

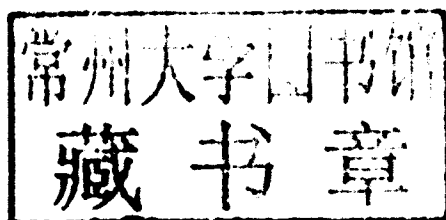


The Elements of News Writing

Third Edition

JAMES W. KERSHNER

Cape Cod Community College



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of
William Middleton Sheppard (1924–2002).*

*A professor of journalism and mass media at Marietta College
from 1961 to 1988, Shep was a great teacher, adviser,
writer, editor, mentor, and friend.*

PREFACE

In a continually evolving industry that has undergone recent fundamental changes, journalists find themselves facing tough times. Now, more than ever before, there is a starving need for good journalism and thus, good journalists. As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, the demand for news and the access to news is greater than ever. This slim volume is based on the assumption that readers, viewers, listeners and consumers of the news in any form want to consume information, and they want to do so in a format that is as short, concise and useful as possible.

Almost a century ago William Strunk wrote his famous admonition to “Omit needless words.” In revising this text for the third edition, we took Strunk’s words to heart. We added new information about the most recent changes in the news media, but kept the overall length as brief as ever by omitting needless words.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

“You’re teaching journalism? Why bother?” Anyone who teaches journalism has heard questions like that in recent years.

As Mark Twain once wrote, “The report of my death was an exaggeration.” Speculation about Twain’s death circulated throughout his community even when it was a completely false statement. Likewise, journalism is not dead, that too is a false statement.

Our society has a great need for dynamic journalists who are able to adapt to the constantly changing ways in which we send and receive information. This new edition of *The Elements of News Writing* fulfills that need with its up-to-date reflection of the latest changes in the world of news, essential for any emerging journalist. Additions, improvements and changes include:

- A revised and expanded chapter about “The Future of the Mass Media” (Ch. 35) that includes information about social media, “smart phones,” media convergence, blogs, web journalism and podcasts. Students will learn how new technology is affecting the newsroom and they’ll pick up tips on how to utilize this technology.
- A revised and expanded chapter about punctuation (Ch. 9) addresses the errors and misunderstandings that trip up most of today’s journalism students.
- Updated chapter coverage includes references to the new variety of media emerging today and the digitalization of older media.
- A new discussion on the rise of Facebook analyzes the ways in which social networking has completely changed how information is communicated, teaching as aspiring journalists how to effectively utilize social networking in their fields.
- An analysis of the decisions of several major newspapers to cease publication allows students to fully comprehend the functionality of the newspaper industry and how the internet played a role in the demise of these publications.

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What Is News?

Before studying news writing, it is important to consider some definitions. A reporter should know the meaning of the terms *news*, *newspaper*, *newsprint*, *news story*, *media*, *medium*, *mass media*, *news media*, *magazine*, *broadcast*, *broadcast media*, and *journalism*.

1. NEWS IS A TIMELY ACCOUNT OF A RECENT, INTERESTING, AND SIGNIFICANT EVENT

News writing is the craft of writing news. Before beginning, it makes sense to have an understanding of news itself. William Randolph Hearst was quoted as saying that news is anything that makes a reader say, “Gee whiz.”

Hearst was an important figure in the history of American journalism. He was one of the most successful and influential newspaper owners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since the time of Hearst, colloquial expressions of surprise have changed, but news remains something that surprises the reader (or listener or viewer).

Most dictionaries define *news* as an account of a recent event or information that was not known previously to the recipient. Within a family, it may be news that the basement is flooded. Within a neighborhood, it may be news that Mrs. Johnson’s cat had kittens. For information to qualify as news in a larger context, though, it must be interesting and significant to a larger number of people. Thus, for the purposes of news writing, *news* can be defined as a timely account of a recent, interesting, and significant event.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, it was news. When terrorists crashed planes into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, it was news. When a man in Omaha, Neb., mowed his lawn in 1942, it was not news. When a child in Atlanta, Ga., completed an uneventful day in second grade in 2010, it was not news. Between the extremes of events that obviously change the course of history and events that are mundane and routine, many events occur that are more or less newsworthy.

