

# 2

## THE NEWS STORY

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to

- Understand the purpose of 5 Ws and H: who, what, where, when, why, and how.
- Infuse structural methods of constructing leads, nut graphs, and context.
- Fill out the rest of your news story with context, elaboration, and a crisp ending.
- Manage quotes and attribution as sourcing in your story.
- End a story with a purpose and plan with the end in mind when producing content.

### LEADING OFF

A basic news story is crafted with rhythm and style and consists of the lead, nut graph, attribution, content, and ending.

Each news story section provides a way for the journalist to stay organized and structured and for the reader to get inspired to begin reading, keep reading, and stay informed. They may return for more if a story is compelling and the online experience is good.

The ABCDEF rule of news stories states that a strong news story is accurate, brief, clear, detailed, enriching, and fair. This can be achieved in 500 words or less.

- **ACCURACY:** Get it right, double-check, and report the facts.
- **BREVITY:** Be concise. Don't overwrite and get to the point. Each word should drive home the purpose of the story.
- **CLARITY:** Be clear and explanatory. News stories are not vague and ambiguous; they fill in blanks and inform rather than create confusion.
- **DETAILS:** "The devil is in the details." Newsgathering means stringing together details to paint a full picture for readers—the more detail, the better the story.
- **ENRICHING:** Teach the audience something they didn't know. Inform, engage, and educate. The news story needs to contain information.
- **FAIRNESS:** Craft every story by capturing both sides and perspectives to present fair and balanced information to the readers, who will make their own opinion based on the facts.

## THE 5 WS AND H

Facts and details are everything. Without these crucial points of information, there is no story. Ask the questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how, no matter how short or long a story. Ask these questions more than once and in different ways. Dig deep, drill hard, and ask the tough questions. Ask with conviction and fill up your notepads or recording devices. You can never have enough detail; nothing may be more important than repetitively asking the **5 Ws and H** of a story: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, and HOW (see Figure 2.1).

### Who

The sources and subjects of a story are the people. Who said it? Who did it? Who was involved? Who caused the outcome? Who had a problem? Who is the hero? This is a people-focused question. When gathering information, ask for names, spellings, ages, hometowns, occupations, titles, and affiliations. Ask subjects to spell their names, addresses, or any nonobvious points of detail and ask for business cards as physical items to refer to when possible. In your writing, connect with subjects and sources early in stories. Allow the subject a direct connection to attribution so your audience knows where you got the information. The “who,” by the way, should not be anonymous other than on rare occasions. You can read more about anonymous sourcing in Chapter 5. Finally, since “who” involves people, and people allow for good visual storytelling, consider photos and videos to include in your multiplatform storytelling that amplifies the “who” in your reporting.

### What

What happened? These are the two powerful words you can ask anyone about any topic, and a story with ample context will begin to flush out. “What” can be a play in a football game, a

**FIGURE 2.1** ■ The 5 Ws and H: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How



weapon in a murder, or a conviction in a court case. If the story is about a car accident, explain the make and model of the car, or year, if it's something classically defined. If the story is about a student who won a science award, give the audience a glimpse into what type of science and the outcome of their research. The “what” allows you to get that crucial extra layer of detail.

## Where

Location, location, location. This is where the event or news moment happened. What town? What city? What street? What building? Hammer out the location-specific details that will help paint a picture. Be descriptive and gather specific details about the location: color of the house, what was located next to the building, what are the cross streets of the address, how close in proximity is the expressway or service road? Basic info is imperative in a straightforward news story, especially when you have a small word count. If you only have 100 or 200 words, you must write right and to the point. You might only have a short story budget due to layout space in a physical publication, a cost-per-word freelance budget, or the value of the story may be less than something else that was assigned on the same day.

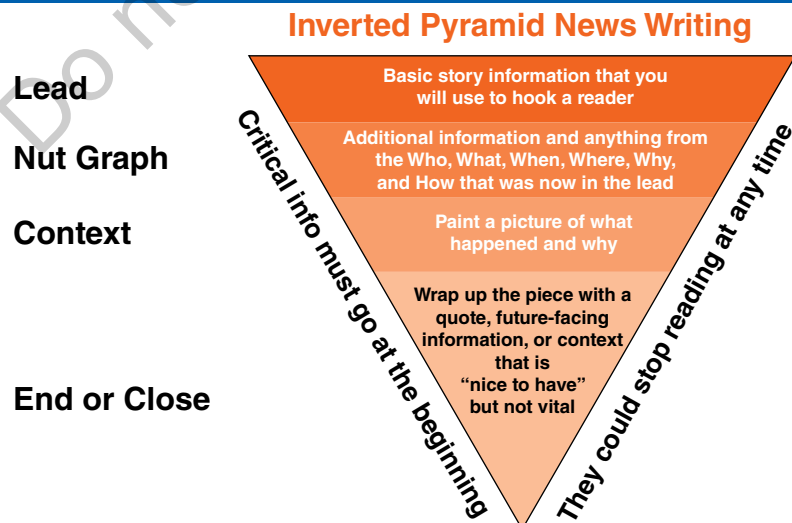
## When

Timing is everything. What time did the crime happen? On what day? When did the player score the goal? In the third period? What year did that plane crash take place? Give your audience a chance to understand when something happened so they can assess the news value of timeliness. If the incident happened within the hour, it's breaking news and will be more significant to prospective readers than old news.

## Why

This is where you'll connect the dots and define WHY the WHO did WHAT, if you follow this tongue twister. The “why” is the motivation behind the action or outcome. Why did it happen? Why did the actor commit the alleged crime? Why did the player score a touchdown? Why did the school district increase the tax rate? Why is the business being closed? The more you dig, the more you can explain why something happened. We'll talk about the structure and flow of a story, but often the “why” falls after the who, what, where, and when in the second paragraph, often referred to as the **nut graph** (and sometimes the “nut graf”; see Figure 2.2).

**FIGURE 2.2** ■ Story Structure



## How

Don't be fooled into thinking "how" also represents "why" because the type of questions associated with asking someone "how" they did something are vastly different than describing "why" they were motivated to achieve the outcome. The "how" can be the nuts and bolts and also fit into the nut graph. If you look at this like an equation—I know, you took journalism to avoid numbers and theory!—it would look like this: WHO + WHAT + HOW = WHY . . . and when and where are important but may not always define the outcome. "How" is an explanation, and in order for you, the writer and reporter, to describe something, you must first understand it yourself; therefore, you need to ask the proper questions as part of the reporting process.

Let's put the 5 Ws and H into practice and analyze their basic function with an actual story. This story was published on a community news site on Long Island. It's a sports story combining historical significance with modern events.

*There have been 3,500 players in 60 years of Sachem High School football history, but only one has rushed for 1,000 yards and recorded 1,000 receiving yards. Cam Lee created his own exclusive club in his final game on Long Island.*

*Lee, working on this achievement for three varsity seasons, reached both plateaus in a win over crosstown rival Sachem East on Saturday afternoon in Farmingville, NY, and finished a legendary career during a shortened spring season that seemed like it would never happen at the height of the pandemic less than a year ago.*

*He reached the rushing milestone on one of his three rushing touchdowns, specifically the 61-yard score to open the second half where he was nearly tackled and escaped a scrum of defenders before rushing to the other side of the field and down the sideline. His receiving record was attained on a 47-yard shuffle pass that also resulted in a touchdown in the second quarter. He scored four times.*

The story went on for another 400 words about his career with quotes from him, his teammates, and coach, but I'm just showing the opening graphs and the details important for the purpose of this chapter. Now to analyze:

**WHO:** Cam Lee is the football player being written about.

**WHAT:** He set a personal statistical milestone for rushing yards and receiving yards that had never been done before in the 60-year history of the football program.

