Chapter 6: Writing the News Story in Simple Steps

Here we finish the job of writing the news story, which we began in *Chapter 4: Writing the intro in simple steps*. We consider ranking key points, structuring them in a logical way, and the importance of checking the story before handing it in.

The first hurdle has been cleared when you have written your intro. You have made a good start - but only a start. You now have to tackle the rest of the story to ensure the second, third and following paragraphs live up to the promise of the intro.

With a thorough understanding of the story, its content and its implications, and with the appropriate intro composed, the remainder of the story should fall into place quite naturally. It should become natural for you to take the readers and listeners by the hand and lead them through the story so that they absorb easily the information you have gathered.

**Remember the inverted pyramid**

Remember the inverted pyramid. Using this structure, the first sentence or first two sentences of the story make up the intro and should contain the most important points in the story. In the sentences below the intro, detail is given which supports the facts or opinions given in the intro; and the other most newsworthy details are given. Less important details and subsidiary ideas or information follow until the story finally tails away to the sort of details which help to give the full picture but which are not essential to the story.

A story written as an inverted pyramid can be cut from the bottom up to fit limited space or time.

**Length and strength**

The actual length of the news story should not be confused with the strength of the story. Some very strong stories about major issues may be written in a few sentences, while relatively minor stories can sometimes take a lot of space. However, it is usual for stronger stories to be given in more detail. Whatever the length of the story, the bottom point of the inverted pyramid - the place where we stop writing - should be the same. That is the level at which further details fail to meet the criteria for newsworthiness.

**Simple steps in writing the news story**

As with writing the intro, if you follow a step-by-step approach to the rest of the story you will make your task simpler and easier. We have already chosen key points, a news angle and written an intro about Cyclone Victor. Let us now return to that information and write the full news story.

The amount of detail which you include will be different for print and broadcasting. If you are writing for a newspaper, you will need to include as much relevant detail as possible. If you are writing for radio or television you will give much less detail.

For example, a newspaper report should certainly include the names and other details of the dead and injured people, if those details are available. You will not want to include these details in a radio report unless they are especially noteworthy.

One reason for this is that newspaper readers can jump over details which they do not want, and carry on reading at a later part of the story. Radio listeners and television viewers cannot do this, so you must make
sure that you do not give details which most of your listeners will not want. If you do, you will bore them, and they may switch off.

It is also true, of course, that you can fit much more news into a newspaper than into a radio or television bulletin. Radio reports have to be short so that there is room for other reports in the bulletin.

Information

Let us now return to the Cyclone Victor example, which we used in the Chapter 4. This is the information you have already been given:

At 2 a.m. yesterday morning, meteorologists at the Nadi Weather Centre detected a cyclone developing rapidly near Nauru and moving quickly south-west across the Pacific towards the Solomon Islands. They named the cyclone "Victor". At 3 a.m., they contacted the Solomon Islands government, warning of the approach of Cyclone Victor. Government officials immediately put emergency plans into operation. They warned all shipping in the area of the cyclone's approach. They broadcast warnings on the radio and alerted the police, who in turn sent officers to warn the people. By 10 a.m., winds in Honiara were blowing at more than 140 kilometres per hour. At about midday, the centre of the cyclone passed directly over Honiara before tracking into the Coral Sea, where it blew itself out. In Honiara, more than 20 houses were destroyed and a number of other buildings sustained considerable structural damage. More than 100 people are now homeless. Six people were killed. Another 18 people have been treated in hospital for minor injuries. Mopping-up operations have started in Honiara. The emergency services are still awaiting news from outlying districts but believe that Honiara has been the worst affected. Police say that of the six people who died, three men drowned when their car was blown off the road into a river, and two women and a man were killed by flying debris.

Key points

These are the seven key points from which we selected our intro:

- Nadi meteorologists warn Solomon Islands government of approach of Cyclone Victor.
- Solomon Islanders themselves warned of approaching cyclone.
- More than 20 homes destroyed and other buildings sustained considerable structural damage.
- More than 100 people homeless.
- Six people killed.
- Eighteen people treated for minor injuries.
- Three drowned and three killed by flying debris.

