



# Story structure

*Giving an overall shape to your writing.*

Let's be clear: There's no simple, droolproof, one-size-fits-all solution for organizing stories. Every story unfolds in a different way.

Still, there's nothing random about good writing. Every story needs a beginning, middle and end. You can't just toss facts together as if you're flinging spaghetti against the wall. If you want readers to stick with you, you've got to organize each story's overall structure. Here's how.

## ORGANIZING YOUR STORY: THE MOST COMMON SHAPES

You may think newswriting is a free-form, seat-of-the-pants, spur-of-the-moment, sit-down-and-start-typing kind of thing.

Wrong. Write that way, and your stories become clumsy, rambling jumbles of random facts and quotes.

Readers hate chaos. If you confuse them, you lose them.

So think before you write. Organize your ideas. Plan your story, whether by sketching a quick outline, visualizing a mental image or brainstorming with an editor — whatever helps you draw a road map for your story to follow.

If you get stuck, try carving your story's structure into broad sections, such as:

- I. The Problem
- II. What It Means
- III. What Happens Next

Or try something like this:

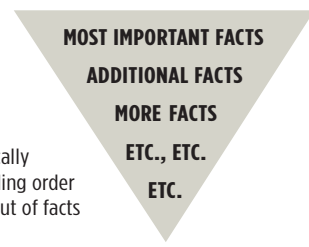
- I. Look: This Person Has a Problem
- II. Uh-oh. The Problem Is Everywhere
- III. What the Experts Say
- IV. What the Future Holds
- V. What It All Means for That Person We Met at the Start of the Story

That structure, it turns out, is quite popular with journalists — especially feature writers at the Wall Street Journal. To save time and effort, many crafty reporters automatically pour their stories into that tried-and-true shape (just like they pour breaking news into inverted pyramids).

Yes, we know: Every story is different. Still, if it helps you to visualize stories in physical shapes like pyramids, circles or martini glasses, consider the options at right.

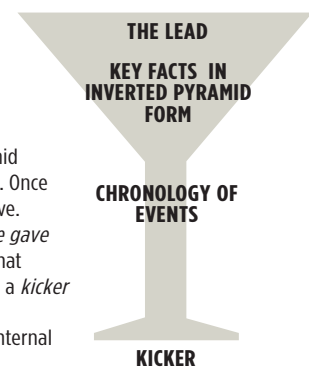
### THE INVERTED PYRAMID

**Best for:** News briefs, stories about breaking news events.  
**Not recommended for:** Anything else.  
**How it works:** Summarize the key facts in a concise lead. Then organize the story as logically as possible, arranging paragraphs in descending order of importance. End the story when you run out of facts (or you run out of room on the page).



### THE MARTINI GLASS

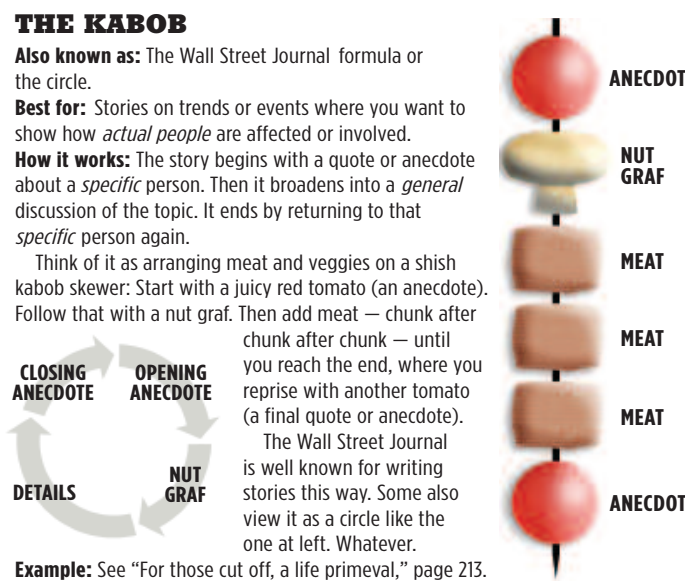
**Also known as:** The hourglass.  
**Best for:** Crimes, disasters or other dramatic news stories where you want to include a chronology to show how events unfolded.  
**How it works:** Begin with an inverted-pyramid summary of the story's most important facts. Once that's done, shift into a chronological narrative. (Try setting it up with a phrase such as *Police gave this account of the accident:*). Then detail what happened, step by step. If possible, end with a *kicker* (a surprise twist or strong closing quote).  
**Example:** See "Check-writer sets off clerk's internal alarm" in the Morgue, page 223.



### THE KABOB

**Also known as:** The Wall Street Journal formula or the circle.  
**Best for:** Stories on trends or events where you want to show how *actual people* are affected or involved.  
**How it works:** The story begins with a quote or anecdote about a *specific* person. Then it broadens into a *general* discussion of the topic. It ends by returning to that *specific* person again.  
 Think of it as arranging meat and veggies on a shish kabob skewer: Start with a juicy red tomato (an anecdote). Follow that with a nut graf. Then add meat — chunk after chunk after chunk — until you reach the end, where you reprise with another tomato (a final quote or anecdote).  
 The Wall Street Journal is well known for writing stories this way. Some also view it as a circle like the one at left. Whatever.

**Example:** See "For those cut off, a life primeval," page 213.



## AND AS YOU MOVE FROM PARAGRAPH TO PARAGRAPH, REMEMBER:

◆ **Keep paragraphs short.** Short, punchy paragraphs are *much* easier for readers to scan and absorb.

Really. Some reporters have even trained themselves to write just one sentence per paragraph.

Like this. Think of it this way: In a thin newspaper column, thick paragraphs (like the one you're reading now) get dense and daunting as long, wordy sentences stack up, giving your eyes no place to rest. Deep paragraphs may actually discourage readers from sticking with your story. So you should also try to:

◆ **Write one idea per paragraph.** Keep your focus tight, especially when explaining complex material. Parcel out your information in short, paragraph-sized chunks. Think about hitting the return key every time you type a period.

◆ **Add transitions.** To keep your story flowing, guide the reader from one idea to another with carefully placed transitions — words or phrases such as:

*However, Meanwhile, In addition, Previously, Finally, On a related issue,*

In this example, notice how transitions (in italics) help connect the ideas from sentence to sentence:

Police will cast a watchful eye on downtown revelers this New Year's Eve.

*But* police admitted they will not be as prepared for trouble as they had hoped. *For one thing,* backups from the state highway patrol will probably not be available.

*Instead,* Police Chief David Barker said he will rely on reservists to augment the city's regular officers.



## SO WHAT CAN YOU DO TO KEEP READERS FROM GETTING BORED?

See these two guys here? See how they're reading their newspaper with excited grins on their faces? Well, nobody does that anymore. Sorry.

Nowadays, readers are in a hurry. They're impatient. They're easily bored. And your job is to deliver the news to them in the most appealing, accessible, easy-to-digest way. In fact, we could argue that the modern journalist's job basically boils down to:

- 1) *teaching,* and
- 2) *storytelling.*

Which means that anytime you have a wonderful narrative story to tell, by all means *tell it*. Weave your magic. Paint a picture. Make us laugh. Make us cry.

But how often will you find those wonderful narrative stories? Unfortunately, they're pretty rare. Which means that most of the time your job is to teach readers about complex issues and events. You'll have to *think* like a teacher; you'll have to constantly ask: What's the most effective way to convey this material?

For today's readers, gray pages packed with paragraph after paragraph of long-winded narrative text simply *isn't* the most effective way to convey information anymore.

Later on, we'll explore this topic further. ▼ But for now, before you unleash any mile-long narratives, consider these alternatives:

## THE ENDING. THE CLOSER. THE KICKER. THE BIG FINISH.

Good writers agonize over their endings as much as they agonize over their leads. They often save their best stuff for last: a juicy quote. A revealing anecdote. An amazing fact. A clever pun. The goal is to give the story a climax, a punch line — what writers call a *kicker*.

"You should hear it echoing in your head when you put the paper down," says Bruce DeSilva of The Associated Press. "It should stay with you and make you think a little bit."



**SAM STANTON** of the *Sacramento Bee* concluded his story about the execution of a murderer this way:

A guard read the wordy announcement that contained a simple message:

Robert Alton Harris had been declared legally dead at 6:21 p.m.

The witnesses filed outside, into the bright sunlight.

After 25 years and nine days, California's gas chamber was back in operation.

**DON HAMILTON** covered the dedication ceremony at a Vietnam War memorial. His story ended:

Toward the end of the ceremony, Lee Ripley looked down and shook his head. Ripley served in the Air Force in 1968 and 1969.

"I hope we don't have to do this again anytime in the future," he said quietly. "But I bet they said that after Gettysburg. We still haven't learned anything." ▼

**ERIN BARNETT** wrote about a woman caring for her failing husband, an Alzheimer's victim:

She pulls a turtleneck over John's wiry gray hair. Then she brushes his teeth and his wet hair before pulling him up. He looks down at her. She looks up at him.

