

CHAPTER 13

WRITING THE NEWS STORY

A CAMPUS reporter had just been talking to the head of the Farm Crops Department about hybrid seed corn. He had called to pick up a timely fall corn story for the farm page of a daily newspaper. He was told that the corn crop, both open pollinated and hybrid, had been seriously damaged by aphids in some areas. However, certain particular hybrids evidently had shown the ability to resist aphid attacks, and their resistance had now been confirmed by two years of observation in several states.

The farm crops professor gave the reporter a reprint of a technical article on the research work that had established the relationship between the observed damage and the aphids as the cause. He also gave the reporter an experiment station bulletin on hybrid corn research, a copy of the recent annual report of the state corn growers association on field results with various hybrids, and loaned him a copy of a new extension leaflet giving instructions on harvesting, drying, and storing seed corn.

As the reporter listened he began to "write" the story in his mind—a habit developed through experience. As he heard about the hybrids resistant to aphids, he thought that maybe here was his lead. The farm crops man gave him some new figures on the striking increase in hybrid seed corn acreage and also in farm acreage for the current year. He set down these figures accurately; perhaps the lead might be there. The professor made a rather startling statement. That was put into the reporter's notes. That might make the best lead. At least it would have to be quoted.

As the reporter went away from the interview, he turned over in his mind the facts he had just secured, arranging them in some sort of order. There was a deadline for his story and he barely

had time to get the story written. He began "writing" it "in his head" so that by the time he reached his typewriter he could hammer it out with little hesitation.

The professional newspaper reporter has to do that sort of thing every day—write the story in his head as he gathers his facts.

However, if a reporter has more time he sits down to his typewriter and works more leisurely. He has his "dope"—the notes he made. He also has a vivid memory of the things he had been told, and the several pieces of printed information given him by the farm crops professor.

Now for writing the story. But first there are several things he must decide:

1. How much is the story worth to his paper—how long should it be?
2. What aspect of the whole subject will make the best lead material?
3. In what form shall he write the story?
4. He has enough material, gained from the half-hour conversation and bulletin, to write a small book. What portions of this material shall he use?

Planning the story: He leans back in his chair and thinks through his task. He remembers a weather forecast that he had seen that morning—in fact it was this forecast that had suggested that the story ought to be got at once. The prediction was for cooler weather with a possibility of frost. He had gone to get just a timely, seasonable story on seed corn and possible frost damage. He didn't know about the aphid damage and resistant varieties until he was told.

So therefore, the story had a heightened value. It was real "spot" farm news with information of timely value for many of the newspaper's readers—not only farmers, but business men who have a direct interest in corn and its many ramifications.

So the reporter decides to let his story "run"—give it all the space it needs for a thorough covering of the material. Because of the spot news angle of the aphids, that is the lead. Because it is straight news, he thinks it should be handled in the straight news manner with a summary lead and an inverted pyramid

arrangement. All this is preliminary to the actual writing of the story.

The next step is to make a plan of the story. This may be written out—and it should be in the case of the novice, especially if the article is to be of any length—or it may be arranged mentally.

This planning of the story involves a decision as to the form in which it will be written and a weighing of the news values of its various elements. The plan will make it possible to do two things, to arrange the data of the story in the proper sequence and to include everything that is necessary for a sufficiently complete account of the event.

With these preliminaries—and every experienced writer has his own way of going about them—one is ready to put his story on paper.

In some such way, whether on the campus or in the full-time employment of some publication, every reporter must analyze and organize his material for the writing of a news story. Perhaps the home economics student reporter at Iowa State College has learned that at last the long investigation carried on there and at several other institutions, dealing with the food intake of college women, has been released for publication. Or in the soils laboratory at Ohio State University the reporter has been looking through an electron microscope which magnifies 100,000 times, disclosing things in soils never before possible for the human eye to see. This is the only one of its kind in the world as yet available for soils research work. Or again, the engineering student reporter at Pennsylvania State College may have found that in the campus Diesel laboratory, a new simple smoke meter has been invented to measure the smoke in the exhaust from the Diesel engine. It can be built for \$25 and will be news to research workers and power engineers the world over.

Whatever the story, the reporter who gathers it has the task of analyzing the material and making a plan for writing it.

