News Writing

Vastly different approaches

Academic Writing

GOAL: Detailed Analysis
TIMING: Days, weeks or months
PROCESS:

- Idea

- Preliminary reading

- Thesis

- Research

- Outline

- Write essay
  (usually for authority figure)

- Rewrite
  (usually alone)

Journalistic Writing

Vastly different approaches

Academic Writing

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Journalistic Writing

GOAL: Concise summary
TIMING: As fast as possible
PROCESS:

- Assignment

- Original research
  a. Archival research
  b. Interviews
  c. Surveys/data analysis
  d. First-hand observation

- Organize content

- Write story
  (for a general audience)

- Edit
  (usually with another person)

5 Ws and H

- Who
- What
- When
- Where
- Why
- How

You don't have to cover all of these in the lead, but usually you will address one or two in the first graph. The rest should come soon. Make sure they are all covered.

Let's try it as a group, using "Three Little Pigs"

- Who
- What
- When

- Where
- Why
- How

Wolf injured in pig attack

Who was involved? The three little pigs (the first pig, the second pig and the third pig) and The Big Bad Wolf (a.k.a. Wolf).

What happened? Each pig constructed a house out of different materials (straw, sticks and bricks). Wolf (allegedly) threatened to blow over their houses and is believed to have destroyed both the straw and stick homes at this time. Pig one and two were able to flee to the brick house, where they remain at the moment. We're still waiting to hear from local authorities, but it looks like the Wolf may have been injured while attempting to enter the brick house.

When did it take place? At various times throughout the day.

Where did it take place? Outside a straw house, a stick house and a brick house.

Why did it happen? Apparently the Big Bad Wolf was trying to eat the pigs. Several eyewitnesses recall the Wolf taunting the pigs before he destroyed the straw and stick homes by chanting, "Little pigs, little pigs, let me in." The pigs apparently scoffed at the Wolf's idle treats, saying "Not by the hair of our chinny, chin chins." It's believed this angered the Wolf and led to him blowing the houses down.

How did it happen? It would appear the first two homes were not built to withstand the Wolf's powerful breath. The incident inside the brick house is still being investigated, but early indications suggest the Wolf fell into a boiling pot of water when trying to enter the house through the chimney.

Journalistic writing

- Carefully Documented

- Fair and balanced (unbiased)

- Concise

Document and Verify

- Be prepared to prove what you say
- Back up with facts (statistics, direct observations, official statements); if you can't, OMIT
- Provide detailed descriptions when events and facts may be disputable
- Cite sources directly with facts
  - No footnotes, end notes or parenthetical attributions

    Instead: According to a Gallup Poll, a majority of today's college students are optimistic about their futures.

Being fair

- Include all sides of the story
  - You don't have to count words to ensure equal coverage, but an obvious imbalance should be avoided.
  - If you can't reach both sides of a controversy, hold the story as long as possible. If one side declines comment or just can't be reached, say so.

- Avoid "editorializing"
  - Be wary of qualitative adjectives such as *normal, ordinary, rare, smart, weak*, etc.

- Be wary of assertions of fact that are shaded by a speaker's perceptions
  - Discuss coverage of police shootings

Being Concise

- Use minimum words to say maximum

TIPS

- Rely on short declarative sentences
- Avoid redundancy
  - Don't preface content and restate it later (i.e.: no topic sentences)
  - Limit the use of introductory clauses ("At first," "Looking back," etc.)
- Use adjectives sparingly (less true for feature stories)
- Write a draft, then go back and cut, cut, cut

Other essentials: Quotes

- **Exact words in quotation marks**
  - A quote implies that you spoke with that person
    - If conversation was by email, say so in the attribution
    - If you are citing a secondary source such as NYT, clearly say so
  - Don't quote routine facts or second-hand info
    - Try to avoid quotes that would require brackets and ellipsis to work
  - Use quotes when something is uniquely stated
  - Also use quotes when exact wording is newsworthy
    - Bill Clinton: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman."
    - Can be challenging; see recent comments by Donald Trump about whether John McCain is a war hero because he was a POW.

