What is news?

Editors, reporters and readers have asked that question for centuries.

In every newsroom, journalists constantly apply what's called news judgment: the ability to determine which stories are most interesting and important to readers.

But which readers? To a 13-year-old boy, the day's biggest story might be the city's new skateboarding ban. To a 70-year-old woman, it might be a new Social Security proposal. The teenager doesn't care about Social Security; the retiree won't read about skateboarding. Whose news interests should prevail?

Take the page at left, for instance. How did those stories get there? Who decided that those were the topics most worthy of front-page prominence? Denis Finley, editor of The Virginian-Pilot, explains the paper's choices:

1. We use the top of the page to drive single-copy sales. Normally, sports doesn't cut it, but when Tiger Woods comes back after eight months, well . . .

2. The lead story. Right now, there's nothing more important than the financial state of the nation. Obama's budget represents a huge philosophical shift for the country and seeks to deliver on promises he made in his campaign. Our duty is to break it down so it's easy to understand how the budget affects each person.

3. "Unsolved" is a talker. Readers ask most often for these three things: Teach me something; give me something to talk about; watch out for my interests. This mystery story about an unsolved murder gives the reader a little break from the hard news.

4. Survey after survey indicates that health stories are in our readers' top five. This story is a seemingly obvious, but important, finding that tells people how to lose weight and falls into the "teach me something" category.

5. Everybody likes to see justice brought against wrongdoers, especially when the wrongdoer is a slimy swindler. And this story has all the elements: vanity, skullduggery, and ultimately, failure.

6. Coming Sunday. We push the Sunday paper whenever possible and often save our best work for that day.

So here you see one of the basic facts of life for newspaper reporters: They do the research and they write the stories, but it's their editors who ultimately decide how successful they are — and where their stories run.
IS IT NEWS? THAT VARIES NEWSROOM TO NEWSROOM

The New York Times runs "All the News That’s Fit to Print," but what fits there might not fit quite right here. Here’s how three mythical Mudflap news outlets might decide which of these stories to run:

**THE 5 O’CLOCK TV NEWSCAST**

We try to cover a wide range of topics, with a heavy emphasis on local news, sports and weather. Here’s how our news director would usually vote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE STORY</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>REVIEW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STORM WARNING</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Readers really eat up scary weather stories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COUNTY FAIR</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Kids + cows + carnival rides = great video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUITION HIKE</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>If time is tight, may only merit a brief mention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLLEYBALL BILL</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Meaningless ceremonial baloney.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLU SHOTS</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Good images; strong appeal for older viewers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOLIVIA BUS CRASH</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>No. Let the network newscast deal with this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIRL SCOUT COOKIES</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Sure. Viewers find this stuff irresistibile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTTERY WINNER</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Jackpot’s not big or juicy enough to be a story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAY-Z SEX CHANGE</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Untrustworthy. Unsavory. No local connection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE SMALL COMMUNITY WEEKLY**

We have limited resources and a tight regional focus — local people, local sports, issues that affect our community. Here’s how our editors would usually vote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE STORY</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>REVIEW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STORM WARNING</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>We’ll wait and see if there’s any local damage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COUNTY FAIR</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Let’s go whole hog. Lots of extra photos, too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUITION HIKE</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Other media will cover it; do older readers care?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLLEYBALL BILL</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Cheesy public-relations stunt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLU SHOTS</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Good consumer story, possible Page One.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOLIVIA BUS CRASH</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Sorry, we don’t run international news.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIRL SCOUT COOKIES</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>This will make an adorable story, with photos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTTERY WINNER</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>People win bigger jackpots all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAY-Z SEX CHANGE</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>None of us have ever heard of this guy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE ONLINE CAMPUS NEWSPAPER**

Our Web site focuses exclusively on campus life, student sports and academics, with a little local news tossed in. Here’s how our editors would usually vote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE STORY</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>REVIEW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STORM WARNING</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>We’ll wait and see if there’s any local damage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COUNTY FAIR</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>No thanks, unless eg students are involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUITION HIKE</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Strong student interest. Give this story big play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLLEYBALL BILL</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Nobody cares, not even volleyball players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLU SHOTS</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>How soon until shots are available to students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOLIVIA BUS CRASH</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Not even juicy enough for our “World Briefs.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIRL SCOUT COOKIES</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Ugh. Please. This is SO not interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTTERY WINNER</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Appealing campus human-interest feature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAY-Z SEX CHANGE</td>
<td>☑</td>
<td>Won’t run it, but we’ll e-mail it to all our friends.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WANT TO TRY A SIMILAR NEWS JUDGMENT EXERCISE? TEST YOURSELF → 34

WHAT MAKES A STORY INTERESTING TO READERS?

Everybody’s different — and what’s fascinating to you might be boring to me. Still, for a story to qualify as “news,” it usually contains at least one of these values:

- **IMPACT:** Does the story matter to readers? Will it have an effect on their lives or their pocketbooks? The bigger the consequences, the bigger the story becomes.
- **IMMEDIACY:** Has this story just happened? Is it about to happen? Timeliness is crucial, especially when you’re competing against other news outlets.
- **PROXIMITY:** How close is this story? Nearby events will matter more to readers than events in other cities, states or countries usually.
- **PROMINENCE:** Does this story involve a well-known public figure or celebrity? If so, readers are bound to be more concerned or curious.
- **NOVELTY:** Is something new, odd or surprising going on? (Did a man bite a dog?) Readers enjoy news that’s intriguing and unexpected.
- **CONFLICT:** Is there a clash of power! A political battle? A sports rivalry? Reporters and readers both enjoy dramatic storytelling.
- **EMOTIONS:** Does this story make us sad? Happy? Angry? We all respond emotionally to human-interest stories that are poignant, comical or inspiring.
What readers read

Delivering news and information effectively is part art, part science.

Everyone consumes the news in a different way. Different news media even give consumers different names: TV viewers. Radio listeners. Newspaper readers. And Web sites, which are used for viewing, listening and reading, call their users . . . . readers.

Since this is a book on newswriting, we’ll focus primarily on readers. And as journalists have done for centuries, we’ll relentlessly ask: What do readers want? Serious issues or light gossip? Long narratives or short summaries? Words or pictures? Meat or fluff?

Smart journalists tailor their material to the reading habits and news appetites of their audience. And as new media transform the news media, it’s essential to monitor how effectively you’re communicating. What good is a story if nobody actually reads it?

SO HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT READERS READ?

◆ WE ASK THEM.
◆ WE WATCH THEM.

FOCUS GROUPS: Readers convene in small groups to critique a publication or react to new prototypes. A moderator guides the discussion while editors eavesdrop via camera or one-way mirror.

Advantages: Ordinary folks offer unfiltered opinions about what you’re doing right and wrong; it’s a good way to test new ideas and revise strategies.

Disadvantages: A handful of people may not accurately reflect the majority view. Worse, one or two loudmouths can sway everyone else’s opinions.

PHOTO, MAIL AND WEB SURVEYS: Researchers compile a series of questions (How often do you read this publication? Which topics are most important to you?), then distribute questionnaires or conduct phone interviews with respondents who have been selected and screened to ensure the survey’s accuracy.

Advantages: Surveys provide detailed data; the more questions are asked, the more comprehensive the findings. Results are generally reliable and accurate.

Disadvantages: Respondents lie (“Yes, I always read editorials”). And editors often don’t know what to do with statistical results. Suppose 33 percent of your readers want more crime coverage. Is that a mandate? Or a minority?

MONITORING DEVICES:
 Cameras embedded in computer screens track users’ eye movements as they read Web pages (above). Cameras can monitor readers’ eyes as they scan newspaper pages, too.

Advantages: The eyes don’t lie. We can see where people actually look.

Disadvantages: Testing occurs in unnatural conditions, pressuring readers to read differently than they might if they were outside the lab.

OTHER WAYS TO GAUGE READER RESPONSE:

◆ Ethnography. Acting much like anthropologists, researchers study the habits and rituals of media consumers (often observing them in the field) to learn what, where, when and especially why readers read what they read.

◆ Sales/Web views. It’s simple math: Track which papers sell more than others, or which Web pages generate more traffic.

◆ Reader response. Monitor phone calls, e-mails and letters to the editor in response to topics and stories (both pro and con).

◆ Anecdotal feedback. It’s not always trustworthy, but reporters rely on word of mouth to gauge which stories strike a chord with sources, friends and colleagues.

HOW TO CONDUCT A QUICK, CHEAP, SEMI-SCIENTIFIC READER SURVEY

STEP 1 Recruit a dozen volunteers. (The more people you enlist, the more reliable your survey will be.) Aim for a representative mix of readers by age, gender, lifestyle, etc.

STEP 2 Ask your volunteers to read the next issue of your paper as they typically do — but tell them to circle everything they read with a dark felt-tip pen as they go through the paper. That may mean just a headline, a photo caption or the first two paragraphs of a story. (By “reading,” we mean processing words in a meaningful way, not just glancing.)

STEP 3 Ask your recruits to do this for several issues of the paper. If you’re a daily, ask them to read for a week; if you’re a weekly, have them read two or three issues. Collect the papers from them when they’re done.

STEP 4 Mark each pile so you know who’s who (i.e., “25-year-old male grad student”). Then ask: What did they consistently read? What didn’t they read? What topics or story treatments had the most (or least) success? Identify patterns and problems. Make changes, then try another survey.

A revealing page from a reader survey at an Omaha paper, showing how people often skip over text to view reader-friendly bullet items instead.
I READERS ARE IN A HURRY

In the past, people devoted a big block of time — say, half an hour — to reading a newspaper or viewing a news cast. But in today’s sped-up, plugged-in world, we often absorb news in chunks throughout the day, in a steady series of upgrades rather than one big download.

"Readers use a wide variety of media, and there is a finite amount of time in their day," says Mary Nesbitt, managing director of the Readership Institute, a media research center at Northwestern University. "There is no dearth of news and information, but there is a dearth of time.

"You are competing for their attention, so stories need to be clear, focused and to the point."

2 READERS HAVE SHORT ATTENTION SPANS

"Nine times out of 10, readers prefer short stories to long stories," Nesbitt says.

Why? They're impatient. They're swamped by a sea of information, much of it meaningless. They're distracted, too: According to a 2003 study, 74 percent of Americans regularly watch TV and read the newspaper at the same time.

It's frustrating to admit it, but many readers just can't seem to process long, complicated stories. So what's a reporter to do? "Start with the idea that the story will be short, then think about whether something longer is needed," says Michele McLellan, director of Tomorrow's Workforce, a newsroom training center. "Journalists often get this backward."

3 READERS WANT STORIES THAT PERSONALLY CONNECT

"Readers want to see themselves in the newspaper," McLellan says. Unfortunately, though, "newspapers focus heavily on the power structure and that means middle-aged, white, male, official perspectives dominate."

That's why successful reporters craft stories that focus on you, the reader, instead of them, those politicians and strangers over there. "Institutional stories — stories about the actions of city council, the planning commission or the school board, for instance — are ignored," Nesbitt says, "unless the reporter makes it clear why it really matters. People like to feel smarter about things that matter to them. Understand what people really care about, then in your work help them to smarten up."

4 READERS WANT STORIES TOLD IN A COMPELLING WAY

Dry, detailed summaries of news events are a staple of journalism, but if that's all you give readers — an endless parade of facts, paragraph after paragraph after paragraph — they'll sap their stamina.

Given a choice, readers generally prefer stories: real narrative dramas starring real people. Research shows that feature-style writing — with more personality, more why should I care attitude — often has more appeal than standard, "inverted pyramid"-style news writing. ▼

Readers will always want solid, accessible facts. If you're smart, though, you'll develop a versatile repertoire of reporting approaches. "Readers respond to a variety of story forms," Nesbitt says. "If a story can be more effectively told with a bulleted list, a series of photos, a Q-and-A format or a graphic, so be it."

5 THERE'S MORE THAN JUST ONE TYPE OF READER

Some readers are hard-core news junkies. Others are casual browsers. Some love long, in-depth profiles. Others hate them. Some read the paper simply out of fear that they'll miss something and feel left out of conversations. (Researchers call them "anxiety-driven" readers.)

Can you satisfy everyone? No. But keep your ideas fresh. Keep your topics diverse. Stay out of rut. And remember, readers who call or write to say your story offended or enthralled them do not necessarily speak for the majority. Don't let random criticism intimidate you, but don't let flattering fan mail steer you into a safe, predictable rut, either.
What it’s called

Want to sound like a reporter? Talk the talk.

When you start writing for a publication, it might be a daily (printed every morning), a weekly (printed, say, every Wednesday) or a newsletter published once a month.

It might be a mainstream broadsheet (The New York Times), an alternative tabloid (The Village Voice) or some specialty publication (Fur & Feather Magazine).

If you’re a reporter, your stories will be spiked or killed if they’re unpublishable. If they’re too long — if you’ve written a thumb sucker or a goat-choker — an editor may cut or trim a few grafs (paragraphs). If a sloppy editor ruins your story, you can moan that it’s been butchered; if it runs way back on page 17, you can groan that it’s been buried.

Here’s a roundup of other, less grisly terms you’ll find in the world of print. Later in this book, we’ll learn the lingo used by radio, TV and online journalists.

THE PARTS OF A STORY

Not all publications use the same jargon, but there’s agreement on most terms. Here are some common elements found in a typical story.

**BYLINE**
The reporter’s name, often followed by credentials. Many papers require that stories be a certain length — or written by a staffer — to warrant a byline.

**DATELINE**
Gives the location of a story that occurred outside the paper’s usual coverage area.

**LEAD**
(also spelled lede.)
The opening of a story. Here, this news lead condenses the key facts of the event into the first paragraph.

**QUOTE**
Someone’s exact words, usually spoken to the reporter during an interview.

**ATTRIBUTION**
A phrase that tells readers the source of a quote OR the source of information used in the story.

**FREeway closed as ornery oinker hogs traffic**

*A pig named Mama falls onto the freeway, causing hours of commuter chaos*

*By Susan Payneso*  
Staff reporter

-**PORTLAND** — Westbound traffic on Interstate 84 was backed up for nearly five miles early Monday when “Mama,” a 600-pound hog on the way to slaughter, fell from the back of a truck.

For two frustrating hours, the sow refused to budge.

Fred Mickeison told police that he was taking six sows and a boar from his farm in Lyle, Wash., to a slaughterhouse in Carlton when Mama escaped.

“I heard the tailgate fall off, and I looked back and saw her standing in the road,” Mickeison said with a sigh. “I thought: ‘Oh, no. We’ve got some real trouble now.’”

Mama was “pretty lively and loud” when she hit the ground, Mickeison said, lumbering between cars and causing havoc on a foggy day.

There were no accidents, police said.

After about an hour of chasing the pig with the help of police, Mickeison began mulling over his options, which included having a veterinarian tranquilize the hog.

About 10 a.m., a crew of highway workers arrived and decided to use a front-end loader to pick up the sow and load her back into the truck.

“That pig was in no hurry to move,” said Wally Benson, the highway crew chief. “I think she knew where she was being taken, and she was in no hurry to get there.”

Even the police were sympathetic to the pig’s plight.

“That pig really honked off a lot of commuters,” said trooper Tracy Collins — a vegetarian.

“But I was sad to see her go.”

Sue Payneso covers traffic and transportation issues in Oregon and Washington. She can be reached at suepayneso@news.com.

**HEADLINES**
The big type, written by copy editors, that summarizes the story.

**PHOTOS**
Photos are either shot by staff photographers or purchased from national wire services. Most newspaper photos run in black-and-white, since color printing is more expensive; online, most photos are in color.

**PHOTO CREDIT**
A line stating the photographer’s name (often adding the paper he or she works for.)

**LIFTOUT QUOTE**
(also called a pullquote.)
A quotation from the story that’s given special graphic emphasis.

**TAGLINE**
Contact information for the reporter, enabling readers to provide feedback.
THE PARTS OF A PAGE
Join stories together and you create a full newspaper page. And at most newspapers, no page is more important than Page One, which showcases the most compelling stories and images. Here's a look at the components you might find on a typical front page:

FLAG
This is the one front-page element that never changes: the name of the paper, set in special type.

EDITION
Daily papers often print one edition for street sales, another for home-delivery to subscribers.

INFOGRAPHIC
These informational graphics display key facts from the story in a visual way. At big papers, they're created by artists; at smaller papers, they're produced by editors or reporters.

DECK
A subheadline, written by copy editors, that supplements information in the main headline.

TEXT
The actual story. When text is set into columns of type, it's measured in inches. This story runs for about seven inches before it jumps.

JUMP LINE
When a long story is continued on another page, editors run this line to tell readers where the story continues, or jumps.

LAYOUT
This is also called a "skyscraper." This is designed to grab readers' attention so they'll buy the paper and read this story in the sports section.

WIRE STORY
A story written by a reporter working for another publication or a national news service, then sent by telegraph, in the old days, nationwide.

MUG SHOT
A close-up photo of someone's face. These usually run small — just an inch or two wide.

CENTERPIECE
(also called a "lead story"). Editors decided that this was the top story of the day — either because of newsworthiness or reader appeal — so it gets the best play and the biggest headline on Page One. Notice how this story isn't about a current event; it's a type of feature story called a "follow-up.

INDEX
One of the last page elements that copy editors produce before sending the paper off to the press.

LOGO
A small, specially designed title (often with art) used for labeling special stories or series.

NEWS WEB PAGES use many of these same terms but add a few of their own. For a closer look ▶159
Just the facts

When you write a story, you must try to be objective. Truthful. Fair.

You can’t just pull material from your memory, or quote your friends, or make pronouncements about the way things ought to be. You must be factual — which means basing your stories on the best facts you can find.

Good reporters respect the integrity of facts. When you select them carefully and arrange them skillfully, you can communicate without inserting your own opinions. For instance, this fact by itself seems trivial: Percentage of Americans who can name two freedoms granted by the First Amendment: 28.

But now add this fact: Percentage of Americans who can name two members of “The Simpsons” cartoon family: 52.

Together, those two facts lead to an unspoken conclusion — that Americans pay more attention to TV characters than to government. True? Arguably. But it’s a good example of how journalism should work: The facts tell the story, and readers draw their own conclusions.

AND NOW, POSSIBLY THE WORST STORY EVER WRITTEN

How many different kinds of errors does it take to screw up a news story? Here’s a frightening (but fictional) example:

2. Bad math alert! The dorm is open 40 weeks per year; that means each resident ate 20 burgers a week. Likely? No. And one carrot does not weigh one pound, so this second statistic is bogus and misleading.
3. This is pseudoscience. What specific “research” has proven that meat is bad? Which cancer rates are lower in Japan? Aren’t other factors (stress, lifestyle, environment) also responsible for causing cancer?
4. Inserting religious opinion into any news story is a sure way to offend readers. Believe whatever you want, politically or religiously, but never try to pass it off as news.
5. June only has 30 days. A mistake as simple (and dumb) as this can cast doubt on every other fact in the story.

Campus vegetarians will hold a puke-in at Turkel Hall Friday to protest the dormitory’s unhealthy food policies. All students are encouraged to attend.

“The menu in that dorm is just meat, meat, meat,” said Ben Dover, the highly respected president of Vegetarians Opposed to Meat in Turkel (VOMT), “That’s why so many Turkel residents have being getting sick this year.”

According to Dover, Turkel’s 200 residents were fed more than 160,000 hamburgers last year while eating just 1,000 pounds of carrots. In other words, a typical student ate just one carrot for every 160 burgers.

Dover said the protest was sparked after a student worker in Turkel’s cafeteria spotted a crate of beef labeled “Grade D: Fit for Human Consumption.” Many colleges try to save money by buying Grade D meat products, which include brains, skin and testicles.

Research has shown that a diet heavy in meat is bad for you. In Japan, where rice is a staple in people’s diets, there is a much lower incidence of cancer. My own health has improved dramatically since I stopped eating meat last year.

Even spiritual masters like Gandhi and the Buddha proved that a vegetarian lifestyle brings you closer to God.

“Our puke-in has received letters of support from famous vegetarians like Opal Winfrey and Dwight Yokum,” Dover added.

The event begins at noon Friday, June 31, outside the Turkel Hall cafeteria.

Encouraged to attend? By whom? This smacks of partisan cheerleading.

Highly respected? In whose opinion? Objective newswriting should avoid vague, biased generalizations like this.

 Says who? According to what statistic? It’s irresponsible to quote an allegation like that without adding facts to support it (or a counterargument to refute it). In fact, because this story relyso entirely on just one source — Dover — it’s far too unbalanced to be trustworthy.

There is no such thing as “Grade D” meat. In fact, this entire paragraph is an urban legend: folklore popularly believed to be true. A good reporter would have checked out this story and discovered that it’s a fabrication.

Never inject yourself into a news story. “My” opinions and anecdotes about “me” are irrelevant and unprofessional.

By misspelling Oprah and Yosemite, the reporter undermines the credibility of this entire story. (Note, too, how many times the reporter has flubbed the spelling of Turkel.)

Credibility — more than news itself — is our stock in trade. An informative story is important. A dramatic story is desirable. An honest story is imperative.

David Shaw
Los Angeles Times media writer

“What matters to me most is the truth. That’s the only thing that matters in journalism. The fundamental reason you’re reading journalism is because it’s truthful. Of course, everyone believes their own version of the truth. If you believe it, it’s true. So truth is in the same place it will always be: the hazy middle.”

