



# Writing News Effectively

News—What Is It? One definition is: *News is what readers are interested in.*

News stories must follow a prescribed structure. This type of writing isn't always the most interesting way to tell a story, but it is the most efficient way of giving information quickly and accurately.

News writers assume that readers will quit reading before finishing an article. For this reason, writers crowd the most important information into the first paragraph. This paragraph is called the "lead." In the lead paragraph, you should answer the five "W" questions and the "H" question: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? After reading the lead, readers should have a good idea of what the article is about. There shouldn't be any surprises later in the story.

Think of writing a news story like an upside-down pyramid. The most important information is at the top or the wide part of the structure. As you progress through the article, the information is more detailed and less important, but fills in gaps left in previous paragraphs.

Because space is usually limited in newspapers, this allows the editor to shorten a story without having to rewrite the entire article. He can simply cut the final paragraphs. It also makes it possible for a reader to scan the newspaper, reading headlines and lead paragraphs to get the gist of each story. If a topic interests him, he can read further to get more details.

## Steps to Follow in Writing a News Story

1. Assemble all the facts you know about the story.
2. Select your headline.
3. Answer the questions posed by the five Ws and the H. Give answers to the questions that will make the story the most newsworthy— choosing the "angle."
4. After answering the H and W questions, write your lead paragraph. One or more of the five Ws and the H will be the main point of the story. It may not be necessary to answer the why and how in the lead paragraph in order to have a complete story, so include all the points necessary. Don't feel you have to answer all of them every time. The lead paragraph should induce the reader to read the next sentence. Don't expect readers to read forever, they want to know what's going on and they want to know it soon. **Example:** *I've often wondered what goes into a hot dog. Now I know and wish I didn't.* The example grabs your attention and stirs interest in reading what follows.
5. Write the article in third person. You are writing as a reporter for the newspaper. Your audience is the community who are not part of your church and are not included in the "we." Even if you have to name yourself as a participant in the event, don't say "I," write your name, John Brown or Susie May, just like you were talking about someone else. When talking about

your church, be sure to give the complete name, Collegedale Seventh-day Adventist Church; members of the congregation; they, etc.

6. **Never** editorialize in a news story. You are not writing to state your opinion, only to give the facts. This means you cannot say, “Everyone had a great time.” Unless you interview everyone to know that this statement is true, it cannot be used. Using a quote from someone stating he/she had a good time is acceptable. You can report laughter or applause, things that are evidence of a good time, but you cannot state something you did not observe or cannot prove. Let the facts speak for themselves. Readers should be able to come to their own conclusions. The reporter’s job is simply to pass along raw information without coloring it with personal prejudices.

7. Be sure grammar and punctuation are correct. Check to make sure what you write is the message you want to convey. The following are announcements from church bulletins:

Don’t let worry kill you—let the church help.

Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.

At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be “What is Hell?” Come early, and listen to our choir practice.

8. Verify all names, addresses and other statistical information. For example: Don’t assume that because a person’s name is Johnson it is spelled one way. It could be Johnsson, Jahnsen or Jonson. Is the address 810 12<sup>th</sup> St., or 1208 10<sup>th</sup> St. A telephone directory is a good place to check names and addresses.

9. Check dates. Compare the dates you were given by your news source with a calendar.

10. Always write with a dictionary. Don’t guess the meaning and spelling of a word—look it up. Your computer’s software may not catch an incorrect word meaning.

11. Be consistent. Pick a style and stick with it. Check the style of the publication you are writing for. If you write news stories on a regular basis, a journalism stylebook such as used by the Associated Press or the *New York Times* would be a good investment.

12. Avoid using words that only your church members would understand. Try to look at the story from the standpoint of the reader.

13. Don’t try to impress your reader with a huge vocabulary. Simple language works best in a world where people are usually in a hurry.

14. Keep sentences and paragraphs short. Do not start two paragraphs with the same word. If you start your story with “On (day of week) something happened...” Start over. Begin with the most important fact of the story and use action verbs.

15. Make your writing flow. Use transitions such as—and, besides, also, first, next—to bridge thoughts and to keep sentences flowing. There are fewer misconceptions or false interpre-

tations when transitions and connectives are used freely and wisely.

16. **Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.** Saying out loud what you're trying to put down on paper is a great tool for avoiding "wordiness." Remember to be concise.

## Feature Writing

Feature writing offers more opportunities for flexibility and creativity in writing style. Many of the rules for writing news stories are the same—timeliness, accuracy, active tense—but the lead paragraph in a feature does not have to answer all the five Ws and the H. These questions should be answered, but the order for placement is not dependant upon the inverted pyramid rule.

To get the reader's attention, strive for a colorful lead to your story. Details throughout the article should keep the interest of the reader and make him want to continue reading. Save a "kicker," something unique, for the final paragraph.

### Story Possibilities

- New staff members
- Members who have received recognition in the community
- Distinctive volunteers
- Resolutions on public issues in the community, nation, or world
- Visits by well-known personalities
- Response to natural disasters in other parts of the nation or world
- Notable annual events
- Unique new programs
- Activities directed toward specific community needs
- Ecumenical cooperation on events or programs
- Significant records broken
- Travel by congregation members involving a specific activity
- New approaches to worship, study, or social service
- Participation in national, or international meetings by local persons
- Damage to property through fire, vandalism, or theft
- Construction, remodeling—beginning and completion
- Local angles to national religious stories
- Recognition for unusual congregational service

## Writing for TV and Radio

Check with your TV and radio station. Instead of news in the form of a story, they may just want a fact sheet. It is important to be succinct and write the way you speak. In a news story, you may begin with the name of a prominent person who is coming for a visit. For TV and radio, begin by giving an interesting synopsis of the person and then the name.