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# Module: Basic Reporting for Journalists

“Reporting is the essential ingredient in good journalism. Everything else is dressing. Whether covering the White House or the school board, the reporter is the engine that drives the newspaper, the contributor who makes the newscast worthwhile.

Forget the fancy packaging. The news organizations that are most successful—the ones audiences consider essential—are those that care most about good reporting.”

--Sid Bedingfield

# Lesson 1: Understanding News & A Reporter's Job

## The birth of Journalism

*by Tim Harrower*

In ancient times, news was scrawled onto clay tablets. In Caesar's age, Romans read newsletters handwritten by slaves. Wandering minstrels spread news (and the plague) in the Middle Ages. Then came ink on newsprint. Voices on airwaves. Movie newsreels. TV network newscasts. Multimedia websites. News-apps for smart phones.

When scholars analyze journalism's rich history, some view it in terms of technological progress—for example, the dramatic impact of bigger, faster printing presses. Others see journalism as a form of literature, one that's constantly evolving as it reflects and shapes its culture.

Others see it as an inspiring quest for free speech, an endless power struggle between Authority (trying to control information) and The People (trying to learn the truth). Which recalls the words of A.J. Liebling: "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one."

**News in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:** It was a century of change and journalism changed dramatically too. The typical newspaper of 1800 was an undisciplined mishmash of legislative proceedings, long-winded essays and secondhand gossip. But by 1900, a new breed of editor had emerged. Journalism had become big business. Reporting was becoming a disciplined craft. And newspapers were becoming more entertaining and essential, providing most of the features we expect today: Snappy headlines. Ads. Comics. Sports pages. And an "inverted pyramid" style of writing that made stories tighter and newsier. The key changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

**The emergence of the penny press:** In the 1830s, a new approach to newspapering emerged. Aimed at the interests of the common citizen, it emphasized local news, sports, human interest stories about real people and above all, crime.

**Innovations in printing:** Cheaper paper and faster presses made news affordable and available like never before, especially to America's growing urban population.

**The rise of the modern newsroom:** The biggest and best newspapers hired and trained reporters to cover news in a professional way.

**News in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:** As the century progressed, newspapers surrendered their supremacy: The competition simply had more appeal. First came radio, luring listeners with speech and music. Next,

movie newsreels added visuals to the voices in the news. By 1950, television wooed viewers (and advertisers) by combining sights, sounds and unbeatable immediacy. In the 1990s, a new rival evolved: online news via the Internet.

Technology has transformed news delivery just as it's changed every other aspect of modern life. Today's news media are more accessible and engaging than ever before. As a result, despite everything newspapers have done to improve their product—better design, bigger photos, broader coverage, tighter writing—many people now realize they don't need to work hard at reading when they can more easily absorb information by watching video and listening to audio.

**Today's changing media landscape:** A hundred years ago, if you wanted news, you had one option: read a newspaper. Fifty years ago you had three options: read a paper, listen to the radio or watch TV. But if you want news today, it's right there on your desktop PC. Your laptop. Your smartphone. Your tablet. And who knows what new personalized gizmo will make news even more portable and accessible tomorrow? News is everywhere now. Without even trying, we absorb information. So who are the winners in this new era of news? Tech-toy makers, of course. And consumers, who can choose, moment to moment, whatever news-delivery platform best suits their needs. Who are the losers? Old Media. TV, radio and print journalists are scrambling to keep their audiences happy and their ad revenues flowing. After all, without journalists, who'll supply the news content for all these shiny new digital devices?

## Qualities of News

*By Carole Rich*

Definitions and delivery methods of news are changing. But these are some traditional qualities of news stories that still apply to print, broadcast and online media.

**Timeliness:** An event that happened the day of the day before publication or an event that is due to happen in the immediate future is considered timely. In broadcast and online media, timeliness is considered immediacy and is even more crucial. When stories are posted online immediately after they happen or broadcast several times a day, you have to consider how to update them frequently.

**Proximity:** An event may be of interest to local readers because it happened in or close to the community.

**Unusual nature:** Out-of-the-ordinary events, a bizarre or rare occurrence or people engaged in unusual activities are considered newsworthy.

**Human interest:** People like stories about people who have special problems or achievements or who have overcome difficulties.

**Conflict:** Stories involving conflicts that people have with government or other people are often newsworthy, especially when the conflict reflects local problems or a national issue.

**Impact:** Reaction stories to news events or news angles that affect readers have impact, especially when major national stories or tragedies occur in any community.

**Helpfulness:** Consumer, health and other how-to stories help readers cope with their lives.

**Celebrities:** People who are well-known for their accomplishments – primarily entertainers, athletes, or people who have gained fame for achievements, good or bad—attract a lot of attention.

**Entertainment:** Stories that amuse readers, make them feel good or help them enjoy their leisure time have entertainment value.

## Newsroom Lingo

Some terms to become familiar with:

**Lead:** The first sentence in the story (not to be confused with the headline)

**Nut:** The contextual paragraph also known as the billboard

**Byline:** Reporter's name

**Tagline:** The line at the end of the story which gives reporter's contact information

**Jump-line:** Line that says the story continues elsewhere (now becoming redundant)

**Teaser:** Used in print at the top of paper/website or on broadcast

**Spiked/Killed:** When a reporter's story is trashed

**Goat-choker:** When a reporter's story is too long

**Grafts:** Paragraphs

**Butchered:** When an editor does a sloppy job

**Caption or Cutline:** The text under a photograph

**Sidebar:** A smaller story alongside a major piece

**Copydesk:** The place where stories get edited

**Walkthrough:** When magazine pages are put up on a wall to review

## **What Reporters Need to Remember About Readers**

*Extracted from Tim Harrower*

1. Readers are in a hurry: In the past, people devoted a big block of time to reading a newspaper or viewing a newscast. 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.
2. Readers have short attention spans: Readers are impatient and distracted.
3. Readers want stories that personally connect: Successful reporters craft stories that focus on you, the reader, instead of them, those politicians and strangers over there.
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, you'll sap their stamina.
5. There's more than 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. Can you satisfy everyone? No. But keep your ideas fresh. Keep your topics diverse. Stay out of ruts.

## **Components of the Story**

*By Melvin Mencher*

News stories are:

1. Accurate: All information is verified before it is used. Direct observation is the surest way to obtain accurate information.
2. Properly Attributed: The reporter identifies all sources of information.
3. Complete: The story contains the specifics that illustrate, prove and document the main point of the story.
4. Balanced and fair: All sides in a controversy are presented.
5. Objective: The writer does not inject his or her feelings or opinions.
6. Brief and Focused: The news story gets to the point quickly and keeps to the point.
7. Well-written: Stories are clear, timely, interesting.

## **Class Exercise: What it takes to be a reporter**

Select Yes or No. Answers and scoring will be provided by the instructor.

