

Chapter 10

Newswriting for Broadcast



Objectives

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- Identify ways to find newsworthy stories.
- Explain how the angle of a story affects how the story is written.
- Summarize the concept of “writing for the ear.”
- Apply the guidelines for good news story writing.

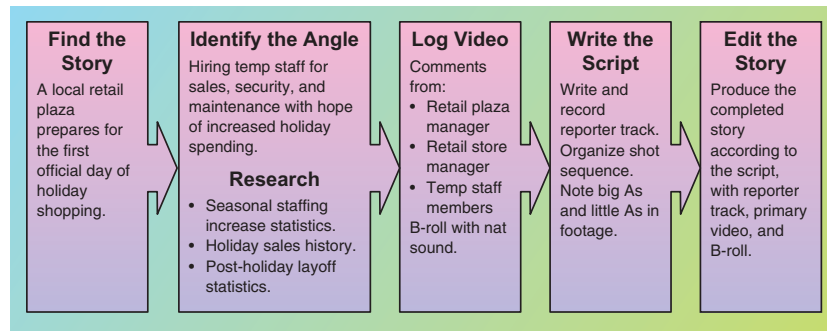
Introduction

Whether a news story appears on a newscast as a reader or as a fully prepared and edited package, the story first needs to be written. This chapter presents many topics a reporter must consider in writing a story for broadcast, aside from the video footage (**Figure 10-1**).

Professional Terms

attribution
angle
close
hard lead

lead
reporter track
soft lead

Figure 10-1. A reporter must manage the entire process of writing a news story.

Finding Stories

It may be difficult to imagine how reporters can find stories to write about day after day. Whether in a small town of 1000 people or a metropolitan area of 2 million people, local television stations manage to run news programs with new stories several times a day. Stories are out there for a reporter to find. In determining if a story is newsworthy, ask yourself:

- Is there some conflict in the story to sustain viewer interest?
- Is the story unusual?
- Is someone well-known involved in the story?
- Is there a segment of the audience that will be impacted by the story?
- Can the story be brought “home” to the local audience?
- Does the story include emotion or human interest aspects?

Reporters have a well-rounded base of general knowledge, are particularly aware of their immediate surrounding environment (local government and politics, locations and geography, various agencies, current issues affecting the local population), and understand which topics of public interest motivate, excite, worry, and concern the audience. Reporters listen, read, watch, and ask questions. Remember: Who? What? When? Where? How? A reporter should always be thinking, “What is the story?” Anytime there is a lively conversation in the reporter’s vicinity, he should be alert to the topic and recognize it as a possible story idea. It doesn’t matter if people involved in the conversation are arguing, laughing, sharing, or discussing; if those people are interested in talking about something, it is a potential story. Also, any story or program on television is a possible springboard for a local story.

PRODUCTION NOTE

People are often somewhat self-centered—interested only in what *they are* interested in. An effective reporter must be interested in what other people are interested in, and be able to recognize and develop those topics.



In developing a human interest story, for example, consider that nearly everyone has something that is particularly interesting to them. This interest may be a hobby, craft, leisure activity, relative, living environment, physical location, memory, or an object (such as a special antique, heirloom, car, recording, or collection.). The reporter’s job is to find the “thing” about a person, ask questions to get the most interesting information, and turn it into a story.

ASSISTANT ACTIVITY

Begin a conversation with a classmate and do not end the conversation until you have discovered five new and interesting things about that person. The longer you talk, trying to find something to say, the more both of you will open up and share interesting information.



Finding Stories in an Educational Environment

Reporters watch what is happening around them—in school, in the car, on the bus, in the cafeteria, at the mall, on television, and on the Internet. Any event, visitor, poster, bulletin board, or classroom assignment is a potential story. Student reporters should tour the school and try to view it as someone who has never been there before, **Figure 10-2.** Story ideas may come simply from the surroundings. For example, passing the classroom where the yearbook is produced might spark a story about the new yearbook staff and this year’s yearbook theme. Walking past a student wearing a trendy, branded t-shirt may inspire a story about brand status or the shopping habits of students. The activities director or master calendar in the school is a great source of information on upcoming events. Knowing about events that are scheduled provides a direction or source to gather more information, such as the organizations sponsoring an event, and write a story.

