation of copyright protections).

Copyright therefore provides journalists and journalistic outlets with a legal remedy when their work is republished without authorization, and fair use protections can be leveraged to allow journalists to include portions of copyrighted work, such as segments from an explosive book or citizen-recorded videos, in their reporting.

Incitement and Inflammatory Speech

The Supreme Court has ruled that speech or publication that advocates for illegal conduct, such as attacking an elected official or activist, is legally protected, unless that advocacy is *likely* to incite *imminent* lawless action. This means that abstract advocacy (e.g., writing that a particular politician 'should be shot') is protected, though specific calls to action (e.g., writing that people should gather at a particular time and place to shoot the politician) are less likely to receive protection.

A crucial Supreme Court decision in this area is *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969). In that case, Clarence Brandenburg, a Ku Klux Klan leader in rural Ohio, contacted a reporter at a Cincinnati television station and invited him to cover a KKK rally. Portions of the rally were filmed and showed men in robes and hoods, some of whom were carrying firearms and engaging in cross-burning. One of the speeches made reference to the possibility of "revengeance" against two specific racial and religious groups, as well as their supporters. Another speech advocated for those groups' forced expulsion from the United States. Brandenburg was charged with advocating violence under Ohio's criminal syndicalism statute, and he argued that his speech was protected by the First Amendment.

In a per curiam decision, meaning a decision that was not signed by individual justices but spoke for the Court as a whole, the Supreme Court ruled that such speech is protected because the "mere advocacy" of violence does not rise to the standard of "incitement to imminent lawless action," which the Court has ruled is *not* protected by the U.S. Constitution. In particular, the decision helped establish the two-prong "Brandenburg test," under which the government may only restrict speech if (1) the speech is "directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action" *and* (2) the speech is "likely to incite or produce such action."

Put another way, individuals — from opinion columnists to sources quoted by journalists — can speak, publish, and advocate freely unless it can be shown that they are putting others at clear risk. (Whether a journalist should quote certain individuals or give oxygen to problematic assertions is thus more often an ethical question.)

Key Takeaways

- The Supreme Court has historically had a strong aversion to government censorship of journalists, and the bar for preventing something from being published is very high. However, just because something can be published does not mean that journalists

are free from other legal risks after publication.

- Facts cannot be copyrighted, but the ways in which journalists (and others) express those facts can be copyrighted. It is not enough to offer attribution. Unless a journalist is making 'fair use' of some copyrighted material, permission from the copyright holder is necessary.
- Speech and publication may advocate for lawless behavior, so long as that advocacy is abstract or unlikely to produce imminent lawlessness. This covers both opinion columnists and advocacy-minded journalists, as well as the sources they quote.

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12.1.4: Libel

Introduction

The U.S. Supreme Court has generally granted leeway for journalists and journalistic outlets to publish or say inaccurate things, as long as the errors are made in good faith.

Much of the relevant case law within the context of journalism falls under the umbrella of libel, which refers to the *publication of a false statement of fact that seriously harms someone's reputation*. (Regular oral speech that is not published — with publication being anything from a printed news article to a broadcast story that airs to a tweet that appears online — falls under the umbrella of *slander*.) Libel is one of the main legal threats thrust upon journalists when they publish critical information. It is therefore important for journalists to be well-versed on the legal requirements for advancing a libel suit, as well as the classes of defenses that a journalist can offer.

Proving Libel

Libel charges require the plaintiff (the injured party) to prove a few different things. First, they must prove that the defendant published the defamatory statement, meaning that they distributed it to someone besides themselves and the plaintiff. There is no requirement that the statement be distributed broadly or to the general public; simply posting it on a small, private Signal group may be enough.

Second, the plaintiff must prove that a 'reasonable person' will infer that the statement is about the plaintiff. The statement does not need to explicitly name a person. As long as there is enough identifying information in the statement for a person *who knows the plaintiff* to be reasonably likely to recognize the statement as being about the plaintiff, the requirement may be satisfied.

Third, the plaintiff must prove that the statement harmed their reputation, as opposed to being merely insulting or offensive. Generally speaking, it must be a *false statement of fact* that exposes a person to hatred, ridicule, or contempt; lowers them in the esteem of their peers; causes them to be shunned; or injures them in their business or trade. This could be satisfied, for example, if a statement alleges that the plaintiff is gay and the plaintiff can show that someone began treating them differently as a result of that information.