Other essentials: Attribution

- Include useful details about sources, written in a reader-friendly manner
  - Sally Student, a senior music major …
    - **Not:** Sally Student, a fifth-year senior majoring in Composition in the USC Thornton School of Music …
  - First reference should include full name; just use the last name on subsequent reference unless there has been a significant gap between attributions or two sources share the same last name
  - Work long titles into second reference – or later
- Stick to "said" (or "says")
  - Avoid interpretive attributions in news stories (declared, exclaimed, intoned, etc.)
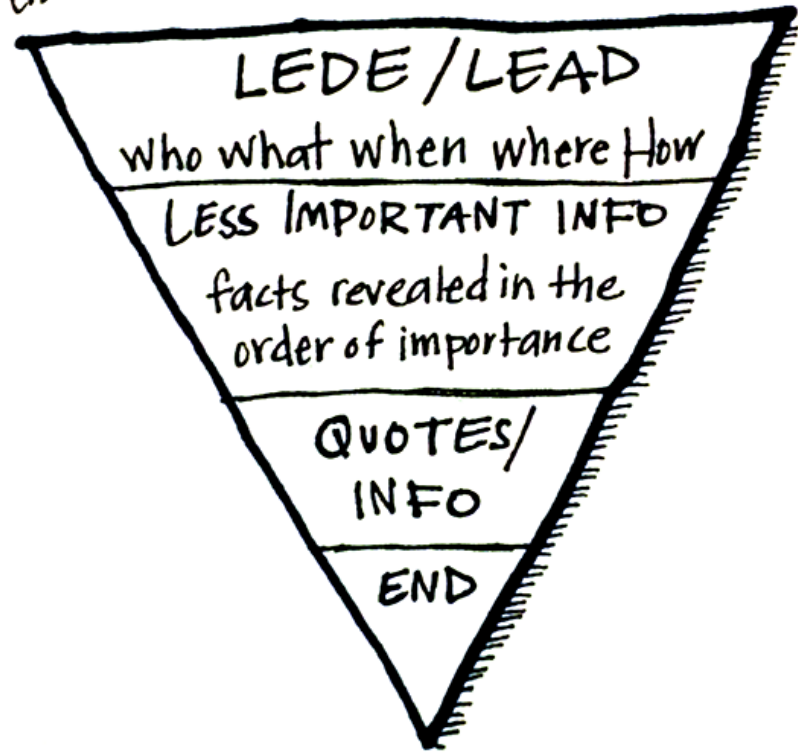
Elements of a news story

- A lead (often spelled "lede")
- A nut graph
- Facts attributed to sources
- Direct quotes and paraphrases to add context and color

The Inverted Pyramid

- Most important info at top, progressively less important info follows.

- Don't be tricked by the visual metaphor. It doesn't mean that you jam everything into the top with the story descending into minutia as it proceeds along.

- Some see it as out-of-date nowadays, but it's still useful as a method to help organize your material before writing.

the INVERTED PYRAMID.

LEDE / LEAD
who what when where How

LESS IMPORTANT INFO
facts revealed in the order of importance

QUOTES/ INFO

END

Modified Pyramid (outline form)

- The lead, usually one sentence, that focuses on Topic A, the most important aspect of the story.
- A nut graph near the top that puts the news in context.
- The paragraphs that follow also focus on Topic A, since that's what the lead deals with.
- After you've adequately dealt with Topic A, you can move on to Topic B.
- Deal with Topic B for as many paragraphs as you need, then move on to Topic C, and so on.
- All paragraphs are just one or two sentences.

Nut graphs

- The "nut graph" answers: Why am I writing this and how does the story affect the reader?
  - If it doesn't affect readers, maybe it shouldn't be a news story.
  - Make sure your story has a point by stating it, simply, somewhere near the top.

More about nut graphs

If the concept feels familiar, that's because it goes by different names in other circles:

- Business people call it an "elevator pitch."
- Friends like to "catch up," sharing the latest personal news in a manner that is very similar to a journalistic nut graph.

You're meeting up with friends for dinner. Jane says: "I can't believe it — after three years, I finally got a raise. It's a relief to have a little spare cash again. I really missed eating out!"

This example has all three components of a classic nut graph:

- *What was: Money has been tight for Jane.*
- *What's new: She got a raise.*
- *What happens now: She is relieved to have spare cash and realizes she missed eating out.*

Case study
DeAndre Jordan of NBA's L.A. Clippers

- Jordan, a star player for the Clippers, reached the end of his contract and became a free agent who could sign with another team.

- He met with four teams, including the Clippers, to hear pitches from each team about why Jordan should play for them.

- He decided on the Dallas Mavericks and allowed his agent to release that information to the news media even though he could not actually sign a new contract for a few days.

- Soon after, he let Clippers players and coaches know he was having second thoughts.

- Representatives of the Clippers rushed to Jordan's home in Houston to persuade him to change his mind and stay with them. The signing deadline was midnight EDT that day.

- As the deadline neared, info about what was going on was disclosed in bits and pieces by reporters and participants, some of it in the form of humorous emojis and photos sent out via Twitter by people associated with the Mavericks and Clippers.

- Jordan eventually decided to rejoin the Clippers, but he neglected to inform the Mavericks before re-signing with the Clippers. This upset those associated with the Mavericks and led to criticism of Jordan from other observers as well.

