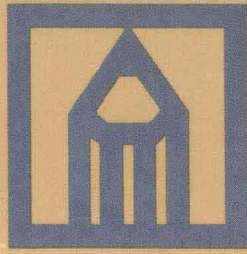
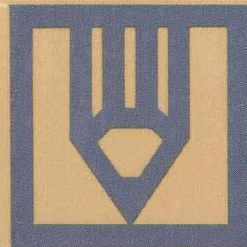


SECOND
EDITION



Newswriting **From** **Lead** **To** **"30"**



William Metz

NEWSWRITING

From Lead to "30"

SECOND EDITION

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Preface

This book was written for students taking their first professional course in journalism. The writing style is casual, even conversational in places. Frequently, I address the reader directly as “you,” and I even throw in some first-person pronouns where they seem appropriate (fully realizing that such intimacy between instructor and pupil is rank heresy to anyone not acquainted with the easygoing familiarity of newsrooms). In writing the book, the goal has been for the author to talk with the student about writing and reporting in much the same way as a city editor would discuss those things with a cub reporter.

There are other departures from more orthodox textbooks. Remarks on the preparation of copy, for instance, are usually salted back among the appendices as being too basic to deserve full chapter standing; here, that topic provides one of the first chapters.

A minimum of space has been devoted to theory and the kind of material usually described in phrases beginning with “the nature of.” Unashamedly, this is a how-to-do-it textbook, a nuts-and-bolts approach to newswriting.

The phrase, “No one can be taught how to write,” is cute rather than correct. Talent is beyond the teacher, but technique can be taught in any art. The process goes on endlessly in newsrooms and classrooms all over the country. A would-be writer could learn technique by trial and error, by merciless self-criticism, but it would be a long and masochistic process. And

editors and news directors rarely have the time or inclination to lead a cub reporter by the hand toward writing excellence. They expect young reporters who have taken journalism courses to carry the weight their salaries indicate they should.

The author's philosophy was well expressed by the late Chilton Bush, a Stanford University journalism educator, in accepting the Sigma Delta Chi Distinguished Teaching Award at a northern California chapter meeting. He said: "The weakness of many schools, in my opinion, is that they are not bearing down hard enough on teaching writing. In some schools, journalism is being taught too much by pontification. About the only way a student can learn to improve his writing is to write under a person who is himself a good writer."

This book is intended for use in a single course: basic news writing. Nothing else. Other texts written for this course have chapters devoted to covering City Hall, the Courthouse, politics, religion, science and other specialized areas. But those fields, it seems to me, are too esoteric for students taking their first whack at journalism. Such reporting would be better left for advanced courses, like the one usually titled, "Reporting Public Affairs." No instructor or textbook—let alone a single chapter—can teach anyone how to cover City Hall. That comes only with attending press conferences in the mayor's office, tramping the corridors to call on department heads, and attending meetings of the City Council and various boards and commissions.

It is assumed here that journalism students know nothing about writing news. But it is also assumed that they know the fundamentals of grammar and composition: what a sentence is; the parts of speech and how to use them correctly; the properties of nouns and pronouns; agreement of subjects and predicates, nouns and pronouns; punctuation and spelling. The purpose here is to teach students how to write a news story, not the basics of English.

The book aims at preparing students for work on newspapers, but this shouldn't turn off those who want to go into broadcasting or public relations or magazine writing. Most veterans in these fields, I believe, will agree that the best preparation for their work is some time spent writing for newspapers. The latter offer more variety in writing—and a chance to do more writing—than the other media. If writers change careers, they almost always move from newspapers to other fields, not the other way around.

No journalism student can become a pro in the classroom, simply because classrooms don't provide realistic situations. Writing for the school paper helps; so do the internship programs that some schools and departments of journalism offer (or require). Best of all is the experience a student may get by working part time on a commercial publication while going to school. Teacher and textbook can point the student in the right direction,

make suggestions, provide encouragement and perhaps inspiration, and shorten the on-the-job apprenticeship. But what separates the superior writer from the mediocre one is something beyond the reach of book or teacher; it is an intangible quality within each would-be journalist.