Fourth, the plaintiff must show that the statement was published with some level of *fault*. Fault requires that the defendant either did something they should not have done *or* failed to do something they should have.

Finally, the plaintiff must show that the statement was published without any *applicable privilege*. A number of privileges may be available depending on what was published by the defendant and the source they relied upon for the information.

Within journalism, *the most common defense against the charge of libel is truth*. If a statement is truthful, then it does not matter if the plaintiff is harmed. For example, an article claiming that Dr. Zamith clubs baby seals for fun would not be libelous if I had repeatedly clubbed baby seals for personal enjoyment, even if the publication resulted in fewer students taking my classes. (For the record, I do not club baby seals, for fun or professional reasons.) Notably, the burden of proof is generally on the plaintiff to show that a statement is false. Thus, in that example, I would have to show that there's no evidence that I engage in such behavior — and any video showing me engaging in the act should be enough to summarily dismiss the libel suit. (In limited circumstances, the burden of proof may fall to the defendant.)

Statements of pure opinion, which cannot be proven true or false, cannot form the basis of a defamation (or libel) claim. For example, the assertion that "Dr. Zamith is a jerk" is clearly a statement of opinion and cannot serve as the basis of a libel claim. (However, the assertion that "Dr. Zamith is a jerk because he clubs baby seals" involves a statement of fact.) Additionally, the standards for harm and fault do vary depending on the plaintiff's position in society.

Public and Private Figures

Two particular Supreme Court decisions have clarified the libel protections and responsibilities for journalists. In *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* (1964), the *Times* was alleged to have committed libel by publishing a full-page advertisement by supporters of Martin Luther King Jr. that criticized the police in Montgomery, Alabama, for their mistreatment of civil rights protesters. The ad had a number of factual inaccuracies, such as the number of times King had been arrested during the protests, and the *Times*

subsequently published a retraction of the advertisement. Nevertheless, Montgomery Public Safety commissioner, L. B. Sullivan, sued the *Times*. Although he was not named in the ad, Sullivan argued that the inaccurate criticism of actions by the police in the ad was defamatory to him because it was his duty to supervise the police department. In an unanimous decision, the Court ruled that "the First Amendment protects the publication of all statements, even false ones, about the conduct of public officials except when statements are made with actual malice (with knowledge that they are false) or in reckless disregard of their truth or falsity."

Put another way, when it comes to *public officials*, in the context of carrying out their public duties, *the plaintiff must show that the journalistic error was due to an intent to harm the official or as a result of recklessness* — meaning a journalist plainly disregarded information that should have been evident to them. This is a high bar, as it can be immensely difficult to prove a journalist's *intent* to harm. Later cases extended the "actual malice" standard to encompass *public figures*, which include not only public officials but anyone who has gained a significant degree of fame or notoriety in general or in the context of a particular issue or controversy. This may include celebrities, elite athletes, or regular citizens who become embroiled in highly public debates.

Later, in the case *Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.* (1974), the Supreme Court established a separate standard for *private figures*, such as a teacher or local business owner. In this instance, a series of articles appearing in the magazine *American Opinion* claimed that Elmer Gertz, a lawyer who represented an individual shot and killed by a police officer, had orchestrated the officer's conviction; that Gertz was a member of various communist front organizations; and that he had a lengthy criminal record of his own. Gertz sued over those false statements.

Although the editor of the publication conceded the errors and stated that he had made no independent efforts to verify the claims, he countered that the publication did not involve actual malice and was protected under the *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* standard. In a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled in Gertz's favor, noting that public figures had access to more resources and ways to defend themselves than private figures, and therefore public figures should be held to higher standards in libel cases. The Court further held that states could formulate their own, lower standards of libel for statements made about private figures. In practice, this has resulted in a lower standard for private figures across the U.S., with private figures having only to show that a journalist was *negligent*, or that they failed to engage in basic journalistic practices like trying to verify basic information prior to publication.

