

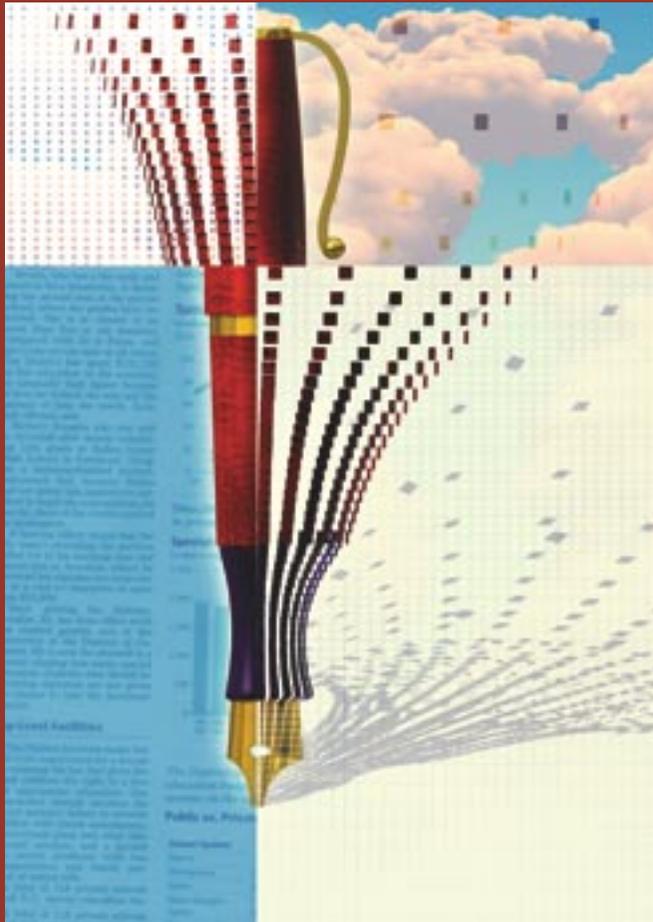
Handbook of
Independent
Journalism

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b y D e b o r a h P o t t e r

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C o n t e n t s

1



What Is News? [4]

Types of news
Where the news comes from
The journalist's role
Objectivity and fairness
News providers

2



Getting the Story [12]

Five W's and an H
Observation
Research
Sources
Interviews
Ground rules
Getting it right

3



Telling the Story [22]

Focus
Writing
Leads
Story structure
Endings
Attribution
Quotes and sound bites
Numbers

4



Editing the Story [30]

Newspaper jobs
Broadcast jobs
The editor's role
Copy editing
Coaching
Headlines, captions, and teasers
Graphics and visuals
Supervising

5



Broadcast and Online [38]

Broadcast story forms and terms
Broadcast writing
Sound
Pictures
Newscasts
Online news
Online story forms
Online writing

6



Specialized Journalism [46]

Beat reporting skills
Government and politics
Business and economics
Health, science, and the environment
Police and courts
Sports
Questions journalists should ask about polls

7



Ethics and Law [54]

Ethical principles
Ethical decision-making
Ethics codes
Codes of conduct
Community standards
Legal issues

8

Journalism Resources [61]

Membership groups
Reporting and editing
Specialized journalism
Journalism training
Freedom of expression
Books
Ethics codes

INTRODUCTION

Journalism is both a profession and a craft, since journalists draw on specialized skills and adhere to common standards. So what makes journalism different from other occupations like medicine or law, which could be described in similar terms? Perhaps the greatest difference is the special role the news media play in a free society.

A free press has often been called the *oxygen of democracy*, because one cannot survive without the other. The French political writer Alexis de Tocqueville noted as much when he visited the United States almost 200 years ago. “You can’t have real newspapers without democracy, and you can’t have democracy without newspapers,” he wrote. Since then, that simple statement has been proven true in nations all over the world. Democracies, established or emerging, depend on the consent of an informed citizenry, and the news media are a primary source of the information people need in order to govern themselves.