One thing which seems to bother the beginning reporter as much as anything is how long to make the story. One teacher of technical journalism answers that question when his students present it, by asking another question: "How high is a tree?" The length of a

story depends upon its news value, the character of the publication for which it is to be written, the space it has available, and so on. However, a story should be long enough to present the essential facts for the readers it is to reach.

Several things may determine how long the story should be. The city or state editor or the magazine editor may tell the reporter how long a story he wants. Otherwise the reporter will decide for himself, largely on the basis of what he thinks is the news value of his material. If the story has a policy bearing, that is if it advocates or opposes some movement or belief in which the paper is particularly interested, this fact will influence the length. For example, if the newspaper is making a particular effort to educate its farm readers to the production of better milk, a story on the bacteriology of milk infection will be worth more than if the paper were not stressing this type of material.

Preparation of copy: All copy which goes to a publication to be edited and put into type should, of course, be typewritten. To facilitate editing, both by yourself and the copyreader or editor to whom your story will go before it is put into type, it should be double or triple spaced. As a matter of practice, however, it is not always possible for students in a campus journalism course to have access to a typewriter when a story has to be written. In such case, the reporter should use a pencil with a heavy soft lead and leave as much space between the lines as there would be if he were using ruled paper and writing on every other line. Always write on one side of the paper only.

At the top of the first page in the upper lefthand corner, write some clue—one or two words—as to what the story is about, as “Hybrid Corn.” If you are on the staff of the paper, write underneath this, your name or initials, as “Brown” or “AHB.” If you are sending your story to a paper with which you are not connected, write your full name and just below that, your address. At the top of the second and subsequent pages, in the upper lefthand corner, put the same clue used on the first page, with your name or initials underneath. The address is needed only on the first page. The first page is not numbered, but number the second and other pages at the top, preferably in the center. Indicate the end of

the story in some way. Most reporters now use several marks, such as "#####."

Begin the first page of your story about one-third of the way down from the top, leaving blank four or five inches at the top. This gives the copyreader or editor space to write in the headline or give necessary directions to the printer. The reporter does not write headlines. Avoid splitting a paragraph at the bottom of a page and carrying part of it over to the top of the next page. In daily newspaper offices frequently a story of several pages will be given to a number of linotype operators to set up. If a paragraph has been split, this will mean that on the copy desk the part of a paragraph at the bottom must be cut off and pasted on to the next sheet, so each linotype man can have complete paragraphs.

It is a good idea to put on the upper righthand corner of the first page of copy the approximate number of words in your story. It isn't necessary to count the words, but just make a quick estimate. Put the number down in multiples of 25 if a short story, or in multiples of 100 if a long story.

Clean copy, that is, copy which is free of typographical errors, X-ed-out matter, and interlineations, copy which is neat and easily read, is not only indicative of careful workmanship, but is also a guarantee against needless errors in the printed version of the story.

After the story is written, edit it carefully, assuming as far as possible the point of view of the reader and trying to see your story as he will see it. In this way you can best test its clearness, completeness, and accuracy. If the story, upon second thought, will profit by alterations, or if it is much marked up in the editing, it should be rewritten.

In writing and editing his copy the reporter should follow the "style" employed by the newspaper or magazine to which he is going to send his story. By "style" is meant the rules of the particular publication covering capitalization, spelling, abbreviation, punctuation, and so forth. Most newspapers and magazines have a printed style sheet or style book which can be secured by writers. In other cases style is a matter of office tradition and can be

learned by a writer who is not on the staff only by a study of the publication.

Copy should usually be written or edited into short paragraphs. Long, solid blocks of type in the newspaper or magazine column have a forbidding appearance.

Often speed in the preparation and submitting of copy is important. This is especially true when one is writing for a daily newspaper. The reporter should know the editorial deadline, the time after which copy cannot be got into the paper, and plan his work accordingly.

Student reporters are at first sometimes inclined to look upon a news assignment in the same light as routine assignments in other courses or as a term paper, which does not have to be completed at any set time. It is a traditional habit of students to put such assignments off and then do up a batch of them whenever the time or urge to work comes. News writing is not done that way. The story has to be written and in before the deadline. You cannot write copy for a newspaper or magazine after it is printed. So back work should never be accepted from a student after it is due, under any consideration. To learn this lesson is all-important to anyone who expects to get publicity stories into a publication. The county agent, the vocational teacher, the home service worker for the power company, the chap who has to get publicity for his engineering construction company—all must learn that copy has to be in on time. The sooner it is in, the better.

