

Hold the front page

Lynn Eaton writes regularly for the *BMJ* and has worked as a news reporter at the UK broad sheets the *Sunday Times* and the *Independent*, among others. She explains how to write an effective news story

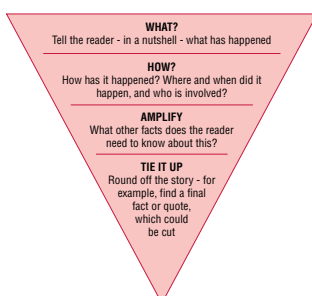
You know how to structure an essay—beginning, middle, and end. You also know how to write up a scientific paper—introduction, method, results, and conclusion. But how on earth do you write a 300 word news story?

The biggest danger is you may try to turn it into a piece of purple prose. Do not even think about it: save that for your novel—or leave it to the well established columnists. The important thing with news is to get your message across fast and accurately. That means getting straight to the point; using language which your audience finds easy to understand; and checking (and double checking) your facts, spelling, and grammar.

Most journalists will have spent at least 10 weeks on a full time postgraduate course learning the ropes, so do not expect perfection overnight. But here are five tips to get you started.

Get the structure right

Few people have time to read to the end of a news story. Most read the headline and, if that interests them, the first paragraph. If that hooks them, they may read a few more lines. And if you are lucky the reader might just finish the story.



A guide to structuring a news story: the inverted triangle

Table 1 One word is better than three

Don't say	Do say
At the present time	Now
Provided that	If
In view of the fact that	Because
In order to	To
The majority of	Most

Table 2 Use the active voice

The subject of these sentences—shown in italics—is the one doing the act

SAY *The doctor* injected the patient.

NOT The patient was injected by *the doctor*.

SAY *Scientists* did a study.

NOT A study has been done by *scientists*.

The first paragraph must grab the readers' attention. It has to summarise the story in a nutshell. If your story was cut back to one paragraph—a “news in brief” article or NIB—the reader should still have some idea of what was going on.

As one journalism tutor tells his students, do not waste time on foreplay—get straight to the climax. And, although there are times when you can break this rule—called the “dropped intro” in the business—you are best not to try to be a Casanova just yet.

This intro from last month's *studentBMJ* works perfectly: “Up to two fifths of women and almost one fifth of men lack interest in sex, according to the results of a study published in the *BMJ*.”¹ It tells the reader all they need to know and could stand on its own if need be.

There is an easy mnemonic for the structure of a news story (figure) which makes sure you

put the message first. Follow this and writing news gets a lot easier.

Use straightforward language

You may only have 300 to 400 words to play with, so each word must earn its place. Avoid long, complicated words and never use two words when one would do (table 1).

Try to use a conversational tone, rather than the more formal language that you would read in a textbook. Try to avoid complicated subclauses. And always use the active voice (table 2).

Getting a comment

If you need a comment on a story, try putting the subject matter into Google, which may throw up some ideas. Choose an organisation relevant to your readership. For example, in a news story in last month's *studentBMJ* on prejudice against gay and lesbian health professionals, the reporter quoted the Gay and Lesbian Association of Doctors and Dentists.²

Check it—and check it again

Get your facts straight. Do not be embarrassed to ring back to

check a point you are unclear about. Check on Google if you are not sure whether you have spelt an organisation's name correctly.

Is it the Department *for* Health or the Department *of* Health, for example? Does it cover England, England and Wales, just Scotland, or the whole United Kingdom? These details may seem boring or unimportant, but they do matter. Get them wrong and your news editor will start to doubt your whole story.

300 words means just that

If you have been commissioned to write 300 words and you deliver 500, your news editor will not thank you. They will not pay you for the extra 200 either. True, it can be difficult to cut your copy. But wouldn't you rather be the one to decide which quote you can afford to cut? Unlike the web, a paper page does not magically expand to fit an extra few hundred words. So if you don't cut it, be warned: someone else will.

Lynn Eaton freelance journalist, London

- 1 Tayal U. Two fifths of women have no interest in sex. *studentBMJ* 2003;11:355.
- 2 Iles A. Students should understand gay health needs. *studentBMJ* 2003;11:355.



Kirk Douglas in the film *Ace in the hole*

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