**WHERE:** He played on Long Island, and the milestone was achieved against crosstown rival Sachem East in Farmingville, NY.

**WHEN:** The game was played on Saturday afternoon, and we know that this was Lee's final game. We also know that he set the milestones in the second and third quarters, respectively.

**WHY:** This isn't a hard news story, so the "why" is simply because he has been playing varsity football for 3 years, and because of the length of his career and his skill, he was able to string together the yardage necessary to make local history.

**HOW:** This is about the play and moment that made history, a 47-yard shuffle pass and a 61-yard rushing touchdown that almost didn't happen because he escaped being tackled.

## MINI ASSIGNMENT: ANALYZE ELEMENTS OF THE 5 WS AND H

Find three news stories from three different media outlets and define the who, what, where, when, why, and how for each story. Provide a copy of the online link, as well as a write-up deconstructing each element.

### LEADS AND NUT GRAPHS

A **lead** (aka **lede**) is the most important part of your story because it attracts the reader. Writing leads becomes easier with more writing experience but is often the hardest element of the story to develop. For something meant to be quick and to the point, it's nerve-racking to nail the right details in the right cadence and keep it to less than 35 words and two sentences. Ask yourself what's the news peg, which is the angle that makes the story newsworthy.

Grabbing your audience's attention is not easy. They have so many options for news and content. They are clicking and scrolling from one device and app to the next and getting bombarded by news alerts on their phone, desktop, and inbox. But your direct and impactful lead may just capture their interest, and they should know exactly what the story is about within 5 to 10 seconds of skimming. The details, of course, will come via context and attribution.

An effective lead makes a promise to the reader or viewer: I have something important, something interesting, to tell you. A good lead beckons and invites. It informs, attracts, and entices. If there's any poetry in journalism, it's most often found in the lead (Scanlan, 2014).

Here are some quick-hitting tips on leads:

- Don't bury the lead! Don't make the readers work for it; give it right to them.
- Writers decide what the lead is after their reporting and news gathering and should be formulating the key news item during the reporting process.
- Avoid using quotes or questions in your lead; it's confusing for the audience and doesn't provide structure for writers to build on. Don't start with something like, "How great is this?" or "You're not going to guess what happened on Long Island today!"
- Aim to start with the what and who and don't use words like "It" or "This" to open a story.
- Don't leave the audience hanging; tell them why the story matters:
  - It's not, "The school board met on Tuesday at the high school." It's, "The Thompsonville Board of Education met on Tuesday evening to vote, 7–2, in favor of closing three school buildings and redistricting due to a decrease in student enrollment projections." The story is not about the school board meeting but about the buildings being closed and the community impact of the decision.
- Don't try to be cute, cliché, or comedic. No puns allowed!
- Ask yourself what the most important element of the story is . . . and lead with that.

## Summary Leads

These are commonly used in hard news stories. A **summary lead** provides necessary detail and gets to the point in one or two sentences while capturing most of the 5 Ws and H. Anything not used in the first two sentences will fit into the context after.

This example shows the who, what, why, and when:

- Who: Johnson & Johnson
- What: Finalized settlement
- Why: Opioid addiction crisis
- When: Friday

CAMDEN, N.J. (AP)—Drugmaker Johnson & Johnson and three major distributors finalized nationwide settlements over their role in the opioid addiction crisis Friday, an announcement that clears the way for \$26 billion to flow to nearly every state and local government in the U.S.

In this example, we see who, what, how, and why:

- Who: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- What: Soon loosen mask guidelines
- How: Weighing metrics
- Why: So more people can feel comfortable

*Washington Post*—The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will soon loosen its mask guidelines by weighing metrics such as hospital capacity and coronavirus admissions, rather than simply looking at case counts, so more people can feel comfortable going maskless in indoor public spaces, according to two senior administration officials and two people familiar with the plans.

In this example, we see the who, what, when, and where:

- Who: 25-year-old woman
- What: Found dead
- When: Thursday afternoon
- Where: Oak Cliff apartment

*Dallas Morning News*: A 25-year-old woman was found slain Thursday afternoon at her central Oak Cliff apartment.

In this two-sentence lead, you are drawn in by the first sentence with the basic information and then learn the rest of the key story points in the second sentence.

*St. Louis Post Dispatch*—A former member of the St. Louis Blues hockey team is running for a seat in Congress. Jim Campbell, a forward in the National Hockey League

for a decade beginning in the 1990s, filed Tuesday to run as a Republican for the 4th Congressional District seat now held by Republican U.S. Rep. Vicky Hartzler of Harrisonville.

### Order of Information

Place the most important details at the beginning of the first sentence. Following the “subject-verb-object” order is helpful, meaning who made it happen, what actually happened, and what or whom did it happen to?

*San Jose Mercury News:* A driver died Thursday morning after being hit by a Caltrain while trying to cross the tracks in San Bruno, officials said.

- Subject: A driver
- Verb: Died
- Object: Caltrain

*Detroit Free Press:* A Center Line nursing home worker who forged residents’ signatures on absentee ballot applications in 2020 pleaded guilty this week and is to serve the first 45 days of her probation sentence in the Macomb County Jail.

- Subject: Nursing home worker
- Verb: Forged signatures
- Object: absentee ballot

Could it be rewritten? It won’t read correctly or logically without the cadence of subject-verb-object.

*Forging patient signatures landed a Center Line nursing home worker in jail for 45 days after being sentenced in Macomb County Jail.*

In looking at the sentence order from the *Detroit Free Press*, if you switched to beginning with the where and what, it takes away from the emphasis on the who (the nursing home worker), which is the most important part of the story. It’s also not advised to start a lead with a declaration like “forging.”

### Delayed Information

If the subject of a routine news story is not well known, craft the first sentence and identify the subject by age, location, and/or occupation and then add in the other details in the next graph.

NBC: A man from Carmel, Maine, accused of violently assaulting a 3-year-old child will be held in jail until a mental health evaluation has been completed. Damion Myers, 34, made his initial court appearance and bail hearing virtually Wednesday.

AL.com (*Birmingham News*)—A Montgomery man is being held on \$1.5 million bond in connection with a deadly shooting outside an Alabama Walmart last month.

Calvin J. Wells, 24, is charged with murder and domestic violence, according to Wetumpka police Lt. L. D. Mann. Wells was taken into custody Friday by U.S. Marshals.

### According to Who?

Where did you get the information? Ask yourself “according to who” as a reminder to place that information in the lead. It can be as simple as adding “police said” at the end of the lead sentence. Also remember to add attribution if there are any accusations in the reporting, such as political or criminal stories. I’ll provide more detail on attribution later in this chapter.

MLive.com (Michigan): A man accused of assaulting and holding his girlfriend at gun-point was arrested after fleeing the scene, police said.

10TV.com (WBNS Cleveland)—A man was found fatally shot Saturday morning in northeast Columbus. Columbus police said officers were called about 11:15 a.m. to the 1900 block of Oakland Park Avenue, just east of Cleveland Avenue, for a report of a person dead in a backyard.

### Feature Leads

In features and profiles, and basically most stories beyond hard news, there is more creative flexibility with the opening lines in a story. This is a challenge as much as it presents a possibly easier flow of ideas and words. It may take a few tries to nail the **feature lead** in a story, and that’s perfectly acceptable. Build interest by using anecdotal information to cause suspense. This boils down to storytelling. Have fun, try new writing styles and strategies, and improve your leads over time with experience.

### Anecdotal Leads

An **anecdotal lead** allows writers to tell a story and to leverage people and events with specific details as an entry to their world. To maximize this writing technique, use these tips:

- Latch onto one key element of the larger story.
- That key element can be small and create a pathway for the greater purpose (think big picture).
- Make it intriguing for the reader and entice them to enter your story.
- Play on the right emotion with the anecdote; the sentiment should be consistent throughout: Is it a sad, happy, hurtful, angry, or comedic angle?