News diction: What should be the characteristics of news diction, for what kind of style should the news writer strive? The answer to these questions lies very largely in the nature of the news writer's task. What is he trying to do and for whom is he trying to write?

First of all he is trying to convey information. He is not usually trying to inspire, to entertain, to move, except as these purposes are tied up with his primary one.

If we accept these statements, we shall have to agree that the one quality of writing for which, above all others, he should strive is clarity. He must endeavor to find the words and phrases which

will make clearest to his readers the ideas which he has got from his news sources.

And his readers—they are a mixed group, men, women, and children, educated and uneducated. They bring to the task of reading what he has written all degrees of intellectual ability. And yet he must write for them all, he must find a common denominator of language.

All of this points to a second cardinal quality of good news writing—simplicity. This does not mean that a news writer is limited to monosyllables and simple sentences, but it does mean that he should largely avoid extremely technical words or phrases, foreign language words and phrases, and the more exotic elements of his own vocabulary. Again, it does not mean that an ample vocabulary is a handicap, but that his efforts should be to know the exact uses of words rather than to build a vocabulary of unusual words which he will have little occasion to employ.

But even news writing isn't all bread and meat; if it were it would be too dull and monotonous for both the writer and the reader. Given that a story is clear and simple, there is no reason why it should not also be entertaining, clever, sprightly.

In other words there is ample room for originality and imagination in news writing. Negatively put, this implies the avoidance of the trite word and the hackneyed phrase. Positively, it implies the injection of imagination into what one writes.

In the following stories, the writers have succeeded, with material that is in no way exceptional, in giving an imaginative turn, an interesting freshness and originality, to what they have to say.

WHEN CELL MEETS CELL

Memphis, April 22—Minute cells of a human body can recognize each other by chemical means as accurately as a dog knows his master, Dr. Leo Loeb, Washington University pathologist, explained at the opening session here this morning of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology.

The differences between people are as great in chemical ways, he explained, as in shapes of noses and mental traits. The chemical traits by which cells identify individuals are as characteristic even as

fingerprints and moles or other distinguishing marks.

The individual scent or pattern of scents by which a dog recognizes a particular man is, of course, chemical. Cell recognition is far more subtle but it is also more fundamental. . . .

DOES YOUR MOUTH WATER?

Those persons whose mouths fail to water at the mention of home-made mustard pickles need not read further. For others here is the formula:

One pint of cucumbers, about 2 inches long; 1 pint of large cucumbers, sliced; 1 pint of pickling onions; 1 cup of string beans; 1 pint of small green tomatoes; 1 pint of cauliflower, cut in small pieces; 3 red peppers, chopped; 1 cup of carrots, sliced; 1½ cups of white sugar; 4 tablespoons of flour; ½ tablespoon of tumeric; 1 teaspoon of celery salt; 4 tablespoons of mustard and vinegar.

Miss Grace Magee, of the home economics division, Iowa State College, who furnished the formula, advises further: Soak all vegetables over night in brine, which is made up of one cup of salt to one gallon of water. Drain and let stand

in clear water for three hours. Mix enough vinegar and water in equal quantities to cover the vegetables and let them stand for an hour. Drain and scald with this liquid.

Mix the dry ingredients, add three pints of hot vinegar and cook in a double boiler. Drain the vegetables, pour the dressing over them while hot, let simmer for five minutes and seal.

The pickles will be firm and crisp, if the vegetables have been fresh, if the proper salt solution has been used, if the ingredients have been properly blanched and not softened by boiling.

Freshness and originality may be given to a news story by the use of words and phrases which specifically describe sound, motion, color, appearance, and other characteristics, rather than hackneyed general terms. It can also be done by direct quotation when the principal in the news speaks words that are more forceful and picturesque than the reporter could invent. An occasional figure of speech, well chosen, lends liveliness without interfering with the function of a story to tell the news, but really serving it.

A book on good news style would hardly illustrate more clearly what it is than the following story which appeared in the *New York Times* of April 9, 1941, unsigned, but coming as a special. From the lead, with such picture words as "death lifted the mask," "daybreak," "zigzagged," to its final direct quotation, "the Lone Ranger could never die. Every kid knows this by heart," it is a model of what effective news writing may be. It is a story out of the field of radio broadcasting, and its effective use of technical details helps to make it a great story.

