



## Basic News Writing

By Bill Parks, Journalism Instructor

*The ABCs of news writing are Accuracy, Brevity and Clarity. The first and most important is accuracy -- a story can be creative and compelling, but if it contains errors, it is worthless. Actually, it is worse than worthless; a false news story undercuts the public trust necessary for the survival of a free press.*

Always **check numbers, spellings of names**, who said what, and the other basic facts of any story. A reporter's job is to find out what is going on, then write a story that's interesting and informative. Accuracy always comes first. Second is brevity. Each word in your story should do a job. If not, take it out. Get to the point. Say it just once. Don't be redundant. Don't say "8 a.m. in the morning," since 8 a.m. is in the morning. Just say 8 a.m. Or say 8 in the morning.

Remember the **inverted pyramid style** of writing. Put the most important fact in the lead. Hook the reader's attention. Explain the lead and then go on to the next most important fact in the second inverted pyramid. And then the next. Lead up to an interesting finish. Don't just stop writing when you run out of information.

**Clarity** starts before you write. Clarity starts with complete, competent reporting. You should understand your subject so completely that your story leaves it crystal-clear in the reader's mind. Your story should leave no questions unanswered. Avoid jargon. Explain anything that wouldn't be obvious to the average person. The more information you gather, the more you have to sift through to determine what belongs in the lead. The more you know, the harder it is to tell it quick and make it simple. It's only easy if you don't know what you're talking about.

No one said good reporting is easy.

### The Five 'W's'

Every news story must cover the "Five W's:" Who, What, When, Where, Why and sometimes How and So What? You don't have to cover all these in the lead, obviously, but usually you will address one or two in the first graph. The rest should come soon. Make sure they are all covered somewhere in your story.

### Objectivity/Fairness

The reporter's job is to find out the truth and tell it, regardless of who might be made uncomfortable. The reporter's responsibility, as implied by the First Amendment, is to serve only the reader. The public needs unbiased information in order for democracy to succeed. That means that your stories must be unbiased.

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Most reporters believe pure objectivity is impossible. When you select one word over another, your judgments enter the story. But fairness is possible, and fairness should be every reporter's goal.

Fairness requires the reporter to recognize his or her own biases in the story, and then consciously include all relevant points of view -- even ones that the reporter doesn't like, personally. Always look for the "other side" in any story. If someone or some institution is accused of something by a source in your story, you have an absolute obligation to contact the accused party and give them the opportunity to respond. This should be done in the first story, not in some later "response" story.

Use neutral language. Avoid exclamation points. Don't say "our college" when referring to Ohlone. Say Ohlone. Our tone should be one of the disinterested, but honest observer. A reporter's credibility is the only guarantee the reader has of the story's accuracy. There are no policemen in the newsroom forcing reporters to be accurate. The First Amendment wouldn't allow that.

If we write inaccurate or biased stories, the readers will stop trusting us. And if that happens, we all might as well go into some other field.

## The Lead

The lead is usually the toughest part of writing a story. The lead is the first word, sentence or paragraph of the story. Sometimes it can be two or three paragraphs.

Whatever its length, the lead has several important jobs to do. First, it must interest the reader in the rest of the story. Imagine the reader as impatient, with lots of other things he or she could be doing instead of reading your story. Imagine the reader saying, "Get to the POINT! Don't waste my time! Tell me the STORY!" If your reader were stranded on a desert island with nothing to read but your story, you could probably get away with a vague, rambling lead. But today's reader has a Metro train to catch, the kids are fighting again and the TV never stops blaring. Your story has tough competition.

Surveys have shown that most people get their news from TV, but many then turn to newspapers for the details behind the headlines. Your job is to write a short, punchy, informative lead to attract readers who have grown accustomed to TV's "sound bite" journalism. But then you must supply the details, the insights, the context that TV doesn't have time for.

What are the rules for a good lead?

- **Keep it short.** News writing is always tight, but the lead calls for special care. Condense your story into one sentence, then one phrase, then one word. Make sure that word is near the beginning of the lead. As a general rule, no lead sentence should be longer than 10 words.

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- **Get to the point.** What is the story about? Tell the reader in the lead. Don't say, "The city council met last night." Tell the reader what the city council did. "Business taxes were raised a whopping 30 percent on a 6-1 vote of the city council last night." What's the story about? Taxes. So get taxes in the lead.
- **Focus on the action.** Use the "active voice." Instead of saying something happened, say who did what to who. Use the action word. If nobody did anything, it may not be a news story.
- **Hook the reader.** Put the most important, the most interesting, the most exciting thing in the lead. A novel may take 100 pages to lead up to the climax of the story; a news story puts the climax first and then explains what led up to it.

These rules are sometimes thrown out for feature leads, or "anecdotal leads" that start with a little story that sets the scene for the point you are trying to make. But the lean, punchy news lead will work best on most stories.