Although journalists who follow best practices receive robust protections against libel, they must nevertheless sometimes weigh the *threat* of a libel suit. Even if a journalist is well-positioned to defend themselves, the legal process can be very expensive — especially if the journalist lacks the support of an organization with a legal team on retainer, as is the case for most freelancers. In fact, several powerful figures have wielded libel lawsuits as a weapon against critical journalism, knowing that even an unsuccessful lawsuit is likely to make other journalists think twice about writing critical stories about them in the future. While some states have enacted laws penalizing frivolous lawsuits in recent years, they nevertheless continue to serve as powerful weapons for silencing journalists.

Key Takeaways

- Libel refers to the publication of a false statement of fact that seriously harms someone's reputation.
- In the United States, libel claims usually must be proven by the plaintiff, and they must prove multiple things. In contrast, a defendant needs to only show that the statement was true or based on some form of privileged communication. Statements of pure opinion are not eligible for libel claims.
- In the United States, public figures must clear a very high bar to succeed in a libel suit. The standards are considerably lower for private figures, though it remains a high bar.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs

The idea of recording audio voice-overs or conducting video stand-ups causes immediate angst for most print journalists. Learn some tricks of the trade to feel normal “on the air.”

13.1: Introduction

13.2: Interviewing while Recording

13.3: Voice-overs

13.4: On-camera Standup

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13.1: Introduction

“Are you ready?”

“Sure. I’ll just wing it.”

There is a tendency to think that, because anyone can speak, improvisation is good enough when it comes to adding voice to a multimedia project.

It’s not.

Whether you are interviewing a subject “on tape” or providing voice-over narration for video, preparation will make the difference between producing professional-level projects or “amateur hour.”

Can you imagine “just winging it” when it comes to writing a news story or shooting an event as a photojournalist? I sure hope not.

Invest a little more time in your multimedia project with planning and preparation for your voice contribution and you’ll make the rest of the effort worthwhile. For example, taking just a moment to decide where to record an audio interview can help you avoid ending up in a noisy coffee shop with too much background noise. Following are some easy-to-follow directions on how to get “ready for prime time.”

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13.2: Interviewing while Recording

Recording an interview digitally provides content that can be used in many different types of multimedia:

- As a stand-alone audio file with a news story (especially powerful if the subject matter is emotional or the subject is well-known).
- As a podcast.
- As a stand-alone audio file for a blog post.
- As the audio to accompany a photo slideshow (works best when mixed with natural sound).

Location, location, location: Ideally, you will be able to record the interview face-to-face. If possible, pick a location for the interview that is quiet and has good acoustics. A person's home or office is a good option; a coffee shop or restaurant is not. If the interview needs to occur outside, make sure it is as far away from traffic and crowds of people as possible.

While it's possible to record a phone interview, the lower sound quality makes it hard to listen to phone recordings for long periods of time. Try to keep the interview focused and edit it down to just the most salient points. (Or consider re-asking some key questions at the end. More on this to come.)

Pre-interview questions: The subject of the interview deserves to know a few things before they start answering your questions on tape. Provide them with some advance information, such as:

- How long will the interview be?
- How much editing will be done to the audio (if any)? If you can go back and take out the long pauses and the ums and ahs, it will help the subject relax and not feel like they're "on the air" and have to fill every second.
- How will the audio be used and who is the audience?
- Will you send them a few questions you want them to answer so they can articulate their thoughts more succinctly?

It's a good idea to have several questions pre-written. While you may have years of interviewing experience, this is a different kind of interview where you also have to think about the equipment (is the subject speaking loud enough?), the environment (is that air conditioner too loud?) and the pacing of questions and the banter so it sounds good later. That said, don't script every question because the natural ebb and flow of conversation is an important quality that will make listening to an audio interview easier for the audience.

What you say can — and will — end up on tape: Some of the most common interviewing tricks that journalists use don't work well when conducting an audio interview.

For instance, you have probably learned to rely on "uh-huh" and "I see" and "really?" to let the person you're interviewing know you're listening and understanding what they're telling you. In an audio interview, try to use nonverbal clues like nodding instead. You may have developed a habit of audibly agreeing with what your subject is saying while they are saying it. When the tape isn't rolling, this works to let the subject know you want them to elaborate upon this area, but when the tape is rolling, these interruptions can be disturbing to the listener and can cover up some of the subject's key points. So remember, while the subject is talking, **remain silent**.

