

## Unit 2 Basic News Story Structure

### I. Introduction to News Story Structures

Traditional journalism boasts two main newswriting structures: “basic” or “hard” news stories, and “features.” Newspaper reporters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century typically used a hard news structure for covering daily news events, like legislative decisions, speeches, natural disasters, or sports. They often associated features with “soft” news, such as trends or fashion. Magazine writers almost always used feature structure.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, feature style has taken over most large newspapers. Reporters structure feature stories like a strip of tape. The stories have distinct sections, each with a particular role. The lead introduces the story topic and draws the reader in, the “nut graf” explains the significance of the story, the “body” provides the bulk of the information, and the “conclusion” or “ending” ... you can guess what it does.

Now, newspaper reporters generally assume that their readers have already learned about major news events from television, radio, or blogs. As a result they only sometimes write an “inverted pyramid story,” one where they summarize the story in the “lead” (or “lede”) and then provide supporting information and more details in descending order of importance.

However, writing a summary lead is a basic skill that every journalist should have and it’s important to understand traditional news story structure for two other reasons. One is that it is an efficient way to deliver a coherent package of information, and it is easy to edit such stories for length: Because the details are provided in descending order of importance, editors can shorten hard news stories without losing essential information by simply cutting from the bottom.

(Features should be a unified whole. If you cut the ending or a section of the body from a well-written feature, the reader should notice immediately that something is missing.)

The most important reason is that the traditional news story format forces reporters to think about six vital questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? The lead usually answers in brief the first four questions, and the body of the story provides more information. Superficial stories may stop there, but better stories discuss the “why” and “how.” In this chapter we’ll focus on hard news structure -- in a later chapter we’ll get to feature story structure – because even if most journalists don’t use it today, it’s a good way to organize our thinking about the questions our stories should attempt to answer.

### II. Basic News Story Structure

Basic news stories are simple in structure and style. Their format allows them to be read quickly and comprehended easily. They usually have all or most of the following elements:

1. Lead: The opening words summarize the story, usually in a single declarative sentence.

Remember this phrase: “The lead is NOT the fact of the meeting, the lead is what happened at the meeting.”

“City council met last night” is a terrible lead. So it met. Big deal. Instead, report what the councilors decided: “City council voted last night to increase property taxes by 3 percent.” A report on the vote implies that the council met and readers will realize that.

Your lead, in short, must **focus on** or **summarize** the most important aspect of the story you want to tell. A good basic news story always has a strong lead that draws the audience in by delivering an interesting or important fact.

Write leads in the **active voice**. In the sentence, “The boy hit the ball,” the verb “hit” is in active voice. In, “The ball was hit by the boy,” the verb is in passive voice, meaning that something was being done to the subject of the sentence. Active voice is simple and direct: subject—verb—object. It also makes clear immediately who is doing the action and who is the direct object of the action. Embarrassed or worried people tend to use the passive voice as a way of avoiding responsibility: “Mistakes were made.”

Use of the passive should be limited to times we don’t know where responsibility lies. If we’re at a deadline and we can’t pin down whether local police, the county sheriff, or the FBI arrested Senator Jefferson Smith, we might say “Jefferson Smith was arrested and charged with espionage.” Normally, though, we’d say, “Police arrested Jefferson Smith...”

2. **Backup:** Rarely can all the information needed to make sense of a given story fit into the first sentence. The “backup” provides in a couple of sentences the additional details and sometimes background that the reader requires to understand the story.

3. **Lead Quotation:** Many hard news stories focus on the statements of people important to the issue or event. The lead quotation simply provides the exact words this person used to verify for the reader that the assertions in the lead are true and accurate. Avoid lead quotations that simply repeat the lead, however.

4. **Nut Graf:** This is a clear, concise statement of why this story is important. It explains the story’s significance or relevance to the reader and to society. The reader should, after reaching this point, have enough information to make sense of what happened even if he reads no more of the story. It should have covered the basics: who, what, where, when, and why.

Not every story has all these elements. Every basic news story has some sort of lead statement (with variations—we’ll cover that in later lessons), but often the story’s significance is implicit in the lead itself so there is no separate nut graf. If the lead is, “The President of the United States declared war on Canada today,” the significance is clear. Similarly, not every story needs a lead quotation. Use your judgment, but understand that readers probably will recognize and expect certain features.

One final note on leads: Reporters often use “soft leads.” In a basic news story, it is typically a single sentence or sometimes a paragraph preceding the summary that offers some interesting fact, context, or contrast. Reporters often use soft leads to draw in readers when the news summary itself seems a little dry. For example:

“Planning to deal with the federal government? You’d better do it soon.

