

CHAPTER ONE WRITING

1. Getting to know the paper
2. News writing
3. Anatomy of a news story
4. Lede writing
5. Features writing
6. Arts writing
7. Opinions writing
8. Sports writing
9. Business writing
10. Science and health writing
11. Self-editing
12. He said, she said (alternative attributes)





Getting to know the paper

- ▶ So you've walked into your student newspaper office. You've spoken with an editor or two and maybe even been assigned a story. Now what?

Asking questions is key to being a good reporter, so don't be afraid to talk to other people from your paper about how things work. Learn as much as you can from the staff and editors. Remember, that the people and the process are as important to the paper as the words.

- Get a tour of the office, either from an editor or another staff member. Where are the bound volumes of old issues kept? What about this year's editions? Where are the other student papers from across the country piled up? Where are the research files?
- Study the masthead (the box where the editors' names and titles are listed). Find out who's who and who does what.
- Go to a few staff meetings. You don't have to actually speak. Go to learn more about the paper, the staff, and maybe score some free food.
- Sit down and look through old issues of the paper. Get a feeling for the issues that have been covered in its pages. Read the news stories carefully to get an idea of the paper's style. Does your paper use the past tense — she said — or the present — she says?
- Does the paper have its own styleguide outlining its preferred style? Ask for the styleguide or any volunteer guides (aside from this one, of course) they might have handy.
- Look around for fellow newcomers or other staffers you can talk to about what it's like working at the paper.
- Come to the office at different times of the day to get a feeling for the different steps the staff goes through as they puts the paper together. Meet the array of people who are there throughout the week.
- Get a rundown on the formatting system your paper uses. Are you using the same document file type as the paper does? Should you attach a word file or paste your article in the body of an email? (Most times, editors will want to receive it as a word document).

- When's production? Simple proofreading is a good introduction to student newspapering. It's a good, non-stressful way to get to know the staff and the behind-the-scenes workings of the paper. You don't have to stay for the entire process, just volunteer to help out a bit at first.

- Every paper has staffers who have been around a few years. Some are seasoned veterans anxious to let others in on how the paper works. Others are old hacks who run around like crazy people. They want to teach you all about the newspaper — just ask!

If some of the people in the office really are jerks, don't worry. They'll be gone soon enough, and, because of the high turnover rate in student papers, you and your contemporaries will soon be running the paper. Make a point of getting to know both the editors and other new volunteers. Get together for a coffee or a beer, to plot what you'll do in this strange new world. ◀



News writing

FIRST THINGS FIRST

- ▶ A news story doesn't begin with the first interview or the opening paragraph. It starts with background research.

So before making that first phone call, run through the following checklist. If you can't get the answers to these questions yourself, talk to the news editor(s) or a more experienced reporter.

- Has the paper run stories on the topic before? Dig them up.
- Who are the major players? Get their names, titles, phone numbers. Your editor(s) usually know all the local power figures, so they're a good source to talk to.
- Who are the other players? Be imaginative: who else might be affected by or have an opinion on the subject? Call them up. You should always be expanding your contact base.
- Have you searched through directories — university staff lists, city hall manuals or the phone book — for additional contact information? You will be amazed at how much you can learn from public documents. A good starting point is *Sources*, a vital manual for any reporter. This reference book, available in most newsrooms, has a large contact list divided by subject matter.
- What's your editor's home or cell phone number? Keep them to date on who you've talked to, what you've been told and any new twists to the story.
- Has Canadian University Press, the national student newspaper co-oper-

ative, done any research on the issue? You can visit the CUP website — www.cup.ca — and perform a search of previous articles that have appeared on the CUP wire (get your paper's user name and password from your editors). Also, see if there are any other databases your paper or university subscribes to that you can visit. Lexis-Nexis is a great repository of news and feature content that most university libraries subscribe to.

WHAT IS THE DEADLINE?

Before you sit down and bang out your story:

- Read over your notes and see if there are any holes that need to be filled. Mark out the most important information and quotes.
- Talk to your editor about what you've found. He or she may see a hole in your story that has to be filled before you start writing.
- Think about the angle you're going to focus on.
- Organize the story on paper. Come up with a rough outline.

THE LEDE

The first paragraph, or lede, is the most important part of a news story. It usually consists of one sentence no more than 30 words long. It tells the reader, in a conversational tone, what the story is about and why it's important. Watch people flipping through a newspaper and you'll notice they don't read through most stories. If you want

them to read your story, you have to win them over quickly. The rest of the story — facts and quotes — elaborate and expand on what is presented in your lede.

- [See: Lede writing]
 - Make it snappy, interesting and informative. If it's confusing, overwritten, or bland, you will lose your readers.
 - Putting a person in the lede is a great way to help readers relate to the issues and the people involved. So don't do this: "Women's groups say that if women are ever to enter non-traditional job fields like engineering, the system has to change." Find a real person whose experience can illustrate the problem. Perhaps try something like this: "When Suzanne Leduc told her high school guidance counselor she wanted to be a mechanical engineer, he laughed."
 - Whatever you do, don't exaggerate a point or take something out of context to make a lede catchier. It won't ring true to readers, and you'll lose your credibility with the people involved in the story.

KEEP IT SHORT

If you're stumped, sometimes it's better to jot something down quickly and move on to the rest of the story. But always come back to the lede. If you just use something off the top of your head and it stinks, there's no point in even finishing the story. Nobody's going to read it.

BANGING IT OUT

Always remind yourself that the key to

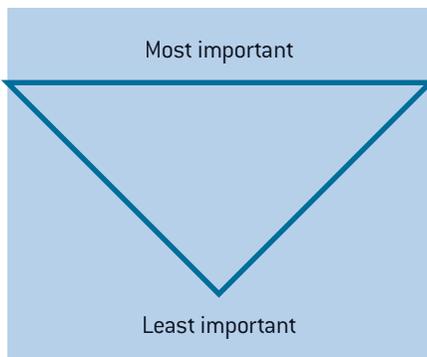


2 News writing

a good news story is to present information in a concise and easy-to-read fashion.

INVERTED PYRAMID

The traditional approach is the “inverted pyramid” style. The inverted pyramid dictates that the most important information is at the top of the story, trickling down to the least important material in the last paragraph. The point is to give the reader as much information as you can before they run out of time, get bored, or get distracted by the TV.



It also gives the production people something they can easily slice off the bottom if they don't have room for the whole thing. This occasionally happens, and sticking to pyramid style is your best defence against losing the best part of your story to the editing knife. The following article from the *Ubsysey* is a good example of inverted pyramid writing:

VANCOUVER (CUP) — *The University of British Columbia has joined the Vancouver and Whistler bid to host the 2010 Winter Olympics.*

If its proposal is accepted, the university will be the site for the speed skating competition and the Olympic Village, where an estimated 3,000 ath-

letes will stay.

And while UBC isn't that keen about the prospect of building a speed skating oval on campus, it was necessary under the proposed terms of the deal, said Byron Hender, the university's executive co-ordinator for student and academic services.

"The university wants to support the bid," he said.

The large, enclosed oval rink could be used as class space or library storage after the Games, added Hender.

As well, new residences would be built in preparation for the Games, said Mary Risebrough, university director of housing and conferences.

But, she continued, students living in these or other residences would have to relocate during the two-week long Games.

The Canadian Olympic Association is scheduled to choose a Canadian city to enter into the international bidding for the Games on Nov. 21. Details about who will fund the proposed site at UBC won't be finalized until then.

"I don't think we will do anything at all until we are sure of Vancouver [as a site]," said Hender.

However, it's likely funding will come from outside sources, she said.

Calgary and Quebec City are the two other Canadian cities competing with Vancouver to host the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Official announcement of the bid by UBC's board of governors is expected in about two weeks.

-30-

This story begins by giving the most important information: UBC is joining Vancouver's bid to host the Winter Olympics. Paragraph two is derived from this opening phrase. In turn, paragraph three comes out of the second

sentence. The result is that each paragraph comments on information given in preceding lines.

By the time we reach the sentence that begins “The Canadian Olympic Association . . .” we are entering into a subtopic, namely, the day Canada will choose a candidate for its Olympic bid.

If there wasn't enough space in the paper for the entire story, an editor could start cutting around here. Note, however, that the most important information would not be lost because it is at the top.

There are pros and cons to the inverted pyramid. It's simple and quick, but the format can be restrictive and boring. Once you've written a lot of stories and adapted to thinking in a news-writing way, you can begin to experiment and not feel bound by standard style.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

A news story is not an essay. Don't try to impress people with flowery vocabulary or your proficiency at stretching a point. By all means, make it lively and use quirky turns of phrase, but don't overwrite.

As well, don't waste words or use big terms where small ones will do. Some examples: give consideration to (consider); in many cases (often); suffered injuries (was hurt); utilize (use); was suffering from (had); the fact that he had not succeeded (his failure). This will help to keep your sentences concise.

Remember to limit your sentences to one thought or idea. If you have a lot



3 News writing

of material, examine how necessary each piece of information is. You might consider breaking it up into two related stories.

Many student journalists speak a different language from their readers: the lingo of administrators, activists, and politicians. Don't pass this virus along. Instead, try to decode it into plainer, simpler words that everyone can understand. Avoid buzzwords like "pro-active," "accessibility," and "empowerment." Think about what a speaker is trying to say and ask what they mean. This will often result in a much better quote.

Assume that average students don't know the full name of their student organization, or any other group for that

matter, even if the paper publishes it six times every week. Always spell out the names of organizations on first reference. Use acronyms later on in the article.

