

News judgment

Is there right and wrong when it comes to news judgment? Right and wrong can be elusive because a news organization's tools are weak for measuring success: whether our audience is served by its decisions. The consensus of many studies appears to be that neither editors nor reporters have a clear image of what their readers think. Furthermore, many editors prefer it that way, believing their job is to present news that readers need, not what they want.

Here are a few classic criteria as to what is news and what isn't:

Audience: Editors and reporters need a general idea about what readers will or won't accept. Good taste is an important criteria where it involves gruesome pictures, stories about lewd behavior or writing that includes profanity.

Prominence: When important people are involved, usually insignificant details take on great importance. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower was hospitalized for a suspected a heart attack, his doctor routinely briefed the media on Ike's bowel movements, information the media made sure got reported.

Oddity: The "man bites dog" story continues to be standard fare for news organizations, and all the more so if the story comes with pictures. Today, when video camcorders are everywhere, viewers are fed a steady diet of unusual happenings on the nightly news.

Proximity: A page 1 story in Chicago may be a brief in Miami. Many smaller newspapers and broadcast outlets pursue the "local angle" with a vengeance.

Magnitude: Sometimes an event attracts so many spectators that it must be covered. The Woodstock rock concert in 1968 became a major story when 400,000 attended.

Impact: Stories are important that affect many people or have a universal quality; that's why death and taxes are closely covered.

Timeliness: Ever notice how stories about global warming crop up in the middle of intense heat waves? News organizations need to watch the calendar for upcoming events, especially those that require advance coverage.

Conflict: It's a key element in any drama, but sometimes those involved in a story complain that only angry words get reported even if conflict was a minor part of a happening.

Celebrity: News and tidbits about celebrities are well-read and watched. The term celebrity extends beyond those on screen, stage and music; it also includes those in political, fashion and literary circles, to name a few. Note the difference between prominence and celebrity. The pope, secretary of state and mayor of St. Paul are prominent. Beyoncé, Jimmy Fallon and Taylor Swift are celebrities.



Dwight D. Eisenhower

Topicality

Issues that form the grist of political and social discourse tend to surface time and again; they make news. Keeping up with current events will enable you to recognize them. Some topical issues that may appear on the current national agenda:

- abortion.
- affirmative action.
- balancing the budget.
- racism.
- entitlement programs/welfare reform.
- gay rights.
- immigration policy.
- managed health care.

Write Now! Secrets of writing quickly and well

BY ROY PETER CLARK

THE POYNTER INSTITUTE FOR MEDIA STUDIES

1. High expectations can slow you down. At the beginning, tell that critical voice in the back of your head to shut up. That voice does its best work later.
2. If you find your focus in the field, you'll do a better job of collecting what you need. If you wait until you're back in the office, you'll lose time re-reporting.
3. Value the time spent rehearsing. Write the story in your head as you drive from the scene to your office.
4. After reporting, ask yourself one question: "What is the point of this story?" Use the answer to frame your lead.
5. No matter how little time you have, work from a plan, even if it's only five words.
6. Highlight materials in your notes so you can find and use your best stuff. A star next to a good quote, two stars next to your lead, might be all you need.
7. If the material fits, stuff it into a reliable form: the pyramid, hourglass, nut graph.
8. Don't be afraid to draft without looking at your notes. The story is in your head and heart, not in your notebook.
9. Trust your hands and the rush of adrenalin. Think of writing not as an intellectual exercise, but as an act of manual dexterity that produces "texterity."
10. Shoot for a "draft and a half," a quick, early version of the story that leaves time for fast revisions, fact-checking, and proof-reading.
11. Keep it short from the initial conception. You can write a haiku faster than a sonnet, a sonnet faster than an epic.
12. Begin the story as close to the end of the narrative as possible. That can foreshorten the piece and the time it takes to write it.
13. Stop writing as soon as you can. Like now.

Write Tight! Tips for Short Writing

BY CHIP SCANLAN

POYNTER REPORTING, WRITING, & EDITING GROUP LEADER

IDEA

- Brainstorm the reader's questions.
- Decide on a focus early but being willing to be flexible, to change with the information you report.

FOCUS

- Be ruthless about finding the heart of the story: an effective story has a single dominant impression.
- Address the question, "What's the story really about?" and answer it in one word.
- Ask two questions that keep track of the focus of any story: What's the news? What's the point? They address the reader's concerns: What's new here? What's this story about? Why am I reading this?
- Keep thinking through the entire process: What's this story really about and what are the essentials I must include?

