

## Chapter 8

# News Judgement and Story Types

TRYING TO DEFINE just what exactly is “news” is difficult. But knowing how to identify a story to research is perhaps a journalist’s most vital skill. This chapter examines issues of news judgement and examines the different story types commonly used.

Most journalists would agree with the cliché that “Dog bites man” is not news, but “Man bites dog” is. Why? Simply because the first happens all the time and the second is an unusual, not to say bizarre, occurrence.

But there are also more down to earth ways of looking at what makes a story. New, in its simplest terms, is something that has happened. It can be an event or a trend, something that occurred suddenly, or something on-going. Someone won something, or lost. Conflict erupted, or was resolved. Something was built, or destroyed. Someone failed, or they succeeded.

A good story has a beginning, a middle and an end. It responds to the six questions set out in Chapter 3: who, what, when, where, why and how? Remember to think of the reader, and what would make him or her want to read your article: Did something happen? Is it new? Is it interesting?



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### Story vs. Issue

One of the biggest difficulties, especially for young journalists, is distinguishing between a story and an issue. A story may be about an issue. But an issue is in itself not a story.

In discussing story ideas, many reporters say that they are concerned about a subject in their community and want to write about it. This is very positive, but not enough. Poverty, education, security - these are subjects.

A journalist has to dig deeper to find an event, a development, perhaps a trend to be able to construct a narrative in which something distinct occurs.

### Following the Peg

The other essential component of story selection is keeping up with the news. Knowing the news intimately is the best way to tell whether your story idea is new.

There is little point in trying to write a story about something which has already been widely covered in the media. A short news piece, or a feature article, should be fresh and should break

new ground. That means something new has happened. It may also mean you have a fresh angle, or a new source, to add to the information which has already been published.

The “news peg” is a problematic concept which refers to what is of news interest or is the subject of particular debate at the moment. Just as your editor will not want an article on something the newspaper has already covered, he or she will also tend to be uninterested in subjects which are totally out of the news.

The balance is never entirely clear and different editors will view the question of the peg differently. Some journalists resent the whole concept of the peg as a very limiting, pack-like approach to media. They argue that it is up to individual media organisations to determine what is news, not to follow events blindly. But when a big story breaks, the power of the peg is undeniable.

Following the peg means targeting stories that relate to the key events and issues of the moment. It could mean a story directly about a major news issue - say, the assassination of a prime minister. Or it could mean an off-angle piece that contributes to

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the subject - say, about the prevalence of violence and gun-culture in the society. Often an article can be adjusted to relate to the peg through editing of the lead. But be aware that pieces may also often be spiked if the news peg shifts too radically.

In any event, you must be aware of the main news at all times. This underscores the single most important task of a journalist, namely, to be an avid news consumer. Read everything you can. Read your own newspaper, your rival newspaper, and newspapers with views you strongly oppose. Try to read newspapers from other countries, and surf the web. Build a usual set of media you try to follow and make a regular habit of reviewing them. Amid that, follow the electronic media, especially the key morning and main evening news bulletins.

### Horses for Courses

How do you know what sort of story people are interested in? The answer is that different people are interested in different stories, according to their background, profession, or where they live.

The first rule then is to consider your audience. Is it a story they are interested in? That they should know about? For example, an international audience will not be interested in an ordinary car crash, which killed two people on a local road, unless they are foreigners or someone internationally known. But a local audience will be.

Similarly, stories may interest an international audience because they are unusual for them, even if a local audience takes them for granted. For example, whale hunting in the Faroe Islands; a likely tourist resort; an interesting archaeological feature or a colourful local festival.

The car crash might even produce a follow-up feature if it points up how bad the roads are, how maintenance has failed and that the latest accident has raised attention to the need for more work on the roads or other safety measures. Potential features exist all around and that is what makes them worth looking for. A good journalist uses eyes, ears and lots of acquired knowledge to get features.

### Story Types

Many news organisations divide stories into four main types, a practice which is also followed by IWPR. In selecting your story you should therefore know what kind of story you intend to write:

- **News** – A report about an event or a trend. It should be punchy, balanced and relatively short.
- **Feature** – An extended narrative allowing more in-depth reporting into an event, a trend, a place or a personality (sometimes known as a “profile”).
- **Analysis** – An analysis of a news event or a trend, often quoting a range of protagonists and experts; analysis may suggest a viewpoint but should present a diversity of opinions with a moderate and balanced tone.
- **Comment** – A partisan viewpoint, presenting a personal perspective and often a strong argument, including recommendations for addressing a problem.

It is imperative in selecting your story that you are also clear with yourself, and explicit with your editor, about which type of story

you intend to write. Most stories for IWPR will be news and features, with regular analysis. Comment is occasional and often limited to known experts or journalists with established bylines.

In order to uphold principles of impartiality, it is essential to distinguish among different types of stories, and in particular to keep news and comment separate.

*News is something that happens: a plane crashes, a politician is killed, war breaks out*

### News Stories

News stories can be divided into two different kinds: spot or breaking news or set-piece news. Sometimes the latter category is called “diary” material because a news organisation knows when something is scheduled to take place and has it down in the diary to cover.