Exemplifying freshness and originality

DEATH LIFTS THE MASK

Special to *The New York Times*

Farmington, Mich., April 8—Death lifted the Lone Ranger's mask at daybreak today. He died at five o'clock when his car zigzagged into a parked trailer in front of the Methodist Church.

None of his estimated fifteen million devoted radio listeners would have recognized their stern-voiced, hard-riding hero in the figure that lay in the wreck. He

was a mild-eyed, chubby man of thirty-two, an inch or so short of six feet.

Away from the microphone and remote from Silver, his snow-white horse, he was Earle W. Graser. In the eight years that breathless children have thrilled to his "Hi-yo, Silver—Awa-ay-ay!" he lived in a white Colonial house here with his wife Jeanne. His daughter, Gabrielle, is fifteen months old.

Millions of youngsters will never believe it, but their Lone Ranger was a lawyer. It may deepen their pain to know that he held three college degrees—A.B., M.A., LL.B.—break their hearts to know he was never west of Michigan, and crush them to learn he could not ride a horse.

But perhaps they will refuse to believe the facts and remember only the voice they heard.

Popular in Foreign Lands

For Lone Ranger was a voice, a deep, rich voice. He sang bass in his church choir. He studied elocution; dreamed of teaching it, some day, in an Eastern college. He liked swimming and played a maddening hard game of badminton.

Three times a night, three times a week, he was heard on 150 stations of the Mutual network and on scores of independent radio stations. A single announcement that he would distribute Lone Ranger badges brought in 1,397,000 requests for the tin.

He was every kid's symbol of hard-riding justice; foe of the road agent, the strong arm of the weak, the deliverer of the oppressed—a deathless, godlike being who had survived from Coronado's time down to our own as each glib script would have it.

The Lone Ranger was as popular in New Zealand and in Yugoslavia as he was in the United States. His fan mail came from Mexico and from South America. One time, when the villains of the script were Mexican bandits, the Mexican consul at Detroit was distraught and wrote him about it. . . .

Once a Soda Jerker

Earle Graser was born in Kitchener, Ont. He was a child when his parents moved to Detroit. He went to Detroit schools and was graduated from a Detroit high school. He won his degrees at Wayne University in Michigan.

In between he worked at odd jobs. He

was a soda jerker for a time. The only horse he ever handled was a grocer's cart horse when he delivered orders. He had one other affiliation with horses—he got his nickname, Barney, from a milk wagon horse on the family route.

He sang in pit orchestras. He was an usher in the Michigan Theatre in Detroit. His only stage appearance was as an Alpine shepherd when he drove six undipped sheep.

Eventually he drifted into the WXYZ studio and did character bits. . . .

He was chosen from among five men who tried for the Lone Ranger part. His lush, vibrant timbre made this easy. It was a voice to make outlaws quake.

The owners of the Lone Ranger program and Fran Striker, the script writer, decided at the outset that the Lone Ranger must ever remain a mystery. They forbade personal appearances. Except within a narrow social circle in Farmington, the Ranger's identity was secret.

The youngsters who worshiped him will probably refuse to believe that the Lone Ranger's pistol shots were just so many raps with a can against a hard leather cushion; that Silver's gallop was merely a sound effect produced by patting bathroom plungers into a box of gravel. . . .

Earle Graser appeared before the microphones as Lone Ranger, his associates estimate, about 1,300 times. Last year and the year before he got two-week vacations. Through these fortnights the scripts built up to the climax of his return. He just vanished and came back at the right minute, not one second too late, not one breath too soon.

The body is to lie in state in a funeral parlor here until rites on Thursday. The broadcasters think mostly adults will come to see it. They think, and hope, that few youngsters will hear of the wreck outside Farmington Church.

A station official said:

"We have to do it that way. The Lone Ranger could never die. Every kid knows that in his heart."

Don't "write down" to reader: There are few things more humiliating to one, no matter who he is or what his position in life, than to be treated with condescension. To write a story in such a manner that the reader will feel that he is being "written

down to" is a serious error of both taste and psychology. It is an error, however, to which the writer of technical stories is particularly prone. His is the task of taking what are often intricate scientific findings and translating them into a language which the layman can understand, and there is often a temptation to assume a somewhat top-lofty air which may creep into his story as an attitude of condescension. To write in such a way is to invite a poor reception of one's story.