1. I enjoy reading. I consume a lot of books and magazines.
2. Writing is fun and rewarding. And I'm confident that people generally enjoy the stuff I write.
3. I am lousy at spelling. My grammar and punctuation ain't so hot neither.
4. I'm technologically skilled enough to shoot video, download files from the Web, post photos online etc.
5. I can organize my ideas and write quickly when I need to.
6. I'd make a good game show contestant because I am good at remembering facts and trivia.
7. I'm efficient and self-sufficient when it comes to doing tedious library or Web research.
8. I am generally more curious than most people I know.
9. In public situations, I am pretty shy. I avoid asking questions in class for instance.
10. I think it's unpatriotic to dispute or criticize government officials.
11. When I choose a career, I'll need a stable 9 to 5 job where my workday is routine and I make big money.
12. If I really want something, I am tenacious until I get it.
13. When I am under pressure, I am able to stay calm and focused without losing my temper.
14. Whenever people criticize what I say or do, it really annoys me. Who do these people think they are?

## **Ethics for Journalists**

Journalists must want to be ethical and must care about doing the right thing. This sincerity will lead to seeking out moral wisdom.

Journalists may not always know what the right thing to do is. Answers to situations are often fuzzy and journalists may disagree among themselves. But the desire to be ethical should be your objective. News organizations have their own codes of ethics, your professional body may have them, there may be regulatory requirements but ultimately its your own standard and your own conscience.

The basics demand that you always double check sources, you give those criticized the right to reply, respect privacy especially of those in grief or shock, protect the vulnerable, especially children, and avoid subterfuge (such as using hidden recording devices). Public interest is a strong ethical principle: detecting and exposing crime and impropriety, protecting public health and safety and preventing the public from being misled by an action or statement.

Journalists must be sure to avoid these ethical pitfalls which can seriously compromise a reporter's credibility and integrity:

1. Deception: Lying or misrepresenting yourself to obtain information.
2. Conflict of interest: Accepting gifts or favours from sources or promoting social and political causes.
3. Bias: Slanting a story by manipulating facts to sway readers' opinions.
4. Fabrication: Manufacturing quotes or imaginary sources or writing anything you know to be untrue.
5. Theft: Obtaining information unlawfully or without a source's permission.
6. Burning a source: Deceiving or betraying the confidence of those who provide information for a story.
7. Plagiarism: Passing off someone else's words or ideas as your own.

## **Ethical Questions to Use as a Guide When Taking Decisions**

*By Bob Steele*

1. What do I know? What do I need to know?
2. What is my journalistic purpose?
3. What are my ethical concerns?
4. What organizational policies and professional guidelines should I consider?
5. How can I include other people, with different perspectives and diverse ideas, in the decision-making process?
6. Who are the stakeholders -- those affected by my decision? What are their motivations? Which are legitimate?
7. What if the roles were reversed? How would I feel if I were in the shoes of one of the stakeholders?
8. What are the possible consequences of my actions? Short term? Long term?
9. What are my alternatives to maximize my truth-telling responsibility and minimize harm?
10. Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To the stakeholders? To the public?

**Class Exercise:** Students break into pairs and answer the following questions justifying decisions they took.

1. You're interviewing a government official. She leaves the room for a few minutes. Do you peek at the letters and notes on her desk?
2. Some news organizations forbid reporters from participating in political activity. Do you agree?
3. Is it okay to accept a gift or a free meal from someone you cover on your beat?
4. If it's the only way to get accurate information for an important story would you claim to be someone else, avoid identifying yourself as a reporter or secretly record a conversation without informing the other person?
5. Are there any circumstances under which it would be okay to ignore facts that would have forced you to hold or rewrite the story?
6. Would you approve if your news organization exposed corruption by publishing documents obtained without authorization?
7. Do you approve of using anonymous sources when it's the only way to publish important information in the public interest, when someone wants to avoid personal or professional embarrassment and when someone gives you a really good quote but you are unable to verify that person's identity?
8. Do you approve of news organizations paying money for a crucial interview if it is the only way to get someone to talk?
9. Do you think there is too much self censorship at your newspaper?
10. In a public meeting, a politician describes a proposed law as a "bunch of bullshit." What would you do? Print the exact phrase, print the word 'bull----' or paraphrase with a synonym like crap or manure?
11. A friend of yours is the lead singer of a local rock group. Your editor wants you to review the band. Would you agree to do it?
12. Your editor insists that you review your friend's band. At the show, the singer is stone drunk. It is obvious to everyone. It's a terrible show. If you write an honest review, you could ruin his reputation. He asks you to come back the next night when he promises to stay sober and do a great show. Do you agree?
13. A local coach just lost a big game. In an interview, he utters a racial slur about a player—an

amazingly juicy quote that will outrage the community. He calls you in the newsroom an hour later and says he was distraught about losing and he begs you not to run the quote. What do you do?

14. After great research, you write a story implicating a local businessman in a sleazy scandal. Your publisher spikes the story because this man is a major advertiser. Would you leak the story to a friend of yours at a competing publication?
15. You're writing a story about a local sportsman who has had a great performance lately. You discover he been arrested for drunken driving. You ask him about this and he an angrily replies that it has nothing to do with his sport accomplishments. Do you include this information in your story?
16. A popular local singer releases a song that becomes a huge hit but it contains lyrics that many women find degrading and offensive. You are writing about the controversy. Would you print the offensive lyrics so readers can decide for themselves, avoid printing the lyrics because they would give the singer more publicity or paraphrase them and send readers to a website that shows the actual lyrics?
17. In 1977, a team of undercover reporters from the Chicago Sun Times opened a bar called The Mirage. For four months, they documented corrupt inspectors asking for bribes and kickbacks. The paper's resulting 25-part series was powerful and popular. It nearly won a Pulitzer Prize. But in a controversial decision, the Pulitzer Board decided it would be wrong to condone or reward dishonest, deceptive journalism. Do you agree with the decision?
18. You are the features editor. For a food page running the week before Easter, a reporter wants to print bunny-rabbit recipes. Some staffers feel this is a fun idea. Others argue that it is an exercise in bad taste that will offend readers. Would you run the recipes?

## **Lesson 2: Lead Writing & The Reporting Process**

The lead is the first sentence of your news story. 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 get to the point, your readers will flee. Some journalists argue that all good journalism is essentially storytelling which is why we call them news stories. Thus we should write more narrative prose. However others say readers are impatient, they're in a hurry.

There are many ways of writing smart, engaging leads. The simplest, most formulaic lead used in hard news stories is the summary or basic news lead. Learning to write even the simplest lead takes time and practice.

**Effective leads:** To write an effective news lead, collect all your facts first. If you don't know the whole story, your lead can't effectively summarize what's going on. You need to sum up what's important and boil it down. When writing the lead, prioritize the five Ws. Ask yourself which facts must be in the lead. Ask yourself if your lead is clear, concise, compelling and written in the active voice.

### **The Five Ws:**

Facts usually fall into these main groups:

Who: Who is this story about?

What: What is this story about?

When: When did this happen?

Where: Where did this take place?