To ensure that journalists are able to provide that information, many countries have established legal protections for a free press. In the United States, for example, journalism is the only profession mentioned in the Constitution, which states: “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.” As Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, wrote in 1787, “The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Journalists in a free society not only have certain legal protections, they also have responsibilities. In some countries, these responsibilities are spelled out and in others they are implicit. But in almost every case they amount to the same thing: to keep citizens informed, journalists have a responsibility to provide information that is accurate and reported fairly — and independently — from outside influences.

“The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society.”

This handbook offers a brief introduction to the fundamentals of journalism as it is practiced in democratic systems — a journalism that attempts to base itself on fact and not opinion. Opinions have their place, but in the best-edited newspapers they are confined to the editorial pages and op-ed (guest writer) columns. It is the kind of journalism I practiced myself for more than 20 years as a reporter and editor, and that I now teach in professional workshops in the United States and around the world. My goal is to provide a useful and practical guide that will help all journalists do better work for the communities they serve.

In democratic societies around the world, the news media have come to serve an additional function as watchdogs on the activities of the political and judicial branches of government. They have kept democracies viable by giving voice to the voiceless, ensuring that a ruling majority cannot trample the rights of a minority. A 19th century American writer and humorist, Finley Peter Dunne, once said that a journalist’s job is “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” But the primary role of journalism in a free society has remained the same for generations. When a U.S.-based group, the Committee of Concerned Journalists, surveyed journalists about the character of their profession at the very end of the 20th century, they came to this common understanding: “The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society.”



Deborah Potter

1

WHAT IS NEWS?



The answer to the question “What is news?” may seem obvious. News is what is new; it’s what’s happening. Look it up in the dictionary, and you’ll find news described as “a report of recent events or previously unknown information.” But most of the things that happen in the world every day don’t find their way into the newspaper or onto the air in a newscast.

So what makes a story newsworthy enough to be published or broadcast? The real answer is, it depends on a variety of factors. Generally speaking, news is information that is of broad interest to the intended audience, so what’s big news in Buenos Aires may not be news at all in Baku. Journalists decide what news to cover based on many of the following “news values”:

Timeliness

Did something happen recently or did we just learn about it? If so, that could make it newsworthy. The meaning of “recently” varies depending on the medium, of course. For a weekly news magazine, anything that happened since the previous edition the week before may be considered timely. For a 24-hour cable news channel, the timeliest news may be “breaking news,” or something that is happening this very minute and can be covered by a reporter live at the scene.

Impact

Are many people affected or just a few? Contamination in the water system that serves your town’s 20,000 people has impact because it affects your audience directly. A report that 10 children were killed from drinking polluted water at a summer camp in a distant city has impact too, because the audience is likely to have a strong emotional response to the story. The fact that a worker cut a utility line is not big news, unless it happens to cause a blackout across the city that lasts for several hours.

Proximity

Did something happen close to home, or did it involve people from here? A plane crash in Chad will make headlines in N’Djamena, but it’s unlikely to be front-page news in Chile unless the plane was carrying Chilean passengers.

Controversy

Are people in disagreement about this? It’s human nature to be interested in stories that involve conflict, tension, or public debate. People like to take sides, and see whose position will prevail. Conflict doesn’t always entail pitting one person’s views against another. Stories about doctors battling disease or citizens opposing an unjust law also involve conflict.

Prominence

Is a well-known person involved? Ordinary activities or mishaps can become news if they involve a prominent person like a prime minister or a film star. That plane crash in Chad would make headlines around the world if one of the passengers were a famous rock musician.

Currency

Are people here talking about this? A government meeting about bus safety might not draw much attention, unless it happens to be scheduled soon after a terrible bus accident. An incident at a football match may be in the news for several days because it’s the main topic of conversation in town.

Oddity

Is what happened unusual? As the saying goes, “If a dog bites a man, that is not news. But if a man bites a dog, it’s news!” The extraordinary and the unexpected appeal to our natural human curiosity.

What makes news also depends on the makeup of the intended audience, not just where they live but who they are. Different groups of people have different lifestyles and concerns, which make them interested in different types of news. A radio news program targeted at younger listeners might include stories about music or sports stars that would not be featured in a business newspaper aimed at older, wealthier readers. A weekly magazine that covers medical news would report on the testing of an experimental drug because the doctors who read the publication presumably would be interested. But unless the drug is believed to cure a well-known disease, most general-interest local newspapers would ignore the story. The exception might be the newspaper in the community where the research is being conducted.

