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NEWS WRITING

News, Democracy and You

About *News, Democracy and You*

We developed this resource out of a desire to support the three components featured in the title: *News, Democracy and You*. We care about these subjects!

Why the focus on news? Many creative genres deserve attention, but we think you can learn a lot from writing news stories. News is a valuable information product we depend on daily.

Basic news writing relies on sound techniques you can apply to other types of writing: Write about important things, check grammar and facts, choose words carefully, and don't use more words than necessary.

In addition to sharing advice on writing, we address the connection between news and democracy. We often take freedom of expression and freedom of the press for granted, but these are democratic ideals we should celebrate and preserve. Recognizing and protecting these ideals is more urgent today than ever.

Finally, it's all about you. Creative expression is not only vital to free society but also can be a wonderful pastime. Improving your ability to communicate is a challenging, rewarding and fun lifelong enterprise. There is no better time to get started.

Kami J. Knies and Mark Tucker

Contact us

If you have questions or suggestions for improving this resource, please contact us.

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NEWS WRITING

News, Democracy and You



Writing genres

Topic 1

Blogs, mystery novels, commentaries, science fiction, news — these are just a few of many different writing genres we may enjoy and use on any given day. A genre is a specific kind of writing, and each genre is unique in style, form and content.

***News, Democracy and You* focuses mostly on one writing genre: News.**

One of the key characteristics of news is its practical importance in our everyday lives. Not only do we as individuals rely on this unique genre to stay informed; our democratic society depends on it. That makes it special.

While we are all consumers of news, many great stories are waiting to be told, and at times we ourselves may actually become news reporters! When you are wearing your reporter hat, we want you to be the best you can. Read on to learn how.

What you read probably depends on your mood and your needs at any given time.

Isn't it great to have choices?





News

Topic 2

We constantly depend on news and information. Some of us seldom go a few hours without messages from friends or family. We also want to know about things going on in the world and in our local community.

News is a unique type of information genre. Most of us are familiar with news reports and used to seeing and hearing them prepared in a certain way.

The writing rules we use to prepare news may not apply to other types of writing. News stories are structured and written differently from short stories, novels or blogs.

As for subjects, the topics we can find news on are endless. So when we talk about news writing, we are referring to stories on an infinite number of topics that interest people, including environmental news, local news, agricultural news, health news and so on.

We expect to be up to date on local and world events 24/7.





News determinants

Topic 3

With so many important things happening each day, developing news stories on every topic isn't possible. Even if we could, people wouldn't have enough time to read them.

That's why we use a checklist of seven criteria to help us decide if a story is worth telling to an audience. These criteria are called "news determinants":

- Proximity
- Timeliness
- Importance
- Progress
- Conflict
- Unusualness
- Human interest

Story ideas that meet two or more news determinants are probably newsworthy.

The process of deciding what stories are published is known as gatekeeping. Editors usually are the gatekeepers. For every story printed or posted, many more do not make the cut.

So, put on your press hat! How do you rate the gatekeeping by national media? What topics are over-reported? What topics are neglected? Why?

Millions of important things happen daily. What makes some things news?





Inverted pyramid

Topic 4

Luckily, you don't need to know anything about pyramids or geometry to use and understand the inverted pyramid!

The inverted pyramid is a format for ordering information in a news story. The most important fact goes in a sentence at the top called the "lead." The lead is followed by the next most important fact, a quotation, and the next most important fact, until you come to the end.

Imagine an ice cream cone. The most important facts (sprinkles and ice cream) come first, followed by supporting information like additional facts, quotes and details (the cone).

When news is organized this way, the least important facts are near the end, so editors can cut stories from the bottom to fit the space.

Just don't cut your ice cream cone from the bottom or everything would fall out, which would be sad news indeed!

The inverted pyramid style of news is ideal for readers with short attention spans.

Know why?



Spot news

Topic 5

Spot news refers to an event that just occurred and may affect a group of people. These are often the main stories you see on webpages and the front pages of newspapers.

Examples include accidents and disasters, like a downtown fire or a tornado that suddenly impacts people or even whole communities.

But spot news doesn't include only bad news. It also refers to important announcements, community events or sporting events of interest to people.

In all these cases, the event is newsworthy because it affects people and it just happened. Spot news is sometimes called "hard news" and is usually written using the inverted pyramid.

OK, time to put on your press hat! Can you guess which of the news determinants is nearly always featured in the spot news lead?

Who? What? When?

Where? Why? How?