Don't be afraid to explain what a research chair in chemistry is, either. A university is a complex place and few people will understand how it works before they leave. When using terms or job titles, always ask yourself if a new arrival would understand.

Use quotes for opinions and feelings. When it comes to facts and figures, paraphrasing is often much clearer. Don't forget to attribute any information that isn't common knowledge.

Avoid using transitions such as "but"

and "however" to link your story together. This often results in choppy, awkward sentences.

Use the active voice, not the passive. "The college refuses to release information on recent sexual assaults," not, "Information on sexual assaults is being withheld by the college."

Don't tell your readers what happened, show them. Use colour to illuminate details in your story. If you write that a student councillor was visibly upset, how upset were they? Were they crying, sulking or screaming? Be specific. Stimulate the reader's imagination with significant details. How does this look? Sound? Feel? Taste? Smell?

When you're not sure about something,

Top seven news writing tips

1• **Effective writers know their audience**

Don't assume they'll necessarily care about what you're writing about. Challenge them!
•[See: using colourful language; steal these ideas!]

2• **Bad sources are easy to find**

Often lobby groups, unions, PR people, flacks and other usual suspects are boring and predictable. Use the usual suspects only when needed. Like characters in a play, if the audience (readership) doesn't understand what the character's role is, or what they have to add to the larger plot, it's confusing and irrelevant. Good sources have something meaningful to contribute. Readers need to understand why they're there. Good sources are people who the issue you're writing about affects; human sources.

Find sources in Associations Canada, on the Web, Sources, university PR department — look for them.

•[See: developing sources]

3• **Bad questions = bad quotes**

Be prepared. Ask questions that take advantage of their unique perspective and expertise.

•[See: interviewing]

4• **Quotes aren't for facts**

They're for colour! Don't quote anything you could paraphrase better. If you can say it better and more concisely in your own words, do that. If your source can do it better in their words, use them.

•[See: "beyond the inverted pyramid"]

5• **Flabby writing isn't read**

Cut out parasite words and tighten structure. Be smarter with quotes. Clean them up. Use active language. And don't be afraid to use lively, colourful language!

•[See: grammar]

•[See: self-editing]

6• **Great ledes get reads.**

A story is a package: wrap it right.

•[See: ledes]

7• **Use a coherent and engaging writing voice.**

Writing that is relevant, interesting and digestible is very important if you want people to read your stories and have them impact their perspective. But good structure, good flow and good ledes aren't even marginally as important as a passion for good journalism. Journalism that exists not because it's profitable to sell, but because you believe people, your readers, have a right to have access to information that's published for the sole reason that it's important. Not because it's scandalous or saucy, or agenda-driven, but because you believe it's important that people have a fair and accurate picture of any number of issues. ◀



4 News writing

review your facts. Never guess about anything. Always double-check names, titles, facts, figures, phone numbers or addresses. Your credibility and the paper's reputation is on the line.

There's no such thing as objectivity. Our biases find their way into our stories. But we must make every effort to remain balanced, fair and accurate. Your readers have brains. They can make up their own minds. Never slant your information, leave information out, or misrepresent the facts. Show every side of every story.

EDITING YOURSELF

Always re-read your story before you hand it in. Imagine yourself as an average reader picking up the story for the first time.

Make sure you have addressed the following points: What does it all mean? Why is this story important? Who's responsible? Who cares? Is there a remedy? A pitfall? What can be done and by whom? Has this happened before? Who's paying? How much does it cost?

Have you left out key information because you assume your readers already have it? Don't assume your readers have read previous stories on the subject. Make sure you've provided sufficient background.

Is it concise? Surgically remove unnecessary words.

Is the arithmetic correct? How about the names, titles, dates and attributions?

Once you're satisfied with your work,

let another reporter or two read it over. You can return the favour in the future. After you have received feedback, take a break by going for a walk, get a glass of juice, or drink a cup of coffee. The trick is to clear your head, come back and read your piece with a fresh perspective.

After you have given the story to your editor, don't leave. Stick around and watch the editing process. Chances are the editor will have questions for you. Be prepared to have your story rewritten. This happens to everyone, no matter how long they've been on staff, so don't be defensive. The only way you're going to improve your writing is by watching someone else's reaction to it. It's also a good way to learn your paper's style.

SOME FINAL POINTS

Keep an up-to-date contact list in a fresh notebook or index box. You never know when you're going to need to talk to someone again. It's also useful to file away information you have gathered. Some of it might be useful for your next story.

Get to know your school's bureaucracy. Who's on Senate? Who are the council executives? Are these positions hired or elected? What do they do?

Adhering to deadlines is essential. A newspaper runs on copy deadlines, editing deadlines, paste-up and printer deadlines. Your tardiness will slow everybody else down. Remember that you can always file an update later.

Is there a follow-up to be done on your first story? Talk to your sources again af-

ter the story runs to find out if anything has changed or if there's another interesting angle. ◀

With files from Alex Roslin, Andy Riga and Mike Adler.



Anatomy of a news story

BY DERYCK RAMCHARITAR, TESSA VANDERHART
AND
WILLIAM WOLFE-WYLIE

- ▶ A news story is easily the most formulaic thing you'll ever write. Once you get the formula down you'll find that it is full of rules that are made to be broken.

What follows from this formula is a piece of writing that is informative first and entertaining second; think of it as a building, where every shiny brick of news (your facts, the “what’s new”) is anchored in background information and interesting quotes.

Tessa Vanderhart, CUP 69 summer resources co-ordinator, said that the most important part of writing a news story is maintaining balance between what speakers with opposing viewpoints say, as well as between what is quoted and paraphrased.

“A news writer uses research and interviews, writing with interlocked paraphrasing and direct quotes, to create a story — a story where everything is attributed but common facts, most of the colour and adjectives come from your sources, and everything follows from the question ‘what is the news here?’”

William Wolfe-Wylie, Canadian University Press national bureau chief in 2007-08, noted that the goals of a news story are accomplished by the inverted pyramid structure: by putting the most important information nearest the top, and the least important near the bottom, the story gains relevancy, context, and helps the reader gather its message.

Wolfe-Wylie explained that the inverted pyramid structure was developed by

telegraph operators in the First World War — who needed to deliver as much information as possible before the lines were cut. The style similarly helps readers get the most relevant information from a news story, right away, in order to keep readers’ attention.

The detailed information required for a good news story is found only in one way: through research. Deryck Ramcharitar, former editor of the *Underground*, emphasized the importance of doing research before interviewing people, long before writing the story itself.

“It helps you ask better questions,” he said. “Make sure you read what others have written on the topic — because if your story is redundant, why would anyone waste their time?”

According to Vanderhart, who is also former news editor of the *Manitoban*, after research comes interviews.

“Research is for facts, interviews are for colour!” she said. “Don’t be nervous; interviews aren’t as scary as you’d think. Or, well, you’ll get used to the scariness and come to like it.”

She advised reporters to bring a tape recorder and a notepad, and come up with a list of questions with the editor before heading out (or before making a phone call, as is often the case).

“Be sure to get the five w’s (and one h) down first — the facts,” she said. “But don’t forget to ask the harder questions: be flexible, ask about anything tricky that comes to mind, any holes in logic or strange things your interview subject says,” said Vanderhart.

Then in writing the story, she said, it is

important to use transitions and introduce quotes to focus the relevance to the story. Vanderhart emphasized the key to using quotes effectively: “never, ever quote something you could paraphrase better.”

The tone of the article is also important, noted Ramcharitar. Newswriting avoids colloquialisms and slang, in favour of simple, direct language.

“But don’t be condescending,” Ramcharitar said. “It’s important to speak to the reader. You’re informing them; do a good job of that by keeping in mind that they don’t necessarily know what you’re talking about.”

If you have questions, don’t be afraid to ask your editor.

“Use a telling, snappy, even ironic quote at the end,” he added. ◀



Lede writing

BY CARL WILSON

- ▶ Journalism, H.L. Mencken once said, is literature in a hurry. As an instant novelist, then, every sentence you write should grab the reader's interest, impart vital information, clarify obscure angles and provoke an impassioned response.

Sure. But in the real world, a crucial interview comes in right before deadline and you rewrite the whole story in ten minutes. Most of the time, journalists concentrate on efficiency and cut corners on style.

But there is one exception. There is one place in your story where diction, action and a well-chosen word matters more than anything: the lede.

A lede is the beginning of the story. In most hard news stories, that means the first sentence. In some features, it may take the first few paragraphs. Whatever its format, your lede must be compelling enough and inviting enough to arrest a reader's attention as they scan half-interestedly across the page.

It must do all of this in less than 30 words.

An effective lede does two things: it answers the questions “what's new?” and “why care?”

The most common order of opening paragraph's in student newspapers is:

- Lede
- Sub-lede (nutgraph)
- Quotation
- Background

But experiment! A lede can incorporate any of these things so long as it clearly

and effectively communicates the idea of your story.

A lede should contain the essence of the story. What is this story about, thematically, and why should we care?

A lede should also communicate the key information contained within the story. Journalistic tradition would classify this data under “the five Ws and one H”: Who, What, Where, When, Why and How. This system is useful to the writing of any story, but a lede that contains all these points will often be overwrought — “St. Penelope's Boys' School Chancellor Restwud Dooyougud presented his resignation to Senate on Wednesday due to allegations of chronic alcoholism made by Head Boy Alphonse McPuke during last January's intramural Debating Club championship.”

A snappy summary or a teaser is more likely to draw the reader in — “St. Penelope's Restwud Dooyougud finally kicked the chancellorship habit on Wednesday, after months of rumours about his private life.” The details come in the next few paragraphs. This approach highlights the priorities of the story and makes for better writing.