News organizations see their work as a public service, so news is made up of information that people need to know in order to go about their daily lives and to be productive citizens in a democracy. But most news organizations also are businesses that have to make a profit to survive, so the news also includes items that will draw an audience: stories people may want to know about just because they’re interesting. Those two characteristics need not be in conflict. Some of the best stories on any given day, in fact, are both important *and* interesting. But it’s fairly common for news organizations to divide stories into two basic categories: hard news and soft news, also called features.



Types of News

Hard news is essentially the news of the day. It’s what you see on the front page of the newspaper or the top of the Web page, and what you hear at the start of a broadcast news report. For example, war, politics, business, and crime are frequent hard news topics. A strike announced today by the city’s bus drivers that leaves thousands of commuters unable to get to work is hard news. It’s timely, controversial, and has a wide impact close to home. The community needs the information right away, because it affects people’s daily lives.

By contrast, a story about a world-famous athlete who grew up in an orphanage would fit the definition of soft news. It’s a human-interest story involving a prominent person and it’s an unusual story that people likely would discuss with their friends. But there’s no compelling reason why it has to be published or broadcast on any particular day. By definition, that makes it a feature story. Many newspapers and online-news sites have separate feature sections for stories about lifestyles, home and family, the arts, and entertainment. Larger newspapers even may have weekly sections for specific kinds of features on food, health, education, and so forth.

Topic isn't the only thing that separates hard news from features. In most cases, hard news and soft news are written differently. Hard news stories generally are written so that the audience gets the most important information as quickly as possible. Feature writers often begin with an anecdote or example designed primarily to draw the audience's interest, so the story may take longer to get to the central point.

Some stories blend these two approaches. Stories that are not time-sensitive but that focus on significant issues are often called "news features." A story about one community's struggle to deal with AIDS, for example, is a news feature. A story about a new treatment option for AIDS patients would be hard news. News features are an effective way to explore trends or complex social problems by telling individual human stories about how people experience them. (We'll discuss these different writing styles in more detail in Chapter 3, "Telling the Story.")

Where the News Comes From

Journalists find news in all sorts of places, but most stories originate in one of three basic ways:

- naturally occurring events, like disasters and accidents;
- planned activities, like meetings and news conferences;
- reporters' enterprise.

Unplanned events frequently become major news stories. A ferry sinking, a plane crash, a tsunami, or a mudslide is newsworthy not just when it happens but often for days and weeks afterwards. The extent of the coverage depends in part on proximity and who was involved. A fatal automobile accident in Paris might not be big news on any given day. But an accident in Paris in 1997 was a huge news story, not just in France but also around the world, because one of the victims was Britain's Princess Diana.

Citizens who witness a disaster will often contact a news organization. Journalists also learn about these events from first responders: police, fire, or rescue officials. In some

countries, news organizations are able to monitor emergency communications between first responders and can dispatch journalists to the scene quickly so they can watch the story unfold.

In many newsrooms, the most obvious source of news is the daily schedule of events in town, which includes government meetings, business openings, or community events. Often called a "daybook," this list of activities is not automatically newsworthy but it provides a good starting point for reporters searching for news. Reporters who regularly cover specific kinds of issues or institutions, also called "beat" reporters, say they often get story ideas by looking at agendas for upcoming meetings.

Press releases can be another source of news, but again, they are just a starting point. Dozens of press releases arrive in newsrooms every day, by mail, by fax, or even on video via satellite. Government officials and agencies generate many of them, but other large organizations like private businesses and non-profit groups also issue press releases to let the news media know what they are doing. A press release may resemble a news story but because it is produced by someone with a vested interest in the subject it is not likely to tell the complete story. Press releases may be factually correct, but they usually include only those facts that reflect positively on the person or organization featured in the release. Even if a press release looks newsworthy, a professional journalist first must verify its authenticity, and then begin asking questions to determine the real story before deciding if it's worth reporting.