Why: Good journalism reports the news, great journalism explains it. The why is what makes news meaningful.

**Buried Leads:** When a reporter puts the most important element of the story way down, thus burying the most critical information.

### **Types of Leads:**

Basic news leads: Summary lead that combines the most significant information into a sentence.

Delayed identification lead: A type of lead that withholds an important piece of information till the

second paragraph to create interest.

Anecdotal leads: A lead that uses a mini story about someone or something that points to a bigger story.

Scene-setter leads: Descriptive leads that set the scene.

Direct-address leads: Most stories are written in the objective third-person voice. Some stories begin by speaking directly to the reader.

Blind leads: More extreme version of the delayed lead. You tease readers by withholding a key piece of information then springing it on them in a later paragraph.

Round-up leads: Using a list rather than one thing to interest a reader.

The startling statement: Also known as a zinger lead, this type of lead grabs attention.

Wordplay leads: Amusing leads including bad puns.

Topic leads: A lead to avoid since it is weak and lazy.

Question leads: Starting your story with a question.

Quote leads: Starting with a quote.

### **Tips for Lead Writing:**

1. Keep leads short: 35 words or less
2. Limit leads to one or two sentences
3. Avoid starting with when or where unless the time or place is unusual. Most leads start with what or who
4. Avoid leads beginning with there, this or it
5. Use question and quote 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 that it did

## Class Exercise:

### A. Lead Writing: Write summary news leads using the following information:

1. A study was released yesterday by the University of Colorado. The study was funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The study said that 60 percent of college students who begin studying science, mathematics or engineering switch to another major. The study cited poor teaching and an aloof faculty as the cause.
2. There was a fire yesterday at a pizza restaurant. It is located at Clifton. Two firefighters were injured when the roof fell in. They were treated at Jinnah Hospital for minor injuries. The fire started in the basement of the building. The cause is under investigation. The roof collapsed and the inside of the restaurant was destroyed. Damages are estimated at 5 million rupees. The information comes from fire officials in your community.
3. The Centers for Disease Control today released the results of a survey of nutritional supplements. Nutritional supplements include vitamins, protein supplements and products promising muscle growth. Only supplements in powder, capsule or tablet form were surveyed. "It turned out that at least half of the ingredients have no documented medical effect," said Roseanne Philen, a medical epidemiologist at the National Center for Environmental Health and Injury Control. She was part of the surveying team. The survey said many nutritional supplements have no medical support for their advertised claims.

### B. Scrambled Leads: Sort out the facts to determine what logically belongs together and then write leads for each of these four stories.

**WHO:** Abner Hoobler/Victor, a labrador retriever/Carlotta Tendant/Rev.Faith Christian, minister at the Dayton Zealotic Church

**WHAT:** Was swept over Niagara Falls and lived/Glues a clown mask to her husband's face while he was sleeping/bitten in the leg by a lion/Celebrates birthday

**WHEN:** Tuesday night/Easter Sunday/Midnight tonight/7.a.m. Saturday

**WHERE:** The Living Jungle at the Dayton Zoo/The bedroom of a house in North Dayton/Niagara Falls, NY/Twilight nursing home in Dayton

**WHY:** Claimed he spends too much time clowning around with his friends/Becomes the first Nebraskan to be 115 years old/Jumped out of a pickup truck when his family stopped at a restaurant/Says she leaped over the wall to convert the beast to Christianity shouting 'Jesus will save you.'

C. Write a clever, catchy lead for each of the following:

1. A sheriff's deputy in Ridge-crest, Calif., ticketed Linc and Helena Moore Friday after one of their chickens allegedly impeded traffic on the road near their farm. A police spokesman said that chickens in the roadway have been a problem in this small community but verbal warnings have failed to resolve the problem.
2. Steve Relles lost his computer job three years ago when it was outsourced to India. Now he earns a living as a dog butler, scooping up dog droppings. Relles has more than 100 clients in Delmar, NJ, who pay him \$10 a month to clean the poop out of their yards.
3. Rick O'Shea, an electrician, was admitted to Mercy Hospital Saturday morning after being electrocuted. Doctors failed to revive him and he was declared dead at noon. But at 12:15, a nurse noticed O'Shea's hand twitching—then his eyes popped open. He's now listed in serious condition at the hospital.
4. The London zoo recently opened an exhibit featuring three men and five women (all swim-suited British volunteers) caged on rocks behind a sign that reads Warning Humans in their Natural Environment. "The exhibit will teach the public that the human is just another primate," a zoo spokesman said.

**Homework:** Students to bring in one example each of a good and a bad hard news lead from the newspapers and explain their selection in class.

## The Reporting Process

*Summarized from Melvin Mencher*

The reporter's job is to gather information that helps people understand events that affect them. This digging takes the reporter through the three layers of reporting:  
Surface facts: source-originated material—news released, handouts, speeches, news conferences

Reportorial enterprise: investigative reporting, coverage of spontaneous events, background

Interpretation and analysis: significance, causes, consequences

The reporter is like the prospector digging and drilling the way to pay dirt. Neither is happy with the surface material, although sometimes impenetrable barriers or lack of time interferes with the search and it is necessary to stop digging and to make do with what has been turned up. When possible, the reporter keeps digging until he or she gets to the bottom of things, until the journalistic equivalent of the mother lode—the truth of the earth—is unearthed.

The reporter, like the prospector, has a feel for the terrain. The sensitivity—the reporter's street smarts or nose for news—helps unearth information for stories. Equally helpful is the reporter's general knowledge.

As reporters go about their work of digging up information, they are guided by an understanding of the nature of reporting: Reporting is the process of gathering relevant material through a variety of means (direct observation, examination of reports and documents, use of databases and Internet resources) and subjecting the material to verification and analysis. When assembled in a news story or a feature, the material gives the reader, listener or viewer a good idea of what has happened.

Layer 1 reporting is the careful and accurate transcription of source-originated material—the record, speech, news conference. Its strength and its limitations are those of objective journalism. Layer 1 is the source for the facts used in most news

stories. Information is mined from material that originates with and is controlled by the source. Much of the reporter's task is confined to sorting out and rearranging the delivered facts, verifying addresses and dates and checking the spelling of names. Most stories appearing in newspapers and on radio and television are based on source-originated material. When reporting is confined to layer 1, the distinction between journalism and public relations is hard to discern.

When reporters initiate information-gathering and when they add to layer 1 material, they are digging in layer 2. Whenever the situation moves beyond the control of those trying to manage it, the reporter is working in layer 2. The transition from layer 1 to layer 2 can be seen at a news conference. The reading of a statement provides source-originated material. The give-and-take of the question-and-answer period is spontaneous. When the source declines to answer questions, the reporter should understand that he or she is back in layer 1, dealing with material controlled by the source.

Those who dig deepest in layer 2 are called investigative reporters. Their work falls into two categories—looking into systemic abuses and checking on illegal activities.