A lede should raise questions, not just provide information. Otherwise we might be content with the factoid and stop reading. The ‘why’ of those five Ws is always more complex than can be spelled out in a paragraph. If your lede opens a window onto the complexities, we'll feel challenged instead of patronised.

Your lede will also set mood and tone. Ledes can be intimate or cold, tragic or hilarious, hard-hitting or celebratory. One of these choices will be right for

your story, and a mismatch might be deadly.

The first words of the story will determine how we read the rest of it. “St. Penelope's long-time leader was driven out of office this week” will frame a very different story than “The scandal-plagued reign of Restwud Dooyougud finally crash-landed on Wednesday.”

Knowing your audience is important. Your lede might contain a different idea if your publication is geared primarily towards science students or the gay and lesbian community than if it's a general-audience newspaper — e.g., “The chemistry department lost a strong advocate Wednesday when Chancellor Restwud Dooyougud resigned his post,” or, “Restwud Dooyougud resigned on Wednesday, to the pleasure of campus queers who considered the former chancellor an apologist for St. Penelope's anti-gay policies.”

Be concise. Don't stall the reader with peripheral details — “On Wednesday, at the third Senate meeting this year, the chancellor of St. Penelope's, Restwud Dooyougud, rose to present his resignation.” Instead, make the lede an active, dynamic agent — “There was a quiver in Restwud Dooyougud's voice, last week, as he read from a prepared statement and officially resigned as the chancellor of St. Penelope's.”

Mainstream journalism uses a maximum 25 to 30 words in a lede.

There are many ways to lede your readers, including:

Summary lede — tries to cram as much of the “five w's and an h” into a single sentence as possible. It is also



2 Lede writing

known as the standard lede, and is used for standard inverted-pyramid news. This lede is the entire foundation of Canadian Press style — and one of the best ways to begin a hard news story.

E.g., “Brian Mulroney intends to fight urban poverty by rounding up all the drug dealers in Canada and locking them in small steel boxes, the prime minister told the Alberta Chamber of Commerce in a campaign speech in Red Deer last night.”

Single-item lede — Concentrates on just one or two elements for a bigger punch.

E.g., “Brian Mulroney has warned the nation’s drug dealers that they won’t breathe easy if he’s re-elected.”

Quote lede — Use a dramatic quotation to launch the story. This should be used sparingly, and only when the quote is fantastic. Often paraphrasing the quote, as in the first example above, will be more effective. Most people do not speak in sound bites.

E.g., “‘I say we stick those evil socialist drug pushers where the sun don’t shine.’

“A red-faced Brian Mulroney shouted these words to the Alberta Chamber of Commerce last night, justifying his plan to ‘lock all the drug dealers in Canada in tiny metal boxes and throw away the keys.’”

Analogy lede — Make a comparison between the issue or event at hand and something more familiar. Usually the fruit of inspiration, this kind of lede either works or it doesn’t.

E.g., “Civil libertarians fear that Brian

Mulroney’s prescription for drug abuse could make the War Measures Act look lax.”

A popular type of analogy lede is the Janus-faced lede, in which you look into the past and/or future to find comparisons with the event or issue in question.

Distinctive incident, picture or contrast lede — Use an anecdote, image, or contrasting images to illustrate the point. It often brings in a human element, and gives the story personality, specificity and colour. A good way to improve stilted news style and to highlight ironies.

E.g., “While Brian Mulroney addressed them last night, the members of the Alberta Chamber of Commerce finished off their dinner wines and started in on dessert cocktails. Some enjoyed fine cigars or puffed on long cigarettes as they smiled at the prime minister’s words.

“And when Mulroney promised to lock up every last drug dealer in the nation, the assembled tobacco company execs and beer wholesalers rose to their feet to applaud.”

Also called the “grain of sand” lede (focusing on a single grain then panning out . . .) it’s best when efficient, brief, and clearly related — or long and drawn out into the backbone of your feature piece. Either way, watch for sentimentality or sensationalism.

Cartridge lede — uses one word or short phrase as a teaser for the rest of the lede. This usually seems gimmicky and, again, should be used sparingly.

E.g., “Sardine tins.

“That’s what Brian Mulroney intends to use to contain the drug problem and cure urban ills.”

Question lede — poses a question to the reader, which the story proceeds to answer. Occasionally the source of an amusing riddle, but more often confusing and counterproductive to the average news story.

E.g., “How can we prevent crime, solve urban poverty and stimulate the steel industry all at the same time?”

“Brian Mulroney’s answer might disturb some Canadians.” Or, alternatively, “Has Brian Mulroney finally lost it?”

Cosmic lede — A cosmic lede makes some grand sweeping statement about an issue (or about life itself) as a way of introducing the subject. It’s a pretentious, lazy way to write, particularly endemic to bad arts writing. The only way I can imagine this sort of lede working is as parody.

Bad example, “When politicians talk about drugs, the subject stirs many emotions and conjures up competing ideas of good and evil.”

Better example, “When politicians talk about drugs, you sometimes have to wonder if they’re stoned.”

Double-barreled lede — Sometimes, you just have two: there are two important angles, too related for separate stories, and too important to focus on only one. The well-done double-barrelled lede is elusive, but if you choose one item to focus on in the first line, and transition well to the other item in the second, it can be done. Two ledes are better than one huge lede.



3 Lede writing

ADDITIONAL ADVICE

“This is a story about”: columnists use this; it’s pompous and empty. Just get on with being a reporter.

The lede doesn’t have to be the first thing you write. In fact, wrestling with a lede can either prevent you from getting the story done on time or misguide you in how you slant the story. If a lede doesn’t trip off your typewriter, wait until you’ve finished the core of the story, figure out an angle, then try again.

Meetings, speeches, demonstrations, news conferences and the like are usually not news. The decisions or issues raised at them are news, and that’s what should appear in your lede.

The first part of your story does not have to correspond to the chronological first event. Start with the point, then fill in the background.

Make sure you attribute opinions in your lede. But don’t clutter the lede with over-identification — use either the name or the job title, and then use the other label in the next reference to clarify the attribution. (Lede: “Brian Mulroney said today . . .” Second sentence: “The prime minister told businessmen that . . .”) Alternatively, use a general attribution, like “civil libertarians” above. Make sure you name specific groups or persons in the next couple of paragraphs.

If at all possible, avoid using the full name of an organization in your lede, particularly if it’s a long one. Bureaucratic nomenclature slows down the sentence and turns off the reader. Paraphrase it so the “Alberta Chamber of Commerce, Red Deer Branch” becomes “a group of Red

Deer businessmen.” But remember to provide the full name later.

Never use an acronym or short form in a lede or headline, unless it’s a household word like “U.S.” or “CBC.” Introduce acronyms only in the body of the story. (Note: the acronym for your student government is not a household word, even if you print it ten times an issue and use it all the time in your office.)

A pedantic note: Some people spell it “lead” rather than “lede.” I prefer the latter because it distinguishes writing a “lede” from getting a “lead” or a tip on a story.

Despite everything I’ve said, don’t get overly obsessed with writing the perfect lede. Remember, lede writing is like walking the plank. You don’t have any choice but to do it, so do it with flair — but make sure that once you splash down, you’re in a position to fight past the sharks and swim to shore. ◀

Carl Wilson is a former editor of the McGill Daily. The guide was edited to include files from a lecture by Bob Weber.



Features writing

- ▶ There are some things that a writer can't accomplish with a 300 word news piece — like set a scene, narrate a story, explore different aspects of an issue, or profile a person's life and career.

That's why there are features.

News stories and features are meant to complement each other. They allow a newspaper to offer well-rounded coverage that varies in depth and timeliness. While the two styles share basic elements, they differ in the treatment of an issue, the depth of research, the style of writing and the structure.

WHAT IS A FEATURE?

It's perhaps easier to define a feature by saying what it isn't. A feature isn't simply an extended news story. The inverted pyramid style works in short-to-medium length stories, but becomes tedious and boring in longer pieces.

Neither is a feature an editorial or opinion piece. Departing from a straight news structure doesn't mean that we forget about research, attribution, quotes and fairness.

While a feature is similar in structure to an essay, it should not read like an academic paper. Scholarly writing is difficult to read precisely because it is written with scholars in mind. Don't lapse into jargon, stilted language, windy paragraphs or an academic tone when you are writing for a general audience.

The feature pulls the reader in with the lede paragraphs, winds through a narrative that is based on research and interviews, and finally closes out with a conclusion or more questions.

Features relish in their ambiguous title simply because they offer a writer the opportunity to take the ideas wherever they may lead.

Features can involve investigative work to expose wrongdoing on a broad scale, or they can be used to profile the life and career of prominent community members. Features allow writers the time to dig deep into their story and get at the roots instead of just scratching the surface.

Features, above all, are fun and informative.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Speak to your editor. Editors are often full of ideas that they've accumulated over the years but have never followed up on. They'll likely be able to give you the Cliff's Notes on almost any recent hullabaloo in your community and provide a few starting points for your research.

If you're looking to come up with an original idea then observation and analysis are your only friends. Pay attention to everything. Read everything you can, listen to gossip and other people's conversations, watch television and listen to the radio. Observe. By immersing yourself in information, you often develop a germ of an idea and let it grow.

Brainstorm. Write down everything about a given subject without thought to its coherency. This will often reveal an interesting theme. Look critically at your ideas. Some of your ideas will have been done to death ("Students use marijuana in residence, hurts study

habits") but others could have an original angle ("Students use marijuana in residence, all grown locally in community co-op").