REPORT

- Keep in mind the “iceberg effect.” The strength of a story is the mountain of reporting that lies underneath, the interviews, details, understanding that the writer will never see but will infuse your story with power.
- Mine for gold: With short stories you only want the best; the most illustrative anecdote, the most telling detail, the most pungent quote, the most revealing statistic.
- Look for revealing details that put people on the page. The female police officer who wears “size four steel-toe boots.” The widow who sprays her dead husband’s aftershave on her pillow. “In a good story,” says David Finkel of *The Washington Post*, “a paranoid schizophrenic doesn’t just hear imaginary voices, he hears them say, ‘Go kill a policeman.’ ”
- Use the five senses in your reporting and a few others: sense of place, sense of people, sense of time, sense of drama.

ORGANIZE

- “Think ‘short’ from the beginning. That’s a suggestion echoed in *The Elements of Style*, Strunk & White’s indispensable guide: “You raise a pup tent from one sort of vision, a cathedral from another.” Staying faithful to an 800-word length will help you jettison irrelevant information and avoid reporting detours that might be interesting but will consume valuable time.
- End it first. Once you settle on a destination, it’s easier to plan your route.
- Work the Rubik’s Cube. Move, cut, shift the elements of your story.
- Keep in mind the “Say what!?” method of story organization:
 - a. The Zinger, the lead, has an image or detail that draws people in the story.
 - b. The Clarifier explains the Zinger.
 - c. The Nut Graph sums up the story and broadens the story’s context.
 - d. The Accordion contains bulk of the narrative.
 - e. The Echo is an ending featuring a strong quote or image that echoes the lead and leaves the reader with a strong emotion.

DRAFT

- Write early: Find out what you know, what you need to know
- Write the end first. Most reporters concentrate on the lead. When you’re writing short, especially, the ending is more important for time management and psychological reasons.
- Find a narrative line
- Put your notes aside before you start to write. “Notes are like Velcro,” says Jane Harrigan of the University of New Hampshire. “As you try to skim them, they ensnare you, and pretty soon you can’t see the story for the details.” Her advice: Repeat over and over, “The story is not in my notes. The story is in my head.”

REWRITE

- Raise the bar: is it good enough?
- Cut “like a surgeon,” as poet Anne Sexton says. “Down to the bone.”
- Select, don’t compress: Wholes, not parts

Role play the reader. Step back and pretend you’re reading your story for the first time. Does the lead make you want to keep reading? Does it take you too long to learn what the story is about and why it’s important? If not, are you intrigued enough to keep reading anyway? What questions do you have about the story? Are they answered in the order you would logically ask them?

Asimov's Dirty Dozen Elements Of a Standard News Story

BY NANETTE ASIMOV
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

As editors, we often must trim stories to fit. Our approach to this is dictated by who wrote the story and what use we make of the copy.

At one end of the spectrum is the "inverted pyramid" story taken from a wire service that is to be used in a digest along with other stories. These stories are trimmed to just the most important or interesting facts, most often from the bottom up.

At the other end is the complex feature written by a staff member. These stories often take a prominent place on the front of a newspaper section or as a spread in a magazine. Such stories must be trimmed with care.

In between we will find a variety of stories and uses. Sometimes we must take a more complex story off the wire and trim it severely. At other times, we might take a story carefully written by a staff member and cut it down for a different edition.

The inverted pyramid is written to accommodate trimming from the bottom up. It came about with the invention of the telegraph and the coming of the wire services.

Chip Scanlan of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies writes that the expense of using the telegraph caused newspapers to develop "a new kind of writing that departed from the flowery language of the 19th century; it was concise, stripped of opinion and detail.

The fledgling Associated Press incorporated the style of writing stories that "would be brief, tailored for a national audience and deliberately stripped of the partisanship that characterized American newspapers until that time," Scanlan writes.

Scanlan discounts the idea that reporters used the inverted pyramid because they were afraid the telegraph wire would be cut before they were done transmitting. But the more flowery style of writing continued during the Civil War.

When an editor trims an inverted pyramid story, he or she should read the copy to make sure nothing important is near the end. For example, in a story about Congress passing a bill, the votes of representatives from the newspaper's area might be buried. These should be salvaged and moved up.

Stories written in a narrative style are harder to trim and require careful news judgment.

Consider this an outline of a narrative news story. Each number represents a new paragraph, with the order somewhat flexible. Some elements can be added to. Some can be dropped, though never the "lede" or the "nut graph." These are not firm rules, but the ingredients of a successful story.

We spell it "lede" and "graph" (for paragraph) out of tradition; in the days of hot lead type, intentional misspellings were used so printers in the backshop could recognize instructions meant for them, and would know not to let them be printed in the newspaper.

1. First sentence ("lede" or Zinger)

Make the first sentence the NEWS. No dilly-dallying. News is the newest thing. Was there a vote? Did someone die? Was someone appointed? Was there a protest? Is big money being offered? Wasted? Time for background later. Lede should be SHORT, yet must tell who, what, when and where. Don't overload it with details.