"There you go sweetie," she says.

And John is off. He strides back through the bedroom. He passes a watercolor of maroon, yellow and brown on the wall. Nellie says it is nasturtiums climbing out of their planter box. Like all her paintings, this one has a name. She calls it "Breaking Free."

**RICK BELLA** begins his story about a seaside sand-castle contest with a biblical reference:

In the beginning, there was mud. *The story concludes this way:*

Finally, as the crowd retreated, the Pacific lapped at the creations, reclaiming the sand to re-create the familiar beach.

Ashes to ashes, mud to mud.

## ALTERNATIVES TO LONG, GRAY NEWS STORIES

### BULLETS

One effective way to emphasize a series of items is to add *bullets*, which help to highlight key points so they "pop" out of the text. For best results:

◆ **Start with a boldface phrase**, like this, to make your main points easy to scan.

◆ **Use parallel construction.** Here, for example, every bullet item is a handy tip, and each one begins with a verb.

◆ **Run at least three items.** Fewer than that, your list will look odd or incomplete.

Throughout this book, we use bullets (with boldface type and diamond-shaped dingbats) to highlight and summarize tips and lists. Bullets work for news stories, too.

### SIDEBARS

A *sidebar* is any short feature written to accompany a longer story. Sidebars usually run in boxes beside or beneath the main story, like the one you're reading now. They help you reorganize complex information into smaller sections, to which you can add graphics, photos, etc.

As it turns out, sidebars often have higher readership than the stories they accompany simply because they're shorter and easier to access.

### SUBHEADS

Ours are boldface, underlined and gray (but they work in plain black, too). Notice how they *instantly* show you that the text in this sidebar is divided into four sections.

Subheads break long stories into short, accessible chunks. They can be inserted whenever there's a shift in topics — which means that anytime you want to make complex material more reader-friendly, you can build subheads into your story as you write it. Like we've done here.

### OTHER STORYTELLING ALTERNATIVES

Not every story requires paragraph after paragraph after paragraph of text. Take this book, for example. Have you noticed how there's virtually *no* long-winded text anywhere in this thing?

You be the judge: Has this format made the information easier for you to absorb? Or have we *dumbed it down too much*?

You can approach news stories the same way we've structured this book. You can break complex material into lists. Quizzes. Q and A's. Timelines. Chronologies. First-person flashbacks. Diagrams.

In Chapter 6, we'll show in more detail how these alternative story forms work. ▼

## CHECKLIST

◆ **Plan ahead.** Don't just stop a story because you ran out of material. Write the ending right after you write the lead, then work on the middle. Think of the lead and the ending as bookends.

◆ **Don't end stories by summarizing** what we've learned, like term papers do. There's no need to revisit or rehash points you've previously made. We don't need any sermonettes, either.

◆ **Avoid cute clichés** like *That's all, folks,* or *And that's the way it is.*

◆ **End with a bang** (a strong word or phrase), not a whimper (a weak attribution like "he said"). Effective writers try to place their most emphatic words **here, at the end.**







# Editing

*Who's going to clean up the errors in your story?*

For centuries, reporters have had a love-hate relationship with their editors. On the one hand, reporters see editors as “the boss” — barking orders, spiking stories and mangling their exquisite prose. “I am not the editor of a newspaper,” Mark Twain said, “and shall always try to do right and be good so that God will not make me one.”

But on the other hand, where would you be *without* editors? Who would calm the newsroom chaos? Pacify angry readers? Fix your clumsy spelling? Delete that innocent-looking phrase in your story that might get you sued?

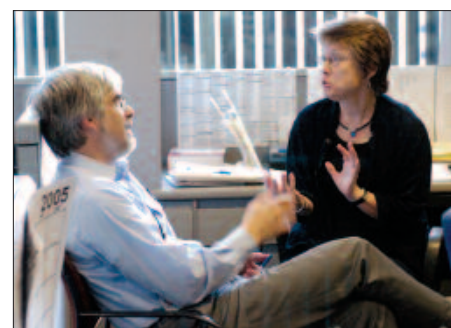
Every story needs editing, and every newsroom needs good editors. Copy editors, photo editors, design editors, online editors — they all play a part in making your efforts as effective as they can be.

## HOW EDITORS PLAY A PART IN THE STORIES YOU WRITE

Every story you ever write will be edited. By an editor. Or perhaps many editors. It varies from newsroom to newsroom. On a small weekly, one editor may write, proofread and design every page in the paper. At a big daily, you might find an “assistant night editor for

sports” who never writes a word and relies on a dozen other editors to process the reporters’ finished stories.

Generally, though, editors are responsible for a) managing the newsroom staff, and b) making sure every story is as error-free as possible. For example:



Don Colburn, a reporter covering health issues at *The Oregonian*, discusses a story idea with his editor, Sally Cheriell.

### BEFORE YOU WRITE THE STORY

- ◆ **Assigning the story.** Editors try to match the story to the right reporter, weighing factors such as workload, beat, writing style, prior stories, etc.
- ◆ **Planning the angle.** Editors will often urge you to focus on a particular aspect of the story: “Let’s look at the effects of this tax on part-time workers.”
- ◆ **Estimating the scope.** How long should each story be? Editors will often decide (“just give me 10 inches”) based on a story’s impact, the amount of news traffic that day or how much space is available in the paper.
- ◆ **Anticipating the packaging.** Some stories are simple: just text and a headline. Others require photos, sidebars, charts or graphs — and the best time to plan a complex package is before you start writing. ▼



As deadline approaches, Cheriell works with Colburn on the final draft of his story, making comments and suggesting changes.

### WHILE YOU WRITE THE STORY

- ◆ **Adding new details.** Editors will notify you of new developments (“the mayor just got arrested”) that require you to revise your story.
- ◆ **Monitoring your speed.** “When’s that tax story gonna be done?” With many stories in progress, editors always keep one eye on the clock, guiding the staff’s work flow as deadline approaches.
- ◆ **Fine-tuning your approach.** Before you veer in the wrong direction, editors try to ensure your story answers the right questions. (“The lead isn’t that they lost the game, it’s that the quarterback broke his leg.”)
- ◆ **Monitoring layout changes.** If a new ad comes in, your 20-inch story may suddenly get cut in half. Or the story may hold for a day, waiting for a late photo.



Copy editor Kay Mitchell follows behind *The Oregonian*’s reporters and editors, making last-minute corrections and writing headlines.

### AFTER YOU WRITE THE STORY

- ◆ **Editing the content.** Several editors may examine the structure and substance of your story to ensure it’s readable, logical and fair.
- ◆ **Copy editing.** This is where any errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation or style get fixed. When that’s done, a copy editor writes a headline that summarizes your story.
- ◆ **Cutting or padding to fit.** Once all the photos, ads and stories combine on the page, some elements may need to grow or shrink. On deadline, the easiest solution may be to cut the bottom off your story.
- ◆ **Assigning follow-up stories.** One event (“the mayor resigns”) flows into another (“meet the new mayor”) — and the whole process begins again.

## HOW MUCH EDITING DO YOU NEED?

How’s your spelling? Grammar? Punctuation? Know much about style, usage or libel? Take this test and see if you’re ready to write a printable story.

Answers on Page 292.

### 1 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) Police arrested the rapist, Levon Coates, who sheriff Smith described as a homeless drug addict.
- \_\_\_ b) Police arrested the alleged rapist, Levon Coates, whom Sheriff Smith described as a homeless drug addict.
- \_\_\_ c) Neither of the above.

### 2 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) The \$4,400,000 grant is allocated into three areas: \$1,700,000 for research, \$1,900,000 for new oscillators, and \$1,800,000 for salaries.
- \_\_\_ b) The \$4.4 million grant is allocated into three areas: \$1.7 million for research, \$1.9 million for new oscillators and \$1.8 million for salaries.
- \_\_\_ c) Neither of the above.

### 3 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) The terrorist will be hanged at midnight.
- \_\_\_ b) The condemned terrorist will be hung at 12 midnight.

### 4 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) By the time Lincoln became President, seven states had succeeded from the union: South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Georgia.
- \_\_\_ b) By the time Lincoln became president, seven states had seceded from the Union: South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Georgia.
- \_\_\_ c) Neither of the above.

### 5 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) Melman is the candidate that is very heavily favored.
- \_\_\_ b) Melman is the heavily-favored candidate.
- \_\_\_ c) Neither of the above.

### 6 Which is correct?

- \_\_\_ a) Between you and me, she is a better reporter than I.
- \_\_\_ b) Between you and I, she is a better reporter than me.

### 7 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) Jim and his friend, Jack, were chased by his dalmatian puppy, Rex, which bit him.
- \_\_\_ b) Jim and his friend Jack were chased by his Dalmatian puppy, Rex, who bit him.
- \_\_\_ c) Neither of the above.