Journalism is both an art and a craft. The art refers to a feeling for the language, a sensitivity to what is going on in the world, a capacity to recognize what is significant, and an ability to relate it in a way that will capture the attention of thousands or millions of people the writer has never met. It's difficult if not impossible to teach these things; they spring from inborn impulses and capacities rather than from outside imposition. But the craft of journalism—as of any other craft—can be passed on from the experienced to the inexperienced. That's what this book tries to do.

In entering journalism, you are taking one of your first steps in joining a historic company of movers and shakers. Above all else, if you are to succeed, there is one thing you must do: Become a good writer.

W. M.

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CHAPTER 1

The Nature of News



At most newspapers, especially large ones, an editors' conference is held before each edition to evaluate the news: which story shall lead the paper, which stories shall appear on Page 1, which pictures shall be used and how big they shall be and on which page they shall run. Usually present are the managing editor, wire editor, news editor, state editor, city editor and chief photographer. Above, Mike Parman (arms on table), assistant managing editor for news of the *Sacramento* (Calif.) *Bee*, gets the opinions of his top staff members. (Photo courtesy of the *Bee*.)

Communication has been defined as the art of transmitting information, ideas and attitudes from one person to another. *Mass* communication, which is what journalism is all about, means communicating with *many* persons simultaneously through the media.

In the definition above, "information" may be taken to mean "news." But just what is news? It is difficult to define because it's a process, not an object—and the process is a complicated one. News is certainly more than Webster says it is: "a report of recent events." The word defies categorization. There are almost as many definitions of news as there are journalists. Every reporter, however, would probably agree that an event itself isn't news. A murder is committed, but the body is hidden and the crime goes undetected. Two celebrities are married, but so secretly that the press does not hear of it. A congressman just as secretly accepts a bribe. In each case there is no news because there has been no report of the murder, the marriage or the bribe.

Or add a measure of complication to the situation. Suppose a reporter covers a City Council meeting at which 12 items of business are acted upon. Later in the newsroom, going over notes taken during the meeting, the reporter decides that three of the items are so trivial that they do not merit mentioning. As a result, nine of the council's actions make news; three do not. In another case, a reporter covers a speech by an official of the Sierra Club. In writing his story, the reporter includes some of the speaker's remarks and omits others. Hence, some of the environmentalist's views become news; some don't.

Clearly, the reporter has a big voice in determining which information reaches the public and which doesn't. Probably nowhere else in the process of gathering and disseminating news is "the power of the press" so evident.

THE "GATEKEEPERS"

In diagramming the flow of news from source to consumer, social scientists sometimes label certain persons as "gatekeepers"—those who have the power of opening or closing a gate on the flow of news. Reporters are the first of such gatekeepers and possibly the most important. The staff reporter's boss, the city editor, can't logically decide which items to include in a story and which to delete, since the editor wasn't the one who attended the City Council meeting and heard the speech.

After the reporter, other gatekeepers may be the news editor, the wire editor and the copy editor. These are the people who almost exclusively determine what shall be news, what the public shall read—or see or hear on the air. They occupy positions of power and would pose threats to society if they were serving a special interest. Fortunately, most working journalists have only one purpose: informing the public as accurately and as com-

pletely as they can. Opinions are—and should be—advanced on the editorial page in editorials and personal columns. But the news columns are another matter. Republican editors and publishers ran thorough accounts of President Nixon's Watergate woes, and Democratic news executives gave full coverage to Sen. Edward Kennedy's troubles at Chappaquiddick. Reporters learn early to strive to keep ideological or political bias out of their copy.

Interwoven in any definition of news is the fact that it must be something of interest to a significant number of readers, viewers or listeners. In this respect, the nature of news is always changing. A few years ago, there was little public interest in, and therefore little news about, such issues as race relations, education, science, the environment, consumerism or equality for women. Before Rosa Parks' refusal to sit in the back of the bus touched off the civil rights movement, race was rarely mentioned in the press. News of education was limited largely to sports, PTA meetings, enrollment figures and bond issues. Most scientific developments were too esoteric to spark the attention of the public. The environment was taking care of itself, we thought. It was widely taken for granted that women either had equality or weren't much interested in it. And Ralph Nader hadn't raised the banner for the consumer.

It might be argued whether public interest in these issues was created by the press or whether the press merely responded to interests aroused by other means. Probably the two had to go together.