Staged events, such as demonstrations, also can produce news, but journalists must be wary of being manipulated by the organizers who want to tell only their side of the story. Politicians have become adept at staging events and "photo opportunities" in order to attract coverage, even when they have no real news value. That does not mean journalists should ignore these events, but only that they need to do additional reporting to get a complete story.

Most reporters say their best stories come from their own enterprise. Sometimes story suggestions come from strangers, who may visit, telephone, or e-mail the newsroom with a complaint or concern. Some news organizations actively solicit ideas from people who live in the communities they serve, by providing a telephone number or an e-mail address where suggestions can be submitted. Journalists spend a lot of time building relationships with people who can provide them with information. (We'll talk more about source building in Chapter 2, "Getting the Story.")

Journalists frequently find stories simply by looking around and listening to what people are talking about. What you overhear at a sports event or in line at the post office could turn into a news story. Ask the people you meet when you are not covering a story what is going on in their lives or their neighborhoods and you might find yourself on the trail of a news story no one else has covered.

Another way to find news is to ask what has happened since the last time a story was in the paper or on the air. Follow-ups often lead to surprising developments that are even more newsworthy than the original report. For example, a story about a fire the day after it happened might tell you how many people were killed and the extent of the property damage. But a follow-up several weeks later could discover that a faulty radio system made it impossible for firefighters to respond quickly enough to save more lives.

Documents, data, and public records can lead to terrific stories as well. Reporters can use them to look for trends or to spot irregularities. This kind of work requires more effort, but the results are almost always worth the trouble. It's considerably easier when the data are made available electronically, of course, but reporters have been known to enter data from paper records into computer database programs just so they can search for the most significant information in a pile of statistics. For example, a list of people who have received speeding tickets might yield a story if it could be sorted by name instead of date. That's how television

reporter Nancy Amons learned that one driver in her town had managed to amass a dozen traffic violations in three years and had even caused an accident that killed another driver without ever losing his driver's license. When she investigated, city officials admitted they had failed to do their job.

The Journalist's Role

New technologies have made it possible for anyone with a computer to disseminate information as widely as the largest news organizations. But a well-designed Internet site, no matter how well it's written or how often it's updated, is not necessarily a reliable source of news. The truth is that in a complex world where information is no longer a scarce commodity, the role of the journalist has become more important than ever.

Unlike a propagandist or a gossip, the journalist sorts through the information available and determines how much of it is valuable and reliable before passing it on to the public. News stories, whether hard news or features, must be accurate. Journalists not only collect the information they need to tell the story, they have to verify the information before they can use it. Journalists rely on first-hand observation whenever possible and consult



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multiple sources to make sure the information they receive is reliable. And, except on rare occasions, they identify the sources of their information so the audience can evaluate its credibility.

But journalism is more than just the distribution of fact-based information. Propaganda also may be based on facts, but those facts are presented in such a way as to influence people's opinions. As we've already noted, public relations professionals use facts, as well, but may tell only one side of a story. Journalists, on the other hand, strive to be fair and complete. They strive to tell an accurate and authentic story, one that reflects reality, not their own perception of it or anyone else's.

Another distinction between journalism and other forms of information is that journalists strive for independence from the people they cover. A public relations professional who is employed by the organization he or she is writing about is unlikely to include information that might make the organization look bad. A journalist, on the other hand, will attempt to provide a complete picture, even if it is not entirely positive.

Journalists are not mere transmission belts for their own viewpoints or for information provided by others. They do original reporting, they do not confuse fact with opinion or rumor, and they make sound editorial decisions. A principal responsibility of journalism, says Bill

Keller, executive editor of *The New York Times*, is "applying judgment to information."

Unlike other purveyors of information, journalists owe their primary allegiance to the public. As Canada's *Montreal Gazette* states in its code of ethics, "A newspaper's greatest asset is its integrity. Respect for that integrity is painfully won and easily lost." To maintain that integrity, journalists work hard to avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. (We'll talk more about that in Chapter 7, "Ethics and Law.")