*The Oklahoman—A group of Oklahomans had their hands full one recent morning sorting through dozens of colorful dresses that spilled out of bags and boxes, but their project had nothing to do with fashion.*

*With the dresses destined for girls in Guatemala, the United Methodist Women’s Group at Quail Springs Methodist Church and two busy octogenarians in Davis have been sewing seeds of love—and battling human trafficking at the same time.*

*The dresses sewn by the women will be delivered to girls in Guatemala in March through “Dress a Girl Around the World,” an international program. Leaders with the program said the special label sewn onto the front of each dress seems to deter human traffickers, perhaps because the labeled dress identifies the wearer as someone who is loved and cared for.*

In this lead, the writer opens with a vivid image of people sifting through colorful dresses (which makes for good complementary photography if the reporting team could gather while in the field).



The writer creates a shift in thought as they push from dresses to a project that actually has “nothing to do with fashion.” Intriguing! In the second graph, you learn this story is about trafficking, and in the third, it gets even more clear that it’s specifically about a program in Guatemala.

## Narrative Leads

Writing a **narrative lead** is a lot like crafting a literary story. This tactic sets the scene, develops the character and the mood, and then, once readers are captivated, hits them with the real purpose of the journalism by the emotional output of the subjects. You may think the lead is buried, but it’s not—it’s the prize the reader gets after enjoying their journey through the first few sentences offered. If written with specific detail and rhythm, readers will enjoy breezing through the rest of the copy and may come back for more.

In this lead, you can picture the courtroom and the color of the people, and the story moves you from present to past, depicting where the subject is in court versus what happened when he shot someone, which landed him in court. As you’ll read, the lead carries you to a critical junction in the story about race in the court system in the South.

*The Advocate (Louisiana)—Matthew Allen was 20 when he stared across a courtroom in Houma at the 12 men and women who would decide whether he would spend the rest of his life in prison.*

*Only two of the faces in the jury box were Black, like him.*

*Allen stood accused in the killing of Dicarie James on a back road south of Houma. The two men had quarreled over a drug deal inside James’s car. As he lay dying, James told deputies it was Allen who shot him three times with a .22-caliber revolver, twice in the chest.*

*Allen initially professed innocence, but he later admitted killing James, saying he fired in self-defense. The jury deliberated for 2.5 hours until it reached a decision: guilty as charged of second-degree murder.*

*But as with many verdicts in felony trials across Louisiana, this one came with serious misgivings—and a pronounced racial divide.*

*The two Black jurors disagreed with the rest. It didn’t matter.*

*In Louisiana, unlike anywhere else in America, that was good enough to send Allen off to a mandatory life prison term, with no chance of parole.*

Poynter refers to this as a “narrative action” lead because of the descriptive verb-driven disposition.

*The Press Democrat (California): Cal Fire Battalion Chief Gino DeGraffenreid was about to jump back into his truck after loading a fleeing family into a police car when he thought he heard someone yelling amid the roaring wind and fire in the hills northeast of Santa Rosa.*

*He ran toward the voice and saw them: a couple wearing next to nothing, freezing amid an unprecedented fire belching smoke and raining firebrands.*

*“They were soaking wet,” DeGraffenreid said. “They had awoken to a smoke detector, jumped in the pool and for about an hour had been in the pool trying to stay away from heat.”*

*He wrapped them in T-shirts, put them into his truck and caravanned with police down Michele Way to Mark West Springs Road, a white-knuckle trip with fire and intense heat—a burning neighborhood already wiped clean of all that had once been so familiar.*

*“All of the landmarks—the houses, the fences, the goofy Volkswagen bug—all of the visual landmarks were gone,” DeGraffenreid said.*

In the next narrative, you get all the information you need and find yourself instantly hooked because of the impact of the moment. By the end, we know who, what, where, when, why, and how, and each element of news and information built up to the inconceivable catastrophe. The writer remembers the particulars: the names of the church, the booze, and the gun (Clark, 2018). This is a very blunt and aggressive way to open a story. It’s a specific point of view meant to offer a harsh depiction of what the gunman was thinking and why he committed such heinous acts.

*GQ Magazine—Sitting beside the church, drinking from a bottle of Smirnoff Ice, he thought he had to go in and shoot them.*

*They were a small prayer group—a rising-star preacher, an elderly minister, eight women, one young man, and a little girl. But to him, they were a problem. He believed that, as Black Americans, they were raping “our women and are taking over our country.” So he took out his Glock handgun and calmly, while their eyes were closed in prayer, opened fire on the 12 people gathered in the basement of Mother Emanuel AME Church and shot almost every single one of them dead.*

### Delayed Info or Teaser Leads

A **delayed (or teaser) lead** grabs you with an interesting line and then hit you with the purpose of the story directly after. They also define critical elements before subjects. This sets up the reporting throughout the remainder of the piece by introducing the reader to what happened (Bowman, 2020).

*Atlanta Journal Constitution—The Braves have worked 37 postseason games over the past four autumns. Mike Soroka, their best pitching prospect of this century, started one. He was masterful in Game 3 of the 2019 NLDS, holding the Cardinals to one run on two hits on a day the venerable Adam Wainwright was just as good. The Braves scored three in the ninth to win.*

*Since 2019, Soroka has logged 13.66 big-league innings. He has torn the same Achilles tendon twice. Since 2019, the Braves have won six of seven playoff series and, using nine different starting pitchers, gone 19–9 in postseason games. Yours truly has long regarded Soroka as the key player on the Braves’ loaded roster. I’m not sure that still applies.*

### Tell-Me-Why Lead

In a **tell-me-why lead** the writer tells you why you should read, shows the impact to the region, and presents a road map of what to expect.

*Texas Monthly—If you’re not paying attention to this year’s Republican primary for a seat on the Texas Railroad Commission—and relatively few voters are—you should be. This vitally important election of one of the state’s top energy regulators will have a significant impact on whether Texas’s natural gas infrastructure freezes up again and contributes to widespread blackouts, as it did a year ago. While it no longer helps set global oil prices, as it did in the forties and fifties, the Railroad Commission still oversees fossil-fuel production and pipelines. And, if all that’s not enough to draw your interest, the race has taken three unexpected turns during the past couple of weeks—involving death, alleged corruption, and barely covered breasts.*

## First-Person Lead

Don't put yourself in a story often, if ever. But if you find the opportunity to write a compelling story about something you experienced with a **first-person lead**, here's an example:

NPR—*For many of us, Sept. 11, 2001, is one of those touchstone dates—we remember exactly where we were when we heard that the planes hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I was in Afghanistan.*

## Scene-Setting Lead

Draw the reader in with details about the location. In this **scene-setting lead**, you know it's on the second floor of a library with high ceilings. That's a lot of specific information that allows you to visualize what you're reading and "set the scene."

NPR—*On the second floor of an old Bavarian palace in Munich, Germany, there's a library with high ceilings, a distinctly bookish smell and one of the world's most extensive collections of Latin texts. About 20 researchers from all over the world work in small offices around the room.*

## Single-Item Lead

Very direct and quick hitting, a single-item lead just mentions elements of prominence.

Associated Press—*The Philadelphia Phillies are World Champions again.*

## Wow Lead

Also known as a startling or zinger lead, a **wow lead** creates a surprise you're not expecting. This gem from 1968 has been featured in many articles and "how to" guides about leads.

*New York Times: A 17-year-old boy chased his pet squirrel up a tree in Washington Square Park yesterday afternoon, touching off a series of incidents in which 22 persons were arrested and eight persons, including five policemen, were injured.*

For this lead, the writer was creative and direct on a story about a man who died smuggling cocaine-filled condoms in his stomach.