EXAMPLE: The San Francisco school board voted unanimously last night to raise the hurdle for high school graduation by adding more mandatory math and science classes.

IMPORTANT: Recognize news; don't bury it. Sometimes the news is more than one thing. If the teachers union had threatened to sue the board, then your lede must include that key fact in a single, tight sentence: Despite the threat of a lawsuit by teachers, the San Francisco school board voted unanimously last night to require more math and science classes in high school.

2. Second sentence clarifies with more details about the first. Save details for the nut graph. Avoid packing them into the lede:

EXAMPLE: The board voted 7–0 on the proposal by Superintendent Jill Rojas to require high school students to take a third year of math and science; a second year of foreign language and the arts; more health classes and fewer electives, such as wood shop.

3. Sexy quote.

In newswriting, we do not want to postpone bringing real people into the story. Select the quote that best illustrates the points made in the lede and second sentence. When out gathering news, a reporter should remember to listen for that “sexy quote,” or ask the question that is likely to produce it.

EXAMPLE: “It’s shameful to think that in the 21st century, a student can graduate from a California high school after completing only two years of math and two years of science,” Rojas told the board. “Four-year colleges do not seek to admit students with such minimal requirements. Doors are closed to some students before they are 18 years old.”

4. The nut graph.

In this essential paragraph — or paragraphs — the writer steps back from the immediate events to provide context. This graph tells how the current news fits into the larger picture. It tells what’s been happening lately or elsewhere, so the reader knows why story matters.

EXAMPLE: The school board’s action mirrors efforts around the country to raise academic standards. Embarrassed by American students’ poor performance on international achievement tests in recent years, and pressured by colleges to produce better-prepared graduates, public educators nationwide are turning back to basics. And that means students everywhere are facing more lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic — and less art, music and perennial favorites like wood shop.

5. Begin the accordion with a summary graph of what’s to come.

Here the writer lays out the varying points of view, foreshadowing the details of the rest of the story. This summary is key to fairness: No one’s point of view is paramount if all are summarized toward the beginning of the story.

EXAMPLE: At the school board meeting in San Francisco, several teachers said the plan was long overdue. But others were furious. Many who teach the highest levels of math and science predicted that the quality of their rigorous courses will inevitably be watered down if students of all levels are forced to take them. A number of teachers also warned that dropout rates would rise if art and shop classes are neglected.

6. Supporting quotes, in backwards order.

This quote should support the last point of view summarized in the previous graph.

EXAMPLE: “I’m very worried,” said Sylvester Smith, a 10th-grade English teacher. “You board members don’t realize that wood shop keeps kids coming to school.”

7. Transition, then another supporting quote.

Quotes from two people should never be back to back. A transition is needed as a bridge from one idea to another. Then follow up with the relevant quote. Quotes are usually in a separate paragraph to set them off.

EXAMPLE: For months, several of the district’s top teachers have spoken out against the superintendent’s plan to raise graduation requirements. At school board meetings, those teachers have said the plan looks better on paper than in reality because many students are ill-prepared to do well in higher-level math and science classes.

“This won’t help poor students do better,” said Jon James, a chemistry teacher. “It will hurt the students who do well.”

8. Transition, then final supporting quote.

Notice that supporting quotes go in reverse from the way they were summarized in No. 5, the summary graph.

EXAMPLE: Not all teachers opposed the plan, and some were downright enthusiastic.

“I teach in middle school,” said Mary Mustard, “and I think the new requirements will give students a reason to study harder in the earlier grades.”

9. Real-time color, anecdotes, examples.

This need not be confined to this section. “Color” means brief descriptions of sights, sounds and mood.

EXAMPLE: School board members debated the graduation plan for almost 90 minutes. Restless students, teachers and parents waited for the vote, the sound of their private conversations rising with their impatience. As the din from their chatter grew louder, board members called for quiet and even ejected some offenders from the auditorium.

10. The past

Is there additional history that can help the reader understand more about the subject? Has this sort of thing happened before? How is this time different or similar?

EXAMPLE: It has been 20 years since San Francisco’s high school graduation standards were raised and 10 years since they were lowered again.

11. The future

Wind up the story by looking toward the future. What is the next step? Or if an anecdote is used up toward the top, a useful technique is to refer back to the beginning, or to the anecdote, to look to the future.

EXAMPLE: After the vote, a delighted Superintendent Rojas said she plans to propose new academic requirements in the lower grades, too.

12. The echo

Usually a short, high-impact sentence. It may be a poignant or telling quote. In some stories, the echo can be something that brings the reader back to an idea or anecdote told at the beginning. Or it may be a surprising bit of information that works best at the end.

EXAMPLE: Turning to a group of supportive teachers who lingered to chat, Rojas suggested that calculus be taught as early as the fourth grade. The happy teachers frowned collectively. “Well,” said Rojas. “It’s just an idea.”

