The background of the cover is a dense, abstract collage of newspaper clippings. The clippings are cut into various shapes and sizes, creating a complex, layered texture. The colors are primarily shades of blue, red, orange, and yellow, with some black and white elements. The overall effect is one of a chaotic yet organized collection of text and images, suggesting the transition and fragmentation of news writing.

NEWSWRITING IN  
TRANSITION

RAY LAAKANIEMI

# NEWSWRITING IN TRANSITION

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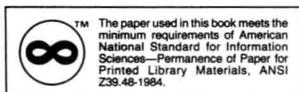
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# Introduction to the Philosophy of Newswriting: From Prewrite to Rewrite

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**N**EWSWRITING may never be the same again, so this newswriting book is different. It is an introduction to newswriting, with an emphasis on the philosophy of newswriting. It focuses on the subtle and the major transitions taking place in the learning of newswriting that will make writing easier and more meaningful for beginning reporters. It looks to the day when reporters will report (as some are now reporting) directly from the scene with a laptop or other computer, where they must be able to think and compose on a computer screen in minutes.

It also assumes that the media will continue to change and come together in form and function, and that this will have an impact on the form of news stories. The fact that many newspapers are buying 1-900 and other electronic systems and producing facsimile newspapers, that the phone companies would like to run dial-in classified advertising, and that the use of computers is growing exponentially means the media will continue to change.

While the form may change, the essential purpose of the reporter will be the same: to explain events and trends in words and in a way the reader can understand quickly and easily. The message is the heart of any reporting, despite the evolutions in form of message.

This book is unlike the 20 or so others on the market because it focuses on understanding *why* news stories are written the way they are.

By focusing on the problems the student needs to understand *before, while, and after* writing news stories, this book provides something new and useful. It focuses on how the reporter thinks his or her way through a story.

This book offers solutions to the most common writing problems students have, based on 20 years of teaching and media experience. It starts with the questions the student asks most, and it goes step-by-step through the most common writing forms.

Something special is added from national writing coach research, in that the student can understand the most common writing problems professionals have—and avoid those problems.

The book builds on writing theory, but does not dwell on it. It progresses naturally from the writing development stage the student is likely to be in at the start, to the stage they need to be in to begin professional newswriting. There is no glossing over the problems students will have in learning a new writing style.

By telling the beginning writer *why* these steps are necessary, and then taking that writer through each step, they will understand why they are writing in this manner. This ought to make a complex writing form easier.

Throughout the book, good writing examples from national and regional newspapers, national magazines, and wire services are used. They have been selected from award-winning stories in national and regional contests and are used to illustrate different points.

Extensive efforts have been made to include writing from all regions, from male and female reporters, and all elements of society. There are some 60 examples in the book from 23 states; 50 percent by male authors, 40 percent by female authors, and 10 percent are group projects. Of the 60 stories, 23 are known to address minority issues or are written by members of minorities.

Chapters on cultural diversity and visual literacy are included. Little progress has been shown in reporting on minorities in this country in the last 50 years, despite the pleadings of the Hutchins and Kerner commissions. Chapter 23 includes statements by minorities on covering minorities and advice on getting student reporters to think about cultures other than their own or the culture of their close personal friends. Visual literacy has been added because writers must not only understand photos, graphics, and other visuals, but also know how to work with designers, photographers, and others for the improvement of the product.

We feel students need to read well-written news stories to understand how to write better news stories, feel the enthusiasm the writer has for the story, and have the satisfaction of reading all the way through a well-crafted story.

It is quite clear that most beginning news writers do not read enough news stories. The 40-plus examples carefully chosen for this book illustrate key points in the newswriting process, and are thoroughly discussed before the articles are presented. Therefore, the student will know what to look for in each article.

The theory that is included is process writing theory, well known to English teachers but all-but-new to journalism. It stresses looking at a story as being made up of component parts, not as an entire "product" or single unit. Understanding that a story comes in parts helps to fix that story when some parts are not up to standards.

Process theory also teaches that rewrites are a normal part of the writing process, not a two-minute penalty whistled by the writing instructor. Students who understand process will be better able to cope with the rewrite needed to polish and improve their copy.

One of the main emphases of this book is on the single greatest problems news writers have—organizing a news story. A national study of writing coaches in the late 1980s indicated that reporters had problems organizing leads, organizing stories—and organizing time.

By stressing process, rewrite, and organization, the book teaches students the beginning-to-end system of writing news stories, both formula and feature. By understanding that it is not a simple sit-down-and-write process, they will be able to understand the different needs of different stories.

The relevant, well-written models of stories at the end of many chapters demonstrate to readers what others have accomplished before them. Writing students need role models. The difference in writing skills between those who have had models to follow and those who have not is significant, in my opinion.

Perhaps the reason reporters have so much trouble organizing stories is that they do not think in terms of the entire story, only the individual parts. If the students of today do not read entire news stories, it is going to be difficult for them to write entire news stories.