Reporters face a public increasingly interested in knowing all the dimensions of the events that affect their lives. The result has been a journalism that has expanded beyond accounts of what happened. Reporters are encouraged to tell readers, viewers and listeners how and why it happened, to describe the causes and consequences of the event. Layer 3 reporting tells people how things work, why they work that way or why they don't work.

## Lesson 3: Story Planning

Reporters try to visualize and structure their stories at these stages:

1. Immediately on receiving the assignment
2. While gathering material at the event
3. Before writing
4. During writing

### **Stages of the Story Process:**

1. **Conceive:** The idea for a story may come from anywhere: something you came up with, a breaking news event or an assignment from an editor. Although you may have an initial focus, that can change after you gather the information. Think about what is the most important information, what is most newsworthy, what is the main point of the story.
2. **Collect:** Get the basics (five Ws), take notes on your observations as well as quotes, facts and comments from your sources, tape interviews, note background information, gather anecdotes, collect data and documents, verify names and spellings.
3. **Construct:** Write a headline to focus your story, express your focus as a tweet, determine the most important and current information, decide what main point would elicit responses via a blog/social media. Then plan the order of the story by listing and prioritizing all the topics you want to cover, arrange elements chronologically if relevant, decide how to use sources.
4. **Correct:** Read your story aloud to pick up errors, check if you've covered the basics, make sure you have included context, check for accuracy, make sure you are using the show don't tell principle, use verbs, purge parroting, cut excess words, edit the pace, check grammar, cut jargon.

### **The Nut Graph:**

The one paragraph that condenses the story idea into a nutshell is called the nut graph. It addresses: what's the point, what's the context, what's at stake, why do we care?

Nut graphs are more useful for features. In a news story, a nut graph can provide appropriate context but you may not always need it and may add the Ws you didn't use

## Planning your story:

There's no one way to organize all news material. But all good stories need a beginning, a middle and an end. Organizing is important. Readers hate chaos. Confuse them and you lose them.

Here are some ways:

1. Make an outline
2. Talk to your editor beforehand and throughout the process so that you're on the same page
3. Use this model: Look this person has a problem, Oh the problem is everywhere, what the experts say, what the future holds, what it all means for the person in the lead.

## How to organize and write your story:

1. Identify the focus or main idea from notes
2. Locate the material that supports, explains, amplifies the main idea
3. Organize the secondary material in order of importance
4. Decide whether you want a direct or a delayed lead
5. As you write, make sure the different elements are linked with transitions
6. Read the completed copy to make sure you have buttressed, documented, amplified the lead idea, for accuracy, brevity, clarity, check for accuracy, brevity, clarity and check for grammar, word usage and style.

## Story structures:

1. **Inverted Pyramid:** This is a basic news format so readers can quickly understand what's going on without having to read the whole text. The basic principle is summarize first and explain later. Organize the most important facts at the top of the story and then descend putting the facts in order of importance.
2. **Hourglass:** This structure is often used in crime or more dramatic stories. Start with inverted pyramid summary of most important facts, move to chronological order, end with kicker (a surprise twist or strong quote).
3. **WSJ Formula/Circle:** This structure is used for stories on trends or events to show how actual people are affected. Start with a specific person, move to a general discussion of the topic, and then come back to the specific.

## Tips for organizing material:

1. Keep paragraphs short
2. Keep it to one idea per paragraph
3. Use transitions to keep the flow smooth and help connect ideas
4. In the conclusion, don't summarize or conclude, avoid cliches and end strongly

**Class Exercise:** Write the top five paragraphs of a news story making sure you put together a compelling lead and a nut graph.

Laura Hardy is 19. She is a yoga instructor with red hair. She lives in Locust Valley, 10 miles west of Lincoln, in an old farmhouse. She ate lunch in Lincoln last Friday Dec 24 with her ailing grandfather. After lunch, while cycling past Lincoln Federal Savings, she saw a thick manila envelope on the sidewalk. She was in a hurry, so she stopped, put it in her backpack and bicycled home. When Hardy opened the envelope at home, she found it contained a total of \$300,000 in cash and cheques made out to Fenster Ford. Fenster Ford is owned by Fred Fenster and is the area's largest car dealer. Hardy immediately phoned the bank and told them about the envelope. She then rode her bike back to Lincoln. It was snowing. A total of six inches of snow eventually fell by morning. Around 5pm Hardy arrived at the bank. Xavier Mooney, president of Lincoln Federal Savings was there. So was Fred Fenster. They thanked Hardy and shook her hand while posing for photos. Hardy then rode back home. When contacted by phone, Hardy said: 'it's enough just to do the right thing.' When contacted by phone, Fenster said: 'she's a great little girl, the kind of girl we in Lincoln should be proud of.'

**Homework:** Students to find examples of different types of stories and explain in class how they can be improved using the principles learned so far.

## **Lesson 4: News-Gathering**

### **Sourcing & Attribution:**

Without sources, there is no news. They provide the material we turn into stories. Government officials, facts, records, data all of these are sources. What reporters need to remember though is that sources can illuminate and explain but they can also confuse, distort or lie.

That's why reporters must:

- Select sources: select what's most important
- Check sources: for accuracy to ensure all facts and statements are true
- Balance sources for fairness to represent all sides of the issue
- Cultivate sources: for tips, story ideas

The more sources you use the more your reporting provides:

Depth: Your story will offer more information and insight

Context: Readers broaden their understanding when you approach the topic from different viewpoints

Reliability: Less chance of inaccuracy and bias when you gather facts from a variety of sources

### **Types of sources:**

Newsmakers: Those people who willingly or unwillingly take part in the news. Such as the firefighter, the politician and so on. Their recollections, emotions, opinions validate stories and give them life.

Spokespeople: Those officially representing someone. Beware of spin here.

Experts: An author, professor, government official, to provide analysis and opinion

Official records: Statistics, reports, court records Most public records are available under the FOIA.

Reference material: Web research.

Ordinary people: Not all sources are officials.

Anonymous sources: Those reluctant to be identified in a story; they are afraid for some reason. Sometimes granting anonymity is the only way to get information but it can undermine your credibility which is why its often discouraged.

***How do you decide if a source is reliable?***

--Always beware of every source.

--How does he know what he knows?

--What's the past record of this source's reliability?

--Does this source have bias or self interest? Am I being manipulated?

--How can I verify or refute what he's saying through other sources?

**The Internet as a source:** The Internet is the most important reporting tool ever created; a place to gather data, quotes, ideas and facts. But you can't always find what you need and you can't always trust what you find. Don't forget good old shoe-leather reporting. When using the Internet, be careful the information you are using isn't a fabrication or the statement isn't misquoted or wrongly attributed. To evaluate the reliability of a Website, assess its authority: Is the author reputable, is there a way to contact the author? Then, assess its accuracy: Did the information originate with this source or does the author say where it came from? Can you verify this information from another reliable source? Are there grammatical or factual errors that cast doubt on the source's reliability? Assess its objectivity: is this site sponsored by anyone with a slanted agenda? Does this site allow readers to challenge accuracy? Assess its timeliness: Has the site been updated regularly and frequently? Are there publication dates on all pages, can you ensure all information is up to date?

