

PJP'S QUICK GUIDE TO JOURNALISM

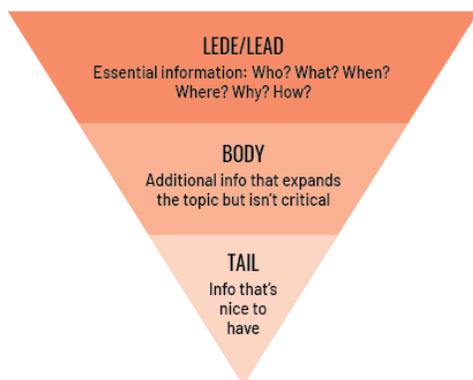
INTRODUCTION

Chances are you have already done some writing. Perhaps you've written poetry or short stories or essays. Perhaps you've written opinion articles. In journalism, we endeavor to inform readers about news such as a change in law or important events. Sometimes we tell stories about people or organizations. We do this by first reporting on the story. We interview people and we conduct research from books, documents and articles in other publications. Whenever possible, especially if we are reporting an event, we incorporate our own observations. Only after we've gathered all the ingredients do we start writing the story.

This handout is a guide to the nuts and bolts of journalism. It tells you about the basic rules and principles for how to pull together an article. The bottom line, however, is simple: a good article is one that grabs the attention of a reader and doesn't let go. That means starting with an interesting first sentence. It means making sure that your quotes are powerful, and that you have details that help the reader see your story in their mind. It also means that all your facts are correct and attributed to trustworthy sources, and you are writing as objectively and clearly as possible.

Journalism is hard and journalists hone their craft their entire career. We bear a big responsibility to report and write with integrity. But know this: your voice matters. Reporting behind the wall matters. History is shaped by those who record it.

THE INVERTED PYRAMID



Most news stories are written in a style called “the inverted pyramid.” Imagine an upside down triangle: the wide section at the top represents the first paragraph of the story, while the pointy section at the bottom represents the very last paragraph. The top paragraph contains the most important information in the story. The second paragraph contains the second-most important batch of information. And so on until the last paragraph.

More Info: We usually write news stories like this because our readers often only have a couple of seconds to spend on our news story, so they need to be able to see what the news is right away. If they want to learn more, they can read another paragraph and get more information. They can stop at any time and still know how many people died in that accident last night and what time the school board meeting is tonight.

LEDES

A lede (also sometimes spelled “lead”) is the opening sentence or paragraph of an article. Its purpose is to hook the reader's attention and establish the main information or questions needed to understand what comes next in the article. Effective ledes are concrete and focused, use active language, and avoid clichés.

More Info: There are two main approaches to writing ledes:

- **Straight news:** In a standard news story, the lede contains a summary of the story's essential information, and answers at least some of the "five W's" — who, what, where, when, why (and how).
- **Features:** A feature lede delays essential information in favor of appealing to the reader's emotion or curiosity. This lede style may open by setting the scene, providing an anecdote, or offering a quote. Since feature ledes don't get right to the point, journalists often choose to include a paragraph farther down in the article that clarifies that story's main idea and provides necessary context. This paragraph is called the *nut graf*, since it explains why the story matters, in the proverbial nutshell.

Examples:

- **Straight news lede:** "The European Parliament voted Tuesday to ratify the landmark Paris climate accord, paving the way for the international plan to curb greenhouse gas emissions to become binding as soon as the end of this week." [Rebecca Hersher, *NPR*]
- **Feature lede:** "When they heard the screams, no one suspected the rooster. Dechardonae Gaines, 2, was toddling down the sidewalk Monday lugging her Easy Bake Oven when she became the victim in one of the weirder animal attack cases police can recall." [Kelley Benham French, *St. Petersburg Times*].

ATTRIBUTION

A key part of writing a reliable news story is attribution — letting your readers know where the facts in your article come from. Aim to attribute if the information in your article: indicates a point of view (i.e. opinion or emotion), is subject to change (i.e. annual statistics), was not personally witnessed, or is not commonly known or independently verifiable. You can choose to integrate this information in the form of a direct quote, a paraphrase (a restatement in your own words), or a summary of the facts.



More Info: There are many types of sources a reporter can use, including:

- **A person:** identify initially by full name and title, such as "Lt. Sam Robinson." All subsequent references use only the last name, or the title when relevant ("Robinson," the lieutenant"). Information sourced from people can come from verbal interviews, a speech, or a written document.
- **A publication:** this includes newspapers, magazines, books, public records, and research documents. Titles of published material should be italicized. Also provide the names of book authors as well as the names of any institutions affiliated with research, i.e. Stanford University or Vera Institute.
- **The writer:** firsthand observations do not need attribution.