Marryn Keizer
Chief of research at US Weekly

“Facts are stupid things.”
Ronald Reagan, misquoting John Adams, who said “Facts are stubborn things.”

“Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts.”
Daniel Patrick Moynihan, scholar and U.S. senator

“We are reporters and reporters of the facts — not judges of the behavior we describe.”
Alfred C. Kinsey, founder, Institute for Sex Research

“Every fact has the same weight. If you screw up on something small, trivial, then you cast doubt on the whole piece. We trudge through every inch of it because once you’ve lost your credibility, that’s it.”
Sara Lippincott, editor and fact-checker, The New Yorker

“For one ‘Talk of the Town’ piece, I had to determine the number of Ritz crackers in a huge New Jersey supermarket. I called the general manager of the store, who then shouted to an assistant over their PA system. The assistant went to count the number of Ritz boxes on the floor while the manager and I tried to estimate the number of crackers in a box. We then went through the same process with hot dog packages.”
Peter Canby, fact-checker for The New Yorker
SO WHERE DO OPINIONS BELONG IN JOURNALISM?

Ideally, journalism provides a maximum of information with a minimum of opinion. But isn’t it sometimes appropriate to add emotion and attitude to newswriting? Doesn’t complete objectivity suck the life out of stories? Where do you draw the line?

An earthquake measuring 7.4 on the Richter scale shook western Japan on Sunday, forcing hundreds to evacuate as quake-generated tsunami waves approached. (Reuters)

Battered by the recession and the deepest budget deficits in decades, a large majority of states are slicing into their social safety nets — often crippling preventive efforts that officials say would save money over time. (The New York Times)

Tom Brady was uncannily accurate as usual, throwing for 335 yards and three touchdowns, but that wouldn’t have been enough if not for two big plays by a defense that had been pushed around all night. (The Associated Press)

The Iraq fiasco masks the magnitude of the destruction this presidency has visited both on the country in general and the G.O.P. in particular. (Frank Rich in The New York Times)

Shamelessly devoid of intelligence, interesting characters, scenes or gore, “Alien vs. Predator” is a concept that fails to deliver on any of what made the original films so great. (Williamette Week)

This news story is straightforward, factual and unemotional — even though this event resulted in deaths and injuries. The reporter makes no attempt to over dramatize the situation or to philosophize about the human tragedy.

In news analysis stories like this one, reporters must be careful not to inject their own political views. It’s OK to use colorful verbs if they’re accurate (“battered,” “slicing,” “crippling”), but opinions should be expressed only by people quoted in the story.

Sports stories often add flavor and attitude to the reporting. Like a play-by-play announcer, this reporter blends fact (“335 yards”) with interpretation (“uncannily accurate as usual”). Sports fans — unlike readers of hard news — accept some colorful spin on their stories.

Opinion columns must be truthful, but they can be partisan and passionate, too, like this excerpt from a column critical of George Bush’s handling of the Iraq war. Readers understand that this is commentary, not news.

This movie review doesn’t pull any punches. And that’s what readers expect from critics, whether they’re reviewing music, food, drama or video games. Reviewers, like columnists, are expected to mouth off in provocative ways.

Distorting the news with your opinions is as damaging — and unprofessional — as defacing a photograph. Still need convincing? Read the following excerpt from the Staunton Spectator, Oct. 7, 1862. This is how a typical Virginia newspaper reported that President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves. Here’s what results when reporters dispense with facts:

L I N C O L N ’ S F I E N D I S H P R O C L A M A T I O N

Since the time our first parents were expelled from Paradise, and

“They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,

Through Eden took their solitary way,”

there has not been as much joy in Pandemonium as at this time. The Arch-Friend in the regions of

woe “grins horribly a ghastly smile,” for he and his

emissaries upon earth — the extreme abolitionists — have succeeded in prevailing upon “Old Abe” to

issue a proclamation of emancipation which will send

a thrill of horror through all civilized nations. ... 

Before he committed this act of atrocity, in reply to the Committee sent by a meeting of the “Christians (!) of all denominations” of Chicago, who were, at

the instigation of Satan, urging upon him to

perpetrate it, he said that “he had been considering it

night and day for some time ....

In a word, the devil triumphed, and Lincoln issued

his proclamation, which has “crowned the pyramid of his infamies with an acrocych abhorred of men, and

at which even demons might shudder.”

After the Committee of abolitionists from

Chicago had retired, and when he was in some

perplexity as to the course he should adopt, Satan,

his potential ally, “squat like a toad at his ear,”

addressed him, as Milton represents Death as
dressing Sin within the gates of Hell....

Think you can write a better lead? Try the

exercise on page 66.
The five W's

Facts usually fall into these main groups.

And your success as a journalist depends upon your ability to keep your facts straight. In the early 1900s, signs were posted in the newsroom of Joseph Pulitzer's New York World that shouted:

ACCURACY! ACCURACY! ACCURACY!
THE FACTS — THE COLOR — THE FACTS!

Now, you can argue about the number of W’s here. (Are there four? Or five? Does how count as a W?)

But you can’t argue that good journalism combines facts and color, as Pulitzer observed. By “color,” he meant description and flavor. But in the example at right, we’ll take “color” even more literally:

No, we’re not talking about that legendary 1960s rock band, The Who — although we could be, if we were writing a story about classic rockers. And that story might be popular, too, because readers love stories that focus on people: Celebrities. Movers and shakers. The rich and powerful. The weird and wacky.

Reporters generally love writing “people profiles,” too, because it’s so fun to interview fascinating folks. Journalism provides a perfect excuse for letting you ask intimate questions of total strangers.

When you start assembling facts for even the hardest hard-news story, always focus on the “who” elements: Who’s involved? Who’s affected? Who’s going to benefit? Who’s getting screwed? No matter how abstract the topic, it’s the “who” angle that keeps it real.

\[ THIS OBITUARY from the San Jose Mercury News explains who Pope John Paul II was, who’s mourning his death around the world and who might replace him as the next pope. \]

\[ EXAMPLES OF THE FIVE W’s in a typical story, with facts color-coded to match the words in the headline at left: \]

Swimming was prohibited in Cooper Lake Monday after a dangerous amount of algae was found in the water last week.

Polk County health officials declared the lake off-limits because of blue-green algae blooms. Ingesting the water can make people ill and kill small pets. Restrictions include windsurfing and sailboarding but not boating.

“We hope it won’t last longer than two or three weeks,” said Robin Fox, the county’s director of environmental health.

\[ EMPHASIZING THE “WHO” ANGLE: \]

This lead from the Medford (Ore.) Mail Tribune makes it instantly clear what the story is about:

A self-described miser who drank outdated milk, lived in an unheated house and held up his second-hand pants with a bungee cord has left a $9 million legacy that will benefit Southern Oregon social service agencies.

This feature story centers on a number of “who” — film critics, film characters and film actors:

The Online Film Critics Society, an international association of Internet-based cinema journalists, is sharing its love with the character we’re supposed to hate.

The society has announced its new list celebrating the Top 100 Villains of All Time.

The greatest screen villain, according to the 152 members, is Darth Vader, played by David Prowse and voiced by James Earl Jones in the original “Star Wars” trilogy.

\[ EMPHASIZING THE “WHAT” ANGLE: \]

Notice how this USA Today business story begins with a list of famous “whats”:

The Empire State Building. The SUV. The Incredible Hulk. The Boeing 747.

When it comes to big, no place does it better than the USA. But after a 34-year run, one of these icons is starting to see its popularity fade.

The 747 — synonymous with “huge” as the world’s largest commercial jetliner — is increasingly being pushed out of airline fleets worldwide for being too expensive to operate and too hard to fill.

Here’s a Toronto Star story about a pop-culture trend:

Plastic surgery reality shows are setting a frightening example, bringing the practice of cosmetic surgery into disrepute, doctors say.

“It is barbaric, the whole premise of changing the way they look completely,” says Dr. Frank Lista. “It’s turned plastic surgery into a freak show.”
Some news stories happened in the past (The Beavers lost Friday night’s game). Some will happen in the future (The Beavers play the Warthogs next week). And some go on and on, through the past, present and future (The Beavers are currently trapped in a 20-game losing streak. What will it take to make them winners again?).

Timeliness is essential to every story. In this media-saturated, 24-hour cable-network-and-online-delivery culture we live in, your audience wants news that’s fresh and immediate. They want to know when events happened, when events will happen and how long they’ll last.

Being a reporter, then, means constantly keeping your eyes on the clock, for two reasons:
1) so you can include the “when” in every story, and
2) so you can finish every story before deadline.

The bigger the news organization, the broader its coverage area, USA Today, for example, calls itself “The Nation’s Newspaper” and covers the entire world.

But most American newspapers are small dailies and weeklies that focus exclusively on their cities, counties or school campuses. Which means the “where” of every story is crucial: the closer the event, the more relevant it will be to readers.

But explaining the “where” of a story isn’t necessarily simple. The more complex a topic is, the more you may need to supplement your reporting with visuals such as a map (Where will they build the new airport?), a diagram (Where will they expand the shopping mall?) or a photo (Where did police find the body?).

Good journalism reports the news; great journalism explains it. And explaining the news requires asking, over and over, the question “why?”. Why is this new law necessary? Why will it cost so much? And most important of all: Why should we care?

When news breaks suddenly, finding the explanations for events can be difficult. But for most stories, remember, the “why” is what makes the news meaningful.

Good reporters are also good teachers. They know how to explain things in a clear, concise way. And explaining the “how” of a story often requires detailed explanation:

How will this plan work? How did that prisoner escape? How do I decorate my dog for Halloween?

For short stories and news briefs, the “how” is often omitted to save space. But readers love a good “how-to” story, especially in the feature section.

The “where” of a story is determined by where it’s set. The “why” is what makes it interesting. The “how” is how to approach it.

And there’s a clever “where” lead by Bob Buz:

When it comes to advertising the location of its monthly meetings, the Global Positioning System Users Group is different than most groups.

They gather on the fourth Thursday of the month at N 40 37 18 W 80 02 50 W...
The inverted pyramid

This newwriting format summarizes the most important facts at the very start of the story.

It may seem like an obvious idea to us nowadays — getting right to the point when you start a story — but it didn’t occur to most reporters until midway through the 19th century. For example, here’s the lead from a Fourth of July story in the Massachusetts Centinel in 1785:

Monday last, being the anniversary of the ever-memorable day, on which the Illustrious Congress declared the then Colonies of North-America to be Free, Sovereign and Independent States, all ranks of citizens participated in the celebration of the happy event, and even Nature put on more than usual mildness, expressive of her joy on the occasion — Ere the Eastern ocean was yet bordered with the saffron hue, the feathered choristers sang their early matin, and to usher in the auspicious day, Aurora unbarred the ruddy gates of the morn, with sympathetic smiles.

Flowery enough for you? By 1898, however, the Chicago Tribune was starting stories this way:

GUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba — The first heavy fighting at close quarters between the American marines and the Spaniards took place here today.

As usual, American pluck and discipline won. The little invading force showed splendid courage and spirit. . . .

What changed? Sentences got shorter. Writing got tighter. And reporters developed a formula for compressing the most newsworthy facts — the who, what, when, where, why — into the opening paragraphs of a story. That formula lives on today. It’s known as the inverted pyramid.

WHY, IT DOES SORT OF LOOK LIKE AN UPSIDE-DOWN PYRAMID, DOESN’T IT?

To tell that same story using the inverted pyramid, you’d stack the facts in the opposite order, putting the final facts first:

THE INVERTED PYRAMID STORY

A search is under way for a criminal who leaped from a police van outside of Jackson State Prison yesterday. After pleading guilty to second-degree murder in court, Pete Moss was on his way to begin serving a 10-year sentence when he escaped. Moss had been arrested Sept. 21 after confessing to killing Lynn C. Doyle by running him over in an alley with his car. Moss admitted he had been furious with Doyle for shooting Moss’s dog during a marijuana deal.

See the difference? In chronological stories, things get resolved at the end. In the inverted pyramid, things get summed up at the beginning. You start as strongly as you can, summarizing what’s newest — then you add additional facts in descending order of importance.

The inverted pyramid helps readers scan news stories quickly and efficiently. But it helps you write news stories quickly and efficiently, too. Once you train yourself to organize facts this way, you can apply this formula to almost any breaking news event — which is why the inverted pyramid has been a cornerstone of newswriting for the past century.
**HOW A TYPICAL NEWS STORY USES THE INVERTED PYRAMID**

As we've seen, the main advantages of the inverted pyramid are:
- It condenses information efficiently, so readers can grasp facts quickly.
- It allows editors to trim stories from the bottom, since the details in the text become gradually less essential. Now, reporters certainly don't want their stories cut carelessly (or prematurely). But sometimes it's necessary. Take this wire story, for instance. It could be cut after the second paragraph. Or the third. Or . . . .

---

VIENNA, Austria — California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is getting a birthday gift from his home country: a stamp in his honor.

The Austrian post office announced on its Web site that the $1.25 stamp will be released on the actor-turned-politician's birthday, July 30. Schwarzenegger, who will be 67, was born in the Austrian village of Thal near the southern city of Graz.

The stamp — which shows Schwarzenegger in a suit and tie, with the U.S. and Austrian flags in the background — is part of a collectors series called “Austrians living abroad,” the post office said. Schwarzenegger moved to the United States in 1968 to pursue a career as a body builder and movie star. He made his first visit to Austria as California governor last weekend, when he represented the United States at the state funeral of President Thomas Klestil.

— The Associated Press

---

**SO SHOULD YOU USE THIS FORMAT FOR EVERY STORY?**

Not every journalist is a fan of the inverted pyramid. Writing coach Don Fry called it “the worst form ever invented by the human race for explaining anything in words.” And Bruce DeSilva of The Hartford Courant once complained that “the inverted pyramid remains the Dracula of journalism. It keeps rising from its coffin and sneaking into the paper.”

What’s the problem? Why are some journalists so irked by the inverted pyramid? Two reasons, usually:
- It gets repetitive. And stale. And repetitive. Who wants to read a paper where story after story looks like this?

**THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTS**

**A LESS IMPORTANT FACT**

**AN EVEN DULLER FACT**

---

**WHY WRITING A GOOD LEAD ACTUALLY MATTERS TO READERS**

No reporter would ever deliberately try to bore or confuse readers. But sometimes it happens: A story takes too long to get going. Readers struggle to make sense of it. They get impatient. They bail.

That’s why it’s crucial for you to realize how important your lead is. If you take too long to make sense, your readers will flee like rats from a sinking ship. Take the story below, lifted from the front page of a Colorado newspaper. Try making sense of it by reading just the text. By the time the story jumps to page 7, you’ll be moaning. *What’s the point?*

Fortunately for most readers, the headline tells what the story’s about long before the writer does.

---

**Drew Carey, improv group to headline at UCCC**

It was just a trip to blow off some steam from the constant pressures of filming “The Drew Carey Show,” but Kathy Kinney is glad her cast members made the trip. Kinney, who plays the mascara-encrusted Mimi on the long-running sitcom that will finally end this summer, attended a comedy improvisational act in Cleveland, and they called for Drew Carey to do the show. Carey didn't feel like it, but he did do some improvisational comedy. And this is where Kinney fit in perfectly.

Kinney, along with another cast member, Ryan Stiles, made their living on improvisational

SEE UCCC, PAGE A7
Writing basic news leads

It’s the essence of journalism: the key facts summarized in a concise way.

Some journalism teachers insist that a story’s lead (or “lede”) must be just one paragraph. And that paragraph must use just one sentence. And that sentence must be 30 words or less.

And if you violate this formula, readers will be alarmed by your incompetence.

Fortunately — or unfortunately — it’s not that simple. As we’ll see in the pages ahead, you have many, many options for writing smart, engaging leads.

Let’s begin by focusing on the most fundamental option: the basic news lead for inverted-pyramid stories. It’s the style of newswriting that comes closest to using a dependable formula. And here’s the good news: If you can master the process of writing leads — identifying key facts and expressing them concisely — you’ll have a solid command of the craft of journalism.

Still, learning to write even the simplest leads takes time and practice. For many writers, just starting the story is the most agonizing, time-consuming part of the job. But that’s why they pay reporters the big bucks. So start honing your speed and skill now.

The Parent-Teacher Association of Cornelis Banta School held its regular monthly meeting Tuesday evening in the school cafeteria, for the election of officers for the coming year, with Mrs. Noah ten Floed, president, in the chair. The nominating committee proposed Mrs. Douwe Taleran for president, Mrs. David Demarest for vice president, and Mrs. Lauren van Boschkerken for secretary-treasurer. It was moved and seconded that the nominations be closed.

Mrs. Gianello Venutoleri arose and said that she wanted to nominate Mrs. Nuvo Cittadino, Mrs. Giuseppe Soffiati, and Mrs. Salvatore dal Vapore. Mrs. ten Floed ruled Mrs. Venutoleri out of order. Mrs. Venutoleri appealed to the parliamentarian, Miss Sarah Kierstad, who sustained the chair.

Mrs. Venutoleri took a small automatic pistol from her handbag and shot Mrs. ten Floed between the eyes. Constable Abraham Brinkerhoff came and escorted Mrs. Venutoleri to the county jail. The body of Mrs. ten Floed was removed to Van Emburgh’s Funeral Parlor.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned for refreshments, which were served by Mrs. Adrian Blauvelt’s committee. The next meeting will be held on Friday evening, Sept. 10, for the installation of officers.

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE NEWS LEAD

1. COLLECT ALL YOUR FACTS

This is essential, for two reasons:

◆ If you don’t know the whole story, your lead can’t accurately summarize what’s going on.

◆ The more you know about the story, the easier it will be for you to sum it up and boil it down.

2. SUM IT UP, BOIL IT DOWN

If you had just 10 seconds to shout this story over a cell phone with dying batteries, what would you say? If it helps you organize your thinking, jot down the five W’s in a list, like so:

WHO: Three Mudflap passengers were injured.

WHAT: A private plane crashed.

WHEN: Friday night, 9:12 p.m.

WHERE: The Mudflap River behind Mudflap Airport.

WHY: A bolt of lightning struck the plane, killing the engine.

3. PRIORITIZE THE FIVE W’s

The lead needs to contain the facts that are most important — and only those facts that are most important. So evaluate each of the five W’s. Ask yourself: Which facts must be in the lead? Which can wait a paragraph or two? And which of the key facts deserves to start the first sentence?

4. RETHINK, REVISE, REWRITE

Write a first draft, even if it’s not perfect, just to get things rolling. Then ask yourself:

Is it clear? Are the key points easy to grasp? Is the wording awkward in any way?

Is it active? Have you used a strong subject-verb-object sentence structure?

Is it wordy? Do readers trip over any unnecessary adjectives or phrases?

Is it compelling? Will it grab readers and keep them interested?
A PLANE CRASHES, WHICH LEADS ARE BEST (OR WORST)?

Writing leads is often a process of trial and error. You try stacking different facts in different ways until you find the most concise, effective combination.

Let’s use that plane crash (from Tip #2 at left) as an example. You work for a weekly paper near the airport. What’s the best lead for that news story? Here are some of the solutions you might create as you emphasize each of the five W’s:

**LEADING WITH THE WHO**

In news stories about accidents or disasters, leads often begin by stating the number of deaths or injuries. It may seem morbid, but it helps readers gauge the seriousness of the event. So let’s try that:

Clark Barr, 45, Leah Tard, 42, and Eileen Dover, 17, of Hicksville, were injured when a bolt of lightning struck their private plane, a Cessna 812, at 9:12 p.m. Friday. Barr suffered a fractured leg. Tard cracked several of her ribs, and Dover, who remains in intensive care at Mudflap Hospital, broke both her wrists and ankles after nearly drowning in the river after the plane crashed.

Is this okay? Yes. There’s way too much detail too soon. Readers’ eyes will glaze over as they try to digest all those facts. The lead should summarize, not itemize; even the names of the victims should wait a paragraph or two. One exception: a recognizable name can leap to the lead if that person is newsworthy —

Hicksville mayor Clark Barr and two other passengers were injured Friday night when their private plane crashed into the river behind Mudflap Airport after being struck by lightning.

— but ordinarily, nonrecognizable names don’t belong in the lead. Besides, that paragraph is still too wordy. Can it be trimmed even more? How about this:

Three people were injured Friday when a plane crashed at Mudflap Airport.

It’s shorter, yes. But now it’s too short. There’s just not enough information. It’s vague. Dull. Undramatic. We need a few more details — but not too many — to tell the story and capture some of the drama:

Three passengers were injured Friday when lightning struck their private plane, plunging them into the river behind Mudflap Airport.

Success! This lead gets the job done. It emphasizes the “who” (the three injured passengers) and conveys just enough of the key facts without being too wordy.

**LEADING WITH THE WHAT**

There are three “whats” in this story: the plane, the crash, the lightning. Which “what” is most lead-worthy? Let’s begin with an obvious but bad idea:

There was an accident at Mudflap Airport Friday when a plane crashed after being struck by lightning, resulting in injuries to three passengers.

Dull? Yes. Why? Beginning a lead with a tired phrase like “there was” or “it is” makes the sentence weak and uninspired. It’s almost like we’re backing into the story. Better to use a more specific noun, like:

A private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport Friday after being struck by lightning. Three passengers were injured.

Not bad. But “a private plane” isn’t the most exciting phrase to start the lead with. (“A hot-air balloon shaped like SpongeBob SquarePants” — now, there’s a phrase that would grab readers’ attention.) Notice, too, how that lead uses two sentences. That’s acceptable. There’s no rule that requires a lead to be only one sentence. But if you can write a single, clear, compact sentence, do it. Let’s try again:

A private plane was struck by lightning and crashed at Mudflap Airport Friday, injuring three passengers.