Whether these events are news or not depends on how recent, interesting, and significant they are. Of course, those three adjectives—*recent*, *interesting*, and *significant*—are relative terms. They can be interpreted in different ways by different people in different situations. This is why journalists work hard at trying to decide what information is the most newsworthy.

How Recent Is It?

The more recent the event, the more newsworthy it is. This is why television reporters stress live accounts of *breaking news*, which is news occurring at the same time that it is being reported. Daily newspapers stress news that occurred the day before publication. Follow-up stories of a continuing nature usually begin with the most recent developments in a continuing story. For example, a follow-up on a murder investigation might begin, “Police said today they have no new leads in the case of the heiress who was found dead in her beachfront mansion two years ago.” Although the killing took place two years ago, a new statement from the police makes the story newsworthy. The more recent an event, the more likely it is that the readers, listeners, or viewers will have not heard the information before.

Sometimes it takes a while for news to reach us from a remote part of the world, so one might hear that an earthquake in a remote part of China occurred several days ago, but the news was just reported today. This sort of delay was much more common in the past.

The delay in obtaining news is the reason for the journalistic term *dateline*. A *dateline* is the name of a city, in all caps, printed at the beginning of a news story. Originally, a dateline included both the name of a city and the date the dispatch was written. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, news could only travel across the Atlantic Ocean by ship, so American newspapers would print news stories written in Europe and dated before a ship carried the news across the ocean. In the twenty-first century, with instantaneous worldwide digital communication, the term *dateline* reminds us of how far we have come.

How Interesting Is It?

Timeliness obviously is one factor that can make an event interesting, but there are many others. People tend to be interested in things that affect them directly. This brings in the factor of proximity. In general, the nearer something is, the more interesting it is. A murder within a few miles of your home is likely to be very interesting to you, whereas a murder occurring thousands of miles away is likely to be less interesting. However, there are exceptions. The murder trial of O. J. Simpson in 1995 was interesting to people far from California because the defendant was a celebrity. Another factor that can make an event interesting is utility. Columns labeled “News You Can Use” are very popular because people tend to be interested in information they can apply to their own lives. This is why people read about developments in health and fitness; they hope to be able to apply the information to improving their own health and fitness.

People also tend to be interested in information about the basic drives that motivate humans. Everyone needs food, clothing, and shelter, and stories about these subjects tend to have some inherent interest. Two other areas that interest most people are the search for spiritual or religious fulfillment and the search for sexual fulfillment. It has been said that those two areas are usually the subject tackled first by any new means of communication. The fifteenth century saw not only the earliest mass printing, the Gutenberg Bible in 1455 but also the earliest printed pornography. That began an effort to control the publication of obscene material that continues to this day.

In a noted obscenity case, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said of obscenity: “I cannot define it, but I know it when I see it.” This description also might be applied to the common term *human interest story*. A human interest story usually is made up of such things as compassion, love, and that tension between selfishness and selflessness that we all

feel deep inside. When nine Pennsylvania coal miners trapped underground for 77 hours in a flooded mineshaft were rescued in July of 2002, the whole nation breathed a sigh of relief. It is hard to predict what will make a human interest story, but most people accept that there is a shared humanity that unites us all. This is what interests most humans.

How Significant Is It?

Significance is just as hard to pin down as timeliness or interest. The most important question a journalist can ask is, "How will this affect the readers?" Reporters cover politics routinely; part of the reason is that some politicians are celebrities. The real reason that political news is significant, though, is that the actions of political leaders can affect readers directly. A change in political power can mean that the reader will be paying higher or lower taxes or receiving more or less service from the government. News that means a person will be more or less secure in employment or have more or less security or personal safety is significant because it affects that person. Some events are significant because they have historic importance. Although Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon in 1968 may not have affected many people directly on a personal level, it obviously was significant because it was a historic event. Most people believe that it changed the course of human history in the long run.

The word *news*, of course, is the root of two compound words central to journalism, *newspaper* and *newsprint*, and the phrase *news story*.

