

THE BODY OF A NEWS STORY

The portion of a news story that follows the lead is called the “body.” It contains the information a reporter believes readers need to know. The information can be presented in several styles: inverted pyramid, hourglass, focus or narrative. No one technique works best for all readers, all stories or all reporters. All require thorough reporting, and all require reporters to organize the facts and present them effectively. Whatever story style a writer chooses, the important thing for the writer is to determine how best to convey information to the reader.

Think of writing a news story as driving a train along a track. The rails are the story’s central point and give the story direction. The railroad ties—who, what, when, where, why and how—provide a foundation. The train’s engine is the lead; it must be powerful enough to pull the rest of the story. Like the whistle of the engine, a story’s lead must capture the reader’s attention. Each car that follows the lead represents a paragraph containing information and providing structure. The “cars” can be arranged in whatever sequence—for example, from most important to least or chronologically—seems most effective. The train is strengthened when research, verification, multiple sources, quotes, anecdotes and descriptions fill the cars. The amount of information needed to complete the story determines the number of cars in the train. Holding the train cars together are couplings, which represent the transitions between paragraphs of information. Without strong transitions, the paragraphs disconnect from one another.

This chapter discusses the writing styles and the techniques reporters often use to write effective bodies for their news stories.

THE INVERTED-PYRAMID STYLE

Inverted-pyramid stories arrange the information in descending order of importance or newsworthiness. The lead states the most newsworthy, important or

“I think journalism gets measured by the quality of information it presents, not the drama or the pyrotechnics associated with us.”

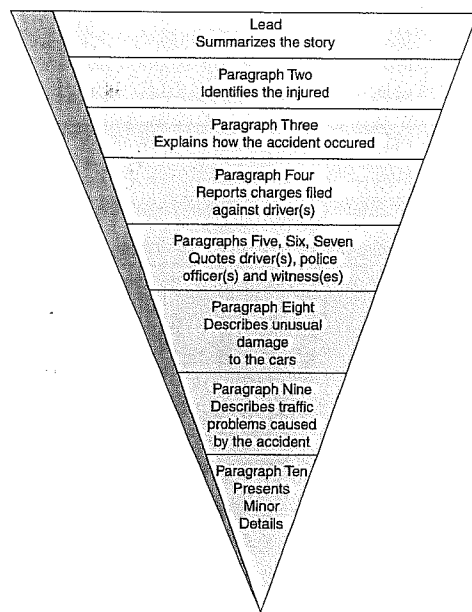
Bob Woodward,
U.S. journalist

striking information and establishes the central point for the rest of the story. The second paragraph—and sometimes the third and fourth paragraphs—provides details that amplify the lead. Subsequent paragraphs add less important details or introduce subordinate topics. Each paragraph presents additional information: names, descriptions, quotations, conflicting viewpoints, explanations and background data. Beginning reporters must learn this style because it helps them decide what is most important and what is least important. It also helps reporters discover “holes” in their information—details that have not been collected and need to be found.

The primary advantage of the inverted pyramid is that it allows someone to stop reading a story after only one or two paragraphs yet still learn the newest, most newsworthy and most important facts. The inverted pyramid also ensures that all the facts are immediately understandable. Moreover, if a story is longer than the space available, editors can easily shorten it by deleting paragraphs from the end.

The inverted-pyramid style also has several disadvantages:

- Because the lead summarizes facts that later paragraphs discuss in greater detail, some of those facts may be repeated in the body.
- A story that follows the inverted pyramid rarely contains any surprises for readers; the lead immediately reveals the major facts.
- The inverted pyramid-style evolved when newspapers were readers' first source for breaking news; now radio, television and the Internet fill that role.
- Readers with less than a high school education cannot easily understand stories written in this style.
- The inverted pyramid locks reporters into a formula and discourages them from trying new styles.



The inverted-pyramid style of story writing has been a staple of news writing for decades.

Figure 9-1

Many writing coaches discourage the use of the inverted pyramid, saying it is overused, confusing and often irrelevant. The inverted pyramid remains a common format for organizing news stories, however, partly because of its inherent advantages, and partly because using it is a difficult habit to break. Daily deadline pressures also encourage its use because coming up with new styles requires additional thinking and, perhaps, more rewriting.

Organizing the Information

If two cars collide and several people are injured, an inverted pyramid story about the accident might contain a sequence of paragraphs similar to those outlined in Figure 9-1.