**Quotations
are key in
people stories.**

Human interest news

Topic 6

Some news stories that focus on interesting people and their experiences are called human interest stories. Readers of all ages are interested in “people stories.”

Human interest stories often appeal to readers’ emotions by sharing unique human experiences that are funny, serious or unexpected.

These stories are not written in inverted pyramid form, but they can be structured in many ways. One of the easiest is to start by describing or talking about the person featured in your story. This effective technique is known as “leading with a person.”

Quotations are especially important in human interest stories because they allow readers to hear from the newsworthy person in his or her own words. Include quotes throughout.

Put on your press hat! Do you know anyone who would be a good topic for a human interest story? Why?

***News always involves people.
Human interest stories go
a step further.***

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Conciseness

Topic 7

Concise writing is brief but complete. The goal is to get your points across with the fewest, most meaningful words.

Not all writers are great at removing extra words. Sadly, many of us have learned to add fluff and filler words to make school assignments longer.

Concise writing is worth the effort. Using fewer words is a service to readers and frees space to add important details and information.

So, start removing extra words right now. It gets easier with practice!

Purdue OWL (Purdue Online Writing Lab) provides some good examples:

Wordy: *The candidate talked about several of the merits of after-school programs in his speech.* (14 words)

Concise: *The candidate touted after-school programs in his speech.* (8 words)

Writing concisely is more challenging than it looks and more important than it sounds.

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Editorializing

Topic 8

Writers may share their opinions in some types of writing, such as commentaries, blogs and creative essays. But that's not so in the news genre.

In news and feature stories, you should provide as many relevant facts as possible and interview others for quotations. You should not allow your own views or opinions into the story — an error known as “editorializing.”

By letting facts speak for themselves, authors achieve objectivity, an important goal in news writing. Objectivity is important in building trust with readers. How can readers trust what they read if the author’s biases are in a story?

So, put on your press hat! Is it ever acceptable for news writers to use the first-person pronouns *I*, *me* and *my* in a story? Why or why not?

Including our own opinion:

Blogs *OK*

Editorials *OK*

News ~~*OK*~~





Interviewing

Topic 9

The most important source of information for a news story is usually a person. It could be the scientist who just discovered a way to make food safer. Or the local 4-H member who just won a national award. Or the mayor announcing that 100 new jobs are coming to the area.

The writer's job is to identify and interview sources, write down interesting facts and information, and gather quotations.

Phone interviews are sometimes necessary, but in-person interviews are always best. Follow these tips for a great interview:

- Learn as much as you can before the interview.
- Ask open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions.
- Ask for clarification if something is unclear.
- Take complete notes.
- Always thank the source for his or her time.
- Write the story soon after the interview.

Good stories depend on interesting facts and quotes.

.....



Fact-checking

Topic 10

You know the feeling. The speaker pronounces your name incorrectly, Or your name is misspelled in an article or on a website. Or maybe your teacher calls you by your sibling's name.

Such errors are easy to make. Most of us have made the same mistakes ourselves.

But, as writers, we must consider that our work has a life of its own — articles, websites and social media posts can exist for months or even years for all to see. Information must be accurate, and our job is to make sure it's correct.

Always double-check the accuracy of names, ages and dates. Never guess at the spelling of a name or company, even if it sounds obvious. Be careful with numbers, too.

Fact-checking is not glamorous work, but it's essential for good writing.

Tip: If you aren't sure, look it up or ask.

***Factual errors are understandable
but not acceptable.***





Parts of speech

Topic 11

Every word in the English language can be grouped into one or more of the eight parts of speech. Isn't that amazing?

OK, we tried, but it's hard to make grammar exciting. Exciting or not, correct English usage is a must in professional writing.

Proper usage begins with a basic understanding of the parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections. The parts of speech are the building blocks of everything you write, much like buckets of sand form sand castles.

Many excellent books and online references can help sharpen your grammar and editing skills. Make a commitment to correct grammar in everything you write. Readers will notice. So will teachers and future employers.

If there are sentence or grammatical errors in our work, how can readers trust that our facts are correct? They can't.





Active voice

Topic 12

Writers know that verbs serve as the power words in a sentence. But how we place verbs in a sentence, whether in active or passive voice, makes a big difference.

A verb's voice refers to whether the grammatical subject of a sentence is acting or being acted on. Sentences that use active voice — in which the subject is acting — are easier to read and usually have fewer words.

Passive voice is sometimes necessary, but it may be wordier and harder to read.