### 8 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) The boys’ golf team won their first play-off.
- \_\_\_ b) The boys golf team won its first playoff.

### 9 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) 20,000 helpless villagers died in the tragic volcano eruption.
- \_\_\_ b) Twenty thousand helpless villagers died tragically in the volcano eruption.
- \_\_\_ c) The volcano killed 20,000 helpless villagers.
- \_\_\_ d) None of the above.

### 10 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) More than 50 anti-war churchgoers carried handmade signs.
- \_\_\_ b) Over 50 antiwar church-goers carried hand-made signs.

### 11 Which would you print?

- \_\_\_ a) Prof. Anne Benson said, “Dr. Wormer is a blackmailing faggot, like my ex-husband.”
- \_\_\_ b) Professor Anne Benson alleged that Dr. Wormer was “a blackmailing faggot” like her ex-husband.
- \_\_\_ c) Neither of the above.

## The PRESS ROOM

### WHAT DO YOU MOST RELY UPON EDITORS FOR?

I have learned — after many years of proud ignorance — that I am only as good as the editor working with me. A good editor can do everything from offer emotional support on a tough story to help you reshape the inevitably bad first draft of a long story. Conversely, a bad editor can lead you down the road to hell.

Peter Sleeth, *The Oregonian*

Making sure the narrative of the story flows, finding any holes in a story, and — yes — catching spelling, grammar and punctuation boo-boos.

Michael Becker, *Journal-Advocate*

I rely on editors to save me from myself. After a year writing for The Associated Press, I generally write pretty cleanly. Then there are those days when I produce massive brain farts and I hope and pray they yank my copy back from the writing abyss.

Carol Cole, *The Shawnee News-Star*

More than anything, I need an editor to find the holes in my stories. My copy is pretty seamless, and it can disguise a lot, even from me.

Jerry Schwartz, *The Associated Press*

When you get stumped on something or run into a reporting or writing problem, an editor can stand back and provide ideas you haven’t considered. It’s easy to get blinded when you’ve been working on a story for a long time, and a good editor will help you get through that.

Sarah Bahari, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

I rely on editors to determine which stories I need to tackle first, which ones deserve the most (or least) space and which ones I can shelve. This is important input for busy journalists who have ever-growing lists of story ideas.

Jesse Fanciulli, *Greeley Daily Tribune*

Catching tiny details like “Is it Elisabeth or Elizabeth?”

Patricia Miller, *Durango Herald*

The best editors inspire, energize, constantly question my copy and edit within the tone and cadence of my stories. Only one has done that in my career.

Mark Freeman, *Medford Mail Tribune*

This is something that is universally underappreciated and overlooked and, dammit, for me it’s the most important thing ever: enthusiasm. I want an editor who invests as much energy and enthusiasm and spirit in a story as I do. Most of the other stuff I can get on my own (even my husband — a TV guy! — can line-edit with the best of ‘em). Big-picture editing — the kind where *thinking* and brainstorming are required — is a very close second.

Beth Macy, *The Roanoke Times*



# Newswriting style

You say “Mister Potato Head,” I say “Mr. Potatohead.” Who’s right?



**Historical footnote:** Years ago, editors wore green eyeshades to shield their eyes from the glare of harsh newsroom lights.

## THE ASSOCIATED PRESS STYLEBOOK: AN INDUSTRY STANDARD

### WHAT A STYLEBOOK ENTRY TELLS YOU

Entries are alphabetical, as in a dictionary. But the listings include topics such as **days of the week**, as well as specific words.

Cross-referencing helps you learn more about a topic elsewhere in the book.

Some entries simply show you the correct spelling, capitalization or hyphenation.

Italicized text provides examples of correct and incorrect usage.

These boldface entries show you the correct punctuation — but they also provide background information to help you verify facts.

**days of the week** Capitalize them. Do not abbreviate, except when needed in a tabular format: *Sun, Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat* (three letters, without periods, to facilitate tabular composition).

See time element.

### daytime

**day to day, day-to-day** Hyphenate when used as a compound modifier: *They have extended the contract on a day-to-day basis.*

**D-Day** June 6, 1944, the day the Allies invaded Europe in World War II.

**DDT** Preferred in all references for the insecticide *dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane*.

When you write stories, some things are certain: how to spell *paraphernalia*, for example. As you type the letters, they’ll either be right or wrong.

But other writing questions can’t always be answered so easily. For instance, one reporter might choose to write *The six-inch T.V. costs ninety dollars*. Another might say *The 6" TV costs \$90*. Both sentences seem correct, but which version is preferable? And who decides?

That’s where style guidelines come in.

When journalists talk about “style,” they mean either:

- ◆ the way you write (in a “breezy, comic style,” say, as opposed to a “wordy, intellectual style”), or
- ◆ the rules that govern punctuation, capitalization and word usage (writing *the president was born Jan. 1* instead of *the President was born January first*).

Every news outlet customizes its own style guidelines. Some newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, require reporters to refer to men as *Mr.* throughout a story; most other papers discourage using such “courtesy titles.” Some capitalize the *W* in *Web site*; others say *website*.

It’s the copy desk’s job to standardize the style in your stories — but it helps if you know the rules, too.

Over time, every newsroom develops style guidelines for writing about local people, places and things. Suppose the center of your campus is officially called Smith Quadrangle, but students call it “the quad.” Should you refer to it that way in print? And should *quad* be capitalized?

Most publications don’t have the time, energy or grammatical wisdom to grind out a comprehensive guide to the English language. So they select a proven, professional manual to serve as their official arbiter of style — and the American news industry standard is “The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law.”

The Associated Press is a news cooperative providing state, national and international stories, photos and graphics to more than 15,000 news outlets around the world.

Newsrooms do use other stylebooks (The *New York Times* markets its style manual, for instance). But if you pursue a print reporting career, the AP stylebook is the one that will eventually wind up on your desk.

## HOT DOGS, POPSICLES, DUMPSTERS AND HARRY S. TRUMAN

You’ll find lots of valuable writing advice inside *The AP Stylebook* (see next page). But if you’re a word nerd, you’ll be fascinated by its grammatical and factual oddities, too. For instance:

**Styrofoam** is a trademark for a brand of plastic foam, but it’s never used to make cups. Which means there’s no such thing as a *styrofoam cup*.

**Heroin** once was a trademark, too. But it isn’t anymore. (Neither is *yo-yo*.)

It’s **Smokey Bear**, not *Smokey the Bear*.

When writing about the deity, **God** is capitalized. But when cursing, use lowercase, *goddamn it*.

**Dumpster** is the trademarked name for a brand of trash bin, so it’s always capitalized. The same goes for *Popsicle*, *Frisbee*, *Mace*, *Kitty Litter* and *Seeing Eye dogs*.

**Pingpong** is one word. So is *bonbon*. But *boo-boo* and *pooh-pooh* are hyphenated. And *ball point pen* is three words.

It’s the **U.S. Navy** (capitalized), but it’s the *French navy* (lowercase).

**Dr Pepper**: There’s no period in the soft drink’s name.

**Harry S. Truman** said there was no need for a period after his middle initial because it didn’t actually stand for a name. Even though the period is often omitted (at the Harry S Truman National Historic Site, for instance), AP style requires a period after the *S*.

**Yams** are not botanically related to sweet potatoes.

**Hot dogs** got their name in 1906, when a cartoonist drew a dachshund wrapped in a long, narrow bun.

You are a **boy** or a **girl** until your 18th birthday. Then you become a *man* or a *woman*.

They’re called **Canada geese**. Not *Canadian geese*.

And speaking of Canadians: It’s derogatory to call them **Canucks** unless you’re talking about the Vancouver hockey team, the *Canucks*.

## NUMBERS

◆ Spell out *one* through *nine*, then go to figures for 10 and up. If a sentence begins with a numeral, either spell it out or rewrite the sentence. Figures for years, however, are an exception: *2004 was an election year*.

◆ Always use numerals for ages: *He’s an 8-year-old genius. The law is 1 year old*.

◆ Always use numerals in ratios: *She won the election by a 2-to-1 ratio*.

◆ For dimensions, use figures and spell out inches, feet, etc.: *She is 5 feet 9 inches tall*.

◆ Write *percent*, not *per cent* or *%*. Depending on the sentence, you may use either a singular or plural verb. Both of these are correct: *The teacher said 75 percent was a failing grade. As a result, 25 percent of the students were failing the class*.

◆ *Dollars and cents*: Both are written lowercase. Use a dollar sign (\$) and numerals for an exact figure: *The hamburger cost \$3.99*. For amounts less than a dollar, use numerals: *It cost 99 cents*. Use a \$ and numerals to two decimal points for amounts of \$1 million and up: *The plan costs \$79.31 million*. Spell out casual uses: *I loaned her a dollar. She looks like a million bucks*.

## TITLES

◆ Titles generally are capitalized only when used before a name: *President Roosevelt, Professor Tate, Pope John*. But when used otherwise, do not capitalize: *The president spoke to Congress. The professor scheduled a committee meeting*.