This lead has a new problem. Know the difference between active and passive voice? Active voice uses strong subject-verb-object phrasing: “lightning struck a plane.” Passive voice uses weaker phrasing: “A plane was struck by lightning.” Good writers avoid the passive voice, especially in leads, because it lacks punch. Train yourself to recognize and avoid passive phrasing, which means rewriting the lead like this:

A bolt of lightning struck a private plane as it landed at Mudflap Airport Friday, causing a crash that injured three passengers.

Good. We’re using the strongest “what” to start the lead. We’re using active voice. We’re supplying enough of the key facts without getting too wordy.

**LEADING WITH THE WHEN**

The plane crashed on a Friday, but does that timing have any real significance? No. The “when” is not a crucial part of this story. (In fact, do we even have to specify it was Friday night?) Thus, this lead —

On Friday night, three passengers were injured when their private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport after being struck by lightning.

— is a bit weak. Like that first “what” lead at left, it backs into the story, which often happens when you begin the lead with a prepositional phrase.

Now, suppose it had been a tragic week at Mudflap Airport. You might, in that case, call attention to that fact by crafting a “when” lead like this:

For the third time this week, a private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport. On Friday, three passengers were injured after their plane was struck by lightning.

But that’s not the case. So that’s not our lead.

**LEADING WITH THE WHERE**

How important is the “where” of this story?

Is it more significant than the crash or the injuries?

At Mudflap Airport, three passengers were injured Friday when their private plane crashed into the river after being struck by lightning.

No. The “where” is crucial, but it’s just not the juiciest fact. (Plus, we’re assuming that Mudflap is nearby. If we lived farther away, we might also need to add more geographic detail, like what state Mudflap is in.)

**LEADING WITH THE WHY**

What caused this crash? Lightning hit the plane and killed the engine.

Our story will go into greater detail, but a lead like this gives readers a quick grasp of what went wrong. So this “what” lead is also a good “why” lead.

**SO WHICH LEAD IS BEST?**

Most reporters (and editors) would choose either that final “who” lead or that final “what” lead. Both are effective. Which do you prefer?
Beyond the basic news lead

It’s not mandatory that you begin every story with a summary of key facts.

As we’ve explained, for most breaking news events, you need leads that are factual and concise. You need leads that summarize the who-what-when-where-why. And being able to produce solid news leads on deadline is one of the most valuable skills a reporter can possess.

But not every story is a timely news event. Some stories explore social issues. Some profile interesting people. Some provide previews of coming attractions.

And for those, a basic news lead may be too dull and dry. You may need something livelier, snappier, more creative, a lead that doesn’t just summarize, but amuses. Astonishes. Intrigues.

Now, it’s impossible to specify what kind of story requires what kind of lead. That’s what makes reporting so creative. When the right story comes along, instead of writing this —

A Hicksville man has been sentenced to life in prison for murdering his girlfriend.

— you might instead lead with this:

Lincoln Mabry Jr. so loved Becky Kerr that he beat her in the face with a pistol barrel and shot her to death.

Over the years, reporters have devised dozens of oddball names for obitlead leads: psts, zingers, sing-alongs, riddle-posers, god-only-knows. Call them whatever you like; the fact is, all good reporters spend countless hours searching for the Perfect Lead. Now it’s your turn.

ONE OF THE LONGEST (AND MOST MEMORABLE) LEADS EVER WRITTEN

After a surprisingly warm March day in 1995, feature writer Ken Fuson wrote this piece in The Des Moines Register. One sentence, 290 words. Gimmicky, yes. But irresistible.

Here’s how Iowa celebrates a 70-degree day in the middle of March: By washing the car and scooping the loop and taking a walk; by daydreaming in school and playing hookey at work and shutting off the furnace at home; by skateboarding and flying kites and digging through closets for baseball gloves; by riding that new bike you got for Christmas and drawing hopscotch boxes in chalk on the sidewalk and not caring if the kids lost their mittens again; by looking for robins and noticing swimsuits on department store mannequins and shooting hoops in the park; by sticking the ice scraper in the trunk and the antifreeze in the garage and leaving the car parked outside overnight; by cleaning the barbecue and stuffing the pipes in storage and just standing outside and letting that friendly sun kiss your face; by wandering where you’re going to go on summer vacation and getting reacquainted with neighbors on the front porch and telling the boys that — yes! yes! — they can run outside and play without a jacket; by holding hands with a lover and jogging in shorts and picking up the extra branches in the yard; by eating an ice cream cone outside and (if you’re a farmer or gardener) feeling that first twinge that says it’s time to plant; and (if you’re a high school senior) feeling that first twinge that says it’s time to leave; by wondering if in all of history there has ever been a day so glorious and concluding that there hasn’t and being afraid to even stop and take a break (or begin a new paragraph) for fear that winter would return, leaving Wednesday in our memory as nothing more than a sweet and too-short dream.

... AND ONE OF THE SHORTEST LEADS EVER WRITTEN

James Thurber was a popular humorist and cartoonist in the mid-20th century. He started out as a newspaper reporter, where an editor urged him to write shorter, dramatic leads — which prompted Thurber to begin a murder story this way:

Dead.

That’s what the man was when they found him with a knife in his back at 4 p.m. in front of Riley’s saloon at the corner of 52nd and 12th Streets.

"Every story must have a beginning. A lead. Incubating the lead is a cause of great agony. Why is no mystery. Based on the lead, a reader makes a critical decision: "Shall I go on?"

Rene Cappon, author of The Associated Press Guide to Newswriting

"The best day is one when I can write a lead that will cause a reader at his breakfast table next morning to spit up his coffee, clutch at his heart and shout, 'My God! Martha, did you read this?'

Edna Buchanan, legendary police reporter

"Always grab the reader by the throat in the first paragraph, sink your thumbs into his windpipe in the second, and hold him against the wall until the tagline.

Paul O’Neil, writer

"If you don’t hit a newspaper reader between the eyes with your first sentence, there is no need of writing a second one.

Arthur Brisbane, 19th-century yellow journalist

"I’ve always been a believer that if I’ve got two hours in which to do something, the best investment I can make is to spend the first hour and 45 minutes of it getting a good lead, because after that everything will come easily.

Don Wycliff, Chicago Tribune

"I don’t look at my leads as a chance to show off my flowery writing. My leads are there to get you in and to keep you hooked to the story so that you can’t go away.

Mitch Albom, sports columnist, Detroit Free Press

"The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn’t induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead. And if the second sentence doesn’t induce him to continue to the third, it’s equally dead.

William Zinsser, author, On Writing Well
The city installs new parking meters. What kind of lead should you write?

The city council met Tuesday to consider installing parking meters on Boinck Street, a road bordering the school campus, where students have always parked for free. Angry students argued against the plan. "It's just greedy," said Dan DeLyon. "It's slimy," said Isabelle Ringing. "It's a stab in the back," said May K. Fist.

"It's long overdue," the mayor insisted, and the measure passed. Effective Jan. 1, the meters will cost 50 cents an hour — and parking violations will result in a $50 ticket.

Suppose you're covering this story for the campus newspaper. What kind of lead would you write? A basic news lead, or something more provocative? Here are a few options:

**The city council met Tuesday to discuss...**

Wait! Stop! This is boring. What's the news? Try again:

A proposal to install parking meters on Boinck Street was a topic of hot debate at Tuesday's city council meeting.

Still too dull. Why? It misses the point. The proposal isn't the story. The meeting isn't the story. The **impact** on your readers is the story. That's got to be the main emphasis.

Students will pay to park on Boinck Street starting Jan. 1, thanks to a measure passed by the city council Tuesday.

Better. It's a standard news lead, but it does a good job of answering the question, "Why should I care?" (although some editors might challenge the use of the word thanks.) But must this story use a serious lead? Or could we try:

There's no such thing as a free parking space — not after Jan. 1, anyway, when students will start paying 50 cents an hour to park on Boinck Street.

Clever? Or cliché? That lead has a little attitude, but is it too much? And should it say "students will start paying" — or "you will start paying"? If you like the idea of aiming this story at "you the student reader," then how about:

Starting Jan. 1, it'll cost you $50 if your parking meter expires on Boinck Street. Happy New Year.

Is it OK to feature the lead like that? If so, why not show how the parking plan would affect a typical student —

Dan DeLyon's job at Stinky's Pizza barely pays him enough to gas up his '93 Camaro every day. So starting Jan. 1, he'll be taking the bus to school.

"They're sticking meters on Boinck Street," he said. "I can't pay 20 bucks a week to park."

—and then segue into the details of the plan that passed last night. Is that an engaging way to humanize the topic?

"It's long overdue," said mayor Lilac A. Rugg, describing a new measure passed by the city council Tuesday authorizing the installation of parking meters on Boinck Street.

Ugh. A dull quote makes a dull lead — and so do phrases like "authorizing the installation." (Notice, too, how deeply buried the phrase "parking meters" is.) Some editors say it's lazy to start any lead with a quote. But how about:

"It's slimy," said Isabelle Ringing.

"It's just greedy," said Dan DeLyon. "It's a stab in the back," said May K. Fist. During an angry debate at Tuesday's city council meeting, students voiced their anger at a plan to install parking meters on Boinck Street. But the plan passed, so students will start feeding meters Jan. 1.

These quotes are strong, but those student names are a bit distracting (besides, the story isn't about them). What if we edited the quotes for greater impact? Like this:

"Slimy."

"Greedy."

"A stab in the back."

Students voiced their anger at the city council's plan to install parking meters on Boinck Street on Tuesday. But the plan passed, which means students will start feeding meters Jan. 1.

Those opening quotes now have more punch. But:

- It sounds like they'll install the parking meters **Tuesday**. That sentence needs rewriting to eliminate confusion.
- Many editors (and readers) may feel this lead is unfairly biased. It seems to side with the angry students. Agree?
- The most effective lead, then, may be one that combines the meters, the meeting, and your money. How about:

The meters are coming. Despite opposition from students, the city council approved a new parking plan **Tuesday** — which means that starting Jan. 1, you'll pay 50 cents an hour to park on Boinck Street.

As you can see, you've got lots of options, depending on your taste and news judgment. Which version would you choose?

**CHECKLIST**

- **Be concise.** Streamline your ideas, your words, your sentence structure. Think subject-verb-object.
- **The biggest problem with most leads? They're too wordy. Remember, news leads are usually just one sentence. Most use fewer than 30 words. That's not an ironclad rule — just an observation based on millions of successful news stories.**
- **Be accurate.** Set your facts and spelling right. One mistake in the lead can undermine the entire story.
- **Remember what day it is** when readers read your story. If there's a chance of confusion when you write about tomorrow's concert or last night's game, use the names of the days to be safe.
- And speaking of days: Be careful to put the date in the right place.
- **Wrong:** The panel will meet to discuss drug use on Friday.
- **Right:** The panel will meet on Friday to discuss drug use.
- **Don't name names.** Don't say John Smith was hit by a bus in your lead, unless everyone knows who John Smith is. (Don't just say A man was hit by a bus, either. Try to add a touch of description, like An elderly Mudflap man was hit by a bus.)
- **Use strong verbs.** Which means rewriting that sentence above to make it active, not passive: A bus struck and killed an elderly Mudflap man Tuesday.
- Beware of soft, mushy verbs like "be," "try" and "plan" — or dull, bureaucratic verbs like "considered," "met" and "issued." Don't let your leads bog down in meetingspeak.
- And speaking of meetings:
- **Ask "Why should I care?" Write from the reader's point of view as often as possible. Don't just report — explain. Explaining why things matter often makes the best lead.**
- **Sell the story.** Find out what makes this story different or special, and use that to punch up the lead. Who wants to read another ordinary meeting/game/speech story?
- **Don't get hung up by a problem lead.** Unsure of how to start the story? Just jot something down and move on. Finish the story, then loop back around and revisit the lead.
- **Move attributions to the end of the sentence.** The reporting textbook said, Not: The reporting textbook said to move attributions to the end of the sentence. ▼
Leads that succeed

A roundup of the most popular, commonly used options.

Writing is a creative process, so there's no way to list every conceivable category of lead. (Many have tried; all have failed.) Instead, this collection of favorites is just a beginning. Remember, there's no type of lead that always works, just as there's no type of lead that always fails. The success of every lead depends on how well you write it. And rewrite it. And rewrite it.

Want more ideas? Browse our collection of clever leads scattered throughout THE MORGUE

1

BASIC NEWS LEADS

1. The summary lead begins the majority of news stories by combining the most significant of the five W's into one sentence:

   The Pentagon has ordered 1,500 additional troops to Iraq to provide security in advance of the upcoming election, military officials announced Wednesday. — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

2. The delayed identification lead is a type of news lead that withholds a significant piece of information — usually a person's name — until the second paragraph:

   A Smallville man escaped injury Saturday after plunging over Wohelo Falls in a kayak.
   Lance Boyle, 21, was treated for cuts and bruises at Mercy Hospital after what he called a "wild, boneheaded ride."

   Spreading the information through two short paragraphs makes it easier to digest than if you crammed it all into one long paragraph.

   By structuring that same information a bit differently — still using a delayed-identification lead — the story takes a different tone:

   Lance Boyle will never forget the "wild, boneheaded ride" he took Saturday.
   The Smalville man escaped injury after plunging over Wohelo Falls in a kayak.

   Most news stories won't name names in the lead unless they belong to recognizable public figures or celebrities. A lead that does that, however, is called — what else? — an immediate identification lead:

   Actress Scarlett Johansson was involved in a minor car crash near Disneyland last week while trying to elude photographers.

2

ANECDOCTAL/NARRATIVE LEADS

Some stories unfold slowly, as the writer eases into the topic with an engaging or meaningful anecdote. This anecdotal lead begins a story on adult skateboarders:

   About five years ago, architect Mark Seder was reading the morning paper and watching his 10-year-old son riding at a local skate park. As he kept looking up from the paper to his son, something dawned on him.

   "I realized that I was getting out of shape and I thought, 'Why in the world don't I join him?'"
   Soon afterward, armed with a board, a helmet, and knee and elbow pads, Seder took his first tentative ride. He was 49 years old.
   Today, Seder is 54 and still skating.... — STEVE WILSON, Portland Tribune

   Ideally, the anecdote will have a beginning, middle and end; it will be a mini-story that sheds some light on the bigger story you're about to tell.

   Some feature stories begin by dropping you right into the action — action that often continues throughout the entire story. These are called narrative leads. If anecdotal leads are like snapshots, narrative leads are movies:

   "Oh, Jesus," she moaned softly. She squeezed my hand.
   The vacuum machine purred steadily and the fetus that was her unborn child was sucked through a clear plastic hose and into a large glass bottle.
   "Oh," she said again, and scratched my forearm.
   "We're almost done," the doctor said. "I just have to check and make sure you're all clean and empty."
   She squeezed my hand harder. .... — BOB GREENE, from a column called "Kathy's Abortion"

3

SCENE-SETTER LEADS

In 1941, Time magazine wrote a story on America’s reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor. It began with a description:

   It was a Sunday morning, clear and sunny. Many a citizen was idly listening to the radio when the flash came that the Japanese had attacked Hawaii. ....

   Scene-setter leads lack the urgency of hard-news leads. They’re a device borrowed from fiction ("It was a dark and stormy night..."), and they’re usually reserved for long feature stories, where descriptions of sights, sounds and smells transport you to another place:

   The stink. That hits you first. Like a furnace blast. Now notice the mirrors spackled with dried mucus, sweat and spit, the faint arcs of blood that speckle the walls behind the ring. The portrait of Jesus as a boxer watching over the heavy bags. The ring, with its ropes that sag like a sad smile.
   It doesn’t get any more authentic than an old boxing gym. As real and as honest and as raw as the paint peeling from the walls. .... — INARA VREZENIERS, The Oregonian

6

DIRECT ADDRESS LEADS

Virtually all news stories are written in an objective, third-person voice; stories refer to him, her, they, them. But feature stories often use the second-person voice to speak directly to you, the reader:

   If you’ve been waiting for a chance to collect every episode of "The Simpsons" in one boxed DVD set, you’re finally in luck.

   For a feature about "missed connection" classified ads, a direct address lead may be the best way to explain the story's topic:

   You’re at a party when you spot a stranger across the room. You feel a spark, a moment when your eyes lock with his. But your friends are tugging at your sleeve, ready to leave, so you head out the door. Now you can’t get Mr. Fascinating Stranger out of your mind. Why didn’t you just go over and talk? What if he felt the same connection?
   Some people don’t just wonder — they advertise. .... — KRISTEN TURQUOIST, The Oregonian
**BLIND LEADS**

These are more extreme versions of the *delayed identification leads* mentioned earlier. You deliberately tease readers by withholding a key piece of information, then spring it on them in a subsequent paragraph. Like this:

The most valuable consumers in the apparel business right now are people who carry no cash, have no credit cards and often spit up dinner on their new clothes. They're infants and toddlers — and at a time when sales in many apparel categories are flat, they're fueling a major boom in baby clothes.

*RENEE R. McILHANNO. Portland, Oregon*

**ROUNDUP LEADS**

Sometimes, instead of focusing on just one person, place or thing in the lead, you want to impress the reader with a longer list. Take the *roundup lead* on this legislature story:

Gamblers get more choices. Smokers inhale cheaper cigarettes. And tipplers can hoist a round to Oregon lawmakers who keep state alcohol taxes among the lowest in the nation. Even gluttons came out OK in the just-ended legislative session, which rejected efforts to require more nutritious school lunches and more time in PE classes.

*“Sin had a fabulous session,” summed up Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland. — HARRY ESTEVES. The Oregonian*

This feature story uses a blind roundup lead:

Sherlock Holmes did it. So did Albert Einstein. Hugh Hefner, Bing Crosby. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, President Gerald Ford and Popeye the Sailor. Yes, they all discovered the secret of looking smooth, suave and utterly sophisticated:

Pipe-smoking.

**THE STARTLING STATEMENT**

*One in four Americans will be infected with a sexually transmitted disease at some point in their lives.* Did that grab your attention?

That’s the goal of the *startling statement* (also called a “zinger” or a “Hey, Martha!”). It’s used to begin this story from Romania.

We dare you — *try to stop reading.*

Before Toma Petre’s relatives pulled his body from the grave, ripped out his heart, burned it to ashes, mixed it with water and drank it, he hadn’t been in the news much.

That’s often the way it is with vampires here in Romania. Quiet lives, active deaths.

Villagers here are outraged that the police are involved in a simple vampire slaying. After all, vampire slaying is an accepted, though hidden, bit of national heritage, even if illegal.

“What did we do?” pleaded Flora Marinescu, Petre’s sister. “If they’re right, he was already dead. If we’re wrong, we killed a vampire and saved three lives. Is that so wrong?”

*MATTHEW SCHOFIELD. Knight Ridder Newspapers*

**WORDPLAY LEADS**

This catch-all category encompasses a wide range of amusing leads, including bad puns:

For Germans trying to lose weight, the wurst is yet to come.

Or this scene-setter with sound effects:

Kwthhooooncop! The Hell Candidates’ twin flame cannons torch off like the burners igniting in a jet engine and flames spike 20 feet up into the lights above the stage of the Paris Theatre.

*JOHN FOYTON. The Oregonian*

Or this portrait painted with typography:

Most dogs have upper teeth shaped something like this: VVVVYYYYY.

Buster Finkel, sad-faced pet of Max Finkel, has upper teeth something like this: UUUUUUUU.

Or witty wordplay like this, from a story about a mother caught in the middle between the police and the welfare system. Here’s how reporter Heather Svokos started that story:

Rock. Susan McQuaide. Hard place.

**...AND THREE LAZY LEADS YOU SHOULD GENERALLY AVOID**

♦ *Topic leads.* It’s not enough to simply state that a game was played —

The Swamp Toads battled the Mudhogs in a crucial conference playoff Saturday.

—or that a meeting was held:

The school board convened Tuesday night to discuss complaints about the cafeteria.

Those are called *topic leads.* And they’re lazy. The news is not that a game was played; what matters is the *outcome* of the game. Who won? And yes, the school board met. Big deal. What happened?

Topic leads are weak because they convey no actual news. Instead, they say to readers: *Maybe something happened. Or maybe not. We’re not sure.*

♦ *Question leads.* Some editors *loathe* sports stories that begin with questions —

Did the Swamp Toads finally figure out how to reverse the Mudhog curse Saturday?

—or meeting stories, too, for that matter:

What has the school board decided to do to reduce complaints about cafeteria food?

Get. To. The. Point.

Question leads are just weak, irritating stalling — sometimes. But does that make *all* question leads taboo? No. It’s possible to craft clever, engaging questions that hook us into reading further. But beware; you may need to convince grumpy editors that a question lead is the best option.

♦ *Quote leads.* Seldom is a quote so terrific that it becomes the smartest, most engaging way to launch a story. Instead, what usually happens is this:

“The cafeteria food is awful, and it costs too much,” said sophomore Anne Chovey at the school board meeting Tuesday.

The problem: The quote doesn’t fairly summarize the story. It’s an opinion, not a fact. We don’t immediately know who’s speaking. The sentence ends awkwardly.

That quote would work well in the second paragraph — following a newsier lead.
After the lead...what next?

Just write another paragraph. Then add another. And another . . .

