



**OKLAHOMA CITY UNIVERSITY**

**News Gathering and Reporting Guide**

# Tools of the Trade

As with any type of trade, writers need tools. However, writers' tools mostly are written text used for research. Here are a few items every reporter should have:

- A mini recorder
- Notebooks
- Pens
- AP Stylebook
- Dictionary
- Thesaurus
- Maps
- Telephone books
- Telephone directories
- Personal telephone directory
- Encyclopedias
- Internet access

# Where can I find story ideas?

There is no simple answer to this question, but there is an easy one - everywhere. Easy to say, but difficult to explain. Tips for spotting story ideas.

- **Celebrate normalcy.** You can't write a story about every person or everything, but they all have stories.
- **Understand your audience.** Consider who your readers are and what types of things they want to read. If you aren't sure, ask them.
- **Observe your surroundings.** Often you see things that turn into story ideas. Watch what people are doing. Look for signs (literally) of things that are happening in your area.
- **Read everything.** A great way to find good ideas is by reading every publication you can get, and adapting ideas to fit your pub. It's ok to "borrow" ideas from other publications as long as you give them your own flare.
- **Focus your topic.** One of the most difficult things about generating story ideas is focusing them so they are feasible. Break big topics into several "bite-sized" chunks.
- **Ask your sources.** The people you interview for one story are excellent sources for your next idea. Ask them what they're interested in reading about. Make notes of other story ideas you get during interviews.
- **Write little stuff.** Not every topic is a major story, but you may find some subjects that make great sidebars (smaller stories that run beside main ones). Be willing to develop several stories instead of writing just one that is really long.
- **Eavesdrop.** You can't write stories based off of what you hear, but you can get ideas from listening to what people around you discuss.

# Letting the News Lead You

Not only do writers have to generate ideas, they also have to remember them when it's time to pitch them for publication. This can be a process of letting the news lead you from one story to another. There is never a time when there isn't something to write about. However, there are plenty of times when we can't remember our great ideas. Tips for letting the news lead you:

- **Keep a running list of story ideas.**
- **Jot down story ideas.** Never assume that you will remember a good story idea.
- **Keep a clip file.** If you see something you like in another newspaper, magazine or on the web, print it or clip it. Spend time later figuring out how to localize it.
- **Understand that there are no new ideas.** It's unlikely that you will find a topic that has never been written about. Novelty is not necessarily important. It's more important to localize and focus the topic. Make sure it applies to your reader.
- **Look for the less obvious.** Remember that the loser often makes a better story than the winner.
- **Define your thinking place.** Understand where you get your best ideas, and be willing to go there during a "drought."
- **Know the creative process:**
  - o Information gathering – finding out everything you can.
  - o Incubation – thinking about it.
  - o Frustration – getting sick of thinking about it and frustrated with not getting the right idea.
  - o Illumination – the light bulb.
  - o Evaluation – will it actually work?

# What questions should I ask?

## Who

You need to know the central characters, including the source you're interviewing.

## What

Understand the concept or issue involved through the eyes of your source. Don't assume you know these things, ask.

## When

Establish a timeframe when you're not talking about now.

## Where

Where did/will the action take place. Remember to include addresses for all businesses.

## Why

This is sometimes the most complex question. If someone doesn't know why, it's ok to say so in a story, but you can never have your reader wondering if you asked. Also, if you are forced to ask a "yes or no" question, be sure to follow it up with why.

## How

What was the process that set this topic into motion? This also needs to come from the official source.

Also, don't forget to ask:

- Name spelling and official title.
- If the source has anything to add.
- If there's anyone else you should contact.
- Follow-up questions. Don't be afraid to call a source back or to ask questions that aren't on your list.

# Writing it all down

When you go to interview a source, it's important that you do a good job of documenting their comments in order to write an appropriate story. Things you should consider when taking notes:

- Always get the source's correctly spelled name and a variety of contact numbers.
- Staple business cards into your notebook. Always ask if the card is correct.
- Don't crowd your notebook. Leave space for annotating notes.
- Never allow a tape recorder to keep you from taking the best notes possible.
- Take 20 times as many notes as you put in the story.
- Draw diagrams of rooms, stages, scenes, flags, etc.
- Inventory the space around the source. Don't be afraid to question them about the things around them.
- Use your senses to record the scene.
- Ask follow-up questions.
- Don't write down "off the record" information. If you document it then it becomes tempting.
- Write the story as soon as possible after the interview.
- Put quote marks at the beginning and end of direct quotes. Leave the end quote marks off if you paraphrase.