Spotting passive voice is easy: Look for a “to-be” form of the verb followed by a past tense verb, as shown here:

Passive: *The car wash was organized by the neighborhood kids.*

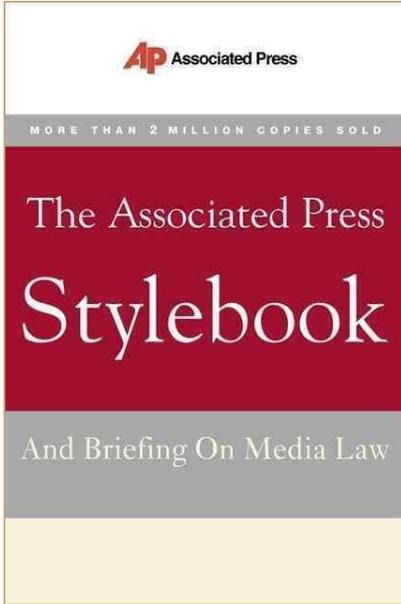
Active: *The neighborhood kids organized the car wash.*

Put on your press hat! Can you name the other “to-be” verb forms?

“Passive verbs are the 97-pound weaklings of writing!”

— Anonymous

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Style

Topic 13

Abbreviate or spell out? Numerals or words? Capitalize or lowercase? *Affect* or *effect*? No way around it – writers must wade through a lot of rules.

Rules governing such decisions are called style rules. They improve your writing by helping you be consistent.

We recommend that you refer to a good website or book for guidance on style. Writers have many to choose from, but one example is the Associated Press Stylebook.

The more you use style rules, the more familiar you become with them. In time you will memorize most rules and won't need to look them up. When you get to that point, you'll find that learning style saves you time.

*Style is a courtesy to readers
and a timesaver for writers.*





Titles and headlines

Topic 14

Titles and headlines are crucial in professional communication. Readers have many choices, and there are only seconds to attract their interest. An attention-grabbing title or headline is the first thing a reader sees.

The best titles and headlines are informative and clever. Start by making a list of keywords that should be included.

Include who, what, when, where, or why to give your readers an idea of what they will be reading. Add a strong verb that helps describe the story. A catchy headline is also a plus.

Writing titles and headlines is a special skill that takes practice. You might find it helpful to develop two or three possible headlines and choose the one you like best.

Time to put on your press hat! Why is the title or headline nearly always written last?

What's the last thing a writer writes and the first thing a reader reads?





Photos and art

Topic 15

News is not just text; it also includes photos or art. Strong photos not only attract readers' attention but can also show things that would be difficult or impossible to explain in words.

We all know good photos when we see them. Here are some basic rules for shooting photos to support a news story.

- Shoot photos of people, not just things.
- Try to provide a center of interest.
- Show people's faces, not backs and body parts.
- When possible, capture the whole person in the frame.
- For mug shots, focus on the face, not shoulders or the wall.
- Avoid distracting or busy backgrounds.
- Get different angles of the same subject (shoot from up high and from down low).
- Remember the rule of thirds — the main point of your photo is not in the actual center.
- Shoot a lot of photos!

People with no time to read a story will still look at a photo.





Photo captions

Topic 16

As soon as you shoot photos, gather information to write captions. While you might not use all of the photos you've taken, it's smart to collect all needed information while you're there.

For example, get people's full names and information about them, such as their age, job title and so forth. Make a note of what each photo shows and what people are doing. Think of the caption as a small story to accompany your picture.

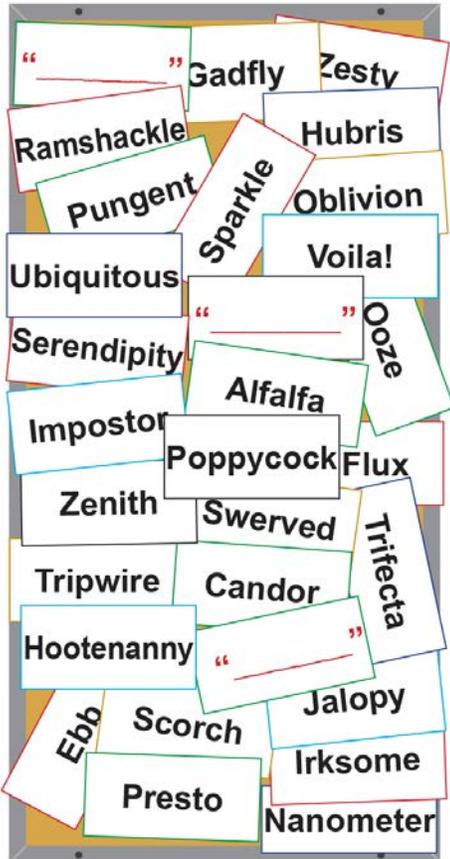
Collecting this information simplifies your task when you sit down to write captions. Most captions are a sentence or two long, but how much information you include depends on the subject as well as space.