Narrow your idea into a tightly-focused story proposal by describing it in a five-word title or by identifying one question that you want your story to answer.

NOW IT'S TIME FOR RESEARCH

Talk to people who have been around the paper for a while and see what advice they have. Look through back issues of your campus paper, the city paper and any other publications that seem pertinent to your subject. This will help to organize your thoughts by seeing what other people have written.

As with any article, interviewing people for a feature means you must listen carefully to the answers. But the process should be complimented by keeping your eyes and ears on alert for detail: the way people look, talk, and move. What does the location look like? What does it smell and sound like? Watch for physical elements that can set the mood and tone. What book is your subject reading when you arrive? Are the windows clean? Where are the cobwebs in the room?

Keep in mind that not everything is relevant or interesting. No one is going to care if your subject's chair is green. They will, however, care if his office is filled with photos of his family, or if the university president has an open copy of the Atkins Diet Cookbook on his desk.

A feature allows you an opportunity to provide players with a more human face than a typical news story. These



2 Features writing

details, which would be edited out of a news story as superfluous information, become integral to a well-written feature that uses them appropriately.

A feature also requires you to synthesize a lot more information than a news piece. Because of this, it necessitates that you write multiple drafts. The first draft of a feature is about getting all of your information down on paper or the computer screen.

Type the most important parts of your notes out, write key sections early, then cut-and-paste them into a coherent order. You can refine your lede, add or delete quotes (or whole interviews) and play with the structure as you progress.

As you write further drafts, you may discover that some questions remain unanswered and that more research or interviews are needed. Have someone read your drafts and offer an outsider's point of view before you fine-tune your final version.

The final step is to edit your feature for clarity and colour. It is at this point when you refine sentences, find better choices for words, cut out clutter, and ensure that your story flows coherently. Pay special attention to the lede, which serves to grab the interest of your readers and pull them into the story.

Pay attention to your thesis. Make sure that each of your points is clearly articulated and backed up with facts and interviews. Avoid “ping-pong” journalism: bouncing from one source to another, contrasting their arguments is sloppy. The reader will go bug-eyed. You're telling a story and that requires a certain amount of literary finesse.

Finally, the conclusion should draw the strings together and give the piece a sense of cohesion. As with the opening paragraphs, select quotes or an anecdote that illustrate your conclusions, or sum up with an irony. In a feature, you have lots of space to work. Avoid cliché, upbeat, endings. “Where will it go from here? We'll just have to wait and see” is as bad in feature writing as “And then I woke up” in fiction writing. Part of a feature is analysis and finding deeper meaning.

In a feature about women's attendance in post-secondary education published in the March 2007 edition of the *Walrus Magazine*, for instance, the closing sentence reads: “We'll have one large group of men locked from progress due to their failure to keep up academically, while another cohort of eager and highly educated women finds itself stymied in its attempt to reach the top.”

PROFILES

In artistic terms, a profile is a side view of somebody's face. The journalist's profile, similarly, takes a look at a person from a particular angle. A profile is a mini-biography, a character sketch, a celebration or an expose of a particular person or group of people.

Why write profiles? Because human beings are inherently interesting. Writing about people helps your readers identify themselves within the story. It allows you to humanize social and political issues. If you profile a politician, administrator or community leader, readers get a glimpse of what motivates their actions for good or for ill. If you profile someone living through oppression or fighting for rights, it dramatizes social

and political issues. Profiles provide the reader with an idea of what it might be like to experience life in another place or from another perspective.

You can profile a sleazy administrator, an interesting student, or a little-known professor. You can choose someone from the surrounding community who is at the centre of some controversy or heading up some innovative program or group. Many community figures lead very interesting lives.

Before arranging any interviews, find out everything you can about your subject. Talk to some of their friends, associates and enemies. What stands out about your subject? What did everyone mention? What did everyone leave out? What makes them significant to your readers' lives? Do they have a crazy, interesting life story? Whatever your primary impression is, use it as the centerpiece for your profile.

The end result should be something of a mini-drama that blends description, action, and dialogue. The sources should do most of the talking, not you. Profiles should include plenty of quotes, and should usually touch on the following, in no particular order:

- 1• The person's background (birth, upbringing, education, and occupation).
- 2• Anecdotes and incidents involving the subject.
- 3• Self-describing commentary from the subject.
- 4• The reporter's observations.
- 5• Comments of those who know



3 Features writing

the interviewee (friend or foe, but ideally both).

- 6• A news peg, whenever possible, which indicates why the subject is significant.

PHOTO FEATURES

Photo features are just that: features that tell a story using photos. Usually they will include a few words introducing the topic of the feature, as well as a short but descriptive explanation of what each photo is portraying.

Photo features can be used for almost any subject that has interesting visual aspects to it — an art show, a travel feature, a gold-medal sports game, or a city's historic sites. Just remember that less is often more when compiling a photo feature. Don't attempt to cram 20 photos on two pages when four or five will tell the story just as well. Keep it simple and it will be beautiful.

NEW JOURNALISM

New Journalism was developed in the 1960s and challenges the traditions of objective writing by relying on a more literary style.

In the beginning, it was reporters like Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe who turned news writing on its head. Central to the philosophy of New Journalism is the belief that a reporter should become part of the story they are covering. This is a radical step when compared to the detached approach advocated by most newsrooms.

When Hunter S. Thompson wrote *Fear*

and *Loathing in Las Vegas* — his seminal 1970s novel describing a drug-crazed adventure in Vegas — he didn't interview policemen, gamblers or tourists. Rather, he got stoned out of his gourd and chose to portray Las Vegas through his own drug-crazed eyes.

Not all New Journalism is as crazy as the writings of Thompson, though. A reporter who sleeps on the street for a feature of homelessness, is engaging in a form of New Journalism called participatory observation.

New Journalists revel in unconventional writing forms. These flowery techniques range from word play to descriptive phrases that are more at home in a novel than a conventional newspaper.

New Journalism provides a fascinating form for a reporter to work with. Be wary, however, of succumbing to ego. Too often reporters experimenting with New Journalism begin describing themselves and their fantasies at the expense of the larger story. Like all experiments, use this style with caution.

MAKING FEATURES A REGULAR PART OF YOUR PAPER

Draw up a list of features you'd like to tackle in your paper each semester. Assign them to interested writers as you would news or entertainment stories. Pairs or teams of feature writers can often accomplish more together by dividing up the interviews and research.

Reserve space for the scheduled features and do a good job on layout and design to highlight these stories. If writers spend time, energy and creativity on their pieces, they ought to see their work

treated well in your pages. Put notices on your front cover, or in the previous issue, telling readers to watch out for the hot feature coming up. Most papers place features in their centre spread, where it can often benefit from full colour on side one (which includes the cover, back page, and centre spread).

Find a freelance writer or a reporter at your local paper who writes features to share their secrets with budding feature writers.

Clip and post examples of good features you find in newspapers and magazines. Reading good writing is one of the best ways to motivate good writing. ◀

*With files from Beth Ryan
and Mike Orsini.*



Arts writing

- ▶ Ask a student journalist why they write news and you will hear things like, “I want to change the world,” or “I want to show people what is really going on.” Ask culture writers why they write arts, and you are more likely to hear “Free stuff!”

A lot of people think arts writing, especially at the campus level, involves little more than receiving free tickets, books and CDs. The film passes and free records are nice, but these goodies are mere invitations to a vast cultural world.

Good arts writing is a combination of creativity and analysis, molded within the confines of heavy research. There are different kinds of culture writing,— just like there are different art forms — and each has its own style. You would not tackle a music story the same way you write a theatre piece. Covering gallery exhibits requires a different approach than commenting on poetry. Here are some general tips on arts writing to start with.

PAUL SIMON MAY BE AN ISLAND, BUT NOTHING ELSE IS

Culture is not created in a vacuum. All art, including pop culture, has history and context. Always keep this in mind when writing arts.

Imagine you are covering the re-make of a movie. Instead of jotting down a scene-by-scene account of the film, ask yourself why it was relevant to people when it was first released, and why it is still relevant today. Is this part of a trend, or is it a reaction against a specific style? Remember, an event does not have to be “serious” art to be part of

a movement, trend or genre. The movie *Scream*, for instance, resurrected the teen-horror genre even while it made fun of it.

So when you are interviewing an artist, don’t be afraid to ask for context if you do not see it right way. This does not mean asking questions like “who are your influences?” This question is so standard that no one can give anything but a stock answer. Instead, try asking why the artist thinks their work is important now, whether they see themselves as part of a trend and what motivates them to create.

ARTS V. NEWS

News stories usually follow the inverted pyramid format: the most important information on the top, the least important material at the bottom. Moreover, news tends to focus on events, be it the passing of a new law or a plane crash. But in arts writing sticking solely to the facts is very dry.

Arts stories are not limited to recounting events. Rather, they take a play, movie, gallery exhibit or album and place it within a context. A story on Miles Davis, for instance, could focus on a period in his life and compare it with the various stages in his musical career. An article on cubism might describe the social factors that lead to the rise of this famous painting school.

Beyond the outright recounting of events, arts writers are interested in discussing the significance of a work of art, and significance requires context. So a culture reporter at a ‘Stones show might ask, “Why is this geriatric band so popular? What does this say

about society?” and use the concert as a stepping stone for answering those questions.

Because of this, arts stories do not have to follow the inverted pyramid structure. Compare these two articles:

ST. JOHN’S [CUP] — Memorial University’s men’s soccer team prevented a serious fire in an Amherst, Nova Scotia hotel two weeks ago.

