



CHAPTER 2



WRITING GAME STORIES

Sports fans today no longer await game recaps in print to learn how their favorite teams and players fared. Odds are, fans already know final outcomes, stats, and highlights, even before the final whistle blows, thanks to social media and mobile phones. So there's no need to fill stories with what happened, because fans already know most of the play-by-play and have probably viewed video highlights, which are readily available as they happen.

Instead, game stories today blend analysis, commentary, and narrative into feature-centric pieces that focus more on *how* and *why* a team or player won or lost. Ultimately, though, you are there to tell a story, whether the focus is on a player returning from a back injury or an opposing player who entered the game on a hot streak or a major slump. Develop potential angles before you arrive at the arena or stadium; otherwise you will be forced to scramble the entire game—and odds are, you'll fail to deliver an interesting story.

"Don't focus as much on what just happened," says Michael Wallace, an NBA beat writer for ESPN, "and instead shape a story to tell readers why this game's outcome is important and what it might mean moving forward. Usually, in every game, something amazing or unexpected happens. There tends to be a breakout performance on some level from someone who wasn't expected to deliver on such a level. I tend to start there when developing what my game story or column will be about."

By the time the Miami Heat had defeated the Toronto Raptors to even the 2016 Eastern Conference semifinal at 3–all, most fans already knew the score (103–91), that Goran Dragic had scored a lot of points, and where Game 7 would be played. But they did not know Dragic's thoughts on eight players heading to free agency, something the *Miami Herald's* Manny Navarro had learned during a seven-minute interview with the Miami point guard earlier that day. Plus, fans did not know *how* or *why* the Heat had changed its starting lineup right before tip-off to feature shorter, quicker players.

As a result, Navarro's lead reads more like a sidebar or feature. The final score, along with the team's key scorers, is not mentioned until the fourth paragraph:

Goran Dragic didn't want to start looking ahead to this summer and the looming free agency of most of his Heat teammates.

"I feel like if we start talking too early then you're already done, not focused about these games," Dragic said several hours before Game 6. "You know, it's not good timing to talk about that. We're still alive.

"We've still got—hopefully, two games—at least two games left. That's all that matters."

The Heat, facing elimination Friday for the third time in these playoffs, will have at least one more game. Led by Dragic's team-high 30 points, seven rebounds and four assists and 22 points, six rebounds and five assists from Dwyane Wade, the Heat advanced to another Game 7 with a 103–91 victory over the Toronto Raptors at American Airlines Arena.

SOURCE: *Miami Herald*

(<http://www.miamiherald.com/sports/nba/miami-heat/article77613752.html>)

Later in the story, Navarro outlines how the Heat's smaller lineup succeeded, focusing on a trend, significant plays, noteworthy statistics, and comments from players on both teams. We learn that Miami used this smaller lineup for nearly two-thirds of the game, implemented a man-to-man defense, and used one bigger player for a stretch of play, which is visually described:

The Heat waited until about eight minutes before the 8 p.m. scheduled tipoff to announce it was replacing 6–10, 245-pound center Amar'e Stoudemire in the starting lineup with the 6–7, 225-pound Winslow. The Raptors, though, probably had an inkling Miami's small lineup was coming because of the success the Heat had with it in Game 4.

With Winslow, Dragic, Luol Deng, Wade and Joe Johnson for the final 4:48 of regulation and then five more minutes of overtime in Game 4, the Heat turned a 79–72 deficit into a 94–87 victory. Then, in Game 5, a similar small lineup with Richardson and Tyler Johnson rotating in for the injured Deng cut a 15-point fourth-quarter deficit to 1 with under two minutes to play before the Raptors pulled away behind DeRozan and Lowry.

On Friday, the Heat's lineup worked again. Miami went small for all but 18 minutes and 19 seconds in the game. Despite giving up size to the Raptors,

Miami only lost the rebounding battle by two (43–41) and just scored just two fewer points in the paint than the Raptors (46–44).

“It was just one-on-one defense,” DeRozan said. “We’ve just got to buckle down, not try to rely on help so much. Every individual on our side just has to man-up and play one-on-one defense so we don’t have to get in rotation where it involves guys getting to the basket, getting easy shots.”

McRoberts was the only big man who played for the Heat, and he had several big moments. He flew in for a tip-in dunk over Bismack Biyombo in the second quarter and then had a pair of tip-ins off misses in the fourth. McRoberts finished with 10 points and five rebounds.

Winslow, meanwhile, finished with 12 points and three rebounds in 26 minutes. But he had help throughout as Miami gang-rebounded and made sure to box out.

Said Wade: “Sometimes unconventional works.”

SOURCE: *Miami Herald*

(<http://www.miamiherald.com/sports/nba/miami-heat/article77613752.html>)

This story included a 53-photo slideshow, four video clips from the game itself, a video clip from a post-game interview in the locker room, another one from the press conference, and a two-minute, 49-second post-game wrap-up that featured Navarro and colleague Ethan J. Skolnick. Plus, the story included a link to columnist Greg Cote’s perspective on the game and to the box score.