Normally, reporters emphasize people: what they do and what happens to them. Consequently, in the car accident example, the injuries to the people are described early in the story. Damage to the cars is less important and reported later. If the damage was not unusual, the story might not mention it. Paragraph three describes the accident itself—the recent action and main point of the story. Quotations, such as those used in paragraphs five, six and seven, add detail and color as well as a pleasing change of pace. Paragraphs eight, nine and 10 add less essential information and might be deleted if space is limited.

The exact organization of a story will vary depending on the story's unique facts and most newsworthy points. The second, third and, maybe, fourth paragraphs should provide details that develop and support the lead.

Notice how the leads in the following stories summarize their topics and how the second and third paragraphs present their most important details. Neither story ends with a summary or conclusion; instead, the final paragraphs present the least important details. The stories are cohesive because their leads summarize the main topics and because each of the subsequent paragraphs presents additional information about those topics:



LOTHIAN—A Glen Burnie man was in serious but stable condition yesterday, a day after he fell asleep at the wheel and collided with a box truck in south county.

David A. Calligan Jr., 19, was driving a 1998 Ford Explorer east on Route 258 near Brookwood Road just before 3 p.m. when he fell asleep and crossed the center line, county police said.

The Ford collided with a westbound GMC box truck, which overturned, trapping Calligan.

A county fire department spokesperson said it took 15 to 20 minutes for firefighters to free Calligan, who was flown by state police helicopter to the Maryland Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore.

The box truck driver, 29-year-old Ulise Trujillo-Hetteta of Waldorf, and passenger Raphael Ignot, 26, of Fort Washington, were not seriously hurt.

(The Maryland Gazette)

A Carlisle couple is homeless following a house fire Sunday.

The borough's four fire companies were dispatched about 3 p.m. to a one-story ranch house owned by Suzanne Zeigler at 307 Avon Drive.

"Fire was coming from the roof when we arrived on the scene," Carlisle Fire Chief David Boyles said this morning.

It took firefighters about 45 minutes to contain and extinguish the blaze.

Boyles said the homeowner was out shopping at the time of the fire and no one was home.

The structure sustained heavy fire damage to the roof and severe water damage everywhere else.

He said the fire appears to be electrical in origin and started in the garage.

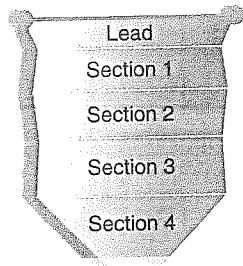
The American Red Cross provided assistance to the homeowner, her fiancé and their three cats and two dogs, said Gene Lucas, executive director.

Boyles said a passerby from the neighborhood rescued the pets from the home.

One firefighter was treated at the scene for a minor burn.

(The Carlisle [Pennsylvania] Sentinel)

Notice that in both of these inverted-pyramid story examples, an editor could easily remove the last couple of paragraphs if needed for space and still retain the essential information of the story (see Figure 9-2).



The inverted-pyramid style often resembles this rather than the typical pyramid.

Figure 9-2

Many of the facts reported in longer news stories are of approximately equal importance. Those stories are more likely to resemble the diagram in Figure 9-1 rather than the perfect triangle shown in Figure 9-2.

Immediately after the diagram's summary lead, section 1 presents several paragraphs that contain information of roughly equal importance. Those paragraphs may present some additional information about a single topic or information about several different but related subtopics. Section 2 may describe a somewhat less important aspect of the story. Section 3 presents more facts of about equal importance to one another but of less importance than the facts in section 2. Section 4 contains the least important details, perhaps routine procedures, background information or a reminder of related or similar incidents that occurred in the past.

Writing the Second Paragraph

The second paragraph in a news story is almost as important as the lead—and almost as difficult to write. Like the lead, the second paragraph should emphasize the news. In addition, the second paragraph should provide a smooth, logical transition from the lead to the following paragraphs.

Sometimes reporters fail to emphasize the news in a story's second paragraph. Other times they fail to provide smooth transitions. As a result, their stories seem dull or disorganized. The following pages discuss both of these problems and present some solutions.

AVOID LEAPFROGGING Reporters often refer to an individual in their lead and begin their second paragraph with a name. However, many reporters fail to say clearly that the individual referred to in their lead is the person named in their second paragraph. Readers are forced to guess. They will usually guess right—but not always.