2. A NEWSPAPER IS A PUBLICATION, USUALLY PRINTED ON NEWSPRINT, PUBLISHED AT REGULAR INTERVALS, TYPICALLY DAILY OR WEEKLY, AND CONTAINING USEFUL INFORMATION, SUCH AS NEWS, COMMENTARY, FEATURE STORIES, AND ADVERTISING

Although a few newspapers ceased publication during the first decade of the twenty-first century, there are still approximately six thousand newspapers around the world, and no two are exactly alike. The variety is one of the greatest strengths of journalism. People in most places have the opportunity to choose among several newspapers. In North America, there usually were competing newspapers in all major cities between 1850 and 1950. After that, economic factors reduced the number of newspapers in any one city. Nevertheless, in the early twenty-first century, residents usually have a choice of a metropolitan newspaper, a local newspaper, and a regional newspaper, plus one or two national newspapers. The main things that all newspapers have in common are that they contain news, they come out regularly, and they are printed on newsprint.

3. NEWSPRINT IS A LOW-GRADE PAPER MADE FROM WOOD PULP USED CHIEFLY FOR NEWSPAPERS

Since newspapers are printed in large quantities and discarded quickly, it would not be cost-effective to print them on high-quality, long-lasting paper. Most newsprint is produced from wood pulp, but since the 1970s, an increasing quantity of newsprint is made

from recycled newsprint itself. According to the Newspaper Association of America, the average amount of recycled fiber in the newsprint used by U.S. newspapers and other newsprint consumers increased from 10 percent in 1989 to more than 35 percent in 2010.

4. A NEWS STORY IS A WRITTEN ACCOUNT OF A RECENT, INTERESTING, AND SIGNIFICANT EVENT PRODUCED FOR DISSEMINATION TO LARGE GROUPS OF PEOPLE

Once a reporter has determined that an event or situation is news, he or she still has to turn it into a news story. This involves gathering the information, analyzing and synthesizing it, organizing it, and presenting it in an interesting way. The specific style, content, and format of a news story depend on the content, the circumstances, and the nature of the news medium. News stories can be presented in newspapers, magazines, or on radio, television, the Internet, or other media.

5. MEDIA IS THE PLURAL OF MEDIUM

Although common usage (and some recent dictionaries) accepts use of the word *media* as a singular collective noun, it is helpful to remember its original use as a plural noun. Misuse of the word *media* in the singular comes up in comments such as, “The media is just out to make money.” This implies incorrectly that the media is a single, monolithic unit. The truth is that the media—specifically the mass media—are a ragtag assortment of many different news outlets owned by many different people with many different agendas and priorities. If one wished to attribute the same motivation to all of them, proper usage requires a plural verb: “The media **are** just out to make money.”

6. A MEDIUM IS AN INTERMEDIATE SUBSTANCE, AGENCY, OR INSTRUMENT THROUGH WHICH A FORCE ACTS OR AN EFFECT IS PRODUCED

The word *medium* is used many ways in the English language. Picture an exotic-looking woman in a turban sitting at a circular table in a darkened room. As the séance begins, everyone holds hands around the table, and the woman begins to report messages from poor deceased Uncle Henry. She reports that Uncle Henry wants you to give lots of money to this woman, who is a medium. She is the intermediary carrying a message between you and your dead uncle.

In an art class students may have an opportunity to experiment with mixed media, such as oil paints, watercolor, pastels, and charcoal. Each of these is a different medium, and each acts as an intermediary, carrying a message between the artist and the viewer of the art.

In the same way, a newspaper, a magazine, a radio or television broadcast, a Web site, and a bulletin board (either physical or virtual) each is a medium. Each medium is an intermediate agent carrying a message from a source to a recipient.

7. MASS MEDIA ARE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION THAT REACH VERY LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE SIMULTANEOUSLY

Although many people use the term *media* to mean “mass media,” it is more accurate to describe newspapers, magazines, radio, and television as the mass media. (The World Wide Web and other parts of the Internet can be considered mass media too.)