“In the end, the modern game story really isn’t a work of art anymore,” Navarro says,

but an ever-evolving compilation of pregame/post game insights from players and coaches, statistical trends and a couple of highlights of the key moments of what happened in that game. Since so many people watch a game on TV or see the highlights on SportsCenter, it’s a tough challenge as a writer to provide a unique angle or perspective on what happened in that game and to look ahead to what might happen going forward. The toughest part? Remembering to do that as fast you can because in 10 minutes something else will be trending and you will be writing the next story.

As Wallace and Navarro know, good writing comes from solid reporting. Anybody can knock out a witty one-liner or craft a clever lead once in a while, but only dedicated reporters can deliver captivating stories, compelling insights, and breaking news.

"Even the stylists like Gary Smith, Frank Deford and David Foster Wallace report the hell out of a piece," says L. Jon Wertheim, author and reporter for *Sports Illustrated*. "If you have an abundance of material, the writing part is so much easier. In my experience, the pit in the stomach comes when you have 1,000 words of material and a 2,000-word space to fill."

sports insider

Print deadlines are still the toughest part of the job when writing a game story. With games starting later and later, particularly in the playoffs, it presents huge challenges. For one, we usually have to file for print within minutes of the game ending. So, generally, I try to grab a storyline from earlier in the day at shootaround or from practice the day before, develop it and use that as my lead. That's assuming it ties into a general point of my game story. So, for instance, if Goran Dragic has a big game I'll go back to the transcription of my latest conversations with Goran (hopefully it was a one-on-one) and take something from it that presents a unique perspective or thought he shared and explain how it ties to this game in particular or playoff series.

My early stories for print usually aren't very good or insightful beyond that because those are the only quotes that usually get into my stories. In the rest of the early print story, I include a big picture nut graf and follow it up with key moments in the game, stats and important news on injuries. I also provide some perspective when I can without stepping on the toes of any fellow writer from my paper who may be writing a sidebar, column or notebook.

Once the game ends and I'm done filing my early story for print and online, I head down to the locker room and work it as hard as I can. Not only am I looking to gather quotes for my daily game story, but also for day-after stories, blogs, etc. I'm also shooting video when I can (usually group interviews).

I've found the best approach after I get back to my computer and I'm done in the locker room is to compartmentalize what I've gathered by headlines/stories. Anything newsworthy, or the best quotes, I tweet out as fast as possible. Major news outlets like ESPN, CBS Sports, Bleacher Report pick up those tweets and post them on TV and usually give you credit. That's one way to help bring in more Twitter followers and readers.



Manny Navarro,
Miami Herald

As far as writing, the necessary news and best post-game quotes go into my revised game for online (sometimes, print if we have a second deadline). Then, I'll save something else (preferably a one-on-one interview) for a blog or for the next day's story. Teams sometimes won't practice the day after the game because they travel or players are given a day off. So, you always have to have something in the bag in reserve.

✧ Before each game, reporters need to read, interview, and observe as thoroughly as possible.

If there's time for another phone call, make it.

If there's an article worth reading, find it.

If you can get your hands on the rule book, read it.

If a colleague has a good scorekeeping system, steal it.

If there's a practice or event scheduled, attend it.

If there's the tiniest prospect of an interview, grab it.

If you do all this—and then, while the game's going on, you take every note you can—you'll end up with far more information than you can possibly use. That's when you'll know you're becoming a reporter.

"It's a lot of work, frankly," says Bob Ryan, sports columnist emeritus for *The Boston Globe*. "And you don't know which 5 percent you're gonna need. But it's all there if I need it."

Sportswriters write all sorts of news and feature stories, blog postings, and columns, but most of them spend much of their time covering games. If writing about a game were as simple as showing up and watching, anybody could do it. Journalists, however, realize that far more is required. You need to understand the context of the event, know the key participants, and have some idea what makes today's game unique—all before you even arrive. And that's what comes after you've gotten a handle on the basics, like making sure you have press credentials and know how to read the stats.

In the chapters that follow, you'll find practical, how-to information on covering every sport to which you're likely to be assigned: what to look for, whom to interview, what to ask. All of the resulting material will go into your notebook or recorder or camera—or some combination of the three. This chapter helps you figure out what to do with the information once you've collected it.

In simplest terms, your job as a sports reporter is to look for angles, leads, and storylines, so that even fans who saw the game themselves have reason to revisit it through your eyes. "The goal of a newspaper story, especially in the 24/7 information age of online, is tell people something they couldn't know without reading the story," says Bryce Miller, sports columnist for *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. "We talk about these key words high in stories—'first,' 'biggest,' 'only' and 'most.' If you can use any of those words, it means your reporting has identified the uniqueness in the event. Newspapers also have the chance to take you into locker rooms, into interview areas and places quick radio/TV sound bites do not."

Fans have more access to sports information than ever before in newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs, social media, TV, and sports-talk radio. As a result, fans' expectations have grown. Readers now expect:

- ▶ More sophisticated stats
- ▶ To know more about trends (why a team is on a winning or a losing streak)
- ▶ To know what's coming next
- ▶ To understand what a loss or a victory means
- ▶ A unique angle they cannot get elsewhere

Sports writers need to research teams and players before they even get to the field, so they can prepare possible storylines. Then they need to take comprehensive notes. And finally, sports writers need to ask questions that probe why something happened on or off the field.