◆ Some titles are descriptive of occupations and are not capitalized: *astronaut Tom Swift, assistant coach Janet Johnson*.

◆ *King, queen* and other royal titles follow much the same guidelines. Capitalize them only directly before a name: *If I were a king, I’d want to be like King David*.

◆ Some titles are a bit more complicated, such as *former President Gerald Ford or acting Mayor Jill Fox*. Note that the qualifying word is not capitalized.

◆ For long titles, it’s best to put them after a name for easier readability: *Jim McMullen, president of the association, wants taxes lowered*. Or, if you prefer, you can say *The president of the association, Jim McMullen, wants taxes lowered*.

## CAPITALIZATION

◆ Always capitalize proper nouns: *Wally, Nike, Boston*.

◆ Capitalize common nouns when they’re a part of the full name for a person, place or thing: *Republican Party, Dixon Lake, Benson Boulevard*. In other references, the nouns are not capitalized if they stand alone: *the party, the lake, the boulevard*.

◆ Some words derive from a proper noun and depend on that word for their meaning. They should be capitalized, as in *Christian, English, Marxist*. But other words no longer depend on the proper nouns for their meaning: *french fries, pasteurize, venetian blind*.

◆ The first word in a sentence is always capitalized, even if it is a proper noun that otherwise is not. For instance, *e.e. cummings* is all lowercase, but at the beginning of a sentence it would be *E.e. cummings*, which looks odd and should be recast to avoid.

◆ In composition titles, the principal words in a book title, movie title and the like are capitalized, including prepositions or conjunctions of four or more letters:

*“Gone With the Wind.”*

# AP STYLE HIGHLIGHTS

“The Associated Press Stylebook” is the ultimate desktop reference for print reporters and editors.

It’s the book you’ll turn to first when you’re unsure about usage, grammar, capitalization and punctuation.

There’s a lot to learn in its 400 pages, but here’s a roundup of the guidelines you’ll use most often. (To save time later, commit these to memory.)



## ABBREVIATIONS

◆ Abbreviate these titles before a full name, except in quotations: *Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Mr., Mrs., Rep., the Rev. and Sen.* When used before a full name in a quote, spell out all except *Dr., Mr., Mrs.* and *Ms.*

◆ After a name, abbreviate *junior* or *senior* as *Jr.* or *Sr.* After the name of a business, abbreviate *company, corporation, incorporated* and *limited*.

◆ Always abbreviate *a.m., p.m., A.D.* and *B.C.*

◆ When a month is used with a specific date, abbreviate *Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov.* and *Dec.* Spell out months when used alone or with a year only: *We met in December 2000, then got married on Dec. 14, 2002*.

◆ Spell out the names of all states when they stand alone. Eight states are never abbreviated: *Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas* and *Utah*. The others are abbreviated when used with the name of a city, town, etc., whether in datelines or in text. See the stylebook for the acceptable state abbreviations.

## ADDRESSES

◆ Abbreviate *street, avenue* and *boulevard* when they’re used with a specific address, such as *1234 Della St.*, but spell them out otherwise: *We took a drive down Electric Avenue*. Other designations, such as *court, lane* and *road*, are always spelled out.

◆ Always use figures for the address number.

◆ Spell out *First* through *Ninth* if they’re street names, then go to figures after that: *222 10th Avenue*.

◆ If you have a complete address, abbreviate any compass points, such as *712 Jones St. S.E.* But without an address, it’s just *Southeast Jones Street* (note *Street* is spelled out and capitalized).

## THE INTERNET

◆ Some basic styles: *Internet, the Net, World Wide Web, the Web, Web site, dot-com, JPEG, DVD, CD-ROM, online, cyberspace, e-mail*.

◆ When listing Web addresses, use this format as a guideline: *http://www.timharrower.com*

## PARENTHESES

◆ When a phrase in parentheses is inside a sentence, place the closing parenthesis inside the period: *They gave everything they had (but they still lost)*. If it’s a separate thought, the closing parenthesis goes outside the period: *They gave everything they had. (Unfortunately, they still lost.)*

◆ Use parentheses to insert a state name or similar information within a proper name: *She’s a sports reporter at the Allentown (Pa.) Morning Call*.

◆ Do not use parentheses to set off a political designation. Instead, use commas: *Joan Jeffries, D-Fla., said Thursday that she would run for re-election next year*.

## POSSESSIVES

◆ For plural nouns not ending in *s*, add *’s*: *men’s clothing*. If they end in *s*, add only an apostrophe: *the dogs’ leashes*.

◆ For singular nouns not ending in *s*, add *’s*: *the school’s playground*. This applies to words ending in *x* or *z* as well.

◆ For singular common nouns ending in *s*, add *’s* unless the next word begins with *s*: *the waitress’s order book, the waitress’ sugar*.

◆ For singular proper names ending in *s*, use only an apostrophe: *Jones’ music, Phyllis’ car*.

◆ *It’s* is not a possessive; it means only “it is.” *Its* is a possessive: *A dog likes its food, not it’s*.

## PREFIXES

◆ Use a hyphen if the prefix ends in a vowel and the word that follows begins with the same vowel: *re-entry, anti-inflammatory*. (*Cooperate* and *coordinate* are exceptions.)

◆ Use a hyphen if the word that follows is capitalized: *The song was written by ex-Beatle Ringo Starr*.

Guidelines for specific prefixes:

**pre-**: The stylebook does list exceptions to Webster’s *New World Dictionary*, including *pre-empt, pre-exist* and *pre-election*.

**co-**: For nouns, adjectives and verbs that describe a partnership, use a hyphen: *co-author, co-worker, co-pilot*. Do not use a hyphen in other cases: *coexist, coeducational, cooperate*.

**sub-**: In general, no hyphen is needed: *subtotal, subcommittee, submachine gun*.

## A FEW OTHER NITPICKS WORTH REMEMBERING:

- ◆ It’s *adviser*, not *advisor*.
- ◆ *amid*, not *amidst*.
- ◆ *ad nauseam*, not *ad nauseum*.
- ◆ *minuscule*, not *miniscule*.
- ◆ *doughnut*, not *donut*.
- ◆ *amok*, not *amuck*.
- ◆ *Smithsonian Institution*, not *Institute*.

### Further/farther:

◆ *Further* is an extension of time or degree: *We need to take this idea further*.

◆ *Farther* is used to show physical distance: *I live farther from school than you do*.

### Imply/infer:

◆ You *imply* something by what you say or write.

◆ People *infer* something by reading your words.





"In real life I am basically shy and can't do a lot of things, but on the job, the story is all that matters — the deadline is coming at you, unstoppable, like an avalanche down a mountain. You brave the wrath of crooks and cops and bad crowds and mean dogs without even seeing them. There is no time. Do what you have to and worry about it later. And fortunately, you do not worry even then, because later arrives with the hot breath of a new deadline on its heels."

**Edna Buchanan,**  
legendary crime reporter

## Making deadline

*When you're a reporter, you live by the clock.*

In broadcasting, you measure stories in minutes and seconds. At newspapers, you measure them in inches — but still, those presses roll at a set time. Which means every page must be designed and finished at a set time. Which means every story must be edited and proofed at a set time. Which means you must turn in your story at a set time — otherwise, you cause serious problems for lots of people.

Which makes them angry. And gets you fired.

Meeting your deadline isn't optional. It's mandatory. Oh sure, stories sometimes straggle in, a few minutes late. Once in a while, they even fall through at the last minute. But every reporter knows how deadly it is to blow a deadline.

Now, if you plan to write for online publications, you could argue that there *are* no deadlines in cyberspace — that news is updated around the clock. Which is true. Nevertheless, editors will always be pushing you to finish your stories; you'll always need to write with speed and efficiency, because the beast will always need feeding.



### TIPS FROM THE PROS TO HELP FINISH THAT STORY BY DEADLINE

**Bob Batz,**  
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:*  
I always tell people who are stuck, including myself: Breathe, think, and then just write down the story like you'd tell it to a friend. You can always go back and fine-tune it if you have time.

**Peter Sleeth,** *The Oregonian:*  
It helps when you are stuck on a story to realize there are just three boxes to fill: The lead, the nut graf and the explanatory body of the story, in that order. If you write each one as a stand-alone, it can help the biggest weenie get through deadline.

**Jesse Fanciulli,**  
*Greeley Daily Tribune:*  
Write a super-fast first draft: Just let the words tumble out, write as fast as you can and don't let your inner critic prod you into self-editing. Once you have everything you want to say down, look it over, pinpoint the angle, write the lead, reorganize, insert quotes, facts and figures, rewrite where necessary and check the facts.

**Kevin Pang,** *Chicago Tribune:*  
If you're stuck staring at your monitor, walk away from the computer. Grab a pen and steno pad. Go to the break room and write out your story. When you're typing, the words fly on the screen almost reflexively. By writing each word out, you'll have time to think and process what you want to say, and how to say it.