All the professional rules of writing apply to captions: Write concisely, use active voice and double-check the accuracy of your information.

What should every photo have?

- A. A caption***
- B. A caption***
- C. A caption***
- D. All of the above***





Word selection

Topic 17

One of the fun parts of communication is working with all kinds of words, thousands of them, wonderfully diverse long and short specimens with different sounds and meanings.

Even slight adjustments in words and phrasing can make a big difference in your writing.

For example, did she *go up the hill* or did she *trudge to the top*? Did he *run down the sidewalk* or did he *slice through the crowd*? Did she *hit the target* or did the *shot pierce the bucket*?

Vivid nouns and strong verbs bring your story to life in the reader's mind. Help them to see and hear your topic! Adding even one special or unique word to a story can make a difference.

Time to put on your press hat! You'll see three blank "cards" on the left. Add three fresh words that you like. Why did you pick each?

***Choose words carefully —
they are essential to a great story.***

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Creativity

Topic 18

Many writers don't think they're creative even though writing is a creative activity.

Finding your creative self isn't easy. You must be willing to take chances and experiment. Not all of your ideas are going to work out. Just remember that every creative attempt is a learning experience. It gets easier with practice.

You can do one thing right now to enhance creativity — banish clichés from your writing.

Clichés are worn-out, overused phrases. They are no longer creative, and they're someone else's words!

Also, many are downright ridiculous. Should you *take the bull by the horns*? No, you should not. Is the *third time a charm*? We don't think so. Can you *have your cake and eat it, too*? We have no idea!

Should you eliminate clichés? Yes. Permanently.

Clichés

- Outside the box
- Lives (his/her) life to the fullest
- Make no mistake
- Last but not least

And too many others to mention

Do this right now to enhance your writing and creativity!

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Copyright

Topic 19

Your writing is creative property that is automatically protected by law.

You hold the copyright to your creative expression, which includes your unique phrasing and presentation. You also own the copyright to photos you shoot.

Copyright is like an invisible safe that protects your creative work from others using it without your permission.

Others' creative work is also protected in exactly the same way. This is why you should always cite or give credit to sources you use in a news story or in a term paper for school.

Copyright also applies to photos, art and company logos, so never copy or use images from the web or social media without the owner's written permission, unless they are clearly marked as free to use or public domain.

Your creative work belongs to you.





Communication ethics

Topic 20

Ethics is surprisingly complex. In simplest terms, ethics is a set of standards and rules that determine whether a particular behavior is or is not acceptable.

Society and individuals set ethical standards. Organizations and companies often develop their own codes of ethics. At its most basic level, ethics is concerned with doing the right thing, so it's important in all areas of life.

Ethical issues arise in news because stories involve people. Incorrect or careless reporting could harm a person's reputation. Including private information about someone may invade their privacy or cast them in an unfair light. The wrong photos can mislead audiences or may simply be in poor taste.

Three values can help you be an ethical communicator.

- Be honest in what you write.
- Insist on accuracy.
- Be fair when writing about or shooting photos of people and issues.

Three values form the basis of ethical communication.





Keep writing

Topic 21

Becoming a better writer and communicator takes time. It's also fun and rewarding, so keep practicing.

You can do other things to improve your writing skills. Books and online articles on writing can be a big help. But we also recommend reading about a lot of different things.

That's right — the simple act of reading can help improve your writing. Whether the subject is sports, science fiction or a biography, pay close attention to the words and the length and structure of sentences and paragraphs. What did the writer do well? What, if anything, could be improved? Why?

Also consider searching online for a writing rubric. A rubric is a guide or tool used to evaluate something. For example, teachers often use rubrics to grade papers. You might find one of the many different types of rubrics helpful as an aid to improve your writing.

Write.

Read.

Repeat.





The First Amendment

Topic 22

We often take for granted the freedom our Constitution guarantees. But you need look no further than the First Amendment to review some of our most basic rights.