## The Nut Graph

Every story needs a "nut graph" that answers the question: Why am I writing this, and why do I think the reader should read it? The best way to make sure your story has a point is to state it, simply, somewhere near the top of the story. It doesn't have to say, "The point of this story is..." But if the story is about a budget shortfall, a good nut graph might quote a district official on whether the shortfall would force an increase in tuition. How does the story affect the reader? That's what should be in the nut graph. If it doesn't affect the reader, maybe it shouldn't be a news story.

## Quotes

Quotes bring a story to life. Let your sources tell the story. The reporter's voice in the story should outline the main points and set the stage for the quotes. Quotes let your sources "talk" to the reader, giving a personal impact that you can't get any other way in print.

But quotes should be special. Don't use quotes for information that can be more clearly explained in your own words. Only direct quotes are contained inside of quotation marks. Information inside quotation marks must be the source's exact words.

But another step is needed to achieve accuracy: The words inside the quotation marks must also convey the intent of the speaker. To use the speaker's exact words to say something he or she did not mean is to take the quote out of context. It is a serious complaint often made by sources.

At the end of the interview, always check quotes that you intend to use, and if you are unsure what the speaker meant, ask.

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The proper form for using a direct quote is: "I won't run for president," Dan Quayle said Thursday. "But I may walk a little." Notice that punctuation is inside the quote marks. The quote is attributed after the first sentence.

Try to minimize the use of partial quotes: When asked about his presidential plans, Quayle said he "won't run." The first example, using the full quote, is both more interesting and more accurate. The partial quote leaves a false impression.

Indirect quotes don't have to use the speaker's exact words, but they must convey what the speaker meant. For example: Steve Young Thursday denied reports that he would retire from football at the end of the 1997 season, but he said he is feeling his age. Indirect quotes can be used to introduce direct quotes. For instance, the next sentence in the Young story could be: "I feel every tackle of my career when I wake up in the morning," he said.

Make sure that the reader knows who is talking. If you've quoted one person for several paragraphs, and then plan to quote someone else, use a graph of transition between the two quotes. For instance: Meanwhile, another city councilman had opposite views. "I think the planned development stinks," said Councilman Joe Smith. If you end one quote and start another without tipping off the reader, confusion will result.

Remember, you may accurately report what a person said, but that person may be wrong. Verify any questionable statement by calling other sources. It's not enough to say later, "But that's what he said."

Keep in mind that your goal is to inform your readers. Never rely on only one source. If you find that one of your sources doesn't have the information you need, switch sources.

## Transitions

Each paragraph in your story should flow naturally from the one before it. If you have gathered enough information, and if your lead is strong enough, you may find that your story seems to "write itself," flowing naturally from beginning to end. But other stories seem "choppy," with the narrative taking jags and loops that could lose or confuse the reader. Transitions smooth out those jags and make the story easier to read.

Here are some guidelines:

- **Make sure your story elements are presented in a logical order.** The most common order is the chronological order. This happened, then this happened, then this happened. For the sake of variety, you want to use the word "then" no more than once.
- **Use introductions as transitions between speakers.** For example: Ed Smith, professor of biology at Ohlone, disagrees with the idea that frozen yogurt causes split ends. "That's the craziest idea I've ever heard," he said.

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- **Set the scene for a new area of discussion.** Don't just start in a new direction without notifying the reader. For example: Meanwhile, a group of Ohlone instructors have been developing another theory, one based on experiments with bananas. "We think we're on to something," said Professor Harold Foote.

## Endings

Although the news writing style tries to put the most important information in the beginning, in order to draw in readers, it is also important to save something for a good ending. A good ending gives a "rounded out" feeling to a story, especially if the end makes reference to information in the lead.

For instance, in a story by a Monitor staff member about a young man trying to quit gang crime and turn his life around, the ending was: Valle gave a convincing "yes" when asked if he is going to graduate from college. This means that he will have to see his mother cry again, although this time he will see her from a stage while he is wearing a cap and gown, holding a diploma in his hand. The lead had talked about how his mother cried when he received a scholarship to attend college, shortly after he had been released from jail. The ending made a smooth reference to the lead, tying the story together.

## Other Stuff

Avoid one-source stories. Talk to as many people as possible in the time you have for reporting. Make sure you leave enough time for the writing portion of the story. How do you know when you've done "enough" reporting, talked to enough sources, read enough reports? Experience will teach you the answer, and it will be a lot more than you thought at the beginning.

The news reporter's job has three parts: Reporting, writing and meeting deadlines. All three are important, but news reporting couldn't exist without deadlines. The deadline is your discipline. Learn to meet deadlines, learn how to gather information, and the writing style will come eventually.

Remember that there is a broad, clear distinction between news writing and advertising. Use your normal objectivity and fairness when writing about advertisers, even if they push you for a "positive" story, and threaten to pull their advertising if they don't get it. Our focus is on the reader. Our job is to write truthful, fair stories, and sensible advertisers will respect that. The same applies to our college administration. We must always give all sides of a story, and we must ask for reaction from all interested parties, but our job is to report the news objectively, regardless of who is involved.