Crafting a story on deadline is a challenge—whether the deadline is 20 minutes or two days away and whether you became a sports writer last week or 20 years ago. “You need to keep readers interested by telling a story, whatever the story is that day, in a readable, entertaining way,” says Tyler Kepner, national baseball writer for *The New York Times*. Kepner used to write 150-plus game stories a season covering the New York Yankees. “It’s a grind because you have to churn out so many stories. But I try to make sure, when I sit down to write each one, that they’re appealing for more than the dry facts.”

There’s no trick to meeting a deadline, except to start quickly and keep plugging away. After a game, think about the most important thing you want to say—on this day, about this game—and make that point in any words that come to mind. Then, keep writing. You can always change the lead later, when you’re done with the first draft; your first goal is simply to get something down.

“I don’t worry myself into corners,” says Glenn Stout, editor of *The Best American Sports Writing* series and author of more than 20 books on sports. “If you keep working, the words come. Writer’s block is a luxury.”

Navarro says print deadlines present the biggest challenge for game coverage. Writers typically have to file game stories within minutes of the game concluding. Jenifer Langosch, the Cardinals beat writer for MLB.com, files her game stories in the bottom of the eighth inning, sending in an update only if the final score changes. Then, she goes downstairs to attend the manager’s post-game press conference and to interview players lingering in the locker room. Langosch inserts these comments into a revised story that is filed roughly 45 minutes after the first story.

digital assist

PREVIEW PACKAGES

Create a preview package online. That's what *The Columbus Dispatch* does for the Ohio State football team, something that should be a model for all sports departments. This package includes a cover story, profiles of players from each team, rosters, schedules, updated weather reports—and five keys to winning games. Check out "Buckeyextra" at www.dispatch.com.

The Columbus Dispatch | dispatch.com | buckeyextra.com

GAME DAY+

HOME SATURDAY'S GAME FIVE KEY FACTORS EXTRAS ON THE EDGE ROSTERS OSU SCH
MORE COVERAGE

COVER STORY

BOOM! DANIEL HERRON READY TO CARRY LOAD

BY TIM MAY
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Somewhere along the way, Daniel Herron's nickname changed subtly in spelling and mightily in meaning.

"I'm not sure, but I think that happened somewhere between Warren Harding High School and Ohio State," said his former high school coach, Thom McDaniels. "I called him Danny most of the time."

» FULL STORY



EXTRAS

» MEET A BUCKEYE

» ACROSS THE BALL

» PLAY OF THE WEEK

» GAME PREDICTIONS

FEATURED COVERAGE



OSU SPOTLIGHT » JUSTIN BOREN

It has been more than a year since the former Michigan lineman got to line up and fire out against an opponent in a college football game. The drought ends Saturday when he starts his first game at left guard for Ohio State. [Click here to read the story.](#)



NAVY SPOTLIGHT » ROSS POSPISIL

While watching video of linebacker Ross Pospisil and his teammates, Ohio State right tackle Jim Corda saw similarities between the Navy defense and the elite Navy SEALs he read about in the book *Lone Survivor*.

For late-night basketball games, Navarro generally develops a storyline from a shoot-around or practice held the day before, if it connects to the main action in the game. Then, he'll insert a big picture nut graf and follow it up with key moments in the game, stats, and important news on injuries. After he returns from the locker room, he'll review his notes, tweet his best quotes, and start revising the final draft. The best post-game quotes go into the revised game, but he'll save interview material, preferably from a one-on-one interview, for a blog or next-day story. Teams often won't practice the day after the game, so he likes to keep some material in reserve.

LEADS

Start with the most interesting story, not always with the winners or leaders. That story might include a key play, a trend, a significant stat, field conditions, post-game observations, or how this game affects the future. All key information about the event should be high in the story, but you don't have to shoehorn it all into the first paragraph.

If a tennis player who's been in a long slump played surprisingly well today, you can lead with that player's story instead of the winner's. If Jordan Spieth shoots a quadruple bogey on a par-3, that's bigger news than Donny Willett leading by two strokes. A player returning from appendicitis or a heart transplant is a better story than simply reporting who leads in the opening rounds.

"Here's a good rule of thumb," says Doug Ferguson, golf beat writer for the Associated Press. "If you were to call a friend who asked you, 'What happened at the golf tournament today?' then your answer is probably the story." Substitute the word game for golf tournament, and you'll have almost foolproof advice for figuring out what's important about any game. What would you tell a friend?

Every story has an infinite number of possible leads and approaches; no self-respecting writer works by formula. To start getting a sense of your options, read as many game stories as you can. Here are some ways to start your game stories:

ON GETTING UNSTUCK ON DEADLINE

I once was stuck as a young writer for a P.M. paper. Agonized over a lead for hours, literally. I took the office electric typewriter home with me. At long last the way out hit me. I wrote a straightforward lead, finished the story, and then went up and revised the lead. I haven't had to do that since—maybe once or twice—but I vowed that day never to agonize over a lead again. Just write, and I have had few problems finding angles since. There's always an angle, it's just which one you pick and how you approach it.