THE QUALITIES OF NEWS

While definitions vary, there are ways of looking at news that aid our understanding of it. Timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence, human interest—these are factors that every experienced reporter and editor consider, consciously or unconsciously, in deciding what to include in a story or in a newspaper or a newscast. These are qualities of news; they do not define news itself. Nevertheless, they are worth considering.

Timeliness

Americans want to know *now* what has happened, and technology makes it possible for them to know. When Joe Smith picks up his evening paper or tunes into the 5:30 or 6:30 p.m. newscast, he expects to be informed of what happened that morning. If the paper or station doesn't deliver that day's developments, Joe begins to consider changing his subscription or switching to another channel. Reporters, who live by the commandment "Thou shalt make the deadline," never forget that news may cease to be news after 24 hours. Consumers, too, sense the immediacy and perishability of news. Like bread, it's never as good a day old as it is fresh.

When reporters turn up facts that might make a story, or when editors evaluate a story in the light of everything else they have at hand to fill the paper, they ask themselves: "How timely is it?"

"Today" is as timely as news can get. In the following example the time element—the "when"—is the dominating point of the story:

Today is the last day for property owners to appeal the reassessments announced last month by the county assessor.

Proximity

Another question involves nearness, either the geographical closeness of an event to the newspaper's circulation area or the relevance of an issue to the readers. The more "local" the news is, the more interest there will be in it. One pedestrian killed in your town is of greater concern than six persons who perish in a head-on collision a thousand miles away. And a report of a \$1 million gift to the local liberal arts college is read more raptly than an account of a \$10 million bequest to a giant university in another part of the country. The story with the greatest proximity to readers, of course, is the one with their names in it.

In the following example, the only reason the story made the front page of the *Tumwater Gazette* was Miss Driscoll's closeness to the readers of that paper. In any other community, the story would likely have been consigned to the newspaper's back pages.

Marilyn Driscoll of Tumwater has become the first woman ever assigned duty on a U.S. Navy fighting ship.

For years, editors have been localizing wire stories when they could, knowing the greater appeal a local angle has for readers. An Associated Press account of a train derailment in Kansas, for instance, may list an Oregonian among the victims in the eighth paragraph. The editor in the home town of the victim knows that more of his readers will be interested in this story if it is rewritten to feature the Oregon casualty in the first paragraph.

Journalists have known of a communications phenomenon for more than two centuries, and social scientists have become aware of it more recently: Individuals are avid to read about events in which they have been involved. Hence, if someone attends a rock concert, a religious revival or a zoning hearing, one of the first things he will seek out in next morning's newspaper is the account of what he has already seen and heard. The same paradox is repeated weekly with sports fans. Joe Smith, who sits on the 50-yard line Saturday afternoon, will flip through the sports pages of Sun-

day morning's paper to read about the game he watched so intently a few hours earlier, because of its proximity to him.

Prominence

The more notable or eminent a person is, the more valuable this person is as a news source. Pre-eminent, of course, is the president of the United States. When he gets a cold, the stock market shivers. When he goes fishing, his bait is described in detail. When he plays golf, his progress around the course and final score are carefully recorded. When he takes to bed with an illness, his menus, temperature, sleeplessness, and disposition become front-page items. When President Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in Colorado and was hospitalized there, medical bulletins were published regularly. President Reagan got the same kind of attention when he was shot by John Hinckley.

The famous, the infamous and the eccentric exercise a special appeal for the public. In the 1920s and 1930s, when nationally known criminals faced the gallows or the gas chamber, their last words and the details of what they ate for their last meals were eagerly read. Most marriages that end in divorce do so quietly, with few aside from family and friends knowing or caring. But the marital difficulties of the famous have increased newspaper sales.

Here is the beginning of a story that wouldn't be classed as news except for the prominence of the man involved:

Gov. Mike O'Callaghan can't wear cowboy boots, doesn't like cowboy hats, and wears conventional business suits to rodeos. So he's wondering what to do with all the western clothing he got as gifts at the Western Governor's Conference in Albuquerque, N.M., last week.