This problem is so common that it has a name: "leapfrogging." To avoid it, provide a one- or two-word transition from the lead to the name in the second paragraph:

ALLENTOWN (AP)—A man rammed his car into his wife's car, then shot her in the arm and leg before bystanders tackled him, police said.

Police expressed gratitude to the bystanders who helped bring Felipe M. Santos, 53, of Allentown into custody Monday.

REVISED: ALLENTOWN (AP)—A man rammed his car into his wife's car, then shot her in the arm and leg before bystanders tackled him, police said.

Police expressed gratitude to the bystanders who helped bring the man suspected of the attack, Felipe M. Santos, 53, of Allentown, into custody Monday.

CONTINUE WITH THE NEWS After providing a smooth transition between the lead and the second paragraph, continue with information about the topic summarized in your lead. Mistakenly, some reporters shift to a different topic, a decision certain to confuse their readers:

The mayor and City Council agreed Monday night to freeze wages and make city workers pay more for benefits in an effort to close a budget deficit that is now larger than officials expected.

Mayor Sabrina Datolli, who has been a lifelong resident of the city, is in her fourth term as mayor. She has seen many ups and downs over her years as mayor, but hopes the city can overcome its problems.

REVISED: The mayor and City Council agreed Monday night to freeze wages and make city workers pay more for benefits in an effort to close a budget deficit that is now larger than officials expected.

Mayor Sabrina Datolli said the wage freeze and other measures are needed to prevent layoffs of city employees, cuts in programs and more drastic fiscal surgery to balance the city's budget.

Before revision, the story seems to discuss two different topics. The lead summarizes a problem that confronts city officials everywhere: balancing budgets. The second paragraph shifts to the mayor's career and hopes. It fails even to mention the problem of balancing the budget.

NAMES, NAMES—DULL, DULL Reporters sometimes place too much emphasis on their sources' identities. As a result, their second paragraphs fail to convey any information of interest to readers. Note how the following example can be revised to emphasize the news—what the source said, saw or did, not who he is:

A highway engineer was killed Wednesday at an Interstate 95 construction site when a tractor-trailer owned by Shearson Trucking Inc. plowed through a concrete barrier and struck him.

A materials engineer, Riley Patterson of Independent Testing Laboratory Inc., was killed in the mishap.

Jonathan Martin, a site manager for Baldini Construction Co., saw the accident happen.

REVISED: A tractor-trailer plowed through a concrete barrier at an Interstate 95 construction site Monday, killing a highway engineer.

The force of the crash pushed the concrete barrier into a piece of road equipment, crushing the engineer, Riley Patterson. Patterson had been using a core-drilling machine to bore a sample hole in the concrete roadbed when the accident occurred. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Jonathan Martin, a worker at the site, said he saw the truck crash through the barrier but could not warn Patterson because of the noise of the drilling machine.

BACKGROUND: TOO MUCH, TOO SOON Avoid devoting the entire second paragraph to background information. The second paragraph in the following story is dull because it emphasizes routine, insignificant details:

Local Red Cross officials expressed alarm Wednesday that blood supplies are dangerously low prior to the beginning of the long holiday weekend.

Nancy Cross, executive director of the Broward County Chapter of the American Red Cross, said the Red Cross strives to maintain an adequate blood supply for emergency situations. "The role of the Red Cross since it was founded is to help people during times of need," she said.

The story shifts from the news—the lack of adequate blood supplies—to the organization's purpose. Yet that purpose has not changed since the Red Cross was established. Thus, the second paragraph says nothing new, nothing likely to retain readers' interest in the story. Fortunately, the problem is easy to correct:

Local Red Cross officials expressed alarm Wednesday that blood supplies are dangerously low heading into the long holiday weekend.

Restocking those supplies will require a 50 percent increase in blood donations over the next three days, said Nancy Cross, executive director of the Broward County Chapter of the American Red Cross.

"Holiday periods are often a problem because people are traveling or have other plans and don't think about the need for blood," Cross said. "But the holiday period is also a busy time for emergency rooms and trauma centers, which increases the demand for blood."

The revised second and third paragraphs describe the solution to the blood supply problem and explain the reasons for the problem—details central to the story, not minor or unnecessary ones.