Ed Bouchette,
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

sports insider

Focus on Significant Facts

Here are a few leads that offer the most significant details simply, in a straightforward approach:

- > “Natalie Stewart drilled nine aces, Sarah Gisoni recorded eight digs, and Ali Carlson recorded 10 assists to lead Charleston Middle School to the state volleyball championship, a three-set victory over Pekin Junior High in Bloomington on Tuesday.”
- > “Camilo Villegas holed out for an eagle early in his round and made a string of birdies late for a 9-under 63 on the easier North Course at Torrey Pines, giving him a three-shot lead Thursday in the Buick Invitational.”¹
- > “LaShawn Merritt won a second gold medal at the world championships on Sunday when the United States blew away the field in the 4 × 400-meter relay. Merritt, the 400 champion, ran the anchor leg and took the baton home in 2 minutes, 57.86 seconds. Britain took silver in 3:00.53, and Australia picked up the bronze in 3:00.90.”²

Describe Something

Watch players and coaches after a game has concluded—on the sideline, on the field or in the locker rooms—to find something that helps define the game just played.

- > “Shaun Pruitt’s head hung lower than anybody’s at the Assembly Hall on Thursday night.

“Illinois’ senior center had three opportunities from the free-throw line to give Illinois the lead in the final minutes of Illinois’ game against Indiana, but the ball couldn’t find the bottom of the net. After missing the front end of a one-and-one from the line with four seconds left in regulation, the senior center was unable to convert two more from the line with two seconds left in overtime.

“In a game that saw eight lead changes and nine ties, the No. 14-ranked Hoosiers were able to pull ahead for the final time in the second overtime, outscoring Illinois 14–10 in the final period to escape with an 83–79 victory.”³
- > “As the game clock ticked down to zero, Susie Rowe finally let up, relaxing her shoulders and skipping a bit toward midfield. The senior back flung her stick in the air like a graduation cap and embraced the nearest teammate, fellow senior Danielle Keeley.



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MLB.com regularly inserts video into game stories, usually to offer key moments. In this game story on the World Baseball Classic, four video were inserted into a 900-plus word story—roughly one video every 225 words. The videos, which ranged from 18 to 37 seconds, displayed the final strike that sealed the victory for Puerto Rico in the ninth inning, a two-run throwing error by the USA third baseman, consecutive stolen bases by Javier Baez, and a StatCast assessment that revealed the speed of the ball coming off a bat and the first-step reaction time of the third baseman who caught the ball. By offering video, writers can focus more on trends, storylines, and other aspects of the game. Start inserting video into your own game coverage, even if they are more lengthy and inserted less frequently, in order to practice for your own big leagues after graduation.

—MLB.com

<http://m.mlb.com/news/article/219847280/puerto-rico-reaches-wbc-17-semifinals/>

Puerto Rico reaches LA, is floating on error



Diaz closes the door for P.R. Edwin Diaz goes Josh Harrison to swing through a breaking ball for the final out, sealing Team Puerto Rico's 6-5 win over Team USA

By Matt Kelly / MLB.com | 3:08 PM ET | 6 COMMENTS

Two days ago, the Dominican Republic's 11-game win streak in the World Baseball Classic was the talk of the tournament.

That was until they ran into Puerto Rico on Wednesday.

Full Game Coverage

Meanwhile, Team USA was building a reputation as the tournament's "comeback kids." But then Puerto Rico found a way to stifle their ninth-inning rally Friday night.

The Dominicans and Americans were the biggest favorites heading into WBC '17, but as the tournament enters its final apex, it's the Puerto Ricans who are rolling. The Classic's lone unbeaten team at 5-0, Puerto Rico pulled off a thrilling 6-5 victory against the U.S. on Friday in San Diego — aided by an uncharacteristic error from third baseman



- Complete coverage
- Schedule & tickets
- Watch on MLB Network
- Watch on MLB.TV
- Get your WBC gear
- Video
- Rules for 2017 Classic

"The Terrapin field hockey team had just won the NCAA championship. The Terps defeated Wake Forest 4–2 Sunday at Trager Stadium in Louisville.

"For the No. 1 Terps (22–2), it is the third title in four years. For Rowe, and the rest of the celebrated senior class, it was the perfect sendoff."⁴

Address Field Conditions

Sometimes field conditions or weather greatly affects a game's outcome. Look at the following example from *The New York Times*:

PRINCETON, N.J.—The Princeton defense was not the only challenge for Harvard late Saturday afternoon. The Crimson was heading into persistent rain and a gusty wind. A pass did not seem to be such a good idea, especially on a fourth-and-1 late in the game.

Or maybe it was, because Princeton did not expect it. Harvard quarterback Chris Pizzotti floated a pass to tight end Jason Miller for a first down, and the Crimson took the lead four plays later on a 6-yard run by Gino Gordon, then held on for a 24–20 victory.⁵

ORGANIZATION

When you have tight deadlines and you're focusing on news, use the inverted-pyramid style of writing. That means starting with the most significant information and then arranging your other points in descending order of importance, so that, if the story had to be cut from the bottom, you won't lose anything crucial. In inverted-pyramid structure, you're unlikely to lead with the first quarter in basketball, the first inning in softball, or the first mile during a cross-country meet, because the key plays tend to come later, when the game is close. So you would first focus on the final quarter of most football games—unless something extraordinary happened in the opening minutes.