Remember that we decided that (e) and (d) were the most newsworthy key points because they best filled the four criteria for news:

- Is it new?
- Is it unusual?
- Is it interesting or significant?
- Is it about people?

Remember too that we decided to use key point (e) in preference to (g) because they were about the same fact but (e) was shorter for our intro.

The intro

By filling in just enough of the Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? to allow the intro to stand alone if necessary, we finally wrote the intro:
Six people were killed and more than 100 left homeless when Cyclone Victor hit the Solomon Islands yesterday.

Options

We have three choices at this point for writing the rest of the story. We could tell it chronologically - that means in the time order in which the events happened. Or we can tell it in descending order of importance of the key points, all the way down to the least newsworthy at the end. Or we can use a combination of these two approaches, i.e. we can begin by giving the key points in descending order then fill in the less important details in chronological order.

Whichever option we choose, there must be a clear logic behind the way the story is told. This will make it easy for the reader to follow and understand it. There are many ways in which you could show visitors around your village or town, some of which would be logical and some illogical.

You might show them the centre of the village first, then move to the outer buildings, and finish with the river and the food gardens. Or you might show everything to do with one family line first, then move to a second family line, and so on. Visitors could follow and understand either of these.

However, if you wander at random through the village, pointing out things as you happen to see them, your visitors will probably become confused.

So it is with writing the news story. You must choose a clear and simple sequence for telling the facts and giving relevant opinions. In this way your readers or listeners will not become confused.

To return to our Cyclone Victor example, let us choose to give the main key points in descending order of importance and then to tell the story in chronological order to give the minor details. This will demonstrate both of the other approaches.

Ranking the key points

We have already chosen (e) and (d) for our intro. In what order should we put the other key points? Clearly the deaths need explaining if possible, as does the damage to people's homes. Because lives are more important than homes, let us take (g) as our next key point, followed by (f) which is about injuries:

Three men drowned when their car was blown off the road into a river.
Two women and a man were killed by flying debris, and a further 18 people were treated in hospital for minor injuries.

Notice that we split key point (g) into two halves. This was partly to stop the paragraph from being too long and partly to emphasise the unusual nature of the deaths of the three men in the car. It is less unusual for people to be killed by flying debris in the middle of a cyclone, and we filled that paragraph out a bit by including details of the injured.

Now let us tell our readers or listeners more about the homeless:

More than 20 homes were destroyed and a number of other buildings were badly damaged.

Notice here that we changed the word "houses" to "homes", since "homes" are houses with people living in them. We also changed the phrase "sustained considerable structural damage" to "were badly damaged". As in the intro, you must avoid overloading any sentence in your story with unnecessary words - remember the canoe. The original phrase was just jargon. The rewritten phrase is shorter and simpler to understand.
Telling the rest of the story

We have so far used five of our key points in the first four paragraphs of our news story. The remaining two key points are facts about the cyclone itself - how it was spotted and how people were warned. There are clearly lots of details which can be given here.

It would be possible to write the rest of the story by choosing more key points from the information left, ranking them according to newsworthiness then writing them in order. This is, however, very complicated and may confuse your reader or listener. A much simpler alternative is to now go back to the beginning of the event and tell it in chronological order, as things happened.

Before we do this, we have tell our audience that we are going to change from the key points method of news writing to the chronological method, otherwise they might think that our next paragraph is our next key point (although our readers or listeners would not use that term). The easiest way of doing that is to provide a kind of summary to the first segment of our story with the paragraph:

The emergency services are still awaiting news from outlying districts but believe that Honiara has been the worst hit.