*Miami Herald—His last meal was worth \$30,000, and it killed him.*

## Nut Graph

The term *nut graph* (also *nut graf*) was crowned in the 1950s at the *Wall Street Journal* and suggests that readers can get everything they need from the story "in a nutshell"; it's the paragraph in a feature or anecdotal story that fills in the focus or purpose of the story. Why does the story matter? It's in the nut graph. Whereas a summary lead provides the most important information in the first sentence or two, an anecdotal or feature lead may be a longer, more drawn-out version of storytelling to hook the reader, and they need the nut graph to hit them with the real reason they are reading.

But effective nut paragraphs can do far more. They can answer questions raised in leads, explain why stories are significant, and place stories in meaningful contexts. They help writers organize their own material. They provide cues for headline writers, copy editors, and

designers. They shorten stories by creating a tight organizational focus, and they suggest an outline for the story to follow (Buttry, 2018). The nut graph has several purposes (Scanlan, 2019):

- It justifies the story by telling readers why they should care.
- It provides a transition from the lead and explains the lead and its connection to the rest of the story.
- It often tells readers why the story is timely.
- It often includes supporting material that helps readers see why the story is important.

The sample about Rose Jusino comes from a Pulitzer Prize finalist piece. In the third paragraph, you read that the story is about continued fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. There is narrative and scene-setting detail that drives toward the purpose of the story.

*Washington Post*—Rose Jusino was waking up after working the graveyard shift at Taco Bell when a friend knocked on her door at the Star Motel. The electric company trucks were back. The workers were about to shut off the power again.

*The 17-year-old slammed her door and cranked the air conditioning as high as it would go, hoping that a final blast of cold air might make the 95-degree day more bearable. She then headed outside to the motel's overgrown courtyard, a route that took her past piles of maggot-infested food that had been handed out by do-gooders and tossed aside by the motel's residents. Several dozen of them were gathered by a swimming pool full of fetid brown water, trying to figure out their next move.*

*The motel's owner had abandoned the property to its residents back in December, and now the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic was turning an already desperate strip of America—just down the road from Disney World—into something ever more dystopian. The motel's residents needed to pay the power company \$1,500.*

In this scene-setting feature lead, you get the nut graph or purpose of the story in the fourth paragraph: “*The Cape we love is at risk now.*”

*Boston Globe*—These bridges span much more than a canal.

*To traverse the Sagamore, from the north, or the Bourne, from the west, is to cross the boundary between work and play. As the last girder shrinks in the rearview mirror, the road opens onto the pine-fringed mid-Cape expressway. Already those knotted neck muscles are beginning to soften and uncoil.*

*The beaches we love—Marconi, Cahoon Hollow, Nauset, to name three—are still miles away. But the worst of the dreaded Cape traffic is behind us now. We are in a postcard land that evokes a particular memory, a four-word poem, for anyone who has had the good fortune to experience it: Summer on the Cape.*

*But this is no vacation. The Cape we love is at risk now. Cape Cod is perched on a stretch of ocean warming faster than nearly any in the world. And as much as we might wish it away, as hard as we try to ignore it, the effects of climate change here are already visible, tangible, measurable, disturbing.*

## MINI ASSIGNMENT: FIND THE LEADS

Using different online publications, find three leads that you like and three that you don't and share examples in class. Make sure to find summary and feature leads as part of the analysis and list what writing style and strategy you like or dislike about each. Provide a link to each story cited.

### CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

After the lead and nut graph are written, it's time to produce “the rest” of the story, which consists of context, background, elaboration, and the ending. The context and background show the fruits of your newsgathering and reporting. It's “everything else” that doesn't fit in the lead and nut graph but also lends support to the most important details you deliver as part of your reporting.

Context provides perspective in relation to people, places, or processes. If you're writing a story about tax increases for a local school district, what are the numbers in relation to neighboring communities or state averages? If you're writing about inflation and the economy, how is it impacting various areas of household items, and is it varying per region in the country? If you're writing about a football championship victory, do you know if this is the first time the team won or the 10th? Historical context provides news value.

Another purpose of context is to provide the audience with new and important information about the story. Why do they care? It's in the context. The news can often seem like something only for news junkies, spoken in a language that only the initiated understand, especially when wire copy is used as base material. What new entry points can be created for the reader to feel as though he has a stake in the story (American Press Institute, 2022)?

To substantiate the details, you'll add sourcing and attribution, which we'll also discuss in this chapter.

This story from Sagem Report on Long Island is about a middle school basketball player who makes school district history by becoming the youngest to score in a varsity game. The historical context is bolded to show why Pitman's performance was historic and how it stacks up against other players.

Addison Pitman became the first seventh grader in Sagem basketball history to score in a varsity game.

**She is the first Sagem North player to perform in a varsity game as a seventh grader and the second in Sagem history after Danielle Cosgrove, who played for Sagem East in the 2012–2013 season when she was brought up from JV in the fourth quarter of a playoff game against Riverhead. Cosgrove, who is currently playing at St. John's University, did not score.**

**Not even Nicole Kaczmarski, the greatest girls' basketball talent to graduate from Sagem, has that on her résumé. Kaz, who had her No. 23 uniform retired and played at UCLA, was on varsity as an eighth grader.**

Pitman, who started the season with the JV squad and attends Samoset Middle School, scored 2 points in a 62–40 Sagem North loss against William Floyd on the road.

Between absences on the roster and Pitman's drive to shine on the next level, the stars aligned for this cosmic moment in Flaming Arrows country.

Keep an eye on the Pitman name. Her brother Jack, a freshman, made his way to the varsity football team in a playoff game at Stony Brook's LaValle Stadium by the end of the 2021 season too.

Here is another example from the Associated Press about surging gas prices . . . and some things to note:

- You'll notice four paragraphs that establish the purpose of the story, including quotes from a state senator.
- The bolded portions show just how much context this story needs. It's very data driven to show historic averages and provide context on why the increase in gas prices is causing politicians from some states to call for a "gas tax holiday."
- In addition, the story provides specific context and details from each of the states, as well as significant sourcing and attribution to support the data.

With gas prices at record highs across the U.S., an increasing number of governors and state lawmakers are calling for the suspension of gas taxes to provide relief to motorists who are facing the prospect of even higher pump prices as the country cuts off Russian oil imports.

Proposals for a "gas tax holiday" to counter inflation had been moving slowly in Congress and state capitols before Russia invaded Ukraine, but they have gained momentum this week amid surging prices that averaged \$4.25 a gallon on Wednesday, according to AAA.

Republican legislative leaders in Michigan and Pennsylvania announced proposals Wednesday to suspend or reduce state gas taxes. That came after the Republican governor of Georgia and Democratic governor of California both called for relief from state gas taxes Tuesday, when President Joe Biden ordered a ban on Russian oil imports.

Meanwhile, the Democratic governors of Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin sent a joint letter to congressional leaders urging them to support legislation suspending the federal government's 18.4-cent-a-gallon gas tax through 2022.

Critics of the proposals say there is no guarantee the savings would get passed on to consumers and worry that suspending gas taxes could hurt funding for road projects. Even so, the eye-popping prices at the pump are prompting lawmakers to act.

"In the past several days, we have seen gas prices skyrocket to historic levels," Pennsylvania Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman, a Republican running for governor, said in a memo seeking co-sponsors for the legislation. "We must do all that we can to address this now at the state government level and offer our support to hard-working families."

