



**BERKMAN
COMMUNICATIONS**

COMMUNICATING IN STYLE!

THE BASICS

A. What is News?

Webster's New World Dictionary definitions:

1. new information about anything; information previously unknown

In Journalism School, students are taught:

When a dog bites a man, that is not news.

When a man bites a dog, that IS news.

What is Newsworthy?

According to the above source:

1. having the same qualities of news; timely and important or interesting

There are "NOUNS" in contemporary life that have, intrinsically, extra appeal in terms of newsworthiness. They tend to be topics that appeal to our emotions and/or our sense of well being:

Children

Animals

The elderly and infirm

The victimized

Heroes

What we perceive will immediately benefit or harm us or ours

Our working definition:

News is information that - through the media -- people in San Diego:

MUST know

NEED to know

SHOULD know

WILL WANT to know

WILL BE INTERESTED to know

In 21st century America, the concept of “news” has come to encompass INTERPRETATION in addition to the factual reporting of information.

1. The dissemination of “facts” – let us say, for instance, a labor report -- often is far more enlightening and thus has greater impact when it is put into CONTEXT via INTERPRETATION.
2. INTERPRETATION, however, is vulnerable to abuse – conscious or otherwise. Because the interpretation of facts and information can raise doubt, cause uncertainty and/or generate reaction, we must be especially careful that interpretations we may write are founded on valid information that is thoroughly described or identified.

Why should we care about “news” writing?

Your ability AND facility in writing simple, expository English will serve you well beyond the writing of news releases. Business correspondence, reports, presentations, proposals – all benefit from your ease with expository use of the language.

In your course of your assignments for the San Diego County Workforce Partnership, you may be asked to write a news release or prepare documents in “news style” so that they will be:

Of interest to media

Easily comprehended by the media

Easily (read: EFFORTLESSLY) used by the media

Professional news disseminators are taught from the get-go to expect submissions to adhere to AP style. Some will actually discard submissions without thorough review if the disseminator has not used AP style!

News (AP) style

News style evolved during the 20th century. As technology progressed and news media proliferated, it was natural for journalists to be taught and publications to adhere to standardized rules and guidelines for news writing. Historically, journalism was the career of transients, thus the adherence to standards made it much easier for reporters and editors to move easily from job to job! Too, these standards enable the message receiver to “grow up” understanding what “the standards” communicate!

While good arguments can be made that News Services trace their ancestry back to informal cooperatives and the freelance journalists of 18th century Europe and North America, the Associated Press is considered the oldest formalized cooperative institution. Its concept was first discussed in May 1848 by representatives of six New York City newspapers who recognized the value of the newly invented telegraph, but also recognized that costs were too prohibitive

for each newspaper to have access on its own. Over 155 years, news services of every ilk have risen, evolved, fallen, merged or otherwise graced us with their presence somewhere in the world. United Press International was, for many years, AP's major competitor. Now, UPI is for all purposes a secondary source. According to the Associated Press' Web site, today it serves "more than 1,500 newspapers and 5,000 broadcast outlets in the United States. Abroad, AP services are printed and broadcast in 112 countries. Worldwide, the AP services more than 15,000 news organizations.

As the standardized style for news writing/editing became more pervasive, the news services, including both AP and UPI, published their own stylebooks. By the 1970s, the books were virtually identical and the Associated Press Stylebook became the standard for American journalists AS WELL AS Public Relations practitioners.

There are, however, two renowned news publications that adhere to their own styles – *The New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. For the most part, their respective styles ARE AP with some notable exceptions. For example, the ubiquitous use of the "courtesy titles" *Mr.*, *Mrs.* *Miss* and *Ms.* was changed radically about 30 years ago with the exception of such narrowly defined uses as in obituaries, and by some Op/Ed or bylined columnist. Except at *The New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, where the courtesy titles are still used throughout the editorial inches. Reporters and editors of these publications, however, EXPECT the news they receive from news services, from communications practitioners and from the general public to adhere to AP style!

1. What AP style IS NOT!

AP style is NOT the formal and grammatically well-mannered English of the English majors. Nor is AP style ALWAYS particularly logical! As an evolved and evolving standardization, AP style is what it is. AP style IS fluid and continues to evolve. New words, new concepts, new technology, new nations, new laws and court precedents – these are just a few of the evolving conditions of contemporary life that influence commensurate evolution of AP style.

2. AP Stylebook

The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual now runs nearly 350 pages! For the most part, the sections of the stylebook that you will find most pertinent are:

- "A to Z listing of guides to capitalization, abbreviation, spelling, numerals and usage"
- "Business guidelines and style" (glossary of business-related words and terms)
- "A Guide to Punctuation"

3. Substitutions/Enhancements

- The AP Stylebook should be used WITH a dictionary and Thesaurus – not as a SUBSTITUTE for these important references!
- NEVER RELY ON SPELLCHECK OR OTHER COMPUTER PROGRAM!
- If you do not have access to a Stylebook, Internet sites to consult include:
 - a. usu.edu/communic/faculty/Sweeney/ap.htm (Guide to AP Style by Dr. Michael S. Sweeney, University of Utah)
 - b. sage.edu/RSC/programs/communications/test/index.htm (Opening Thoughts by Kevin R. Stoner)
 - c. faculty.whatcom.ctc.edu/tsonnema/basics/apbasics.htm (AP Style Basics)
 - d. 209.238.240.197/nhmccd/apstylenotes.html (A Quick Guide to AP Style)
 - e. abacon.com/stovall/apstyle.html (Tips on AP Style)
 - f. journalism.okstate.edu/faculty/msowell/jb2003/apstylesummary.html (AP Style Summary)
 - g. missouri.edu/~jschool/missourian/style.htm (BAND-AID AP STYLEBOOK)
 - h. utexas.edu/coc/journalism/SOURCE/journal_links/AP_style.html (Quick AP Style Reference)

II. WRITING FOR THE NEWS MEDIA

Writing for the news media is not “rocket science.” Your objectives are to:

- Communicate your basic information;
- Communicate this information in clearest, most accurate, logical and concise manner; and
- Anticipate as many questions as possible and make sure your news release answers them!