Also, insert the score as early as possible. That could be in the second or third paragraph if you're focusing on a key moment, or that could be the first paragraph if you are filing a straightforward results story on deadline.

CONTEXT AND ANALYSIS

Tell the reader what this game means. Has a team broken an eight-game losing streak? Qualified for sectionals? Lost its fourth straight five-set volleyball match? Earned a berth in a championship?

HEADLINE: BOLSTER YOUR RESUME WITH GAME COVERAGE

1. Focus on getting beat experience. The more the better. Start small, build up to the major beats at your school.
2. To be a successful beat reporter, one of the keys is showing up. Don't just cover the games. Show up at practice, even when you are not scheduled to write. The more the coaches and players see you, the more they will trust you and reveal themselves.
3. Write tight. Get to the point quickly. 500-word stories are becoming the norm, so it's no longer OK to write two paragraphs of prose to set up the lead of the story. A good way to check yourself is to write a headline based on the first two paragraphs of your story.
4. When choosing your postgame sidebar, instead of focusing on a particular player, look for stories that focus on a key moment or key decision that helped turn the result.
5. Don't take the summer off. Find an internship. Start looking in September. Many deadlines are in November/December.

—Bill Hill,
assistant managing editor at MLB.com



Break down games into smaller parts, such as scoring runs in basketball, key drives in football, or key at-bats in softball or baseball. For example, you might notice that a basketball team played better with a smaller lineup, going on scoring runs of 12-2 and 10-0 when the starting center was on the bench. You might notice that a soccer team dominated the middle of the field for most of the game, which will allow you to focus on the play of the center midfielders and backs and describe their efforts during these key moments. You might compare the number of running plays with the number of passing plays by each football team during the game or a key series or by each half of the game. Why did the teams run more in the second half? You could also assess how well a team ran power plays in hockey. Why did a team struggle despite having a one-man advantage? For baseball, you should address pitch selection and pitch counts. Did a pitcher rely too heavily on fastballs, especially when he was behind in the count? Or did a team hit more grounders than fly balls?

Don't forget to convey what happens next. Has the team advanced to the next level of a state playoff? Include this information high in a story. Where does the team play next during the regular season? That detail can wait for later.

Here are some more examples:

- “With Kansas’ 63–21 loss to Texas Tech, MU moved into a first-place tie in the Big 12 North with the Jayhawks by dismantling its second North opponent in as many tries this season. Mizzou previously beat Nebraska 52–17.”⁶
- “Gaudin allowed a leadoff single and walked the next hitter, but escaped the inning with a ground out, a strikeout and a fly out. His sinkers and sliders moved all over, several bouncing in front of catcher Jose Molina. One hit a batter, another was a wild pitch, and three times Oakland moved a runner to third.”⁷
- “Seattle doesn’t game plan for its exhibition opponents, and the Broncos ran a heavy diet of screen plays and short routes. Their longest play of the first half was a 26-yard completion to Eddie Royal on a bubble screen.”⁸
- “The offense is being helped this year by a couple of things, and maybe they’re obvious. One: The inside players have the ability to step away from the basket and be threats unlike the center who clogged the middle in recent years. Although he didn’t do it Saturday, center Mike Tisdale has shown great confidence in his mid-range jumper and so has forward Mike Davis. That opens a lot of space to get things done. Two: The Illini start three guards who have played the point at various times. Trent Meacham, Demetri McCamey and Chester Frazier can all pass the ball effectively and their assist numbers reflect the fact that sometimes they have three point guards on the court simultaneously.”⁹

KEY PLAYS

Describe or cite key plays that change the outcome of a game, highlight key drives, illustrate a trend, describe how a strategy succeeded or failed, and show how a player made a difference. Sometimes these events are not obvious—such as a slide into second base that broke up a double play and allowed a run to score in the third inning of a 2–1 game. Sometimes the big hit is not really so big, as the following story shows:

PHILADELPHIA—There could be a lot of empty pews in Philadelphia churches on Sunday morning. The prayers of the Phillies’ fans were answered at 1:47 A.M., with a slow chopper up the third-base line that gave the Phillies the victory in Game 3 of the World Series.

Carlos Ruiz, who had homered in the second inning, drove in the game-winning run in the bottom of the ninth with a ball that traveled only about 40 feet. It brought home Eric Bruntlett to lift the Phillies over the Tampa Bay

Rays, 5–4, at wild and water-logged Citizens Bank Park. The Phillies lead the series, two games to one.