Seven players were swimming in the hotel’s pool when they saw flames in the sauna room. Buckets of pool water doused the fire.

Said Memorial coach Alan Ross, “When the manager asked to see me in his office, the first thing I thought was that some of the boys were in trouble.”

Instead, Ross was thanked. “There is no doubt about it. The quick action of those young men saved the hotel room from serious damage and probably total loss,” said the manager in the St. John’s Evening Telegram.

-30-

The first sentence of this news story tells the reader what the event is (a fire), who was involved (a soccer team), when it occurred (two weeks ago), where it happened (Nova Scotia), and why it is important (a fire was stopped). A reader could stop reading at the first line and still understand the story.

Now consider this piece from a CUP arts writer:

VICTORIA [CUP] — Dan Bern lives in a world where he is the Messiah, Marilyn Monroe married Henry instead of Arthur Miller, and Jesus goes to the mall.

It is a weird landscape populated by every pop icon from Tiger Woods to Philip Glass to Charles Manson.



2 Arts writing

Arts stories should not limit themselves to a play-by-play account of a concert, film or festival. Culture pieces suffer if the writer does not go beyond these tight constraints. Art must be placed in a context, and this means the actual event — be it a show, recital or dance — is only one element in the story.

This story does not begin by describing an event with the most important facts on top. Rather, it takes a singer, Dan Bern, and describes him as someone who treats art as if it were a cut-and-paste project. If the writer began by describing a concert — “Dan Bern rocked the Jesus Monster truck rally last night with his strange, lyrical cocktails.” — the story would revolve around the spectacle of a rock show. Instead, an arts writer will focus on the bigger issue, namely, an artist’s kaleidoscopic take on songwriting.

The story then proceeds to describe Bern’s music, has quotes of the artist commenting on his songs, and contains opinions by the journalist who is acting as a critic.

DON’T FORGET THE ARTS IN ARTS WRITING

A sports journalist never forgets to describe how a team played or what the score in a game was. So why do so many arts writers forget to describe art in their stories?

An article on a certain band, for instance, describes how the tour is going, what the backstage gossip is and who is shooting up what. But look carefully, and you realize how little there is about what the band sounds like.

If you are covering music, make sure you describe song structure. Are the melodies complex or simple? Do they follow a standard rhythmic pattern or are their beats unconventional? You do not have to succumb to adjectivitis — e.g. “The Tailor Tops are a galactic, acid jazz-drenched, rock covered, bossa nova loving group of punks.” — in your articles. What you do have to realize is that terms like “punk” and “rock” are too generic. Both The Talking Heads and the Sex Pistols were called punk, even though they played totally different music.

So, if you are writing about a painter describe their use of colours and brush strokes. Profiling a writer? Make reference to language use, literary experimentation and plot structure. If dance is your beat, come up with new metaphors to describe body movement. In short, if you are covering the arts make sure you write about art.

WRITING AN ARTS REVIEW

Those who think arts writing is synonymous with reviews are wrong. Yes, being a critic is central to the culture beat. But so is covering arts funding, censorship laws and cultural history. These type of stories are a lot different than a critique. This being said, the following are some thoughts on how to write a review.

As in news reporting, taking notes is a must for arts writers. Jotting down impressions, key words and quotes helps avoid memory failure. A pad and pen are invaluable if an artist is speaking at an exhibition. Forgetting to take notes can lead to severe problems and perhaps inexcusable mistakes, but your perceptions may also change over time.

Your notes can stir up forgotten ideas and associations.

Background information is another must. Often it can be obtained through the most simple routes — the cinema, gallery, theatre, publisher or promoter will likely have press information and visuals on your subject. An administrator or public relations type may also refer you to further information or arrange for an interview. The local library, perhaps at the university, probably carries the latest editions of journals and magazines with in-depth arts coverage that may be of some assistance.

Once you have gathered all of the pertinent information, and looked over your notes, it is time to get down to the business of writing the critique. Like other arts articles, reviews are different than a news story. News writing concentrates on facts and personal statements (quotations). If there is room, an analysis is laced over the facts.

In reviews, however, the writer’s analysis is most of the story. Unlike news writers, who are generally meant to be read and not seen, culture reporters place their opinions at the front of the article. As a result, a review needs a more tailored form than the inverted pyramid. It needs a style that allows for the clear development of analysis and the drawing of specific conclusions based on presented evidence. So say hello to your old high school buddy; the essay (sort of).

Style considerations, and the reality of cutting articles to fit space, mean reviews should not look like the papers you hand in to your professors. Culture reporting, therefore, requires a certain blending of essay and news styles.



3 Arts writing

In other words, reviews follow standard journalism rules (clear sentences, simple language and short phrases) while incorporating the essay's philosophy of arguing ideas and defending points. A review, like an essay, must have a central thesis. However, as with news articles, you should arrange your analysis with the most important points on top. This way a reader can get to the good stuff right away and stick with the piece.

Your impressions of a work may be broad, and many of the ideas may not fit in a straight line. If this is the case, it might be best to pick out the most dominant impressions you have of the work and use that idea as a loose thesis for the article. Place it first, and discuss the smaller points in relation to that main one.

TRACKING DOWN ARTS STORIES

Culture sections in student newspapers tend to be full of reviews of the latest film, concert or play. The arts world, however, is not one-dimensional. No self-respecting paper would ever be satisfied with a news department that only covered student council meetings. Equally, an arts editor must aim beyond the simple review. There are tons of arts issues that you can cover. All you have to do is find them.

Ask people who are making their living from the arts. They are bound to know what is going on with culture funding, arts education and trends. Get in the habit of asking your local gallery curators which local painters are hot. Talk to poets about the literary scene. Question musicians about the difficulty of making a living through live shows. Follow the money trail in your area — who is

paying for what, how much does it cost and why are they supporting it.

Read everything you can get your hands on. This includes magazines, newspapers, industry journals, reference books, cultural encyclopedias and the posters advertising events stapled across town. This will give you some idea of what's going on in the arts world and help you find context in your stories.

Follow up on story leads. If you did an interview with a local band about their new CD and they mentioned how much they enjoyed touring on the summer festival circuit, go out and research the history of music festivals. You might end up with a kick-ass story that looks at the rise, fall and resurrection of summer concerts. Not every lead will turn out to be a good story. But when these leads do work, they are a million times more valuable than a press release. With time and hard work, you could also start scooping other papers.

FINDING FRESH STORY ANGLES

The artistic community both comments on and influences society at large. A good arts article, therefore, examines an artistic development or issue by presenting its cultural implications. In a review of a local Shakespeare Festival, for instance, take a moment to ponder the fact that every little theatre across the country produces Shakespeare. Is this great because it brings culture to the masses? Or is it bad because it means that probably only one per cent of all Canadians know that Tompson Highway is a playwright and not a road?

Chances are that your local big name

daily will cover the Shakespeare festival. Anyone who wants to know whether this year's Lady Macbeth is truly evil can go look there, leaving plenty of space in your paper for a terrific story "Shakespeare: good or bad." You will also get much better quotes if you ask the actors about their impact on the greater community, rather than the standard questions about their rehearsal schedule.

STATUS OF THE ARTIST

This is an important angle for investigative stories, and cultural news in particular. Talk to artists about their own education and development. Look into training and apprenticeship programs and profile them, with an eye for process and access. Ask what artists do to further develop skills and ideas while working.

Cover the grit, not just the glory. Cover artists' unions in labour stories. Deal with health and safety hazards faced by painters and technicians. Look into income tax, copyright, border hassles, working two jobs, touring headaches and other problems faced by working artists. Profile some counter-examples to the artist-entrepreneur model, like co-operatives, collectives and workshop groups.

CRITIQUING ART

Culture writers drench their stories with personal judgments. This is OK. Being a critic, after all, is central to arts reporting. If you think something sucks, say so. If you believe it rocks, don't be shy with your praise. But whenever you express an opinion make sure you can justify your statements. This goes for



4 Arts writing

every article you'll ever write, from the tiny CD review to a full-length feature on the Canada Council. If you can't figure out if you like or dislike something, work harder.

Avoid the three pitfalls of criticism:

1• Everything is shit

This has long been the hiding place of those who know little and criticize everything in order to look smart. It may be the case that you live somewhere where all the art is, in your opinion, shit. If this is the case, keep looking. Make sure that your criticism is fair. If you are going to community theatre don't expect to see Broadway. Equally, do not treat a horror movie like prime drama.

2• Everything commercial is shit

This also gets tiring. Some people insist anything commercial is worthless. This is like saying that a band is no good until they are signed to Universal. Always make sure to judge art on its own merit. Just because Picasso made millions selling his paintings does not mean his art was any less revolutionary. Likewise, do not dismiss a singer because they committed the crime of reaching number one on the billboard charts.

3• Everything local is fantastic

There's a tendency, especially in alternative press, to lionize local artists. Do not get sucked into this habit of saying that a band is great because they are from your hometown, or that a movie is good because it is Canadian, or that a book is worth reading because Margaret Atwood wrote it. Always question your opinions and the views of others.

That being said, legitimize the local. Treat your community cultural insti-

tutions as living organisms, and write about their triumphs and tribulations.

If a new Third World bookstore opens up, or a venerable jazz improvisation group breaks up, write a story about it. Profile the most interesting movie house or women's art co-op around. If there's a coup within the local theatre hierarchy, delve into that controversy. You can also suggest what kinds of cultural institutions are absent from your community and prompt some enterprising group to create them.