You may have also honed a knack for establishing a rapport with your subject by showing how much you know about their topic. Again, this is effective early in the relationship but try to develop your rapport before recording the interview digitally. Listeners want to hear what your subject has to say, not what you think about the topic. So remember your job is to **ask questions**. Some context following a subject's response, like spelling out an acronym, is helpful. But try to keep it to a minimum.

One good option is to capture "sound bites" at the end: If the goal of recording is to produce an audio clip to accompany a news story, consider waiting until the end of the interview to do the recording. That way you can conduct the interview just as you normally would, then ask the subject to address a couple of the most salient points for the recording.

This helps you during the interview and helps speed the editing and processing of the audio back in the office. Instead of going over an hour of tape to find a few minutes worthy of publishing online, there will only be a few minutes to edit. And by letting the interview play out "normally" you will know which questions you'd like your subject to address for recording (something you may not know in advance).

Mark the best spots: Another technique to speed up the editing process when recording the entire interview is to mark the points where the interviewee says the best stuff. Most journalists take note when they hear a quote or a nugget of information that will be especially useful. When that happens while recording, write down the counter number on your tape recorder or the time elapsed from a digital recorder. You'll save loads of time whether you're producing audio for the Web or just need to get to the best quotes to write your story.

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13.3: Voice-overs

You cannot control everything that happens when interviewing someone else, but you can have complete control of a voice-over or the narration that you will record for a video story or an audio slideshow that goes with a photo gallery. Here's how to make the best of it.

Write a script: Having a detailed script that you can practice a few times before turning on the microphone will greatly enhance the quality of the finished product. Crafting an effective script is quite different from news writing. The fewer words the better as the purpose of voice-over narration is to amplify or clarify what may be obvious on screen. Short, simple declarative sentences work best.

Choose words that are easy to say and have a good flow when put together. Build in natural breaks for taking a breath. Add some verbal "white space" so the narration doesn't overpower the visual elements of the story.

Script for Hurricane Family Feature (courtesy KPLU radio):

(Kitchen nats — opening drawer) :03

Patricia Quinn searches through the kitchen cupboards of her new home in Seattle.

(Kitchen nats — raw sound) :02

Behind freshly-painted cabinet doors, are small reminders of her family's old life in New Orleans.

(Kitchen nats — bag rustling)

She pulls out a prized possession — authentic Louisiana-style beans.

(Kitchen nats — beans and season salt mixed) :19

NOTE: See Appendix, for the full version of this script.

Warm up: While it may feel weird, stretching the muscles in your face and mouth and humming or singing will help prepare you to be recorded. Open your mouth as wide as possible and move your jaw back and forth. Then hum some deep notes and some high notes and sing a few bars of a familiar song, like "The Star-Spangled Banner." Your facial muscles and vocal chords need to be ready to perform, just as if you were about to go running or play basketball.

Operative words: Marilyn Pittman (http://marilynpittman.com), who serves as a guest lecturer at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, teaches print journalists about audio and video performance. She recommends finding the "operative" words in your script — the words that are essential to telling the story — before you begin recording.

Which are the operative words? The words that would give the listener or viewer the gist of the story rather than the complete sentences in the script, Pittman says. Usually they are the classic who-what-where-when-why-how words — nouns, adjectives, adverbs, titles, names.

Now read through the script and add emphasis to the operative words. According to Pittman, you can do that in four ways:

- **Volume** — Increase or decrease the volume of your voice when saying an operative word. Emphasizing a word by making your voice louder is also called "punching" it.
- **Pitch** — Change the pitch of your voice when you say an operative word, going up or down the scale, high and low, falsetto to baritone.
- **Rhythm** — Change the rhythm of your voice — the space between the words — when saying an operative word. Pause before the word, after the word, or both to emphasize it. A pause is especially effective before a word that's complex or highly technical in nature. A pause is also effective when you're introducing a new idea in a script.
- **Tempo** — Change the tempo or speed of your delivery to emphasize an operative word. You might pick up the tempo where the copy is less important, and then slow down when you hit a section with more operative words to emphasize them. Or you might stretch out a vowel in an operative word.

Be conversational: While focusing on operative words will help, don't allow yourself to be too distracted by them. It's more important to be natural and conversational as you speak. If it sounds like you're reading a script and intentionally emphasizing some words but not others, the entire project will suffer. So aim for a flowing, conversational reading of your script first, and then add the more complicated techniques of operative words.

