

## Chapter 3

# Story Structure

PROFESSIONAL NEWS REPORTS use generally accepted international norms of structure, designed to present the information directly, concisely and clearly. Different countries have different traditions and one style is not necessarily better than another. But the news writing style outlined below reflects what is usually accepted internationally, especially in English-speaking countries.

The central principle is that the *reader comes first*.

This means that reports must be written with a view to the people who will be receiving the information. The prose must be direct, attract their attention and make them want to read the report. This is what sets good news writing apart. What do the readers want - or need - to know? Why should they read the report?

In literature or films, the audience expects to be entertained and may be held in suspense. The writer starts at the beginning, weaves a plot, holds the reader in suspense, especially through the quality of the writing or imagery, and works to a climax. The audience sets aside time to go through this experience.

Not so with news. People want information and they want it up front.



*Before the newspaper can be put together (as here, in Kabul), the stories themselves must be carefully constructed*

*The main purpose of news writing is to convey information*

Feeling engaged is a plus for a news audience and can be an important factor in television news. But the main purpose is to convey information. In newspapers or on the web, there is no guarantee a reader will take time to finish the story, or indeed will look at more than the beginning of the report. So the writer must cater especially for that.

Watch someone reading a newspaper or a web page. The pattern is very different from reading a book. With a newspaper, the reader scans the page, the headlines and then the first sentence of a story that attracts. Readers make a decision about what to read and how much, turning pages slowly or quickly, depending on how well the reports attract them or what information they spot of their special interest. There are many different “places” within a newspaper or a web site for the reader to go, and many articles competing for attention. There are also many different newspapers to read, and literally countless web sites. It is with reason that the fast skimming of vast numbers of online information sources has become known as “surfing”.

The way a news story is built - the structure - must cope with this. In the international tradition of journalism, the climax - the

most important material - is therefore generally presented right at the beginning or introduction. This is called the lead. The most important facts are packaged as succinctly as possible, with the barest necessary explanation, in that first paragraph. The story then moves, paragraph by paragraph, into the detail or body of the story by covering the facts in a diminishing order of significance and importance.

### Inverted Pyramid

This form of writing is commonly known as the inverted pyramid style, because when made into a diagram it appears as an upside-down pyramid with the important foundation at the top and the least important point at the bottom. It caters to the needs of a newspaper reader, as well as a newspaper editor.

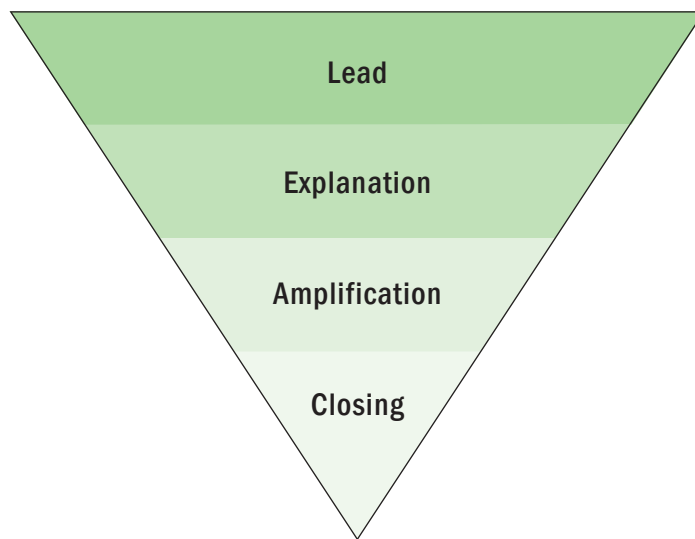
This style of news writing saves the time of readers, who can see at a glance from the first sentence whether the story is worth following. The lead contains the most important material. A successful lead, generally 25-40 words, provides the main points of the story, and aims to attract the reader's interest. A good test of a lead is to assess whether the opening itself could stand alone as a comprehensible news brief.

Following on from the lead, the story proceeds to the explanation, laying out the main facts of the article, the individuals or organisations involved, and the issues of debate.

The amplification takes up further points of interest, delves into more detail, elaborates initial perspectives in more depth or provides more colour or extended quotations from participants.

The closing may tie-up the piece, pulling together various strands of the story, or offering a speculative tone, often through a direct quotation from a participant. But it should not contain fresh information or introduce an important new theme or concluding point, which should have already been covered. In general it is a light touch, and in many cases may be left out altogether, or be cut for space.