Consequence

Whatever is important is almost, *per se*, newsworthy. An Ecumenical Council in Rome issues an edict that affects Catholics around the world; it is significant news even in the secular press. The president of the United States shuffles his Cabinet and names a new secretary of state; every citizen has a stake in the appointment. On the state level, the governor abolishes state aid for county fairs; a traditional and much-liked activity is threatened. On the city level, voters approve a school bond issue; parents go into debt, and the quality of the community's education is sustained.

Severe storms, scientific discoveries, epidemics, labor strikes, inflation, church mergers—these and many more developments are of such consequence as to make news.

Also, what qualifies a story as news depends partly on the newspaper's readership. A development that becomes big news in an industrial city may not even make the paper in a tourist town. And a story given front-page display in a labor paper may be buried in the back pages of a general-interest newspaper.

Here is a hypothetical story that would be of front-page consequence to only two cities, Peoria and Denver. Elsewhere, the news would be virtually ignored.

Caterpillar Tractor Co. announced today
it will move its world headquarters from
Peoria, Ill., to Denver, Colo.

Human Interest

In a general way, human-interest stories might be defined as those that arouse an emotion in the reader, that evoke a visceral response. Some news stories do this, too, of course; the distinction might be that human-interest stories are *intended* to affect the reader's feelings and sensibilities in some way. Thus, a human-interest tale deals deliberately with such qualities as love, hate, pity, compassion, sympathy, curiosity, anger, grief. On a broader scale, human-interest stories are woven around such themes as surprise (an underdog team's winning is bigger news and of more interest than a favorite's victory); drama (a political conservative's appearance at Harvard creates more excitement if he is hooted off the stage than if he is allowed to speak); conflict (divorces are more newsworthy than happy marriages); suspense (a 4-year-old girl becomes trapped in an abandoned well; will the toiling rescuers reach her in time?); novelty (the old "man bites dog" story is the best-known example). This list is not inclusive, but it indicates certain elements that can lift a story out of the routine and endow it with human interest.

Here is the beginning of a warm little story with a contrast that readers welcomed—a child's innocence in an age of political cynicism:

Melinda Herrington of Reno likes Gov. Mike O'Callaghan. And because she does, she sent him a \$1 million check to help get him elected again.

Melinda, 7, has been filling a piggy bank for most of her life. Surely, she thought, there must be a million dollars in it by now. So she went to her father. . . .

Some journalists and journalism educators describe human-interest stories simply by saying they are stories about people and events that the reader can identify with. That would explain a seeming phenomenon in reading habits: Living thousands of miles away and knowing none of the

victims, why are we nevertheless interested in reading about an earthquake in Greece, a volcano eruption in Guatemala, a ferry sinking off Japan, or a coal-mine dam bursting above an Appalachian hamlet? The answer, of course, is that all such tragedies involve human beings like ourselves, and we can identify with the victims. (This may appear to contradict the point made earlier about proximity. But empathy can overcome linear distance to provide a feeling of proximity.) The reporter, in putting a story together, must always ask: Will these facts interest the readers? Or, how can I present these facts so they *will* interest the readers? Put another way, it might be asked of each story under consideration: How much impact will it have on the readers? A simple fact of journalistic life is that readers read stories they identify with.

DEFINING "NEWS"

News is a slippery word. If one asks, "What is news?" there is no exact answer. It is clear that news does not depend on the community or on the editor. Community standards change; so do editors. Even on the same newspaper, the news editor on one shift may make value judgments entirely at odds with those of the person who takes over on the next shift. And what makes news in a Midwest farming town may not get a second glance from the editor in an East Coast fishing community. Working reporters and journalism scholars have attempted many times to pin down the concept of news, without much success. Here are some stabs that have been made at it:

News is an account of an event, or a fact, or an opinion which interests people.

Full and current information made available to an audience.

The report of a recent event, marked by fairness, currency, accuracy, conciseness, balance and objectivity.

An event or belief that alters or threatens to alter the status quo of society in a rationally important manner.

Anything that departs from normal human behavior or expectations.

News is anything the editor says it is. (A cynical observation but one accepted in newsrooms where the editor is credited with knowing what the newspaper's readers want.)