“Senate Democrats on Friday rejected calls from House Republicans to accept \$4 billion in cuts as a compromise to keep the government running for two weeks past a March 4 deadline, leading to speculation that the federal government is likely to shut down early next month.”

5. **Body:** Basic news stories typically provide information in descending order of importance. Usually this information comes in one of three forms in the body:

a. **Background** provides the context or describes previous circumstances a reader needs to know to understand the most recent event.

b. **Exposition** is simply the reporter’s explanation or description of what happened or is happening and why.

c. **Narrative** offers a detailed, chronological description of the most important events in the news story. For example, a lead might say that “Apollo Airlines Flight 1524 crashed shortly after taking off from Washington’s Dulles Airport earlier today, killing all 145 passengers and crew.”

A typical news story would then provide more details of the event, comments from official

sources and witnesses, and so on. It might also include a narrative from the perspective of a witness:

Bill Scott of Tampa, Fla., was sitting by the terminal window drinking a cup of Starbucks coffee when he glanced up and saw a jetliner suddenly tip sharply to the right.

“Hey, look at that,” he said to his wife, Gladys. The couple watched in horror . . .

### III. Rules for Attribution: Editing and Punctuating Direct Quotations.

Almost every news story contains quotations of some kind. They are most often from people directly involved in the story, those who have some official connection to what happened, or those who have some sort of knowledge relevant to the story, such as experts. Quotations can be from “official sources,” such as politicians or police officers but sometimes the best sources have no official title or role.

Published quotes should:

1. Be short. Young reporters tend to let their sources go on too long out of a laudable desire to let their sources “speak for themselves,” or a sense that, “They’ve spent time with me, I owe them something.” Few people, though, speak concisely and directly – and the reporter is working for readers, not officials. The reporter should summarize the relevant information as succinctly and clearly as possible, saving direct quotations for the sentences that are . . .

2. Be pithy or interesting or notable. Don’t quotation the coach saying, “Well, tonight Jimmy Clark scored 33 points.” Instead, give Jimmy’s point total and instead quote the coach saying something interesting. Many people speak in clichés: “Tonight, Jimmy was hotter than a two-dollar pistol.” Try to use a quotation that offers specific detail and insight: “Jimmy had been missing those 15-footers so he shot hundreds in practice this week. Tonight that hard work paid off.”

3. Be clear. The reporter must understand what sources say and communicate that to his audience. If a source says something that is not clear but seems important, ask and keep asking until his point is clear.

4. Advance the story. Some reporters have an odd habit of following up exposition or a summary with a quotation that adds no new information. It probably stems from slavish devotion to the lead/backup quote formula, as in, “Senator Smith called yesterday for a repeal of the healthcare legislation passed in 2009. ‘I call for a repeal of the healthcare legislation we passed in 2009,’ Sen. Smith said.” A quotation must advance the story by providing new information. If it doesn’t, something needs to be cut.

Reporters may make minor changes to quotations to correct grammatical errors. Few people consistently use proper English while speaking. To reflect those mistakes in quotations only draws attention away from the content of the quotations and toward the source’s manner of speaking. Unless there is a compelling reason to emphasize grammatical errors or the speaker was deliberately trying to make a point by his word choice, go ahead and fix grammatical errors. Refrain, however, from making other changes to quotations. Clean up grammar and so on, but if the quotation needs major changes to be coherent, then paraphrase the speaker’s words.

Quotations can easily be taken out of context, thereby communicating something different from what the speaker intended even though the words are “accurate.” The source, upon reading the article, should agree that quotations attributed to him accurately represent both his words and his intended meaning.

Avoid explanations or questions to set up your quotations. For example, don’t write, “When asked what the greatest danger facing teens today is, Johnson replied, ‘Well, . . .’” Such constructions are usually clunky and draw attention to the reporter. Instead, structure quotations

so that their meaning and significance is obvious without the explanation: "The greatest danger to teens, Johnson said, 'is . . .'"

Quote fragments, such as in the previous example, are acceptable in modest doses but too many - especially two or more consecutive fragments -- make the prose seem choppy. Prefer to quote in complete sentences.