**Observation as a source of information:** To bring stories to life you need to engage

your and the readers' senses. Apply the principle of show don't tell. If you are at the scene, engage your eyes, ears. The ability to observe and record events is the secret to great reporting. Capture the sight, sound, action and emotion.

**Attribution:** Attribution identifies where an idea comes from. Attributing facts and opinions to their sources shows readers that you have been reporting what's been said not saying it yourself. Reporters are experts at finding out information. They don't have expertise in topics they write about. Attribution lets people know who sources are so readers can determine themselves how credible the story is. Ideally, documents, people, publications should all be attributed.

Here are often confused phrases used in attribution:

--On the record: You can use everything with name and title. Use the information, identify the source and run actual quotes.

--On background: Reporters may quote but not identify source. Try to define as precisely as possible who the source is. The source will try for it to be as vague as possible. You try for it to be as accurate as possible. Use the information, don't identify the source, and you can run actual quotes.

--On deep background: Can only say it is learned, you can't identify the source even vaguely. This is shaky ground. Unless you have the information from someone you have a high degree of confidence in and you have tried and tested. Plus your editor has to approve. Use the information but can't identify the source or run actual quotes.

--Off the record: This means the information cannot be used. This is often misunderstood. Many sources use this when they mean they are speaking on background. A reporter can use this information as a lead and then locate an on record source. Can't use the information or identify the source or run quotes.

Why do we use quotes? Without quotes a story sounds like a dull, dry press release. Adding real words spoken by real people adds personality to your story.

Quotes provide opinion, emotion and flavour. Keep your ear tuned for colorful quotes but you must be selective. Weed out many quotes you gather because:

1. People lie: Stay skeptical. As they say in the newsroom, when your mother says she loves, you check it out.
2. People yammer: Stumble, ramble and that deadens your writing rather than brings it to life.

### **Types of quotes:**

1. Direct—exact words in quote marks. Attribution follows. Use this method for something important, controversial and to help state ideas in an interesting way.
2. Indirect—paraphrased. Summarize what the source told you without using exact words or quote marks. It's a way to clarify what someone said. Paraphrasing is necessary because people don't always speak efficiently. Quoting them indirectly helps rephrase ideas in a clear way. This is also the best way to attribute a fact.
3. Partial Quotations—quote key phrases. Beware of these as they often get in the way of readers.
4. Dialogue: Capture a conversation between two lets speakers.

There are two approaches to quotes:

**Pragmatic:** People rarely speak in clean or complete sentences, they pause or repeat themselves. According to this approach, reporters should correct slips of tongue or the source will look bad or make what hes saying unclear. Pragmatists may clean up quotes from people not accustomed to dealing with media but not those from prominent people.

**Purists:** quotes are sacrosanct and should never be changed. Eliminates any questions about accuracy.

Problems to avoid when using quotes in stories:

1. Don't bore readers with dull and obvious quotes.
2. Don't rehash what a quote is saying.
3. Avoid using a quote as a lead.
4. Beware of monologues. Most quotes should be one or two sentences.
5. Beware of foul language
6. Clean up hemming and hawing but don't distort a quote's meaning.

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## Nine questions to help you evaluate the credibility of news sources

*By Vicky Kreuger at Poynter*

Whether you're covering the news or reading/watching/hearing it, the credibility of your sources is key to evaluating the information. Do you trust the sources? Are there enough sources? Enough knowledgeable sources? Are all the questions answered? Is the news credible enough? Here are questions you should ask in evaluating the sources used in information you read, see and hear:

- Who is the source of this information? Is that clear to the audience, or might the source simply be the person reporting the news?
- What would this source know? Does he or she have training in the area? A job title that would indicate knowledge?
- When did the source get this knowledge? Recently? So long ago that situations might have changed?
- Where did the source get this knowledge? Does he or she have a degree in this field? Training? Work experience? Was the source involved first-hand? If so, does this make his or her views more credible ... or less?
- Why use this source? Does he or she have the necessary expertise to be trustworthy? Does this fill in a gap in the audience's understanding?
- How transparent is the reporting? Can the audience determine the sources of information and why they are good choices?
- How does this source know this information? Could I confirm the source's information through government records, other documents, further reporting or other sources?
- What is the past reliability and reputation of this source?
- What is the source's motive for providing the information? What does this source have to gain or lose? Will this information make the source look better, worse, guilty or innocent?

**Class Exercise:** Students break into groups prepare a plan for which sources of information they will seek out for a story assigned by the instructor in class.

## **Interviews as a source of information**

Interviews come in a variety of styles and structures from a 5 minute phoner to a long interrogation. Interviewing is a social skill: You must be friendly but aggressive, polite but probing, sympathetic but skeptical. You need to ask hard questions from strangers who may be shy, suspicious or disturbed.

But interviewing is one of the most fun aspects of the job. You get to pick brains of a wide variety of people. If you are a good listener you can be a great interviewer.

William Zinnser said interviewing is a skill you get better at. You will never be as ill at ease as the first time and you will never be fully comfortable prodding someone for answers who is shy or troubled.

### **Types of interviews:**

Every time you speak to someone to gather material for a story: facts, quotes, opinions, reactions, it's an interview.

1. A long formal interview: you sit privately in a room, ask questions, probe and get answers
2. A quick phoner: Seek fast facts to plug into a story.
3. A walkaround: Where you accompany your interview as she does that thing you are interviewing her about.
4. An on-the-fly chat: You door stop a politician or celebrity and fire off questions as quick as you can while they go where they are going.
5. A backgrounder: You informally pick an expert's brain on a topic you are researching.

### **How to Conduct the interview:**

Before you interview, you decide if it's best to conduct your interview in person, on phone or via email.

**In person:** This is the best way to build rapport and it is easier to get cooperation. You get a chance to observe surroundings, pick up cues from gestures and body language and people take you seriously when you're in front of them. But it takes time to set up a meeting, travel, wait, make small talk etc. Distractions like people or calls often interrupt the interview and face to face interviews can go bad if either side feels uncomfortable.

**By phone:** This is a fast way to get answers, talking to a reporter on the phone is less intimidating and no advance notice is needed often. But its impersonal, you can't see their reactions or observe anything, you may mishear or misquote and you need a recording device.

**By email:** Interviewee can ponder and give thoughtful answers, it is flexible and convenient for

both sides, you have a written record/proof and typed material is easiest to work with. But there's no personal interaction, you can't ask immediate follow up questions and there's always the risk this person isn't who they claim to be. You must always verify identity by phone.

### **Recording the Interview:**

If you don't take good notes, you can't write a good story. Interviewing means multitasking: listening, observing, interpreting, writing, reacting. All this under pressure and maybe about an unfamiliar topic. So you need a system to record and organize your material in your notebook.

