The P.I.T. (Aka, “The Point is This”)  
Jim’s Notes on Newswriting

VOL 1 ISSUE NO. 2: STORY ORGANIZATION

Story organization sounds so boring. It suggests writing by following a formula. “I’m a writer; I need to be spontaneous to be creative.” So many times we’ve heard that on the editing desk we call The P.I.T.

The fact is, the best writing is the product of planning and revision. Tightening up wordy sentences, rearranging paragraphs, adding detail, are all part of the discipline of producing a clear and compelling piece of writing. The revision process is part of a writer’s education. She always learns something from reworking a piece. And she comes to understand the art of structuring a story.

All writing benefits from effective structure, but newswriting carries its own demands. It must be clearly presented, succinct, authoritative, and fair to all parties discussed, all while telling the reader why that story is important. Your first draft will rarely be your final draft if you turn a critical eye to your writing.

When I was in journalism school, I took a class on critical writing. It was taught by a film critic, so we watched old classic films and wrote critical essays about them.

I remember one student wrote a colorful piece about an old western movie, but it was difficult to understand. He had organized his story to follow the chronology of the film, reflecting how the story was told. But a clearer presentation would have been organized around the major theme of the movie, and how various parts of the story supported that theme. It was a valuable lesson on the power of effective story organization.

How you put a story together is a key element in engaging the reader and getting your point across. But where to begin?

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Start your story with the primary point or the most important piece of information as simply as possible. The first paragraph of a news story is known as “the lead” because it contains the most important elements of the article.

Convey to the reader how you know your information. If this is something you witnessed, make that clear. If you got the information from reliable sources, identify them. If the source must be anonymous, describe them as best you can.

Tell the reader exactly why this story is important by giving crucial context or a brief history of the issues you are dealing with. This is called “the nut graf.” It’s the paragraph that states clearly the nut — the meat — of the story, and tells the reader why they should care.
The rest of the story should unfold with additional information that illuminates your theme and adds detail, including colorful quotes from sources, additional background, and anecdotes that bring the story alive.

This basic framework for a story is known in the news business as “the inverted pyramid.” Turn a triangle on its point and the broad base becomes the top where the most important information goes. The story unfolds with less and less vital detail, dwindling to the bottom point. For more detail, you can send us a request for the Prison Journalism Project's handout, "A Quick Guide to Journalism."

The pyramid is useful to readers who don’t have time to read the whole story. By reading the first four or five paragraphs they should get the most vital information, and they can return to the story for more detail later.

This is a vital roadmap to producing effective news writing. But there are other crucial points:

THE FIVE Ws


SAY IT ONCE

— Don’t repeat yourself. Deal with major elements of the story once. Going back and forth between points confuses the reader and will make your story longer than it should be. How long should it be? As short as possible while giving all the vital information.

THINK BEFORE YOU WRITE

— Plan your story. Sit and think about how you want to tell your tale. Write down the main points, arrange their order in the story, make an outline of what you want to say and the detail you will use: the facts you gathered, where you got them, the sources you talked to, the history of the story leading up to this development. A little planning goes a long way.

PLAY WITH IT

— Rework your story after writing the first draft. You are not only the writer, you are the first editor. Be critical. Look for vital information stuck low in the text. You might find you "buried the lead" by bringing in late a vital piece of information that might work better in the first paragraph. Tighten up sentences, eliminating every word that is not crucial to the story.

The more you write and think about story structure, the more it will become ingrained in you. It’s like riding a bicycle. What feels awkward at first eventually becomes a reflex. **The point is this: story**
structure is vital to effective written communication, and it gives you the framework to employ your creativity in conveying something about the world around you. It’s vital to thinking like a reporter.

There are many books about writing, perhaps thousands, some giving very technical instruction and others full of inspiration. But the one that may have sold more copies than any other is a classic. "The Elements of Style" was privately published in 1918 by a Cornell University professor named William Strunk, Jr., for students in his English classes. One of those students was E.B. White, who would go on to write "Charlotte's Web," other children’s classics and several collections of essays that are treasured by many readers. White wrote a piece about "the little book" in the New Yorker magazine in 1957, and was asked to edit a reissue of the book. That version is often referred to as "Strunk and White" and has reportedly sold upwards of 10 million copies.

Perhaps the most famous advice in the book is this:

"Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that he make every word tell."

Heed this advice, and you will be a hero to your editor.

Strunk’s original work is widely available online, for public consumption. We might dip into it for future editions of The P.I.T.

PJP Writer Paul Grossman’s April 12 story, "Human Again," describes a day — his birthday — when he receives his first visitor at his correctional facility in over a year. From his preparations in anticipation of the visit to his checking back into the facility, Grossman takes a relatively mundane event and turns it into a compelling read.

The narrative is well paced and never feels overwritten. But one element really makes it all work: the writer's attention to detail.

Grossman doesn't just tell us he got spruced up for the visit:

"I must have combed my hair half-a-dozen times, checked myself in the mirror at least 20 times, repeatedly cupped my hands over my mouth to check my breath (even though I will be wearing a mask due to COVID-19). My foot continually taps on the floor..."

