

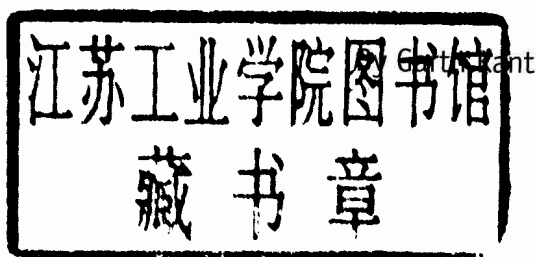
**HOW TO WRITE  
TELEVISION**

**NEWS**



**GARTH KANT**

# HOW TO WRITE TELEVISION NEWS



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## Higher Education

### HOW TO WRITE TELEVISION NEWS

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# HOW TO WRITE TELEVISION NEWS

## DEDICATION

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For Mom and Dad

## PREFACE

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Once upon a time, more than a few of us at CNN Headline News were drawn to the bright lights and big bucks of New York City. While at MSNBC, some fellow expatriates instituted a writing program. They asked me to help. As I began working with trainees one-on-one, I realized a few key principles kept recurring. I also discovered that when I explained these ideas to the trainees in simple and understandable ways, their writing improved suddenly and dramatically.

I started writing these principles down, so I would remember the descriptions that got the best results. I discovered there are really just a few indispensable news writing principles: keep it simple, make it conversational, make it complete and make it accurate. Everything else flows from those ideas. There are so many tips to good news writing that they easily fill a book. This book uses those tips to reinforce the four fundamentals. I explain how each tip comes from one of the four basic principles. So, on the one hand, this book has just four simple ideas. On the other, it has a wealth of information, some of it fairly complex. But to make all that information easily understandable, I explain how everything in this book comes from one of just four simple ideas. As long as the student sticks to the four fundamentals, he or she won't go far astray. And by learning just the four fundamentals, students can easily understand all the rest of the information in this book and grasp its importance.

Once I began writing notes on those four basic principles, I realized I had the outline for a handbook on news writing. So I decided to just keep writing. This book is the result. Well, not exactly. Actually, not even close—first it would require the input and talent of a number of extremely talented people.

I have tremendous gratitude for the three people whose contributions to this book are the most important. We all met at CNN-Headline News. We went through the same newsroom boot camp. We all know what it's like to face deadline panic, to experience overnight-shift disequilibrium, and to know the saving grace of deep and true friendship of comrades-in-arms. Writer and producer-extraordinaire Robyn Turner is currently blessing CNN-International with her talents. Laurel Mocklar is the maven of the Weather Channel. And her husband Michael Mocklar is producing mini-documentary masterpieces.

Robyn put an extraordinary amount of time, thought and effort into helping me with this book. Her expertise was invaluable. Her contribution is enormous. As is my gratitude.

I must thank Laurel for helping me hammer out difficult decisions and thinking some tough things through. Her contributions were insightful, elegant and much valued ... at least until she dropped off the radar to have a baby. (Admittedly, a much wiser and more rewarding investment of her time.)

And the biggest thank-you of all goes to her husband. No one else put as much into helping me with this book as Mike. His ideas and suggestions were extraordinary. He challenged and encouraged me to make the book as good as possible every single, small step of the way. I could not have had better help. My appreciation is enormous.

This book truly would not have been possible without the expert analyses, insights, criticisms and suggestions of the legion of professors who peer-reviewed the drafts. I owe each and every one of them inexpressible gratitude for their input—both for encouraging me when I came close to the mark and for snapping me back on course when I ran adrift. A heartfelt thank-you to Dean Paynter, (formerly with) Brigham Young; Greeky Kyle, Missouri School of Journalism; Timothy F. Brown, Nicholson School of Communication, University of Central Florida; and Sue Kopen Katcef, Phillip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland.

I thank my beloved brother Jonas, the consummate Madison Avenue attorney and negotiator, for wringing unimaginable concessions out of my publisher ... while somehow not permanently severing my friendship with him. I thank my incomparable and beloved father, Hal, for his nonpareil legal advice and for refusing to allow me to strangle Jonas. I also thank Dad from the bottom of my heart for all the time we've spent discussing life, politics and everything. I also warmly thank my father's wife and my favorite pen-pal, Jesse, for helping keep my chin up through the grueling rewrite process by providing a stream of amusing and insightful e-mails. I thank and pay due homage to the woman without whom none of this would be possible, my dear mother Sheila, whose encouragement and love is like none other. And to her husband and my dear friend Tim, thanks for keeping Mom in line.