### **Best way to take notes:**

1. Notebook: low tech, no chances of failure, notes easy to access and transcribe later. But quotes may be inaccurate unless you develop a shorthand, standing still to write can be cumbersome, some scribbling may seem illegible later. Mark up your notes: quote here, check this, circle important stuff. If your notebook makes a source nervous, you can explain that this will help write accurate stories.
2. Recording: Most accurate way to capture spoken work, its proof if someone challenges you, you can use audio on the website. But replying and transcribing wastes a lot of time, sometimes background noise makes it difficult, it's a machine so it can fail. Also people can be intimidated by it.
3. Typing: Fastest way to turn notes into a story since its on the screen, most efficient way to gather last minute details or fill holes in a story on deadline, you can conduct an entire interview using chat or email. But your quotes can be inaccurate, computer can go bad, and you're stuck sitting in one place behind the screen during the interview.

## **The Interview Process**

### **Setting up the interview:**

1. Get familiar with the topic: Online research, talk to editors.
2. Think the story through: Decide who best sources are, experts, stakeholders
3. Determine how to interview them: who will top source be, should it be done face to face?
4. Set up the interview: be persuasive and polite, act like you need help and describe what you need. If it's face to face be sure to ask for an hour at least. Try to insist the flak doesn't sit in.
5. Decide when and where to meet: Usually at their place of work so you can collect interesting detail and color.
6. Clarify in advance if you will be taking photos, recording etc.

### **Preparing for the interview:**

1. Continue your research: the more you know the more productive our interview will be. But also collect and organize basic material so you are not asking stuff you should know. Use the interview to collect details, insights, opinions.
2. Organize your questions: Sources rarely reveal startling new information without some prompting. Good interviewers always write out a list and check them off as they go along. But don't be wedded to the list because you always want to ask follow up questions on the spot. And sometimes your question is evaded so you need to come back to it in different wording. Ask yourself what questions would my audience like to ask, which issues will affect the public.
3. Prioritize: Decide which questions require simple yes or no answers to quickly nail important information and which need more detailed thoughtful answers. Also want to be sure your most important questions are not at the end in case the interview ends suddenly. Save awkward and difficult questions for the end so if it ends you already have your story.
4. Be on time, dress appropriately. Don't wear jeans interviewing a banker and don't dress like a banker to interview a farmer. Your appearance can help you gain or lose the confidence of the person you interview.

The difference in being prepared: you won't ask questions about material already widely publicized and look sloppy, you won't ask boring questions, you won't appear ignorant although sometimes you feign ignorance to elicit an in depth answer, you will be more likely to recognize a newsworthy statement, you will notice if your source is avoiding a certain issue, sources will tell you more if they trust you and they will trust you if you appear knowledgeable.

### **During the Interview:**

1. Relax: Be friendly and curious, not afraid. Don't want to be too casual but want to make your interviewee relaxed enough. Start with a moment of small talk. Mention a subject of mutual interest or mention something interesting or unusual in the room. A source at ease will provide more info.
2. You are in charge: Once the interview begins, you should take control and keep it. Don't let the interviewee dominate you. You are asking the questions and you will keep asking till you are satisfied. Focus the discussion on important matters, if the source lapses into generalities, ask specific questions. If the source strays, refocus the conversation. Don't let a source waste time or evade important questions.
3. Start with the basics: name, age, title, double check spellings.
4. Budget your time: If it's very short don't waste time with small talk.

5. Start with softer questions: warm up with non-threatening stuff.
6. Focus your questions: Broad vague queries won't generate the material that makes a story. Ask precise ones.
7. Keep it simple: Avoid rambling two or three part questions. One thing at a time.
8. Ask open ended questions.
9. Make sure your questions are answered: Pay constant attention, don't drift, don't let them sidestep important issues.
10. Rephrase questions: To get a more quotable response or when an answer is unclear or contradictory.
11. Ask follow up questions: The best ones are how do you know that, can you give me an example.
12. Stay flexible: Go with the flow. Sometimes interviews take unexpected turns. Some of your best material may come out of the blue.
13. Ask people to slow down: Slow them down if your note taking is falling behind. Ask how did you feel about that, then what happened.
14. Don't worry about asking dumb questions, better to sound dumb now than in the story. Don't hesitate to say you lost me.
15. Remember to look around: make notes of color, activities, gestures, descriptions.
16. Use reassuring body language: nod, make eye contact, but keep your own comments to a minimum.
17. Use silence as a tactic: to prod people into saying more. If you gaze blankly at them they may talk more.
18. Don't interrupt and don't take sides. Don't argue or debate. Few sources will speak freely after a reporter disagrees with them.
19. Save your controversial questions for the end: they may storm off so make sure your other questions are answered.

**After the Interview:**

1. Review your notes to correct errors or clarify confusion or fill in gaps.
2. Ask who else you should talk to: get a source, a website, a person.
3. Ask permission to call later for questions.
4. Ask interviewees if they would like to add anything you missed or to call you if they think of anything else.
5. Say thank you: people have given their time and information.
6. Review your notes again privately: clear up and find the lead

### **Writing the Interview Story:**

1. Q&A format still used but in the long form very dense and boring and most people don't use it. Still effective as a sidebar or an online item very short.

2. Most interview stories begin with a summary lead then present the story's highlights in the following paragraphs.

3. Decide which facts are most newsworthy and emphasize those

4. Discard clichés, platitudes, self praise and statements which are repetitious, irrelevant and obvious.

5. Use quotes to bring the story to life not to tell the entire story

To enrich a story for web:

1. Post the entire transcript: if the interview is very interesting or newsworthy

2. Post audio or video: Use a clip

3. Led readers join the conversation; readers can ask questions ahead of time. especially handy.

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## Speeches & Press Conferences

### Covering a speech:

1. Get background information on the speaker
2. Get an advance copy of the speech
3. Get names and spellings right
4. Find out if there is an interview opportunity before or after the speech
5. Arrive early and find a good seat
6. Take detailed notes including noting all the colorful quotes
7. Get responses from people affected by the speech
8. Focus the lead on specific actions
9. Use the inverted pyramid. Don't write your story using the order in which the speech was given.
10. Use direct and indirect quotes so the tone isn't monotonous
11. Provide transitions
12. Eliminate jargon and explain
13. Check controversial facts and give anyone attacked in the speech a chance to respond
14. Include color from speech and its listeners

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## Covering a press conference

*By Carole Rich*

News conferences are like speeches, except that the questions reporters ask after a news conference are often more important than the prepared comments the speaker makes. The answers to those questions are an important part of the story—and sometimes are the story. Consider news reports after the U.S. President conducts a news conference. His prepared remarks often are less interesting than his answers to the press corps.