This sentence also tells the reader or listener that we have given the most important news. Our next paragraph tells them that we are going back to the beginning of the story:

Cyclone Victor was first detected at 2 a.m. yesterday by staff at the Nadi Weather Centre. They plotted it travelling south-west across the Pacific towards the Solomon Islands. An hour later, they contacted the Solomon Islands government to warn them of the cyclone's approach. Government officials put emergency plans into operation. They radioed ships in the area and broadcast warnings to Solomon Islanders over the radio. Police officers were sent out to warn people. By 10 a.m., winds in the capital, Honiara, were blowing at more than 140 kilometres per hour. Two hours later the centre of Cyclone Victor passed over Honiara before tracking into the Coral Sea, where it blew itself out. Mopping-up operations have now started in Honiara.

Now we have told the story of the cyclone, at the same time bringing our audience up to date with latest developments.

Checking the story

Before we hand this story in to our chief of staff or news editor, there are two more things we have to do to make sure that it is accurate; we must check for mistakes and we must check for missing details.

Inexperienced journalists are often so relieved that they have actually written a story that they forget to check it properly. You should make it a firm rule to read your story through several times before handing it in.

If you should find another mistake on any reading, correct it and then, because your reading has been interrupted by the correction, you should read the whole story through again from the beginning.

Keep doing this until you can read it through from beginning to end without finding any errors. Only then can you hand it in.

Mistakes

We have to check back through our story to make sure that we have all the facts correct, the right spellings, the correct order of events, the proper punctuation. In short, is this how you want to see the story in your newspaper or hear it read out on air?
Missing details

We have to ask ourselves whether there are still any outstanding Who? What? Where? When? Why? or How? questions still to be answered.

In our cyclone example, we do not give any specific details of who the dead and injured were, or how they were killed and hurt. Why did it take the Nadi Weather Centre an hour to alert the Solomon Islands government? What is the damage outside Honiara? What is going to happen to all the homeless people?

The amount of detail which we include in the story will depend on how much we feel our readers or listeners will want.

As we explained earlier, newspapers will give more details than radio or television bulletins. In particular, we shall want the names of the six people who have been killed to publish in a newspaper report; but not in a broadcast report.

There is still plenty of work to do, maybe in our next story.

The final version

The final version of our cyclone story, let us say for a newspaper, is now almost ready. We check for mistakes, and are satisfied that we have made none.

We then check for missing details. We have not given the names of the dead and injured, so we might phone the police and the hospital. Both places tell us that names will not be released until the families have been informed. This must be included in our story.

There are no details yet of damage outside Honiara, and it may be difficult to get that information if telephone lines are down and roads flooded. This, too, should be added to the story.

Our finished version should now look like this:

Six people were killed and more than 100 left homeless when Cyclone Victor hit the Solomon Islands yesterday.
Three men drowned when their car was blown off the road into a river, in the national capital, Honiara.
Two women and a man were killed by flying debris, and a further 18 people are being treated in hospital for minor injuries.
The names of the dead and injured are not being released until relatives have been informed.
More than 20 homes were destroyed and a number of other buildings were badly damaged.
The emergency services are still awaiting news from outlying districts. However, they believe that Honiara has been the worst hit.
Communications between Honiara and other areas have been disrupted by the cyclone.
Cyclone Victor was first detected at 2 a.m. yesterday by staff at the Nadi Weather Centre.
They plotted it travelling south-west across the Pacific towards the Solomon Islands.
An hour later, they contacted the Solomon Islands government to warn them of the cyclone's approach.
Government officials put emergency plans into operation. They radioed ships in the area and broadcast warnings to Solomon Islanders over the radio.
Police officers were sent out to warn people.
By 10 a.m., winds in the capital, Honiara, were blowing at more than 140 kilometres per hour.
Two hours later the centre of Cyclone Victor passed over Honiara before tracking into the Coral Sea, where it blew itself out.
Mopping-up operations have now started in Honiara.

TO SUMMARISE:

Remember to read your story through thoroughly before handing it in. If you find any errors, correct them - then read it through again.
Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does your intro meet the six requirements we discussed at the end of the previous chapter?
- Have you chosen the key points? Have you ranked them in order when writing your story?
- Have you presented the facts in an orderly manner and provided links between different segments?

Have you read it through again?