I must thank someone else without whom none of this would have been possible, the man who hired me out of college without any journalism background, the man who hired me after an interview during which we discussed Italian opera, Mideast politics and the Grateful Dead, but not journalism—the former Senior Editor of CNN Headline News and the man who is the godfather of journalistic integrity and excellence for so many of us, Nunzio Scena. I also must thank the man who adroitly transformed me from trainee to writer, my mentor at CNN-HLN, Jim Guthrie.

I thank the man who took the photos for this book, Guy Atchley. Guy is the anchor-extraordinaire for KGUN-9 news and a local legend

in Tucson. He is the epitome of style, class and professionalism. It is a true pleasure to work with him.

My deepest gratitude goes to Publisher/Editor Phil Butcher. (A perfect name for an editor ... as you will discover by reading this book.) I will always consider Phil brilliant not just because he signed me to a contract, but because he also saw the germ of a worthwhile manuscript in the very rough original draft I sent him out of the blue. I also thank Phil for putting up with my torment during rewrites with such poise and grace. More than anyone else, I owe Phil my gratitude for this book's existence.

So many other people provided invaluable help. Next on the list would be Phil's one-time assistant, the talented and ineffably charismatic Marcella Tullio. She did a lot of indispensable hand-holding by phone and e-mail as I slaved over rewrites. Perhaps her greatest contribution was helping me cogently organize and consolidate chapters: She provided solid suggestions of what should go where. Then she showed great patience as she helped me sort out how to make it work. Her objectivity, encouragement and kindness are greatly appreciated.

Much the same can be said for the first of Phil's assistants with whom I worked, Christine Fowler. She provided great assistance in helping to initially organize the book. That really got me off the ground and in a solid direction, for which I am most appreciative. And in the latter stages of this process, it has been a delight to work with Phil's current assistant, Françoise Villeneuve. She has skillfully helped guide the ship into port, which I appreciate greatly.

It has been a delight to work with the remarkably capable and diligent Project Manager Meghan Durko during the production phase. A wonderful professional, she is astute and to-the-point while always easy-going ... even while tackling such confusing dilemmas as how to code good scripts from bad. (A bit of an inside joke, that.) The same can be said of Marketing Director Leslie Oberhuber, who also has that wonderful combination of expert efficiency and affability. Another big thank-you to Associate Designer Marianna Kinigakis for making the final product look so cool, and for not blowing a gasket while I hemmed and hawed my way through each step of the design phase. I also must thank the brilliant work of Copy Editor George Watson who exhibited his genius and garnered my gratitude by largely confining his edits to punctuation.



# INTRODUCTION

Writing television news is simple but it isn't easy. It is simple because it is based on some fairly clear rules. It isn't easy because there are a lot of rules. And because many of those rules have exceptions.

There is something that makes the rules easier to learn and to remember, and that is a clear explanation of the rules. This book is devoted to explaining the rules clearly and to giving you a clear understanding of the do's and don'ts of television news writing.

This book is intended to teach the basics of news writing. It is also designed to help news writers write more effectively. This book uses two approaches. One explains what to do and why. The other explains what not to do and why. Both approaches are illustrated with scripts that actually aired on national network newscasts.

This book presents the fundamentals I used to mentor my writer-trainees. It uses some of my old scripts to illustrate these principles. I will also show you mistake-riddled scripts (that also actually aired on national network news) as illustrations of what not to do. In both types of examples, I use either the full script as it aired or only those parts relevant to what I am illustrating. (Those scripts are written in uppercase. So you can easily pick out the good from the bad, a thumbs-up symbol



accompanies “good” scripts, and a thumbs-down symbol goes with the “bad” scripts. Where I did not save a script that illustrates a certain principle, I made one up. Those scripts are written in lower case with initial capital letters.)



In all the scripts the reporters' names have been changed to generic pseudonyms. (Local newsrooms use the title “reporter.” Network newsrooms tend to use the term “correspondent.”)

Some of the scripts may seem dated. The scripts are meant to demonstrate timeless news writing principles. They are not meant to

reflect current events. I've been saving scripts for quite a while, and I used the ones I felt best illustrated certain points—no matter how old the stories are.

Rules can instruct you how to write. But they cannot make you a writer. Only practice, and more practice, will make you proficient. As with most skills, such as learning to type or learning a musical instrument, you have to practice until you no longer think about what you are doing; you are just doing it.

There are two parts to good writing. One is knowing what to write. The other is knowing how to write. The two are related. If you follow the principles of good news writing (such as fairness, distinguishing fact from opinion and providing proper attributions) it will become clearer what to write—it will become clearer what is important and what is not. Your news judgment will improve with practice.