**Kevin Duchscher,** *Star Tribune:*  
Assemble the story in your head even as you're reporting it. Make mental notes to match the jottings in your notebook: an apt quote, the best scene-setter, telling details.

**Jim Souhan,** *Star Tribune:*  
Some people freeze on deadline. My cure for that: Start typing. The simple act of typing in possible leads or details frees you up. Sometimes writing a bad lead on deadline helps you remember what a good lead looks like, and allows you to jump-start your writing.



### ACCURACY

- YES NO
- Have you checked the spelling of every name? Double-checked it with the actual person? (Is it *Christyn?* *Krystin?* Or just *Kris?*)
  - Have you verified all dates, places and times of events?
  - Have you personally tested all phone numbers mentioned in your story, using what you actually typed on the screen? Did someone answer and approve the number for publication?
  - Have you personally tested any Web or e-mail addresses in your story? Are you sure all Web addresses will still be valid when the story is published?
  - Have you double-checked every job title? Company name?
  - Have you run spell check? Double-checked all unusual spellings (*Smyth, Millar*)? Caught any homonym mix-ups (*their, there*)?
  - Have you tested all the math in your story? Do the numbers and percentages correctly add up? (If in doubt, ask a colleague to recalculate your figures for you.)
  - Have you checked the accuracy of facts or claims made by sources quoted in your story?
  - In reviewing all the sources of information you used, are you sure that everything is reliable and up to date?
  - For stories on complex topics that are new to you, have you tried running your story by an expert on the subject?
  - Have you checked the accuracy of all information in related sidebars or photo captions? Does everything match what's in the story?
  - Do all quotes accurately capture what was said, and convey what was *meant*? Are they clearly and correctly attributed?
  - Have you added middle initials where appropriate (especially crime or court stories)?

### FAIRNESS AND BALANCE

- YES NO
- Is the story fair? Are all sides of the issue represented?
  - Have you given all your sources an opportunity to respond to any negative charges or opinions?
  - Can readers clearly tell *fact* from *opinion* in your story? Are you sure that your story doesn't disguise opinion as fact?
  - Have you clearly labeled any facts that may be in dispute?
  - Is there a diversity of voices quoted in the story: a representative mix of genders, races, ages, etc.?
  - Have you avoided unnecessarily alluding to anyone's race or religion unless it's relevant to the topic?

### WRITING STYLE

- YES NO
- Does the lead or nut graf clearly state what the story's about?
  - Does the story back up what's said in the lead?
  - Is your lead concise? Fewer than, say, 30 words?
  - Are all the five W's clearly explained without making readers dig through the rest of the story to find them?
  - Does the story convey *why readers should care*?
  - Have you taken pity on your readers and explained complex/inside information in a way that ordinary folks can understand?
  - Do you personally understand everything in the story?
  - If appropriate, does the story give readers enough tools to get involved (phone numbers, Web sites, event information, organizations to contact)?
  - Have you gone through the story to weed out all excess flab, like unnecessary adjectives and adverbs?
  - Are sentences short enough?
  - Are paragraphs short enough?
  - Are sentences written in the active voice, with strong verbs?
  - Have you corrected all grammar and punctuation problems?
  - Have you removed all jargon and journalese?
  - Have you made all clichés as scarce as hen's teeth?
  - Have you ever actually seen hen's teeth? You know why you haven't? Because they are so freaking *scarce*, that's why.
  - Have you eliminated inappropriate slang, such as "*freaking*"?
  - Does your story avoid unconscious sexist or racist phrasing?
  - Have you eliminated all dull, meaningless, say-nothing quotes?
  - Have you clearly sourced and attributed all information that's not general knowledge?
  - Have you considered how your sources will react to this story? Are you sure you haven't violated their trust, included any information without their consent, or caused them any embarrassment?
  - Have you refrained from mentioning yourself in the story or using "I," "me," "we" or "us" (except when quoting others)?
  - Have you alerted your editors to anything in your story that readers may find offensive or objectionable?
  - Have you read a printout of your story? (This will help you view the story with fresh eyes, and it may reveal errors you missed on the computer screen.)





# 66 newswriting tips

*Boring-but-important advice every reporter should memorize.*

Luckily for you, this book won't bog itself down analyzing grammar, syntax and punctuation. Instead, on these two pages we've summarized key principles every reporter should know — adapted from the “Hot 100” tips compiled by Sheryl Swingley of Ball State University.

## WRITING LEADS

- 1) Keep leads short. The first paragraph should usually be 35 words or fewer.
- 2) Try to limit leads to one or two sentences.
- 3) Avoid starting leads with the *when* or *where* unless the time or place is unusual. Most leads start with *who* or *what*.
- 4) Avoid beginning leads with *there*, *this* or *it*.
- 5) Use quote and question 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 it did.

## THE REST OF THE STORY

- 8) Vary your sentence lengths. Stories become dull when sentences are all the same length. If you notice that happening, try turning one long sentence into two or three shorter ones.
- 9) If you must write a long sentence, try using a short sentence before or after it.
- 10) Avoid using several prepositional phrases in a sentence. Prepositional phrases start with some of the following words: *about*, *above*, *against*, *at*, *between*, *by*, *down*, *during*, *for*, *from*, *in*, *like*, *on*, *over*, *through*, *to*, *toward*, *under*, *up*, *until*, *upon*, *with*.
- 11) Remember that short paragraphs encourage readers to continue reading.
- 12) Try to limit paragraphs to:
  - ◆ 60 words or fewer, or
  - ◆ no more than 10 typeset lines, or
  - ◆ one to three sentences.
- 13) Paragraphs should generally contain only one idea.
- 14) Avoid introducing new information at the end of a news story. All aspects of a story should usually be introduced or outlined in the first few paragraphs.
- 15) Transitions — linking words such as *but*, *and*, *also*, *besides*, *however*, *meanwhile*, *subsequently*, *finally*, etc. — are necessary to show the reader that the writer has a sense of direction. Carefully placed transitions guide the reader from one thought to another.

## EDITING AND STYLE

- 16) Eliminate words such as *when asked* and *concluded*. These are weak transitions. Just report what was said.
- 17) Whenever possible, omit the word *that*. **Example:** *The quarterback says he's ready, not the quarterback says that he's ready.*
- 18) The correct order for writing *when* and *where* is time, day (date) and place: *The concert begins at 8 p.m. Friday in Fox Hall.*
- 19) For a past event, say it happened *Tuesday*, not *last Tuesday*. For a future event, say it will happen *Monday*, not *next Monday*. Eliminate the words *last* and *next*.
- 20) Use the day of the week for events occurring within six days of a specific day; use the date for events occurring seven or more days before or after a specific day.
- 21) On first reference, identify a person by his or her first and last names. On second reference, refer to the person by his or her last name only.
- 22) On second and all other references, don't use *Miss*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, *Mr.* or *Dr.* unless it's a style requirement of the news outlet you're writing for.
- 23) A long title should follow, not precede someone's name. A title that follows the name should be lowercased and set off in commas.
- 24) Short titles may precede names and usually are capitalized. See *titles* in the AP Stylebook.
- 25) Always double-check the spelling of all names.
- 26) Use the computer's spell-checker. When in doubt, consult a dictionary. The latest edition of “Webster's New World College Dictionary” is the preferred reference.
- 27) For style questions, consult the AP stylebook. If the answer cannot be found there, consult a dictionary or a grammar guide.
- 28) Ask for help. Public library information desk personnel can be resourceful and helpful in person or on the phone. (University librarians are usually better at offering advice face to face.)

## RULES OF GRAMMAR

- 29) If *none* means *no one* or *not one*, use a singular verb. **Example:** *None was found guilty.*
- 30) When you use a pronoun to refer to a team or a group, the proper pronoun to use is *its*, not *they*. **Example:** *The team wants to improve its record.*
- 31) Use parallel construction for verbs in lists or sequences. **Example:** *He likes camping, fishing and hunting.*  
NOT: *He likes camping, fishing and to hunt.* **Example:** *The fire killed six people, injured 60 more and forced hundreds of residents to leave their homes.*  
NOT: *The fire killed six people, injuring 60 more, and will force hundreds of residents to leave their homes.*
- 32) When using *either...or* and *neither...nor*, the verb agrees in person with the nearer subject. **Examples:** *Either the coach or the players are to blame.* Neither the players nor the coach is to blame.
- 33) Know the difference between *its* (no apostrophe for possessive pronoun) and *it's* (the contraction for *it is*). **Examples:** *The dog has a thorn in its (possessive pronoun) paw, and it's (contraction) time to remove it.*
- 34) Know the difference between *whose* (possessive pronoun) and *who's* (the contraction for *who is*). **Examples:** *Whose (possessive pronoun) coat is this? Who's (contraction) wearing it?*
- 35) Know when to use *their* (possessive pronoun), *there* (adverb) and *they're* (the contraction for *they are*). **Examples:** *It is their (possessive pronoun) project. The project is over there (adverb). They're (contraction) working on it.*
- 36) When making comparisons, *as* and *such as* are generally preferable to *like*. Use *like* as a preposition, not to introduce clauses. **Examples:** *It tastes like a peach.* The farmer grows peaches, *as* he did last year.