**Pennsylvania's 57.6-cent-a-gallon gas tax is the highest in the nation, just ahead of California's. Corman said he is introducing legislation for a roughly one-third reduction through the rest of the year. The lost gas tax revenue would be offset by**

**directing \$500 million of federal COVID-19 relief aid to state police and issuing \$650 million in bonds to ensure infrastructure projects remain funded.**

**Legislation pending in both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate also would offset lost revenue from a gas tax suspension by transferring an equal amount of general fund dollars to the accounts that fund state highway and public transit programs. The legislation is opposed by groups that advocate for road and bridge funding. They fear a tax suspension would set a poor precedent and become politically difficult to restore if politicians are cast as supporting a tax hike when it kicks back in.**

**The potential for lost infrastructure funding has been one of the biggest obstacles to those seeking to suspend or reduce gas taxes, but some state officials say they can afford the financial hit. Many states ended their 2021 fiscal years with record cash balances due to an influx of federal pandemic aid and a resurgent economy that yielded greater income and sales tax revenue than expected.**

**Suspending Michigan’s 27.2-cent-a-gallon fuel tax from April through September would cost about \$725 million. The bill passed the GOP-controlled House on Wednesday and now goes to the state Senate, also controlled by Republicans. The office of Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, said it could hamper road repairs.**

“Michigan has billions of dollars in surplus revenue available,” House Speaker Jason Wentworth said in a statement Wednesday. “The solution here isn’t complicated. Republicans are going to take action today and put a real plan on the governor’s desk to actually lower the cost at the pump.”

**Though average gas prices are at record levels, they are not yet the highest that Americans have paid when adjusted for inflation. The previous record high of \$4.10 a gallon in July 2008 would be equal to about \$5.24 in today’s dollars.**

**Proposals to suspend gas taxes are based on an assumption that the savings would be passed on to consumers.**

“Money saved at the pump translates into dollars back in consumers’ pockets for groceries, child care, rent, and more,” the six Democratic governors wrote in their letter Tuesday to Democratic and Republican congressional leaders.

But transportation advocates say that because of other factors affecting gas prices, the full amount of tax cuts may not be reflected at the pump.

**On average, only about one third of the value of previous gas tax cuts or tax increases were passed on to consumers, according to a 2020 report from the American Road & Transportation Builders Association that analyzed 113 state gas tax changes enacted over several years. That’s because retail gas prices are influenced by complex factors, including the price of crude oil and supply-and-demand pressures.**

“The real problem with this approach at both the federal and the state level is that there’s no way to ensure that the people will see this savings when they go to the gas pump to fill up their cars, their SUVs and trucks,” said Jim Tymon, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

**Last year, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp suspended state motor fuel taxes for several days to offset increasing prices after a computer hack led to the shutdown of a key pipeline that carries fuel to much of Georgia.**

**Kemp on Tuesday said he again wants to suspend the state’s 29.1-cent-a-gallon gas tax because of rising prices, though details remain to be worked out in legislation introduced in the General Assembly.**

**California Gov. Gavin Newsom also renewed a call to provide relief from rising gas prices during his State of the State address Tuesday, after a previous proposal gained little traction in the Democratic-led legislature. The average price for a gallon of gas in California reached \$5.57 on Wednesday—the highest nationally, according to AAA.**

**After Newsom’s speech, California Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins and Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon issued a joint statement saying they plan to pursue tax relief from the general fund instead of “a small cut to the gas tax that might not get passed on to consumers.”**

**Virginia lawmakers also were negotiating this week whether to suspend a recent gas-tax hike for one year. The proposal was a key campaign pledge of Gov. Glenn Youngkin, a Republican elected last November. The Republican-controlled House included the temporary 5-cent gasoline tax cut in its budget proposal, but the Democrat-controlled Senate did not.**

Before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida had proposed a five-month pause on the state’s gas tax this summer as part of a broader package of tax relief. Democratic Gov. J. B. Pritzker of Illinois also had proposed to halt an automatic 2.2-cent increase in the state’s motor fuel tax as part of a broader tax-cut plan.

Lawmakers in other states—including Maryland, Minnesota, New York, and Ohio—also have proposed to suspend or roll back gas taxes. A day after Russia invaded Ukraine, Missouri state Rep. Andrew Schwadron, a Republican, filed legislation to suspend the state’s motor fuel taxes for six months, citing an emergency to protect consumers from rising prices.

“The quickest way that we could provide that relief would be by temporarily suspending that gas tax,” he said.

### Paragraph Length

Try to stick with one or two sentences per paragraph and break stories up with a cadence that keeps the reader engaged with movement. Think of it like steps in dancing. It creates a rhythm and pace from beginning to end. 1-2-2-1, 1-2-2-1.

### Sentence Cadence

Succinct and direct. Keep sentences no more than 30 to 40 words on average and go shorter if the opportunity presents to add punchy text arrangements. The reader will gravitate toward a story where the sentences and paragraphs aren’t all the same. Between the size of the sentences and the use of quotes and transitions, the writer controls the reader’s journey.

### New Information

All new information should be toward the top of the story. If it’s NEW and NOW, it’s important to the reader; therefore, it’s important enough to place toward the top.



This means you should not introduce new information at the bottom of the story. Obviously, all of the context in your story may be *new* to the reader if they are just learning about the topic, but the point of this note is to avoid putting fresh and important information deeply buried in the text.

## Use of Transitions

It's common to use transitions like *however*, *subsequently*, *besides*, or *meanwhile* in stories to create movement for the reader. Transitions help connect thoughts and extend the length of sentences. A transition can be a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or an entire paragraph. In each case, it functions the same way: First, the transition either directly summarizes the content of a preceding sentence, paragraph, or section or implies such a summary by reminding the reader of what has come before (The Writing Center, n.d.).

Make sure your story elements are presented in a logical order. The most common order is chronological order (i.e., this happened, then this happened, then this happened). For the sake of variety, you want to use the word “then” no more than once (Parks, 2014).

Use transitions to introduce new subjects.

*“John Smith, a Suffolk County Legislator from the eighth district, opposes the use of plastic bags in retail shops and has developed educational resources for the community related to sustainability and recycling.”*

*“However, with the legislature going into the holiday break, their immediate focus is on the infrastructure project impacting the Hawkins Corridor to alleviate traffic congestion. This was not discussed at tonight’s county meeting because they will hold a special discussion on Wednesday evening to address concerns and the vision plan.”*

## Story Sections

**Story sections** are used more when stories exceed the average 500-word count. Story sections or chapters help writers organize their thoughts and allow the audience to compartmentalize the reading material. Each section can theoretically have its own lead, nut graph, and context. The following list is a structural example of breaking down sections in a story about the increase of home sales and values in a region:

- Lead and nut graph – 75 words
- Section 1: How did we get here? What causes the increase in home values? – 250 words
- Section 2: How is it impacting people? Who is selling and buying? – 250 words
- Section 3: How is it impacting real estate agents and firms? – 250 words
- Ending: What’s next, and how long will this last? – 150 words

## Additional Information and Complementary Storytelling

Do you have too much context and information that won’t fit within your word count, or is it making the story too long for its initial purpose? Create an engaging visual experience for the reader, either online, on social media, or in print, depending on what distribution points you can access.

- **Pull quotes:** Break up the text with a larger and impactful quote.
- **Boxes and highlights:** Pull out details and highlight them in an easy-to-read layout and design.
- **Bullet points:** Readers love bullet points—look at how this note is written!
- **Notebooks** and sidebars: Do you need to use all of your reporting and information for one story? No, if you think there is room for additional stories or complementary pieces for different platforms, assess using what you need for the basic news story and expand from that initial point.
- **Multiplatform thoughts:** Always have a multiplatform plan for your story. Is there so much context and background information that the audience would benefit from a deeper and more interactive experience online?