He doesn't simply say he borrowed a sweater for the visit:

"I quickly put on my "visit shirt": a maroon St. John's Bay sweater someone lent me so I don’t go in
looking like a full-on convict. I don’t want to give my visitor pause by seeing me in prison colors."

Grossman doesn't simply go through security before the meeting:

"(I) show my ID to the CO. He makes a note of the shoes I am wearing, so I don’t switch shoes with my visitor. I have no watch, no belt, just the essentials."

Throughout the piece, this attention to the little things builds a vivid mental picture in the reader's eye. It reveals aspects of prison life that, while commonplace to the incarcerated, are news to outsiders like this editor. (Who knew about that shoe thing?) I read the piece several days ago and I can still see the movie it projected on my mind.

**Detailed reporting can make the difference between a ho-hum presentation and a gripping tale.**

Grossman's contrast of prison procedure (including a strip search after the visit) with his ebullient mood reveals a human spirit enduring the realities of incarceration. It's a very affecting piece.

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**STORY EXAMPLE: Human Again (April 12 by Paul Grossman)**

I am waiting in eager anticipation, checking the clock every minute or two as I sit on my bed in my state green pants and a sweater folded neatly beside me so it does not wrinkle before my visit. I must have combed my hair half-a-dozen times, checked myself in the mirror at least 20 times, repeatedly cupped my hands over my mouth to check my breath (even though I will be wearing a mask due to COVID-19). My foot continually taps on the floor until the corrections officer — the CO — calls out, "Grossman — visit!"

I quickly put on my "visit shirt": a maroon St. John's Bay sweater someone lent me so I don’t go in looking like a full-on convict. I don’t want to give my visitor pause by seeing me in prison colors. It’s interesting that judging someone based on the color of their skin is racist, but judging someone based on the color of their clothing is acceptable.

It is a freezing 3/4 mile walk to the visiting room. I am not allowed to wear thermals, and my jacket and hat must remain outside in a cubby-hole. Every step I take, bringing me closer to the building, is surreal. Not only has it been over a year since my last visit, but today is also my birthday. A local rabbi I have been corresponding with is my visitor; what a blessing!

Finally, I get to the visitor’s building and show my ID to the CO. He makes a note of the shoes I am wearing, so I don’t switch shoes with my visitor. I have no watch, no belt, just the essentials. I sit in the "boss chair," a metal director’s chair, and I slide down the seat as directed. I am good to go.

Then, in an instant, the visiting room door opens — a portal to the outside world. Through it I can see people sitting and eating, and children running around. This is as close to the outside as I will get, at least for a while, so I soak it up. I check in at the CO’s desk, and from there I can see the rabbi waiting. I am reminded by the CO on duty that there is no physical contact allowed due to
COVID. If there is contact, the visit will be ended immediately and I will be forcibly quarantined for fourteen days.

Arriving at the table, I inform the rabbi that I must take the seat facing the CO’s desk and that he is to sit across the table from me; the rabbi politely moves. It is awkward at first without a hug or at least a handshake, but that won’t ruin the experience. News of the second wave of the coronavirus has dominated the news, and this may be my last visit for quite some time. Visitations will surely be stopped again.

Tears begin to well up in my eyes. I can’t help it; the weight of the moment gets to me. This is my chance to speak with someone from the outside: This man who came in on his day off to visit someone he’s never met on their birthday in prison in the middle of a pandemic. I’m awestruck. He sees my eyes filling with tears and then so do his. I cannot let my emotions show because crying in prison is a no-no. As much as I want to be fully human in this moment, I cannot. After all, I am still incarcerated.

Our conversation is expansive, covering vast ground; everything from how I am doing to religion, situations I am dealing with in prison, and my plans for re-entry. The conversation makes me feel human again — what an amazing sensation!

Time quickly passes and soon the rabbi has to go. I thank him profusely for his visit, and we agree to stay in contact. He leaves the table, and per procedure I stay seated until the COs call me over to the desk. After they hand me my ID card, it’s time for the strip search.

The CO points to Frisk Room #3 as he puts on his latex gloves, popping them at the wrists as they snap into place. Time to get naked. Everything at this point is done upon CO command to ensure no contraband is smuggled back into the facility.

I open my mouth and swirl my fingers around the gums — nothing there. Then I take one boot off at a time and hand each over. One sock at a time, turn them inside out — no shaking — and hand each over. Then my sweater, t-shirt, pants, and underwear. I am now fully naked. I am so used to this procedure that it doesn’t phase me. I show the bottoms of my feet and yes, I bend over and spread my cheeks — all clear. I get dressed, and I’m out the door.

This time, the 3/4 mile walk back to my housing unit is over in an instant. I don’t even feel the freezing cold. It’s still warm and cozy here on cloud nine.

Regardless of the extra COVID procedures, I really needed that. I am just grateful visits are happening at all. As I enter my housing unit, everyone asks how my visit went. There is a certain glow one has when we come back from a visit, and I have it. I say it went well and head back to my bed. As I lie there a tear drips down my face. I cannot help it. It is true joy.