“It was a great night for me,” Ruiz said. “I’ll remember it for the rest of my life.”¹⁰

The Boston Globe’s Fluto Shinzawa focuses on an early goal here that sparked a later rally:

In the second period, Thornton, as the third man high in the offensive zone, winged a shot on goal. Yelle, positioned in front of goalie Johan Hedberg (28 saves), positioned his stick and deflected the puck into the net at 3:37, giving the Bruins the life they needed. Then, at 5:57, Lucic scored the first of his three to tie the score at 2.¹¹

In football, teams win and lose based on their ability to both score quickly and produce lengthy drives that keep the other team off the field. Sometimes, a winning drive happens at the end of a big game like the Super Bowl, when the New York Giants rallied to defeat the previously unbeaten New England Patriots during an improbable and bizarre finish. Sometimes a team wins because it put together a drive that did not yield a single point but did run five or eight minutes off the game clock.

Or maybe the most significant drive is one that put the game out of reach, such as the following one that enabled the Florida Gators to secure a second national championship in three years:

The Sooners couldn’t finish. So the Gators finished them off. The joy culminated Thursday with an impeccable 76-yard drive and a 4-yard pass from Tebow to receiver David Nelson in the middle of the end zone with five minutes to go. Tebow created third-down conversion after conversion on that drive to finish with 231 passing yards and two touchdowns to match his 109 yards rushing.¹²

STATISTICS

Cite key stats, but don’t rely too heavily on them—especially in the lead. Don’t just focus on the fact players scored 30-plus points, ran for more than 100 yards, or recorded 20 kills in a match—unless you’re writing short briefs for a sports roundup. In more fully developed game stories, stats should support other key ideas. Explain how a softball player drove in seven runs, what enabled a basketball player to grab 15 rebounds, or why a miler managed to run the final two laps faster than the opening two. In golf, you might note when players go on cold or hot streaks, something that combines stats and trends. The following passage also explains why a streak ended:

Marino did much better than that. He made seven birdies in a bogey-free third round, including five in a seven-hole stretch on the back nine. "I got hot starting on No. 9. I made a couple putts," Marino said. "I've been hitting it good all week, but the last two days I didn't make much of anything on the greens. I got on a nice streak the last few holes of today." The streak ended at No. 17. Eager to finish before dark, Marino nearly hit his tee shot into the group in front of him, a threesome hidden in the sunken fairway.¹³

Stats are essential for understanding all athletic events, but they do not tell the entire story. So be judicious about which ones to insert, and use only those that help illustrate key trends, drives, or plays or those that explain how a team won or lost. Readers can easily check box scores and read blog entries to learn more about additional stats from games or events.

QUOTATIONS

Quotations allow your readers to share in the thoughts and emotions of the game's key people. They're a perfect example of why people read sports stories, even if they watched the game and know the outcome: Reporters add to readers' understanding by asking questions and finding out things no one could know just by looking.

A good quote takes you inside the speaker's head and helps you see the world through different eyes. The next chapter, about interviewing, provides tips on getting people to talk to you. Once they do, learn to distinguish a good quote from a mediocre one. The fact that someone said something to you and you managed to record the words exactly does not make the quote worth using. A good quote must do more than take up space—it must advance the story. A good quote is either a unique thought or a thought expressed in unique language.

Here's Indians' outfielder Shin-Soo Choo offering insights into Jered Weaver, who pitched a shutout against the Angels: "He was using his fastball early and then throwing his changeup and curveball in hitters' counts. He was hitting the inside corner and the outside corner."¹⁴

How did Jelena Jankovic blow three match points to nearly lose to Elena Dementieva in the finals of a women's tennis event? "I couldn't believe, you know, that I was able to win this match," Jankovic said. "At 5-4 and three match points on my serve, I thought I was going to win right there. And then all of a sudden, she was going for broke on those points and she took her chances. It was tough for me to accept that I lost that game."¹⁵

Both quotes allow readers to get inside an athlete's head.

West Virginia football coach Bill Stewart relies on clichés in the following quote, which offers no insights into the team's season: "It's going to be a long grind," Stewart said. "It's going to be 12 hard-fought games, but it's going to be great for college

football and great for this league."¹⁶ What will be the biggest challenge for the season? How will the team cope with a difficult schedule? Ask questions to solicit quotes that are worth reading.

And in the following quote, what exactly did Alabama football coach Nick Saban really say about his team's preseason workout? "It was good to get the first scrimmage behind us. It was good to see guys go out there in competitive situations, and see who could step their game up. Obviously, those guys who have a little more experience, have more playing time behind them and a little more confidence usually have a better opportunity to be successful."¹⁷ Saban says very little beyond the obvious.

Don't waste space with quotes unless they offer new information, expert opinion—or are entertaining. At times, you may even want to lead with an entertaining quote:

- > Miami coach Pat Riley after his team, then 11–46, won, to end an 11-game losing streak: "I feel like a mosquito in a nudist colony. I know what to do. I just don't know where to start."¹⁸
- > Boston Celtics coach Doc Rivers when asked how many more games Kevin Garnett would miss with a strained abdominal muscle: "You know Doc's a nickname, correct?"¹⁹
- > PGA Tour player Rory Sabbatini: "Lick the lollipop of mediocrity once and you'll suck forever."²⁰
- > Bowling Green football coach Gregg Brandon after his team lost 63–7 to Tulsa in the GMAC Bowl: "I don't know what happened. We were out of it before we were in it."²¹

LANGUAGE

Paint a picture. Let readers see what happened. Don't write that a tailback scored on a 25-yard run, something anybody can write from reading a box score. Instead, show how the tailback made it into the end zone.