## DEEP DIVE: REBECCA AGUILAR



**Rebecca Aguilar**

Courtesy of Rebecca Aguilar

*A journalist for 4 decades, Rebecca Aguilar spent 28 years in television news with career stops in Toledo, Chicago, Corpus Christi, San Antonio, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Dallas. Rebecca has been recognized for her journalism work with 50 awards and nominations, including several Emmy awards. She has also been a leader with the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Society of Professional Journalists.*

### How important is understanding the basic structure of a news story for young journalists?

Understanding the basic structure of a news story is important, but don't overthink it. Keep that structure in mind, simple and flexible. When you have a story idea, it's good to know your basics: who, what, where, when, why, and how. Those are the answers that will form your road map on how to start, explore, explain, and end a story.

### Describe an experience working on a news story that inspired you.

In my 40 years as a reporter, I had several stories that inspired me because I was able to have an impact on society. I investigated a man posing as a lawyer and uncovered that he dressed the part and was far from it. He ended up going to prison because of my investigation. In another story, the federal government created a policy about employees who become registered sex offenders after I discovered that there were U.S. Postal mail carriers who were registered sex offenders. The U.S. Postal Service did not know about it. I also helped shut down an entire school district in North Texas after discovering some of the school board members were corrupt. Some of them went to prison.

### Can you define the importance of objectivity and fairness for a student journalist?

First of all, accept and acknowledge the facts that we all have biases and opinions. Your job as a journalist is to report the facts whether you agree or disagree with them or not. Strive to be fair and objective regardless of your personal beliefs and opinions. As journalists, our job is to gather the facts and get them out to the public. The only journalists giving their views are those paid to do that job: television commentators and opinion writers.

### What is the best advice to give a young journalist today?

My best advice is to find a couple of mentors—they should be journalists who have a similar job you want to do or are doing. These individuals should tell you what “you need to hear” and not “what you want to hear.” A good mentor will make you better at your job, talk you through a professional and sometimes a personal crisis, and pat you on the back when you need it. Also, it would be best if you had male and female mentors because men and women don’t always think alike.

### Is this also the best advice someone gave you earlier in your career?

The best advice I got early in my career is to be unafraid. Unafraid to move to the other side of the country for any job. Unafraid to knock on the door to get an interview, even though the odds are someone will slam the door in your face. Unafraid to stand up for yourself as a journalist in the newsroom and outside when pursuing a story. Unafraid to walk away from a job where the environment is not suitable for you personally and professionally. Unafraid to cover any story. Unafraid to take risks.

## QUOTES AND ATTRIBUTION

Quotes add depth and credibility to any story. It’s not a story just because you wrote it; it’s a story because the event or news instance happened, and someone is able to verify it. That *someone*, or *source*, brings life, character, and believability to anything you write and report.

Quotes allow for the story to move with a specific pace, while offering transitions and “wow factors” in the way you craft any piece. Either the reader says, “Wow, I can’t believe they said that,” or “Wow, I can’t believe that happened.” Not every quote is powerful and eye-opening; some are descriptive and mundane but, again, offer verification to reporting details.

As discussed in this chapter between the lead and nut graph, you’ll likely have the who, what, where, when, why, and how addressed, but if not, the rest of that information can come from a quote in the third or fourth paragraph.

Here are some tips on quotes:

- **Look for emotion and impact:** Did the subject say something emotional that reflects the purpose and context of the story? Find the impact and find sources who offer the perspective your readers expect and relate to and use quotes that underscore the total impact.
- **Focus them:** You know the story’s focus because it’s in your lead and nut graph. Use those as the compass for the rest of the material in the story. Quotes should relate to the focus.

- **Enhance the copy:** Use quotes that complement your text but also add color and vibrancy to the overall reporting.
- **Balance:** Do you have enough quotes to present both sides?
- **Paraphrase if needed:** If the direct quote is unclear to you, it won't be clear to the reader. However, if you can clarify as a follow-up question in the interview and get enough sentiment from the subject to paraphrase their thought, work that into the story instead by using attribution. For example, *Lemieux was frustrated after the team's sixth straight loss. He told reporters after the game that the issue falls on execution and finishing plays, not preparation or coaching.* In this example, it's not a direct quote, but it offers Lemieux's direct thoughts.

Here are some things to avoid with quotes:

- **Don't repeat previous words or transitions:** If you already wrote it in the story or you already used it in a quote, avoid using the same information or transitions elsewhere in the story. Just because the source said it doesn't mean you have to mention it with your words and their quotes; pick one way to place that information in your story.
- **Avoid mundane information:** "Our next game is Friday at 7 p.m.—we'll see you there," said Nolan. Anything basic like standard information does not need to be placed in direct quotes; just use it in the story as needed. If it's about events, scheduling, or notes you can find on a website or social media, it's fair use and acceptable to use in a story. If there are changes to the prior information, use attribution. For example, *The time of Friday's county board meeting has been changed due to a scheduling conflict with . . .*
- **Avoid ambiguity:** Quotes should be clear and not leave the readers scratching their head wondering, What did they say? In the course of your reporting career, sources will ramble, be vague on purpose, or simply offer nothing worth using. It will happen. Cut through the unusable and find the information worth sharing in direct quotes. If there are no usable direct quotes, apply attribution to paraphrased material.
- **Be leery of crafty speakers:** There are some sources who are brilliant speakers with beautifully crafted words, and everything sounds good. Put on your news judgment cap and find the valuable assets from their words and, again, relate their quotes to the focus of the story. They may say something interesting that is unrelated to the story. Perhaps you can write another piece or use it to pitch to your editors as a complementary news element.
- **Avoid accusations:** Be very careful using quotes from politicians or public officials (or anyone, really) that defame a person or organization. Libel could come into play, even if you attribute the words to someone else.

### Comma and Punctuation/Format

Inexperienced writers often misplace the punctuation on quotes. The comma should be inside the quotation mark before attribution.

*For example:* "Our defense was spectacular tonight," he said.

*Not:* "Our defense was spectacular tonight", he said.

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*Not:* “Our defense was spectacular tonight.” he said.

*Not:* “Our defense was spectacular tonight” he said.

*Not:* “Our defense was spectacular tonight.”

## Quoting Questions

As in the situation using a comma, put question marks inside the quotation mark when the question is being quoted directly.

*For example,* “What more can I give to this business?” Stern said. “I have poured my heart and soul into this store for 40 years, and I can’t do it any longer.”

## Attribute the Source After the First Sentence

Put the name of the person who spoke the quote after the first sentence of the quote, not after the second, third, and so on. This is a hard-and-fast rule that you must follow forever. This won’t change. Learn this now and keep it in mind every time you write a quote in a story for the rest of your career.

*For example,* “It’s really an honor to have your uniform number retired,” said Keith Seaver. “To have my number hung in the rafters with the other greats from this organization is more than I could dream of as a kid growing up, just hoping to play professionally one day. This is everything to me and my family.”

*Not:* “It’s really an honor to have your uniform number retired. To have my number hung in the rafters with the other greats from this organization is more than I could dream of as a kid growing up, just hoping to play professionally one day,” said Keith Seaver. “This is everything to me and my family.”

*Not:* “It’s really an honor to have your uniform number retired. To have my number hung in the rafters with the other greats from this organization is more than I could dream of as a kid growing up, just hoping to play professionally one day. This is everything to me and my family,” said Keith Seaver.

## Use One Paragraph for Each Quote

Keep organized by having each quote appear as its own paragraph and don’t loop in other quotes or other sources into those solo paragraphs. Keep in mind this is not an essay for your English class and not a book project—it’s a news story. New source = new paragraph. New quote or thought from existing source = new paragraph.

## Single Use of Quotes

Once a quote is used, don’t use it again in the same story. It should be used as a single reference point in your story. If you would like to create a pull-quote graphic that adds some resonance to the words either on a print, online, or social graphic template, then that works very nicely.

## The Clearer the Better

If you don’t understand the quote, don’t use it because if you don’t understand it, your audience probably won’t either. If you feel pressured to use quotes because it’s the only sourcing you have,

then paraphrase the quote and attribute it to your source. If that doesn't work, go back to the drawing board and find another source. Speaking of which, it helps to gather quotes and attribution from more than one source to add more voices to your piece.