8. NEWS MEDIA ARE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION THAT SEND NEWS TO VERY LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE SIMULTANEOUSLY

Mass media are part of the news media to the extent that they carry news. Some media have the ability to transmit news but choose to do very little of that, so it would not be accurate to consider them part of the news media. Examples include radio stations that broadcast only music, television stations that are devoted to home shopping, and periodicals such as comic books. These are part of the mass media but not the news media.

9. A MAGAZINE IS A PUBLICATION ISSUED PERIODICALLY, BOUND IN A PAPER COVER, AND TYPICALLY CONTAINING ARTICLES, STORIES, ESSAYS, POEMS, AND SO ON BY MANY WRITERS AND USUALLY INCLUDING PHOTOGRAPHS, ILLUSTRATIONS, AND ADVERTISING

A magazine, like a newspaper, is a *periodical*, which means that it is published periodically. And like newspapers, magazines contain a variety of useful and interesting information. Magazines usually are distributed weekly, monthly, or quarterly. They are usually printed on higher-quality paper than newsprint.

There are exceptions in both fields, but generally, magazines are likely to appeal to a widely distributed group of people with similar subject-area interests, whereas newspapers are more likely to appeal to a general-interest audience in a more limited geographic area. Newspapers tend to emphasize more timely news, whereas magazines may emphasize less time-sensitive information, including fiction and poetry. By extension, some television programs are described as “magazines” to indicate that they include contents similar to those found in printed magazines.

10. TO BROADCAST IS TO SCATTER OR DISSEMINATE SOMETHING WIDELY

The original meaning of *broadcast* was to “cast broadly,” as in sprinkling seed across a field. This image was used to describe the way radio signals (and later television signals) were sent out through the air across a wide geographic area. Radio and television became known as *broadcast media*.

11. BROADCAST MEDIA (SUCH AS RADIO AND TELEVISION) ARE ENTERPRISES THAT TRANSMIT INFORMATION, INCLUDING ENTERTAINMENT, NEWS, AND ADVERTISING, BY SENDING ELECTROMAGNETIC WAVES OVER LARGE AREAS

The term *broadcast media* dates back to the early days of radio in the 1920s, and technology has been changing ever since. In the 1940s, television appeared; in the 1960s, FM broadcasting became popular. In the 1980s, cable television spread throughout most of America. In the late 1990s, satellites became increasingly popular as a means of delivering television and then radio. Digital technology is also changing the means of delivery, but media that are distributed to a large number of home receivers without first being printed on paper are likely to be referred to as *broadcast media* for years to come, even if the signals are not literally “broadcast.”

12. JOURNALISM IS THE OCCUPATION OF REPORTING, WRITING, EDITING, PHOTOGRAPHING, PUBLISHING, OR BROADCASTING NEWS

It is worth noting that the English words *journalism* and *journal* both come from the Latin word *diurnal*, meaning “daily.” A journal is a daily diary. But the words *journalism* and *journalist* have taken on the added aspects of newsworthiness. The origin of the word underscores the importance of timeliness in journalism.

History of Journalism in the United States

1. IN SOME SENSES, JOURNALISM IS AS OLD AS HUMANKIND

The origins of journalism are lost in antiquity. Surely, when the first cave people huddled around a fire and one of them got too close, that person must have grunted and gestured to let the others know that fire can burn. That was news—a timely account of a recent significant event. But it was only distributed to those within earshot of that first reporter.

Archaeologists have discovered cave paintings that are about 30,000 years old. Some depict hunting scenes. That account of a news event was visible to anyone who visited the cave, so perhaps that was the first mass-media news account.

Anthropologists date the beginning of modern writing to the Sumerian cuneiform writing language of about 3400 B.C.E., or more than 5,000 years ago. That made it much easier to pass along news to a broader audience—at least to anyone who could read.

One well-documented example of a daily posting of written news took place in Ancient Rome. It was known as *Acta Diurna*, or “daily acts.” These were accounts of military and political news that were controlled by the government. They were posted in a public square and changed daily.