**Figure 10-2.** Pay attention to activity in the school hallways. From activity banners to the students themselves, potential stories may be right in front of you!

VISUALIZE THIS

You see that there is a shoe drive scheduled for next month, but you've never heard of a shoe drive. Bingo! If you've never heard of it, many other students at your school probably have never heard of it either. Just the name, "shoe drive," sounds odd enough to make you curious to find out more. You note the event information and seek out the sponsors.

It turns out that the shoe drive is a request for students to bring in old shoes they no longer wear. The shoes are collected and donated to a charity that gives them to people who need shoes.

You could write a story that merely announces the upcoming drive. Or, you could use your curiosity to create an interesting package that might actually increase the number of shoes collected in the drive. Perhaps you can go to the charity shoot on-camera interviews with those involved in the drive. Maybe you can contact some people who have been helped by the charity—they may not be willing to have their faces on camera, but the story is about donating shoes, anyway. Get footage of feet of all sizes, both with and without shoes.

You can either simply make an announcement, or you can develop a thought-provoking feature story. And remember, it all started with two words on an activity calendar in an office: "shoe drive."



Go into the community outside the school building to discover people and events in the local area. Visit craft fairs where artists and crafters sell their work. Read the local newspaper to find stories about local people, events, and retailers. A story from the newspaper may be further researched and enhanced with video to make a compelling package.

There are innumerable stories that can be written based on interviews and activities surrounding the sports, music, theater, and art programs at your school. Competitions are almost always news story topics because they contain the element of conflict. Competition stories may include Mathletes, science fair and social studies projects (may also showcase students for achievement), or the band preparing for a marching competition, and a follow-up story with the results of the competition. Any course that involves visual classroom or laboratory activities, such as career and technology classes, can provide compelling video.

As course registration time comes around, small features may be written about the guidance department and the various elective classes offered. Additionally, consider an in-depth interview with a teacher who has an interesting, but little-known characteristic, pastime, or life experience.

- The English teacher who is a weekend paintball aficionado.
- The drama teacher who was once in the New York cast of *CATS*.
- The math teacher who just returned from a tour of duty in the Middle East.

Student reporters may also be assigned different beats that cover all areas of the school. Covering a beat involves developing a relationship with people in that area of the school, knowing the purpose and responsibilities of the group or department, and knowing their calendar of regular and special events. The reporter should check-in on a regular basis to keep up-to-date with any new or unusual changes or events. For example, a new science credit is required for graduation. The student assigned to the science department beat should be on top of the story. Which class is now required? Who will be teaching it? What will the class cover? The student

assigned to the guidance department beat should also be involved in the story. When will the requirement go into effect? Which students will be affected? When can students begin registering for the class? Ideally, both student reporters would get this information by diligently covering their beats and would bring up the topic in the pre-production morning meeting. The producer or assignment editor decides if it is a story, who will do the story, and from what angle the story should be developed.

Researching Stories

Once a story is determined, research begins. The purpose of research is to gather all the information necessary to frame a story responsibly, fairly, accurately, and completely for viewers. There are usually several ways to get information, and the reporter should be persistent in finding out everything possible about the story and getting the facts straight. The information and details of a story should be double-checked to ensure that every word is verifiably truthful and factual. Hearsay is as unacceptable in reporting as it is in courtrooms; hearsay is gossip, not reporting.

The amount of research necessary can vary a great deal depending on the story type and approach to a story. In the previous "Shoe Drive" example, the research could be as brief as getting the details of the drive in a quick conversation with the event sponsor, or may be as involved as researching the charity, its operation, and its clients. A story may cover an accident on the main highway through town, which caused the road to be closed in both directions and will affect hundreds of local residents. Researching the exact road location and other details with the police department may be as simple as listening to a police scanner and making a follow-up phone call. In this case, the story can be written and put on the air as soon as possible. Or, the news director may choose to send a camera crew out to the location and do a live feed or produce a package of the story for a later newscast. The actual research necessary for this story is very minimal, but is absolutely necessary to verify the facts of the story.