Develop your contacts, be critical and curious. Make the reader feel involved in their local cultural scene.

A FEW QUICK RULES TO REMEMBER

Experiment

Try different writing styles. Look at art forms you usually avoid and try to understand things that you dislike.

Avoid clichés

A lot of arts writing relies too heavily on clichés — they are in the headlines, the text and in the interview questions. Do not fall into the habit of trying to come up with the latest trendy phrase. What is important here is the work, not a flashy sentence for its own sake.

No Q&As

The question-and-answer format is the laziest way of writing a story. Arts writing is more than transcription. Moreover, Q&A is very repetitive. If the answer is "We're from Winnipeg," did we really need to read the question "So, where are you guys from?" This also applies to the hidden Q&A, a story full of long quotes and little substance.

Cover a broad spectrum

Only covering events you think will be enjoyable or important is a mistake. By all means, write about things you enjoy, but if all you print are rave reviews, readers will soon catch on that you are a cheerleader rather than an honest critic.

Do not over-describe the plot

You are wasting your time if you spend all, or most, of your story on plot synopsis. A brief sketch of the plot is all that's needed. Concentrate on analysis, and do not destroy the potential viewer/reader's experience.

Do not be too technical

Remember that you are writing for a general student audience, not your honours English or Fine Arts class. Avoid high-brow critical terms, industry lingo and other jargon unless you are going to explain them. Conversely, you should include at least some description of how the technical side of the work contributes to the full effect. Keep both the general student audience and the high-brow reader in mind whenever you are working on a culture article. ◀

*With files from Kathe Lemon
and Ken Burke.*



Opinions writing

- ▶ The tough circumstances under which student journalists operate mean that eventually something has to give. The slack is often found on the editorial page.

Writing an editorial can be a daring act. We all value freedom of expression, but most people are more comfortable keeping their thoughts to themselves. Speaking out in front of your peers, even on a safe topic, can be intimidating. So here are some tips on how to improve your editorial writing.

WRITING AN EDITORIAL

Editorials are a newspaper's opportunity to comment on the issues of the day. For the people who follow the newsmakers — who investigate issues affecting their readers — it is an opportunity to express their own views and draw links that their readers may not have drawn.

At its best, an editorial is, as playwright Arthur Miller put it, “a nation speaking to itself.” It is a clear and concise argument articulating what everyone feels but cannot express. It rearranges information in a way that clarifies what was previously obscure.

At its worst, it is a degenerate rant; the squawk of the human parrot who publishes his own words for the mere sake of seeing them in print.

Editorial writing is challenging. Opinions are commonly held, but rarely are they properly defended. Editorial writing is about presenting information as well as a course of action for the future. It is about speaking to leadership as much as it is about speaking to the average citizen.

With this in mind, editorials must be tight and focused.

Avoid the obvious. Everyone knows racism is wrong and tuition fees are too high. The key question to ask, and try to answer, is exactly how and why. Select a novel approach for tackling a problem and don't expect to solve all problems in one fell swoop.

An argument in print is won on skill and intellect, not speed or flash. A rushed, unclear opinion piece will not attract readers. Limit your sentences to a single thought. Make sure your editorial has a unified theme and a clearly articulated viewpoint. Avoid tangents.

Don't use words from your thesaurus-enriched vocabulary that aren't shared by most of your readers. You might impress your clever friends, but the point of persuading people will have been lost.

Make sure your argument is as easily understood as all of the words that compose it. Always have someone else read your piece before you file it.

On the subject of language, let's recap some basics: check your spelling, avoid clichés, watch out for stereotypes and mind your punctuation.

Do your homework. Make sure your facts are right. Nothing destroys an argument like even the smallest factual error.

Write from your heart. Nothing is duller than someone trying to write more formally than is necessary. Go with your instincts over a bland, generic approach. A deeply felt editorial is always preferable to a stale exhumation

of the facts. But being passionate about something is not always a cue to pick up a pen. Rage is useful to focus your thinking and motivate heartfelt writing, but it does not communicate clearly.

Try to be personal. Don't make your voice out to be more than that of one person who has thought through and researched a subject. Never use the word “we” unless you know who you're collectivizing.

This, however, doesn't mean you cannot be brave. It's often more fun to write editorials that deviate from conventional wisdom and stir responses from your readership. For instance, if you strongly feel that students can afford higher tuition fees, make sure you use facts to support your argument, and put it in words.

Don't contribute to the cacophony of disinformation and nonsense. The only opinion anyone is entitled to is an informed one.

Show some style. A little flair keeps people interested. Spray a little colour here, an unusual adjective there, and constantly keep your eye on improving your work. But, stick to a conversational tone. Readers generally appreciate clear, but relaxed, arguments.

Finally, steal mercilessly from other writers. Read widely for good ideas in other newspapers, magazines, blogs and journals. Judge what works, what doesn't, and borrow some ideas.

KEEP YOURSELF IN LINE

You should always be watchful for fal-



2 Opinions writing

lacies and erroneous lines of reasoning. The following list of arguments should be avoided at all costs.

Ad hominem

Attacking people on the basis of their personal characteristics, or reaching an irrational conclusion that can't be sustained by the argument itself. Making fun of someone's appearance, rather than their views, falls victim to this fallacious form of arguing.

Tearing down a scarecrow

Don't misrepresent an opposing point of view and then "prove" that it's false. Imagine the following debate:

Argument: I believe in censoring hate literature because racists threaten the very fabric of society. Yes, free speech is a cornerstone of our country. But to permit racism to flourish is to undermine democracy, and if we undermine democracy we can forget about anyone having free speech.

Response: So you believe in censoring everyone. That is why we can't pass hate literature laws, because in the end nobody will be able to speak. If we accept your argument, we are saying nobody has the right to express their mind.

This form of argument misrepresents the view at hand and then "disproves" it. The first person never said they wanted everyone to be censored.

Slippery slope

When you attack an argument by taking it to an extreme. Consider this debate:

Statement: I believe in Medicare.

Response: But that's a form of socialism. And socialism, together with commu-

nism, fosters government control. So if we introduce Medicare we will begin moving towards a dictatorial government. It's better to let the private sector control health care.

Generalizing

When someone takes a solitary event, or a few case examples, and draws a wide conclusion. For instance, "Mary almost got me killed yesterday while driving me to work. Man, I tell you, women drivers suck." ◀

With files from Martha Muzychka and Brian Fawcett

Sports writing



BY ROB TERPSTRA AND DAN PLOUFFE

- ▶ Sports doesn't have to be cut and dry with 500-word articles and stock player photos. Sports writing exists to inform, to entertain, to provide a service and to have fun.

The stories should be something that your reader can't find on TV or the Internet. The only way you will be able to do this is by being objective and by talking to people related to the event you are covering. Remember, you are the eyes and ears of the reader — you have to recreate the scene assuming that the reader was not there.

Stories should not be more than 500 to 600 words. Shorter is often better. Sports features, though, can run up to 1,500 words depending on the importance and breadth of the subject matter.

You should have fun writing the sports story. If you are not having fun, neither is your audience. But, with that in mind, there are a few tips which will improve anyone's game.

INTERVIEWING/COVERING THE GAME

Write down everything at a sporting event. Talk to the opposing coach and at least one player. You'd be surprised how many sportswriters are simply afraid or shy of the other team and even interviewing. Break this barrier and you won't be stuck having to write a one-sided story.

For game stories, interview the head coach and 2-3 athletes you think did well in the game. Rarely will you interview a plethora of the other team's

players or coaches unless someone just scored the equivalent of Wilt Chamberlain's 100 points.

You don't always have to interview the player who scored 50 points or a hat trick, though. Diversify your subject matter. If the bench (or subs) scored a goal, make that the story. Find something that makes the game different from every other game. The Gateway, for instance, had to cover a 122-game winning streak in women's hockey. They didn't interview Danielle Bourgeois every single game. Instead, they focused on certain aspects of another 9-2 blow-out. When the Canadian flag fell to the ice, that was news, however strange it may seem.

When covering a game, don't wear blinders. The game doesn't necessarily have to be the whole story. Sidebar stories are great additions. Tell people about the basketball team that had a dance session after the game with some kids who were watching the game, the woman who's coaching the men's soccer team, or the time when the university president slipped and fell on the ice during the intermission promotion.

Be prepared. Have your interview planned out in your mind's eye. You should know who you want to interview and have a backup plan in case you can't get in contact with them. Before the event or during the intermission, get a contact such as a manager or press liaison to ensure those people are available. Have at least five questions in advance and your research done research beforehand.

Avoid e-mail interviews. They allow the athlete to think about their answer in a way that is manufactured. It reveals

Online statistic sites

- www.oua.org,
- www.sportetudiant.com,
- www.atlanticuniversitysport.com,
- www.universitysport.ca

See your university's athletics site for news/box scores etc.

Use www.world-newspapers.com and www.cbssportsline.com for ideas on columns and features.

the least amount of information and prevents both parties from developing their interview skills.

You have to think on your feet. Have follow-up questions ready for any possible response to any of your questions. It is your job to press for information. You want to make them think. If you ask stupid questions, you'll get stupid answers. To avoid one worded answers or one-liners, ask open-ended or a follow-up question.

Begin an interview with an ice-breaker. Be calm. The athlete will feel more relaxed, and if you look relaxed they will be as well. Don't use this as a reason to ask easy questions, though, you are looking for the five W's and its little sister, 'how'. Remember this. Too many questions are better than not enough.

