

Newspaper writing 101

These are tips for beginners on writing newspaper articles.

Writing the story

A story is much like a conversation. It begins with the most interesting piece of information or a summary of the highlights and works its way down to the least interesting facts. There are words or phrases that take you from one topic of conversation to another. Before you know it, you're finished.

Inverted pyramid

You should be very familiar with the inverted pyramid style of writing. You'll likely use it every day. For example, when you call a friend to tell him or her about a big date, you begin by telling the most interesting and important things first. The least important information is saved for the end of the conversation, and depending on how much time you have to talk, that information may not get into the conversation.

That concept also applies to news stories. The lead is the first paragraph of a news story. Usually, the lead is one sentence long and summarizes the facts of the news story in order of most newsworthy to least news-worthy. The reader should know at first glance what the story is about and what its emphasis is.

Here is an example:

Bargainers from General Motors and UAW Local 160 will resume talks in Warren this morning seeking to end a day-old strike over the transfer of jobs from unionized employees to less costly contract workers.

Who, What, Where, When, Why and How ... The five Ws and an H

Depending on the elements of news value, the summary news lead emphasizes and includes some or all of the five Ws and H.

Who names the subject(s) of the story. The who, a noun, can refer to a person, a group, a building, an institution, a concept -- anything about which a story can be written.

The who in the lead above are the bargainers from General Motors and the UAW.

The what is the action taking place. It is a verb that tells what the who is doing. Reporters should always use active voice and action verbs for the what because they make the wording direct and lively.

What are the bargainers doing? The lead says they will resume talks.

When tells the time the action is happening. It is an adverb or an adverb phrase.

When will the bargainers resume talks? This morning.

Where is the place the action is happening. Again, it is an adverb or adverb or adverb phrase. In our story, the where is Warren.

Why, another adverb, explains the action in the lead. The bargainers are meeting to discuss the transfer of jobs.

How usually describes the manner in which action occurs.

The lead

The lead sets the structure for the rest of the story. If the lead is good, the rest of the story comes together easily. Many reporters spend half their writing time on the lead alone. One guiding principle behind story organization is: The structure of the story can help the reader understand what you are writing about. The structure should lead the reader from idea to idea simply and clearly. The object is to give readers information, and wow them with convoluted style.

News lead

In one of their bloodiest raids into Lebanon in years, Israeli warplanes killed dozens of Muslim guerrillas with rockets and machine-gun fire Thursday as they pounded a training camp of the pro-Aranian party of God.

Quote lead

"I have the worst job in the Army." This is an example of a good quote lead because the reader asks, "What could that possibly be?"

Description lead

Penciled sketches of an air strike, complete with renderings of F14s and Patriot missiles. And on the ground, tiny people run for cover. That's how 8-year-old Jimmy Zayas pictures war in the Middle East...

Like a beauty pageant entrant, Donald Hofeditz struts his vital statistics. He curls his thumb in his waistband to show he's a size 36, down from 40. He pats his stomach where 50 pounds used to rest. And he rubs his chest about his now healthy cholesterol level of 177.

Hofeditz even relishes showing his "before" pictures. The pot-bellied 70-year-old in the early 1980s was unable to cut his backyard grass because of the cumbersome weight.

Bad lead

A reminder to those who enjoy good new records. The library has 22 new records which it is willing to loan out! The students are invited to come and look them over!

In the first place, the opening sentence isn't even a sentence. There are times when sentence fragments are acceptable, if you use them effectively, but that first sentence isn't one of them. Is it news that the library is willing to "loan out" materials? That's what libraries are for. The word "out" is unnecessary. And "loan" is an adjective or noun, not a verb. Make it "lend." A better way to express the thoughts in this lead would be: Twenty-two new records have been placed in the school's lending library, the head librarian announced.

Transitions

With one-sentence paragraphs consisting of only one idea -- block paragraphs -- it would be easy for a story to appear as a series of statements without any smooth flow from one idea to the next. Block paragraphing makes the use of effective transitions important. Transitions are words or phrases that link two ideas, making the movement from one to the other clear and easy. Obvious transitional phrases are: thus, therefore, on the other hand, next, then, and so on.

Transitions in news stories are generally done by repeating a word or phrase or using a synonym for a key word in the preceding paragraph. Think of block graphs as islands tied together with transition bridges of repeated words or phrases.

Direct quotes

You should use direct quotes:

- if a source's language is particularly colorful or picturesque
- when it is important for written information -- especially official information -
- to come from an obviously authoritative voice
- to answer the questions "why, how, who, or what?"
- Use a direct quote after a summary statement that needs amplification, verification or example.

Remember, a direct quote repeats exactly what the interviewee said. If you don't have a person's exact words, you can paraphrase, but you cannot change the meaning of a person's words. And when you paraphrase, you must never use quotation marks.

Putting it all together: News story

By RICHARD A. KNOX

Colleagues of polio vaccine pioneer Jonas Salk said Wednesday that they are ready to mount large-scale trials of his AIDS vaccine in thousands of people infected with the AIDS virus. The Salk group, which had been criticized for promoting the vaccine without sufficient documentation, this week published the first scientific report of its results. The group's research showed that growth of the human immuno-deficiency virus slowed substantially in infected volunteers given three injections of the vaccine.

The report, in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases*, comes at a time when researchers are discouraged about efforts to make an effective AIDS vaccine -- either to treat HIV-infected people, such as Salk's subjects, or to prevent infection, such as classic vaccines against polio or smallpox.

"Both approaches have their problems with this virus," said Dr. Thomas Merigan of Stanford University, a prominent AIDS researcher. The virus' ability to elude immune defenses "is the most powerful tool this virus is using against us now."

Putting it all together: Feature story

By JANE MEREDITH ADAMS

They met through video dating, when the sight of his muscular build drove her so wild she smacked kisses all over the monitor. Never mind his rowdy past, his other mates, his penchant for projectile vomiting when annoyed. True love forgives.

Now the young couple would like to start a family -- part animal urge, part science project. For she is Koko, the world-famous gorilla. A two-time National Geographic cover model, she wowed the public in the 1970s by learning to communicate with humans using American Sign Language. Researchers have higher than usual expectations for the mating of Koko and her muscular intended, Ndume, from the Brookfield Zoo outside Chicago.

Eager to understand animal intelligence, scientists are hoping to discover whether Koko will teach her offspring to use sign language.

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