Deadlines are a constant concern for reporters trying to be diligent about responsible research. An approaching deadline should not compromise a reporter into writing and airing a story that has not been fully researched. Once a story is aired, incorrect information cannot be taken back without embarrassing the reporter, news program, and higher administration. Airing incorrect information may also have legal consequences for the station and can endanger viewers. Reporters should always work under the assumption that they will have to prove everything they say or write. **Attribution** (crediting the source of information) should always be given for the quotes, information, and facts of a story.

Two important concepts in developing a news story are "KISS" (keep it simple, silly) and "be complete." These seem to be in opposition with each other, so reporters must carefully balance both concepts at all times. To keep a story simple, write with simple sentence structure using simple language. A story should not be cluttered with insignificant or irrelevant details. A complete story leaves viewers with no unanswered questions.

A reporter needs to fully understand the story and find an angle before writing the story. An **angle** is the approach used to tell a story, which helps the viewer understand why this story is important, why the viewer should

attribution: Crediting the source of information used in a story.

angle: The approach or point of view used to tell a story.

care, and what makes this story unusual or different. In the previous “Shoe Drive” example, using feet and shoes as the main images in the story could be an interesting approach to the story for both the reporter and the viewer. The language used to write the story should allow the audience to understand and care about the story, as well.

One angle that is frequently used is to tell a story through a character. The reporter chooses a person who is part of the event or affected by the topic of the story and uses that person as the “face” of the story. Taking this angle personalizes events, issues, and conflicts, and allows viewers to identify with the character. For example, a story about minimum wage jobs could focus on statistics (such as income, living expenses, and number of people with minimum wage jobs). However, when the topic is examined through a day in the life of a single mother with a minimum wage job, statistics become personal and the story has a face and significance with the viewing public. The character can tell the story from firsthand experience, which the reporter cannot do.

Newswriting Fundamentals

Chapter 8, *Scriptwriting* addressed the type of writing necessary for various kinds of non-news programs. Newswriting is different from the writing style used for other program types. However, one concept that applies to all types of scriptwriting is the kind of language used. In scriptwriting, informal language is used to write the way people speak. This also applies to writing stories for news programs and is called “writing for the ear.”

Reporters should have command of language, sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary, and should actively search for the precise right words to use in a story. The language used in a news story needs to be simple and direct, so the meaning is understood the first time it is heard. Sentences should be short and should not contain long clauses. Remember, not all television viewers can rewind the program and re-play something they did not understand the first time. While some viewers *may* use their DVR to rewind and replay something they want to hear again, viewers should not need to listen twice to understand the information.

For newswriting, use simple sentences written in active voice, rather than passive voice. Also, use simple subject-verb-object sentence construction.

- Active: “The stunt car hit the ramp, flew through the air, and landed in the pile of hay bales. The driver climbed out and waved to the crowd.” “The mayor called a city council meeting.”
- Passive: “After going up the ramp, through the air, and landing in hay bales, the driver climbed out and waved to the crowd.” “A city council meeting has been called by the mayor.”

Try to avoid using forms of the verb “to be” coupled with a past participle, such as “has been called.” These phrases typically make a sentence passive.

Use present tense as much as possible. The very nature of news does not always lend itself to telling a story in present tense, but using the present tense engages the interest of the audience.

- “The police are investigating last night’s accident on Route 13, which resulted in one fatality.”
- “Governor Jones says that...”
- “The Health Department urges consumers to ...”

Assistant Activity

Write a news story. Keep “writing for the ear” in mind while writing and revising your story. Read the story out loud to a friend or family member. At the end of the story, simply stop talking and wait. If your listener asks a single question about the topic, that question needs to be addressed in the story.

Perhaps you need to word something differently or you accidentally left something out. Fix your story and read it to another person—do not read it to the same person again. Continue to read aloud and revise your story until your listener has no questions at the end. Television does not allow conversation between the reporter and viewers; the audience cannot ask the reporter questions. Television is similar to a lecture format, without the opportunity for questions and answers at the end.



With the very first line of a story, viewers decide if they will continue paying attention. Phrasing is crucial in delivering your message to the audience. To effectively communicate with viewers, the content of a story should be stated as clearly and accurately as possible. The following are suggestions for good news story writing.