### Limit the Use of Ellipses

You see ellipses (i.e., . . .) used in stories when quotes are not finished or if there is an omission of words in sentences. Either they were cut off mid-thought, or perhaps it was never recorded or was captured in-full during your reporting. These are most useful when covering a speech or there is a long delivery of important quotes at a press conference. In general, it is not necessary to use an ellipsis at the beginning or end of a quotation, even if you are quoting from the middle of a sentence. An exception is that you should include an ellipsis if, to prevent misinterpretation, you need to emphasize that the quotation begins or ends in midsentence (Lee, 2015).

*Example of an original sentence without ellipses:* “After speaking with my family, I decided this week to officially run for the seat of Suffolk County executive, giving this county a chance to grow and prosper and to establish a better future for our children.”

*Example of sentence with ellipses:* “I decided to run for Suffolk County executive . . . to establish a better future for our children.”

### Attribution

Attribution helps reporters and news outlets show where they received the information they are reporting. Did they get it from someone directly? Is it a public official? Did they witness the event? If not, was someone else there to verify the information? Reporters assign attribution to facts and statements that they gather. It's an element of transparency for the audience to know, and hopefully trust, how the reporter did their job as a news gatherer. If information is common knowledge, it does not need attribution. If the information is a meeting date, office location, or a holiday on an academic calendar, for instance, you can write it as such without attributing info. However, if the academic calendar was changed midyear for a specific reason, it's worth noting that the change was made by the provost's office, citing the specific reason.

### “Said” Versus “Says”

Most often write in past tense for news stories and present tense for feature stories. This has long been debated by writers and editors, and a majority agree on “said” most of the time. No matter which tense you use in your story, it must be consistent the whole time. Don't use both; just use one and stick to it. “Says” provides a sense of immediacy in the narrative as you paint a picture and bring the reader along for your journey, whereas “said” is clearly in the past when the story already happened, which is always the case with a news story because you report on things that already happened.

### “According To” Versus “Said”

Use “according to” in attribution when referring to inanimate objects such as a report, study, or information portal. Use “said” when a person provided the information.

*Example with use of “according to”:* Air pollutants have increased since the construction of a chemical plant in Burgundy, according to an environmental study from the town.

*Example with use of “said”:* A chemical plant is on the agenda for closure based on a recent environmental study released by the Town of Burgundy, county officials said.

## Attribution in the Lead

On stories where you did not witness the event or news and it's deemed official information, put attribution directly in the lead. This immediately creates a correlation for the reader on where the reporter received the information they are writing about.

*For example*, “A couple was gunned down in the Smithville section of Newbridge Heights around midnight, Smithville County Police said.”

*Or*, “A 3.5% tax hike is expected for the next year’s school budget, Dunham County School officials said during an emergency school board meeting on Thursday.”

## Use of Titles

You’ll likely need to add someone’s title to their quote to explain who they are if they are being interviewed in a position of power or relevance to the story. Capitalize titles before names and put them lowercase after as a method of style.

*For example*, “The storm rolled in and devastated the town in less than 15 minutes from start to finish,” said Grove Lake Mayor Chris DiMaggio.

*Or*, “The storm rolled in and devastated the town in less than 15 minutes from start to finish,” said Chris DiMaggio, mayor of Grove Lake.

## Mr., Ms., and Mrs. in Journalism

Should you use Mr., Ms., and Mrs. before a surname in a story? The short answer is that it’s up to your publication. If there is an established style from your editors, like they have at the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, then stick with that form of consistency. If not, don’t use it. If this is a consistent style with the publication you are working for, be sure to only use the courtesy title on the second reference and beyond. The first reference should be their full name, including first name and surname.

## Using Quotes From Other Publications

You may have to use quotes from another publication’s story by giving them credit. Some publications have a policy against citing another media brand, so be sure to check with a news manager before going rogue. Oftentimes, a singular outlet will break a story and have the exclusive. Other outlets then report about it and cite the original outlet in attribution and in quotes.

*For example*, “It’s possible Henry Rowengartner gets traded before the deadline, and it’ll be a sad day in Cubs history if that happens,” Cubs owner Tom Ricketts told the *Chicago Tribune*.

## Embed Social Media for Attribution

It’s common to write stories specifically about social media commentary from sources you never interviewed but use their quotes by embedding their accounts directly on your page. This is not plagiarism—it’s fair use. If someone puts commentary on a public social media account, it can be used as sourced material in your story. The social media companies make it easy by including an “embed link” on their page so you can share it as needed on your content management system. At the very least, take a screenshot of the full social media post and put that image in your story.

## ENDING THE STORY

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If starting a story with an impactful and engaging lead seems difficult, hopefully the ending of your story is an easier decision to make. At this point in your writing journey, you have already laid out all of the important information, and the ending presents an opportunity to write what's left or how you want the reader to finish their time with you and your words. There are a few options to consider when closing out a story.

### Future-Facing Closer

What's next? Date of the meeting or something to look out for, such as an arraignment? Next playoff game? Time of a meeting? It can be a quote or statement.

*Portland Press Herald:* A New Hampshire man was charged with trespassing. He never showed for his court date. The story ends with a note about a new court hearing in the near future:

Lidstone faces a contempt of court hearing at the end of March in the civil property dispute case.

### Quote Closer

End with a quote. If there are quotes that offer a strong closing sentiment that supports the theme and angle of your story, go with it. If it's future-facing quotes that also add impact, even better. This is not a cliffhanger, however. It should not leave the reader guessing or wondering what happens. It's news, and it's fact-based reporting.

*Salt Lake City Tribune:* This is a classic quote ending on a story about city development being halted until a gentrification study is conducted.

"It's going to be very difficult to find another place like this where I can find it at the same rent," he said. "It's special because of the size of the home and also the ability to be in a place that's private."

### Full-Circle Closer

Tie the end to the lead and beginning of the story. It may be a reference to something specific, or it could be a quote that ties into the initial writing to bring it all "full circle."

### Suggestive Closer

This is when a writer mixes a future-facing thought either with a quote or a full-circle detail and plants a suggestion.

*Philadelphia Inquirer:* This story is about a \$15 million renovation at a music school. The ending points to prior renovations, talks about the future of music, and reiterates the total impact to the school, while suggesting that the musical work inside the building is still what will define its reputation rather than the cosmetic changes.

The opening of Lenfest Hall more than a decade ago blew some dust off the institution, and this renovation at least makes available the space to imagine what the future can be for classical music. But it's what happens within the walls of the school—its ability to



offer a new set of real-life skills while not cutting into the famously high level of hyper-specialized training—that will determine whether Curtis remains on top.

*USA TODAY:* They ran a story about the negotiations between Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association. The season was in peril of starting late or being canceled. There was an update where some series were already canceled at the beginning of the season. After a long story about labor negotiations, they ended it with this:

And a 162-game regular season is rapidly fading from view.

### More-Info Closer

Many times in local news, reporters end stories with resources and links to help their readers with various issues. For example, the resources could be lists and guides for warming or homeless shelters or more detailed information about a government policy, among other things that an audience finds helpful.

*Bismarck Tribune:* The North Dakota publication offered a story about the number of fatal crashes being stable year-over-year. They ended the story with a line and link about the state government’s fatal crash policy and resource site:

North Dakota has a Vision Zero strategy to eliminate motor vehicle crash fatalities and serious injuries on North Dakota roads. For more information, go to <https://visionzero.nd.gov/>.

### Feature Closer

I’ll provide more detail on these in the long-form narrative chapter, but since these are news features, it’s worth knowing about “climaxes” or “cliffhangers” that either end in grand fashion or keep you on the edge of your seat, depending on the depth offered by the writer.