## WORD CHOICES

- 37) Eliminate lazy adverbs. Let strong verbs do their jobs. Instead of *the radio played loudly*, write *the radio blared*.
- 38) Eliminate lazy adjectives. Let strong nouns do their jobs. Instead of *the gang members created a chaotic scene*, write *the gangsters created chaos*.
- 39) Choose strong verbs that suggest what they mean. Active verbs add pace, clarity and vigor to writing. Avoid *be* verbs.
- 40) Use simple words. Don't send readers to the dictionary. Odds are they won't bother looking up definitions; worse, they might quit reading.
- 41) Words such as *thing* and *a lot* annoy many readers and editors. Choose better synonyms. (Note correct spelling of *a lot*.)
- 42) Be careful using the word *held*. Make sure the object can be held physically. **Weak:** *The Rotary Club meeting will be held at noon Monday in Room 125.* **Better:** *The Rotary Club will meet at noon Monday in Room 125.*
- 43) Avoid using words that qualify how someone feels, thinks or sees. Qualifiers include the following: *a bit*, *a little*, *sort of*, *kind of*, *rather*, *around*, *quite*, *very*, *pretty*, *much*, *in a very real sense*, *somewhat*.
- 44) If you use jargon that won't be understood by a majority of readers, be sure to explain each term used.
- 45) Writing *yesterday* or *tomorrow* may be confusing to readers. Use the day of the week. (*Today* may be used with care.)
- 46) Give a person's age if necessary for identification or description; it's preferable to saying *teenager* or *senior citizen*. Write *Jim Shu, 30*, instead of *30-year-old Jim Shu*.
- 47) For suicides, until the coroner completes his or her investigation, it's best to say the person *was found dead* or *fell* or *plunged to his death*. (Some papers avoid using the word *suicide*; check with your editor.)
- 48) For arrests, write *arrested in connection with*, *sought in connection with*, *charged with* or *arrested on charges of*.
- 49) For murders, write that arrests are made *in connection with the death of*. Do not report that a victim was murdered until someone is convicted of the crime. In obituaries, it may be said the victim was *killed* or *slain*.
- 50) For fires, write that a building is *destroyed*, not *completely destroyed*. Buildings also are damaged *lightly*, *moderately* or *heavily*. A fire may *gut* or *destroy* the interior of a building. To *raze* a building is to level it to the ground.

## PUNCTUATION

- 56) No comma should appear between time, date and place. **Example:** *The fire started at 4:32 a.m. Monday in the kitchen of Bob's Bakery.*
- 57) In a series — *red, white and blue* — a comma is usually not needed before *and* unless the series is complex or confusing.
- 58) Use a comma with *according to*. **Example:** *Dogs are becoming more intelligent, according to researchers at Penn State University.*
- 59) Avoid comma splices: joining two independent clauses with a comma. **Example:** *Half the company's customers lost power after the ice storm, power was restored to most of them quickly.* (A period or semicolon should replace the comma.)
- 60) Another common problem: adding a comma between the subject and the verb. **Example:** *About half of the company's customers, lost power after the ice storm.* (The comma is not needed.)
- 61) When in doubt about using a comma, leave it out.
- 62) Quotation marks always go outside commas (,) and periods (.). They always go inside semicolons (;) and colons (:). They may go inside or outside of question marks. Check the AP stylebook.
- 63) The dash is a long mark (—) most often used to separate a list or series in sentences where extra commas might be confusing. **Example:** *All these punctuation marks — commas, periods, dashes, hyphens — have their own peculiarities.* Dashes also provide a way to insert interruptions or dramatic phrases. **Example:** *All these tips — don't worry, we're nearly done — are important to know.*
- 64) The hyphen is a short mark (-) used in hyphenated modifiers (*two-week workshop*, *well-read student*), in words that break at the end of a line of type (like this *hyphenated* word here), in telephone numbers and Social Security numbers. Don't hyphenate adverbs ending in “ly” paired with adjectives: It's a *freshly painted room*, not a *freshly-painted room*.
- 65) Use an exclamation point only after brief expletives. **Examples:** *Fire! Run! Goal!* Exclamation points often demonstrate a lack of control (or excess of emotion) on the writer's part. Use them sparingly.
- 66) If you ever catch yourself overusing a particular set of punctuation marks — dashes, parentheses, semicolons — force yourself to stop. Remember, simple sentence structures are always best.

## NONSEXIST, NONAGEIST, NONDISCRIMINATORY WORD CHOICES

- 51) Avoid words that reinforce ethnic, racial, gender or ageist stereotypes.
- 52) Avoid referring to someone's ethnicity, race, gender or age unless it's essential for the clarity of the story. (Race might be relevant when a criminal is at large; referring to ethnicity, race, gender, age or disability might be appropriate when an achievement or event is a first.) Use the substitution test: If you wouldn't say it about a Caucasian man, then don't say it about a woman, people of other races or people with disabilities.
- 53) Use *he* or *she* instead of *he*. Women do notice the difference. If using *he* or *she* or *him* or *her* is awkward, try a plural pronoun: *they*, *them*, *their* or *theirs*.
- 54) Substitute asexual words for sexist *man* words. For example:

QUESTIONABLE	BETTER
mankind	people, humanity
man-made	synthetic, manufactured
manpower	workers, work force, staff, personnel
founding fathers	pioneers, colonists, patriots, forebears
anchorman	anchor
cleaning woman	housekeeper, custodian
coed	student
fireman	firefighter
foreman	supervisor
housewife	homemaker
postman	letter carrier
policeman	police officer
salesman	salesperson
stewardess	flight attendant
weatherman	meteorologist
the girls (for women over 18)	the women

- 55) Respect people with disabilities:

crippled	impaired, disabled — or be specific: paraplegic
deaf and dumb, deaf mute	hearing- and/or speech-impaired
crazy, insane, half-witted, retarded	mentally ill, developmentally disadvantaged, disabled or limited — or be specific: emotionally disturbed

Separate the person from the disability.

Mary, an epileptic, had no trouble doing her job.	Mary, who has epilepsy, had no trouble doing her job.
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— Examples adapted from an International Association of Business Communicators' book called “Without Bias.”



## IF YOU COULD OFFER ONE PIECE OF ADVICE TO A REPORTER JUST STARTING OUT, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Read voraciously. Find the best reporters and read every word they write. Try to figure out how they do what they do, and then incorporate what you want into your own style.

Another piece of advice: Take a typing class. I'm not even sure if they offer them anymore, but I've always been jealous of the reporters whose fingers absolutely fly on deadline.

**Bret Bell**, *Savannah Morning News*

Reading upside-down and backward is a skill worth cultivating, and not at all hard once you catch on. I once picked up a scoop on who would be the new city manager of Cincinnati with a little furtive desktop perusal while interviewing the mayor. I confirmed the name, obviously, with other sources.

**Randy Ludlow**, *The Columbus Dispatch*

I didn't go to j-school, but the best advice I ever got was from a crusty editor who told me to carry a pencil, because a pen won't work in rain or cold. That advice saved me one rainy night when I covered a fatal plane crash.

**John Reinan**, *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, Minn.)

### I wish I would have learned shorthand.

**Nancy Gaarder**, *Omaha World-Herald*

At my first journalism job, we were taught: *If your mother says she loves you, check it out.* It sounded harsh at the time, but the hard truth is, you've got to get confirmation and documentation. Don't believe it until you've checked it out yourself.

**Deborah L. Shelton**, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

If you ever, ever get a niggling feeling about something in a story, even the faintest of niggles, don't ignore it. For it almost always comes true the next morning. So make that extra phone call and sleep better.

**Leah Beth Ward**, *Yakima Herald-Republic*

## The PRESS ROOM

### ADVICE ON REPORTING AND WRITING FROM VETERAN JOURNALISTS

Professor Halvorson, formerly of the University of Oregon j-school, had the best advice I ever heard. He advised every young journalist to put 10 percent of his net paycheck each week into a "Go To Hell Fund." The good and wise professor reasoned — and it is true — that there will be times when you are asked to do unethical things in your career and you need to be able to tell your editor to go to hell, and take a walk.

**Peter Sleeth**, *The Oregonian*

Take your vacation time.

**Andy Alford**, *Austin American-Statesman*

- ◆ Spend less time with journalists and more time with people who read the paper. They have better stories to tell.
- ◆ Spend less time in the office.
- ◆ Call fewer corporate executives. Call more employees who work for those executives.

**David Lyman**, *Detroit Free Press*

With rare exceptions, by the third paragraph of every story, answer the two questions that readers doubtlessly are asking:

- 1) What's this story about?
- 2) Why should I bother reading it now?