### Story Structure: Inverted Pyramid



This structure recognises that the purpose of a news story is not to keep the reader or audience guessing but to present facts rapidly, clearly, accurately and simply. Crucially, it also helps editing, allowing stories to be quickly cut down to fit into a smaller space on the page, and readily adapted for changing circumstances.

*Good journalism is about satisfactory answers to the six questions*

Suppose an editor has asked for 800 words on one story, then something more important happens, such as the assassination of the country's leader or a bomb blast - and such events do happen suddenly and unexpectedly. The editor must act quickly to cover the breaking story. This means less space for the other story (sometimes even no space).

If a story is structured in the inverted pyramid form, it is a relatively simple matter to cut the material from the bottom up without losing the essence of the information. It might even end up as a single paragraph. But if properly structured, it will still be clear, self-contained and informative.

It will answer the six key questions.

## The Six Questions

Good journalism is all about satisfactory answers to questions. There is nothing more annoying than a news story that raises questions, then leaves them unanswered. It may not always be possible to address all questions in the lead paragraph without cluttering it up and making it difficult to understand. But that is what journalism aims to do, and certainly basic questions should be addressed in the first few paragraphs. A good news lead is not usually more than 25-40 words.

### Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?

Note the active nature of these questions. Journalism is about events - whether a dramatic moment or a trend, it covers things that actually happen in the world, and tries to do so in a succinct way to communicate them simply and clearly to a broad audience.

Read the following example:

**OPPOSITION AND GOVERNMENT  
TRADE ACCUSATIONS OVER KILLING THAT  
ROCKED MONTENEGRO**

*By Nedjelko Rudovic in Podgorica*

*The arrest of two suspects for the murder of a prominent journalist has failed to quell a war of words between the Montenegrin government and the opposition over the shooting.*

*The murder of Dusko Jovanovic on May 27 has fuelled an atmosphere of fear and insecurity in the republic, widening the chasm between opposition parties and the government.*

*Damir Mandic, a well-known martial arts sportsman, and his brother Almir were arrested last night in connection with the investigation.*

*Jovanovic, 40, editor of the Podgorica daily Dan and a critic of the pro-independence coalition, was shot dead around midnight in front of his office.*

*After Jovanic got into his car, a vehicle with tinted windows pulled up close by and a gunman opened fire from it. The car sped off in an unknown direction.*

*The killing is an embarrassment for Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, as the opposition has claimed the murder was carried out on the orders of figures close to - or even in - his government. At an opposition march held to honour Jovanovic's memory on May 29, protesters shouted "Milo - murderer" as they passed government buildings in the capital, Podgorica.*

*The ruling coalition insists the murder was carried out precisely to destabilise the administration.*

*Determined to dispel any suspicion that the government had a hand in the killing, Interior Minister Dragan Djurovic announced he would resign if the crime was not solved, and offered a million-euro reward for information about who ordered or carried out the murder.*

*Djukanovic himself said the killing was "an attack on the peace and stability of Montenegro. This is why it is important to analyse who might have had the motive to send such a message by perpetrating this criminal act".*

*The interior minister has asked French, British, German and American police to send experts to crack the case. German experts have already arrived.*

[Story cut here for purposes of this example]

This is not a “hard” or “spot” news story, but a news analysis following the overnight arrest of two suspects in the killing. But it too requires a clear structure. Let’s test the inverted pyramid rules in the story:

The scene is set out in the first paragraph. Afterwards the story is expanded - particularly adding context, titles for the individuals named, and balancing information. But notice that the lead contained the essence of the report concisely.

### Other Leads

While a straight lead is the simplest and safest, sometimes you might want some variety or novelty. The purpose is to attract or intrigue - in which case answering the six key questions may come later. A hard news lead may be inappropriate for a trend or human interest story. But do not wait too long or you will lose your audience. This technique is sometimes called the “delayed drop”.

For instance:

*People in Oslobsk have been living in fear for the past five years, but finally the government took action that will save lives in the region.*

The word “fear” may intrigue an audience. But the six key questions remain to be answered. So the next sentence may be:

*After first evacuating some 500 villagers, special military units yesterday blew up live mines and shells left behind after a conflict six months ago.*

Novelty or intriguing leads should be used sparingly and only where they are truly more interesting or compelling than a straight lead.

