Writing and Structuring News Stories
By Anya Schiffrin
George Orwell Is Right

- Good writing is clear writing.
- Journalistic writing is different from academic writing.
- Get to the point.
- Keep it simple.
- Do not use big words, slang, jargon.
- You are the translator.
- Buy these: Harold Evans’ books on grammar. Read his list of banned words.
- Ross Bruce-Larson’s *Edit Yourself*
Interviewing tips

- Prepare, prepare, prepare.
- You only have one shot at someone important.
- Don’t waste time asking questions that you can get information on before you go in to the interview (unless you are trying to relax the person you are interviewing).
- Do confirm things with the subject that you have read/heard and are not sure of and that they have first-hand knowledge of.
- Ask questions with a view to getting usable quotes.
- Take notes when your subject says something quotable.
- When it happens jot down the number on the tape recorder so you can go back to check the quote as needed.
- Find out how to reach them (or their PR) for follow up questions.
Before You Begin

- You have finished doing a lot of reporting. Now is the time to sit down and begin to write.
- Do you know what the point of the story is?
- Do you know why it matters?
- Do you have enough facts to begin writing?
- Have you thought about the big-picture implications of what you want to say?
- Have you talked to all sides and thought about what agendas they have?
- In the beginning, don’t be too ambitious
Telling A Story

- The point is to tell a story—about an event, about what a market did one day, about a controversy that is not yet resolved, about a CEO or a company and the difficulties/successes they have had or are having, about something a politician or government official or organization is doing.

- Flow is crucial, never let the story get bogged down.

- Sometimes you are writing a story about what could happen, not what has happened, but the same rules of good writing apply.

- Do not speculate too much.
The Lede

- Standard news stories start with a short lede that explains what the story is about.
- This is really the gist of the story, so readers can quickly decide whether they want to read it.
- Put in the main facts and the numbers or information that support those facts.
- In US media, we don’t start stories with quotes and we don’t begin sentences with numbers.
- Our ledes tend to be more direct than in other countries. Our ledes have changed as a result of the internet and are different in magazine-style writing.
The traditional lede

- Short and to the point.
- The first two sentences answer the following questions:
  - Who?
  - What?
  - Where?
  - When?
  - Why?
  - How
Features often begin with a delayed lede. In this case, the first graf or two often begins with some scene setting to draw the reader in.

You could describe a person’s situation, or a place where you reported the piece and what you saw and heard there.

Then you get to the newsy part (the lede) a little lower down.
Nut Graf

- After the lede comes the “nut graf”
- Invented at the Wall St Journal
- The nut explains why the story is important. You can think of it as the “so-what” graf.
- Every news item has two parts: 1) the event 2) why it matters
- The nut graf is a signal to the reader that tells them why the news is important and why they should keep reading.
- The nut graf is the one that says “this is significant because it bodes well/badly for the future” or “this represents a reversal of government policy”
- It encapsulates what the story is about
- It gives context.
More on the nut

- Helps the reader decide whether to keep reading
- Helps the editor decide whether s/he likes the pitch
- Helps the writer figure out what his story is about.
- Provides a road map for writing the rest of it.
- Also provides a transition from the lede to the rest of the piece.

Chip Scanlan says the nut graf “step[s] back from the individual case or scene or person to show where it fits into a larger picture”.

After the nut graf

- You can go into what some people call the “strut graf” which further elaborates the significance of the story.
- This can then be followed by some background (typically in features you have more background. Often reporters break up the background into small chunks and put it in several places in the story)
- After that you go back to the news or the main point of the story
- You never want someone to get bored and give up (though they usually do). So many readers don’t get past the jump.
Pyramid Style

- In US news writing, journalists typically followed the pyramid style. This means that the most important news is up at the top and less important information is lower down. This enables editors to cut from the bottom. (this is different from Europe and other countries where there may be a more thoughtful, featurey lede)

- For straight news stories, try not to bury the lede. Readers need to see quickly what the story is about.

- After the lede and nut graf, you can explain more about what has happened and provide more detail about the news you are reporting

- Then you go into background on the story.

- After that you can give more detail about the story and present the other side’s views. These are often signaled by sentences like “some people believe” “to be sure” “critics say” “analysts say” which may in fact be your own opinion.

- Then back to your main point which you sometimes signal with “nevertheless.”

- You continue to make your point and flesh out the news.

- You can end with the “kicker” which can be a cute quote or a summing up sentence. Try to avoid all the cliches like “the future remains uncertain” or “remains to be seen” or “time will tell” or the old standby “it will be a long hot summer.”

- Magazine style is different from straight news pieces. A front-page analysis piece is structured differently than a wire service spot news piece.
Presenting the Other Side’s View

- After you have presented your argument or the news, that you can give more detail about the story and present the other side’s views. These are often signaled by phrases such as “opponents of the measure say that” or “advocates believe.”