**Katy Muldoon**, *The Oregonian*

Got an interview subject who's nervous and intimidated? Ask where their bathroom is and go use it. That's right, go potty. With this simple act of humility, you'll break the tension, give the subject a chance to relax, and most importantly, let the subject know that you're a regular, humble person like them and no one to be feared.

**Matt Chittum**, *The Roanoke Times*

Write as you report. Don't wait until you've finished all your interviews and gathered your information to start writing. Write when you get the idea. Write after your first interview and after your second and after you gather some information online. You'll be a better writer and a better reporter.

**Steve Buttry**, *Omaha World-Herald*

Remember that the story is not about YOU. Whatever fears, hopes and opinions you harbor about the subject, the sources, how you're feeling, whether you had lunch, whether your photographer is a jerk — *they do not matter.* The important thing is to be a true representative responsible to the integrity of the story.

**JoNel Aleccia**, *Mail Tribune* (Medford, Ore.)

### Don't turn in a story you wouldn't read. And when they tell you newspapers are a business, believe them.

**Ken Fuson**, *The Des Moines Register*

Don't lean on "quotes." Focus too much on finding them during reporting and you'll miss more telling details. Good quotes are rare. You can tell the story better than the characters in it. So after writing, go back and take out half the quotes. And don't quote me on this.

**Bob Batz**, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Editing is incredibly subjective. One editor's idea of great versus so-so journalism can be entirely different. Don't let any editor have you believing you are too good or too bad. It's all perspective.

**Alex Branch**, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

You see a child crushed by an 18-wheeler while sledding, turning beautiful snow into a slushy red crime scene. You see the charred remains of a body. You smell death. You listen to those who grieve. You tell their stories. Dealing with trauma isn't always taught — or learned — in journalism school. It's experienced on the job.

**Kimberly Morava**, *The Shawnee News-Star* (Shawnee, Okla.)

## WHAT'S THE WORST PIECE OF JOURNALISTIC ADVICE YOU EVER GOT?

"If you can't spell, you will never be a reporter," said a journalism prof who sent me home crying. Now that I've been a reporter for nearly 15 years, I think maybe I should give him a call.

**Rachel Stassen-Berger**, *Pioneer Press* (St. Paul, Minn.)

The worst advice I ever got was a warning that anyone who wanted to speak off the record probably was lying. This was from a veteran assistant city editor. I quickly learned that people will tell you the truth in a lot of different settings for a lot of different reasons under a lot of different conditions.

**Rick Bella**, *The Oregonian*

Most idiots deal in absolutes. For example, I've heard "Never write to be cute," or "Never end a story with a quote." The only black and white in journalism should be the ink and paper.

**Michael Bockoven**, *The Grand Island Independent*

The inverted pyramid. What a crock.

**Alex Branch**, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

The worst advice I ever got is to pay attention only to the stories I write. True, we control only our own efforts, but a newspaper is a shared endeavor. We sink or swim together.

**JoNel Aleccia**, *Mail Tribune*

Bad advice: No one will read a story longer than 30 inches. Correction: No one will read more than two inches if it's poorly written; they will read 100 if it's well written.

**Mike Kilen**, *The Des Moines Register*

I do remember some bad "advice" that I gave myself. I failed miserably when I tried to emulate the gruff, cynical veteran reporter sitting next to me. I learned I had to be myself, even if it meant being bumbling and insecure.

**Nancy Gaarder**, *Omaha World-Herald*

Worst advice: Always outline. It's just not true.

**John Foyston**, *The Oregonian*

## HOW MUCH REWRITING DO YOU GENERALLY DO?

A reporter who doesn't rewrite has tight deadlines, bad habits or both. (In fact, I rewrote the above sentence twice.)

Writing can always be made better and tighter. I've won a lot of awards for writing, and I can't recall any for stories — deadline stories included — that I didn't rewrite to some degree. Good reporters don't wait for their editors to tell them to improve their copy — their satisfaction is not what you should be aiming for. You should be trying to satisfy your own standards, and that involves tinkering with your copy as long as is humanly possible.

**Ron French**, *The Detroit News*

I rewrite constantly, but a paragraph at a time. The first paragraph has to be exactly as I want it before I go on to the second. Once the second is finished, I revise the first two, and so on. It's incredibly inefficient, but that's how I do it. I've never been able to write a rough draft. I've tried, but it always just reads like another version of my notes.

**Ken Fuson**, *The Des Moines Register*

### I don't write. I rewrite. My stories come about more like rocking a car back and forth in a ditch than a train going down the track. Eventually it gets out and I'm on my way.

**Tim Nelson**, *Pioneer Press* (St. Paul, Minn.)

Who has time to do much rewriting? I think it's valuable to be able to let complicated stories sit overnight and tackle rewriting with a clear head the next day, if time permits. If it doesn't, you find out how good you really are.

**Carol Cole**, *The Shawnee News-Star*

If I have the lead down — and the tone established, complete with nut graf at the end of a great scene — I'm in. If not, I'm in hell. Tip: If it's impossible to do a nut graf, your story (and maybe even your reporting) lacks focus. I had to re-learn that one again, just this week.

**Beth Macy**, *The Roanoke Times*

### The worst piece of advice imparted to me as a reporter: There's no room for compassion in journalism.

**Karen Jeffrey**, *Cape Cod Times*

One "dumb editor" told me never to use brand names in stories. I think he actually changed a DQ Blizzard in a feature to "ice cream product." Tasty! (I changed it back.)

**Beth Macy**, *The Roanoke Times*

Never start a story with a question????? In my 20 years, I've used probably five question leads. Sometimes it works. This was the lead to one of my stories that won the state AP contest:

*The average adult human heart is about the size of a clenched fist and weighs only 11 ounces. So why, when a parent loses a child, does the hole in their heart feel like an abyss?*

**Deb Holland**, *The Rapid City Journal*

I almost never rewrite. But I never start writing a story until the reporting is complete and the story is developed. Why waste time half-writing a half-reported story?

**Mark Freeman**, *Mail Tribune*

I'm a rewriter. I think it's fun. Honest. I love getting a second shot at something, and am still shocked by how much better I can make a piece I thought was ready to go.

It's best if I have a night away from it. Unfortunately, that's rarely the case. Arggh and damn. But even stepping away for an hour or two gives me fresh eyes. I can come back and distill a watery paragraph to a more potent thought, or simply see the shortest distance between two points.

**Kim Ode**, *Star Tribune*

Tons of re-writing. The first crack never works. Playing with a story helps you say what you really want to say. Getting it out ain't that hard. The trick is getting it to sound right. (I'd like to go back and revise this.)

**Todd Frankel**, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

# TEST YOURSELF

Answers to these exercises are on page 287.

## 1 CHOOSE THE BEST LEAD

Decide which lead is preferable and describe precisely what's wrong with the others.

- \_\_\_ a) At Lyman Airport, a helicopter crashed Friday night, killing the pilot.  
\_\_\_ b) A helicopter pilot died after crashing at Lyman Airport Friday night.  
\_\_\_ c) A helicopter pilot died in a tragic crash at Lyman Airport Friday night.

- \_\_\_ a) The Oakdale City Council met Tuesday to approve a plan to increase residential water rates.  
\_\_\_ b) The Oakdale City Council voted 4-3 to approve a 20 percent increase in residential water rates on Tuesday.  
\_\_\_ c) If you live in Oakdale, your water bill will increase by 20 percent — an average of \$12 a month — beginning Oct. 1.

- \_\_\_ a) On Saturday, June 3, two local students won a statewide dance championship.  
\_\_\_ b) Lena Genst and Nadia Hedd twirled to victory Saturday at the prestigious FSSA State Dance Championships.  
\_\_\_ c) Two Kennedy High seniors won \$1,000 Saturday after finishing first in a statewide dance contest.

- \_\_\_ a) A Spudville man named Robbin Banks was arrested after robbing a bank Friday.  
\_\_\_ b) Police arrested a Spudville man Friday and charged him with bank robbery. The man's name: Robbin Banks.  
\_\_\_ c) Spudville police arrested a man named Robbin Banks Friday. His crime: robbing banks.

- \_\_\_ a) Pneumonia has taken the life of Justin Case, the oldest prisoner in Florida history.  
\_\_\_ b) Justin Case, the oldest prisoner ever to serve in a Florida prison, died Sunday of pneumonia.  
\_\_\_ c) Florida's oldest prisoner has died at 93.

## 3 UNSCRAMBLE THE FIVE W'S

We've scrambled the basic facts for four different news stories. Sort them out to determine which facts most logically belong together — then write the leads for each of these stories for a publication in Dayton, Nebraska.