# Getting great interviews

Interviews not only provide a reporter with essential information, they also add life and voice to a story. In interviews you can gather information, pick up quotes, and set scenes – the basics you need to write a story. Tips for more effective interviews:

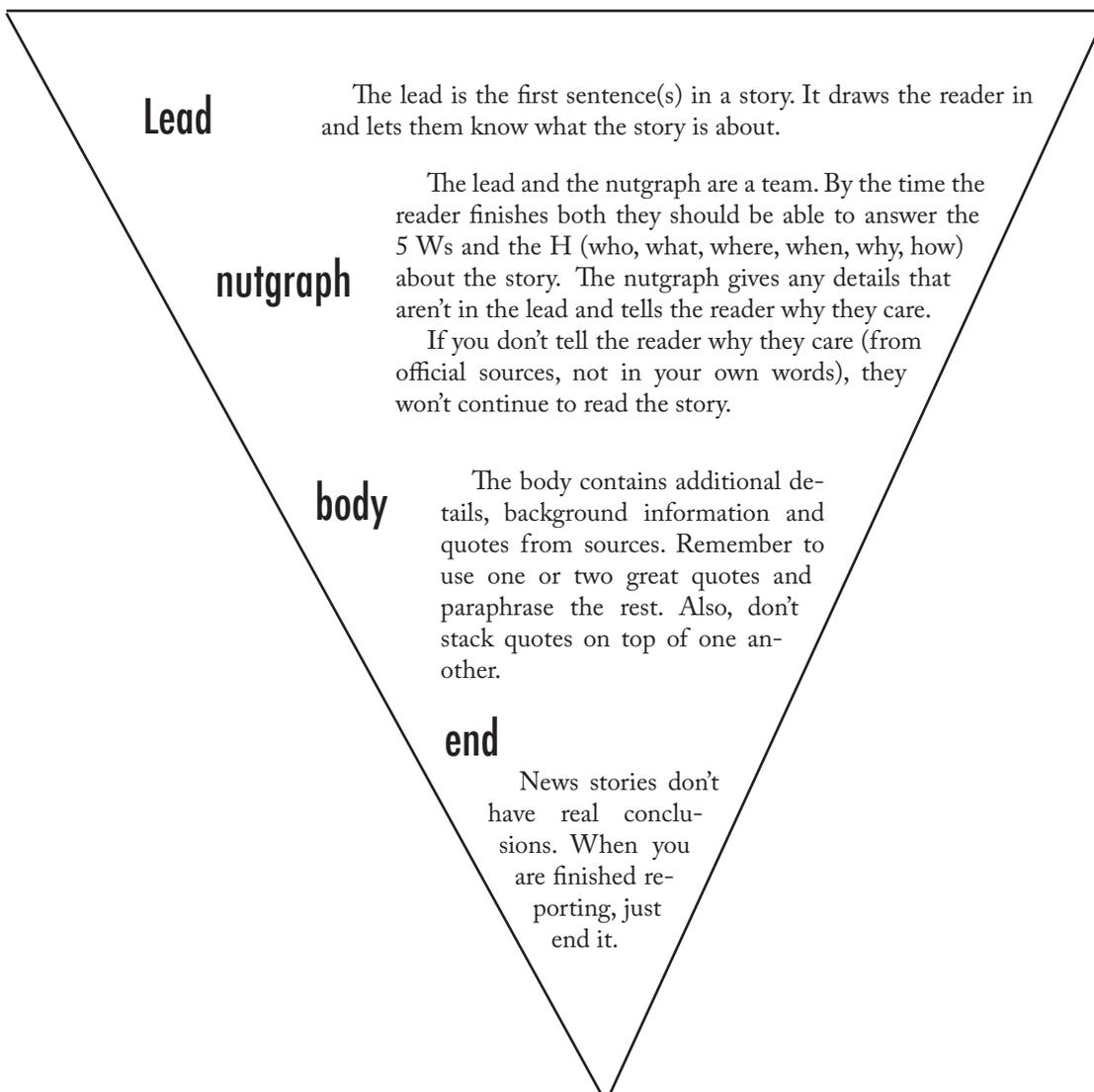
- **Identify yourself as a writer.** Be sure when you set up the interview to identify yourself by name and tell the source who you are writing for and what story you plan to write.
- **Prepare questions.** Draft questions in advance. You will need 15 to 20 questions. Be sure they are short answer. Your first question always should be name spelling and official title.
- **Be prepared for the interview.** This means having paper, questions and at least two pens.
- **Treat an interview like a structured conversation.** Prepare a list of questions in advance, but don't be wedded to it.
- **Plan questions in order.** Don't lead off with the hardest questions. Start easy.
- **Time your note taking.** Pull out your notebook after you get to the place where you'll be interviewing, but then make some small talk. Make your subject comfortable. Show people you're interested in their stories, not just their juiciest quotes.
- **Ask for clarification.** While you're taking notes, if the person is talking too fast, say something like, "Could you repeat that, please? I want to make sure I get all of it down."
- **Know when to be quiet.** Listen carefully enough so that you know when to let your source pause to collect his or her thoughts. Don't feel the need to fill every empty space with conversation.