Objectivity and Fairness

The concept of objectivity in journalism developed almost a century ago, as a reaction to the sensational, opinion-driven reporting that was common in most newspapers of the day. The term "objectivity" was originally used to describe a journalistic approach or method; journalists would seek to present the news in an objective way, without reflecting any personal or corporate bias.

Over time, objectivity was required from the journalists themselves. The executive editor of the American newspaper *The Washington Post*, Leonard Downie, took the concept so seriously that he refused to register to vote. But many journalists today concede that total objectivity is impossible. In 1996, the U.S. Society of Professional Journalists dropped the word "objectivity" from its code of ethics. Journalists are human beings, after all. They care about their work and they do have opinions. Claiming that they are completely objective suggests that they have no values. Instead, journalists have largely agreed that they must be aware of their own opinions so they can keep them in check. The audience should not be able to tell from the story what the journalist's opinion is. By using an objective, scientific method for verifying information, journalists can report stories that do not reflect their own personal views. The story itself, in other words, should be impartial and fair.

Journalists also strive to be fair in their reporting by not telling one-sided stories. They look for contrasting views and report on them without favoring one side or another. In addition to verifying assertions of fact, they will seek out differing opinions in cases where the facts are in dispute.

Fairness is not the same thing as balance, however. Balance suggests that there are only two sides to any story, which is rarely the case, and that each side should be given equal weight. Journalists who seek that kind of artificial balance in their stories actually may produce coverage that is fundamentally inaccurate. For example, the vast majority of independent economists may agree on the consequences of a particular spending policy while a small handful has a different opinion, which has been proven wrong by past experience. A story giving equal time or space to the views of both groups would be misleading.

The challenge for journalists is to report all significant viewpoints in a way that is fair to those involved and that also presents a complete and honest picture to the audience. “Fairness means, among other things, listening to different viewpoints, and incorporating them into the journalism,” says reporter and blogger Dan Gillmor. “It does not mean parroting lies or distortions to achieve that lazy equivalence that leads some journalists to get opposing quotes when the facts overwhelmingly support one side.”

News Providers

Journalists the world over share certain characteristics. They are curious and persistent. They want to know why things happen and they don't take no for an answer. They are not intimidated by the powerful and they care deeply about the work they do. Kevin Marsh, an editor at the British Broadcasting Company's (BBC) Radio 4, says a good journalist has “the ability to grasp the big truths — with the humility to let them go again when the facts don't fit.” A journalist's

job is challenging and complicated. As Philip Graham, late chairman of the board of the Washington Post Company, once said, “(A journalist has the) inescapably impossible task of providing every week a first rough draft of a history that will never be completed about a world we can never understand.”

Journalists today have more outlets for their work than at any other time in history, from small community newspapers to worldwide television news channels and online-news sites. Each of the media outlets has different strengths and weaknesses.

In most countries, daily newspapers generally have the largest staffs and offer more depth on a wider range of topics than the broadcast media. With the addition of online sites, many newspapers have begun to overcome the limitations of their traditional once-a-day publication schedule. But they largely reach only a literate, affluent audience, people who can read and who have enough money to buy the newspaper or have access to a computer to read it on line.

Radio, one of the most widely used sources of news in the world, has the advantage of speed and easy availability. Radio journalists can get the news on the air quickly and anyone with a battery-powered radio can hear the news almost anywhere at any time. Radio reporters tell stories with sound as well as words, so listeners feel they have experienced some of what the event was really like. Radio news is on the air many times a day, so it is frequently updated. But most radio stations provide only a limited amount of time for each newscast, which tends to be a short summary of only the biggest stories, without the depth or breadth that a newspaper can offer.

With both sound and pictures, television newscasts can show viewers what is happening, not just tell them about it. One of television's strengths is its ability to convey emotion and share experiences with viewers. Technological advances — smaller cameras, digital editing, and mobile uplinks — have made it possible for television to be almost as fast as radio in getting a story on the air. But the medium's dependence

on pictures can be a drawback: Television news sometimes avoids telling complicated stories because they are not visually compelling.