Let readers see key passes: "The key play was Cutler's 38-yard pass to lanky receiver Devin Aromashodu. Cutler perfectly placed the pass as Aromashodu stretched out in front of Giants cornerback Bruce Johnson. It gave the Bears first-and-goal from the 1."²²

Vivid language also enables readers to visualize key plays like this: "That's when Stroughter, the 233rd pick in April, took over. He took a kickoff at the 5, spun out of some tackles and raced down the sideline until he was pushed out of bounds at

the Jaguars 20. Two plays later, McCown fired a 17-yard touchdown to tight end Jerramy Stevens."²³

Notice the active verbs used in both passages above—*stretched*, *raced*, *pushed* and *fired*. These verbs enable the reader to more clearly imagine what happened. Avoid passive voice—avoid using *was*, *were*, *is*, and *are*, because the resulting wordier constructions often replace or weaken more visual verbs.

In addition, vary sentences for style and length. Mix longer sentences with shorter ones. Insert phrases and clauses at the beginning, middle, and end of sentences—although not all at once. Don't lull readers to sleep with sentences that all sound the same, sort of like the tide rhythmically slapping against the side of a dock. On the other hand, too many short, rapid-fire sentences can jolt readers. Take chances, try different punctuation: Do whatever it takes to grab readers' attention (and retain it throughout the story).

STORY SCAN: BREAKING DOWN A GAME STORY

On deadline, sports writers rarely have time to develop a longer theme-based story. Instead, they address key plays, trends, and stats, while recording who won and lost. Later versions of the story, something Associated Press calls "write-thrus," may include a feature approach, telling the story behind the final outcome. That's always a good idea. Readers can get the basic information from many sources, so look for stories that reveal something more about the game. Matt Daniels, at the time a senior at Eastern Illinois University, wrote the following story for The Daily Eastern News after a football game.

But, first, let's review some elements in all stories—characters, setting, plot, and point of view, all driven by conflict. In sports, the larger conflict is clear—one team wants to defeat another. But what about those smaller conflicts? The rookie offensive guard matched up against the all-conference defensive end. The quarterback playing against the team that once cut him, thinking he was too old. The volleyball libero diving for kill shots with a broken left wrist. The golfer with a degenerative leg ailment struggling to play during the final holes. Or in the story below, a rookie running back forced to play after the star runner gets injured in a key conference game. The stories are endless if you do the research and cover a beat diligently.

HEADLINE: **Adeniji Gives Warrior Effort**

BYLINE: Matt Daniels, Eastern Illinois University

The main character is introduced.

Sweat trickled down Ademola Adeniji's face 30 minutes after Saturday's football game against Eastern Kentucky.

We get a brief physical description and learn he's a football player who far exceeded expectations.

The air conditioning in the conference room he sat in at the O'Brien Stadium football offices worked fine.

But the 5-foot-10, 215-pound running back still showed the effects of the best game of his Eastern Illinois football career.

The Springfield native rushed for a career-high 186 yards on 25 carries during the Panthers' 28-21 loss to the Colonels.

These two sentences serve as nut graf (or thesis), reminding readers the reason a reporter is writing this particular story.

He broke tackles, used his speed to outrun defenders and used his hands, which Eastern Illinois head coach Bob Spoo said were not the best earlier this season, to catch three passes for 58 yards.

Lead quote from another character—from an opposing coach offering a different point of view, one readers may not be familiar with through regular beat coverage.

"Oh, I tell you what, he really surprised me," said Eastern Kentucky head coach Danny Hope. "There were two or three times in the game where we had guys hit him in the backfield or hit on the line of scrimmage and he powered his way through."

He did this on a day with temperatures in the high-80s, unusual for an early October afternoon in Illinois, and without other healthy running backs to give him a break.

But it was all for naught because it was the Panthers' first Ohio Valley Conference loss at O'Brien Stadium since 2004.

"Each week in the OVC, you've got to play game in and game out," Adeniji said. "I mean, individual accomplishment is great, but you need to come out with the 'W.'"

Adeniji's first three carries of the game did not indicate he would have a breakout game. He rushed for 3 yards on his first three rushes, but made it up for it on his fourth rush.

His 17-yard run up the middle on the Panthers third offensive possession moved the offense from their own 5-yard line to the 22.

Adeniji struck next with less than three minutes in the second quarter and the Panthers trailing 9–7. Adeniji took a handoff from quarterback Bodie Reeder at Eastern Illinois' own 27. He appeared to be tackled by ECU defensive lineman Andre Soucy at the line of scrimmage, but broke the tackle.

With ECU playing man coverage on the wide receivers on the outside and Colonel free safety Zach Denton the lone defender dropped deep, Adeniji had plenty of room to run.

He used his speed and cut back to the middle, past ECU's linebackers, after breaking Soucy's tackle.

With only Denton to beat, Adeniji ran past him near midfield en route to a career-long 73-yard touchdown run.

"He's a warrior," Reeder said. "He exemplifies what our entire offense needs to be. We all need to fight from the very first snap. He did that and he didn't give up the entire day."