A. Basic Structure and Elements of News Releases

1. The “Inverted Pyramid”

The basic structure of the news release is the “Inverted Pyramid” – the pyramid

shape of from your Geometry class turned upside down and balanced at its tip.

This structure requires the writer to write the essential information at the beginning of the story. The original theory was – and it is a good one to remember – that a news story might need cutting in the print shop (composing room) in order to fit the news hole. Traditionally, printers cut stories from the bottom. Thus, if the essential information is the beginning of the story, it will not be affected by a printer’s cuts.

2. 5 W’s and an H (Elements of News)

Because news releases are informational, they must anticipate and answer questions. The six essential questions whose answers constitute the elements of the news release are:

- **WHO**
- **WHAT**
- **WHEN**
- **WHERE**
- **WHY**
- **HOW**

These elements of news – the six essential questions that need to be answered – are common sense. If you jot down every question you ask or are asked in a given day, the vast majority will be predicated on **AT LEAST ONE OF THESE CONCEPTS.**

For many years, student journalists were taught to answer all six elementary questions in the first sentence or paragraph of a news release. However, if clarity is being sacrificed in order to cram all the information in the opening sentence, there is no reason why the news elements cannot be addressed in the top two sentences or paragraphs!

3. The “Lead Imperative”

The opening sentence and/or paragraph is called the story’s “lead.” In the traditional news release and news article, the lead both introduces and imparts the gist of the information that you are communicating.

THE SIMPLER THE LEAD, THE BETTER!

If your lead **DOES NOT** interest a reporter, editor or broadcaster at once and compel them to believe the information you are providing is genuine and of interest, they most likely will not read the rest of your news release.

You do **NOT** have to cram **WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY** and **HOW** together into the lead. But you must address a sufficient number of these critical questions if your communication is to be acted upon.

Simple, expository English is among the richest and most expressive of languages! Please don't hesitate to write in this style, avoid the

Biggest/Easiest Pitfalls to Lead Writing:

1. Being CUTE, COY, MYSTERIOUS, MISLEADING are all definite no-nos!
2. Don't use incomplete sentences. The lead must have a subject and verb!
3. Avoid "question" leads - they tend to be trite.
4. Don't hesitate to include attribution in the lead - that is okay!
5. Be careful with flat-out statements of "fact" - they need attribution.
6. Avoid feature- or opinion-like leads unless (1) the information to be imparted absolutely demands such treatment AND (2) the news representative has agreed to consider your feature or opinion piece.

Most Common Types of Communications Tools

1. News Release
2. Media Alerts. Advisories
3. Captions
4. PSAs
5. Fact Sheets/Q&As

III. TIPS OF THE TRADE!

- A. READ NEWSPAPERS, NEWS MAGAZINES AND ONLINE NEWS REPORTS.**
- B. "TALK" YOUR STORY - THEN WRITE IT THE SAME WAY.**
- C. DON'T RELY ON SPELLCHECK.**
- D. KEEP ABREAST OF THE NEWS.**
- E. BE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THE CONNOTATION AS WELL AS DEFINITIONS OF WORDS.**
- F. ALWAYS HAVE AT LEAST ONE (PREFERRABLY TWO) OTHER SETS OF EYES READ WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN.**
- G. ASK MEDIA HOW THEY PREFER MATERIALS (paper, e-mail?).**
- H. IF CERTAIN WORDS ALWAYS GIVE YOU PROBLEMS, LEARN THEIR SYNONYMS (i.e., "affect," "effect").**
- I. NAMES! NAME! NAMES! NAMES! THEY ARE ESSENTIAL AND MUST BE SPELLED CORRECTLY! (If a name has an unusual spelling, you might make a note on the story that the spelling has been confirmed.)**
- J. COMPANY, PLACE, AGENCY, STORE NAMES, ETC. - USE THE BUSINESS CARD SPELLING OR THE TELEPHONE BOOK LISTING.**
- K. DOUBLE CHECK PHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES - IF A WRONG PHONE NUMBER IS PRINTED OR PUBLISHED, SOMEONE WILL BE VERY UNHAPPY.**
- L. IF YOU ARE WRITING ABOUT SOMETHING THAT WILL HAPPEN, GIVE THE DAY AS WELL AS THE DATE (i.e., Sunday, Jan. 26).**
- M. IF YOUR STORY OR MEDIA ALERT HAS A TIME ELEMENT, KEEP IN MIND WHEN IT WILL BE USED (i.e., "today," "tomorrow").**
- N. IF YOU WILL BE SPEAKING WITH A MEDIA REPRESENTATIVE, IT'S GOOD TO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE PUBLICATION OR STATION.**
- O. MOST PUBLICATIONS NOW ACCEPT DIGITAL IMAGES E-MAILED. THE STANDARD IS 300 DPI OR HIGHER.**