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13.4: On-camera Standup

The on-camera standup, an evening news staple, is not something many print journalists look forward to. Occasionally, however, it may be necessary, especially when covering breaking news or a major sporting event. For best results, do some planning and remember the following tips.

Content: Keep it short, of course, but try to provide something extra for the audience. Instead of saying there was an accident on I-10 and the trucker was hauling chickens, you might add that they were running all over the highway and that the officers at the scene were bent over laughing. Print reporters often want to keep the good details for their written story, but shouldn't.

Write a script and warm-up: Even if you are reporting on location from a breaking news event, there are always a few minutes to run through a rehearsal before the tape rolls. If there isn't time to write a script, at least jot down an outline with the major points that you need to cover.

Be stable, breathe easy: Posture is important, so be sure you're standing up or sitting as straight as possible and that your chin is parallel to the floor. Relax your shoulders but try not to move them too much while talking. Breathe from your stomach and diaphragm, not your chest.

Talk with your hands: The most successful on-camera personalities exude personality and appear conversational. Using hand gestures is an easy way to add some informality and will help you feel a little more "normal" during the recording.

Find the right location: Ideally, you will find a spot that is not too busy, or loud or poorly lit. If you are going out in public, look for a setting that contributes to the story by adding an "environmental" element. But remember to ask for permission to tape if that spot is on private property.

Whether you are "on location" or in your office building, think sound and lighting first. If the on-camera subject will be wearing a wireless mike, you can get away with some environmental noise (but not a lot). If you have some heavy duty lighting equipment, you can shoot anywhere indoors and even compensate for indirect sunlight outdoors. If you don't have good external lights, make sure you pick a location that fully lights the subject. You don't want any backlighting or shadows on the subject's face.

Assignment

1. Practice interviewing someone you know with a recorder (tape or digital). Write some pre-interview questions first, then review the interview and listen to how well you manage the flow of the conversation and listen for things you wish you would or wouldn't have done.
2. Find a video news report online. Watch it while paying close attention to when the narrator speaks and what the narrator says. How could you make it better? Write out a new script and practice reading it into a recorder. Then play it back with the video playing without sound and see how well you did.

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Index

A

access
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

accountability
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

accuracy
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics

acoustics
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

active voice
- 6: Writing Basics

AI
- 2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence
- 2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?

AI and writing
- 2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?

American Journalism Handbook
- 5: Interviewing Basics

analysis
- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview

anonymity
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

article writing
- 6: Writing Basics

artificial intelligence
- 2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

artificialintelligence
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

audience engagement
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

audio
- 13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs
- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

B

beat reporting
- 3.2: Developing a Beat

Blair Best
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?

breaking news
- 13.4: On-camera Standup

C

censorship
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

clarity
- 6: Writing Basics

clear writing
- 6: Writing Basics

commentary
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?

communication
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism
- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening
- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview

community
- 3.2: Developing a Beat

community engagement
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

community journalism
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism
- 4: Research Basics

concise writing
- 6: Writing Basics

conducting interviews
- 5: Interviewing Basics

core values
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist

corrections
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

D

digital communication
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?

digital journalism
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

digital recording
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

digital video
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

digitalcommunication
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

discussions
- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview

E

editing
- 4: Research Basics
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

education
- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview

effective communication
- 6: Writing Basics
- 13.3: Voice-overs

emotional connection
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

engagement
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

engaging storytelling
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

ethical dilemmas
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics

ethical issues
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics

ethical practices
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

ethical thinking
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics

ethics
- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

evening news
- 13.4: On-camera Standup

evolution
- 2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

F

fast and slow thinking
- 2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?