On the other hand, many pitfalls await if you write without regard for solid journalistic principles. Those perils range from the merely sloppy (such as weak leads) to the dangerous (libel).

I wrote, copy edited and produced news for CNN Headline News and for MSNBC. I also freelanced a bit for ABC News and Fox News. I currently produce (and write) local news for a station in Tucson. Network news was exciting and I recommend it for those craving adrenaline. It is exciting to hobnob with (or at least pester) movers and shakers on a national level. Local news provides an opportunity to affect your community directly, and that can be uniquely rewarding. And, most importantly, there's more time for golf.

I learned to write television news from the staff at Headline News. That newsroom had a fantastic writing program. Everyone started from the bottom rung as a trainee. With enough hard work and diligence, one could then become a writer-trainee, a writer, an associate producer, a copy editor, a producer and a senior producer. The system guaranteed that every person in the newsroom had been thoroughly trained in solid journalistic principles. It also meant everyone knew the details of the jobs of their subordinates. It guaranteed that everyone obtained sound editorial judgment—the key to good news writing, as I shall explain later in detail. In this book you will learn what I learned then and what I have learned since.

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# THE BIG PICTURE

## 1.1 The Cardinal Rules

## 1.2 What's the Story?

### 1.1 The Cardinal Rules

---

Brevity is the essence of television news writing. The goal is to give viewers information they can understand. The best way to do that is to be clear and concise.

These are the cardinal rules of good television news writing:

**Keep it simple.**

**Make it conversational.**

**Make it complete.**

**Make it accurate.**

Here are the details:

*Keep it simple.*

It is most effective to write in simple, noncompound, sentences. When you read a newspaper you have the luxury of reading at your own pace. You can even go back to reread something. The television viewer doesn't have these options. Television news writing should be as clear and understandable as possible. It should get to the point without getting sidetracked. The art of television news writing is often making a simple summary of a complex event. It is the challenge of saying a lot with a little.

*Make it conversational.*

Write the way you speak. That is the easiest way to be understood. You are not trying to impress the viewer with your

vocabulary. You are trying to make the script as understandable as possible. It is often as though you are explaining a story to a child—not because you think the viewer is dim but because that is often the easiest way to explain a complex situation.

*Make it complete.*

A script must include all the critical facts. A partial script is a misrepresentation. It can lead the viewer to make incorrect assumptions. It can also be a form of editorializing if the writer excludes certain facts she finds objectionable.

*Make it accurate.*

You must fact-check when you are finished writing. It's always possible to make simple mistakes on complicated stories or to lose track of key details while you are writing. Make sure everything is accurate, can be attributed to a source, and can be verified by your copy editor (if there is one).

Throughout this book there will be scripts illustrating these principles. (For a full explanation about the scripts, go back and read the introduction. I know, I know. . . . I never read introductions, either. It's not *that* long since I was in school. But there's actually some helpful stuff in there, and it will only take a minute to read the whole thing.)

Before getting started, let's make a distinction between what is a story and what is a script. A script is the written account of the story in broadcast news format. The story is what happened. The script is your account of the story. Stories are read by you. Then you write the scripts, which are spoken on-air by the anchors. Wire copy and other source materials describe the story; the copy you write is the script.

At the end of most sections there will be some brief phrases to help you remember the key points. Hopefully they will be pithy and catchy enough to help you remember what to do without constantly having to refer back to this book. These are the “watchwords” for this section:

#### **WATCHWORDS:**

- Keep it simple.
- Write the way you speak.
- Include all the key facts.
- Fact-check when you finish.





A newsroom studio. The floor manager signals to the anchors which camera is in use. In a small newsroom, the floor manager also may be a camera operator.

## 1.2 What's the Story?

---

Before starting a script ask yourself:

Why is this story news?

What would I want to know about it?

What about it is relevant to the viewers' lives?

What is interesting, unusual, and/or new (as in newsworthy)?

Something is news because it is interesting or because it has relevance to a viewer's life. Otherwise, it is just a fact—not news. So look for what's interesting about a story or what makes it relevant to viewers' lives, even in the most mundane stories.

Ordinary news stories may seem boring: "The president wants another tax cut." But just because you write about such things every day doesn't mean this news won't affect people. Tax cuts are very relevant to the daily lives of most viewers. It could mean not having to eat tuna fish sandwiches for lunch every day or not waiting to get rid of that beat up old car. Or it could mean that pothole in front of their home probably won't get fixed soon. If the local school board votes to cut chemistry classes it may seem like an ordinary news story to you. It is very different to a mother whose child wants to be a doctor.