Sometimes you may want to create an atmosphere in the lead:

*The smell of death and a pall of smoke hung over the debris-strewn street. This was all that was left to mark the massive shelling that began here last night and continued unabated for 12 hours.*

Sometimes you might want to jolt the reader’s attention:

*“It’s totally unbelievable,” said the general, expressing shock at the destruction uncovered by the clear light of dawn.*

*He was surveying the battered remains of the town pounded throughout the night by enemy shellfire, leaving dozens dead, hundreds wounded and most buildings in the centre shattered.*

In any event, information should be given quickly and clearly, and the “set-up” in any alternative lead should itself be short and to the point. Brevity is the soul of wit.

Details make stories live and credible. That does not mean packing in too much detail. It does mean letting colourful facts rather than adjectives tell the story. Adjectives should only be used if they really tell something extra, not just paint a pretty picture. Tell your story through action, rather than description. Adjectives sometimes undermine a story’s objectivity and impartiality.

Compare these two sentences:

*The noisy room was abruptly cleared by the furious chairman because of an abuse-shouting delegate.*

*The chairman banged the table with his gavel and ordered the delegates to stop shouting and leave the room immediately.*

The second gives telling detail of what actually happened in an active manner.

If you do use adjectives, ask yourself whether they can be explained by details in the story, and are not just the writer’s

personal opinion or assumption. Do not overdo the detail. The rule is: enough to make the story clear, interesting and even dramatic - but not so much that the audience forgets what the story is about.

*If you are unsure, go back and ask again*

When in doubt, put in all the details you think make the story better. Editors can always take them out, but as they are not on the spot, they cannot add them.

### Background

The journalist should always ensure that she or he has enough background information to be able to understand and write the story. Remember, if you do not understand, it is unlikely that your audience will. If you are unsure, go back and ask again.

The reporter must always remember that the audience will probably not know as much about the background as the writer. So ensure there is enough in the story for the audience to understand the context.

Always give people's full titles and spell out all acronyms in the first usage. As a reporter working in your own country, you are

fully aware of the name of the prime minister. But a reader coming to the story from a world away via the Internet or syndication may have no idea. Political party affiliations can also be very complicated, so ensure that on first (or in rare exceptions second) reference within a story, the full name of the party is spelled out with a brief indication of its approach: left- or right-wing, religious or ethnic, social democratic or conservative, etc.

It helps the audience to know that Ali Beg is a tailor in the main shopping street of the district of X rather than a tailor in a suburb, or whether he owns the business or works for someone else. What is his age? Does he have a family? Is it relevant, or does it help the reader to understand the story better?

Audiences may need to be reminded of some facts even about a well-known personality - The basketball player renowned for shooting with his left hand . . . the deputy who was released from jail only a year ago after serving a sentence for hitting a policeman . . . and so on.

Try to anticipate and answer complications. If two people in the story have the same last name, indicate whether they are related

or not. If an event takes place in the countryside, find a moment to indicate how far it is from the capital, and whether it is north, east, south or west. If an opposition party makes a statement, remind the reader whether it is a large and influential party with the potential to take power in time, or a smaller grouping.

Sometimes you may have to add some words, such as “the desert town”, as many will not know it is in the desert, or “the industrial suburb” or “the southern city”.

The key is: How can I help make it clearer for the audience? Avoid boring or extraneous detail but enable a reader unacquainted with the subject to follow the story. Give exactly the information, no more and no less, that can help the reader understand.

*The key is: How can I help make it clearer for the audience?*

## EXERCISES

Read newspapers with an eye to the lead and answer the following questions for different kinds of stories:

- How many words, or paragraphs, does it take the journalist to set up the story?

- Is it classic hard news lead, or an alternative, atmosphere-setting or other approach?
- Does the lead address the six key questions?

Monitor your own newspaper or Internet reading. Try to figure out what makes you read different stories. What in one article “grabs” you enough to read the entire text and what in another article causes you to turn off and move on? When does the right amount of detail keep a story interesting, and when does the detail become a bore?

Compare your results with colleagues and see if you come to the same conclusions.

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

The Poynter Institute's web site contains a number of "tip sheets" on how to write, construct stories and edit:

[www.poynter.org/subject.asp?id=2](http://www.poynter.org/subject.asp?id=2)