The Name of the Dog

The Bigger the Story, the More Important the Details

BY ROY PETER CLARK

THE POYNTER INSTITUTE FOR MEDIA STUDIES

One of my favorite survivor stories out of the World Trade Center disaster is this gem from the AP: “Mike Hingson, who is blind, made his way to safety from the 78th floor of the World Trade Center during the terrorist attacks thanks to Roselle, his 3-year-old yellow Labrador guide dog.”

We learn from Hingson that “Roselle did a good job. She stayed focused. We stayed to the side. We smelled a lot of jet fuel on the way down. ... Some people had a lot of problems breathing.”

For about 20 years now, teachers at Poynter have been preaching this lesson: “Get the name of the dog.” Never was that lesson more important than in the coverage of disasters in which dogs are used for rescue and security.

The Poynter adage is meant to stand for a wider truth: that powerful writing depends upon detail. Sol Stein calls the effect “Particularity.” Writes Stein, “It is not just detail that distinguishes good writing; it is detail that individualizes. I call it ‘particularity.’ Once you’re used to spotting it — and spotting its absence — you will have one of the best possible means of improving your writing markedly.”

An excellent story distributed by Knight Ridder describes the plight of more than 300 dogs working at ground zero: “Lacerated paws. Burns. Dehydration. Overheating. Irritated eyes. Stress.” Halfway through the story, the writer achieves particularity:

“It’s just hazardous to the nth degree,” said Erick Robertson, 36, who drove from Oakhurst, Calif., near Yosemite, to offer the services of his independently trained search dog, Porkchop. Since Sunday, they have worked about eight hours a day.

Wednesday morning, Robertson knelt by Porkchop’s side as the year-old Australian shepherd got a checkup. Puncture wounds — suffered when a police dog bit him in the back — were tender to the touch. The dog’s gentle green eyes were red from the acrid dust. And he was favoring one leg, which doctors tended to after carefully snipping away three layers of bandages and dog boots.

When Porkchop catches the scent of human remains, he signals his master either with three barks or a motion that resembles a sneeze. Robertson said his dog has been making as many as a dozen recoveries per shift.

“I’m very proud of him. He’s 100 percent out there,” Robertson said, nuzzling Porkchop as the exhausted, dehydrated dog received fluids intravenously. “It just blows me away.”

Of course, the name of the dog says as much about the human namer as it does about the beast. Consider the difference between “Roselle” and “Porkchop.”

In covering a story with so many characters and so broad a landscape, journalists would do well to remember the power of the particular: the color of the rosary beads, a family photograph recovered from the rubble, the name of the dog.



Erick Robertson and Porkchop at Ground Zero, Sept. 19, 2001. (Suzanne Plunkett, Associated Press)

The good editor

The good editor keeps in mind three ideals:

1. Make the simplest fix possible. Some editors see one word that is a mistake and use it as an excuse to rewrite a sentence.
2. For close calls, let the writer's words stand. The editor may not like the sound of what is written, but the writer prevails in matters of taste.
3. When in doubt, seek help by asking questions. Others on the desk are the editor's best resource.

Reasons to change copy

The good editor has a valid reason for every change in a story that he or she makes, including:

- **Accuracy.** This is the No. 1 reason for changing copy. It includes "killer mistakes," usually errors of fact, as well as spelling, grammar and punctuation. Writers appreciate changes that make the story accurate.
- **Clarity.** If the editor doesn't understand it, will the reader? Problems of clarity often require the editor to ask the reporter what he or she means. Be careful not to "fix" something that is unclear by making it clearly wrong. Check first!
- **Simplicity.** Multisyllabic words are more difficult to read and understand; that may be why the military and government are so fond of them. The rule is, Use the shorter word when no meaning is lost. Sort out the double-talk.
- **Brevity.** Long, complex sentences are difficult to read and to understand. Studies have shown that the optimum average sentence length for readability is 20 words, in a pleasing mix of long and short sentences.
- **Consistency.** News stories must be consistent. Figures must add up. If the lead says five men were arrested, five must be named. Consistency also has to do with style. All news organizations have rules about using figures, about capitalization and about abbreviations, among other things. *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* is the most commonly used style guide, but many larger news organizations have their own style books.
- **Coherence.** For a story to hang together, it must have smooth transitions. It may be as simple as finding the right conjunction. It may require making sure quotes are attributed logically or less frequently. In extreme cases, it may require shifting the order of paragraphs.

Rewriting vs. editing

As soon as an editor decides to abandon the strategy of making the simple fix and decides to rewrite a part of a story, he or she runs the risk of introducing errors or changing the essential meaning of the original. Remember that reporters are subject to many limitations and pressures; respect what they do and they will respect their editors.