

Write Like a Journalist

Talk story.

You have to be able to talk to people to find stories—marketing research or existing interviews or speech transcripts alone won't do.



“Being a journalist... is a grand, grand caper. You get to leave, go talk to strangers, ask them anything, come back, type up their stories, edit the tape.”

—David Carr, NYT

Create stories like journalists — even when you're writing for brands.



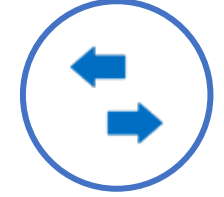
Human-Centric

Whether it's "Call me Ishmael" or "I am an invisible man," every great story starts with a human being, a compelling central character we care about.



Audience-First

Brand storytelling must follow the rules of all good storytelling by starting with the audience we wish to reach. The brand enters the story in the middle, not the beginning.



Tension/Conflict

The character needs to face some problem / tension / conflict that drives the story forward—and keeps the audience hooked.



Experts Sources

Third-party sources of authority are more important than ever. Journalists look to them for unbiased information—positive or negative.



Highly Visual

Stories are not always about writing words; they are about creating worlds. And, from "Game of Thrones," to "Like a Girl," the most memorable stories today are visual.

The 5 elements of an editorial story



The Challenge

What's the big problem facing an audience?



The Ideal

What would life look like without this challenge?



Unique Approach

How does the subject solve this problem like no one else?



Reasons to Believe

How does this unique approach work? Who are the people behind it, what is the process, where is the expertise?



Outcomes at Scale

How does the solution, used by many, help create a better world?

Before you write:

Make sure you know exactly what you want to say.

Structure dictates reporting.

The structure of a story dictates how you will report it, the information you need to collect, and the people you need to talk to.

Thinking ahead will save you time and ensure there are no “holes”

Classic story structure:

Lede: The single most compelling and representative idea, fact, or detail that grabs attention and drops someone directly into a story. In short: What happened?

Nut Graf: Why this? Why now? Why should I care? This is the who, what, where, when, and why of the story in a single paragraph.

Good Quote: Pithy. Human voice. Said better than you could say it.

Support: Facts, proof that it's news.

Background: What does reader need to know to understand this story. This is typically broader context

Two ways to write a lede:

1. Straight (hard) lede: Who, what, where, when.

Want to save the whales? Don't order the lobster.

That's the message from a growing chorus of conservationists that is setting off a tense debate in New England towns, the halls of Congress and courtrooms around the country.

Washington Post: "Want to save the whales? Reconsider the lobster, some say." By Dino Grandoni, 12-3-22

2. Anecdotal lede: A SHORT scene or incident that illustrates the main point of the story.

The change was gradual. At first, Riana Alexander was always tired. Then she began missing classes. She had been an honors student at her Arizona high school, just outside Phoenix. But last winter, after the isolation of remote learning, then the overload of a full-on return to school, her grades were slipping. She wasn't eating a lot. She avoided friends.

Her worried mother searched for mental health treatment. Finally, in the spring, a three-day-a-week intensive program for depression helped the teenager steady herself and "want to get better," Alexander said. Then, as she was finding her way, a girl at her school took her own life. Then a teen elsewhere in the district did the same. Then another.

Washington Post: "The crisis of student mental health is much vaster than we realize" By Donna St. George and Valerie Strauss, 12-5-22

Nut Graf

“American
Culture Is Trash
Culture”

—Wesley Morris,
NYT Magazine,
10-12-22

I was 11 when “Nuts” came out, and it helped lead me into a committed relationship with a certain category of movie. The people in them seemed loonier, lustier, louder than we’re supposed to be. Their eyes were wild; their makeup ran. They had hair we were meant to know was a wig, because it was impossible hair. The paint chips for these movies might read: “wanton,” “lust,” “paramedic,” “weak bladder,” “mattress,” “steamy,” “do not cross,” “pilot light,” “them drawls,” “brazen,” “lit cig,” “urinal cake,” “Crisco,” “bust.” In being honest about this volatile, unkempt, uncouth, indecorous, obnoxious, senseless, malicious, unhinged and therefore utterly uninhibited side of ourselves, a certain kind of movie can make an X-ray of what else it is besides a story about some characters. It can identify the mess.

Nut Graf

“We’re Out of
Movie Stars.
Whose Fault Is
That?”

—Wesley Morris,
NYT, 12-1-22

There are fewer movies, and even fewer of the kind that once allowed an actor to develop a persona over time, to turn into a Tom Cruise: movies about people in jams, in danger, in panic, in pursuit, in heaven, in heat, in Eastwick and Encino and Harlem and Miami, in badlands, lowlands, heartlands, wastelands. Blockbusters, bombs and sleepers. They were relatively inexpensive — middlebrow was one name for them — and they told stories about original characters, not mutations of intellectual property (not always, anyway). And many of the people in them were what we call stars. Folks who were all a little more something than the rest of us — grittier, wittier, prettier, sillier, fitter, wilder, braver, funnier, franker, tougher, loonier, louder.

Good Writing:

- Be clear, simple and forceful.
- Marshall your facts and arguments in a clean, straightforward fashion.
- Don't assume an authoritative (pompous) "voice."
- One idea per sentence.
- Write the way you'd talk with a new colleague you like and respect but don't know well.
- You wouldn't say: "we are experiencing precipitation, and I failed to remember to secure the entrance."
- You would say: "It's raining, and I forgot to lock the door."
- Use active voice. NOT: "The game was won by the Nationals." BETTER: "The Nats beat the Braves."

NFL

Real Subtle, Joe Flacco



Albert Burneko

Today 1:29pm • Filed to: LOWLIGHT REEL ▾

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Photo: Nick Wass (AP Photo)

Baltimore Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco sucks real bad, and moreover has been just sort of broadly shitty for several years, just a total glassy-eyed doofus with a giraffe neck and a knack for cartoonishly ill-timed mistakes. He's also old. Taken together, these are the reasons why the Ravens selected former Heisman winner Lamar Jackson in the first round of this past draft. Jackson is their quarterback of the future.

Unless Joe Flacco gets him killed, first!

Discuss.