

Elm Tips: News Writing

The Basic News Story

The goal of news writing is to convey a lot of information efficiently. Journalists do this by using a spare, clean, direct writing style and organizing stories so that readers can get the main points quickly.

Though there are many ways to write a news article, the basic news story generally follows a simple formula, known as the inverted pyramid. In this technique, the writer presents information in descending order of importance. The most important facts are presented in the lede—the opening paragraph. Succeeding paragraphs provide added details.

The who, what, where, when, why, and how are generally answered in the first two or three paragraphs.

An inverted pyramid story usually starts with:

1. A lede that hooks readers and captures the essence of the story.
2. A second paragraph that amplifies, or backs up, the lede. This paragraph often explains the impact of the story and answers the who, what, where, when, why and how questions not answered in the lede.
3. A lead quote that augments the lede. It's usually the strongest quote of the story and adds a human dimension.
4. A nut graph: a paragraph or two that provides context and tells readers why they should care.

The rest of the story typically includes background information and reaction in descending order of importance.

Remember to:

1. Write tight. Use short sentences, short paragraphs. A good rule on sentences: if you can't say it one breath, break it up into two sentences.
 2. Leave unnecessary details out of the lede. Street addresses, times, even unfamiliar names, should go lower in the story.
 3. Avoid passive verbs. Use active verb construction, where the subject is doing something rather than having something done to him or her.

Ex: Last week's allegation of burglary was retracted Monday.

Change to: A woman who claimed she was robbed last week retracted the story on Monday.
4. Translate jargon. Interpret bureaucratic, legal, scientific, or technical language for readers.
5. Steer clear of clichés.
6. Omit unnecessary words. After writing a story, read through it and see if you can take any words out.
7. Vary sentence lengths. Stories become dull when sentences are all the same length.
8. Back up your lede and nut graph. Make sure you provide adequate evidence—quotes, facts, and statistics—to prove what you say.
9. Read your story aloud. Listen for word repetition, overly long sentences, awkward phrasing.

Self-editing. When writing a story, ask yourself:

1. Does the lede capture the essence of the story?
2. Is my lede 30 words or less? If not, can I tighten it?
3. Does the lede entice readers to read more?
4. Is the main idea of the story mentioned early on in the story, either in the lede or nut graph?
5. Is the story concise? Can I remove any unnecessary words?
6. Do the first few paragraphs answer the 5 Ws and h?
7. Are the paragraphs short?
8. Is the writing objective, free of editorializing?
9. Does the story have quotes? Are they properly attributed?
10. Are all the facts right? Are they properly attributed?
11. Are the tenses consistent?
12. Is the story free of spelling, punctuation, and grammar problems?
13. Are all the names spelled correctly?
14. Are all dates and addresses correct?
15. Did I attribute quotes using "he said" or "she said" instead of explained, laughed, elaborated, etc?