

Writing a News Story

1. What can I write about? What is news?

On the surface, defining news is a simple task. News is an account of what is happening around us. It may involve current events, new initiatives or ongoing projects or issues. But a newspaper does not only print news of the day. It also prints background analysis, opinions, and human interest stories.

Choosing what news can be harder.

The reporter chooses stories from the flood of information and events happening in the world and in their community. Stories are normally selected because of their importance, emotion, impact, timeliness and interest. Note: all these factors do NOT have to coincide in each and every story!

2. Identify what kind of a story it is

Hard news (+/- 600 words): This is how journalists refer to news of the day. It is a chronicle of current events/incidents and is the most common news style on the front page of your typical newspaper.

It starts with a summary lead. What happened? Where? When? To/by whom? Why? (The journalist's 5 W's). It must be kept brief and simple, because the purpose of the rest of the story will be to elaborate on this lead.

Keep the writing clean and uncluttered. Most important, give the readers the information they need. If Softball New Zealand announced a game development initiative yesterday, that's today's hard news.

Soft news (+/-600 words): This is a term for all the news that isn't time-sensitive. Soft news includes profiles of people, programs or organizations. As we discussed earlier, the "lead" is more literary. Most of YPP's news content is soft news.

Feature (+/-1500 words): A news feature takes one step back from the headlines. It explores an issue. News features are less time-sensitive than hard news but no less newsworthy. They can be an effective way to write about complex issues too large for the terse style of a hard news item. Hall of fame inductees are a perfect example. The stories of their Softball career are full of interest which can be reflected in a longer piece.

Features are journalism's shopping centre. They're full of interesting people, ideas, colour, lights, action and energy. Storytelling at its height! A good feature is about the people in your community and their struggles, victories and defeats. A feature takes a certain angle (i.e. the resurrection of a club or playing field) and explores it by interviewing the people involved and drawing conclusions from that information. The writer takes an important issue of the day and explains it to the reader through comments from people involved in the story.

Hint: Remember to "balance" your story. Present the opinions of people on both sides of an issue and let the readers make their own decision on who to believe. No personal opinions are allowed. The quotes from the people you interview make up the story. You are the narrator.

Editorial: The editorial expresses an opinion. The editorial page of the newspaper lets the writer comment on issues in the news. All editorials are personal but the topics must still be relevant to the reader.

3. Structure for your article

The structure of a news story (hard & soft news & features) is simple: a lead and the body.

The lead

One of the most important elements of news writing is the opening paragraph or two of the story. Journalists refer to this as the "lead," and its function is to summarize the story and/or to draw the reader in (depending on whether it is a "hard" or "soft" news story - See below for the difference between these two genres of news stories).

In a **hard news story**, the lead should be a full summary of what is to follow. It should incorporate as many of the 5 "W's" of journalism (who, what, where, when and why) as possible. (e.g. "Barry Paton throws a perfect game at Surrey Park Saturday afternoon against Demons in the final of Softball's Calder McKay Shield". - Can you identify the 5 W's in this lead?)

In a **soft news story**, the lead should present the subject of the story by allusion. This type of opening is somewhat literary. Like a novelist, the role of the writer is to grab the attention of the reader. (e.g. "Until four years ago, J Davis played in Dunedin...") Once the reader is drawn in, the 5 "W's" should be incorporated into the body of the story, but not necessarily at the very top.

The body

The body of the story involves combining the opinions of the people you interview, some factual data, and a narrative which helps the story flow. A word of caution, however. In this style of writing, you are not allowed to "editorialise" (state your own opinion) in any way.

Remember:

The role of a reporter is to find out what people are thinking of an issue and to report the opinions of different stakeholders of an issue. These comments make up the bulk of the story. The narrative helps to weave the comments into a coherent whole. Hint: Stick to one particular theme throughout the story. You can put in different details but they all have to relate to the original idea of the piece. (e.g. If your story is about a Softballer making the Black Sox and their relationship with the club and community you DO NOT want to go into details about their employment).

As a reporter, you are the eyes and ears for the readers. You should try to provide some visual details to bring the story to life (this is difficult if you have conducted only phone interviews, which is why face-to-face is best). You should also try to get a feel for the story. Having a feel means getting some understanding of the emotional background of the piece and the people involved in it. Try to get a sense of the characters involved and why they feel the way they do.

Okay, got it? Let's look at two examples as a way of summarising the essentials:

Softballers are banding together to start a new club. You want to show why they are doing that and the changes they are trying to make in the community. You want to say who they are and the strategies they are using.

A club is having their first premier tournament. Why? What is the purpose for doing this? Do they believe this new tournament will add value to regional Softball? What form or structure will the tournament take?

4. Further tips for news writing

Finding story ideas

- Keep your eyes and ears open; listen to what your friends are talking about.
- Read everything you can get your hands on; get story ideas from other newspapers and magazines.
- Think of a youth angle to a current news story.
- Research a subject that interests you ask yourself what you would like to know more about.
- Talk to people in a specific field to find out what is important to them.

Newsgathering

- Begin collecting articles on your subject.
- Talk to friends and associates about the subject.
- Contact any agencies or associations with interest or professional knowledge in the area.
- Create a list of people you want to interview; cover both sides of the story by interviewing people on both sides of the issue.
- Collect statistics and reports on the subject get old press releases or reports to use as background.

Interviewing do's and don'ts

- Be polite.
- Explain the ground rules of the interview to people unfamiliar with how the media works - this means that you tell them the information they give you can and will be published. If they do not want any part of what they say published, they need to tell you it is "off the record."
- Tape the interview (so if anyone comes back at you, you have the proof of what was said).
- Build a relationship with the person being interviewed.
- Start with easy questions; end with difficult questions.
- Read the body language of the person you're interviewing and if they get defensive, back away from the question you are asking and return later.
- Don't attack the source.
- Keep control of the interview; don't let the subject ramble or stray from the subject.
- On the other hand, don't let your "opinion" of what the story should be colour the interview. Always remember that the person you are talking with knows more about the subject than you do.

Organising the information

- Gather your notes, interviews and research into a file.
- Review your notes.
- Look for a common theme.
- Search your notes for good quotes or interesting facts.
- Develop a focus.
- Write the focus of the article down in two or three sentences.

Writing and editing

- Remember you are the narrator, the story teller.
- Don't be afraid to rewrite.
- Be as clear and concise in the writing as possible.
- Avoid run-on sentences.

- Be direct.
- Tell a good story.
- Tell the reader what you think they want to know.
- Always ask yourself what the story is about.
- Read the story out loud; listen carefully.