# The inverted pyramid

The key to successful news writing is recognizing that news writing has its own format.

Your stories should be easy to read. Your goal isn't to impress the reader with your superb diction and eloquent sentences. The goal is to provide them with the information they need. They aren't going to hunt through long introductions and superfluous clauses to find the "meat" of an issue.

To better serve the reader and provide a standard format for newspaper writers, journalists adopted the use of the inverted pyramid. Under these guidelines, the most important information is at the top.



## PROF's Tips



Remember that the lead and the nutgraph are partners. Neither can work without the other.

If the lead gives the summary of what the story is about, the nutgraph tells the reader why they need to know the information. Also remember:

- The lead and the nutgraph should be different.

- The nutgraph shouldn't be editorial.

- The nutgraph can be a quote.

# Starting the story

The basic purpose of the lead on any story is to summarize the story for the reader. However, leads also need to draw the reader in and motivate them to read the rest of the story.

## Summary statement

Gives a summary of the subject. This is the one thing you would tell a friend if they asked you what you were writing about.

## Narrative

Starts in the middle of a story and works to the end. This type of lead draws the reader into the story because they want to find out what happens next.

## Descriptive

Starts the story by describing a place in an effort to put the reader at the scene of the story's events. Uses the senses to set a scene for the reader. Especially appropriate when the location of the story or the atmosphere is relatively important.

## Opposition

Introduces two opposing sides or viewpoints of an issue. Uses transitions like "on one side/on the other hand." You can only use this type of lead if you have two definitely opposing sides.

## Conversational

Written like the writer is discussing something with the reader. Use the word "your" or "us."

*Remember never to start a lead with a quote or a question. There's usually always another way.*

## PROF's Tips



Leads can be hard at first. Consider the following advice:

- Leads are typically what you would tell a friend you're writing about.

- Leads should be short - no longer than 25 words.

- The fact that a meeting or event was hosted is never your lead. Find the people or issues behind the event. They are the real lead.

# Writing like a pro

It takes time and practice to become a really great writer. The following is a list of things you need to remember to help you along the way:

- Write in active tense.
- Don't have too many official sources.
- Write about people, not things.
- Group all of the quotes from a single individual together.
- Focus not only on the facts, but on the merit of your ideas.
- Without central conflict, you don't have a story.
- Don't stop reporting until you find a surprise.
- Don't leave an interview until you know the story lead.

# Who said that?

## Short title attribution

*The official title goes in front of the name and the “said” goes at the end.*

“I like those people,” President George W. Bush said.

## Long title attribution

*“Said” goes before the name and the official title goes after.*

“Students should be challenged academically,” said Dr. Bernie Patterson, provost and vice president for academic affairs.

## Attribution in paraphrase leading to quote

*Follow the same rules as with long or short title attribution and use “he” or “she” after the quote.*

Students should be challenged academically, said Bernie Patterson, provost and vice president for academic affairs.

“Academic rigor is an attribute that makes OCU a fine university,” he said.

## Two-sentence quote

*Same attribution rules apply, but quote is extended for another sentence.*

“I like those people,” President George W. Bush said. “They make me happy.”