WHO	WHAT	WHEN	WHERE	WHY
Abner Hoobler	Was swept over Niagara Falls and lived	Tuesday night	The Living Jungle at the Dayton Zoo	Claimed he spends too much time clowning around with his friends
Victor, a labrador retriever	Glued a clown mask to her husband's face while he was sleeping	Easter Sunday	The bedroom of a house in North Dayton	Becomes the first Nebraskan to be 115 years old
Carlotta Tendant	Bitten in the leg by a lion	Midnight tonight	Niagara Falls, N.Y.	Jumped out of a pickup truck while his family stopped at Waffle Hut
Rev. Faith Christian, minister at the Dayton Zealotic Church	Celebrates birthday	7 a.m. Saturday	Twilight Nursing Home in Dayton	Says she leaped over the wall to convert the beast to Christianity, shouting "Jesus will save you"

## 2 TOO MUCH OPINION?

Read the following excerpts and decide: Is the wording appropriate, or has the reporter colored the story with too much opinion?

- 1) Moe Mentum's futile campaign came to a disappointing end last night as the candidate conceded defeat before 200 loyal supporters.
- 2) Moe Mentum's grassroots campaign came to an end last night as the exhausted candidate conceded defeat before 200 cheering supporters.
- 3) Logging continued in Conifer National Forest yesterday, despite howls of protest from liberal legislators and environmental radicals who assailed timber workers as "rapists."

4) Legendary geezers the Rolling Stones will rock Memorial Coliseum tonight as they kick off the first of three highly anticipated weekend concerts.

5) From "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart":  
**Jon Stewart:** What's your overall sense of the mood down on the Republican convention floor? How did it feel to be there last night during the speech?

**Stephen Colbert:** Well, John, as a journalist I have to maintain my objectivity, but I would say the feeling down here was one of a pervasive and palpable evil: a thick demonic stench that rolls over you and clings like hot black tar, a nightmare from which you cannot awaken, a nameless fear that lives in the dark spaces beyond your peripheral vision and drives you toward inhuman cruelties and unspeakable perversions — the delegates' bloated, pustulent bodies twisting from one obscene form to another, giant spider-shaped and ravenous wolf-headed creatures who feast upon the flesh of the innocent and suck the marrow from the bones of the poor.

## 4 BOIL DOWN THESE LONG-WINDED LEADS

Here's how two different news stories actually started. Can you condense their essential facts into tighter, more effective leads?

1) The Rev. Thomas J. Reese, an American Jesuit who is a frequent television commentator on Roman Catholic issues, resigned Wednesday under orders from the Vatican as editor of the Catholic magazine America because he had published articles critical of church positions, several Catholic officials in the United States reported.

2) What should have been a fun and exciting weekend turned into a destruction derby for some PCC students. It is a norm for students to gather to celebrate the weekend. Excessive damage was caused to the campus this weekend when some parties got out of control. What was the main cause of it all?

"It's typically directly related to alcohol consumption and too much of it," Nate Buseman, Director of Housing, said.

The suites were the main site of destruction over the weekend. Buseman said banisters were splintered, emergency lights broken, a window shattered and one of the doors was damaged due to abnormal bending at the top of the door frame.

## 5 SUPPLY THE MISSING NUT GRAF

Study this story. It's missing a nut graf. Write one and stick it where it belongs.

When Tad Pole left the Lawton Library last Tuesday afternoon, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"My bike was gone," he said. "That's the third bike I've had stolen this year. I had a huge honkin' lock on it, too."

Lynn O'Leum had an expensive mountain bike stolen from outside Hoobler Hall last week. "I know at least three other people whose bikes have been boosted this year," she says. "That's it.

From now on, I'm walking."

Even Helmut Laws, president of the campus cycling club, had his bike stolen during a club meeting last month.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Seymour Butts, campus security chief. "Whether it's one thief or a whole gang, we can't be sure. But it's an epidemic."

In an average year, 50 bicycles are reported stolen. So far this year, that number is 230, an all-time high. ...

## 6 WRITE THIS NEWS BRIEF

Here are the facts for a short news story. Decide what's important and write the story.

- ◆ Laura Lynn Hardy is 19.
- ◆ She's 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 on 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 checks made out to Fenster Ford.
- ◆ Fenster Ford is owned by Fred Fenster. It's 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 5 p.m., 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."

## 7 CHOOSE THE CORRECT GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION AND STYLE

Which of these versions is correct? (These exercises use "The Associated Press Stylebook" to settle all disputes.)

- \_\_\_ a) It's not OK to wear T-shirts at practice, coach Carter said.  
\_\_\_ b) It's not okay to wear tee shirts at practice, Coach Carter said.
- \_\_\_ a) General Myers met ten times with former vice president Gore.  
\_\_\_ b) Gen. Myers met 10 times with former Vice President Gore.
- \_\_\_ a) He drove East from Seattle, Washington to Boise, Idaho.  
\_\_\_ b) He drove east from Seattle, Wash., to Boise, Idaho.
- \_\_\_ a) The FBI office has moved to 1250 Third Ave.  
\_\_\_ b) The F.B.I. office has moved to 1,250 3rd Avenue.
- \_\_\_ a) In the 90's she received mostly A's in school despite being a rock-and-roll groupie.  
\_\_\_ b) In the '90s, she received mostly A's in school despite being a rock 'n' roll groupie.
- \_\_\_ a) Aaron C. Reskew Jr. is the candidate who will be elected mayor.  
\_\_\_ b) Aaron C. Reskew, Jr. is the candidate that will be elected Mayor.
- \_\_\_ a) 17 clerks worked from 7-10 a.m. in the morning, and were paid just five dollars an hour.  
\_\_\_ b) Seventeen clerks worked from 7 to 10 a.m. and were paid just \$5 an hour.
- \_\_\_ a) Over 16,000 attended Game 1 of the world series to see the Tiger's 5-to-2 victory.  
\_\_\_ b) More than 16,000 attended Game One of the World Series to see the Tigers' 5-2 victory.
- \_\_\_ a) Nearly 50 percent of adults say they're concerned about developing Alzheimer's disease.  
\_\_\_ b) Nearly 50% of adults say they're concerned about developing Alzheimers Disease.
- \_\_\_ a) The nineteen-year-old girl was born September 20.  
\_\_\_ b) The 19-year-old woman was born Sept. 20.



**8 CRAFTING CLEVER LEADS FOR BRITES**

*An amusing brite deserves an amusing lead. Write a catchy, clever lead for each of these four stories.*

**1)** A sheriff's deputy in Ridgecrest, 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 programming 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, N.J., 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 swimsuited 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.

**9 REWRITING THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION LEAD****THE PROBLEM:**

Modern news leads didn't exist in 1862. So when Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, some newspapers wrote garbage like this:

*"The Arch-Fiend in the regions of woe grins horribly a ghastly smile, for he and his emissaries upon earth — the extreme abolitionists — have succeeded in prevailing upon Old Abe to issue a proclamation of emancipation which will send a thrill of horror through all civilized nations. . . ."*

**YOUR ASSIGNMENT:**

We fired the reporter who wrote that terrible lead above. We need *you* to rewrite the top of this news story — just the lead and the first few paragraphs — to run in tomorrow's paper (Tuesday, Sept. 23, 1862).

**THE HEADLINE:**

*Lincoln Issues Emancipation Proclamation*

**WHO:** President Abraham Lincoln

**WHEN:** Monday, Sept. 22, 1862

**WHERE:** Washington, D.C.

**WHAT:** An executive order that outlines what will happen three months from now: On Jan. 1, 1863, all slaves in states which have seceded from the Union will be freed.

**THE CONDENSED VERSION:**

"I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy thereof, do hereby proclaim. . . that hereafter. . . the war will be prosecuted for. . . the immediate or gradual abolishment of slavery. . . . That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any state, or any designated part of a state, the peo-



*First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln*  
Francis Bicknell Carpenter, oil on canvas, 1864

ple whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever, free."

**WHO WILL BE AFFECTED:**

At least 4 million slaves in only those states that have seceded from the Union.

**WHO WON'T BE AFFECTED:**

Slaves in the border states (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri and West Virginia) which remain loyal to the Union.

**THE CATCH:**

If any seceding state rejoins the Union before this measure takes effect, it can keep slavery — at least for now, until a Constitutional amendment can be passed. Secretary of State William Seward criticized this loophole by saying, "We show our sympathy with slavery by emancipating slaves where we cannot reach them and holding them in bondage where we can set them free."

**OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:**

- ◆ Slavery was introduced to America in 1619.
  - ◆ The war between the states started April 12, 1861.
  - ◆ The Union army's victory last week at the battle of Antietam gave Lincoln the confidence to move forward with this preliminary announcement.
  - ◆ The final, official proclamation will be issued three months from now, on Jan. 1, 1863. (It will be more detailed but will essentially make the same points.)
  - ◆ In the short term, the proclamation may have more symbolic value than actual impact. But it clearly proclaims to the South (and the world) that the war is being fought not just to preserve the Union, but to end slavery.
- Hopefully, as Union armies occupy more and more Southern territory, the Proclamation will enable Federal troops to free thousands — perhaps millions — of slaves.