The First Amendment is an amazing one-sentence declaration in our Bill of Rights. It says we may worship as we please, speak freely without persecution and peacefully gather to question or protest government policies.

You may at times disagree with or even find offensive the opinions that other people voice. Recognize they are exercising their First Amendment right.

The First Amendment also guarantees freedom of the press to report any stories it chooses. Press freedom is a significant and special right — only a small portion of the world’s population lives in a free-press society.

While the U.S. press system is not perfect, its mention in the First Amendment reminds us of its essential role in our democratic society.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

*The First Amendment
(Dec. 15, 1791)*





Watchdog role

Topic 23

In addition to serving as our 24/7 source of news and entertainment, news media also fulfill a crucial watchdog role on our behalf.

Watchdogs guard their owners' homes and property. Likewise, news media serve the public interest by keeping watch over government and business activities and elected officials. They alert the public to activities that could otherwise go unnoticed.

You could say that news media are a free society's "hall monitors" that keep a watchful eye on government, business and other institutions. They report what they find to the public.

Media's watchdog role would not be possible without the First Amendment. Only because of our free-press system are news organizations able to report critically on society's most powerful institutions.

Our mass media system not only provides news and information, but also keeps watch over our interests.





Right to know

Topic 24

The public's right to know has a long history in American culture. Simply put, the right to know asserts that citizens should have easy access to news and information that affects their well-being and quality of life.

While the right to know focused originally on exposing government activities, the principle has been extended over the years to many other topics in our everyday lives.

As applied to our food, for example, the right to know means that people have a right to know where their food comes from, who produced it and how it is produced. It's easy to see how the right to know can be applied to other topics, including health, education and science.

Interestingly, the right to know is not a part of the U.S. Constitution and is technically not a "right." Even so, it's a foundation of our democratic society and free press.

The public's right to know is a foundation of democracy.

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Social media etiquette

Topic 25

Social media are a part of our daily lives to connect with family and friends and to stay informed about the world around us. Follow these basic rules of “netiquette” to present your online self in the most positive light.

- Be professional. If your grandmother wouldn’t approve of the language or content, neither will important others!
- Read what you post. What you post says a lot about you. Future employers, teachers and friends will see your content. Always use correct grammar, and check your facts.
- Keep your conversations private. Wall posts and tweets are not ongoing conversations that everyone wants to read. Know when to send a message instead.
- Keep short and to the point. Though different platforms allow for more text, concise posts are best.
- Do not use all capital letters.

Others form judgments about us based on how we communicate online.





Media literacy

Topic 26

We depend on mass media in our everyday lives for entertainment and news, and our democratic society depends on the free flow of information to function properly.

But we should also recognize that mass media can have unintended and negative consequences for some groups in society. Awareness of these issues is known as media literacy. For example:

- Does media advertising unfairly stereotype women and minorities?
- Are violent television shows harmful to children?
- Are rural and poor people being left behind by mobile and cell technology they can't access or afford?

These and other media literacy questions have no simple answers. But asking the questions and thinking critically about media we increasingly carry with us, wear and use throughout the day is still valuable.

Media literacy skills help us think critically about media we use everyday.





Other cultures

Topic 27

Most examples in *News, Democracy and You* are based on U.S. culture, as this is where we live and work.

However, as you travel to other countries in the future, you will see that cultural practices and institutions vary greatly in other parts of the world. Some are very different from ours.

Experiencing different cultures helps fuel your personal growth, and cultural skills are a great addition to your professional toolbox. In future international travels, go further by asking yourself these questions:

- How does mass media use in this country differ from that of the U.S.? How is it similar?
- What is the relationship between the government and the press system in this country? Is it a free press, similar to the U.S.? Is it different? If so, how?

Put on your press hat! If you have traveled internationally, how would you describe the press system of the countries you visited?

We gain insights into our own culture when we experience others.

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Communication careers

Topic 28

Have you ever considered a career in communication? You should if you enjoy working with words, ideas and people.

Although *News, Democracy and You* focuses primarily on news writing, many other exciting communication career options with excellent job placement are available, including these:

- Public relations
- Broadcasting
- Social media
- Graphic design
- Crisis communication
- Science writing
- Advertising
- Extension education
- Marketing/sales
- Web design
- Magazines

Great demand also exists for those who combine science or agriculture with one of the communication specialties listed above.

For more information about communication careers or to speak to a career specialist at Purdue University, call **765-494-8423**.

Are you interested in a rewarding career working with words, ideas and people? Contact us.

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