There have been numerous other, more varied attempts to define news. They have ranged from the underground newspaper editor's views through traditional textbook lists, sociopsychological concepts and philosophical notions. One complicating factor is that the concept of news is fluid and subjective. But while it may not be possible to describe it precisely in words, every journalist, in order to perform as a professional, must come to a personal understanding of the nature of news, must reach some conclu-

sion about its essence before it is possible to recognize news when it happens. Even more important, perhaps, an editor must know what news is before being able to evaluate it.

In selecting stories for display in any day's paper, editors often choose what they think their communities want. Hence, we see an endless parade of stereotyped pictures of presentations (checks, gavels, certificates, plaques, trophies), ground breakings, proclamation signings, ribbon cuttings, and other pictorial clichés. Or the news may be selected merely by whim (a photo of a statuesque sunbather in Florida or Australia).

Asked to explain why one story falls under the category of "news" while another does not, an editor may advance the "instinct theory." Another name for it is "a nose for news." Editors have claimed an intuitive, unlearned, automatic knowledge of what is news, but this notion has been discredited. Traits that were thought to have been "built in" have been shown to be the products of beliefs, learning and interaction.

The contents of a large number of newspapers indicate that their editors have a historic—if not outdated—criterion of what is news. Their headlines show they think of it chiefly in terms of conflict, violence, sex and crime. In such newspapers, disasters, deaths and debacles tend to become routine, even casual. Such fare may have qualified as top news in the 1830s, when editors like James Gordon Bennett and Horace Greeley were creating the first mass readerships. But there is reason to wonder if a news standard that fits the 1980s shouldn't be established.

In this regard, the public may be ahead of the editors. The credibility gap from which the press is undeniably suffering may exist in part because readers often don't agree with editors on what is important—what should get into the papers and what should be featured. Readers may be saying to themselves, unconsciously if not out loud, "How can I trust editors when their news evaluation is so different from mine?"

McGeorge Bundy, president of the Ford Foundation and former assistant to the president of the United States, said in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors: "We are moving toward the age of the college-trained majority. The American journalist has already entered that age himself. Is it not time for him to deepen his perceptions and raise his sights—to fit his own quality and that of his readers?"

Time and *Newsweek* skim off the top stories for their weekly round-ups. It can be presumed that hindsight and more time enable their editors to do a better job of story selection than the daily newspaper editor. But even granted that the editor of a newspaper may be rushing to meet as many as five deadlines a day, what is to explain this newspaper's failure to publish stories that are featured in the news magazines—especially when a high percentage of wire-service copy ends up in the wastebasket instead of in the paper?

One reason for this disparity is the daily press's preoccupation with "firsts" and "leads." There is frequently an overconcentration on this kind of news. Bundy said: ". . . the American press needs to start prizing its readers more and its headlines less."

American newspapers, of course, *are* moving in the direction advocated by Bundy. Probably no other industry is so criticized, from within and without, as the press. As a result, newspapers are becoming less preoccupied with distant events that do not directly affect their readers—shipwrecks, murders, plane crashes, floods. True, such stories continue to make headlines and sometimes are given major space. But many editors don't automatically balloon the dramatic but transitory incident the way they used to. Instead, they look with more favor on stories dealing with cause and effect, social trends and political problems. This change in emphasis is demonstrated in the kinds of stories that used to win Pulitzer Prizes and the ones that have won them recently.

But news is not monolithic. There is a great variety to it, and Bundy identified three kinds:

1. The daily public news. The press reports this kind very well, thoroughly and, for the most part, accurately.
2. The news that has to be dug out the hard way. Here, too, many newspapers do a creditable job, and improvement is steady.
3. The news that no one understands until a thoughtful reporter writes it. This is analytical news that comes after thought and study and extensive private talks. It is here, some scholars and critics think, that the most improvement is possible. We live in a period when the most important kind of journalism is that which is relevant, which goes below the surface. This is not the sort of news that beginning reporters are called upon to write, but it is the kind that all journalists should aspire to write.

NAMES IN THE NEWS

In the past some editors, especially those of small-town weeklies, clung to the theory that the formula for success was to get a lot of names into the paper—on whatever pretext. That philosophy is moribund if not dead. Nowadays, most editors have an enlightened view of the news value of names. Even the much-maligned "personals" columns are likely to have enough news to justify use of the names.

A close examination of a "personals" column, in fact, can tell a discerning journalism student something about news values. Here are four examples from small-town newspapers: