

Article styles and structure training module

Why international conventions at all?

- Every culture/language has its own familiar standards and conventions of writing in the press.

For example, in some cultures and in some languages, it is common to put the most important piece of information last in an article, as a "zinger" at the end to wake the reader up and add that element of surprise. But other cultures work backwards, putting the key bits of information first instead.

- But in an international sphere, internationally recognised conventions are needed so that people from different cultures can feel familiar with the text.
- Always remember: you are not writing for your neighbour; you are writing for people in South Africa, Portugal, Thailand, Brazil and Nebraska.

Aren't you just plugging one culture's style here?

- In a sense, yes, the standard and conventions we are calling "international" here do come out of an Anglo-Saxon, or Anglo-American, tradition.
- But there are reasons for this besides cultural imperialism:
 - The most widely understood language is now English, and that fact will lead to thematic expectations as well as simple linguistic ones.
 - Some aspects of international journalism (putting the most important bits first, for example) exist because the natural audience for many international publications (think Economist, IHT) tend to be business people and other international players, people who generally need to read a lot every day. They have little time to read full articles and are often only able to skim the first few lines.
- Special note: no one is making a value judgement here. No style is better or worse. We're just talking about what the international audience is used to.
- It is rather a fact of the modern world that readers now have certain expectations of international publications that they do not have of their local, regional and national publications.
- As for using these international styles in your local publications, you have to decide what's worth keeping here and what isn't. Pick-n-mix.

Four basic styles

There are a number of different article styles, but four of them are very widely recognised internationally:

1. news
2. news analysis
3. feature
4. opinion/comment

News

- Qualities:
 - fully factual accounts
 - loaded with detail
 - devoid of personal opinion
 - usually very time-sensitive and should be fresh
- in theory, straight news is simple to write
- in practice it can be quite difficult
 - too many facts (delete some?)
 - ordering the facts (most important first)
- Note: IWPR is not a news agency, but we do occasionally run straight news pieces.

News analysis

- Qualities:
 - go beyond pure facts
 - explain events and put them into context
 - have a direction but based on a facts
 - they must be informative and balanced

- Objectivity and balance are essential:
 - no personal opinion
 - items reported must be facts
 - facts must be credited to sources
 - analysis and should be based on these facts
 - If you quote a source putting forward one opinion, there must be an opposing view put forward by another source.

- Details:
 - time critical: mention WHEN in the 1st or 2nd par
 - written in the third person
 - short sentences and paragraphs
 - often one sentence per paragraph
 - 25 words max (20 for a lead) per sentence
 - sometimes longer in features
 - one idea per paragraph
 - not dogmatic (just making it easier to read)
 - avoiding the "wall of text" (esp. online)
 - precise dates (not "last week" but "on July 15")
 - inverted pyramid style: most important facts at the top, least important at the bottom

- NOTE: news analysis is the dominant style at IWPR

Pattern of a news analysis article:

The following is a basic outline of a news analysis article. It is a formulaic oversimplification, to be sure, but still, many journalists have found this pattern approach useful as a guide, and it can help to get journalists thinking about structure. It should not be seen as an ironclad system, more a useful framework to start planning your article.

Title:	don't worry about a title; the editor will most likely write one
Lead:	10 to 15 words explaining what has happened, where, when and why it is important
Paragraph 1 (news):	recount what has happened, who is involved in the event, where it happened, and when; this is a "taster" of the event, not every detail
Paragraph 2 (significance):	explain why the new event is significant, tell the reader what the new event is likely to affect, how is the situation in the country likely to change as a result of this event
Paragraph 3 & 4 (context):	very short background, explaining as briefly as possible the key events preceding this new event, putting this latest event into the context of recent developments
Then arguments proving your lead:	<p>three or four sets of two or three paragraphs each, building your argument as you go. A single set of paragraphs can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expand the background of the situation, presenting a fuller series of events leading up to this new event (in chronological order), or • present a series of balancing quotes commenting on the new event, or • describe a sub-issue related to the new event and its meaning.
Final paragraph:	conclude with a reminder why the new event is important, leave a lasting image in the reader's mind, and never add new material here

Three notes on length:

Sentence length:	no longer than 25 words
Paragraph length:	one or two sentences in the initial summary paragraphs (1 & 2); later paragraphs can be three or four sentences
Article length:	700-900 words

Exercise: News analysis basics

A: work together on lead-writing (30 minutes)

1. ask the class for some current news items from their country and select a good story from those
2. ask group to write a lead for that story, work together as a class
3. repeat this lead-writing exercise two or three times, until participants find it easier

B: work individually on lead and 1st four paragraphs (40 minutes)

1. again, ask the class for some current news items from their country and select a good story from those
2. ask everyone to write a lead and the first four paragraphs of a news analysis article dealing with that story
3. after ten minutes, ask participants to present their work to the group by writing their exercise on the blackboard
4. compare the written work to the new analysis formula

Features

- Qualities:
 - evocative piece
 - it tells a story
 - it is colourful, with well-written images
 - usually a bit longer (1500-2000 words)
- Features bring the reader right to the location of the story, as if the reader were looking through the journalist's eyes.
- For this reason, the lead of a feature is the key element. The feature lead should:
 - capture the mood.
 - create an image and appeal to the imagination.
 - instantly transport the reader to the location.
 - (more on leads when we talk about structure)

Opinion/comment

- Often misunderstood
- What it is not:
 - not a place for rage
 - not the place simply to write what you feel
 - not a place for emotion
- An opinion/comment piece should:
 - have something important to say.
 - develop a convincing argument.
 - be able to stand up to informed criticism.
 - be well-written.
 - be clear the reader is listening to the writer's voice.
- Each piece should:
 - have a particular voice and personal style.
 - be built on careful reporting, analysis and assessment
 - focus on one subject.
 - present new insights in a lively, even controversial, manner.
 - stimulate readers to think and see a subject from a different angle.
 - show rather than tell.
 - use examples and stories rather than confront the reader with bare opinions.
 - focus on the issue and not the writer's experiences.
 - be consistent in tone (chose one voice and stick with it)
- An opinion/comment piece can be formal or informal, depending on the subject matter.

Parts of an article:

NOTE: If much class time was spent on the parts of a news/analysis article, instructors may wish to skip this next section, as it repeats some of the information there.

The THREE parts of an article are:

1. lead
2. body
3. conclusion

Lead

- the lead is the opening of an article, the first paragraph
- aim:
 - to grab the reader's attention immediately
 - to tell the whole story in one, short sentence
- Two types of lead:
 - Summary leads, typical for news pieces, summarise the main facts of the story and pack as much information as possible:

After a high-speed chase through Budva yesterday, police arrested a 45-year-old journalist and charged him with speeding and resisting arrest.
 - Anecdotal leads, typical for features, use a story or some colour to interest the reader and capture the mood of the story:

Sixteen year old Petrisor Lazar wears the face of a 40-year-old - tired, weary and disillusioned. He works hard all day and part of the night at a small private garage in Bucharest.
- More types of leads on the IWPR Web site

Body

- All material in a piece should be unified and belong to the same theme.
- structure needs to be disciplined:
 - the writer is drawing a picture
 - irrelevant info will lose the reader.
- each paragraph needs to follow on logically from the previous one so the reader can follow the narrative
- flow of a piece is susceptible to common mistakes; avoid the following:
 - duplication/repetition
 - long quotes
 - non-essential information
- overall structure of a piece needn't be linear (use of summary breaks, for example)
- Generally, however, the overall structure of a piece can be chronological or it can develop by theme.
- When in doubt, use chronology: time is often the best engine for your narrative.

Article conclusions

- the end
- not the time for new information
- remind the reader why this story is important
- give the reader that feeling of closure
- leave reader with a single significant thought
- your final chance to leave a lasting impression

Overview of this hour:

- There are international conventions, because international readers have certain expectations.
- We covered four types of article: news, news analysis, feature and opinion/comment.
- We covered the three parts of an article: lead, body and conclusion.

Discussion and questions

- How does the local style and structure differ from international styles and structures?
- Questions from the floor?