## Multiple-sentence quote

*Same attribution rules apply, but quote is extended for a third sentence.*

“I like those people,” President George W. Bush said. “They make me happy. They just seem like the kind of people you can trust.”

## Quote from written source

*The source goes after the quote and uses words like “read” or “according to.”*

“It was the coldest day of the year,” according to the National Weather Service’s Web site, [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov).

# Think 'Movie Mode'

Use these movie techniques to better prepare your approach to writing.

1. **What movie are you making?** Ask yourself if you are writing a comedy, love story, thriller, etc. Use your answer to determine your approach the story.

2. **Think like a screenwriter.** Consider your opening, scenes, plot, theme, main and supporting characters, dialogue, and climax. Make an outline if you need to about where your story should start and where it will end.

3. **Think popcorn.** Try to think what keeps you in your seat watching a movie when you really want some popcorn. Ask yourself the entire time you are writing if your story would keep you in your seat. If you were the reader, would you read it? If the answer is “no,” you need to make a change.

4. **Details, details, details.** While reporting, take notes that capture examples of taste, smell, sound, hearing, and sight. Your eyes should become a camera, recording images and senses that can be turned into words. Remember: it's ok not to use everything you write down. It's not ok to need a detail and not have it in your notes.

5. **Get into the field.** Writing an effective narrative means you have seen your subject in action, or interviewed them in their setting – not your setting. By being in the same setting, you can easily gather details on the five senses, your subject's mannerisms, expressions, etc. Adding details when you see your subject in action is much easier than trying to recreate it.

6. **Be a critic.** After you write your first draft, critique your work. Learning to be your own critic will help separate you from your work and enable you to review it with the eye of the reader. Sometimes the best way to do this is take a break, print the story instead of looking at it on your computer screen and read it aloud.

# Holes are for Swiss cheese

One of the top reasons stories are sent back to reporters for corrections is because they are missing important information. Nancy Sharkey of *The New York Times* created this list to check for holes and other mistakes in stories.

1. Does the lead work?
  - Is it supported by the story?
  - If it is an anecdote, does it illustrate the main point?
  - If it is a scene lead, does it draw in readers quickly?
  
2. What is the point of the story?
  - Is the point clear?
  - Does it need additional background information?
  - Does the nutgraph capture the context clearly and concisely without oversimplifying?
  
3. Does the story make sense?
  - Does it flow logically from one section to the next?
  - Are the sections in the right order?
  - Are there significant holes? Or conversely, does it condescend to the intelligent reader?
  
4. Do the numbers add up?
  - Does it compare apples to apples, oranges to oranges?
  - Does it give the numbers in context or are they skewed to prove a point?
  
5. Is it fair?
  - Are the relevant arguments represented adequately?
  - Is it editorial?
  
6. Are references to race, sexual orientation, religion and ethnic background relevant?
  - Is the relevance clearly established?
  
7. How's the GSPS? (Grammar, spelling, punctuation and style.)

# The next step

With the help of your editors and adviser, you will start to grasp the basics. Joe Hight, managing editor of *The Oklahoman*, advises writers to watch their VERBS.

Usually, acronyms drag down a story and confuse a reader. But here is one that can help writing: V.E.R.B.S.

**V is for vigor.** Strengthen your verbs by using ones that are specific, descriptive, show mood and are active - plunge, dive, decide, kick. Avoid passive voice. Trim weak linking verbs such as is, has and make.

**E is for enthusiasm,** the drive to want to learn more, the desire to get the interview that no one else can get and the attitude to check all names and facts one last time. Enthusiasm can drive an average writer to become a good writer and a good writer to become an outstanding writer.

**R is for rewrite yourself.** Rewrite your stories as many times as possible. Double-check facts and names. Trim your prepositions, adjectives and adverbs. Limit your cliches and trim or explain the jargon. Get rid of quotes that don't add to your stories.

**B is for be specific.** Find the details that will help the reader see, taste, smell, or hear your story. Look for details that will help you show the scene to the reader.

**S is for simplify to seek clarity.** If you seek clarity, you want the reader to understand your writing. It means simplicity. Remembering that the best sentences are subject, verb, object. It means focus, avoiding sentences with long backed-in clauses that are unnecessary or delay the subject.