Examples:

- “Jimmy Daniels, a 7th grader at Sadler Junior High School, was dead at the scene with a bullet wound to the head, **said Detective Robert Medley.**” [Tulsa World]
- “**Press Secretary Beverly Hubble said** Grassley is to be treated for a tightening of muscles in his lower esophagus that interferes with the passage of food.” [The Des Moines Register]
- “Salt River floodwaters, which have swept away tons of garbage from landfills alongside the riverbed, will leave behind filthy pools of stagnating water laced with rotting material and hazardous bacteria, **according to a Valley environmentalist.**” [The Arizona Republic]
- “Over the last three months, six executions in the United States have been stayed or rescheduled because of constitutional issues regarding the method of execution or who can be present in the death chamber, **according to Reuters.**” [San Quentin News]
- “**The Independent notes** that before 2003 all those with felony convictions in the state of Nevada could not juries or vote unless they individually petitioned the Department of Public Safety or were granted a pardon.” [San Quentin News]

WRITING DOs AND DON'Ts

- **DO** write in a simple, direct way. Stay away from convoluted sentences and fancy words. Just tell people what happened.
- **DON'T** sprinkle qualifiers (adjectives and adverbs) throughout your text. They often smuggle opinions into your news story.
- **DON'T** use more words than necessary to communicate an idea. Don't repeat yourself.
- **DON'T** tell people that someone was “heroic”; tell an anecdote that shows exactly how “heroic” he was.
- **DON'T** use the first person in a news story. Only use the “I” in a feature if your story is highly relevant in that context.
- **DON'T** fall in love with your own writing. Cut sentences and paragraphs mercilessly when necessary.

INTERVIEWING

Interviewing is about getting the key information that you need to fill out the “5 Ws and How” of a story while also building trust with your source. Think of it as a conversation with another person in which your goal is to try to get more information.

More Info: There are two main types of interview questions:

- **Close-ended questions:** This where you ask a question that a person can answer with a yes or no, without elaborating. They are good for getting a straightforward answer, but they don't really allow you to get the interesting details you need for your story. They work well when you just need to confirm or deny a fact and have a limited time to ask the questions. But they can be boring for the person being interviewed. They don't allow you to build a relationship with your source and you can't usually use the answer as a direct quote in the story.



- **Open-ended questions:** This is where you ask a question that requires a person to give an extended response by making them tell a story of what happened. This can help you create a scene. Open-ended questions allow you to pick up on the voice and vocabulary of the person speaking, provide richer details that you can use to enhance your writing, open the door for new questions that you may not have thought to ask originally, and allow for more conversation between interviewer and interviewee. The downside is that the source could take the conversation into another direction with too much irrelevant detail so an interviewer must politely retain control of the interview.

Examples:

- **Close-ended question:** “Did you see anything in the room?” **Answer:** “Yes.”
- **Open-ended question:** “What did you see in the room?” **Answer:** “There were lots of people dancing, bright lights and tons of food on the table.”

NOTE-TAKING TIPS

Always make sure you ask the correct spelling of a source’s name, their title or position, and their age. Also jot down the date of the interview. Put a star in your notes next to all key quotes or pieces of information. This will later help pinpoint information or quotes that you really want to use in your story.

- **NEVER** put words in a person’s mouth by suggesting they say something in a certain way.
- **NEVER** pay or offer any services or goods for an interview.
- **NEVER** make up an interview with a source or make up a quote someone didn’t say.



USING QUOTES EFFECTIVELY

When writing a story, whether it’s hard news or a feature, quotes are a must. Quotes are important because they can show emotion, bring a character alive, provide a description that brings a reader into the story, provide further explanation for a point you are making, or give an anecdote. You hear soundbites on television. A quote in print is just that: a soundbite. You wouldn’t waste space on video with a boring person’s comments. Don’t waste space on your print story either.

- **DON’T** put too many direct quotes back to back in your story. Let your writing shine through.
- **DON’T** make up a quote.
- **DON’T** take something out of context to make it fit what you want to say.
- **DON’T** “massage” quotes — don’t make them “sound better” than they were originally said.

More Info: There are three main types of quotes:

- **Complete direct quotations:** The reporter uses the entire statement a person made because it was so well stated that they couldn't state it better themselves.
- **Partial quotations:** The reporter takes portions of the entire direct quote. It changes the language of the quote but not the meaning of the original statement while still retaining parts of the original sentences. Partial quotes can be useful when the person gets very convoluted about what they are saying but still has a few good lines that you want to maintain.
- **Indirect and Paraphrased Quotations:** The reporter decides not to use any of the original language of the statement but instead paraphrases what the source is saying and attributes the information to them.

Examples:

- **Direct quotation:** "I couldn't believe what was happening as I saw people start running in every direction," said Jane Smith, an eyewitness to the shootings. "It was as if we were in a bad Hollywood movie."
- **Partial quotation:** Jane Smith, who was closest to the scene of the shooting, said witnesses felt "as if we were in a bad Hollywood movie."
- **Paraphrase:** Jane Smith, who witnessed the shooting, described the chaos of the scene as something out of a Hollywood movie.

NOTES:

This primer is meant to be a general guide based on the principles of journalism in the U.S. However, jails and prisons may differ in their rules and regulations depending on the publication.