Writers spend lots of time and energy crafting their leads. Which is good, especially when it forces you to evaluate your material and prioritize your facts.

Yet writing a lead is just the beginning. A lead may hook readers into starting a story; it may brilliantly distill crucial data. But you have to follow the lead with good material, too.

So how do you do that? How do you decide what facts go where? And when? And all those other W’s?

It mostly depends on how long the story will be. That’s why it’s essential to discuss assignments with an editor before you start writing. You may think a story has awesome potential, but your editor may decide it’s only worth a 6-inch brief. Or conversely, that innocent-looking little feature story could blossom into a prize-winning epic.

Once you know a story’s length, you can estimate how tightly you’ll need to condense your material. Some things will fit; others won’t. Not a problem: Even the Book of Genesis squeezes the creation of the universe into just seven paragraphs.

And it’s got a great lead.

BRIEFS AND BRIEFS:
NEWS STORIES IN A CONDENSED FORM

Longer briefs may contain five or six paragraphs; if they’re bigger than that, they’re called stories.

Some briefs are written as entertaining little featurettes. They’re called briefs, and they’re usually odd or amusing news nuggets told in a humorous or ironic way, as an alternative to ordinary briefs.

Here’s an example of each.

A BRIEF: Most standard news briefs are written using the inverted pyramid structure: a summary lead followed by additional details in descending order of importance. That’s true for this example, as well. It’s a typical news brief summarizing the key facts of a local bank robbery.

A man robbed a Lake Grove-area bank Monday, making off with an undisclosed amount of cash.

No weapon was seen, and no one was hurt in the incident.

According to Lake Oswego police records, a man entered the Key Bank branch at 16230 S.W. Bryant Road about 3:15 p.m. and presented a teller with a note demanding money. The man then left the branch’s back door and rode away on a bicycle.

Police described the man as in his 20s, about 5 feet 10 inches tall and 180 pounds. He was last seen wearing a baseball or fisherman-type cap, jeans, and a black, long-sleeved, quilted jacket.

A BRITE: Brites provide more personality and more comic relief than standard news briefs. The lead tries harder to provoke interest; the ending often serves as a “kicker,” providing a whimsical or unusual punch line. The key is keeping everything as short and tight as possible.

It’s enough to bring tears — or milk — to your eyes. In Istanbul Wednesday, a Turkish construction worker poured milk into his hand, snorted it up his nose and squirited it 9.2 feet out of his left eye in what he hopes will be recognized as a new world record.

“I’m happy and proud that I can get Turkey in the record book even if it’s for milk squirting,” said Iker Yilmaz, 28, who is able to perform the unusual feat because of an anomaly in his tear gland.

Guinness World Records will officially verify Yilmaz’s record after reviewing documents from witnesses at the event, which was sponsored by Kay Suf, a Turkish milk company.

THE SECOND PARAGRAPH
(THE NUT GRAF)
AND WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

As we’ve seen, there are basically two types of leads:

1) Those that summarize the story, getting right to the point, and

2) Those that don’t.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with writing a punchy lead that teases or amuses readers. Like this:

Want to live longer? Have another beer.

Fun stuff! But readers will quickly ask, What’s this story about? Which is why the next paragraph says:

Researchers from Laube University say beer has antioxidant boosters that could help fight cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

Aha! Now we see.

That paragraph — the one that condenses the story idea into a nutshell — is called the nut graf. And it’s vital.

Without a nut graf, impatient readers may wonder What’s the point? and drift away, no matter how clever your lead is.

MUST EVERY STORY CONTAIN A NUT GRAF, THEN?

No. Nut gras are helpful for feature stories (see examples at right). But for news stories, your second or third paragraph may have other duties to perform. You may need it to supplement any of the five W’s missing from the lead:

A Salem golfer is recovering after being hit by lightning Friday morning.

Adam Neve, 53, is in fair condition at Mercy Hospital after being knocked unconscious on the third hole of Salem Golf Club during a sudden thunderstorm.

Or to provide background for the action described in the lead:

Electricity was finally restored for 3,000 shivering Loften residents Friday.

Repair crews worked for more than 72 hours after Monday night’s ice storm downed dozens of power lines.

Or to add a supporting quote:

It’s official: Ike Arumba, the Stars’ star shortstop, is out for the season.

“My doctor said he’s never seen a wrist as badly shattered as mine,” said Arumba, who was hit by a pitch in Saturday’s game against Lincoln.
THE PARTS OF A STORY: HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR FACTS EFFECTIVELY

You've written a terrific lead. You've added a solid nut graf. Congratulations. Now what?

You need to outline your story. To do that, first review your notes. Organize your material into sections, then try arranging those sections in different orders to see what's most logical.

For instance, suppose a college is debating whether to outlaw dogs on the school grounds. Here are two different ways to organize that story. Both work fine, but which do you prefer?

**Version One**

Here's a straightforward story written as an inverted pyramid. (Notice how you could cut the text after paragraphs E, G or H.) As you read the story, pay attention to its structure. Does the material flow logically from point to point?

**The Lead**

A humorous approach to the dog problem.

**The Nut Graf**

This is the essence — the so what? — of the story. Dogs may soon be outlawed.

**The Protester**

We now hear from an anti-dog spokesman who addresses the why question.

**Recent Developments**

This describes when and how students and staff are reacting.

**Sims Quote #1**

To balance the argument. Juliet now expresses the views of student dog owners.

**Sims Quote #2**

With quotes this juicy, we're happy to let her keep talking....

**Sims Quote #3**

Another juicy, dramatic sound bite.

**The Current Law**

This provides more context about pet rules on campus.

**What Next?**

We finish by sending readers to the big meeting.

Dog poop. It's everywhere: on the sidewalk, on the lawn, on the soles of your shoes.

But that may soon change. The Bilford College board of trustees, in response to hundreds of complaints, is considering a new regulation declaring the campus off-limits to dogs.

Ferris Wheeler, president of Students Against Dogs (SAD), has collected nearly 300 signatures on a petition calling for a campus dog ban.

"This stinks," Wheeler says. "I mean, this school smells like dog too. Irresponsible pet owners are letting their dogs chase cyclists, bark and crap all over campus."

Last week, the school's landscaping crew — which students call the "poop patrol" — tried posting signs saying "NO DOGS ALLOWED." Students tore them down. Temps have started to flare.

"This proposal is ugly and unfair to responsible dog owners like me," says junior Juliet Sims. "I admit there's too much poop on the sidewalks, but it's wrong to let a few bad apples ruin it for everybody."

Sims lives off-campus with a golden retriever named Romeo. "He's my sweetie," she says. "He sleeps with me, eats with me, showers with me. He even goes to class with me."

A ban on dogs would pose a painful dilemma for dog-lovers like Sims.

"I hate locking Romeo up all day," she says. "I'd rather quit this stupid school."

Campus regulations currently require all dogs to be leashed, but the rule is rarely enforced. And while pets are prohibited in campus dormitories, no law has ever banned them from school grounds.

But lately, some anti-dog activists have started to bark. Ferris Wheeler, president of Students Against Dogs (SAD), has collected nearly 300 signatures on a petition calling for a campus dog ban.

"This stinks," Wheeler says. "I mean, this school smells like dog too. Irresponsible pet owners are letting their dogs chase cyclists, bark and crap all over campus."

Last week, the school's landscaping crew — which students call the "poop patrol" — tried posting signs saying "NO DOGS ALLOWED." Students tore them down. Temps have started to flare.

To resolve the dispute, the board will hold a public hearing at 7 p.m. Thursday in Bilford Union, Room 11.

**Version Two**

This story uses all of Version One's material but arranges the paragraphs in a different order to produce a different effect. Notice how this version begins and ends with Juliet, the dog owner. Does this structure seem more appealing?

**The Lead/ Sims Quote #2**

This lead starts the story with a more human angle.

**The Nut Graf**

**Sims Quote #1**

Now we get the joke: Romeo is... a dog! This is called a blind lead — where readers have to wait a paragraph or two for the setup to pay off.

**The Current Law**

This info now appears sooner than it did in the previous story.

**The Protester**

Notice how the anti-dog argument comes later in this version. Does that seem to tilt the story in favor of Juliet? Is this biased?

**Recent Developments**

Notice how the line about "tempers" leads into the next paragraph.

**What Next?**

**Sims Quote #3**

Like closing a circle, the story ends where it began: with Juliet.
**Story structure**

**Giving an overall shape to your writing.**

Let’s be clear: There’s no simple, droolproof, one-size-fits-all solution for organizing news material. Every story will unfold in a different way.

Still, there’s nothing random about good writing. Every story needs a beginning, middle and end. You can’t just toss facts together into a news salad and expect readers to swallow it. If you want them to digest what you’re saying, you’ve got to organize each story’s overall structure. Here are some recipes.

---

**ORGANIZING YOUR STORY: THE MOST COMMON SHAPES**

You may think newswriting is a free-style, seat-of-the-pants, spur-of-the-moment, sit-down-and-just-bang-it-out kind of thing.

Wrong. Write that way and your stories become clumsy, rambling jumbles of random facts and quotes.

Readers hate chaos. They like they way your stories and paragraphs are arranged and the way you lead the reader through the story’s events and facts.

So think before you write. Organize your ideas. Plan your story, whether by sketching a quick outline, visualizing a mental image or brainstorming with an editor — whatever helps you draw a road map for your story to follow.

If you get stuck, try carving your story’s structure into broad sections, such as:

1. **The Problem**
2. **How It Got This Way**
3. **Where We Go From Here**

Or try something like this:

1. **Look:** This Person Has a Problem
2. **Uh-oh:** The Problem Is Everywhere
3. **What the Experts Say**
4. **What the Future Holds**
5. **What It All Means for That Person We Met at the Start of the Story**

That structure, it turns out, is quite popular with journalists, especially feature writers at the Wall Street Journal. To save time and effort, many crafty reporters automatically pour their stories into that tried-and-true shape (just like they pour breaking news into inverted pyramids).

Yes, we know: Every story is unique. Still, if it helps you structure material by visualizing physical shapes like pyramids, circles or martini glasses, consider the options at right.

---

**THE INVERTED PYRAMID**

**Best for:** News briefs, stories about breaking news events.

**Not recommended for:** Anything else.

**How it works:** Summarize the key facts in a concise lead. Then organize the story as logically as possible, arranging paragraphs in descending order of importance. End the story when you run out of facts (or you run out of room on the page).

---

**THE MARTINI GLASS**

**Also known as:** The hourglass.

**Best for:** Crimes, disasters or other dramatic news stories where you want to include a chronology to explain how events unfolded.

**How it works:** Begin with an inverted-pyramid summary of the story’s most important facts. Once that’s done, shift into a chronological narrative. (Try setting it up with a phrase such as “Police gave this account of the accident.”)

**Example:** See “Check-writer sets off clerk’s internal alarm” in the Morgue, page 237.

---

**THE KABOB**

**Also known as:** The Wall Street Journal formula or the circle.

**Best for:** Stories on trends or events where you want to show how actual people are affected or involved.

**How it works:** The story begins with a quote or anecdote about a specific person. Then it broadens into a general discussion of the topic. It ends by returning to that specific person again.

**Think of it as arranging meat and veggies on a shish kabob skewer:** Start with a juicy red tomato (an anecdote). Follow that with a nut graf. Then add meat — chunk after chunk after chunk — until you reach the end, where you reprise with another tomato (a final quote or anecdote).

**Example:** See “For those cut off, a life primeval,” page 227.

---

**AND AS YOU MOVE FROM PARAGRAPH TO PARAGRAPH, REMEMBER:**

- **Keep paragraphs short.**
  Short, punchy paragraphs are much easier for readers to scan and absorb.

- **Write one idea per paragraph.**
  Keep your focus tight, especially when explaining complex material. Parcel out your information in short, paragraph-sized chunks. Think about hitting the return key every time you type a period.

- **Add transitions.**
  To keep your story flowing, guide the reader from one idea to another with carefully placed transitions — words or phrases such as: However, Meanwhile, In addition, Previously, Finally. On a related issue.

  In this example, notice how transitions (in italics) help connect the ideas from sentence to sentence:

  Police will cast a watchful eye on downtown revelers this New Year’s Eve.

  *But police admitted they will not be as prepared for trouble as they had hoped.* For one thing, backups from the state highway patrol will probably not be available.

  *Instead, Police Chief David Barker said he will rely on reservists to augment the city’s regular officers.*
SO WHAT CAN YOU DO TO KEEP READERS FROM GETTING BORED?

See these two guys here? See how they’re reading their newspaper with excited grins on their faces? Well, nobody does that anymore. Sorry.

Nowadays, readers are in a hurry. They’re impatient. They’re easily bored. Your job is to deliver the news to them in the most appealing, accessible, easy-to-digest way. In fact, we could argue that the modern journalist’s job basically boils down to:

1) teaching,
2) storytelling.

Which means that anytime you have a wonderful narrative story to tell, by all means tell it. Weave your magic. Paint a picture. Make us laugh. Make us cry.

But how often will you find those wonderful narrative stories? Sad to say, they’re awfully rare. Which means that most of the time your job will be teaching readers about complex issues and events. You’ll have to think like a teacher; you’ll have to constantly ask: What’s the most effective way to convey this material?

For today’s readers, gray pages packed with paragraph after paragraph of long-winded narrative text simply isn’t the most effective way to communicate anymore.

Later on, we’ll explore this topic further. But for now, before you unleash any mile-long narratives, consider these alternatives:

ALTERNATIVES TO LONG, GRAY NEWS STORIES

BULLETS

One effective way to emphasize a series of items is to add bullets, which highlight key points so they “pop” out of the text. For best results:

◆ Start with a boldface phrase, like this, to make your main points easy to scan.
◆ Use parallel construction. Here, for example, every bullet item is a handy tip, and each phrase begins with a verb.
◆ Run at least three items. Fewer than that and lists look odd or incomplete.

Throughout this book, we use bullets (with boldface type and diamond-shaped dingbats) to highlight and summarize tips and lists. Bullets work in news stories, too.

SIDEARS

A sidebar is any short feature written to accompany a longer story. Sidebars usually run in boxes beside or beneath the main story, the like the one you’re reading now. They help you reorganize complex information into smaller sections, to which you can add graphics, photos, etc.

As it turns out, sidebars often have higher readership than the stories they accompany simply because they’re shorter and easier to access.

SUBHEADS

Ours are boldface, underlined and gray (but they work in plain black, too). Notice how they visually divide the text in this sidebar into four smaller sections.

Subheads break long stories into short, accessible chunks. You can add them anytime there’s a shift in topics—which means that if you want to make complex material more reader-friendly, you can build subheadings into your story as you write it. Like we’ve done here.

OTHER SHORT-FORM OPTIONS

Not every story requires paragraph after paragraph after paragraph of text. Take this book, for example. Have you noticed how there’s virtually no long-winded text anywhere in this thing?

You be the judge: Has this format made the information easier for you to absorb? Or have we dumbed it down too much?

You can craft news stories the same way we’ve structured this book. You can break complex material into lists, quizzes, Q and A’s, timelines, chronologies, first-person flashbacks, diagrams.

In Chapter 6, we’ll show in more detail how these alternatives work.

THE ENDING, THE CLOSER, THE BIG FINISH

Good writers agonize over endings the same way they agonize over leads. They often save their best stuff for last: a juicy quote, a revealing anecdote, an amazing fact, a clever pun. The goal is to give the story a climax, a punch line—what writers call a kicker.

“You should hear it echoing in your head when you put the paper down,” says Bruce DeSilva of The Associated Press. “It should stay with you and make you think a little bit.”

SAM STANTON of the Sacramento Bee concluded his story about the execution of a murderer this way:

A guard read the wordy announcement that contained a simple message:

Robert Alton Harris had been declared legally dead at 6:21 p.m.

The witnesses filed outside, into the bright sunlight.

After 25 years and nine days, California’s gas chamber was back in operation.

DON HAMILTON covered the dedication ceremony at a Vietnam War memorial. His story ended:


“I hope we don’t have to do this again anytime in the future,” he said quietly. “But I bet they said that after Gettysburg. We still haven’t learned anything.”

ERIN BARNETT wrote about a woman caring for her failing husband, an Alzheimer’s victim:

She pulls a turtleneck over John’s wiry gray hair. Then she brushes his teeth and his wet hair before pulling him up. He looks down at her. She looks up at him.

“There you go sweetie,” she says.

And John is off. He strides back through the bedroom. He passes a watercolor of maroon, yellow and brown on the wall. Nellie says it is nasturtiums climbing out of their planter box. Like all her paintings, this one has a name. She calls it “Breaking Free.”

RICK BELLA begins his story about a seaside sandcastle contest with a biblical reference:

In the beginning, there was mud.

The story concludes this way:

Finally, as the crowd retreated, the Pacific lapped at the creations, reclaiming the sand to re-create the familiar beach.

Ashes to ashes, mud to mud.

1. CHECKLIST

◆ Plan ahead. Don’t just end a story because you ran out of material. Write the ending right after you write the lead, then fill in the middle. Think of the lead and the ending as bookends.

◆ Don’t end stories by summarizing what we’ve learned, like term papers do. There’s no need to revisit or rehash points you’ve previously made. We don’t need any sermonettes, either.

◆ Avoid cute clichés like That’s all, folks, or And that’s the way it is.

◆ End with a bang (a strong word or phrase), not a whimper (a weak attribution like “he said”). Effective writers try to place their most emphatic words here, at the end.
Rewriting

Your story's good. Now make it better.

Observe, at right, Ludwig van Beethoven struggling to write one of his orchestral works. Notice how the brilliant composer wrote and rewrote and rewrote note after note after note. And even after he died, Beethoven kept on decomposing.

Ba-da-boom.

Hey, but seriously... any veteran journalist will tell you that writing, as the adage goes, is rewriting. Few stories arrive fully formed and perfectly phrased; most require rethinking, restructuring, rewording and a lot of other "re" words.

"There's no rule on how to write," Hemingway once said. "Sometimes it comes easily and perfectly. Sometimes it is like drilling rock and blasting it out with charges."

We could explain further, but first we've got to go back and polish up that Beethoven joke.

**BEFORE & AFTER: A REPORTER'S EARLY DRAFT AND FINAL STORY**

Stories don't always start out bad. They don't always end up good.

The goal of rewriting is to make things a little better, then a little better, then a little better... until you run out of time.

Take the story below, part of a Labor Day package on people with odd jobs. Compare the before-and-after changes that make it more readable:

**BEFORE**

No, no, no. This lead is too cutey.

Sentence is long and dull, with weak verbs, clumsy phrasing ("as such") and redundancy (grading, inspecting, monitoring). Very slow going.

Such a weak clichéd
And "cuts the cheese"? Please. Are we trying to embarrass this woman?

"Carefully inspects" seems redundant. (Can you carelessly inspect something?)

The word "which" is used the same way in two consecutive sentences.

A nice quote, but it rambles on for too long.

That phrase "put on a lot of weight" sounds harsh and insensitive.

**AFTER**

Linda Marvin is a cheese whiz.

For the past four years, Marvin has been a cheese grading analyst for the Tillamook County Creamery Association, and as such, she is responsible for inspecting and monitoring the quality of Tillamook cheese.

As quietly as a mouse, she hits the cheese, chews it, smells it and rubs her fingers in it.

Marvin carefully inspects the color, texture, odor and flavor of the cheese, which other cheese makers don't do. That lowers their quality, she says, which hurts the industry overall.

"I'm very proud of my work," she says. "People say, 'I don't know if I could chew cheese every day.' But luckily, I love cheese. I really do. And I really don't mind doing this."

So with all this constant cheese-chewing, has Marvin put on a lot of weight?

"I spit it out," she says, "so I haven't gained any weight."

**BEFORE**

Linda Marvin's nose knows cheese.

As cheese grading analyst for the Tillamook County Creamery Association, she spends each day smelling and squeezing chunks of Tillamook cheese.

She chooses some cheese, then chews it. Sniffs it. Snaps off a slab. Rubs her fingers in it.

Marvin gives that cheese a complete physical check-up — color, texture, odor, flavor — something lesser cheese makers don't bother doing. Which cheeses her off.

"I'm very proud of my work," she says. "People say, 'I don't know if I could chew cheese every day.' But luckily, I love cheese."

After four years of cheese-chewing, has Marvin packed on a few extra pounds?

"I spit it out," she says with a laugh, "so I haven't gained any weight."

**AFTER**

This lead is better (or, at least, it's fun to read aloud).

This paragraph is now tighter and punchier. Verbs are stronger and more colorful.

Another sentence that's fun to say aloud. These short sentence fragments speed the read.

A change in wording.

Another sentence fragment. An attempt at humor.

Those last two extraneous sentences have been removed from this quote.

The reference to "four years" has moved here, from the second paragraph.

"A few extra pounds" is kinder and gentler.

"Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. I'm always surprised that people think professional writers get everything right on the first try. Just the opposite is true; nobody rewrites more often than the true professional. I rewrite everything at least five or six times."

William Zinsser, author of On Writing Well

"I hate to write; I like to revise. And the amount of revision I do is terrific. I like to get the first draft out of my system. That's the hardest thing for me."

Malcolm Cowley, reporter and novelist

"It is perfectly OK to write garbage — as long as you edit brilliantly. In other words, until you have something down on paper (even if it's terrible) there is nothing you can improve. The audience neither needs nor gets to see the less-than-brilliant first draft, so they won't know you weren't brilliant all along."

C.J. Cherryh, science fiction author

"Someone said a work of art is never finished, it's always abandoned. I will rewrite until they literally seize it from my hand and say stop."