Blake Griffin @blakegriffin32 · 5m

✈️🚁🚗

🔁 2.9K ⭐ 2K

Chandler Parsons @ChandlerParso

✈️

🔁 9.8K ⭐ 5.9K

Marreese Speights @Mospeights16 · 55m

🏆💍

🔁 3.4K ⭐ 3K

Mike Woodson @MikeWoodsonNBA · 4

💰

🔁 2.5K ⭐ 1.7K

Paul Pierce @paulpierce34 · 48m

🚀

🔁 8K ⭐ 6.2K
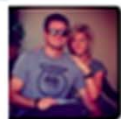
JJ Redick @JJRedick · 2h

🚗

🔁 8.9K ⭐ 5K

Blake Griffin @blakegriffin32 · 2h

✈️🚁🚗

🔁 12K ⭐ 8.2K

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What was?   What's new?   What happens now?

Sample nut graphs:

Under headlines and leads that focused on Jordan's decision to return to the Clippers, the following media outlets provided very different nut graphs:

SB Nation: DeAndre Jordan agreed to a maximum contract with Dallas, but had second thoughts and decided to re-sign with the Clippers after a full-court press by several teammates and coach Doc Rivers at Jordan's house in Houston.

Los Angeles Times: The free-agent center backed out of a five-day commitment to the Dallas Mavericks on Wednesday, re-signing with the Clippers for four years and $87.6 million—with an opportunity to opt out after the third year—during one of the wildest days in franchise history

Huffington Post: The DeAndre Jordan fiasco played out like a Hollywood movie. After committing to Mark Cuban and the Dallas Mavericks, he ultimately decided to return to Hollywood. Jordan, 26, will remain a Los Angeles Clipper after all.

Dallas Morning News: Poof. In a span of a few bizarre hours, Texas A&M product Jordan went from hero to probable career-long villain in North Texas. From savior to traitor. From [Dallas owner Mark] Cuban labeling him the Mavericks' best player going forward to likely Public Enemy No. 1 for all future visits to American Airlines Center.

Summary

- Write for readers
- Verify info and properly attribute it
- Think inverted pyramid, but write using an outline form
- Include the 5 Ws and H
- Include a nut graph
- Polish your leads
- Be concise and careful with your wording, especially when dealing with statistics

Questions?

Appendix

Readers want to know:

- Why should I care?
- What can I do about it?
- How does it affect me?
  - USC readers may include:
    - Students (including graduate and international students)
    - Faculty and staff
    - Interested observers such as companies with business relationships at USC
    - Some alumni, parents and prospective students
    - Other news media looking at USC stories when a significant news story breaks on campus.

Inverted Pyramid Pro and Con

Critics say:

- It tells the story backward.
- It defies the storytelling tradition of a beginning, middle and end.
- Many writers find its emphasis on facts uncreative and stilted.
- Instead of rewarding a reader with a satisfying conclusion, it loses steam as it goes along.
- The structure and its summary lead are difficult for some journalists to master.
- Writers may lack enough knowledge of their subjects to easily answer the central questions about what makes an event newsworthy and how to order it according to importance.

Defenders say:

- Impatient readers want stories to get to the point.
- For breaking news, the pyramid allows a news writer to retop a story continually, keeping it up-to-date.
- Can cut from the bottom to make a story fit a hole without having to worry something vital will be lost.
- Useful organizational tool that forces the reporter to sum up the point of the story in a single paragraph.
- People who master it say it comes in handy for writing everything from legal briefs to grant applications.
- Develops the skills of critical thinking, analysis and synthesis that are the foundation of clarity in writing.

Case Study #2

Despite the Interfraternity Council's temporary expulsion of the Kappa Sigma fraternity last May and an ongoing investigation of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity for an alleged sexual assault, members of the IFC and the Panhellenic Council look forward to beginning a new year of Greek social life at USC, albeit with some changes in the recruitment process.

IFC President Tanner Sandoval said that social life on The Row will be virtually the same as in recent years.

Sandoval credits the Greek community with adhering to the new restrictions, which limit the number of parties held from Friday after 3 p.m. through Sunday at 5 p.m. and institute a social draft system to determine which houses are permitted to host parties during the allotted times. "We've lowered the amount of Greek transports, and we've also improved our relationship with [the Dept. of Public Safety]," Sandoval said.

IFC's judicial board can impose sanctions on houses for a variety of infractions, including DPS write-ups and "dirty rushing," or holding illegal rush events outside those regularly scheduled. The judicial board's initial decision to expel Kappa Sigma in May came after such sanctions.

As of Aug. 5, however, the IFC Executive Board and the University made the decision to revoke Kappa Sigma's expulsion. Kappa Sigma will continue operating at USC, but will be suspended from the IFC for the fall 2014 semester and cannot recruit or hold social functions.

Some USC students worry that the environment at parties remains threatening.

Jasmine Collins, a senior majoring in international relations, said that she and her friends take caution at Greek parties.

"I've had fun at Greek parties in the past. But my friends and I feel like given how crowded it is, and what the environment is, you have to be careful. Last time [we went], we ended up getting harassed by some guy," she said. [… story continues]

Analysis

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