Bring a tape recorder and a notepad. If you can, interviews are best done in a relatively quiet area. This allows you to avoid background noise when trying to decipher your tape and allows you transcribe important thoughts instead of rewinding a 20-minute interview. Remember some athletes or coaches will not want to be taped because they don't like the sound of their voice. You can counter this by ensuring them that



2 Sports writing

you will be the only one listening to the tape. If they're still uncomfortable with the idea, you can just write notes and important quotes in your notebook.

There will come a time when you're trying to get comments from a player that every other sports writer in the arena is also looking at. If you are involved in a scrum with multiple interviewers, get as many questions in as soon as possible before the interviewee has to depart.

In professional arenas, there may be some unwritten rules about interviews. In Montreal, for instance, you cannot interview a player until he is clothed from the waist down. It's also useful to follow the lead of professional interviewers. Some of them have been doing this longer than you've been alive. Use this to your advantage and write down the answers to their questions, as well.

WRITING THE STORY

When organizing a game story, don't fall into the trap of making it read like a timeline. It should reflect, for the most part, the inverted pyramid style.

Ledes, ledes, ledes. You need a dynamic start to your story in 25 words or less. The section editor doesn't want to put words in your mouth, so start the story off with an amazing lede and, if possible, finish it off with a related, and equally amazing, finish.

•[See: Lede writing]

Never bury a good quote. Comments should be high in the story, rarely below the first three paragraphs. Highlight some the decisive plays early on before getting into the game summary. Once

these things have been accomplished, a chronological timeline of game action can be included.

Be very selective in what details of play to include so as not to bore the reader. Working quotes in about certain plays is an effective way to hold readers' interest. The final few lines can vary, but it's a good idea to provide a sense of the significance of the game in terms of standings or what it could mean for an athlete's career.

WRITING STYLE

Choose words for a broad audience. The best word is not necessarily the biggest. Spell check documents and double check spelling of athletes' names and places. Triple check dates and statistics.

Use short paragraphs and take it easy on the stats. You may be stats-happy, but most people skip over numbers instinctively. Instead, use these in a feature or tie them into a sidebar.

Think up your own headlines, sub-headlines, and pull-quotes. Even if they don't get used in the paper, writing headlines and identifying key elements of your piece help to frame your thinking about the story.

Clichés are usually caught by the section editor, but sometimes they are so ingrained, that they feel like second fiddle. Come up with your own meat and potatoes.

You are not a cheerleader. If anything you are the home team's staunchest critic. How are they executing their plays, conducting their offence and defence?

Do not be afraid to ask the hard questions. Your job is to uncover and relay the facts to the reader. Do not paint an inaccurate picture and glowing article for the athletic department's purposes.

Travel. Go to other schools' events or professional sporting events and cover them. This will provide some valuable experience should you go on to journalism school or seek further employment as a sports reporter. ◀

Rob Terpstra (Brock Press) was CUP 70 supplements bureau chief. Dan Plouffe (Link) was CUP 70 sports bureau chief.

Business writing

- ▶ Most people don't give much thought to the special demands placed on business writers. An article, or so goes the common view, is an article. Whether the topic is business, sports or entertainment, a reporter will use the same basic skills: ask key questions, make insightful observations and write sound stories.

But while the essential skills needed to write a business story are pretty much the same as in other forms of journalism, there is a whole world of subtleties that makes business reporting different from other forms of writing.

For instance, like sports writing, the business reporter must have some understanding of the terminology that is bandied about. Business people approach reporters questions slightly differently than politicians do. Often, they're a lot more suspicious of motives. While both groups want to get the right spin, it may be more difficult to extract information from business people.

For all the subtle differences, one rule still holds no matter what type of story you cover: know your readers. Considering that your audience is likely to be university students, a business story in your paper might focus on such topics as corporate presence on campus, what companies or business organizations are backing research in various departments, and the amount of money your student government is spending on campus business.

TRICKS OF THE BUSINESS WRITING TRADE

Beware of corporate manipulation. Many top executives at large compa-

nies have been trained by some of the country's top public relations firms. They learn how to handle reporters and how to get their key messages out. Watch out for repetition in interviews. It is usually the key message that the business person is trying to get across. Listen to whether the subject answers the question, or just repeats something they have already said. Rephrase your questions if you feel you're not getting an honest answer. Persist until you're satisfied that the question has been answered.

Keep calling back

Despite the proliferation of press training seminars, many business people are not media savvy. This is especially true of small business owners. Often, they don't understand deadlines, so they may not answer your call for several days. Keep calling back until you get in touch with somebody. Don't be surprised if they are unfamiliar with on the record situations. Many small businesses may assume they are speaking on background and are surprised to see their name in print. Make it clear during the interview that it is for publication.

Go beyond company spokesmen

Many companies have a designated spokesperson who can be helpful with basic information. Usually, they are not decision-makers. Politely ask if they will arrange the interview with the chief executive officer or the financial officer — the people who call the shots.

Treat public relations people firmly, but politely

Business reporters are plagued by PR firms, who usually have only a single story they want to sell to journalists. Don't alienate them when you turn

them down. Sometime in the future, they can be helpful in getting you access to the top people in the companies they represent.

Scan press releases, then discard

Some reporters estimate that 95 per cent of press releases they receive go straight into the wastepaper basket. Another four per cent are read and considered before they go into the garbage. That leaves about one per cent that have a germ of legitimate story idea. The business world has a long way to go before it learns what interests news editors. It is a reminder that the best stories are enterprise efforts. Stories that come from the ideas in the heads of reporters and editors, not from staged events or boring news releases.

Watch for jargon

Like any specialty, the business world is infected with a plague of jargon and euphemisms. Weed them out ruthlessly. Readers can't be bothered to figure out why a company is "right sizing." They don't care about new "synergies," or couldn't care less what current "paradigm" a firm is in. It's obvious that any projection is always "going forward." Avoid confusion at all times.

USING THE TOOLS

Defining the business section's mandate is half the battle towards knowing what kinds of stories you should go after. The other half is using the right tools to get the stories and background information. This is where business journalism sometimes differs from other forms of reporting.

Use websites

Most business reporting is about com-



2 Business writing

panies and the people who run them or work there. Before contacting the company, you can learn a lot about what it does from its websites. Many publicly-traded companies also post their annual or quarterly reports on their sites.

Many companies keep a record of press releases on their websites. Another good source is Canada Newswire or Canadian Corporate News, which have search engines on their sites that will allow you to search for press releases by company name. SEDAR (System for Electronic Document Analysis and Retrieval) has a searchable database on its website which consists of documents that companies are required to file with securities regulators. If the company's headquarters are in a large centre, chances are the local newspaper actively follows it. Check out the newspaper's website for recent stories. Older stories may be available for a small fee.

Seek analysts

Large companies whose stock is publicly traded often have a number of analysts who actively follow the firms' activities on a regular basis. Companies with good investors relations departments will be able to tell you who the analysts are that follow them. The analysts will often share their insight into a company's activities and prospects with reporters.

Find the background

If your newspaper has a well-kept morgue, dig out past articles from your newspaper archives. Chances are this will not be enough — finding out what the company has been up to in the past few months will likely require more digging. However, it is a start.

Monitor business associates and consultant companies

Business associates are often on the cutting edge of trends that affect their members. They also keep track of upcoming legislation or regulatory changes that could affect their members. Many of them have useful magazines or newsletters that outline latest developments. Similarly, large business service firms, such as KPMG, keep abreast of developments that affect certain sectors.

Monitor Internet message boards devoted to companies or industry sectors. A proliferation of unsubstantiated information clogs Internet message boards, but they can be useful to gauge the general mood about the company. More important, you can also post a message to solicit an interview from an investor or former employee. A warning: most people who prowl the message boards have an axe to grind. Use the information carefully.

A FINAL WORD

Never forget the people angle. Readers are always fascinated with stories about interesting people doing interesting things. Businesses tend to be impersonal, but they are frequently run by intriguing people. High-tech firms are frequently driven by a few individuals who had a vision or came up with a revolutionary concept. Older institutions are sometimes run by skilled individuals who must have made difficult decisions on cutting costs, while figuring out how to return a satisfactory profit to shareholders amid economic conditions. The people behind the business are often more interesting than the business itself. ◀



Science and health writing

BY DAN HOGAN

- ▶ You don't have to be taking a double degree in physics and biochemistry to write about science for a general audience. Some of the best science journalists have only general arts backgrounds and careers spent mostly covering municipal politics, courts and little league baseball.

A basic knowledge of science helps, but by asking seemingly stupid questions a reporter can often get the clearest answers from a scientist. The main thing is to be curious.

Science news need not be as boring as the stock listings in a newspaper's business section. It can be as controversial as politics, as exciting as sports and as entertaining as the arts.

First, science isn't "pure." Behind every research topic is an agenda, a social and economic agenda that's set by the politicians and companies that fund research.

These days when scientists speak of pure research, they usually refer to it as basic research — the fundamental processes that govern nature — to distinguish it from applied research.

But even basic research is socially and economically motivated. Canada's Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, for example, sponsors a strategic grant competition every year in which universities vie for millions of taxpayers' dollars to fund both basic and applied research on areas deemed to be "strategically important" for the nation — the environment, energy, efficiency, communications, etc.

Second, science isn't "truth." It can best

be described as the gradual mounting of evidence that can support a particular way of looking at the world, only to be shattered in time by new evidence.

Third, science is not inherently "good" or "bad." It depends on how it's used and who uses it. The Pugwash scientists of the 1950s, many of whom had seen their ideas turned into bombs, argued against the nuclear arms race — not against nuclear research.