Sally Quinn, columnist

"There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein."

Red Smith, sports columnist
1 **PASSIVE VERBS**

There is a problem many reporters struggle with. The sentences that are written by them are passive. Their phrasing is made awkward because of this, and — wait! Stop!

Let's rewrite that paragraph to make it less passive:

Many reporters struggle because they write passive sentences. This makes their phrasing awkward.

See the difference? We've strengthened our syntax by starting sentences with their subjects. We've eliminated that clunky phrase *there is*. And we've replaced the verb to be (words such as *is* and *are*) with stronger verbs.

You don't have to be a grammar geek to see our point here. Make your sentences *emphatic*. Avoid weak, flabby verbs. No — don't just avoid them. Zap them. *Whack* them. Give them the *heave-ho*. *Gun* them down and *snuff* them out.

2 **REDUNDANCY . . . AND REPEATING YOURSELF**

Sorry. Obviously, we got carried away at the end of Tip #1.

But sometimes it's not so obvious that you're using unnecessary words and phrases. Why say that someone is currently president of the club? Or that the game is scheduled for Friday night? Or that the victims were burned in the flames?

Those italicized words add bulk but no extra meaning, just like these doublespeak phrases:

- grateful thanks
- true facts
- personal opinion
- all-time record
- end result
- serious danger
- totally destroyed
- very unique
- first time ever

Be on the lookout for unnecessary modifiers that *sound* logical but add nothing. Eliminate waste. Edit yourself ruthlessly. As Mark Twain once advised: "When in doubt, strike it out."

3 **LONG, LONG, LONG WORDY SENTENCES**

It should be pointed out that many writers, in order to make themselves sound much more profound and scholarly than perhaps they actually are, use flabby, inflated wording such as "it should be pointed out" and "in order to" and "perhaps" — which we just did ourselves, in fact, earlier in this sentence — in addition to piling up clauses (some using dashes such as those a few words back) or parentheses, such as those in the line above, not to mention semicolons, which often suggest that the writer wants to end the sentence, but just can't bring himself to actually type a period; nonetheless, today's busy readers are too impatient to tolerate the sort of 18th-century pomposity wherein writers, so in love with the sound of their own voices, just go on and on and on and on and on.

4 **JARGON AND JOURNALISTIC**

Bureaucrats love to use words like *utilize*, *finalize* and *structured*. Cops like to say suspects are *apprehended* and *incarcerated*. And if you're a campus spokesman, why say "the school can't afford the pay raises" when you could say "the salary scale revision will adversely affect the university's financial stability"?

Good reporters relentlessly filter out bloated, convoluted jargon and officialese. And those who don't should be redirected, *transitioned*, involuntarily separated, or possibly subject to personnel surplus reduction — i.e., fired.

But reporters often lapse into "journalese" without realizing it. Journalese, as veteran editor Joe Grimm puts it, is the peculiar language that newspapers have evolved that reads like this:

"Negotiators yesterday, in an eleventh-hour decision following marathon talks, hammered out agreement on a key wage provision they earlier had rejected."

That's not as bad as bureaucratic gobbledygook. But it's still a problem because it's full of:

5 **CLICHÉS**

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, you should work 24/7 to avoid clichés like the plague. Hel-lo? It's a no-brainer. Go ahead . . . make my day.

Tired clichés instantly lower the IQ of your writing. So do corny newswriting clichés (a form of journalese) like these:

The close-knit community was shaken by the tragedy. Tempers flared over a laundry list of complaints.

The embattled mayor is cautiously optimistic, but troubled youths face an uncertain future sparked by massive blasts in bullet-riddled, shark-infested waters.

So now begins the heartbreaking task of cleaning up.

Yes, clichés can come in handy. And yes, a skilled writer can use them in clever ways.

Once in a blue moon. ♥

---

The number of years of schooling a reader needs to understand what you've written.

**Fog Index**

Since most Americans read at about a 9th-grade level, experts advise aiming for a Fog Index of 7 or 8, just to be safe. The Bible, Mark Twain and TV Guide have Fog Indexes of about 6. (So does this Fog Index story.) Gassy academic papers and foggy government reports score in the — ugh — twenties. .

Consider this example:

"The developments in the colossus project come after revelations that an extensive effort by the geological Administration to repair damages at 82 houses near the destroyed homes has been plagued by shoddy workmanship, double-billing by contractors, inadequate management controls and ongoing disputes over how much damage was caused by the May 15 siege in which a police bomb ignited a blaze that killed 11 people."

That paragraph has a Fog Index of 30. Now consider this from Winston Churchill:

"We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight in the seas and oceans. We shall fight on the beaches, in the fields, in the streets, and in the hills. We shall never surrender."

Like it? It has a Fog Index of 3.4.

Is your writing murky? Dense? Too wordy and complex?

Test it and see. The Fog Index, developed by Robert Gunning 50 years ago, measures the readability of your prose. It assumes that the longer your sentences are, and the bigger the words you use, the tougher your stuff is to read.

Here's how to calculate your Fog Index:

1) Find a typical sample of your writing, one that uses around 100 words.

2) Count the average number of words you use per sentence.

3) Now count the total number of "hard" words you use — those with three syllables or more (not counting proper names).

4) Add those two figures together.

Example: If you average 12 words per sentence and use 10 big words, 12 + 10 = 22

5) Multiply that sum by 0.4.

The resulting number is your Fog Index: the number of years of schooling a reader needs to understand what you've written.

**AMUSING LIST OF JOURNALISTIC CLICHÉS**
Editoring

Who’s going to clean up the errors in your story?

For centuries, reporters have had a love-hate relationship with their editors. On the one hand, reporters see editors as “the boss” — barking orders, spiking stories and mangling their prose. “I am not the editor of a newspaper,” Mark Twain once said, “and shall always try to do right and be good so that God will not make me one.”

But on the other hand, where would you be without editors? Who would organize the news coverage? Pacify angry readers? Fix your clumsy spelling? Delete that innocent-looking phrase in your story that might get you sued?

Every story needs editing, and every newsroom needs good editors. Copy editors, photo editors, design editors, online editors — they all play a part in making your efforts as effective as they can be.

HOW EDITORS PLAY A PART IN THE STORIES YOU PRODUCE

Every story you write will be edited by an editor — or possibly many editors. It varies from newsroom to newsroom. At small publications, one editor may write, proofread and design every page. At big newspapers, you might find an “assistant night sports editor” who never writes a word and relies on a dozen other editors to process the reporters’ finished stories.

Generally, though, editors are responsible for a) managing the newsroom staff, and b) making sure every story is as error-free as possible. For example:

Assigning the story. Editors try to match the story to the right reporter, weighing factors such as workload, beat, writing style, prior stories, etc.

Planning the angle. Editors often urge you to focus on a particular aspect of the story: “Let’s examine how this new law affects part-time students.”

Estimating the scope. How long should each story be? Editors will often decide (“just give me 10 inches”) based on a story’s impact, the amount of news traffic that day, or how much space or time is available.

Anticipating the packaging. Some stories are simple: just text and a headline. Others require photos, sidebars, charts or graphs — and the best time to plan a complex package is before you start writing.

Adding new details. Editors will notify you of new developments (“the mayor just got arrested”) that force you to revise your story.

Monitoring your speed. “When’s that tax story gonna be done?” With many stories in progress, editors always keep one eye on the clock, guiding the staff’s work flow as deadline approaches.

Fine-tuning your approach. Before you veer in the wrong direction, editors try to ensure your story answers the right questions. (“The lead isn’t that they lost the game, it’s that the quarterback broke his leg.”)

Monitoring layout changes. If a new ad comes in, your 20-inch story may suddenly get cut in half. Or the story may hold for a day, waiting for a late photo.

Editing the content. Several editors may examine the structure and substance of your story to ensure it’s readable, logical and fair.

Copy editing. This is where any errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation or style get fixed. When that’s done, a copy editor writes a headline that summarizes your story.

Cutting or padding to fit. Once all the photos, ads and stories combine on the page, some elements may need to grow or shrink. On deadline, the easiest solution may be to cut the bottom off your story.

Assigning follow-up stories. Often, one event (“the mayor resigns”) flows into another (“meet the new mayor”) — and the whole process begins again.
Making sure the narrative of the story flows, finding any holes in a story, and — yes — catching spelling, grammar and punctuation boo-boos.

Michael Becker, Journal-Advocate

I rely on editors to save me from myself. After a year writing for The Associated Press, I generally write pretty cleanly. Then there are those days when I produce massive brain farts and I hope and pray they vanish from my output.

Carol Cole, the Shawnee News-Star

More than anything, I need an editor to find the holes in my stories. My copy is pretty seamless, and it can disguise a lot, even from me.

Jerry Schwartz, The Associated Press

When you get stumped on something or run into a reporting or writing problem, an editor can stand back and provide ideas you haven’t considered. It’s easy to get blinded when you’ve been working on a story for a long time, and a good editor will help you get through that.

Sarah Bahari, Fort Worth Star-Telegram

I rely on editors to determine which stories I need to tackle first, which ones deserve the most (or least) space and which ones I can shelve. This is important input for busy journalists who have ever-growing lists of story ideas.

Jesse Fanciulli, Greeley Daily Tribune

Catching tiny details like “Is it Elisabeth or Elizabeth?”

Patricia Miller, Durango Herald

The best editors inspire, energize, constantly question my copy and edit within the tone and cadence of my stories. Only one has done that in my career.

Mark Freeman, Medford Mail Tribune

This is something that is universally undervalued and overlooked and, dammit, for me it’s the most important thing ever: enthusiasm. I want an editor who invests as much energy and enthusiasm and spirit in a story as I do. Most of the other stuff I can get on my own (even my husband — a TV guy — can line-edit with the best of ‘em). Big-picture editing — the kind where thinking and brainstorming are required — is a very close second.

Beth Macy, The Roanoke Times
Newswriting style

You say “Mister Potato Head,” I say “Mr. Potatohed.” Who’s right?

When you write stories, some things are indisputable: how to spell paraphernalia, for example. As you type the letters, they’ll either be right or wrong.

But other writing questions can’t always be answered so easily. For instance, one reporter might choose to write The ten-inch T.V. costs ninety dollars. Another might say The 10” TV costs $90. Both sentences seem correct, but which version is preferable? And who decides?

That’s where style guidelines come in.

When journalists talk about “style,” they mean either:

- the way you write (in a “playful, comic style,” say, as opposed to a “sombre, intellectual style”), or
- the rules governing punctuation, capitalization and word usage (saying the president was born Jan. 1 instead of the President was born on January first).

Every news outlet customizes its style guidelines. Some news organizations, such as The New York Times, refer to men as Mr. throughout a story; other publications discourage using such “courtesy titles.” Some capitalize the W in Web site; others say website.

It’s the copy desk’s job to standardize the style in your stories — but it helps if you know the rules, too.

---

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS STYLEBOOK: AN INDUSTRY STANDARD

WHAT A STYLEBOOK ENTRY TELLS YOU

Entries are alphabetical, as in a dictionary. But the listings include topics such as days of the week, as well as specific words.

Cross-referencing helps you learn more about a topic elsewhere in the book.

Some entries simply show you the correct spelling, capitalization or hyphenation.

Italicized text provides examples of correct and incorrect usage.

These boldface entries show you the correct punctuation — but they also provide background information to help you verify facts.

---

days of the week

Capitalize them. Do not abbreviate, except when needed in a tabular format: Sun., Mon., Tue., Wed., Thu., Fri., Sat (three letters, without periods, to facilitate tabular composition).

See time element.

daytime

day to day, day-to-day

Hyphenate when used as a compound modifier: They have extended the contract on a day-to-day basis.

D-Day June 6, 1944, the day the Allies invaded Europe in World War II.

DDT Preferred in all references for the insecticide dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane.

Over time, every newsroom develops style guidelines for writing about local people, places and things. Suppose the center of your campus is officially called Smith Quadrangle, but students call it “the quad.” Should you refer to it that way in print? And should quad be capitalized?

- Most publications don’t have the time, energy or grammatical wisdom to grind out a comprehensive guide to the English language. So they select a proven, professional manual to serve as their official arbiter of style — and the American news industry standard is “The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law.”

The Associated Press is a news cooperative providing state, national and international stories, photos and graphics to more than 15,000 news outlets around the world.

Newsrooms do use other stylebooks (The New York Times markets its style manual, for instance). But if you pursue a print reporting career, the AP stylebook is the one that’s most likely to land on your desk.

---

HOT DOGS, POPCICLES, DUMPSTERS AND HARRY S. TRUMAN

You’ll find lots of valuable writing advice inside The AP Stylebook (see next page). But if you’re a word nerd, you’ll be fascinated by its grammatical and factual oddities, too. For instance:

Styrofoam is a trademark for a brand of plastic foam, but it’s never used to make cups. Which means there’s no such thing as a styrofoam cup.

Heroin once was a trademark, too. But it isn’t anymore. (Neither is yo-yo.)

It’s Smokey Bear, not Smokey the Bear.

When writing about the deity, God is capitalized. But when cursing, use lowercase, goddamn it.

Dumpster is the trademarked name for a brand of trash bin, so it’s always capitalized.

The same goes for Popsicle, Frisbee, Mace, Kitty Litter and Seeing Eye dogs.

Pingpong is one word. So is bonbon. But boo-boo and poo-poo are hyphenated. And ball point pen is three words.

It’s the U.S. Navy (capitalized), but it’s the French navy (lowercase). Dr Pepper: There’s no period in the soft drink’s name.

Harry S. Truman said there was no need for a period after his middle initial because it didn’t actually stand for a name. Even though the period is often omitted (at the Harry S Truman National Historic Site, for instance), AP style requires a period after the S.

Yams are not botanically related to sweet potatoes.

Hot dogs got their name in 1906, when a cartoonist drew a dachshund wrapped in a long, narrow bun. You are a boy or a girl until your 18th birthday. Then you become a man or a woman.

They’re called Canada geese. Not Canadian geese.

And speaking of Canadians: It’s derogatory to call them Canucks unless you’re talking about the Vancouver hockey team, the Canucks.
### NUMBERS
- Spell out one through nine, then go to figures for 10 and up. If a sentence begins with a numeral, either spell it out or rewrite the sentence. Figures for years, however, are an exception: 2008 was an election year.
- Always use numerals for ages: He’s an 8-year-old genius. The law is 1 year old.
- Always use numerals in ratios: She’s 5 feet 9 inches tall.
- Write percent, not per cent or %. Depending on the sentence, you may use either a singular or plural verb. Both of these are correct: The teacher said 75 percent was a failing grade. As a result, 25 percent of the students were failing the class.
- Dollars and cents: Both are written lowercase. Use a dollar sign ($) and numerals for an exact figure: The hamburger cost $3.99. For amounts less than a dollar, use numerals: It cost 99 cents. Use a $ and numerals to two decimal points for amounts of $1 million and up: The plan costs $79.13 million. Spell out casual uses: I loaned her a dollar.

### TITLES
- Titles generally are capitalized only when used before a name: President Roosevelt, Professor Tate, Pope John. But when used otherwise, do not capitalize: The president spoke to Congress. The professor scheduled a committee meeting.
- Some titles are descriptive of occupations and are not capitalized: astronaut Tom Swift, assistant coach Janet Johnson.
- King, queen, and other royal titles follow much the same guidelines. Capitalize them only directly before a name. If I were a king, I'd be like King David.
- Some titles are a bit more complicated, such as former President Gerald Ford or acting Mayor Jill Fox. Note that the qualifying word is not capitalized.
- For long titles, it's best to put them after a name for easier readability: Jim McMullen, president of the association, wants taxes lowered. Or, if you prefer, you can say: The president of the association, Jim McMullen, wants taxes lowered.

### CAPITALIZATION
- Always capitalize proper nouns: Wally, Nike, Texas.
- Capitalize common nouns when they're a part of the full name for a person, place or thing: Republican Party, Nixon Lake, Benson Boulevard. In other references, the nouns are not capitalized if they stand alone: the party, the lake, the boulevard.
- Some words derive from a proper noun and depend on that word for their meaning. They should be capitalized, as in Christian, English, Marxist. But other words no longer depend on proper nouns for their meaning: trench fries, pasteurize, venetian blind.
- The first word in a sentence is always capitalized, even if it is a proper noun that otherwise is not. For instance, e.g. Cummings is all lowercase, but at the beginning of a sentence it would be E. E. Cummings, which looks odd and should be recast to avoid.
- In composition titles, the principal words in a book title, movie title and the like are capitalized, including prepositions or conjunctions of four or more letters: "Gone With the Wind."

### ABBREVIATIONS
- Abbreviate these titles before a full name, except in quotations: Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Mr., Mrs., Rep., the Rev. and Sen. When used before a full name in a quote, spell out all except Dr., Mr., and Mrs.
- After a name, abbreviate junior or senior as Jr. or Sr. After the name of a business, abbreviate company, corporation, incorporated and limited: Always abbreviate a.m., p.m., A.D. and B.C.
- When using a month with a specific date, abbreviate Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec. Spell out months when used alone or with a year only: We met in December 2007, then got married on Dec. 14, 2008.
- Spelling out names of all states when they stand alone. Eight states are never abbreviated: Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah. The others are abbreviated when used with the name of a city, town, etc., whether in datelines or in text. See the stylebook for the acceptable state abbreviations.

### ADDRESSES
- Abbreviate street, avenue and boulevard when they're used with a specific address, such as 1234 Delta St., but spell them out otherwise: We took a drive down Electric Avenue. Other designations, such as court, lane and road, are always spelled out.
- Always use figures for the address number.
- Spell out first through ninth if they're street names, then go to figures after that: 222 10th Avenue.
- If you have a complete address, abbreviate any compass points, such as 712 Jones St. S.E. But without an address, it's just Southeast Jones Street (note Street is spelled out and capitalized).

### THE INTERNET
- Some basic styles: Internet, the Net, World Wide Web, the Web, Web site, dot-com, JPEG, DVD, CD-ROM, online, cyberspace, e-mail.
- When listing Web addresses, use this format as a guideline: http://www.timharrower.com

### PARENTHESES
- When a phrase in parentheses is inside a sentence, place the closing parenthesis inside the period: They gave everything they had (but they still lost).
- If it's a separate thought, the closing parenthesis goes outside the period: They gave everything they had. (Unfortunately, they still lost.)
- Use parentheses to insert a state name or similar information within a proper name: She’s a sports reporter at the Allentown (Pa.) Morning Call.
- Do not use parentheses to set off a political designation. Instead, use commas: Joan Jeffries, D-Fla., said Thursday that she would run for re-election next year.

### POSSESSIVES
- For plural nouns not ending in s, add 's: men's clothing. If they end in s, add only an apostrophe: the dogs' leashes.
- For singular nouns not ending in s, add 's: the school's playground. This applies to words ending in x or s as well.
- For singular common nouns ending in s, add 's unless the next word begins with s: the waitress's order book, the waitress's sugar.
- For singular proper names ending in s, use only an apostrophe: Jones's music, Phyllis's car.
- It's is not a possessive; it means only "it is." Its is a possessive: A dog likes its food, not it's.

### PREFIXES
- Use a hyphen if the prefix ends in a vowel and the word that follows begins with the same vowel: re-entry, anti-inflammatory. (Cooperate and coordinate are exceptions.)
- Use a hyphen if the word that follows is capitalized: The song was written by ex-Beatle Ringo Starr.

### GUIDELINES FOR SPECIFIC PREFIXES:
- pre-: The stylebook does list exceptions to Webster's New World Dictionary, including pre-empt, pre-exist and pre-election.
- co-: For nouns, adjectives and verbs that describe a partnership, use a hyphen: co-author, co-worker, co-pilot. Do not use a hyphen in other cases: coexist, coeducational, cooperate.

### SUBLINGUISTIC ENTRIES:
- In general, no hyphen is needed: subtotal, subcommittee, submachine gun.

### A FEW OTHER NITPICKS WORTH REMEMBERING:
- It's, its, not: advisor, not: advisable.
- amid, not: amidst.
- minuscule, not: minuscule.
- doughnut, not: donut.
- amok, not: anmuk.
- Smithsonian Institution, not: Institute.

**Further/Farther:**
- Further is an extension of time or degree: We need to take this idea further.
- Farther is used to show physical distance: I live farther from school than you do.

**Imply/Infer:**
- You imply something by what you say or write.
- People infer something by reading your words.
Making deadline

When you’re a reporter, you live by the clock.

In broadcasting, you measure stories in minutes and seconds. At print publications, you measure them in inches — but still, those presses roll at a set time. Which means every page must be designed, edited and proofed at a set time. Which means you must turn in your story at a set time — otherwise, you create problems for lots of people.

Which makes them angry. And gets you fired.

Meeting deadlines isn’t optional. It’s mandatory. Sure, some stories straggle in, a few minutes late. Once in a while, they even fall through at the last minute. But every reporter knows how career-threatening it is to blow a deadline.