First Amendment
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

future of journalism
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

G

gaming beat
- 3.2: Developing a Beat

generating questions
- 5: Interviewing Basics

I

identity
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

immersive imagery
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

improvisation
- 13.1: Introduction

independent journalism
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

influencers
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

interview
- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview
- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

interview skills
- 5: Interviewing Basics

interview strategies
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

interview techniques
- 13.3: Voice-overs

interviewing
- 5: Interviewing Basics
- 13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs

interviewing techniques
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

interviews
- 4: Research Basics

J

journalism
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?
- 2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence
- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
- 3.2: Developing a Beat
- 4: Research Basics
- 5: Interviewing Basics
- 6: Writing Basics
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism
- 13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs
- 13.3: Voice-overs

journalism ethics
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist

journalism skills
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

journalism standards
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain

journalism trends
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain

L

Lars Larson
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?

laws
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

learning
- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview

legacy news organizations
- 11.2: News Media and Ethics

local news
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

M

media
- 2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence
- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
- 8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?
- 13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs

media analysis
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?

media ethics
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist

media evolution
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

media organizations
- 3.2: Developing a Beat

media studies
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

media trust
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain

mediaethics
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

memory
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

misinformation
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

moral principles
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

multimedia
- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

multimedia journalism
- 4: Research Basics
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

N

narration
- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.3: Voice-overs

narrative
- 8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening

New York City
- 3.2: Developing a Beat

news
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?
- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life

news agency
- 3.2: Developing a Beat

News aggregators
- 11.2: News Media and Ethics

news analysis
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

news consumption
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain

news reporting
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

news script
- 13.4: On-camera Standup

news writing
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

newscredibility
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

O

oncamera
- 13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs

onlineinfluencers
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

P

plagiarism
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics

planning
- 13.1: Introduction

podcast
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

preparation
- 13.1: Introduction

presentation skills
- 13.3: Voice-overs

primer
- 2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

printjournalism
- 13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs

privacy
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics
- 12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism

professional
- 13.1: Introduction

professional journalism
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

professional standards
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

public interest
- 11.1: How To Think About Ethics

public speaking
- 13.3: Voice-overs

R

recording
- 13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs
- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.2: Interviewing while Recording

rehearsal
- 13.4: On-camera Standup

reimagining journalism
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

reporter
- 5: Interviewing Basics

reporting
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?
- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
- 4: Research Basics
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

reporting tips
- 13.4: On-camera Standup

research
- 4: Research Basics

responsibility
- 11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?

responsible journalism
- 11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist

S

script writing
- 13.3: Voice-overs
- 13.4: On-camera Standup

skills
- 3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life

slow thinking
- 2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?

smartphone video
- 8.2: Beyond the Traditional

social media
- 2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain
- 2.1: How Has Social Media Changed Journalism?
- 7: Is Digital Journalism A Viable Career?

social media in journalism
- 1.5: Community-Centered Journalism

socialmedia
- 2.4: Fighting Misinformation

societal behavior
12: The Law - Rights and Responsibilities of Journalism
Society of Professional Journalists
11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist
sound quality
13.2: Interviewing while Recording
SPJ Code of Ethics
11: Ethics - Being a Good Citizen and a Good Journalist
sporting events
13.4: On-camera Standup
standup
13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs
13.4: On-camera Standup
state of journalism
2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence
storylistening
8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening
8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview
storytelling
3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
3.2: Developing a Beat
4: Research Basics
6: Writing Basics
8: Interviewing Beyond the Basics - Storylistening
8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview
8.2: Beyond the Traditional
13.3: Voice-overs
success
5: Interviewing Basics

T

techniques
8.1: Traditional Journalism Interview
technology
2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence
technologyimpact
2.4: Fighting Misinformation
thematic specialization
3.2: Developing a Beat
transparency
11.1: How To Think About Ethics
trust
11.3: What happens if you make a mistake?
trustableinformation
2.4: Fighting Misinformation
truth
11.1: How To Think About Ethics

V

verifying information
5: Interviewing Basics
video
2.2: Journalism and Artificial Intelligence
13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs
video journalism
8.2: Beyond the Traditional
video production
13.3: Voice-overs
video report
13.4: On-camera Standup
vital information premise
11.2: News Media and Ethics
voice
13.1: Introduction
voiceovers
13: Writing Scripts, Doing Voice-overs

W

Westchester County
3.2: Developing a Beat
why write
2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?
Writing
3.1: A Quick Tour of a Story's Life
4: Research Basics
6: Writing Basics
writing and AI
2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?
writing instructions
2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?
writing pedagogy
2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?
writing skills
2: Digital Journalism - The Good, Bad, and Uncertain
writing tips
6: Writing Basics
writing to think
2.3: AI can generate decent-sounding text. Do we still need to learn to write?

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Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

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