- Never start a story with a participle or word ending in -ing: “Saving the resources of the Chesapeake Bay was always in the thoughts of the conservation group.” The listener must unscramble the sentence to make sense of it—it’s just not the way people talk.
- Avoid introducing a story by asking viewers a question: “How do you feel when you receive a speeding ticket in the mail?” Instead, make an attention-grabbing statement: “Drivers caught by traffic cameras are speaking out.”
- Do not begin a story with a quote read by the reporter.
- Do not scare the audience with your words. Say: “Officials urge you to go into your basement and move near a masonry wall until the tornado passes.” Don’t say: “The tornado will destroy your house and everything in it. Hide in your basement until the danger has passed.”
- Give suggestions that repeat the message of officials; do not give orders. If an order needs to be communicated, turn the mic over to an official to state the order.

Visualize This

A snowstorm has started and the reporter goes on air with a story about the local transportation officials mobilizing the snowplows, drivers, and salt spreaders. Viewers are usually interested in stories about preparations for weather events that may affect them personally. In the newscast, the reporter passes along a request from the head of transportation, “Transportation officials request that citizens stay off the roads during the snow clean-up efforts.” The reporter is not actually telling the public to do or not to do something, but is passing a message along from the officials. The reporter attributes the action to the official who gave the recommendation, which takes the reporter out of the story. It would not be acceptable for a reporter to tell the audience to do something on his own authority.



- Use action verbs, when possible.
- Do not offer your opinion by commenting that something is bad, good, interesting, or shocking.
- A person's name should never be used at the beginning of a story, unless the person is well-known. When a person's name is used in a story, always provide an identifying title or the reason the person is in the news story. Mention the person's title or reason for involvement *before* stating their name, so viewers understand the importance or context of the person.

VISUALIZE THIS

You are a single male at a party. Many of your friends have been trying to “fix you up” with potential prom dates. You’ve already been introduced to four ladies at this party. Your friend Chuck arrives and introduces another woman, Christine. Christine is the most attractive woman you’ve met so far. It would certainly be important to mention that Christine is Chuck’s new girlfriend, right at the beginning of the introduction. Knowing Christine’s title or connection to the event/person (Chuck) is a great deal more important than knowing her name, considering all the attempts at fixing you up at this party. Having this information immediately would avoid a very embarrassing situation.



A reporter has a finite amount of time to tell a story and relay all the information viewers need to know. It is important to purposefully choose the most effective words to tell the story.

- Do not use a long word when a short one will do. Say: “The colors on a plasma television match the colors of things in real life.” Don’t say: “The chrominance and luminance on a plasma television are reproduced accurately.”
- Do not start a story with trite and cliché phrases that do not provide any useful information, such as “Once again,” “In the news,” “A new development,” “As expected,” and “In a surprise move.”
- Mention a person’s age only when it is relevant to the newsworthiness of the story. For example, “A ten year old graduates from Harvard.”
- When footage or images are included in a news story, the reporter should not waste words by narrating with information the viewer can plainly see, or stating the obvious. Phrases like, “As you can see,” “Here is a,” and “This is an” typically describe what the viewer can see for themselves. A picture is worth a thousand words. The reporter’s time and words are better spent in providing viewers with more relevant information that may not be obvious in the image on screen.

Preparing a News Package

The fundamentals of newswriting, including simple sentences and language, present tense, and active voice, apply to any type of news story. A package story that incorporates interview footage with narration by

the reporter poses additional writing challenges. For example, a reporter extensively researched the designer of a new high school theater and contacted the designer to schedule an in-person interview. After conducting the interview, the reporter and photog return to the studio with interview footage and notes. The reporter must now put the story together.

The first step is to log the video footage. Logging the footage is necessary so the reporter can quickly find each statement on the recording during the editing process. The reporter first views the recorded interview footage and notes the time code (specific location address code) for each question, each answer, and, if necessary, the main point of each answer. Also, all the comments made by the interviewee should be transcribed with the corresponding time code noted. By reviewing a written copy of the interviewee’s comments, the reporter can easily decide which comments to use as sound bites and where to find the video and audio for the comments. After logging the interview, the reporter logs the B-roll footage to review other footage that may be inserted to support the story. Nat sound is also logged at this time for use later, as necessary.