Now, if you write for online publications, you might argue that there are no deadlines in cyberspace — that news is constantly updated around the clock. Which is true. But nevertheless, it’s just a different form of deadline pressure. Editors will always be pushing you to file your stories; you’ll always need to write with speed and efficiency, because the beast will always need feeding.
### Deadline Checklist

#### Accuracy

**Yes/No**
- ☐ Have you checked the spelling of every name? Double-checked it with the actual person? (Is it Christyn? Krystin? Or just Kris?)
- ☐ Have you verified all dates, places and times of events?
- ☐ Have you personally tested all phone numbers mentioned in your story, using what you actually typed on the screen? Did someone answer and approve the number for publication?
- ☐ Have you personally tested any Web or e-mail addresses in your story? Are you sure all Web addresses will still be valid when the story is published?
- ☐ Have you double-checked every job title? Company name?
- ☐ Have you run spell check? Double-checked all unusual spellings (*Smyth, Millar*)? Caught any homonym mix-ups (*their, there*)?
- ☐ Have you tested all the math in your story? Do the numbers and percentages correctly add up? (If in doubt, ask a colleague to recalculate your figures for you.)
- ☐ Have you checked the accuracy of facts or claims made by sources quoted in your story?
- ☐ In reviewing all the sources of information you used, are you sure that everything is reliable and up to date?
- ☐ For stories on complex topics that are new to you, have you tried running your story by an expert on the subject?
- ☐ Have you checked the accuracy of all information in related sidebars or photo captions? Does everything match what's in the story?
- ☐ Do all quotes accurately capture what was said, and convey what was *meant*? Are they clearly and correctly attributed?
- ☐ Have you added middle initials where appropriate (especially crime or court stories)?

#### Fairness and Balance

**Yes/No**
- ☐ Is the story fair? Are all sides of the issue represented?
- ☐ Have you given all your sources an opportunity to respond to any negative charges or opinions?
- ☐ Can readers clearly tell fact from *opinion* in your story? Are you sure that your story doesn’t disguise opinion as fact?
- ☐ Have you clearly labeled any facts that may be in dispute?
- ☐ Is there a diversity of voices quoted in the story: a representative mix of genders, races, ages, etc.?
- ☐ Have you avoided unnecessarily alluding to anyone’s race or religion unless it’s relevant to the topic?

#### Writing Style

**Yes/No**
- ☐ Does the lead or nut graf clearly state what the story’s about?
- ☐ Does the story back up what’s said in the lead?
- ☐ Is your lead concise? Fewer than, say, 30 words?
- ☐ Are all the five W’s clearly explained without making readers dig through the rest of the story to find them?
- ☐ Does the story convey why readers should care?
- ☐ Have you taken pity on your readers and explained complex information in a way that ordinary folks can understand?
- ☐ Do you personally understand everything in the story?
- ☐ If appropriate, does the story give readers enough tools to get involved (phone numbers, Web sites, event information, organizations to contact)?
- ☐ Have you gone through the story to weed out all excess flab, like unnecessary adjectives and adverbs?
- ☐ Are sentences short enough?
- ☐ Are paragraphs short enough?
- ☐ Are sentences written in the active voice, with strong verbs?
- ☐ Have you corrected all grammar and punctuation problems?
- ☐ Have you removed all jargon and jounalese?
- ☐ Have you made all clichés as scarce as hen’s teeth?
- ☐ Have you ever actually seen hen’s teeth? You know why you haven’t? Because they are so freaking scarce, that’s why.
- ☐ Have you eliminated inappropriate slang, such as “freaking”?
- ☐ Does your story avoid unconscious sexist or racist phrasing?
- ☐ Have you eliminated all dull, unnecessary, say-nothing quotes?
- ☐ Have you clearly sourced and attributed all information that’s not general knowledge?
- ☐ Have you considered how your sources will react to this story? Are you sure you haven’t violated their trust, included any information without their consent, or caused them any embarrassment?
- ☐ Have you refrained from mentioning yourself in the story or using “I,” “me,” “we” or “us” (except when quoting others)?
- ☐ Have you alerted your editors to anything in your story that readers may find offensive or objectionable?
- ☐ Have you read a printout of your story? (This will help you view the story with fresh eyes, and it may reveal errors you missed on the computer screen.)
66 newswriting tips

Boring-but-important advice every reporter should memorize.

Luckily for you, this book won't bog itself down analyzing grammar, syntax and punctuation. Instead, on these two pages we've summarized key principles every reporter should know — adapted from the "Hot 100" tips compiled by Sheryl Swingley of Ball State University.

WRITING LEADS

1) Keep leads short. The first paragraph should usually be 35 words or fewer.

2) Try to limit leads to one or two sentences.

3) Avoid starting leads with the when or where unless the time or place is unusual. Most leads start with who or what.

4) Avoid beginning leads with there, this or it.

5) Use question and question leads sparingly.

6) The first five to 10 words determine if the lead will be an attention-getter.

7) Remember, what happened makes a better story than the fact it did.

THE REST OF THE STORY

8) Vary your sentence lengths. Stories become dull when sentences are all the same length. If you notice that happening, try turning one long sentence into two or three shorter ones.

9) If you must write a long sentence, try using a short sentence before or after it.

10) Avoid using several prepositional phrases in a sentence. Prepositional phrases start with some of the following words: about, above, against, at, between, by, down, during, for, from, in, like, on, over, through, to, toward, under, up, until, upon, with.

11) Remember that short paragraphs encourage readers to continue reading.

12) Try to limit paragraphs to:

   • 60 words or fewer, or
   • no more than 10 typeset lines, or
   • one to three sentences.

13) Paragraphs should generally contain only one idea.

14) Avoid introducing new information at the end of a news story. All aspects of a story should usually be introduced or outlined in the first few paragraphs.

15) Transitions — linking words such as but, and, also, besides, however, meanwhile, subsequently, finally, etc. — are necessary to show the reader that the writer has a sense of direction. Carefully placed transitions guide the reader from one thought to another.

EDITING AND STYLE

16) Eliminate words such as when asked and concluded. These are weak transitions. Just report what was said.

17) Whenever possible, omit the word that.

Example: The quarterback says he's ready, not the quarterback says that he's ready.

18) The correct order for writing when and where's time, day (date) and place:

The concert begins at 8 p.m. Friday in Fox Hall.

19) For a past event, say it happened Tuesday, not last Tuesday. For a future event, say it will happen Monday, not next Monday.

20) Use the day of the week for events occurring within six days of a specific day; use the date for events occurring seven or more days before or after a specific day.

21) On first reference, identify a person by his or her first and last names. On second reference, refer to the person by his or her last name only.

22) On second and all other references, don't use Miss, Mrs., Ms., Mr. Dr. unless it's a style requirement of the news outlet you're writing for.

23) A long title should follow, not precede someone's name. A title that follows the name should be lowercased and set off in commas.

24) Short titles may precede names and usually are capitalized. See titles in the AP Stylebook.

25) Always double-check the spelling of all names.

26) Use the computer's spell-checker. When in doubt, consult a dictionary. The latest edition of "Webster's New World College Dictionary" is the preferred reference.

27) For style questions, consult the AP Stylebook. If the answer cannot be found there, consult a dictionary or a grammar guide.

28) Ask for help. Public library information desk personnel can be resourceful and helpful in person or on the phone. (University librarians are usually better at offering advice face to face.)

RULES OF GRAMMAR

29) If none means no one or not one, use a singular verb.

Example: None was found guilty.

30) When you use a pronoun to refer to a team or a group, the proper pronoun to use is its, not they.

Example: The team wants to improve its record.

31) Use parallel construction for verbs in lists or sequences.

Example: He likes camping, fishing and hunting.

Example: The fire killed six people, injuring 60 more and forcing hundreds of residents to leave their homes.

32) When using either...or and neither...nor, the verb agrees in person with the nearer subject.

Examples: Either the coach or the players are to blame. Neither the players nor the coach is to blame.

33) Know the difference between its (no apostrophe for possessive pronoun) and it's (the contraction for it is).

Examples: The dog has a thorn in its paw, and it's (contraction) time to remove it.

34) Know the difference between whose (possessive pronoun) and who's (the contraction for who is).

Examples: Whose (possessive pronoun) coat is this? Who's (contraction) wearing it?

35) Know when to use their (possessive pronoun), there (adverb) and they're (the contraction for they are).

Examples: It is their (possessive pronoun) project. The project is over there (adverb) They're (contraction) working on it.

36) When making comparisons, as and such as are generally preferable to like. Use like as a preposition, not to introduce clauses.

Examples: It tastes like a peach.

The farmer grows peaches, as he did last year.
WORD CHOICES

37) Eliminate lazy adverbs. Let strong verbs do their jobs. Instead of the radio played loudly, write the radio blared.

38) Eliminate lazy adjectives. Let strong nouns do their jobs. Instead of the gang members created a chaotic scene, write the gangsters created chaos.

39) Choose strong verbs that suggest what they mean. Active verbs add pace, clarity and vigor to writing. Avoid be verbs.

40) Use simple words. Don't send readers to the dictionary. Odds are they won't bother looking up definitions; worse, they might quit reading.

41) Words such as thing and are annoying to many readers and editors. Choose better synonyms. (Note correct spelling of a lot.)

42) Be careful using the word itself. Make sure the object can be held physically.

Weak: The Rotary Club meeting will be held at noon Monday in Room 125.

Better: The Rotary Club will meet at noon Monday in Room 125.

43) Avoid using words that qualify how someone feels, thinks or sees. Qualifiers include the following: a bit, a little, sort of, kind of, rather, around, quite, very, pretty, much, in a very real sense, somewhat.

44) If you use jargon that won’t be understood by a majority of readers, be sure to explain each term used.

45) Writing yesterday or tomorrow may be confusing to readers. Use the day of the week. (Today may be used with care.)

46) Give a person’s age if necessary for identification or description; it’s preferable to saying teenager or senior citizen. Write Jim Shu, 30, instead of 30-year-old Jim Shu.

47) For suicides, until the coroner completes his or her investigation, it’s best to say the person was found dead or fell or plunged to his death. (Some papers avoid using the word suicide; check with your editor.)

48) For arrests, write arrested in connection with, sought in connection with, charged with or arrested on charges of.

49) For murders, write that arrests are made in connection with the death of. Do not report that a victim was murdered until someone is convicted of the crime. In obituaries, it may be said the victim was killed or slain.

50) For fires, write that a building is destroyed, not completely destroyed. Buildings also are damaged lightly, moderately or heavily. A fire may gut or destroy the interior of a building. To raze a building is to level it to the ground.

NONSEXIST, NONAGEIST, NONDISCRIMINATORY WORD CHOICES

51) Avoid words that reinforce ethnic, racial, gender or ageist stereotypes.

52) Avoid referring to someone’s ethnicity, race, gender or age unless it’s essential for the clarity of the story. (Race might be relevant when a criminal is at large; referring to ethnicity, race, gender, age or disability might be appropriate when an achievement or event is a first.) Use the substitution test: If you wouldn’t say it about a Caucasian man, then don’t say it about a woman, people of other races or people with disabilities.

53) Use he or she instead of he. Women do notice the difference. If using he or she or him or her is awkward, try a plural pronoun: they, them, their or theirs.

54) Substitute asexual words for sexist man words. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONABLE</th>
<th>BETTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mankind</td>
<td>people, humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man-made</td>
<td>support, created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manpower</td>
<td>workers, force, staff, personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>founding fathers</td>
<td>pioneers, colonists, patriots, forebearers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anchorman</td>
<td>anchor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cleaning woman</td>
<td>housekeeper, custodian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coed</td>
<td>student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fireman</td>
<td>firefighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreman</td>
<td>supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>housewife</td>
<td>homemaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postman</td>
<td>letter carrier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>policeman</td>
<td>police officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salesperson</td>
<td>sales representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stewardess</td>
<td>flight attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weatherman</td>
<td>meteorologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the girls</td>
<td>the women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55) Respect people with disabilities:

| crippled   | impaired, disabled, handicapped |
| deaf and dumb | deaf, hard of hearing |
| deaf mute   | speech-impaired, hearing impaired |
| crazy, insane, mentally ill | emotionally disturbed, emotionally devastated |
| half-witted, retarded | intellectually disabled |

Separate the person from the disability.

Mary, an epileptic, had no trouble doing her job. Mary, who has epilepsy, had no trouble doing her job.

Examples adapted from an International Association of Business Communicators’ book called “Without Bias.”

PUNCTUATION

56) No commas should appear between time, date and place.

Example: The fire started at 4:32 a.m. Monday in the kitchen of Bob’s Bakery.

57) In a series — red, white and blue — a comma is usually not needed before and unless the series is complex or confusing.

58) Use a comma with according to.

Example: Dogs are becoming more intelligent, according to researchers at Penn State University.

59) Avoid comma splices: joining two independent clauses with a comma.

Example: Half the company’s customers lost power after the ice storm, power was restored to most of them quickly. (A period or semicolon should replace the comma.)

60) Another common problem: adding a comma between the subject and the verb.

Example: About half of the company’s customers, lost power after the ice storm. (The comma is not needed.)

61) When in doubt about using a comma, leave it out.

62) Quotation marks always go outside commas (, ) and periods (.)

They always go inside semicolons (;) and colons (:). They may go inside or outside of question marks. Check the AP stylebook.

63) The dash is a long mark (—) most often used to separate a list or series in sentences where extra commas might be confusing.

Example: All these punctuation marks — commas, periods, dashes, hyphens — have their own peculiarities. Dashes also provide a way to insert interruptions or dramatic phrases.

Example: All these tips — don’t worry, we’re nearly done — are important to know.

64) The hyphen is a short mark ( - ) used in hyphenated modifiers (two-week workshop, well-read student), in words that break at the end of a line of type (like this hyphenated word here), in telephone numbers and Social Security numbers. Don’t hyphenate adverbs ending in “ly” paired with adjectives: It’s a freshly painted room, not a freshly-painted room.

65) Use an exclamation point only after brief expletives.

Examples: Fire! Run! Goal!

Exclamation points often demonstrate a lack of control (or excess of emotion) on the writer’s part. Use them sparingly.

66) If you ever catch yourself overusing a particular set of punctuation marks — dashes, parentheses, semicolons — force yourself to stop. Remember, simple sentence structures are always best.
Taking notes

What’s the best way to record the facts and quotes you gather for a story?

It seems ridiculously simple: People talk to you. You write it down. You type it up. Done. Next!

Not so fast, Lois. Reporting may not be rocket science, but the truth is: If you don’t take good notes, you cannot write a good story. And good note-taking isn’t easy. It involves major multitasking — lots of listening, interpreting, observing, evaluating, writing and reacting in a hurry. Under pressure. About unfamiliar topics. In strange places.

If you’re not careful, your notebook can become a confusing, chaotic mess, which is why every good reporter needs a system for recording information quickly and organizing it efficiently — a system that guarantees that the data going into your story exactly matches the data your sources give you. And it all starts with your notebook.

Christina Leonard takes notes and makes a backup tape recording while interviewing a county official for an Arizona Republic story.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT FIND ON A TYPICAL PAGE IN A REPORTER’S NOTEBOOK**

Suppose you’re covering a Memorial Day parade in Dayton. Here are some notes you might gather:

1. A running log of the time.
2. Joe Hyatt, 63, lives in Dayton. He was a Marine lieutenant colonel in Vietnam. Hyatt said, “This is a proud and sacred day for Dayton, a day when we celebrate what it means to be American.” Notice how, without learning shorthand, you can speed up your transcribing by:
   - Skipping small words (a, the).
   - Using symbols instead of common words (“2b” for “to be,” “w” for “when,” and so on).
   - Abbreviating long words (“D” for “Dayton,” “Am” for “American”). But it’s wise to review your notes and spell out those abbreviations while your memory is fresh to avoid confusion. (Did he say “Americans” or “an American”?)
3. Carefully spell out all important facts: names, phone numbers, statistics. Double-check them with your sources as you write them down. When in doubt — if you gather material that you might want to check later — circle it. Or draw a box. Or put question marks beside it. Or add a phrase like sp? (check spelling) or ca? (check the accuracy).
4. As soon as you have a free moment, review your notes to clean up any sloppy shorthand and add details that you were too busy to record at the time: physical descriptions, emotions, tone of voice. (For instance, Little Mary here was a curly-haired blonde in a red-white-and-blue dress, clutching small American flags in each hand.) Fill in any gaps in your data collection. Don’t worry about gathering too much material. You may not use it all, but you’ll regret what you don’t have.
5. Most reporters prefer spiral-bound notebooks like the one shown here. Choose a size that feels comfortable for you — big enough to suit your penmanship, but not too obtrusive or clumsy to carry. And remember, you can usually write narrow columns faster than wide ones.
6. Reporters can be fussy about the type of pen they use. Felt-tips are reliable, but they may smear when you write in the rain (which is why you should always carry a pencil). Some reporters use different-color inks to distinguish between different speakers (Smith is red, Jones is blue).
7. If something seems important, find a way to mark it (adding a star or circling an asterisk, as shown here) so you can quickly spot it later.
8. Draw lines, if necessary, to separate one speaker from another.
9. Be sure to put quotation marks around actual quotes to distinguish them from non-quoted material.
10. For long interviews, try listing your questions 
   - here, on the
   - inside back cover. Then you can flip pages back and forth, reading questions and writing answers.

Remember: The more you practice, the more adept you’ll become at:
- writing while looking somewhere else;
- talking about one thing while writing another;
- stalling for time (rephrasing a question, making small talk) while you furiously finish scribbling a quote.

---

The Other Reason To Carry A Notebook

While researching San Francisco’s alternative lifestyles in the 1970s, journalist Elizabeth Fishel found herself at an orgy where everybody was naked. Trying to be “a good sport,” she disrobed. And for the rest of the night, Fishel doggedly interviewed guests while scribbling in a notebook (“my shield, my alibi, my fig leaf,” she called it) tightly clutched against her naked body.

— The New York Times via anecdotage.com
WHICH IS THE BEST WAY TO TAKE NOTES? A LOOK AT THE PROS AND CONS

Ah, the simple notebook. It's the most indispensable, time-tested tool in your toolbox. No matter how high-tech you try to be, you'll eventually end up someplace where your only option is scribbling notes in a notebook (or, if you're really desperate, on gum wrappers, envelopes, toilet paper — or your arm). So you might as well get good at it, to avoid being caught unprepared.

Recording interviews is the best way to ensure accuracy, especially for lengthy Q-and-A's with fast talkers. Some careful reporters even take additional notes while they're recording (as backup, and to add comments and observations). But remember, recorders make some interviewees uneasy. And in some states, taping people without their permission is illegal. Always ask first.

Some reporters lug their laptops everywhere, taking notes and writing stories while they interview newsmakers or watch the Big Game. But laptops are still buggy and delicate; their batteries can die unexpectedly. That's why most computer note-taking occurs in the newsroom, where reporters sit at their desks and work the phones hard, typing up what they need as they talk.

Arm yourself with a small recorder, but keep it in its holster and take notes. The recorder is often intimidating and you don't have time to transcribe the tapes. If you discover, however, that you can't keep pace with your subject's logic or eloquence, fire up the recorder.

I became dependent on tape recorders as a cub reporter and had to wean myself from them. I never use tape recorders. I only take notes.

Steve Duin, The Oregonian

Use a tape recorder. Only by listening to the tape later can we be properly appalled at how badly we misheard a quote and/or bungled it in our notes.

Jim Kershner, The Spokesman-Review (Spokane, Wash.)

I detest tape recorders. They set an adversarial tone and make interview subjects less inclined to relax and open up. Only the killer quotes need be used and they can be accurately captured with pen and paper.

Randy Ludlow, The Columbus Dispatch

For a series on adolescent girls, I recorded, to ensure I could capture the way girls talk. If the person speaks fast, I record. If the person has a habit of changing their story or stretching the truth, I record. In interviews for daily stories, however, I don't record, unless it's the governor.

Monica Mendoza, The Arizona Republic

Both. Take the tape recorder, turn it on and set it aside. Take clear notes. When you hear that perfect quote, check the meter on the tape recorder and write it in your notes, so you can find the exact quote when you need it.

Phillip Pina, St. Paul Pioneer Press

Tape recorders always fail (at the worst moments). Tape recorders make sources talk funny. Recorders encourage lazy notetaking. Recorders encourage lazy listening.

Clip and paste on your tape recorder:

WARNING! Tape recorders may be dangerous to your professional health.

Don Fry, writing coach
**Interviewing**

**Interviews, like stories, come in an endless variety of styles and structures.**

They can be fast five-minute phoner where you ask a senator for a sound bite (“What do you think of the proposed tax increase?”). Or they can be intimate interrogations of the rich and famous (like the 1977 Playboy interview with Barbra Streisand that took nine grueling months to complete).

Writing may be a solitary art, but interviewing is a social skill. You must be friendly, but aggressive. Polite, but probing. Sympathetic, but skeptical. You need to hurl hard questions at complete strangers who may be shy, sneaky, suspicious of the media or emotionally distraught from the disaster they just survived.

But for many reporters, it’s the most fun part of the job. It offers you a fascinating opportunity to pick the brains of the stupidest and smartest and most successful people you’ll ever meet. If you’re a good listener, you can be a great interviewer.

“Each month, the Playboy Interview provides a fine example of a celebrity Q-and-A. In fact, many men read Playboy just for the interviews. No, seriously.”

**ASK YOURSELF: WHICH TYPE OF INTERVIEW SHOULD THIS BE?**

Anytime you talk to someone to gather material for a story — facts, quotes, opinions, reactions — it’s called an interview.

But no two interviews are alike. They’ll vary according to the time you have, the facts you need and the accessibility of the interviewee.

The most common options:

- **A long, formal interview** where you sit privately in a room, asking probing questions and getting revealing answers.
- **A quick phoner** where you seek fast facts to plug into a story.
- **A walkaround** where you accompany your interviewee as he/she does that newsworthy thing you’re writing about.
- **An on-the-fly chat** with a news-maker (say, a politician or athlete) where you fire off questions as they whisk through a public place.
- **A backgrounder** where you informally pick an expert’s brain on a topic you’re researching.