- “To be sure” is a let-out which says that you, the writer, are aware of the exception that proves the point you are making.

- So if you do a piece on how labor unions in the US are having a come-back, the “to be sure” line would be the line where you say “To be sure, union membership is still very low in the US.”
Being Critical

- There are lots of ways to signal that you don’t agree with the person you are interviewing or that you think the news being presented (at a press conference or in a press release is wrong).
- You can point out information which contradicts the person right after the information they provide you with.
- You can choose a quote which sums up their ideas which is silly and suggests they are misinformed.
- You can give more space to critics than to the person you are writing about.
- You can turn the story around and make it be about the evidence that disproves what they think and put them in as rebuttal to that evidence.
- Just because you got some news or an interview with someone important does not mean you have to make the whole piece be about them or their ideas eg an official press conference about how well the economy is performing can become a peg for an article on how poorly the economy is doing.
Always Be Fair

- Make sure you get both sides.
- If you are attacking someone or some entity, give them plenty of chance to respond.
- Include their evidence in your story where it is relevant.
- Don’t get personal.
- Don’t get nasty.
- Don’t leap to judgment.
- The story is not about you and your opinions. It is about the news.
- Don’t get too personally involved or you will lose perspective.
- Remember you can always write a follow-up piece and you should.
- Being fair will earn you and your publication the respect of your readers and your sources.
- Check and double check all facts and always try and get a comment or a response from the people you are writing about. (I said this before.)
Filling In Missing Information

- As you write, you will see what information you are missing. You can just put in tk and go back to get it by doing more reporting or returning to the people you interviewed for the piece.

- This is also a good time to check facts and quotes if your editors allow you to do that. (Each publication will have rules on what, if anything, can be shown to the people you are writing about).

- Don’t feel bad about going back to your sources for more information. This process signals to sources that you are scrupulous about accuracy. After the interview, let them know you will be calling and make arrangements for this. You can also work with their PR to get information that you need but can’t/don’t want to get from your main source.
Using Numbers

- Use the numbers and data that back up your story.
- There are some rules:
  - Compare apples to apples.
  - If you are writing about a revised number than you must compare it to another revised number.
  - If you are writing about February inflation figures then you must compare the new number to the same number a year ago and to the previous month.
  - Use percentage changes to make it easier for your reader. Do the calculations for your reader so they don’t have to do the work.
  - Explain numbers that are confusing or indices that may not reflect important information eg unemployment numbers that don’t include people who have given up looking or are working part-time.
Finishing the Story

- Make sure you have answered all questions raised earlier in the story. Don’t leave the reader hanging. If you mention in the beginning that someone started a project or tried to do a deal or ran for office, make sure you tell us in the story what happened—even if you add it further down in the piece.

- Spot news stories tend to finish with the less important news.

- Features often finish with a “kicker”. This could be a funny piece of information or a good quote.

- Again, try not to finish with a cliché such as “it looks like it will be a long, hot summer” or “what will happen remains to be seen” or “only time will tell if s/he is successful.”
Using Quotes

Quotes need to be interesting, funny, revealing or to add something to the story that you can’t say as well.

Don’t use quotes like “sales are up to $40 million dollars in the last quarter.” That is information you can paraphrase. Instead you can quote someone saying “Sales are booming” or “This is the best year ever.”

Break up long quotes into two parts or just take the best line and use that.
Don’t…

- Say something is the “first ever” or the biggest/smallest, worst/best unless you are really sure. It’s too easy to be proved wrong. Superlatives are red flags to readers who will immediately start to think of exceptions to what you have stated.
- Write about a subject without knowing what has happened in the past. Make sure you have researched other companies, other countries and situations where the subject you are writing about has occurred.
- Feel obliged to put in every piece of information you have about a subject. It may not be relevant or interesting for you readers.
- Be too opinionated or sympathetic to one side/person in the story. Try to keep your feelings out of the story.
Color

- Look for the interesting detail, the surprise, the unusual
- Look for things that will convey the story (the pepto bismol at the IMF office)
- The peasants gazing at cakes and sandals in the new shopping mall
- Just keeping asking questions. Always follow up. (Thai Binh province)
Writing Tips

- Avoid cliches, far-fetched analogies, drawn out metaphors and overly cute writing.
- Don’t write what you don’t understand.
- If you don’t understand something then get someone to explain it to you or leave it out.
- Don’t be afraid to ask a lot of questions or to go back to a source to have them explain or repeat a comment they made in the original interview.
- Check all facts.
- A mistake in something simple such as how a name is spelled or a date will undermine the credibility of the article and the publication it appears in.
- Don’t overwhelm the reader with data, decide what numbers you need and split them up in the story.
- Read our backgrounders:
  - http://policydialogue