1. Spot news – Spot news is what most people understand as news in its hardest form. It is something that just happens: a plane crashes, a gunman assassinates a politician, a severe storm destroys homes, war breaks out, an earthquake rocks a region, a volcano erupts and so on. The 24-hour news channels call it “breaking news” and run a banner across the bottom of the screen to draw viewers’ attention.

2. Set-piece news – Set-piece news is usually predictable (as above, it can often be in the office diary). It revolves around scheduled events planned in advance: the president of a country delivering a key speech for example, or a company announcing its financial results for the past year. Anniversaries are also sometimes viewed as a good reason to write articles, for example about a historic event, assessing 10 years of independence or a decade after a tragedy.

It can be wise to prepare background for a story in advance. But remember that the unexpected often happens: breaking news can interrupt set-piece news - the president is shot while speaking or is jeered or falls over; or the speaker diverges from prepared remarks. So the journalist must be ready for this. Reporters have ended up in trouble by writing set-piece news in advance without checking what actually happened, only to find out - sometimes from the competition - that things turned out very differently. This is false reporting, and a good reporter must watch for sudden events.

## Features

1. Investigative Features – Sometimes the news is the story itself. This is because, while nothing in particular has happened, and no event has taken place, investigative research in the article reveals information that changes our understanding of events which have already taken place, or are under way.

After a major conflict, journalists produce books and extended articles based on inside information from the participants: politicians, diplomats, generals. The war is long over, but these reports explain the course of events in a way we did not understand previously.

In other examples, an investigative feature may reveal conditions in a workplace, problems facing a minority community, a growing environmental crisis or perhaps positive advances being made in the educational system. The drama in these stories is the on-going cumulative effect, and in digging out the information, the journalist makes it into news.

*Remember that people are always of interest to other people*

2. Colour Features & Human Interest – These can be the most fun and certainly provide the journalist with a lot of creative writing opportunities. Such features do not need to be “hard news”. They could be entertaining as well as informative, for example a story about a political leader, about travel or food. Sport and entertainment are other popular themes. These are often called “human interest” stories. After all, a good publication should not be all heavy and serious. The key to writing features is first of all good ideas and good research. The material must be carefully selected before writing, and then assembled in an intriguing or attractive way. There needs to be a logical structure and a striking conclusion.

When writing features, you can often start with a specific subject, trend or issue to illustrate more general ones.

For instance, when writing about how people have left villages for the towns, find a specific village and some of its people and use their stories to illustrate the problems and successes. Remember that people are always of interest to other people.

If you want to write a story about a project, try to write it through the eyes of the people affected. Try to humanise issues.

You can fill out the picture with statistics and broad information later but they will be boring unless you can show what they mean to people.

### Analysis

A news analysis has to take the reader beyond the normal “spot” news story and would typically go into more detail and explanation than is possible when you are under pressure to write a hard, breaking news story which is still developing. Here, you could be under a lot of pressure, both to gather facts and stay on top of a rapidly moving event (if for instance the death toll in a bombing is steadily rising). Such breaking news stories must have context so that the reader can understand why they are important (again, the “So what?” test). But they cannot be cluttered with analysis which will only get in the way of the important first facts.

When the dust has settled, and the spot story has been fully covered, it might be time to stand back on the situation and write a separate analysis. The danger is that the “analysis” will be little more than the news story dressed up with a few longer

paragraphs and more context. A true analysis needs to seek opinion, for example from politicians, military commanders, aid workers or diplomats, setting out their views on what happened, why it happened and, crucially, what an event means for the present and the future. Try and cast an analysis forward.

### Comment

News organisations often run comment pieces but take special care to ensure that such articles are clearly labelled as such. This ensures that a reader is aware that what he or she is reading is not straight, impartial and factual news reporting but is, in fact, someone's opinion on what has happened or, often, what they think should happen.

Comment can be written by journalists or by outsiders - experts, diplomats or politicians. In the case of journalists, some newspapers with large staffs can afford to enforce a Chinese Wall principle, ensuring that the mainstream news reporting staff is separate from the comment team.

Many western news organisations would also seek to ensure that comment is balanced over a period of time. If, for example,

during a country's elections, a politician from one party writes a commentary in a newspaper, the other main parties will also be given a similar amount of column inches in the run-up to polling. Some broadcasters have very specific rules ensuring that they give equal airtime to major political parties.

It is important to realise that allowing someone to write a comment piece is also not a licence to print libel (for which the publication - and not just the author - could end up being brought before court), wild allegations or racial slurs. It is the responsibility of senior editorial management to ensure that a commentary does not breach the normal boundaries of good journalism.

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### EXERCISES

Read the following statements and identify where the news is and what the reporter needs to do to develop them. What type of story would you write?

1. Lots of children are dying during childbirth, because there are no medical facilities for their mothers. This is especially the case outside the capital and the major cities.
2. The government has sent soldiers to guard the major trade routes to catch smugglers bringing goods across the border without paying customs duties.
3. The education ministry has raised 10 million dollars through an appeal for contributions from the public.
4. Many former refugees who have returned to the country this year are finding life difficult.
5. Some refugees who returned to the capital this year have protested outside the municipality because of their crowded living conditions.

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Research and training links for journalists, in partnership with  
*Columbia Journalism Review*:

**[www.powerreporting.com](http://www.powerreporting.com)**

For guidance on computer assisted reporting:

**[www.nicar.org](http://www.nicar.org)**