*Sports Illustrated:* In a feature story about LA Rams star Aaron Donald, the writer offers strong color and description in defining the defensive star as a king. Yet the story is about his decision to retire or continue playing football after winning a Super Bowl. This ending is powerful because it paints a picture of his connection to fame and fandom yet to his family as well. It’s a cliffhanger because we really don’t know what his decision will be. This also comes with a strong climax in the form of vivid written imagery.

Donald’s dilemma can be understood in one photograph: a stunning image snapped from behind him at the parade. He’s on the stage—shirtless, of course, holding the Lombardi Trophy in his right hand. The diehards down below are screaming, sharing in his jubilation. Viewed one way, the shot looks like the pinnacle, the moment when there’s nothing left to accomplish, and it’s time for a champion to go full dad. Viewed from another angle, it’s a king standing before his kingdom, and rather than retire, he’s ready to rule.

### Edits and Rewrites

Be open to feedback. Develop a writing process that allows for input so the story is the best version of itself when read by the audience. If that means editors, copy editors, producers, and colleagues put their hands and eyes on it to enhance the copy and overall storytelling, so be it.

The quicker you learn to work well with others for the sake of your story, the better team player you'll be, and the better writer and storyteller you'll eventually become.

Sharing your work with others for the sake of process is important, but even more important is sharing your work so you can be a sponge and take in the feedback and use it to improve on your next story and beyond. Understand each edit, why it was updated on your document, and keep notes on how to incorporate those changes in future stories.

Follow this editing process, which varies, depending on the company you may work for and on how much time you have before your copy has to be published:

- **SUBMIT:** Send in the copy to producer or editor.
- **QUICK GLANCE:** Editor makes preliminary feedback.
  - Eliminate unnecessary words like *overall*, *when asked*, *concluded*.
- **REWRITE:** Update any parts or the whole story, depending on feedback.
- **DEEP EDIT:** Work with copy desk on style, grammar, and punctuation.
- **PUBLISH:** Work with multiplatform publishing team on headlines, keyword tags, and any multimedia assets and embeddable media to include in the online version. Share the link and story on social and distribution platforms.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** What's next? Is there a complementary story or follow-up story to your original work?

### What Constitutes a Rewrite?

That's up to your editor. If the story is full of missing information, lacks sourcing and attribution, and is not structured correctly, it may need an entire revision. You may also feel it needs a complete rewrite after you review it yourself. That's okay. It's better to be cautious about putting out a less than perfect article rather than rushing an incomplete work.

### What to Cut?

Trim long sentences, redundancies, cliché sentences, and overwriting with fluff.

## MINI ASSIGNMENT: THE END IS NEAR

Take one story you have written and one story written by someone else on a news website; rewrite the endings. End the new copy with variations, including a circle kicker, quote, and forward-moving detail.

## THE WRAP

With repetition, writing a basic news story should become second nature. This rhythm of crafting a lead, considering a nut graph, gathering enough detail for quotes, attribution, and context, and finishing it off with a smooth ending is a skill that remains with you for the rest of your life and career.

I will include more strategic thoughts about sourcing and attribution in this book. For now, it's important to establish those elements as key pieces of a news story. Attribution lends credibility, and sourcing adds perspective to your reporting.

Capture your audience with an impactful and direct lead. The lead may be the most difficult part of any story to write, but it's worth the effort to get it right.

Now that you know how to write a news story, in the next chapter we'll talk more about advancing the strategy and tactics behind multiplatform journalism. You'll also learn much more about the story structure of news stories in the more specific sections about writing in this book.

## CAREER ADVICE

Write early and write often. Building the confidence to craft a strong news story will take time. The only way to do it is to write and report as much as possible. Find as many reasons as you can to cover events and craft stories, either for class or campus media.

While consistently writing, make sure you read as many stories as you can each day to study the structure, rhythm, and word usage of other journalists. Take what you learn and try to emulate those writing strategies and tactics in your own copy as you find an opportunity to grow.

If you can, ask to help others with their writing and offer guidance. Not only does it help build a relationship with peers and colleagues, but it gives you more examples of others' work to learn from, either to aspire toward, or to help others improve as well.

Your ultimate goal should be to build so much confidence with writing news stories that you can write them in your mind as the reporting efforts are underway. By the time you sit down to write a story, you know the lead, nut graph, first quote, key details, and how to end it. When you are seasoned, thinking about the style and structure will be second nature. To recap:

- Write often.
- Read journalism often.
- Seek advice from journalism mentors.
- Edit peers' and colleagues' work.

## WRITING AND REPORTING WORKOUTS

1. **WRITE A BASIC NEWS STORY:** Rather than give you fake details and have you craft a story from those notes, this assignment is about going out and doing reporting and writing! Let's get you out in the field and turn in assignments for your class. Choose one of three story options and file a 500-word news story by next class (if the professor permits, do both stories and allow one for extra credit):
  - Cover an event on campus.
  - Cover an event in your hometown and local school community.
  - Pitch a story not on campus or your hometown and cover it.
2. **WRITE THE LEAD:** Using details provided here, write a story summary lead.
  - Here are the story notes:
    - Students at Albert University are upset with changes to the school food plans.
    - The menu options have changed for the third straight semester, and the cost per meal has also increased, as per university relations.

- John Smith, 20, president of the student council, spoke at a meeting on Tuesday on behalf of students.
  - Present at the meeting were university officials.
  - Smith said he was lobbying for a meal stabilization plan that aims at a fixed rate for at least 2 or 3 years of a student's tenure.
  - No details about the type of food were provided, but Smith asked for student reps to be involved in the selection of items each year or semester.
  - Smith: "We want to be part of the process. We eat the food. We pay for the food. We, as students, should have a voice in the quality and cost of what we consume."
3. **DEFINE ATTRIBUTION AND SOURCING:** Using the following story examples, list at least two sources for attribution that you would gather for your story for credible information and overall sourcing. Who would you speak with? Where would you gather quotes and information? Who is a credible source for each story?
- Crime: A murder in your local suburb of an alleged criminal on his front lawn
  - Education: School district board of education is voting to increase the school budget specifically to hire more teachers
  - Politics: The county government is undergoing a decade-long infrastructure project that will improve roads, bridges, and bike/walking paths
  - Health: The CDC has recommended vaccination boosters for a new variant of the coronavirus
  - Sports: The local high school football team has won its 10th championship in school history in the final year of the legendary head coach's career
4. **SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT:** Using information from this chapter, find the subject, verb, and object in the following sentences:
- A Holtsville resident won \$1 billion in the New York State Lottery after purchasing a ticket at his local 7-11.
  - Jackson Franco was selected in the first round of the 2022 Major League Baseball Draft, becoming the first player from Lafayette Avenue to be drafted.
  - Billy Joel was in Sag Harbor to watch the debut of his new feature film about his stadium concert series.
5. **PEER STORY PITCHES:** With peers in class, hold a brainstorm session to create a story budget and rundown of editorial ideas. Put these ideas into an organized list together with your professor guiding the discussion.
- The purpose of the assignment is to open lines of communication among students in class.
  - This will allow students to think strategically about the stories around them on campus or in the community.
  - The professor—or even students and their peers—are free to turn down story ideas from the master list or suggest a different angle.
  - Step 2: If you desire to do this, and if the professor would like to assign it, divide the story ideas and have students go out and report (preferably on something they didn't pitch, but were assigned).

**KEY TERMS**

5 Ws and H  
anecdotal lead  
deep edit  
delayed (or teaser) lead  
feature lead  
first-person lead  
lead  
narrative lead  
notebook  
nut graph  
pull quote  
rewrite  
scene-setting lead  
story sections  
summary lead  
tell-me-why lead  
wow lead

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