

Chapter 6

Use of Detail



Always ensure your story passes what journalists often call the 'so what?' test

THE CORRECT AMOUNT OF DETAIL is vital. Think of it like working the zoom on a camera lens. Zoom in too far and you will have lots of detail but no sense of the broader picture and why it is relevant. Zoom out too far and you will see a broad expanse but nothing detailed enough to be of real interest in the photograph.

The key piece of information in your story, of course, is the news - a politician elected, a development project implemented, the number of people killed or injured. But be sure to include the detail that makes it relevant and newsworthy: Is it the first outbreak of violence in a certain region? Is it a key opposition victory in a local election which signals trouble for the government in the coming general vote? Has a central plank been laid in the West's development strategy?

In each of these examples, it is important to give the news and say why it is news. Always ensure your story passes what journalists often call the "so what?" test.

Supplementary detail is essential to help the reader keep going without stumbling over simple questions - the name and orientation of a political party, the location of a town, the

background of a leader. The reporter's job is to provide information, not to give the reader a news quiz.

Yet in providing this detail, try to find concise and discreet ways to tuck the information into your story, without breaking the flow. This may mean folding details in paragraph by paragraph. For example, a sharp lead for a story may highlight a breakthrough for the country's "leading opposition party", but then not give the full name of the party until the second or third paragraph, in order to get the main news into the very top of the piece. The idea here is not to clutter up the top of the story with too much detail too early.

Note that English is particularly well suited to this purpose, allowing supplementary clauses to be added easily between commas, following a long dash or in very short informative sentences. The process may not always be as straightforward in some other languages.

Do not assume prior knowledge from your readers

Basic Identification

The main rule is to provide basic identifying information for all people and organisations you mention in your story. Do not assume prior knowledge from your readers.

On first reference, provide the full name and proper title of all individuals - Lieut. Gen. George Jackson, not General Jackson; Deputy Prime Minister Martin Smith, not Martin Smith.

Include basic geographical information: Tetovo, the Albanian-majority city west of the capital; Nakhichevan, the Azeri province west of Armenia; Hohenwald, a rural town 100 miles south of the state capital, Nashville.

Give the full name of a political party or organisation on first reference - the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), not simply the initials. Provide a brief identification for context unless it is entirely clear - Party for Democratic Action (SDA), the leading Muslim party.

Major international organisations and other very common acronyms do not need to be spelled out, but err on the side of caution. EU, UN, U.S., NATO are acceptable on their own, but

you need to spell out in full organisations such as the Office of the High Representative (OHR), International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). (Note that in Associated Press style, the acronym for the United States includes full stops, in order to distinguish it from the plural pronoun “us”).

It is always best to avoid the over-use of acronyms. Do provide the acronym in first use in parenthesis after the name, as in the above examples. But only do so if the initials will be used later in the story on second reference, or for clarity’s sake, if the common acronym is taken from the local language and would not be readily apparent in the English translation - eg, Party of Democratic Action (SDA).

In extended articles, especially where there are many names, provide a short reminder to re-identify a character or a source if he or she re-appears in the story long after the second reference, as in: “Dr. Faizal, the opposition leader . . .”

It is important to provide adequate detail to explain how a character relates to the subject of the story

Background Detail

As with sources, it is important to provide adequate detail above and beyond basic identification to explain how a character relates to the subject of the story. Again, this is part of passing the “So What?” test, telling why someone is important or authoritative.

For example, if you are writing a story about difficult living conditions in Kabul and you interview a street seller, you should not just describe him as “Abdullah, a resident of Kabul”, but “Abdullah Karimi, 43, who lives in Microrayon and sells CDs in the bazaar to support his wife and 10 children”. This allows the reader to come a better judgement about what Abdullah has to say. It is also more interesting!

Similarly, if you were reporting a story about a bomb attack and were describing the scene by quoting a policeman, “Pierre Dupont, a police officer who was on the scene shortly after the attack, said . . .” is much better than “a policeman said . . .”

Contextual Detail

Always consider whether your audience needs context to understand who or what someone is. The amount of context required will vary depending on the audience but some context is nearly always essential.

For example, for a Serbian audience, you do not need to describe who Zoran Djindjic was and can simply write “Zoran Djindjic, the late prime minister”. But if you are writing for an international audience, you might need to add more detail like “Zoran Djindjic, the Serbian prime minister who was assassinated in March 2003”.

Places also may need context: not just “the Badakhshan province of Tajikistan”, but “Badakhshan, a high-altitude, remote province part of Tajikistan on the south-eastern border with Afghanistan and China”.

Consider whether detail could be added which is relevant to the story. If, for example, the Helmand province of Afghanistan is mentioned in a story about production of opium, it is relevant that the province is the country’s biggest producer of the drug. So instead of saying simply “Government troops entered

If you are in doubt about the right level of detail, provide more rather than less

Helmand to destroy crops of poppies”, you might write “Government forces entered Helmand, the largest opium producing area in the country, to destroy poppy crops”.

As a reporter, if you are in doubt about the right level of detail, provide more rather than less. That gives the editor the choice of whether to include all the detail you report or not. If you omit details about the scene, or people you have interviewed, he or she cannot include it later.

Colour and Voices

Do not forget to use all of your senses when conveying a story to your readers. The classic rule of fiction writing - that it is better to show an event than to re-tell it - holds true for journalism, too. This means providing colour, human voices and other details that will bring the scene to life.

The best journalist can find the short telling detail which can bring a scene alive: the noise on the street, the smell in the air, a bead of sweat pouring down the cheek of a soldier standing at attention. As a reporter, push yourself to get the telling quote which will sum up the story in the words of a local participant.

Quotations, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7, provide more than information; they give the reader a strong sense of location and people’s feelings, and make your story more immediate.

Feature articles, particularly in U.S. newspapers, will often begin with a small scene from the ground to give a human dimension to a larger issue. Again, this is called the “delayed drop”.

A story about the slow delivery of humanitarian aid, for example, may begin with a brief description of the day-to-day struggle for survival in a refugee camp, which illustrates the broader issue. Bringing the story to life in this way can transform what could be a dry political or bureaucratic article into an urgent, human report, engaging the reader’s own human interest.

EXERCISES

To recap what has been learned in this chapter:

- Detail is essential to help a reader understand why a story is in fact “news” or to help answer the “So What?” test.
- Do not overload stories with acronyms but do use them if an organisation with a long complicated name needs to be mentioned often lower down.
- Contextual detail is important but varies according to the needs of different readers. Each case needs to be assessed on its own merits.
- Colour can bring a story to life but needs to be used carefully and with skill.

Discuss with colleagues the following example and possible ways of constructing the story:

You are a reporter working in Sudan where civil unrest means that humanitarian aid is failing to get through to the starving population. The situation in relief camps is dire and you have just returned from one camp with your own disturbing

eyewitness assessment of the crisis. On your return to the capital, as you are considering how to write your story, an official from the Red Cross calls and offers you an advance copy of a previously unpublished report into the situation. The report voices strong criticism about how aid is being distributed and offers concrete proposals for improvement. You are now in the possession of first-hand knowledge of conditions in the camp and an exclusive report.

- How would you construct your news story?
- What would be the balance between description of conditions and “hard news” of the report?
- One version of your story will be for an African publication. Another version has been commissioned for the U.S. market. What would be the difference in level of detail between the two?

ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Tip sheets on writing and editing from the Poynter Institute's online site:

www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=31907&sid=2

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction,
by William Zinsser (HarperCollins)