Do your homework. Before or after the news conference, research the issue. If the conference is about a local crime, check files or background to provide perspective. How many other crimes of this nature have occurred? If the conference is about a city issue, how does the information affect your readers and viewers? Don't just recite the news; interpret it so that your audience can understand how the issues affect them. Stories about news conferences must include the following information:

- Person or people who conducted the conference
- Reason for the news conference and background
- Highlights of the news, including responses to questions
- Location, if relevant
- Reactions from sources with similar or opposing points of viewpoints

Stories about news conferences are like most other news stories. Although reporters' questions may prompt the most interesting information, the answers are usually incorporated into the story without references such as "In response to a question" or "When asked about..."

**Class Exercise:** Students attend a mock press conference in class, ask questions and then write up a story to present in class for critique by colleagues.

## **Lesson 5: Features, Social & Multimedia**

### **Feature writing:**

Journalists are supposed to be tellers of tales as well as purveyors of facts. When we don't live up to that responsibility, we don't get read. Technology, presentation styles and techniques have changed but the challenges of the trade are the same:

What elements make a story intrinsically interesting?

How can we seize the attention of the audience instantly?

How should the tale be shaped to hold that interest and what can be done to nail it into memory?

News stories focus on events that are pressing and public: crimes, disasters

Feature stories focus on issues that are less urgent, more personal: trends, relations etc.

News stories tell you what happened, feature stories offer advice, explore ideas, make you laugh and cry.

### **Selecting a topic:**

Ideally every topic should be fresh, dramatic, colorful and exciting.

The concept of universal needs is useful in choosing a topic.

Good reporters gather two or three times more information than they can possibly use, then discard all but the most powerful, telling details.

### **Types of Features:**

**Profile/Personality features:** A story about a person's life and achievements.

- Human interest story: A story about real people that's tragic, odd, inspirational.
- Color story: Color means flavor or mood. Capturing an experience.
- Backgrounder: Analysis through research and interviews, A crash course for readers on a topic.
- Trend Story: Trend stories keep readers plugged into the people, places, things, and ideas affecting today's cultures.
- Reaction Story: Sampling of opinions from experts, victims etc.
- Historical features: to commemorate the dates of important dates.
- Adventure features: Describe unusual and exciting experiences; the story of someone who survived an airplane crash or climbed a mountain.
- Seasonal Features: Difficult to do because to make interesting must find a new angle.
- How-to-do-it Features: Tell readers how to perform a task.
- Behind-the-scenes Features: Take readers backstage for an inside look at some event.

## **Generating Story Ideas and Finding the time for features:**

- Make lists
- Devote time every day to features even if it's one hour
- Keep your project organized; don't focus on the whole story but on a series of feasible tasks.
- Organize your ideas by topics or by feature types.

## **Where to get ideas:**

- Your publication's archives.
- Your competitors
- TV, magazines, newspapers, websites
- News releases
- Reader suggestions
- Sources on your beat
- Brainstorming

## **Gauging the strength of your idea:**

Where did your idea come from?

If it came from reporting, it's probably stronger than one that just popped into your head.

Is the idea original? Has it been written about before.

Does the idea surprise you? If not then how will it surprise your readers.

Does the idea have movement to it? Something new, something people are developing an interest in

Is there a story there? Is there a tale that will draw the reader along? A beginning, middle and end?

Is there tension? Conflict, a problem to be resolved etc.

Is the story true? If an idea turns out not to be true and you prove it it can be great story.

Do you like the story?

## **Story development tools:**

Extrapolation: Infer if a broader more important story lies beyond the present event.

Synthesis: Stay alert to the possibility of commonality in the material generated and try to spot connections that will provide a story.

Localization: Your rivals are trying to establish the scale of the story. You localize. For example

you are told 1 million pensioners will have \$6 million less to live on a year. But if you go to a small town and find residents who are despairing because they can't buy food or pay bills because they're getting \$50 less per month: this tells your readers what the govt move really means.

Projection: Declining to follow the media sheep to already over grazed pasture. Pass up detailed coverage of central event and focusing on its results. The impact on people and places, the counter moves made by people.

### **Turning an idea into a story:**

1. See if it's been done: make sure it hasn't been done or at least you have a new angle
2. Focus your angle: Most story ideas are too predictable and half baked. Don't pitch an idea about patriotism, instead tell the tale of the oldest flag in town. Don't talk about cheating, find out the top 10 ways students cheat.
3. Talk to your editor: you don't own the story. Its always a collaboration. And collaboration makes good ideas better.
4. Do your research: features require the same degree of accuracy, fairness, attention to detail as news stories do. Though your topics may be softer your reporting stories should remain just as high.
5. Write the story: A useful exercise is to write after every major interview. Keep tweaking. Whether you do it this way or write after collecting all material you will need to rewrite and rewrite.
6. Plan the package: Think of ways to make your story as visual and reader friendly as possible. Collaborate. We don't do enough of this.

### **Successful reporting:**

1. Start with a one-line thesis: what are you trying to say
2. Do your research
3. Report: talk to as many pertinent people as possible
4. Control the material
5. Look for universal connections: Think constantly about what it is in your story that readers can relate to in their own lives.
6. Keep a running list of questions and things to do. Don't rely on your memory and it shows you you are making progress.

7. Talk to your editor everyday: it helps avoid misunderstandings later and also helps to get a fresh and encouraging pair of ears and eyes.
8. Cooperate with the design, photo, online teams.

### **Successful Feature Writing:**

In the 1960s a reporter called Tom Wolfe was so bored by the page beige tone of news stories that he began breaking the rules and others followed. The difference was reporter's borrowed techniques from novelists:

1. Realistic dialogue
2. Vivid reconstruction of actual scenes
3. What's seen and thought by actual characters
4. Recording everyday details: clothing, furniture, gestures

### **Successful feature writers rely on these literary techniques:**

1. Syntax and phrasing: Use sentence fragments. Short sentences for stylistic flair. Longer sentences.
2. Voice and tense: News stories in past tense, feature stories in present tense.
3. Detail and description: Give a feel of you being there by detailing people's appearances, actions and the situation.
4. Other dramatic techniques: Obviously this isn't fiction so everything has to be true. But you can present facts in dramatic ways, borrowing from traditional storytelling techniques. Try to recreate the inner monologue that goes through someone's mind when something is happening: remember this can only happen after you have extensively interviewed your sources and can vouch for the accuracy of every word.

### **Tips for successful writing:**

1. Write tightly. Keep it short, select only the best quotes, the best anecdotes. As Voltaire said: the secret to be boring is to tell everything.
2. Vary sentence structure: short and long sentences, short and long paragraphs.
3. Match your treatment to your topic. Select a tone.
4. Don't overdo it. Colorful yes but don't make your prose the center stage of your attention.

5. Avoid first-person stories.
6. Stay objective: You are to serve and inform the reader not to cheerlead or ridicule.
7. Get quotes right: record or use your own shorthand.
8. Read. Read and read and read. You can't be a great writer till you are a big reader.
9. Find your voice: Publications tend to have rigid rules about good writing and tend to aim for uniformity. Within all that, you can still find your own voice.