Quotations should be punctuated as follows:

1. "*Here we go again,*" *Smith said.* Notice that the comma goes inside the double quotation marks, and that normally the source precedes the verb of saying: "he said" not "said he." You may put "said" at the beginning of the attribution if the source has a long title. Hence, "*Here we go again,*" *said Vice-Admiral John Smith, Undersecretary of the Navy.*
2. "*The time to act,*" *Smith said, "is now."* For quotations with the attribution in the middle of the sentence; notice the comma after the first half of the sentence. The period goes inside the quotation marks.
3. "*The time to act is now,*" *Smith said. "We may never get another chance."* To help break up long quotations, put the attribution in the middle of two complete sentences. Use a period or a colon after the end of the first complete sentence.

## EXERCISES

1. Identify in the following two stories, if present, the lead, backup, lead quotation, and nut graf. A.

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans on Friday urged Senate Democrats to accept \$4 billion in cuts as a compromise to keep the government running for two weeks past a March 4 deadline.

"A government shutdown is not an acceptable or responsible option for Republicans," House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia said in a conference call where he and other Republicans promoted their plan for avoiding the first government shutdown since 1996. They said failure to work out a deal would put the responsibility for a disruption of government services on the Democrats.

With only a week left before federal spending authority runs out, both parties have sought to preemptively blame the other if a shutdown does occur. Democrats who control the Senate have rejected as draconian a bill passed by the House last week that would fund the government through the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30 while carrying out \$61 billion in spending cuts. They have called for a short-term extension of federal spending so the parties can negotiate, but at current spending levels.

Cantor said the \$4 billion they want to trim from the current budget over a two-week period would come from eliminating some of the earmarks or special projects already in the budget and accelerating spending cuts that President Barack Obama has proposed for fiscal year 2012 starting in October.

If Senate Democrats walk away from that offer, said Illinois Republican Peter Roskam, "they are then actively engineering a government shutdown."

Answer:

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans on Friday urged Senate Democrats to accept \$4 billion in cuts as a compromise to keep the government running for two weeks past a March 4 deadline. [LEAD]

"A government shutdown is not an acceptable or responsible option for Republicans," House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia said in a conference call where he and other Republicans promoted their plan for avoiding the first government shutdown since 1996. [LEAD QUOTE]

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[NUT GRAF]

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B.

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's premier research agency plans to open a new center this fall to spur creation of medications because of concern that exciting discoveries aren't being turned into treatments fast enough.

The plan is on track despite the increasingly likely prospect of budget cuts for the venerable National Institutes of Health, agency chief Dr. Francis Collins said Wednesday.

The idea: Do more of the risky early-stage research into promising compounds that drug companies are increasingly reluctant to invest in. It's a period called "the valley of death" because so many of those early experiments fail.

"The valley of death needs to become a valley that leads to life," Collins told reporters. "The time is right even in a difficult budget environment, maybe especially in a difficult budget environment."

ANSWER:

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's premier research agency plans to open a new center this fall to spur creation of medications because of concern that exciting discoveries aren't being turned into treatments fast enough. [LEAD]

The plan is on track despite the increasingly likely prospect of budget cuts for the venerable National Institutes of Health, agency chief Dr. Francis Collins said Wednesday. [BACKUP]

The idea: Do more of the risky early-stage research into promising compounds that drug companies are increasingly reluctant to invest in. It's a period called "the valley of death" because so many of those early experiments fail. [NUT GRAF]

"The valley of death needs to become a valley that leads to life," Collins told reporters. "The time is right even in a difficult budget environment, maybe especially in a difficult budget environment." [LEAD QUOTE]

2. Reorganize the following paragraphs from an Associated Press story into the proper order for a basic news story.

"It's strictly a matter of self-defense," said state Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio. "I don't ever want to see repeated on a Texas college campus what happened at Virginia Tech, where some deranged, suicidal madman goes into a building and is able to pick off totally defenseless kids like sitting ducks."

More than half the members of the Texas House have signed on as co-authors of a measure directing universities to allow concealed handguns. The Senate passed a similar bill in 2009 and is expected to do so again. Republican Gov. Rick Perry, who sometimes packs a pistol when he jogs, has said he's in favor of the idea.

Texas is preparing to give college students and professors the right to carry guns on campus, adding momentum to a national campaign to open this part of society to firearms.

Texas has become a prime battleground for the issue because of its gun culture and its size, with 38 public universities and more than 500,000 students. It would become the second state, following Utah, to pass such a broad-based law. Colorado gives colleges the option and several have allowed handguns.

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3. Outline the following story, identifying the lead, backup, and nut graf as well as the elements in the body (background, exposition, narrative). Also, correct the 6 errors in quotation punctuation that were introduced.

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Republicans in the Wisconsin Assembly took the first significant action on their plan to strip collective bargaining rights from most public workers, abruptly passing the measure early Friday morning before sleep-deprived Democrats realized what was happening.

