

CHAPTER 10  
NEWS STORY STRUCTURE

**Y**OU have driven into town on a Saturday afternoon. As you cross the street from the grocery to the bank, you see the president of the bank in conversation in front of his place of business with a shyster stock salesman, who has been palming off fake stock on the farmers of the community. As you approach you hear angry words exchanged, and suddenly the banker lets fly with his fist and knocks the salesman down.

Or you drop in at the courthouse and hear some of the hangers-on talking of a suit that has been filed by the local cooperative tobacco association against your neighbor to compel him to fulfill his contract and deliver his tobacco to the cooperative warehouse.

You drive back to the farm, bursting with desire to tell your father what you have seen or heard—to tell him before anyone else has told him. You have news to impart. Now, how will you go about telling him your news? Will you begin:

“It was a mighty hot afternoon in town, dad. Streets were crowded with folks. I went to the grocery and got the things for mother. Then I strolled across to the bank corner. There were quite a few people crowding up and I wondered what the excitement was all about. All of a sudden—”

No, you won't tell your news this way, not if you are human. You will shout, almost before you have climbed out of the car, something like this:

“John Minnich knocked down that packing house salesman right in front of the bank this afternoon.”

Or you will blurt out without wasting unnecessary breath:

“Dad, the co-op's sued Jim Baker.”

**Types of literary form:** In imparting your news in this way you will be following an instinct almost as old as time. And you

will be following unconsciously the basic formula of news story form.

Any bit of prose writing that is intelligently done is cast in one or another of several literary forms. Broadly speaking these forms are those of the story, the argument and the essay. The evolution of each into a conscious literary model has been controlled by the effect which it endeavored to produce.

*The story or dramatic form* endeavors primarily to produce an emotional effect. It is normally a chronological narration of selected events leading up to a climax and through it to a denouement. Its purpose is not primarily to convey information, not to instill ideas, but rather to create a characteristic emotional reaction. To this end the story form employs a dramatic conflict, suspense, and a final solution on the basis of the premises laid down in the plot or characters.

*The argumentative form*—that employed in debate, oration, and many essays—is constructed on a logical basis. Its purpose is to convince the reader of the validity of the ideas dealt with. It may, subsidiarily, seek to arouse emotional reactions, but it strives primarily to appeal to the intelligence of the reader by means of its logical organization.

*The informal essay* is essentially subjective. Its form—or absence of form, for as the word informal implies it is unconventional—follows the vagaries of the writer's thought. It is concerned with the presentation of his ideas and emotions with the underlying purpose of revealing his particular personality, or ideas refracted through that personality.

**News story is different:** In these three types of writing are three different aesthetic or intellectual purposes, each finding expression in a fitting way. But there is another kind of writing with a purpose wholly distinct from any of these three—the presentation of news. Here one's purpose is not primarily emotional, nor aesthetic, nor logical, nor concerned with a subjective presentation of personality. It is wholly different and so requires, and has evolved, a wholly different technique of presentation. It is, therefore, just as reasonable to speak of the news story form as a distinctive type of writing as it is to speak of the story form or the debate form.

The news story, then, is different from other methods of writing in two major aspects. These are in the way the news story begins and in the structure of the story. This difference applies to news as it is written for newspapers. It applies to news as generally used in farm papers, trade and class papers, and the news sections of engineering magazines. There are exceptions to this. In strictly technical and scientific journals, a still different method of writing is employed as will be discussed in a later chapter.

**Evolution of the news story technique:** The news story form is not an invention of the newspapers. In fact, the newspapers have been strikingly slow in adopting it. In many European newspapers the news is not presented in the news story form at all, and the same is true of some weekly newspapers in this country. The reason for this situation is a historical one.

People from time immemorial have been conveying news information in the identical form in which the modern news story is written. The example with which this chapter begins is an illustration of this fact. When Nathaniel Butters issued the first regularly published English newspaper in 1622, he went for a model of the form in which he would present his information, not to the gossips of his time, who had, as the gossips of all time have had, the news story technique at their tongues' tips, but to the contemporary essayists and news letter writers. From that time forth for many years, and in the case of many European papers even today, the essay, in spite of its essential inadaptability to the purpose, was to a marked degree the model for news writing. This is strikingly illustrated, of course, in the *Spectator* and *Tatler*, so-called newspapers, in which Steele and Addison, so far as they reported the news of the day at all, did so in essays that were charming but singularly inutile for the purpose of conveying news. They were hardly news writers in the modern sense.

