

Writing for Media

Week 1

Ingredients of News /
Qualities of Good Writing

Introduction

Two people injured in a car crash. Now that's news? Or is it?
Some places, yes. Other places, no.

The definition of *news* is elusive. It can be:

- “Man bites dog.”
- Something you haven't heard before.
- Happy or sad. Disturbing or entertaining.
- What editors and reporters say it is.

Whatever it is, *news* is a complex term, and it is different things to different people. It is information, and today's media are in the information business.

- What's news today might not be news tomorrow.
- What's news in one geographical area is not necessarily news in another.
- One important thing about news: *it is always changing.*

Hard news & soft news

In today's media-conscious world, news comes from print, electronic and broadcast fronts. Sometimes news is bad; sometimes it is good. It can be hard; it can be soft.

- **Hard news** events, such as killings, city council meetings and speeches by leading government officials, are timely and are reported almost automatically by the media
- **Soft news** events, such as a lunch to honour a retiring school teacher or a carwash to raise money for cancer awareness, are not normally considered immediately important or timely to a wide audience. These events still contain elements of news and the media often report them.

- Most media strive to present a mix of hard and soft news.
- People today lead busy lives and they are bombarded with print and electronic info 24 hours a day: they want to know what's happening in the White House and Baghdad, in their constituency at Petaling Jaya and down the street. At the same time, they also want to know what movies are popular, what celebrity marriage is on the rocks, which player is being bought or sold in the transfer market and what to do this weekend.

The Gatekeeping Process

- Selection of news for print or broadcast is subjective. It is based on journalist's feelings, thoughts and experiences.
- Communication researchers refer to people who make news decisions as *gatekeepers*.
- These editors, news directors and reporters can open the gate to let news flow; they can also close the gates to keep news from oozing out. If they refuse to supply information, possible there will be no story.
- One person seldom has complete control over all the gates in the process of disseminating news.
- There is no scientific formula for deciding what is news. At several junctures in the process of gathering and writing news, decisions to include or exclude information are made.

What Makes News?

Criteria for Newsworthiness:

- ***Timeliness***: Is it a recent development, or is it old news?
- ***Proximity***: Is the story relevant to local readers?
- ***Conflict / Controversy***: Is the issue developing, has it been resolved or does anybody care?
- ***Eminence and Prominence***: Are noteworthy people involved? If so, that makes the story more important.
- ***Consequence and Impact***: What effect will the story have on readers?
- ***Human Interest***: Does it contain unique, interesting elements?

(i) Timeliness

- Freshness strengthens a news story. News, like food, spoils after it's been out a while.
- Example: when a tsunami hits, readers immediately need to know its effects.
- Breaking news stories such as demonstrated in the South Asian tsunami and 9/11 terrorist attacks command space at most newspapers as they happen. They are timely, and readers want to know what is happening now.
- This access to instant news puts increased pressure on reporters: they always have to be accurate and quick.

(ii) Proximity

- Events close to home are naturally of interest to the news media.
- People tend to be interested in what affects them, and local events have more effect. This means that a robbery in a neighbour's house will, for better or worse, be more newsworthy to most of us than another suicide bombing in Iraq.
- Local news is the bread and butter of most newsroom.
- Local economic developments are naturally of significant interest to readers, for example; the National Budget.

(iii) Conflict / Controversy

- Conflict—whether it involves people, governmental bodies or sports team—is often considered newsworthy.
- The Minister’s approval of the highway environmental groups have been fighting for the past year is more newsworthy than his okay of the reconstruction of an old parkway everyone agreed had become a safety hazard.
- Journalists must know what the issues are and look for new ideas.
- Exposing controversy and corruption is called muck-racking – an important political function of journalism.

(iv) Eminence and Prominence

- Some happenings are newsworthy because well-known people are involved.
- Everyday people get tattoos done but the next time David Beckham visits a tattoo artist, it will make the news.
- Newspapers routinely publish obituaries, but when a person of prominence dies, does the story make news in papers around the country.

(v) Consequence and Impact

- Few developments hit a community as hard—economically and emotionally—as mass layoffs by major employers. It is not surprising that media give prominent play to these occurrences. The impact of layoffs is not limited to the employees and their families. An economic domino effect is felt throughout the area.
- Readers are always interested in stories that have considerable impact on their communities.

(vi) Human Interest

- People are *not* always interested in that which is most important.
- Human interest stories often appeal to the emotions of readers, pulling them into the lives of others or into subjects of broad concern.
- Sometimes they just want to know what the Prime Minister's wife is up to or what happened to that cute four-year-old who was hurt in the crash.

Other Factors Affecting News Treatment

There are other factors influencing whether a story should be done. These include:

- *Instinct of editors and reporters*: they know news when they see it
- *Audience*: would Malaysians be interested in the Florida hurricane?
- *“News Holes”*: Available space which allow some stories to make the news one day but be left out on another
- *Availability of News*: there are more news on some days compared to others
- *Pressure From the Publisher*: Owners have political and social leanings
- *Influence of Advertisers*
- *News Mix*: balance between hard and soft news
- *Competition among Media*
- *Changing Demographics*: distribution, density, composition, size of the population.

Qualities of Good Writing

Robert Gunning, a former consultant to more than 100 daily newspapers, including *The Wall Street Journal*, and to United Press International (UPI) developed the *Ten Principles of Clear Writing* in his book “The Techniques of Clear Writing”.

The principles are:

- Keep sentences short, on the average.
- Prefer the simple to the complex.
- Prefer the familiar word.
- Avoid unnecessary words.
- Put action into your verbs.
- Write the way you talk.
- Use terms your reader can picture.
- Tie in with your readers' experience.
- Make full use of variety.
- Write to express, not to impress.