The Panthers employed a formation they hadn't used all season in order to spell Adeniji.

Reeder lined up in the shotgun formation with five wide receivers, three to his left and two to his right.

Travorus Bess was limited with a leg injury (two carries for two yards), while Ron Jordan ran once for no gain before he tweaked his right ankle again. Norris Smith didn't dress because of a lingering knee injury and fullback Chip Keys is out for the year with an ankle injury.

Key moments for key player—two early runs along with a third described in greater detail. Great observations.

Quote from teammate offers another perspective on Adeniji's performance.

Alternative Game Approaches

Landof10.com is one of several media entities that offers alternative story formats built around either questions or a list of things learned. These types of stories can run alone or supplement additional coverage; they can also run on deadline or for a print edition a few days afterward.

Scott Dochterman, who covers Iowa athletics for this Cox News vertical, says the format offers a quick synopsis and enables writers to expand on important but overlooked sequences, such as an 8–0 run late in the second half that might encumber a narrative—especially if the run did not greatly affect the final outcome.

"In the new media world, we report an instant recap to provide insight into what just happened," says Dochterman. He continues,

This is helpful for people who want a quick synopsis immediately following the game without the narrative. Then we provide a transcript of what the coach said following the game. In many ways, this is important for fans who want an unfiltered version with context of the coach's news conference. Say the basketball coach didn't call a timeout in the waning seconds and his or her team took a poor shot. The fans want to know why. This quickly gives them that perspective. After providing the quick analysis and transcript, then I delve into a narrative that often revolves around the game's big-picture meaning.

You could also develop new questions for each game, based upon recent trends, stats and storylines, such as:

- **Lakers' D'Angelo Russell maturing, evolving into leader Lakers need.** Luke Walton sees it. D'Angelo Russell admits it. Anyone watching the second-year point guard play recently can see it—there is a little something different about him the last five games. It's sort of there in the stats—20.8 points per game, 39.7 percent shooting from three, 5.2 rebounds, 5 assists, and 1.4 turnovers per game in his last five—but it's more than that. There is a maturity to Russell's game that is growing, a confidence as the game slows down for him and his ability to be the floor general the Lakers have counted on comes to the fore.²⁴
- **Hideki Matsuyama needs the Masters to be in February:** Thomas might have won, but Matsuyama kept his belt as the hottest player alive with another epic performance. In his last six events, Thomas is the only human who has defeated him on the golf course. His Masters odds are plummeting. Matsuyama has finished in the top seven at Augusta each of the last two years. He is an outrageous talent who has seemingly found his own formula for contending every week in any tournament. Beware, PGA Tour, we could be in for the Year of The Hideki.²⁵
- **The Rams continue to hurt themselves with penalties.** The Rams drew eight flags for 43 yards. Several were holding calls on left tackle Greg Robinson, but he wasn't the only one who set the Rams back with miscues. Tackle Rob Havenstein was cited for holding and a false start. Tight end Tyler Higbee, receiver Mike Thomas and defensive tackle Aaron Donald also were among those flagged.²⁶

Here is Dochterman's alternative story on an early-season college basketball game between Iowa and Savannah State.

IOWA CITY, Iowa—With only two upperclassmen in uniform Sunday, Iowa's men's basketball team wanted a crisp, clean game that involved several players.

As expected, it wasn't perfect. But the Hawkeyes (2-0) rotated 12 scholarship players in a 116-84 win against Savannah State (0-2) at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. The bench scored 76 of Iowa's 116 points, the most under coach Fran McCaffery and seventh-most in school history

WHY: Iowa overwhelmed Savannah State with 18 3-pointers, topping the school record of 10. Six different players hit at least two 3-pointers. Overall, Iowa sank 18 of a school-record 43 3-point attempts (41.9 percent).

WHAT IT MEANS: McCaffery weighed redshirting one of his five scholarship freshmen before the season began, but ultimately the Hawkeyes have played all five in their first two games. It was a difficult choice for McCaffery—he wanted to space out the classes but guard Maishe Dailey wanted to play. It's an interesting situation for Iowa, because with so many young players, determining each one's season-long trajectory is challenging. Dailey scored six points in 13 minutes Saturday.

WHO STARRED: Backup shooting guard Brady Ellingson was in a first-half shooting zone. He connected on 4 of 6 3-point attempts for a career-high 21 points in 14 minutes—before halftime. Ellingson finished with 23. Freshman forward Cordell Pernsl added 18.

WHO STUMBLED: It requires effort to call anyone's performance "a stumble" in a 32-point victory. But starting point guard Christian Williams scored just 1 point in 19 minutes. He did, however, add 4 assists and 4 rebounds without a turnover.

WHO WAS THERE: University of Iowa President Bruce Harreld attended the game. The arena was filled with veterans, who were honored with applause during a media timeout.

WHO IS NEXT: Iowa plays host to Seton Hall (2-0) at 9 p.m. ET on Thursday in the second annual installment of the Gavitt Games, an annual challenge between the Big Ten and Big East conferences.

Scott Dochterman,
Landof10.com

www.landof10.com/iowa/recap-iowa-throttles-savannah-state-sets-school-record-for-3-pointers