Recently, the distinction between the traditional categories of print and broadcast news has blurred. In the United States and other countries, many news organizations now produce news in a variety of media, including the Internet. Since the Internet is infinitely expandable, online news is not necessarily subject to the same restrictions of space and time imposed on the print and broadcast media. News sites can provide more information and keep it available for a longer time. And they can make it possible for users to search for the news that most interests them.

Online-news sites affiliated with newspapers, radio, and television stations may look very similar. They illustrate their stories with photographs, and many offer streaming video of stories or complete newscasts. They also may supply a “podcast” version, publishing their files to the Internet so that their subscribers can download the files onto a computer or portable media player for later consumption. On some sites, you can read the text of a story or listen as the writer reads it to you. News organizations are even posting their own Web logs (commonly known by the shorthand term “blogs”), letting journalists write online diaries about the stories they’re covering or the decisions being made in the newsroom.

In this evolving world of news, many journalists find they need additional skills to do the job that is expected of them. Reporters may be expected to shoot photographs for use on the Internet, in addition to interviewing sources and writing stories for the newspaper. Editors may be asked to post stories on the Internet, in addition to checking reporters’ copy and writing headlines. Photographers may need to shoot video as well as still pictures, and they also may have to provide text to go along with their pictures. Many news organizations are providing training for journalists who are taking on new roles in the newsroom. And some journalism educators are now implementing what they call a “convergence curriculum” to

help students learn the multiple skills they may need in the future.

But for all these new demands, the heart of good journalism remains the same. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write in their book, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, there are some clear principles that journalists in a democratic society agree on and that citizens have a right to expect:

- Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- Journalism must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

These values distinguish journalism from all other forms of communication. Abiding by them is not easy. Journalists face pressure to compromise on these standards almost every day. But keeping them in mind is the best way to ensure that journalism can serve its primary function, supplying citizens with the information they need to make decisions about their lives.

2

GETTING THE STORY



The tip came in an e-mail from a former government official who suggested looking into the supply of life rafts on ferries in Washington state. Reporter Eric Nalder, then with the *Seattle Times*, decided to check it out. His first phone call was to the ferry system's safety director, who was new on the job,

but who gave Nalder the name and location of his predecessor. When the reporter reached the retired director by phone, he confirmed the shortage of life rafts. Far from being satisfied that he had uncovered a good story, Nalder was just getting started.

To get the full story, Nalder needed documents showing the number of life rafts on every ferry, the capacity of each raft, and the maximum number of passengers each ferry could carry. He had to analyze the data to determine the seriousness of the shortage. He also wanted to ride the ferries and talk to passengers and crew. Only then was he ready to write his front-page story, which revealed that ferries in his state had only enough life rafts to evacuate one passenger out of seven.

Reporting is a painstaking process that involves collecting facts and checking them carefully for accuracy. Journalists sometimes witness stories first-hand, but more typically they learn the details from others who have experienced something directly or who are experts in the topic. That information is reinforced or corroborated by additional sources, and checked against documentary evidence in public records, reports, or archives.

The information a journalist collects should answer questions that are commonly known as the five W's and an H: who, what, where, when, why, and how. Depending on the complexity of the story, a reporter might ask those questions in several different ways.

WHO:

- Who is involved in this story?
- Who is affected by it?
- Who is the best person to tell the story?
- Who is missing from this story? Who has more information about this?
- Who is in conflict in this story? Do they have anything in common?
- Who else should I talk to about this?

WHAT:

- What happened?
- What is the point of this story? What am I really trying to say?
- What does the reader, viewer, or listener need to know to understand this story?
- What surprised me? What is the most important single fact I learned?
- What is the history here? What happens next?
- What can people do about it?

WHERE:

- Where did this happen?
- Where else should I go to get the full story?
- Where is this story going next? How will it end?

WHEN:

- When did this happen?
- When did the turning points occur in this story?
- When should I report this story?

WHY:

- Why is this happening? Is it an isolated case or part of a trend?
- Why are people behaving the way they are? What are their motives?
- Why does this story matter? Why should anyone watch, read, or listen to it?
- Why am I sure I have this story right?