For one thing, students cannot understand how a story is organized unless they see how others organize them. Most books offer only snippets of stories, without letting the student see how the entire story is organized.

Further, the power of short words and sentences has to be experienced to be understood.

The concern, confusion, and uncertainty students go through is a part of any writing process, and a significant focus of this book. We try to put that uncertainty into perspective, to show the writer

that everyone has uncertainties and that writing is indeed a difficult process.

This book takes a close look at the personal side of newswriting. How should the writer react to the uncertainties encountered? Deal with deadlines? Organize a seeming jungle of information? Know which quotes to use and how many?

The way stories are written stems from reader and viewer habits, which are not what beginning writers think they are. Newswriting is evolving as the news media enters a new era of competition between newspapers and television, and of cooperation in the newsroom. Differences between writing for newspapers and for radio and television may disappear because of changing technologies. What will remain is the importance of understanding information and putting it into a logical form based on the technology being used.

We hope the writer gains an understanding that the first draft will not be as smooth as expected, and that the second and third drafts (depending on time available) will inevitably improve the story. The first draft is basically an exercise in organization, taking the story from the realm of ideas to the realm of the concrete. Following drafts are bound to make the story smoother, better, and more interesting because they build on the strengths of the original draft and eliminate the weaknesses.

Once the philosophy and the process are understood, the writer can then attack building blocks and the news story forms. Building blocks are those elements that are peculiar to newswriting—short sentences, specific words, accuracy, proper quotes, etc. What was passable and praised in an English class may not be acceptable in a Journalism class because of the different audiences. Brevity and conciseness are golden to an audience that, in most cases, devotes as little time as possible to the words the writer has agonized over.

For the purposes of this book, the story forms are divided into two categories—formula stories and feature stories.

Formula stories are those that remain the same in structure each time, but change in content. These include many of what we call the inverted pyramid stories (most important information first in the story). A very important aspect is to know which stories take formulas and how the formulas operate.

Formula stories include obituaries, accidents and disasters, announcements, meetings and speeches, roundup, and multiple-incident stories. Some of these are more complex than others, but understanding the formula for each and why it is used makes the process easier to understand.

Feature stories include the longer story, the background information story, the personality profile, and the success story. It is a formula story with several formulas. Whichever writing technique works in telling the story best is the technique to use. The challenge for the beginning reporter comes in choosing the technique.

Once the basics are understood, the reader is introduced to a special section on story enhancements. The reporter/writer must understand the basics before understanding how to make copy brighter, more interesting, and more saleable.

This book grows out of 18 years of experience in newspapers and college public relations and 21 years of college and university teaching, some of the years overlapping.

It could not have been written even three years ago because of changes in the understanding of the writing process. I owe a debt to those people who are pioneers in the understanding of the complexities of writing, and to literally hundreds of college students who have suffered with me through the mental pains of learning to write in a way the public will understand and the media will accept. The book is writing and thinking combined, two of the most complex and difficult processes known to mankind.

Several short chapters are devoted to important topics that are usually included or imbedded into longer chapters in other texts. By focusing on one major topic at a time, these chapters help a reporter think through important aspects of writing. These topics include attribution, rewrite, dealing with deadlines, reader and writer habits, and developing the body of the story.

Three chapters respond to changing conditions in the media: first-person stories; reporting cultures other than your own; and understanding the relationships between reporting and the visual side of the media—photographs, charts, and visuals. A special effort is made to point out similarities and the need for cooperation between reporters and photographers and graphic artists.

Several references are made in this book to material previously published in *The Coaches' Corner*, a national newsletter for newspaper writing coaches. Persons interested in the newsletter (\$7 per year) can write to Paul Salsini, 2230 E. Bradford Ave., Unit G, Milwaukee, WI 53211.

Special thanks to Larry Jankowski, Geoff Haynes, Doug Lillibridge, Dick Hendrickson, Dave Swartz and the Jerome Library Periodicals section, Don Hadd and most of all, Karen, Brian and Jan.

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Ray Laakaniemi is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Journalism at Bowling Green State University. He earned an A.B. at the University of Michigan and an M.S. and Ph.D. at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. He conducted the first national study on newspaper writing coaches in the late 1980s. He has conducted writing workshops for newspapers and groups of newspapers in 10 states and Japan. He has 20 years of newspaper and public relations experience, and has been teaching journalists how to write news for 30 years.

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#### **BEFORE YOU WRITE**

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Learning how to manage your time well.  
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##### **3. Reader Habits: Why News is Written the Way It Is 33**

“Tell me why this is important to me.”  
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- Telling a story versus listing everything in the first paragraph.
- Understanding the need for revision and rewrite.
- Respecting the reader's intelligence but understanding that some words and terms can be confusing.