The vote ended three straight days of punishing debate in the Assembly. But the political standoff over the bill — and the monumental protests at the state Capitol against it — appear far from over.

The Assembly's vote sent the bill on to the Senate, but minority Democrats in that house have fled to Illinois to prevent a vote and say they won't return unless Republican Gov. Scott Walker

agrees to discuss a compromise. Republicans who control the Senate sent state troopers out looking for them at their homes on Thursday, but they turned up nothing.

"This kind of solidifies our resolve" Democratic Sen. Chris Larson said Friday after the Assembly vote. "If we come back, they're going to ram this through without us having a say". The governor didn't sound conciliatory Friday, saying during an afternoon appearance in Green Bay that although "we got to find a way to make it comfortable for those 14 senators to come back home," Republicans had no intention of backing off the main tenets of the bill.

Walker's proposal contains a number of provisions he says are designed to fill the state's \$137 million deficit and lay the groundwork for fixing a projected \$3.6 billion shortfall in the upcoming 2011-13 budget.

The flashpoint is language that would require public workers to contribute more to their pensions and health insurance and strip them of their right to collectively bargain benefits and work conditions.

Democrats and unions see the measure as an attack on workers' rights and an attempt to cripple union support for Democrats. Union leaders say they would make pension and health care concessions if they can keep their bargaining rights, but Walker has refused to compromise. Tens of thousands of people have jammed the Capitol since last week to protest, pounding on drums and chanting so loudly that police providing security have resorted to ear plugs. Hundreds have taken to sleeping in the building overnight, dragging in air mattresses and blankets. Democratic Sen. Jon Erpenbach said Friday that the Assembly's passage of the bill did not change Senate Democrats' intent to stay away.

With the Senate immobilized, Assembly Republicans decided to act and convened the chamber Tuesday morning.

Democrats launched a filibuster, throwing out dozens of amendments and delivering rambling speeches. Each time Republicans tried to speed up the proceedings, Democrats rose from their seats and wailed that the GOP was stifling them.

Debate had gone on for 60 hours and 15 Democrats were still waiting to speak when the vote started around 1 a.m. Friday. Speaker Pro Tem Bill Kramer, R-Waukesha, opened the roll and closed it within seconds.

Democrats looked around, bewildered. Only 13 of the 38 Democratic members managed to vote in time.

Republicans immediately marched out of the chamber in single file. The Democrats rushed at them, pumping their fists and shouting "Shame!" and "Cowards!"

The Republicans walked past them without responding.

Democrats left the chamber stunned. The protesters greeted them with a thundering chant of "Thank you!" Some Democrats teared up. Others hugged.

"What a terrible, terrible day for Wisconsin", said Rep. Jon Richards, D-Milwaukee, "I am incensed. I am shocked."

GOP leaders in the Assembly refused to speak with reporters, but earlier Friday morning Majority Leader Scott Suder, R-Abbotsford, warned Democrats that they had been given 59 hours to be heard and Republicans were ready to vote.

"I applaud the Democrats in the Assembly for earnestly debating this bill and urge their counterparts in the state Senate to return to work and do the same." Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald, R-Horicon, said in a statement issued moments after the vote.

The governor has said that if the bill does not pass by Friday, the state will miss a deadline to refinance \$165 million of debt and will be forced to start issuing layoff notices next week. However, the deadline may not as strict as he says.

Answer:

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Republicans in the Wisconsin Assembly took the first significant action on their plan to strip collective bargaining rights from most public workers, abruptly passing the measure early Friday morning before sleep-deprived Democrats realized what was happening. [LEAD]

The vote ended three straight days of punishing debate in the Assembly. But the political standoff over the bill — and the monumental protests at the state Capitol against it — appear far from over. [NUT GRAF]

The Assembly's vote sent the bill on to the Senate, but minority Democrats in that house have fled to Illinois to prevent a vote and say they won't return unless Republican Gov. Scott Walker agrees to discuss a compromise. Republicans who control the Senate sent state troopers out looking for them at their homes on Thursday, but they turned up nothing. [BACKGROUND] "This kind of solidifies our resolve" Democratic Sen. Chris Larson said Friday after the Assembly vote. "If we come back, they're going to ram this through without us having a say". [LEAD QUOTE]

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[EXPOSITION]

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The flashpoint is language that would require public workers to contribute more to their pensions and health insurance and strip them of their right to collectively bargain benefits and work conditions. [EXPOSITION]

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[BACKGROUND]

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[NARRATIVE]

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