To such essays as those of the Sir Roger de Coverly series, news writers for years went, more or less consciously, for their models. The following from an 1833 issue of the *New York Sun*, while it is far from being an Addison essay, will show the affinity, in its indirect, commentative style, to the essay—an affinity as close at least as to a modern news story:

We learn from a correspondent at Columbus, that an occurrence of a most distressing nature, happened in that place last Friday evening, to a woman by the name of Wincup. It appears that she had partially recovered from a serious illness, and on leaving her bed for the first time to go to the fire, a spark lit upon her clothes, which being of cotton were immediately in a blaze.

But every new crisis—every case of a big news story in the field of any newspaper—more or less forced the writer of the event to adopt the natural method of telling news: the same kind of an impulsion which caused the boy in our illustration to blurt out the “big news” of what he had seen in town. A war would come along, and the newspapers would instinctively “play up” the outstanding events of the war. They would bulletinize the news of major engagements, consciously or unconsciously giving their readers the “big” news first.

This tendency became especially marked in this country during the War Between the States. Headlines which were bulletins of the news came into vogue. The stories themselves began to follow more or less an arrangement which would inform the readers first of all of the outstanding events at the front and leave the details and less consequential matters to subsequent parts of the story. In other words, the newspapers came gradually to comply with the unconscious demand of their readers that the essentials of the news be given first place in news stories. It became increasingly impolitic for an editor to ask the pardon of his readers—as an early editor did—for having got a few months behind with his foreign news, even though he promised to catch up with it soon.

This is an account, then, of an evolution. The account has omitted many of the minor factors in the process, but it has shown a steady tendency for the news writer to accommodate the form which he employed in his writing to what is obviously the natural and inevitable technique of the news story.

**Characteristics of the news story:** But what, in a little more detail, are the characteristics of this news story form, and why is it the logical method to employ in telling news?

The newspaper and many magazines must be thought of from a different point of view than that from which we regard a book. Most periodicals, and especially newspapers, are read hurriedly

and incompletely. They are great show windows of the world's events and ideas, into which the passerby gazes, letting his eye fall on this or that item which attracts his interest. In some things in the window he is not interested at all, in others only moderately, and at still others he will gaze with full attention. Whether or not one would wish it otherwise—and it would be a foolish waste of time for a reader to eye every word in a big modern daily newspaper—these periodicals are read smatteringly. More than that, they are read by people who bring to the task all degrees of ability for the assimilation of ideas. These facts impose certain characteristics upon the news story:

1. The bulletinization of news, in order to give the wandering eye of the reader the salient facts. This is exemplified in the headline and the beginning or lead of the news story.

2. Instant intelligibility—a style so simple, direct, and clear that it will make the news immediately available to all types of mind.

**The form of the news story:** The typical news story consists of a lead—usually the first paragraph—which gives in brief the gist of the news and, if the story is of any length, a body which goes into the details of the events described. Both the lead and the body of the story will be discussed in detail in succeeding chapters. It is enough here to say that the elements in the typical news story are arranged, not to effect a climax as in the fiction story, nor to adhere to a process of logic as in the argument, but in an *order of decreasing importance*. The more important elements of the story are put first, the *most* important in the lead.

What has been said previously in this chapter demonstrates the logic of this method. What is not so obvious is that the news story form can be used effectively not only in the presentation of spot news but also in writing of events which lack the spot news quality. Frequently the task of the writer is to give to material which is not obviously “newsy” an air of being so. And this can often be done by casting the material in the news story form.

**Analysis of the news story:** Everyone has read typical news stories, and a bit of reflection will bring to mind how thoroughly they follow the principles which we have been discussing. Consider the following illustration:

## FARMER IS SUED UNDER FEE RULE OF ASSOCIATION

Bedford, Ill., June 3—(Special)—Suit against Alexander Russell, local farmer and stock buyer, which will automatically test a bylaw of the Bedford Cooperative Livestock Association that members selling stock to others than the association must pay a penalty of twenty-five cents a hundred, has been filed by the association in district court here.