## **5. Understanding Process in Writing 58**

- Process theory breaks the act of writing into its component parts so the writer can understand which part, if any, needs more work to make a better story.
- Writing is a disconnected process, seldom following one-two-three step order, and writers should realize this.
- Writing a news story in many respects is like doing a scientific experiment—finding a question to answer, using reliable questioning methods, focusing on important answers, etc.
- Why a great deal of thinking and analyzing needs to be done by a writer before he or she starts to write.
- Why and how stories change as they are being written, and how new discoveries change the shape and form of the story.

## **6. Gathering News: Reporting and Writing Go Hand-in-Hand 71**

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- Why developing story ideas may be more important than the actual writing.
- Specific things reporters watch for—quotes, details, numbers, and specifics.
- How to ask people for information, and how to write down what they give you.
- Why you should always get more information than you need for a story.
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## **7. Libel and Privacy: Respect for the Individual 91**

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- The growing specter of libel (injury to reputation) as a force in the media.
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## **8. Developing Your Own Philosophy of Newswriting 104**

- The student/writer needs to understand why he or she is writing before starting to write. Knowing the purpose of a story makes all the difference in putting it together smoothly.
- Every story in every newscast or newspaper is not important to everyone. But the reporter must act as if every routine story is the most important story he or she has ever done.
- Why writing is more difficult than many other professions, and how to make it easier.

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- 9. Building Blocks: The Elements of Newswriting—Proper Words, Sentences, and Paragraphs 113**  
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- 12. Meetings, Speeches, and Roundup Stories: When It All Happens at Once 188**  
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The reporter must understand the nature of the event, or the procedures of the meeting, and gather as much detail and information as possible.
- 13. Feature Stories: Looking at News from a Different Angle 210**  
Feature writing is a longer, more complex, more conversational type of writing. It can be used to tell about people, to personalize issues, or to explain dramatic trends in people terms.  
While the structure is less formal than the inverted pyramid or formula stories, the feature is not easier to write. The reporter must find a focus, develop an interesting lead, and dig up enough anecdotes and examples to make a good story.  
The feature lead is designed not to give the news, but to get the person

interested in reading the rest of the story. The “hook,” or “catchy” lead, often takes time to develop.

The feature ending is not like the ending of other news stories. It is a reward to the reader for having read the entire story, and generally has a “bang” of its own. Feature writers save incidents, anecdotes, or examples to use as endings.

Above all, a feature is a story, an example of a person or incident that needs to be retold so society can understand what is happening in other parts of society.

#### **14. Writing for the Eye and Ear: Radio and Television 252**

Writing for the broadcast media presents different problems. The writer must be concerned with how words sound, or with how words go with the pictures on the screen.

Listener and viewer habits are such that they are *not* likely to be devoting 100 percent of their attention to the newscast. Know this when writing the news.

Since many times radio and television can be “live” at the scene of an event, immediacy is important in writing news for electronic media.

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**18. Organizing the Rest of the Story: Between the Lead and the Ending 312**

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How to think through a story so that the paragraph following the lead answers questions that were left over from the lead.  
Developing the body of the story using principle and example.  
How to use specifics to prove a point—and to strengthen the body of the story.

**19. Attribution and Verification: Who Said That and Can You Prove It? 320**

The source of a statement is as important as the statement itself. The reader will judge the value of a statement by the reputation of the person who made it.  
The writer must clearly indicate who gave a statement. Obvious statements, which anyone can verify by being there, do not need attribution.  
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**20. One More Time: Editing Your Final Copy and Catching Errors Before You Release Your Story 333**

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One is personalizing, the idea of telling a story through people, of using their individual stories as examples of a larger concept.  
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**22. First Person Stories: The Cutting Edge 362**

There are a few times when the reporter needs to tell his or her story.  
When readers and audiences understand that reporters have feelings, they can benefit from special insights in certain cases.

**23. Reporting Cultural Diversity: The World as We See It Versus the World as It Is 376**

The world is changing, and reporters need to understand those changes to report on them.

Not all groups in society are similar to the group to which the reporter belongs. The press has a duty to cover all elements of society.

National commissions in the 1940s and 1960s said the media need to work harder to report more fully on all aspects of society.

Racial and ethnic minorities cover more than 20 percent of our population. Specific steps can be taken to see that minorities are reported on fairly, and that misconceptions are not perpetuated.

**24. The Visual Attitude: Help Me to Understand 410**

The reporter must understand that words alone, while important, cannot tell the story as quickly and effectively as words with visuals.

While most reporters do not take photographs, they should be expected to help the photographer by suggesting good photo ideas.

Even though reporters are not expected to do charts, graphs, and illustrations, they should be able to suggest ideas to editors and graphic artists.

For the television reporter, integrating moving photographs into a news report is a fact of life.

Print media reporters must realize that in an era of very intense competition, they need to present a complete package of information—words, photos and illustrations—to compete with the electronic media.

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