Everything spoken by the reporter in a package is the *reporter track*, **Figure 10-3**. The reporter track connects all the interview sound bites used in the story and provides viewers with additional information not contained in the sound bites. A package rarely includes audio of the reporter’s original question. A novice reporter may be tempted to ask interviewees to restate the question in their answer, but this is not recommended. This technique results in unnatural and awkward responses from interviewees. A good reporter can write the reporter track and cut sound bites together so that the meaning of the interviewee’s statement is clear without hearing the original question.

Some of the interviewee’s comments recorded on the footage may phrase things better than the reporter can. These are noted as “big A,” or “big answer,” comments. “Big A” comments may be emotional statements made by interviewees, narration, or simply a good turn of a phrase. Other recorded comments may be more efficiently and clearly summarized by the reporter. These are noted as “little A” comments, and they become the basis for the reporter track.

PRODUCTION NOTE

Experienced reporters can actually begin writing a story in their mind while on location or even while an interview is in progress. They envision the presentation sequence for information and recognize which comments from an interview should be used as sound bites in the package. Experienced reporters can often write and shoot stand-ups while on location for a story. However, beginning reporters need to work through the process of logging the tape and studying the information and footage to determine the best way to present a story to the viewer.



After the video footage has been logged, the reporter can begin writing the story. The very first sentence of a story is the *lead*. A *hard lead* begins the story abruptly and does not waste words. It contains a straightforward

reporter track: Everything spoken by the reporter in a package.

lead: The very first sentence of a story.
hard lead: The first line of a story that begins the story abruptly and immediately presents the most important information.

Figure 10-3. The reporter track is presented in the audio column of a package script. In this package example, the reporter track is highlighted in three cells of the audio column.

Video	Audio
Wide shot of reporter Stephanie Carter standing on stage in new auditorium Stephanie Carter Raider Television Super	Stephanie Carter/Stand-up The programs are printed. The tickets are on sale. Tonight is dress rehearsal for the first performance in the new Roane County High School auditorium. This new facility is equipped with features that will enhance any production. Senior Doug Miller is the sound engineer. While others have studied their lines, Doug has been busy learning everything he will have at his fingertips to make those lines sound perfect.
Doug Miller Sound Engineer B-roll of sound board	SOT Doug Every cast member will have wireless microphones like these placed at their temples, sort of like this. They will be almost invisible. I have a volume control here on the sound board for every person, and I've had to learn the settings for each to make them all even. Then, I also have to deal with the music and sound effects. This new sound system has the potential to be perfect, but only if I'm perfect at MY job. I'm pretty nervous.
B-roll of rehearsal	Reporter VO Doug has been at every rehearsal, fine-tuning those settings. He's not the only one who has to learn some new technology. When the curtains open and the lights come up...
Su Kiki Lighting Technician	SOT Su Kiki That will be me, I'm running the lights. We're using a total of 75 different lights for this production. This is my light board and I have a play script with all my lighting cues marked. Some of them are programmed in for different combinations for certain scenes, but I still need to have my timing just right to make everything happen.
	Stephanie Carter/Stand-up Making everything happen—that's what it's all about. Tomorrow night, we'll meet the cast of "The Execs" as they get ready for opening night on Saturday, right here at Roane County High School. This is Stephanie Carter for Raider Television.

soft lead: The first line of a story that communicates the general idea of a story, but does not offer any facts.

action verb and is active, not passive. The most important information is presented immediately. For example, "A bomb threat caused the evacuation of City Hall today." A **soft lead** communicates the general idea of the story, but does not offer any facts. It often sets the scene or introduces the characters. For example, "It's noon. It's quiet. That's about to change. In less than three hours, the Cowboys will take the field in front of thousands of fans and the quarterback decision will be history. The controversy started last week when..."