Judgment for \$52.25 is asked as due on two shipments made by the defendant to a party or parties other than the association.

Mr. Russell was manager last year, thus a member of the association and had signed the contract. The first of the year

the board of directors hired another manager and Mr. Russell began buying and selling stock on his own account, competing with the association. However, he failed to serve notice of withdrawal from the association as provided by its bylaws and is liable to the penalty, according to the petition.

Although the Bedford association appears as plaintiff, it is understood the action is being backed by the state organization which proposes to make a test case and carry it to the higher courts if defeated here.

The case is understood to be the first of its kind ever brought before the courts.

In what ways does this story follow the formula of the news story, and in what ways does it differ from other forms of writing?

We see at once that the first paragraph is a bulletin of the news. It gives the salient facts—that Russell is being sued for violation of his contract with the cooperative association and that this suit will test the legality of a bylaw of the association contract. These two closely related facts are the *big news* of the story.

The story contains, besides these two facts, the following points:

1. The judgment asked.
2. Resumé of Russell's connection with the association.
3. Statement of his failure to serve notice of withdrawal from the association.
4. Interest of the state organization in the case.
5. The fact that this is the first such case to be brought into court.

Now suppose we attempt to weigh the news value of each of these seven points, to determine their relative importance as news.

We would probably agree that the most news inheres in the point concerning the testing of the cooperative law. Rivaling this point in news value, on the basis, at least, of local news interest, is the fact that Russell is being sued by the association.

In naming the third most important point we might be tempted to differ with the writer of the story and say that the next most interesting point is that this is the first such case to be tried. If one were criticising the story, he would suggest that the last para-

graph should be made the second. Perhaps next in interest is the amount of judgment asked, although some of us might contend with good effect that the point concerning the participation in the case of the state organization is of more value because of its importance. Next perhaps in value are the details concerning Russell's connection with the association and the fact that he failed to serve notice of withdrawal.

While reporters might differ as to the exact arrangement of material to follow in writing this story, they would all agree as to the method of procedure—that the more important or interesting aspects of the story should be placed first and the less important and interesting later.

You will observe that this arrangement gives scant consideration to chronology or to logic and that it makes no effort, as would be the case in a fictional story, to work up to a climax.

While, as will be shown later, there are exceptions to this method of constructing the news story, it is typical of the great mass of news stories and the one which most adequately meets the needs of news presentation.

### ASSIGNMENTS

1. Rewrite the following story:

Our friend H. D. Parsons, proprietor of the Malaka Stock Farm, had an escape from fatal or very serious injuries last Saturday evening, which seems almost miraculous. About five o'clock he left town for home with a load of shingles. Just after he had passed the Hatch farm, six miles north of town, his horses became frightened and tried to run. With his one good right arm—all he has—he managed

to keep them in the middle of the road, until they reached the corner about a mile north of Hatch's. There in the sudden turn of the road west, the wagon was upset and Mr. Parsons was thrown about twenty feet. He was unconscious for over an hour, when found by Mr. and Mrs. John Swihart, who happened to be passing, and was taken to his home.

2. Gather material for a local story. After outlining the material on the basis of the discussion in this chapter, write the story as you think it should be written for a local paper.

3. Find in weekly or daily newspapers three stories which you think are ineffective because of the form in which they are written. Outline the material in each of them as you think it should be presented. Rewrite one of these stories.

4. Find three stories which you consider to be effectively arranged and discuss why you think they are well handled.

5. Make a brief study of news material in one of the following magazines (or equivalent) and report on how many items or articles are written in news story form: *Country Gentleman*, *Successful Farming*, your state farm paper, *Engineering News-Record*, *Good Housekeeping* (or other similar magazines), *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Florists' Review*, *Hoard's Dairyman*, *Engineering and Mining Journal*, *Poultry Tribune*, *Milk Dealer*, *Drug Topics*, *Science*, *Printers' Ink*, *American Miller*, *Farm Implement News*.

6. Rewrite a short news story you find in one of the above listed magazines (or equivalent) to tell it more effectively in news story form.