HOW:

- How did this happen?
- How will things be different because of what happened?
- How will this story help the reader, listener, or viewer? The community?
- How did I get this information? Is the attribution clear?
- How would someone describe this story to a friend?

Many reporters use mental checklists like this one to make sure they have covered all of the important elements of a story.

Observation

On-the-scene observation is one of the fundamentals of good reporting. Journalists want to witness events for themselves whenever possible so they can describe them accurately to the audience. Good reporters use all of their senses on the scene. They look, listen, smell, taste, and feel the story so the audience can, too.

To do this well, journalists need an accurate record of their observations. A print reporter can do his or her job with a notebook and a pencil or pen, but many also carry audio recorders and cameras, especially if they are expected to file stories for an online edition as well. For radio, journalists need to capture sound, and for television, both sound and video.

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Using a recorder is one way of making sure that any quotations you might use are accurate. But electronics have been known to fail, so it's important for all journalists to be skilled note-takers. Here are some tips on note-taking from experienced reporters:

- Write down facts, details, thoughts, and ideas. Make clear which is which, and where they came from.
- Draw diagrams of rooms, scenes, or items in relationship to each other.
- Always get correctly spelled names, titles, and contact information. Ask for birth date and year, to make sure you have the person's age right.
- Spell out interview ground rules in the notebook.
- Don't crowd the notebook. Leave space for annotating notes.
- Leave the inside covers blank to write down questions to ask later.
- Annotate the notes as soon as possible.

Many reporters use their own shorthand for common words so they can take notes more quickly. Then they annotate their notes, spelling out abbreviations to avoid any confusion later. They also will mark the most important information they have learned, good quotes they may use in the story, anything they need to follow up on or check for accuracy, and questions that still need to be answered.

It sounds obvious, but reporters must be sure they have the tools they need before heading out to cover a story: notebook, pen, tape or digital recorder, and fresh batteries. There's nothing more embarrassing than

arriving on the scene only to discover there is no film or tape in the camera, or that the only pen in your pocket is out of ink. Today's journalists often carry additional tools: a mobile telephone and a laptop computer. A few other simple items can be useful, as well. Putting a rubber band around your notebook to mark the next blank page makes it easy to find quickly. A plastic bag will protect your notebook when it rains, so the pages stay dry and the ink doesn't run. A small pair of binoculars will help you see what's going on even if you can't get very close. A calculator will help you convert information like the number of tons of fuel carried by an aircraft into terms more familiar to the audience, in this case, liters or gallons.

Research

Journalists tend to collect much more information than they can put into a story, but that information always helps them better understand the event or issue they are covering. Sometimes, background information is essential to give a story deeper meaning. In Eric Nalder's story about life rafts, for example, he included the fact that the water the ferries cross is cold enough in January to kill someone within half an hour. That information

puts the shortage of life rafts in context by explaining more clearly why it matters. It's exactly the kind of information reporters look for when they do research on a story, either before they leave the newsroom or along the way as questions come up.

Journalists have more research tools available today than ever before, thanks to computers and the Internet. Many of them are just high-tech versions of the basic tools of the trade: directories, almanacs, encyclopedias, and maps. Others are databases and reports that would have been much harder to find in the days before the Internet, requiring a personal visit to a library or government building. Still others are resources that few would have imagined two decades ago when the Internet was young: search engines, blogs, chat rooms, and e-mail lists. All of these resources are useful to journalists collecting background on a story. But one of the most basic research tools has not changed in a century: the news organization's own library of previously published or broadcast stories. Whether these "clips" are kept on paper in filing drawers or in computer files, they are a useful starting place for all kinds of stories. Many journalists also keep their own "clip files" of stories they have saved about specific topics.

Imagine that the former president of a neighboring country has died. A reporter assigned to write the story would want to know some basic facts: age, cause of death, and where and when he died. But the journalist would also want information about his time in office, and how the country has changed since he was president. A first step would be to consult previous news reports, either in the newsroom's archive or online. Those reports might mention someone who was close to the former president, whom the reporter could ask for an interview. The reporter would want to have some background on that person before conducting the interview, and might learn that the former president's friend kept all of his letters, which could reveal some surprising new information.



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