But before you start asking any questions, decide whether it’s best to conduct your interview in person, over the phone or via e-mail.

---

**ADVANTAGES**

- **In Person**
  - It’s the best way to build rapport and encourage sources to cooperate.
  - A subject’s physical surroundings often provide useful information.
  - You can pick up cues by watching a person’s gestures, body language.
  - People take you more seriously when you’re right in front of them.

- **By Phone**
  - Fast, efficient way to get answers (if they answer their phone).
  - For many people, talking to a reporter isn’t as intimidating when they can’t see you taking notes.
  - With cell phones, conversations can occur anytime, anywhere — no advance notice is even necessary.

- **By E-mail**
  - Gives interviewees time to ponder and construct intelligent responses.
  - Offers the most flexibility; you can ask and answer questions whenever it’s convenient.
  - Since responses are typed, they’re easy to copy and paste — and they provide a record of all that’s said.

**DISADVANTAGES**

- **In Person**
  - You can waste time setting up a meeting, traveling, waiting around, making small talk, etc.
  - Distractions (people, phone calls) often interrupt the interview.
  - If you’re uncomfortable, unlikable or unpleasant to be around, face-to-face interviews can go badly.

- **By Phone**
  - It’s impersonal. You can’t tell what people look like, what they’re doing, how they’re reacting.
  - It’s difficult to record a phone conversation without buying a reliable recording gizmo.
  - You’re much more likely to mishear or misquote someone.

- **By E-mail**
  - There’s no personal interaction.
  - The lag time between questions and answers makes it hard to ask immediate follow-up questions.
  - Some people take an hour to type what they could say in five minutes.
  - Are you sure this is really the person he or she claims to be?

---

**QUOTED**

“One thing I’ve learned about doing interviews: it’s important to establish early on that you’re not a schmuck.”

*Joel Siegel, movie critic*

“Interviewing is one of those skills that you only get better at. You will never again feel so ill at ease as when you try for the first time, and probably you will never feel entirely comfortable prodding another person for answers that he or she may be too shy or inarticulate to reveal.”

*William Zinsser, writer, editor and teacher*

“If you let the other person control the interview, then you’ve lost.”

*Ted Koppel, ABC News*

“This is a sad fact: Sometimes the dumbest questions get the best answers. You’ve gotta be willing as an interviewer to take chances and ask the dumb questions every now and then.”

*Steve Kroft, “60 Minutes” correspondent*

“People are interesting. You just have to ask them the right questions.”

*John Travolta, actor*

“Play with the quotes, by all means — selecting, rejecting, thinning, transposing their order, saving the good one for the end. Just make sure the play is fair. Don’t change any words or distort the context.”

*William Zinsser*
TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS: BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER
You’re a reporter. You’ve got stories to write. You need to interview people who have information your readers require. So what do you do? Here’s how the process works.

SETTING UP THE INTERVIEW
- First, do your homework. Get familiar with the topic. Read old news stories. Do online research. Check with affiliated organizations. Talk to your editors. Then:
  - Think through your story. Decide who your best sources will be. Who are the experts? Who’s in charge? Who’s being affected? Who has strong opinions? How many different sources will you need to contact?
  - Determine the best way to interview those sources. Who’s your top source? Should that interview be done face to face? Should others be done by phone or e-mail?
  - Set up the interview(s), usually by phone or e-mail.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW
- Continue your research. The more you understand your subject, the more productive your interview will be. DON’T waste people’s time forcing them to explain basic stuff you should already know; instead, use interviews to collect details, insights and opinions.
- Organize your questions. For your first few inter-

DURING THE INTERVIEW
- Relax. Be friendly and curious. Don’t be afraid. Granted, interviews aren’t exactly casual conversations, but the more comfortable things feel, the more success you’ll have loosening your interviewee’s lips.
- Never forget: You’re in charge. Once the interview starts, it’s your show. You’ll ask the questions, and you’ll keep asking until you’re satisfied. Don’t let anyone intimidate you, not even ticked-off bigshots. Remember, there’s real power in that story you’re going to write.
- Start with the basics: name, age, address, title, etc. Be sure to double-check spellings as you jot them down.
- Budget your time. If you’ve only got five minutes, don’t waste time with chitchat or inessentials. Get right to the meat of the matter. If it’s a longer interview:
  - Begin with softball questions. Warm up with the big-picture, nonthreatening stuff. Save the complex, controversial topics for later.
  - Focus your questions. Broad, vague queries (What’s it like being on the soccer team?) aren’t as effective as precise ones (How’d it feel to score that winning goal?).
  - Keep it simple. Avoid long, rambling, two- or three-part questions. It’s more efficient to ask one question at a time, about one thing at a time.
- Limit questions that can be answered simply “yes” or “no.” Questions like “Were you worried on election night?” are called close-ended questions, and they often yield dull answers: “No, not really.” Instead, ask open-ended questions — “What was going through your mind as you waited for the election results?” — to reveal thoughts and feelings that explain why and how things happened.
- Make sure every question gets answered. Pay constant attention. Listen closely. Don’t let interviewees out-clever you and sidestep sensitive issues.
- Rephrase questions when you think an answer is unclear or contradictory, or if you think you’ll get a more quotable response.
- Ask follow-up questions. The best ones are:
  1) How do you know that?
  2) Can you give me an example?
  3) And...?
- Stay flexible. Sometimes an interview takes a turn you never predicted. Go with the flow. Some of your best material may come out of deep left field.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW
- Review your notes before you end the session. Recap what you’ve discussed to fill in gaps, correct errors or clarify confusion.
- Ask, “Who else should I contact?” Often, the most valuable thing you get from an interview is a link to a better source — a person, a Web site or an organization you didn’t previously know about.
- Ask permission to call back later in case you have more questions. If the interview went well, your subject will be glad to help further.
- Ask interviewees to call YOU if they think of anything else that might be helpful to your story.
- Say thank you. And mean it. These people have just given you their time, their trust and their information. Show a little gratitude, eh?
- Rehearse your interview with a friend if you’re not feeling comfortable with the process. See how questions sound when you ask them. Fine-tune your phrasing.
- Get to the interview on time. And another thing:
  - Dress appropriately. Don’t wear jeans and a T-shirt to interview a banker; don’t dress like a banker when you interview a poor farmer. Your appearance can actually help you gain the confidence of those you interview.
  - Ask people to slow down if you’re falling behind in your notes — or slow them down deliberately when they get to the good parts of their stories, so you can fish for more interesting details (“How did you feel about that? So then what happened?”)
  - Don’t worry about asking dumb questions if they lead to smart answers. Better to sound stupid in an interview than to write a stupid story later. Don’t ever be embarrassed to say, “Sorry... you lost me.”
  - Remember to look around and note what you see. What gestures, physical descriptions or activities will add color to the story — or trigger new questions?
  - Use reassuring body language (facial expressions, nodding, making friendly eye contact, etc.). But keep unnecessary comments to a minimum.
  - Try using silence as a tactic to prod people into saying more. Often, just gazing blankly at somebody makes them uncomfortable, and they keep talking.
  - Don’t interrupt.
  - Don’t take sides.
  - Save your toughest question (“the bomb”) for last. If they trust you, they’ll answer. If they stomp off in anger, at least they answered all your other questions.

FOR MORE ON INTERVIEWING, TURN THE PAGE
Interviewing (Continued from previous page)

THE Q-and-A FORMAT: CAPTURING CONVERSATIONS VERBATIM

Interviews are usually worked into stories. But for an engaging alternative, you can run a transcript as a Q-and-A.

Q: Do you believe in an afterlife?
GIBSON: Absolutely. There has to be an afterlife. Otherwise, where is the evening-out process? There has to be an afterlife because Hitler and I both walked the planet and I'm not going to the same place as Hitler.

Q: Is there a hell?
GIBSON: Absolutely.

Q: What's your image of the devil?
GIBSON: The beast with eight tongues and four horns and fire and brimstone. Probably worse than anything we can imagine.

Q: Do you believe in Darwin's theory of evolution or that God created man in his image?
GIBSON: The latter.

Q: So you can't accept that we descended from monkeys and apes?
GIBSON: No, I think it's bullshit. If it isn't, why are they still around? How come apes aren't people yet? It's a nice theory, but I can't swallow it. There's a big credibility gap. The carbon-dating thing tells you how long something's been around, but how accurate is that, really? I've got one of Darwin's books at home, and some of that stuff is pretty damn funny. Some of his stuff is true, like that the giraffe has a long neck so it can reach the leaves. But I just don't think you can swallow the whole piece.

Q: I take it that you're not particularly broad-minded when it comes to issues such as celibacy, abortion, birth control —
GIBSON: People always focus on stuff like that. Those aren't issues. Those are unanswerables. You don't even argue those points.

Q: You don't?
GIBSON: No.

— From The Art of the Interview

THREE WAYS THE WEB CAN ENRICH YOUR INTERVIEWS

Whether you're writing for print or the Web, these options help maximize an interview's effectiveness:

1 POST COMPLETE TRANSCRIPTS
If an interview is unusually interesting or newsworthy, don't just edit the best sound bites into a story and toss the rest. Instead, post the entire Q-and-A online, using a format like the example above.

2 POST AUDIO OR VIDEO
Most interviews are dull and routine. But if you land a conversation with someone famous or newsworthy enough, consider recording it so you can convert it into a podcast or online video clip.

3 LET READERS JOIN THE CONVERSATION
Promote the interview in advance on your Web site and ask readers to submit their questions ahead of time—or better yet, post questions, answers and user comments live as the session unfolds.

"If someone calls me up and says her toaster is talking to her, I don't refer her to professional help. I say, 'Put the toaster on the phone.'"
Sal Ivone, Weekly World News editor

"You may have to act like a jerk at times, or you may have to challenge, tease, coax or just your subject into saying something provocative, but that's part of the job description of an interviewer. You have to be willing to think on your feet, change directions quickly and take charge."
Lawrence Grobel, celebrity interviewer

"I compare myself to a gold prospector. I start asking questions and up comes all this ore, dirt, everything. Now you gotta find the gold dust. I start editing, cutting. Now you've got to find a form. Then it's not just gold dust; it becomes a ring, a watch, a necklace."
Studs Terkel, legendary oral historian

"It's pretty common for me to be in the middle of an interview, hear something, and think, 'Well, there's my lead.' If I walk out of an interview knowing my lead and my conclusion, I know I'm in pretty good shape."
Steve Pond, music journalist

"Long, complex, multipart questions generally do not elicit very good information. I find that most of the news I've ever gotten in my career has been when I ask very short and specific questions that just come to the point. And when I'm talking to young reporters, that's always my advice. Just ask the question."
Bob Schieffer, host of CBS' Face the Nation
A soccer star quits the team, but she’s afraid to say why. A union boss says the strike is nearly settled, but he won’t let you quote him. A rape victim is willing to discuss her ordeal, but she doesn’t want you to print her name.

How do you handle delicate situations like these? Over the years, reporters have adopted these conventions for conducting sensitive interviews:

**ON THE RECORD**

The reporter’s source agrees that anything said during the interview can be printed, and the source’s name can be used: “Obama plans to veto that tax bill,” said Roy G. Biv, secretary of commerce.

**OFF THE RECORD**

The information cannot be published in any form. If a reporter is told off the record that Obama plans to veto the tax bill, the reporter must confirm it from a separate source before printing it.

- Use the information?
- Identify the source?
- Run actual quotes?

**ON BACKGROUND**

The information can be used in a story — and can even run as a quote — but the source cannot be identified by name: “Obama plans to veto that tax bill,” a high-ranking commerce department official said.

- Use the information?
- Identify the source?
- Run actual quotes?

**ON DEEP BACKGROUND**

The information can be used, but the source cannot be revealed. The reporter could write that President Obama is expected to veto the tax bill — but publishing unattributed speculations may be risky.

- Use the information?
- Identify the source?
- Run actual quotes?

Obviously, it’s best for all conversations to stay on the record. Uncertainty and mistrust emerge as soon as things go off the record — which is why, to avoid misunderstandings, many reporters refuse to allow it. Ever.

Editors are wary of printing information from anonymous sources, too. What if the source is lying? If you’re being duped, your paper’s credibility could be damaged.

Still, unnamed sources often provide valuable material. They can leak stories you’d never find on your own; they can steer you to other sources you’d never know about. But before you agree to give any source anonymity, ask:

- Can I persuade this person to go on the record?
  - Have I explained the benefits of telling this story openly and the problems anonymous sourcing might create?
  - Can I obtain this information through another source so I can avoid unnamed sources altogether?
  - Do we all agree on the ground rules for this interview and exactly how we’ll handle any sensitive material?
  - Is our newsroom policy clear on anonymous sourcing?
  - You may be wise to stop the interview, place a quick phone call to your editor and discuss how best to proceed — before you make any promises to your source.

**ADAM SCHEFTER, The Denver Post (in the white shirt and shades):**

“I don’t ask too many questions in a setting like this. I try to save most of my questions for one-on-one sessions, where I’m not advertising to everybody else what I’m writing about. If there’s an issue that everybody knows about — like, say, the status of whether the Broncos signed their first-round draft pick, as was the case on the date of this picture, which was the first day of training camp — I’ll ask it in a public setting like this. Otherwise, for more confidential subjects, I wait until I can ask someone in private.”

- Many interviewers, many interviewees. You’ll find this in the “spin room” at political debates or during media gatherings at trade shows, where impromptu interviews arise in random clumps. (Tip: If you ever find yourself lost and confused at one of these events, just shadow a veteran reporter who knows who’s who.)

- One interviewer, many interviewees. It gets chaotic talking to a crowd (teammates who just won the big game, assembled members of a rock group), so filter out the distractions and keep a careful note of who says what.

  Keep in mind that e-mail may be the most efficient way to ask many people the same questions; just duplicate one message to several sources, then wait for their replies.

**QUOTED**

“If you want something to remain off the record, don’t say it.”

Anita Creamer, lifestyle columnist

“If you’re really going to do an in-depth interview, then you have to know an awful lot about the person, certainly enough to know when he or she isn’t telling the truth, isn’t telling the whole story.”

Barbara Walters, ABC News

“Your purpose in conducting an interview is partly to get facts, but you also want color; you want anecdotes; you want quotes; you want material that will give readers an impression of the interviewee’s personality.”

Max Gunther, author

“The single most interesting thing you can do is ask a good question and then let the answer hang there for two or three or four seconds as though you’re expecting more. You know what? They get a little embarrassed and give you more.”

Mike Wallace, CBS News

“Listen NOW. When people talk, listen completely. Don’t be thinking about what you’re going to say. Most people never listen. Nor do they observe. You should be able to go into a room and when you come out know everything that you saw there. If that room gave you any feeling, you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling.”

Ernest Hemingway, reporter and novelist

“The reporter who believes all that he is told will not last long.”

Quotations

They make stories more appealing, more authentic — and yes, you can quote me on that.

Of course, you can write entire stories in your own words, without quoting a single source. But those stories often sound like dull, dry news releases. Adding real words spoken by real people gives your stories personality. Authenticity. Humor. Quotes provide the emotions, opinions and flavor often missing from objective newswriting.

So in each interview you do, keep your radar tuned for colorful quotes. But be selective. You’ll need to weed out many of the quotes you gather simply because:

- **People lie.** They exaggerate. They fudge facts to make their case; they bend the truth to win our approval. So stay skeptical. Never forget that classic journalistic adage: *When your mother says she loves you, check it out.*
- **People yammer.** And stammer. And fumble around trying to express ideas that you — a professional wordsmith — could say better. Take the disjointed ramblings of former president George Bush at left. Who’d want to read that stuff in a news story? As writing coach Chip Scanlan once advised:

> “By all means, fill your stories with voices — but just as you’d steer clear of a windbag at a party, spare your readers those bloated quotes that deafen a piece of writing.”

President George H.W. Bush’s reply when asked about his ideas for improving American education:

“Well, I’m going to kick that one right into the end zone of the Secretary of Education. But, yes, we have all — he travels a good deal, goes abroad. We have a lot of people in the department that does that. We’re having an international — this is not as much education as dealing with the environment — a big international conference coming up. And we get it all the time, exchanges of ideas. But I think we’ve got — we set out there — and I want to give credit to your governor McWherter and to your former governor Lamar Alexander — we’ve gotten great ideas for a national goals program from, in this country, from the governors who were responding to, maybe, the principal of your high school, for heaven’s sake!”

**OK, YOU’VE FINISHED YOUR INTERVIEWS. HOW DO YOU USE THOSE QUOTES IN A STORY?**

**DIRECT QUOTE** Direct quotes state exactly, word for word, what someone said (or wrote). The quoted statements always begin and end with quotation marks. A phrase identifying the speaker — called an attribution — usually follows the quote.

“Without a doubt, we’ve got the biggest, fastest, best darn team in the league this year,” said Bears quarterback Bruce Easley.

Use direct quotes when a source’s entire sentence presents ideas or opinions in a concise, relevant way; otherwise, one of these other options may be preferable.

**PARAPHRASE** When you summarize what a source told you without using the exact words or adding quotation marks, it’s called an indirect quote or paraphrase. It’s a common way to clarify or condense someone else’s statements:

Bears quarterback Bruce Easley claims that this year’s football team will be the best in the league.

Paraphrasing is necessary because — let’s be honest — people don’t always speak articulately or efficiently. Quoting them indirectly lets you rephrase their ideas in a clearer, more concise way.

**PARTIAL QUOTE** If a direct quote is too long or awkwardly phrased, you may decide to insert just a part of it — a clause, a phrase or even a powerful word — into your own sentence:

Quarterback Bruce Easley calls this year’s Bears the “best darn team in the league.”

But beware of overusing fragmentary quotes. Using quote marks to “highlight” certain “words” may just make them look “odd.”

**DIALOGUE** To capture a conversation between, say, two speakers, you can reprint their actual dialogue:

“We’ll be number one in the league this year,” Easley said.

“And in the state, too,” added coach Butkus. He winked at Easley.

Easley groaned. “Gez, no pressure,” he said.

Butkus smiled. “You can do it, son,” he said, punching Easley’s arm. “You’ll do fine.”

Avoid “partial quotes.” They “get in the way of” the reader, often imparting a meaning to words not “intended” by the “writer.” Or “speaker,” for that matter. Do you know what I “mean”?

Dick Thien, editor and writing coach
PROBLEMS TO AVOID WHEN USING QUOTES IN STORIES

◆ Don’t bore readers with dull, obvious quotes.
A cheerleader tells you “I’m very excited about our big victory.” Uhhhh… that’s news? A pianist says “the concert will be at 9 p.m. Friday.” That may be true, but why quote him on it? Use quotes to add color or reveal character — not to state the obvious. (That’s your job.)

◆ Don’t rehash what a quote is saying. For instance:
Ivan Oder boasts that he never uses deodorant.
“I never use deodorant,” he says.
Either you say it, or shut up and let him say it.

◆ Avoid using a quote as a lead. OK, we admit it: Occasionally, a wonderful quote will make a terrific lead. But not usually. And most editors think it’s lazy. So write the lead in your own voice, then let others talk.

◆ Don’t be telepathic. It drives some copy editors nuts to read sentences like these:
Barb Dwyer dreams of being a rodeo clown someday.
She feels certain it’s the best career she could choose.
How do you know what Barb feels? Have you actually observed her dreams? Don’t put ideas in anyone’s head if you can’t support them with quotes. Instead, say:
Barb Dwyer says she dreams of being a rodeo clown.

◆ Beware of monologues. Most quotes are one, maybe two sentences. Some are one or two paragraphs. Beyond that, it had better be brilliant, engaging stuff — or you risk letting some windbag seize control of your story.

◆ It’s best not to mimic someone’s dialect. Why? Because eef yoo bungle cett, den dey git veddy, veddy MAD atchoo! You might not think it’s insulting (or racist), but it is. Leave the dialects to novelists and comedians.

◆ Beware of foul language. Every publication has its own decency standards, so you constantly need to gauge what your readers will tolerate and where your editors will draw the line. Remember, you’re ultimately responsible for every word that runs in your story. If you use a quote that’s offensive, you’ll be criticized; if you use a quote that’s defamatory, you could be sued.

◆ Don’t distort a quote’s meaning by carelessly deleting words or altering any phrasing — but it is OK to clean up minor hemming and hawing (see below).

PUNCTUATION ADVICE FOR USING QUOTES IN STORIES

◆ Use double quotation marks at the beginning and end of direct quotes:
“I am not an animal,” said John Merrick.

◆ Use single quotation marks for quoted statements inside other quoted statements. When one speaker refers to something someone else said, it looks like this:
“I love that movie,” Sarah said, “the one where the Elephant Man goes, ‘I am not an animal.’”

◆ Put periods and commas inside quotation marks:
“I am not an animal,” said John Merrick in “The Elephant Man.”

◆ If you’re quoting someone’s question, put the question mark inside the quotation marks:
At one point, John Merrick asks, “Am I an animal?”

BUT if you’re asking a question about quoted material, the question mark goes outside the quotation marks:
Does he actually say, “I am not an animal?”

◆ Colons, semicolons and dashes go outside quotation marks. This usually occurs when the quote is used as part of a longer, more complex sentence:
“I am not an animal”: Merrick’s plaintive cry still haunts us. Merrick’s cry — “I am not an animal” — was quite dramatic.