**Tips for writing features:**

1. Write from the time you have the idea, even just a paragraph, or a lead. Or a plan for pursuing the story. Writing helps focus.
2. Write after each interview: Work on the lead, don't just transcribe and put away, write a couple graphs, write while the interview is still fresh.
3. Rewrite each time: Each time you return to the story, return and rewrite. This will polish.
4. Plan your ending
5. Don't be afraid of the edit. All good stories need revision, they need an outside force to scrutinize and ask questions your readers will want rather than the details you have become obsessed with.
6. Seek outside input: Ask a colleague to read and tell you where they get confused or bored. You need a fresh pair of eyes.

**Class Exercise:** Students will form teams of three and draw story topics from a hat prepared by the instructor. Teams will then work together to develop a feature story idea and a reporting plan relating to their topic and present in class.

### **Social media for reporters:**

Class to watch these videos followed by discussion.

Social news strategy:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/skills/social-media/article/art20130912133622865>

How to verify stories on social media:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/skills/social-media/article/art20160622115505760>

How to make the most of user-generated content:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/skills/social-media/article/art20140728140907290>

How should journalists manage their personal and professional social media activity:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/article/art20130702112133517>

### **Multimedia Journalism:**

Class to watch these videos:

BBC's Multimedia Newsroom:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/skills/multimedia-journalism/article/art20140305121733049>

### **Visual Journalism:**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/skills/multimedia-journalism/article/art20141021160021843>

## Mobile Journalism for Reporters

*By Nathalie Malinarich at BBC*

Journalists have always been taught to make every word count - writing for mobile takes the challenge to a new level.

News online needs to be clickable, readable and engaging on any size screen the user chooses. In reality that means 'mobile first': getting the basic story right for mobile then building in extra information and features to enhance the user experience on tablet and desktop.

So how does that affect the way journalists write?

Making every word count and stripping back the superfluous is not a bad rule of thumb for any journalist. For mobile it is make or break, says mobile editor Nathalie Malinarich. "Tolerance of padding on mobiles is a lot lower - so people are even quicker to drop out. You have to get their attention instantly; grab them from the first sentence. It's too easy to click away."

She adds: "If there's an important story about Iraq or Syria where 50 people have died, don't say 10 were killed on Tuesday, 20 on Wednesday - just say 'this week'. It is not a new discipline - it's just got tougher."

BBC News has best practice guidelines to help journalists write and create compelling web pages with 'mobile first' in mind. Although some of the guidance is geared to BBC systems, many of the principles apply to all writing for mobile. Here are some key basics about text:

### Headlines

In BBC News, most stories have two headlines: a short one for indexes and a longer line for search engine optimisation (SEO). Both need to work on all platforms, so the main (SEO) headline has to be tight - not usually more than 55 characters - with key words at the start. This works well: "Fugitive 'Skull Cracker' Michael Wheatley in custody".

More than 55 characters can appear very long at the top of a story on a mobile. This header is probably at the limit of what is acceptable: "Three people die after getting into difficulty in the sea in Cornwall".

"If a story's not doing well in the stats, the first thing you look at is the headline," Malinarich says. "The SEO headline has to work. You need a short header that is factual and gives understanding - otherwise it just becomes 'click bait'. Remember, it's important not to over-sell a

story.”

## Intro

This is the hardest working sentence you will write and it needs to hook the reader with the nub of the story:

“The last UK troops have left Helmand in Afghanistan, as a poll suggests 68% of respondents thought the operation was not ‘worthwhile’ for Britain.”

“Really, it’s about ease of use - so be concise but unambiguous. Avoid long dropped intros to stop mobile readers dropping off,” Malinarich advises.

## Top four paragraphs

The rule about the story being self-contained in the first four paragraphs is a staple of writing for the BBC News website. The piece needs to be balanced and legally sound. It must also give the mobile reader a bite-size version of the story in case they do not want to read any further.

## The write length?

If tight stories read better on mobile, are there quotes that can be paraphrased? Is that 10 paras of background really essential? Only the biggest/most complex stories should go above 600 words, but it is worth remembering that even a 500-word story looks long on mobile.

Malinarich reads most of her news on her phone: “I might read a 24,000-word article that really interests me. But if you have overly worded opening paras the reader won’t get as far as the striking photos or graphics you may have below them.”

It’s also worth remembering that:

- A four-line paragraph on a desktop story will appear as seven or eight on mobile - so keep paragraphs as concise and simple as possible
- Crossheads can be a good way to break up text. Use one on a shorter story (10-12 paras) but more on a longer piece. They should be a maximum of three words and eye-catching; not repeat what has already been covered, but set up the best of what is to come.

## Explainers and Q&As

These both work well on mobile. Readers like the bite-sized digest, as in this feature on the basics of the Ebola outbreak.

“Explainers can tend to get very long, so strip them back,” is Malinarich’s advice. “What should a Q&A do? Give the basics you need to understand a story/issue/development. So five or six straight questions and punchy answers.

“You might think they’re sold on the headline, but we’re finding that people are spending quite a bit of time reading them and getting a fair way down the text.”

## Links

These are useful if you do not have the original source material or image. From a user point of view, links are good additions when justified. Here are a few tips:

- Inline links should take readers to source material at the point at which you mention it. They can be a link to another news source, a research document or a tweet. For example:

“The Liverpool Echo last week revealed that insults had been added to the entry for the Hillsborough Disaster.”

- Related BBC links should be the best mix of latest content, including explainers, analysis, video and features that might not be promoted elsewhere
- Tagging is easy and useful, so do not forget to tag stories with key people, locations, organisations or themes
- On live pages, keep links tight and write in the present tense
- Always check links work once the story is live.

Tables: In-story tables present facts in a bite-sized way, so work well on mobile. And simple displays work best of all. The BBC News site tends to work with a maximum of three columns. A table like the one in this story about asthma death rates appears the same, just slimmer, on mobile.

Mobile traffic: A few facts about mobile news consumption underline why best practice matters:

“More than half of traffic to BBC News is now via mobiles and tablets, and that’s higher at weekends,” Malinarich says. “Desktop traffic peaks between 12pm and 2pm, while mobile is more stable, with a bump in the morning, starting at 6am, and another in the evening.

“When a big story breaks - say, the Boston Marathon bombing which was confirmed early evening - traffic can go off the scale. And if something breaks on Twitter and people want to confirm it, as happened when Philip Seymour Hoffman died, that can create a huge BBC News spike on mobile.”

On the day of the Scottish Referendum result, 86% of UK traffic between 6am and 7am was through mobile and tablet, she says.

A 2014 Deloitte survey showed that a sixth of UK adults check their smartphone more than 50 times a day, and a third of adults check within five minutes of waking.

“You need a really good front page, with strong-looking stories at 6am, not 8am. If there’s a big weather story, for instance, with trains affected and planes cancelled, we have to have it there before people are out of bed.”

So finally... Always remember to preview stories for mobile if you can, and, once published, check the story looks as eye-catching, clean, accessible and readable as possible on every platform.

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