2. PRINTING MADE THE MASS MEDIA POSSIBLE AND ALSO RAISED THE CONCERN OF RULERS

The first major revolution in journalism was the invention of printing. In China, wood-block printing developed about 1000 C.E., and in Europe, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press with movable type in 1440.

Soon there were printers all over Europe. By 1534, King Henry VIII of England required that printers be licensed in order to maintain control of such a powerful technology.

In 1644, the highly respected English author and poet John Milton published an essay titled “Aeropagetica,” which was an eloquent plea for freedom of the press. He argued that if truth and falsehood are both given freedom of expression, the truth will win out in the end. This influenced the framers of the American Constitution 140 years later.

The publication most historians consider the first successful newspaper in the English language was published in 1702 by a woman, Elizabeth Mallet.

3. THE FREE PRESS BEGAN IN AMERICA

Although European newspapers had some degree of freedom, it was in America that the truly free press was born.

The first American newspaper was called *Publick Occurances Both Foreign and Domestic*. It was published by Benjamin Harris in 1690 in Boston, but it was short-lived. A more successful newspaper was the *Boston Newsletter*, first published in 1704.

One of the first newspapers to be published without official permission was the *New England Courant*, first published in 1721 by James Franklin. His younger brother, Benjamin Franklin, worked for James as an indentured servant. Ben was supposed to just set type, but writing under the assumed name Silence Dogood, Benjamin Franklin wrote a satirical column that made the paper very popular with its readers. It also drew the ire of colonial officials, and James Franklin was jailed for printing things to which the governor objected. In order to escape the political persecution of the Massachusetts officials and the personal persecution of his older brother, Benjamin Franklin fled to Philadelphia, where he became a successful printer, writer, scientist, inventor, diplomat, and the father of American journalism.

Benjamin Franklin was respected by the founding fathers and, together with Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison, ensured the inclusion of freedom of the press in the First Amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."

4. THE PARTISAN PRESS FLOURISHED FROM THE 1770S TO THE 1830S

In the early days of the United States, most newspapers were unrestrained in support of a cause or political party. Many newspapers had names such as *The Republican*, *The Democrat*, or *The Whig*. News was obviously slanted and selected to support the paper's point of view. There also were newspapers of commerce, devoted to printing commercial news for leaders of business. Most cities had a variety of newspapers with various points of view. Magazines also tended to be political. Although papers carried some paid advertising, the subscription price of the publications brought in most of the revenue. The newspapers were comparatively expensive, costing about 3 to 6 cents per issue, which was more than most people could afford.

5. THE PENNY PRESS REPLACED THE PARTISAN PRESS IN THE 1830S

In 1833, Benjamin Day founded the *New York Sun*. Instead of charging more for his newspaper, Day relied on selling more copies at a lower price. He sold his paper for only 1 cent; it was a profitable strategy.

Others followed suit. These papers relied on advertising and mass circulation for their revenue. The sharply partisan tone of their predecessors was not appropriate because that would limit them to people with only that point of view. Papers began to get less partisan and more objective.

6. THE INVERTED-PYRAMID STYLE OF NEWS WRITING BEGAN DURING THE CIVIL WAR

During the Civil War in the 1860s, people were eager to read the latest reports of the war. Reporters took advantage of a new invention, the telegraph, to transmit their stories from the scenes of battles to their home offices. But the telegraph lines were undependable because they kept breaking, either from natural causes or from sabotage. Editors became frustrated when the transmission of a story was interrupted before the reporter even mentioned who won the battle. Orders went out to reporters to be sure to include the most important news in the first paragraph and to put the other details in decreasing order of importance. In that way, if the telegraph transmission were interrupted, at least the most important information would make it. This was the beginning of the inverted-pyramid style of news writing (see Chapter 15).

The Civil War period also marked one of the first early high points of the continuing struggle over censorship and freedom of information. Military commanders attempted to monitor all telegraph communication and censor any news reports that could aid the enemy. President Lincoln is quoted as asking, “Should I hang a soldier for treason and then let editors walk free whose words serve to further rebellion?”