Avoid didacticism: For much the same reasons the writer should so handle his material that, even when his purpose is to preach, the preachment will not be obvious. It wouldn't be a bad idea for writers to bar "should," "ought," "need," "must,"—in such phrases as "Experiments show that farmers should add minerals to the rations for fattening hogs"—from their vocabularies. Instead of employing a hortatory form, the writer can tell what the results of the experiment are and leave the drawing of conclusions to his readers.

Make the story practical: The editor of a farm paper once remarked that the greatest fault he had to find with many news stories submitted to his magazine was that they did not give the reader ample information to do the things that the stories themselves recommended. The purpose of much farm and home "time copy" is to convey information about up-to-date agricultural and home economics practices. To accomplish their purpose such stories have, necessarily, to be sufficiently complete so that the reader can actually follow the suggestions which they make.

One gets a story, for example, on seed corn testing. It is not enough, for a farm paper or the farm page of a daily paper, to say that such and such an agronomist recommends this or that type of seed corn testing. That is news to be sure, but for the story to accomplish its function it should go on to a description of the testing method so clear and complete that the reader can carry out the recommendations.

Getting the local angle into the story: When writing a story for a newspaper or regional magazine, the writer will find it important to be on the alert to give as strong a local angle to his

material as possible. The "closer home" the story is, the more interest readers will have in it.

Comment from local people, experiences of local people, the way events will affect local conditions—these things are to be emphasized.

Accuracy in writing the story: Accuracy in news writing is not merely a matter of gathering information correctly but also of writing it correctly. In selecting the facts that are to go into his story, in rejecting others, in clothing them in language, in giving or withholding emphasis, in arranging them in order, the reporter needs to guard against several dangers:

Partial statement or omission of fact.

Misstatement of fact.

Inadequate statement of fact.

Incorrect emphasis on facts.

Overcoloring of fact.

Misinterpretation of fact, through prejudice, misunderstanding, or otherwise.

Erroneous deductions or conclusions from facts.

This brings up another important angle of accuracy which relates to what was said in an earlier chapter about what makes news. This is that *news is fact and not opinion*. In avoiding the dangers just listed, the reporter who does a good job of writing is impartial in what he writes. In the first place, he should be impartial as he gathers the story. The reporter who handles a football story does not take part in the cheering or "rooting" for either team. It is not the best policy for a writer for a farm paper or other type of publication to take part in a convention he is covering by acting as a member of a resolutions committee, by electioneering for some candidate, or by sitting on the platform among the notables. He will secure and write a better story if he keeps free from any entanglements, works as a friend to all involved and tells the facts without bias.

Let us present a fictitious story, not unlike one which was actually given currency in newspapers some time ago, to illustrate these various inaccuracies in writing:

A remarkable corn production record of 125 bushels per acre has just been hung up by Henry Thompson of Thompson County, Mont. That is a mark even for corn belt growers to shoot at, in Iowa, for example, where the state average for corn production will not very much exceed 40 bushels per acre in a good season.

Mr. Thompson did not have a large field of this corn, for Montana farmers are not in the habit of planting 80 and 100 acre fields of this crop as they are in the corn belt. But it was genuine corn

and the figures were carefully checked to insure their accuracy.

Mr. Thompson is also a successful grower of alfalfa. Last year his 40 acres of this crop yielded him 200 tons of hay, besides pasturage. He marketed most of this crop to his neighbors at \$20 per ton and fed the remainder. His income may be figured at about \$4,000 for the field. His land rental, hired help cost and a due portion of the original seed cost amounted to \$1,875, leaving him a profit of \$2,125 for the season on the 40 acres.

The complete facts back of the story were these: The corn was a little trial plot of about one-tenth of an acre, in a garden near the farm house. This plot was expensively fertilized and frequently watered and thoroughly cultivated by hand. It did yield at the rate of 125 bushels per acre, and the corn was of a very good grade. The alfalfa field produced as stated, but a number of important items of production cost were not considered in estimating the profits, such as Mr. Thompson's own labor, interest charges, haulage cost, the near failure of the crop the preceding year, and others.

This story is fictitious and extreme, but many approaching it in inaccuracy are published. Its errors lie wholly in the writing.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Gather material for a news story. Outline it carefully and write it. (This, of course, is a standing assignment, not only with this chapter but with most of the others.)

2. Make a list of from 50 to 100 words which should usually be avoided because of their triteness. (It is well to keep such a list in a notebook and add to it from time to time.)

3. Clip five stories which you think are outstandingly characterized by good news diction.