◆ When editing a quote, use an ellipsis (…) to indicate deleted words, phrases or sentences. But be careful not to distort the quote’s intended meaning:
“I read no newspaper now but Ritchie’s,” Thomas Jefferson wrote, “and in that chiefly the advertisements, for they contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper.”

Edited version: “Advertisements… contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper,” Thomas Jefferson wrote.

When the ellipsis comes at the end of a quote, use four dots instead of three; the fourth dot represents a period ending the sentence.

◆ Use parentheses to supply missing words. It’s a little annoying, but in small doses this helps add meaning:
“…that he (Jefferson) is right about that,” Bush said.

◆ Capitalize the first word of a direct quote —
Bush said, “No, Thomas Jefferson was not an animal.”

—but you don’t need to capitalize partial quotes:
Are we finished with this “not an animal” quote yet?

The Press Room

HOW FAR DO YOU GO WHEN IT COMES TO CHANGING (OR CLEANING UP) THE QUOTES YOU GATHER?

Stammering and the like are the equivalent of typos — they can be fixed. But otherwise, I don’t mess with quotes, ever. There is no shame in paraphrasing — quotes should be used only when they illuminate, or say something better than the writer can say it.

Jerry Schwartz, The Associated Press

I must admit to an inconsistent approach. I hold politicians, public officials and public figures to a high standard. I generally use their quotes verbatim, unless their quotes will be incomprehensible without paragraph after paragraph of context to set it up. I give private citizens (“civilians”) a lot more leeway and generally clean up their grammar.

Rick Bella, The Oregonian

I’ve interviewed a lot of foreigners whose command of English is not always the best. I have no problem changing a “has” to a “have” on my computer screen if it means letting my subjects keep their dignity.

Kevin Pang, Chicago Tribune

Take out the um’s and ah’s, and that’s about it.

Jesse Fanculli, Greeley Daily Tribune

If your source is grammatically challenged, you can better say what he meant to say by paraphrasing. Run quotes verbatim if the manner of speech goes to the essence of the story (i.e., clean up quotes in a story about hip-hop and you lose credibility. KnowwhatI’msayin’?). Otherwise, minimally clean up the quote to avoid having the reader stumble.

Toni Coleman, Pioneer Press

MORE ON QUESTIONS OF TASTE ▶ 148  MORE ON LIBEL ▶ 144
Attributions

Make sure sources get proper credit (or blame) for what they say.

Sources provide you with facts, opinions and quotes. When you write stories, you must clearly indicate where those facts, opinions and quotes came from.

That’s the purpose of attributions.

If a statement is considered common knowledge — the Earth rotates every 24 hours — it doesn’t require attribution because it’s widely known and easily verifiable. But when someone says something new and different — the core of the Earth contains seeds for growing new Earths — you must source it in a way that’s clear to readers:

“The Earth’s core contains seeds for growing new Earths,” said astronomer Dr. Jean Poole.

Now, Dr. Poole may be wrong . . . or nuts. If so, you should find another source to contradict her. (“Dr. Poole is sadly mistaken,” said professor L.M. Shirley Wright.)

The important thing, journalistically, is to keep your own opinions out of the story. You can say that these two sources disagree with each other; you can explain how Dr. Poole’s ideas are considered odd. But you must stay as neutral as you can.

Collect facts, opinions and quotes from the best possible sources — then attribute them.

---

NINE GUIDELINES FOR WORDING AND POSITIONING ATTRIBUTIONS

1. The first time you identify a source, use his/her full name (and title, if needed). After that, use only his/her last name.

Ralph Nader, consumer advocate and political activist, urged colleges to focus on academics, not athletics.

“If Martians came down from space and watched television, they would conclude that universities are sports organizations,” Nader said.

2. For most attributions, it’s preferable to put the noun ahead of the verb:

“I’d rather meet Madonna than the president of the United States,” Britney Spears said.

**NOT:** “I’d rather meet Madonna than the president of the United States,” said Britney Spears.

But put the verb ahead of the noun if that helps you avoid awkward phrasing:

“The kids let out an ‘oooh’ sound,” said James Twomey, the father of a Kenosha, Wis., third-grader who was accidentally shown a pornographic film in class.

3. When a quote uses just one sentence, the attribution usually follows the quote:

“I just wish people would love everybody else the way they love me,” Muhammad Ali said.

**NOT:** Muhammad Ali said, “I just wish people would love everybody else the way they love me.”

4. When a quotation uses more than one sentence, it’s often best to put the attribution at the end of the first sentence:

“I like to drive with my knees,” actress Sharon Stone said. “Otherwise, how can I put on my lipstick and talk on the phone?”

**NOT:** “I like to drive with my knees. Otherwise, how can I put on my lipstick and talk on the phone?” actress Sharon Stone said.

5. There are times when it makes sense to start a quote with the attribution: to set up a partial quote, for instance. Or to avoid forcing readers to scan a long quote without first knowing who the speaker is:

Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones, explained that “rock ‘n’ roll is always considered, quite rightly, a juvenile music. That’s because it’s young itself. But that doesn’t mean it has to be played by young juveniles.”

**NOT:** “Rock ‘n’ roll is always considered, quite rightly, a juvenile music. That’s because it’s young itself. But that doesn’t mean it has to be played by young juveniles,” said Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones.

6. It’s also acceptable to set up long quotes with an attribution followed by a colon:

As Dylan told 60 Minutes: “I never wanted to be a prophet or a savior. Elvis, maybe. I could see myself becoming him. But a prophet? No.”

7. When inserting an attribution into a quote, try to find a logical spot for it, then insert additional quotation marks:

“One of the great things about books,” President George W. Bush once said, “is that sometimes there are fantastic pictures.”

**NOT:** “It just makes you feel permanently like a girl,” said Brad Pitt, explaining his sex appeal, “walking past construction workers.”

8. Once you attribute the first sentence of a quote, you don’t need to attribute additional sentences that directly follow:

**WRONG:** “We are the caretakers of God’s creation,” said Burger King spokesman Rob Doughty. “We have a moral obligation to treat them humanely, and, when we do slaughter them, to do so in a painless manner,” he said.

**CORRECT:** “We are the caretakers of God’s creation,” said Burger King spokesman Rob Doughty. “We have a moral obligation to treat them humanely, and, when we do slaughter them, to do so in a painless manner,” he said.

9. Begin a new paragraph whenever you change speakers. To avoid confusion, add new attributions as soon as possible:

“When a man’s best friend is his dog, that dog has a problem,” Edward Abbey said.

Groucho Marx saw things differently. “Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend,” he said.

“Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.”

**NOT:** “You can put wings on a pig, but you don’t make him an eagle,” Bill Clinton said. “I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals,” Winston Churchill said.
SO SHOULD IT BE SAID? OR SAYS?

News stories are almost always written in the past tense:
Coach Wormer said the victory was a "team effort."

But sometimes you'll see an attribution written this way:
Coach Wormer says next week's game will be a "motherwhopper."

So which should it be, said or says?
That depends on the type of story — and sometimes, the style of your publication. Serious news stories almost always stick to the past tense (said). But the present tense (says) is appropriate for:

- **Reviews**, which describe music or drama as if it's happening now:
  At the start of the movie, Kane says "Rosebud" and drops dead. The film becomes an inquiry into what that word meant, as a way to understand Kane.

- **Feature stories**, especially the "you are there" types of profiles where all the action seems to be occurring now:
  Loreen doesn't know where she'll go when the food runs out. "I got a son in Texas," she says. "I used to, anyways." She turns away and starts to cry.

But be careful not to mix past and present tenses carelessly or inconsistently when you write a feature this way.

- **Broadcast newswriting**, where present tense is usually preferable.

HOW ABOUT STATED? UTTERED? SNOTRED? SPOUTED? SHOUTED?

Paula LaRocque, writing coach:

Stick to plain and neutral verbs of attribution. Said is safe and, unless badly overworked, unobtrusive. Stated or added can work if you've overused said. Explained and announced are fine if the source really is explaining or announcing. Avoid the weird (opined, averred, snotred, laughed, chuckled, uttered, voiced, shrugged) or the overly emphatic (declared, proclaimed).

Louis E. Catron, playwright and professor at the College of William and Mary: Remember that said is invisible. . . . Familiarity breeds acceptance. That's the way said works in dialogue: The reader just doesn't notice the word no matter how often it is repeated.

Like a good actor, the invisible "said" supports the primary lead but never calls attention to itself. Synonyms, however, are like a circus clown with an outlandish red nose, screaming for attention.


Never use verbs denoting nonverbal processes as attributes, like smiled, wept, laughed. You don't smile words; you say them, smiling. "I'm fond of him," she smiled, is no less absurd than "I'm very hot this morning," he radiated.

Roscoe C. Born in "The Suspended Sentence: A Guide for Writers":

You seek a better word not for variety or novelty but to report precisely how a person said a thing if he did it in some distinctive way. This from The Detroit News will illustrate:

Dirty Harry/Clint Eastwood is squinting down the barrel of his .44-caliber Magnum. "Go ahead," Eastwood aspires, daring the dude to begin shooting. "Make my day."

Have you seen Eastwood in that scene? That is exactly what he does: He aspires. This writer wasn't seeking a cheap alternative to says for variety's sake; he wanted the precise verb that would describe how the man said it. And he found it.

Tim Harrower, "Inside Reporting":

Aspires? What kind of high-falutin' verb is that?

EXAMPLES OF ATTRIBUTION IN A TYPICAL NEWS STORY

A balanced story requires a variety of sources — some providing facts, others providing opinions. But each source must be clearly attributed.

Here's a news story written by Chuck Slobhower, a senior at the University of Oregon, while interning at The Oregonian. Notice how each fact and quote is attributed. Notice, too, how the emotion in the story comes from one of its participants — not from the reporter.

This incident was first reported in a Friday-morning news release from the sheriff's department, that cited findings from the county's animal control officers.

At a news conference Friday afternoon, Serhan and Manley (the spokesman quoted below) answered questions. Notice how this sentence structure requires the verb (said) to precede Serhan's name and description.

Details from the news release:

Serhan provides a description of the injuries. There's no need to verify them separately, since they match the sheriff's report.

Note how this attribution combines Serhan said with the phrase choking back tears, It's more accurate and dramatic than writing Serhan cried.

Scheduling a hearing is a matter of public record and needs no attribution.

Manley explained this process at the news conference. Again, notice the placement of said.

Some editors would change this attribution to Serhan said she wants the dog destroyed.

Some editors might also move the Manley paraphrase to a new paragraph, though it makes sense the way it's written here.

This final paragraph resulted from research to find recent related stories. Because this case is a matter of public record, no attribution is necessary.

One key source is omitted from this story: the owners of the pit bull. Slobhower said he wasn't able to contact them by deadline. "I didn't want to put their name in the paper without talking to them," he said. "I didn't want to accuse them of being negligent pet owners."
Writing editorials and columns
If you've got opinions and an urge to express them, here's how.

By now, it's been hammered into you: Reporters must remain neutral. Balanced. Fair.

But opinion-writing is different. In editorials, columns and reviews, writers' viewpoints aren't just allowed, they're encouraged. They're essential.

Opinion columns appear throughout most newspapers. Commentary on current events is usually concentrated on the editorial page and the page opposite (called, appropriately, the "op-ed" page). Specialized columnists comment on sports for the sport section, on business for the business page — while in the feature section, you'll find advice columnists, gossip columnists and reviewers. Beyond that, many publications maintain a stable of columnists, each with a distinctive voice, to ponder life, crusade for noble causes, or tell offbeat stories that might otherwise fall through the cracks.

In short, publications need editorials and columns to provide the personality and passion that news reporting doesn't allow.

EDITORIALS: WHERE PUBLICATIONS TAKE A STAND

America boasts a proud tradition of opinionated editors dating back to Ben Franklin and Isaiah Thomas, who not only expressed strong political views but ran the presses that printed them.

Today's editors confine their opinions, arguments and recommendations to the editorial page, where space (and reader patience) is limited — which means that, to write an effective editorial, you must:

- **Keep it tight.** There's no time for rambling and preambles. Have a point and get to it. Recap key facts and summarize your case like a prosecutor trying to sway a jury.

- **Keep it relevant.** Select a timely, newsworthy topic that genuinely matters to readers. If necessary, explain why it ought to matter to them.

- **Take a stand.** Craft a strong thesis statement that urges action or invites reaction. Avoid load, blanket platitudes: asking readers to "support America" or "study both sides of the tax plan."

- **Attack issues, not personalities.** Avoid name-calling and mud-slinging. If someone's actions are a problem, criticize those actions and tackle the problem without cheap shots that make it personal.

- **Don't be a bully.** As journalism professor Walter Spearman used to say, "Use the rapier, not the sledgehammer." Be precise, subtle and clever. Sway and persuade, don't bluster and bludgeon.

- **Control your anger.** Beginners often find it easier to write an editorial (or a song, or a poem) when they're hurt or angry, Spearman observed. If you're extremely steamed, go ahead and write it — then toss it out and try again without the shrillness.

- **Write a strong lead and a solid finish.** Grab our attention at the start, maintain our interest, then wrap things up with a thoughtful ending. Don't let your arguments just dribble away; reward us with a conclusion that smartly caps the case you've made.

COMMENTATORS: ARE THEY TRUE JOURNALISTS?

A 2005 survey revealed that 40 percent of Americans considered talk show host Bill O'Reilly to be a journalist. More than a quarter said Rush Limbaugh was a journalist, too. But only 30 percent thought that Bob Woodward was one.

Professional journalists disagreed. Only 11 percent of polled journalists said O'Reilly was "somewhat close" to being a journalist; 3 percent said that about Limbaugh. But 93 percent called Woodward a journalist.

Are we just quibbling over the definition of journalist? Or does this point to a more serious problem: the blurring of the line between objective fact-finding and biased commentary?

We live at a time when 85 percent of Americans believe that news reporting is biased (according to a Missouri School of Journalism study), yet many of these same Americans avoid newspapers and newscasts, getting their news from talk radio, "The Daily Show" and partisan Web sites instead.

So back to the question: Are commentators, columnists and bloggers journalists? Yes. And no. Journalists are those who gather and report facts — ideally, as fairly as possible. Commentators gather facts selectively, which isn't fair. (Some ignore and distort facts, too, which is intellectually dishonest.) Then they mix in their own views to promote their own agendas.

The more comment you insert into your writing, the more you're obligated to label yourself a commentator, not a journalist — out of respect for the ideals of fairness every true journalist should have.
A slate roof is a humbling thing. The one we're putting on the old farmhouse is Pennsylvania blue-black, and it's meant to last at least a hundred years. Jeff the roof guy showed us the copper nails he's using to hang it; they're supposed to last just as long. So will the massive beams upon which the slates rest. "Solid as a cannonball," Jeff says. Looking up at the roof taking shape slate by enduring slate, it is difficult not to think about the fact that by the time it needs to be replaced, we will be long gone. In this fast-food, face-lift, no-fault-divorce world of ours, the slate roof feels like the closest we will come to eternity. It, and the three children for whom it is really being laid down.

— Anna Quindlen

"I would not say," Scoop said, "that I am the world's greatest shoeshine boy.

"But I have heard it said." If not the world's greatest shoe-shine boy, Wilford (Scoop) Antley is among the world's greatest talkers. Scoop can talk. He can hardly get the shoes shined down at the Tate Barber Shop for talking. "I am a professional," Scoop said. "I am now 35 years old, and I started when I was 10. I'm better now than I've ever been. I'm at my peak, you might say."

He popped the rag, like the professional that he is. He squirted shoe cream out of an old can. "That's the secret," he said. "Plenty of shoe cream, plenty of elbow grease. I take shoes like they come. Lots of boys don't like two-tones. Shining two-tones comes to me like chewing this tobacco."

Charles Kuralt

WRITING COMMENTARY: ADVICE FOR COLUMNISTS

◆ Develop a distinctive voice. "It's not so much what you say as the way you say it," says Keith Waterhouse, a veteran British columnist. "Your column must have a distinctive voice, to the extent that if your byline were accidentally dropped, your readers would still know who was writing. If your style isn't instantly recognizable, what you have there is not a column but a signed article."

◆ Base your opinions on facts — and present those facts. It's a delicate balancing act: If you leap to conclusions without providing facts to support them, readers will think you're just a raving loon. Yet if the facts crowd out your commentary, you're just rehashing old news. Successful columnists know how (and when) to weave facts into their commentary. "It's your voice with facts embedded in it," says political columnist David Sarasohn, "not a huge pile of facts held together by your voice."

◆ Do your own reporting. Reading previously printed stories may not tell you everything you need to know. Columnists often research public records, conduct their own interviews with sources and grill reporters for extra details that weren't written into news stories.◆ Choose worthy topics. "Feeling passionate about a subject does not necessarily make it interesting reading," Waterhouse observes. "Having something to write about is not the same as having something to say."

◆ Avoid jumping on the bandwagon every time a celebrity goes on trial or a scandal erupts. If you don't have fresh insights to share, why add to the media-circus noise?

On the other hand, when major news grips everyone's attention — if a terrorist attack or disease epidemic is all anyone can think about — it's your job to come up with fresh insights for your column. "There is no point in writing about anything else," Waterhouse says, "since nobody will be talking about anything else."

◆ Always have a backup column, something generic and timeless, ready to run on those days when you simply cannot find anything worthwhile to write about. Better still, keeping two backup columns handy provides a safety net that greatly relieves the pressure to produce.

◆ An initial cap. That's design jargon for the big capital "S" that begins the first paragraph of this column. These design devices signal to readers that this is not just another typical story. It's special — it's opinion, not news.

Responsible journalists know there's a line between objective facts and personal opinions. It's important to draw that line clearly and visibly for readers, too.

COLUMNS: THE OPTIONS ARE ENDLESS

All columnists share the same goal: to build a loyal following. And one way to do that is by specializing.

Some columnists specialize in sports commentary. Others focus only on music or movies. Or TV. Some dispense advice, like Dear Abby, answering readers' questions about relationships, cars, gardening, even sex. (Sex-advice columnists are popular in many campus newspapers and Web sites.) Some columnists become clearinghouses for tidbits on local social events. Others write celebrity gossip columns, dishing dirt about the rich and famous.

Many columnists, however, prefer to tackle a broad range of issues. While their choice of topics may vary, they maintain a recognizable style and voice by adopting one of the common approaches described at right.

TOPICAL COMMENTARY

The most numerous and popular columnists are those who react — with insight, outrage or humor — to political events and social controversies. Over time, readers learn to recognize both their predictable partisan biases and distinctive writing styles.

I'm not sure I've ever seen anything as odd as the right wing's insistence that global warming doesn't exist. I'm not a climatologist, but I can read what they're saying. In fact, they're screaming it. Rush Limbaugh is not a climatologist, either; nor are any of the rest of these pinheads who seem to think the whole thing is some figment of liberals' imagination.

There's nothing liberal about global warming. It's science. There seems to be some element of childish spite in the refusal to recognize it: "Boy, we can drive the liberals crazy by pretending it's not happening, ha-ha-ha."

If you read right-wing blogs, you find a kind of Beavis-and-Butthead attitude about the subject, a sort of adolescent-jerk humor. What's astonishing is finding the same attitude among members of Congress.

— Molly Ivins

PERSONAL MEDITATIONS

Some columnists mine their personal lives for universal truths that resonate with readers. Sharing painful, poignant and humorous insights about families, friends and social relationships, their columns often read like diary entries:

"One fine day in June, with the sun splitting the sky prismatic above the city, I was standing in front of a bakery, reading a book," says one columnist. "You can imagine how much I was startled when a man walked by and asked if I was going to wash the dishes. I was about to answer when I heard a voice behind me.

"That was not a question," the voice said. "That was a statement."

— John Edgar Wideman

SLICE-OF-LIFE

Columnists can be storytellers, too, roaming the streets, eavesdropping on ordinary folks, capturing slices of everyday life. The best practitioners of this form use dialogue and narrative in dramatic, evocative ways:

"I would not say," Scoop said, "that I am the world's greatest shoeshine boy.

"But I have heard it said." If not the world's greatest shoe-shine boy, Wilford (Scoop) Antley is among the world's greatest talkers. Scoop can talk. He can hardly get the shoes shined down at the Tate Barber Shop for talking. "I am a professional," Scoop said. "I am now 35 years old, and I started when I was 10. I'm better now than I've ever been. I'm at my peak, you might say."

He popped the rag, like the professional that he is. He squirted shoe cream out of an old can. "That's the secret," he said. "Plenty of shoe cream, plenty of elbow grease. I take shoes like they come. Lots of boys don't like two-tones. Shining two-tones comes to me like chewing this tobacco."

Charles Kuralt

But how do readers recognize that THIS story is an opinion column?

Suppose I'm writing a reporting book, and I suddenly decide to express my outrage about the unfair federal laws regulating monkey cloning. Won't that be confusing to readers? Shouldn't we find a way to differentiate the textbook material from my opinionated commentary?

Publications usually provide visual cues to help readers identify opinion columns. These include:

◆ Column logos, such as the one at left, which label commentaries using the writer's name and photo along with a title or topic.

◆ A headline font that's different from the style that standard news stories use.

◆ An initial cap. That's design jargon for the big capital "S" that begins the first paragraph of this column. These design devices signal to readers that this is not just another typical story. It's special — it's opinion, not news.

Responsible journalists know there's a line between objective facts and personal opinions. It's important to draw that line clearly and visibly for readers, too.