7. YELLOW JOURNALISM BEGAN IN THE 1880S

By the 1880s, advertising was the dominant moneymaker for newspapers, and higher circulation meant more advertising. The battle for circulation heated up, particularly in New York, where William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* was in fierce competition with Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*. In 1895, Pulitzer hired a cartoonist to draw a comic strip that included a character whose long nightshirt was colored yellow. It was the first use of color in printing a newspaper, so it made quite a splash. Soon Hearst and Pulitzer had rival “yellow kids.” Meanwhile, both editors favored large headlines designed to appeal to readers’ emotions. This new sensationalist style of reporting became known as *yellow journalism*.

In 1898, Hearst and Pulitzer both seemed to be pushing for war with Spain. Hearst sent artist Frederic Remington to Cuba to send back pictures of the war. According to a popular story that historians have not been able to confirm, Remington is supposed to have sent a telegraph saying, “Hate to spend your money. There is no war.” And Hearst is said to have replied, “You supply the pictures. I’ll supply the war.” Soon after that, the U.S. battleship *Maine* was blown up in Havana harbor. Nobody knows what caused the explosion, but the explosion caused the start of the Spanish-American War.

8. CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY AFFECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF JOURNALISM

Around 1900, several technological changes began affecting journalism. The telegraph had been in use since the 1840s, and newspapers were struggling with how to use it. The first meeting of what was to become the Associated Press (AP) was held in 1848 in an attempt to save money on telegraph costs by sharing resources among six New York newspapers. To get the latest news from Europe, many newspapers sent reporters to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to meet trans-Atlantic steamships, which stopped in Halifax to refuel before

arriving in Boston or New York. Rather than every New York newspaper having a correspondent in Halifax, why not share the cost and share the news? The cooperative arrangement was rocky at first, and it was not until 1900 that the AP was formally incorporated as a not-for-profit cooperative.

The idea of newspapers cooperating in a “wire service” meant that correspondents had to write in a style that would be acceptable to a variety of clients. Since it couldn’t be slanted to please one or two editors, wire-service stories emphasized just the facts, with little interpretation or slant.

Like telegraphy, photography had been around since the 1840s. It gained prominence in the Civil War and began to be used commonly in newspapers around 1900.

Another new technology was the invention of the Linotype machine by Ottmar Mergenthaler in 1885. This machine casts type one whole line at a time out of hot lead. Before that, lines of type were assembled by piecing together pieces of type representing individual letters. The Linotype made it possible to produce newspapers much more quickly.

Sadly, author Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain)—who had begun his writing career as a newspaper reporter—invested a fortune in a competing machine that lost out to the Linotype, leaving Clemens impoverished.

9. RADIO AND TELEVISION CHANGED JOURNALISM BUT DID NOT REPLACE NEWSPAPERS

Technology continued to change newspapers, mostly by speeding up the newsgathering process, throughout the twentieth century. In 1903, Guglielmo Marconi transmitted radio waves across the Atlantic, beginning the use of radio waves for long-distance communication and laying the framework for popular use of radio as a means of mass communication. By the 1920s, most homes in America had radio receivers.

Television came soon after that. By 1960, most American homes had television receivers. Television and radio altered the face of journalism worldwide. As each of these mass media emerged, people predicted that they would replace newspapers, but that did not happen. People continued to read newspapers at roughly the same rate as before the popularity of the broadcast media developed.

In the early 1960s, offset printing sped up the process of printing newspapers and was followed by “cold type” typesetting, which replaced the old “hot type” Linotype machines with a phototypesetting process that created a plate of each page based on an original page created without the use of any lead type at all.

10. THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY CHANGED TELEVISION JOURNALISM FOREVER

On Nov. 22, 1963, Dan Rather was working for a local CBS affiliate in Dallas and was asked to deliver a large tin containing film to a station across town. That’s when he witnessed chaos and confusion in the street around Dealey Plaza and headed for the hospital, where he heard from a priest that the president had been assassinated. Rather fed the information to Walter Cronkite, who was the anchor of the “CBS Evening News.” Millions of Americans learned of Kennedy’s death from Cronkite, rather than from a daily newspaper.