The reporter scripts a package by writing the reporter track to connect the "big A" comments. A good reporter does not write, "We asked Joe about the new theater and this is what he said" as a lead in to Joe's answer (big A). A more eloquent and interesting lead in may be, "Visitors to the new theater at Roane County High School find several features especially nice." The script then cuts to the "big A" of Joe talking about the surround

sound system of the theater, with a lower third key identifying him by name and title. The B-roll footage is reviewed to determine which images may be inserted into the script to make it stronger and provide visuals during the audio of the reporter track. The time code of the B-roll is entered into the story script, as well.

The ending of a story, or the **close**, may look to the future—what will happen next, who will be called to testify next, or when is the next game? Sometimes the close may be a "punch line" that sums up the story.

Once the story is written, the reporter usually records the reporter track or VO. The written story, reporter track, primary video, and B-roll tapes are then sent to the editor to put the story together. In smaller studios, the reporter may be responsible for editing the video and story together. The package is given to the producer when complete, and the reporter moves on to the next story.

Reporting the News

Viewers choose a preferred news program for a variety of reasons. Aside from the availability of channels, some viewers may choose a news program because they like the "look" of the set (**Figure 10-4**), the personalities of the anchors and reporters, or the physical appearance of the on-air personnel. Some choose to get the news from websites for convenience and may access additional information and features not included in a regular on-air newscast. News professionals hope viewers choose their news program because the content of their news show is the best produced in that time slot—excellent video and audio, near perfect performances by reporters and anchors, and the most pertinent, complete, and accurate news. No matter the viewers' reasons for watching, reporters have an obligation to the audience—report the news truthfully. Reporters obtain information,

close: The conclusion of a story.



Figure 10-4. An attractive set may attract loyal viewers. (Countryside High School, Clearwater, FL)

process and organize the information, and give facts to viewers in the most understandable way. Viewers then make their own decisions and form their own opinions.

VISUALIZE THIS

Today is April 15—Federal Tax Day. A reporter does a story about people who wait until the last minute to file their taxes. Video for the story includes a long line of cars waiting to get into the parking lot of the post office, which is completely full. The reporter simply reports that taxes are due and does a human interest piece with video of people who waited until the last minute to file. Included may be man-on-the-street interviews with a few drivers commenting on why they waited until the last minute to file.

The reporter does **not** launch into an opinion piece about taxes being too high, blaming all the ills of the country on the current administration, and suggesting that citizens rebel by not paying their taxes at all. It is unacceptable and unprofessional for reporters to present their own opinion in a news story.



Wrapping Up

Finding stories in the world around you is easy once you realize that a story can be anything that keeps people, including yourself, engaged. If something is interesting to one person, it is likely interesting to others, either as participants or observers. The reporter is responsible for bringing topics of interest to the viewers. Reporters diligently research subjects and double-check facts before passing information along to ensure earnest reporting, not gossiping. To write a story, reporters find just the right angle to keep viewers interested in the story and choose words purposefully to avoid interjecting their own opinions. A story that is told truthfully and well, informs the public and supports the reporter's professional reputation.

Review Questions

Please answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper. Do not write in this book.

1. What questions should you ask yourself to determine if a story is newsworthy?
2. What are some story sources in an educational environment?
3. What is the purpose of researching a story?
4. What is *attribution*?
5. Explain "writing for the ear."
6. What is the *reporter track*?
7. What is a *hard lead*? Give an example.

Activities

1. Watch several news programs and choose five stories that you find interesting. For each story, identify what makes the story newsworthy, what the angle of the story is, and note any attribution given during the story. Be prepared to share your findings in class.

STEM and Academic Activities



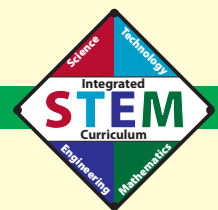
1. Identify the technological advancements that have made the process of researching stories easier. Explain how each advancement is used to research stories.



2. Create a list of possible news stories that can be written about your school. Of the topics on your list, what percentage of the stories are sports topics? What percentage are academic topics? What percentage are entertainment topics?



3. Choose three current event news stories and write a soft lead for each story.



 Social Science

4. Watch three local news programs on different stations. Which of the three news programs do you prefer? Why do you prefer one program over the others? Compare and contrast the news set designs and on-air personalities when explaining your preference.