Today, scientists debate whether to spend billions on huge atom smashers — not because anyone thinks particle physics is bad, but because all that money could perhaps be better spent on other projects.

The trick is to show scientists as ordinary people, competing and co-operating in the world of politics, business, ideas and ethics.

Scientists are, in general, quite approachable and eager to talk about their research. Many simply enjoy sharing their knowledge with others.

They may also be concerned about problems facing society and want to add their voice to the public debate on how to clean up toxic waste or whether to build more nuclear power plants, for instance. Public exposure can bring scientists more prestige and research funds, too.

There is a minority of scientists who act arrogant, elitist and above the lowly press. They may have been burned by a sloppy journalist in the past, or they may be exactly what they appear to be.

The crucial thing is to be patient with them. Scientists don't like to be rushed

in giving explanations. They want you to understand the context of their research.

At the same time, let them know who your audience is. Try to get them to avoid jargon, which may be useful to scientists in a particular field, but confusing to anyone else.

One of the most common complaints by scientists is that science stories, especially in the popular press, are riddled with mistakes. They also complain that reporters rarely show them their stories before they go to print.

Writers counter that their journalistic principles would be compromised if sources were able to preview stories. Besides, reporters must often scramble to meet daily deadlines and may not have enough time to check all the facts, especially if they're working on more than one story.

Science is different from other beats, however, with its own language. Words such as "power" and "energy" can be used interchangeably in colloquial English, but they have quite separate meanings in physics.

When trying to simplify the scientist's language for the average reader, a writer can unwittingly alter the original meaning.

Still, journalistic integrity is important. If you feel uncomfortable about showing the entire story to your source, at least check the technical terms and explanations with them. Quotes should not be "cleaned up," even by the source. Scientists, like politicians, have to live with the consequences of what they say.



2 Science and health writing

CHECKLIST FOR SCIENCE STORIES

1• Is the story interesting to the average reader?

Science isn't just about abstract concepts. A science story, like any good story, should have people doing things. Look for drama, tension and controversy. Don't forget color — the scientist's excited gestures, the maze of glass tubing in the lab, etc.

2• Does the story point out the relevance of the research to society or to our understanding of who we are?

If not, chances are most people won't want to read it. Even something as far-removed from society as neutrinos can make for compelling reading: the discovery of their abundance and mass may shed light on how our universe was formed and whether it will collapse back on itself in another Big Bang billions of years from now.

3• Is the story sensationalistic?

If the words “miracle cure” or “break-through” are in every article you write, you're either lucking into a lot of good stories, or you're guilty of sensationalism.

That being said, don't underplay a good story. If a development has the potential to save thousands of lives, then say so, adding any necessary caveats.

4• Does the story mention who funded the research?

The discovery that taking a certain pill a day keeps the doctor away is one thing,

but if the study was funded by the pill's maker, then that's quite a different story. What do other, independent studies of the pill say?

5• Have you included all the key players in your story?

Members of a scientific team are most upset when you leave them out, which is often necessary because of limited space.

Try to talk to everyone involved in the research project, as well as scientists in any rival research team. Sometimes you get quite a different perspective from a scientist's colleague or competitor.

6• Are all scientific terms in the story clearly defined?

Better yet, don't use unnecessarily technical words. Instead, try to find common words to explain an uncommon term, even if it takes a sentence to do so.

7• Finally, try to dig up science stories that no one has written much about.

Genetic engineering and 3-D virtual reality gadgetry may be hot topics, but what about animal communication? Aging? The origin of the Moon? You may end up writing breaking stories or stirring up interest in as yet unexplored territory. ◀

Self-editing



► Self-editing can be the most annoying and pointless step in the writing process if it is not done correctly. If you do it right, though, your editors will love you and your copy will glimmer like gold. It should get a little bit easier with each story until you plateau and vainly assert that you no longer need to self-edit. But you're wrong. Review these rules one more time.

1• Edit while you write

Assuming that you're not using a typewriter, this is what the 'real' journalists do and what will get you assigned those late-breaking production-night, hold-the-presses type stories. Know the rules of grammar, Canadian Press (or your newspaper's) style, how to type and self-edit like the wind and those stories will be yours.

As the words fly on to the screen, constantly shift your eyes across them, scanning for errors in style, punctuation, grammar and vocabulary. As paragraphs emerge, examine their structure and relevance to those preceding and following each of them. Re-arrange them as necessary. Re-write your lede a dozen times as the story evolves. Fiddle with the order of your quotes, whose voices are where and what they're saying. Scan for balance and fairness, making sure that, in your haste, everyone is fairly represented. Then . . .

2• Take a break.

You can't self-edit right after you've finished writing. Grab a coffee or a juice, or whatever it is you kids drink these days, and chill out. If you're in the newspaper office, grab a coffee for your editor, too.

3• Is the most important information at the top?

Even in narrative writing, you need to lure your readers in. We call this a "headline." If you haven't yet written a headline, now's the time to do it. Express the story in as few words as possible, knowing that the headline may be the only thing that gets read. Then, read it aloud with your lede. Do they tell readers what they need to know?

4• Are you telling the whole story?

This is the most common problem of un-self-edited copy — the things going on in your head haven't all made it to the paper. The best way to flesh out the missing details is to tell someone your story, and see what comes out (also a good way to fix a lede that won't write itself!). Another good technique is to write a fake email to your grandmother explaining the story. It's a good way to make sure your story hits all the key points necessary to understand the issue. You can send the email if you really feel like it, I'm sure your grandmother would love to hear from you.

5• Know your weaknesses.

Is it "it's vs. its," or wasting hours crafting the perfect lede? Either way, know it and own it. Ask for help if necessary, but try to account for it on your own. For example: my weakness is organization, so in preparing this document I wrote my points in the order that they came out, knowing that I'd self-edit for organization later. That's what good self-editing is all about.

6• Check your facts!

The most important thing that you can do for your story is make sure that everything is accurate. It's as simple as Google for most things. Just type every (yes, I mean every) pronoun into the fact-checking machine and out will come correct spellings. Play your tape while you're doing this, and when you come to a quote slow it down and make sure that every word is on the tape as it is on your page.

•[See: Ch 5. Fact-checking]

7• Read it one last time — this time aloud

Look for places where you:

- Used extra words (it was actually true — was it actually?).
- Used extra commas (but, pauses, and, and don't need to be followed by commas — and if you have too many commas in a sentence, try a dash!).
- Trip over clumsy clauses.
- Switch the passive voice to active by putting the acted-on subject first (the straw may have broken the camel's back [passive] but the camel kung-fu'ed him first [active]).

Most importantly, use SpellCheck. Please. You'd be shocked to know how often people forget to.

Your story isn't perfect yet, but that's why there are editors. While we're on the topic, go get your editor another coffee. ◀



He said, she said — alt. attributes

- ▶ Some writers, looking for variety, try to squeeze six or eight different words of attribution into their story. They think readers will be bored by endless repetitions of ‘said’.

Yes and no. If multiple paragraphs start with Jones said or he said, readers will notice. If every sentence has to be attributed, the problem is with your story rather than your attribution style. In most well-written news stories, attribution is almost unnoticed. *Said*, in this case, is more than enough, but there are plenty of other options depending on the circumstance.

We can use *admit* when someone confesses to a shortcoming or improper deed: “I sold the tools for drug money,’ Jones admitted.” You cannot use *admit* unless someone owns up to guilt — “I’m a Baptist,’ Jones admitted” won’t quite do it.

State, though overworked, has its place. Most of us do not state things. I don’t know when I last used the word in attribution. Say that someone stated an objection or maybe even stated his name, but I would not say, “I’m Jim Baker,’ he stated.” Don’t use the word casually: “I guess I’ll be shoveling off,’ he stated” only sounds forced.

Vowed and *promised* can be illustrated with this simple sentence: “I will be back.” Depending on what we are trying to tell the reader, we have a choice of attributive verbs. “I will be back,’ he promised” expresses a guarantee; to vow has more solemn, even religious overtones and cultural contexts. *He warned* carries still another meaning. You cannot stretch this forever.

We also have verbs to indicate the vol-

ume of utterance: *shouted*, *yelled*, and *screamed* all have different connotations, and may be used with exclamation marks. Sometimes we want to have our speaker whisper something.

Maybe we even have that person *mutter* or *mumble*, though those words do better as descriptions of speech than as attribution verbs. That is, it’s better to say “Jones mumbled an apology” than to say, “‘I’m sorry,’ Jones mumbled”. Beware of the threat implied in *utter* and the animosity in *mutter*; after all, mutterers say things under their breath.

We also have a good supply of words to avoid in attribution. Some of these provide amusement: speakers may have facial expressions, but to say that someone *grinned*, *chuckled*, *smirked*, *soothed* or *calmed* a statement is indulgent. Unless you’re writing a crime report on the Joker in Batman, it wasn’t *grinned* — use *said* and *describe* the body language that led to this interpretation.

Feel, *think*, and *believe* have three, very distinct meanings: sensual, cerebral, and deeply held. Unless you’re writing fiction, you don’t know what a person feels, thinks, or believes — you only know what they say. So: saying he thinks is your best bet.

Finally: the great debate, *says* vs. *said*. There are many reasons to use *said* in newswriting: most important is the realization that what someone told you is just that, what they told you. Like a web page, it could change. In fact, journalists would be unnecessary if everyone went around saying the same thing all day. Something was said, it happened once, and you recorded it. Use *says* for movies, books, and music and the past tense for all other occasions.

We have different words to indicate different meanings. Careful writers choose the right words to express the appropriate meaning. 90 per cent of the time, the right word is *said*. ◀