Ending the Story

The term "kicker" can have two meanings. It can refer to an additional line set above the main headline of a story that helps draw attention to the story or it can refer to the ending of the story itself. Ending the story well is important because it helps to nail down the central point of the story and can leave a lasting impression in readers' minds. Sometimes the kicker, or ending of the story, is just as important as the lead.

"Want to write well? Open with a punch, close with a kick." This advice, from Matthew Stibbe, freelance journalist, CEO of Articulate and Turbine, serves journalists well. By default, many writers will

use a dramatic quote to end the story. And while quotes can be effective kickers, there are other ways to end a story that rely on the writer's skills of observation and creativity to tell the reader the story is over. Sometimes, waiting until the end of the story to use a dramatic quote can often diminish its power. It may be better to use an anecdote that ties into the story's lead or describe a scene as a wrap-up or focus on a detail, such as a statistic, that is tied to the central point of the story.

Here are the first couple of paragraphs from an Associated Press story about how Penn State University football fans were adapting to life without Joe Paterno as head coach:

STATE COLLEGE—From bumper stickers to signs posted by a few businesses to the occasional T-shirt, reminders of Joe Paterno sprinkle Happy Valley.

Most cues are subtle enough to make an outsider look twice. Like the decals with the outline of the bespectacled Paterno's distinctive face or the shirt with the image of the long-time Penn State coach's trademark look of rolled-up khakis and sneakers.

The story continues to explore the aftermath of Paterno's death and the scandal that tarnished his legacy and the struggle Penn State University and its alumni were having dealing with the controversy. The last paragraph, the kicker, ties the story to the central point:

At the least, the football program that appeared to be in peril after the sanctions has regained its footing under Paterno's successor, Bill O'Brien. The former New England Patriots offensive coordinator conducted a masterful job leading Penn State to an 8-4 season and keeping most of the team together after the penalties.

Notice that the second paragraph of the story builds on the lead and adds detail to the central point it introduced. The last paragraph of the 21-paragraph story mentions a detail about the football team and its first season without Paterno at the helm. The football program was only mentioned briefly throughout the entire story.

This story from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reports on efforts to deal with financial problems at the city's Science Center:

The St. Louis Science Center will slash \$600,000 in expenses this year and hopes to cut \$1.5 million more next year in an effort to tighten spending, Interim President Philip Needleman said Tuesday.

The announcement comes one week after the science center's board of commissioners approved a restructuring plan that reduces the number of vice presidents to four from nine. The board also expanded its oversight of executive pay and six-figure spending.

The second paragraph adds a chronological detail to the board's actions that explains the central point of the rest of the story—the board's efforts to trim costs to make the center more efficient and able to maintain its programs. In the story, the writer addresses criticisms from the board and others that executive pay was too high. The story ends with a quote kicker from one of the board members:

Another board member, real estate broker Jerome Glick, said during the meeting, "I think they got the message."

The following story from The New York Times about a decline in Brazil's oil production and the dire consequences for the country begins with a summary assessment of the problem and continues with details about the country's dilemma. The last paragraph, the kicker, invokes a warning of what the future holds for the country.

RIO DE JANEIRO—Brazil's oil production is falling, casting doubt on what was supposed to be an oil bonanza. Imports of gasoline are rising rapidly, exposing the country to the whims of global energy markets. Even the nation's ethanol industry, once envied as a model of renewable energy, has had to import ethanol from the United States.

Half a decade has passed since Brazilians celebrated the discovery of huge amounts of oil in deep-sea fields by the national oil company, Petrobras, triumphantly positioning the country to surge into the top ranks of global producers. But now another kind of energy shock is unfolding: the colossal company, long known for its might, is losing the race to keep up with the nation's growing energy demands.

The kicker of the 27-paragraph story ties back into the central point and leaves the reader with a dire prediction:

José Carlos Cosenza, a Petrobras executive, has warned that Brazil may need to import large amounts of fuel for almost another decade. Moreover, gasoline demand is expected to climb even higher as Brazilians buy more cars.

Complex Stories

Stories that contain several major subtopics may be too complex to summarize in a brief lead. The U.S. Supreme Court, when it is in session, may in one day take action in several cases. Two or three of those actions may be important, but, to save space, most newspapers report them all in a single story. Reporters can mention only the one or two most important actions in their leads, so they often summarize the remaining ones in the second, and sometimes the third, paragraphs of their stories.

After summarizing all the major actions, reporters discuss each in more detail, starting with the most important. By mentioning all the cases in their stories'