

GENERAL WRITING & REPORTING TIPS

General Structure/Definitions

A **lede** is the first sentence of a news story. A straight lede is normally 35 words or fewer and gives a complete summary of the story. Some general rules:

- **Do not use names in the lede.** Instead, provide context for the story. “Police arrested a Hollywood man Tuesday...” provides more context than providing that person’s name. The exception is if the story directly involves someone famous.
- **Answer the “when” “where” “what” “how” in the lede.** Unstated is the “why,” which is the overarching reasons you’re writing the story at all. That is, the other questions answer the “why should I care?” part.
- **An example:** “Police arrested a Hollywood man Tuesday, accusing him of riding his motorcycle naked at high speeds near the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood Airport.”
- Note this example avoids using the **name** in the lede, the name of the police **agency** that made the arrest or even exactly the **crime** he is alleged to have committed. **Instead, it gets directly to the action, and thus, why we care about this story at all.** The other information is important, and needs to be in the story, but not in the lede.
- **A source is always necessary.** In the lede, however, that source can be vague. In this example, it is “police.” In others, it might be “officials said” or “authorities said.” Again, however, the precise source must be spelled out somewhere in the story, usually by the second or third graf.

After the lede, your story needs to fill out any information provided in the lede, provide additional context for the story and, almost always, **quotes**. There are, in general, two types of quotes.

- A **direct quote** is where you take someone’s exact words and put them into your story.
- A **paraphrase** is where you source a particular bit of opinion or information to a particular person, but you put it in your own words.

In general, **paraphrasing is far more useful for imparting information** while a **direct quote is far superior for showing opinion or emotion**. Remember that all matters of fact or opinion need to be sourced to someone or something (such as a document or other public record).

As such, paraphrasing makes it easier for you to organize your writing around the information you’re trying to get across rather than using someone else’s sentence

structure to do so. In fact, structuring a quote around a paraphrase and a direct quote is often the most fluid and impactful way to utilize a source.

- **An example:** Andy Garmond, a climate scientist and professor at Florida Atlantic University, said poorer areas of north Miami-Dade County are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise.

“The city of North Miami is just screwed,” he said. “It’s going to be a real mess.”

In the example above, these two sentences were likely pulled out of an interview that may have lasted 30 minutes or more. Garmond may have taken 15 minutes of that time explaining South Florida soil science, oceanography or even the types of plants that may be impacted by sea-level rise.

But your story is about the impacts on poorer areas, so your use of Garmond needs to be focused on that, not the thousand other things he decided to wax philosophic about. All sentences including – and perhaps particularly – quotes need to forward the reason for the story itself.

Budget Line Format

In most newspaper organizations, reporters are required to pitch stories to their editors in a specific format. This is often called a “budget line.” This is a summary of the proposed story, its intended length, whether there will be art or other multimedia included and its deadline.

This gives the editor a quick, easy-to-read way to see all of the articles that are expected for that person’s planning purposes. Because of this, the budget lines need to be done in a uniform way. When filling one out, use the format below:

Slug: English-only highway signs

Writer: Jayda Hall

Summary: When driving on the roads of Miami-Dade and Broward counties, motorists are reminded every few miles to use their turn signals, not to jump in and out of the traffic lanes and all manner of other reminders. But these signs are only in English. Why not Spanish as well?

Live Art/Photographer: Yes, of highway signs (Hall)

Words: 600

Deadline: May 11 @ 6pm

Note that this assumes you have a solid understanding of the story you are writing, have already talked to some potential sources and know your deadline. For class purposes, art or multimedia is extra credit, but generally required for SFNS pieces.

Tips for Good Writing

- You will be much better served if you **focus your work on a single theme, person or issue**. Do not stray from your focus, or your writing will suffer.
- **People dream, wish, imagine, think and say**. Buildings, school districts, councils, etc. do not. **A district may have a spokeswoman, but it has no mouth**. Remember that.
- **“That” is often completely unnecessary**. The next time you type it, reread to see if the sentence reads better without it. It probably will.
- **Do not use the first person, editorialize** or otherwise show the reader you personally feel something is great, boring, tedious, wonderful, generous, etc.
- **But allow others to say it**, or indicate that something is boring by showing what makes it boring. That is, not “Student were bored by the class,” but “Several students rolled their eyes or yawned through the 90-minute class, with nearly a third of the students appearing to be asleep.”
- **That is: Show don’t tell**.
- Sourcing. When you **make a statement of fact, you need to attribute it to something or someone**. Otherwise, you’re writing an editorial, a column or an advertisement. **SFNS and/or this class is for none of these things**. Do not do it. For instance, do not write:

The class is learning new things about electricity, thanks to a grant from Miami-Dade County.

Instead, write:

The class, said teacher Floyd McManus, is learning new things about electricity, thanks to a grant the school received from Miami-Dade County.

Even when it seems tedious, write “he said,” “she said,” etc. If it’s excessive, I’ll let you know and I’ll edit it out. But it won’t be. **Read a paper closely, and see how often this comes up.**

- **Also, be aware of what you're doing when you use the word "said."** The following should be your go-to verbs:
 - o **"Said"** – used only for human beings
 - o **"Stated"** – only used when quoting from documents (policy manuals, lawsuits, etc.)
 - o **"Acknowledged"** – used sparingly to show something surprising... The quoted equivalent of "however"

This means the following words: **sighed, exclaimed, admitted, explained**, (especially!), should not be used.

- **Adverbs are always inappropriate.** Avoid.
- **Watch your transitions.** Make sure one paragraph smoothly follows the next.
- **Along those lines, don't quote people back-to-back.** Make sure you have a transition between sources.
- **Use the active voice.** Passive voice is boring. Sometimes it's unavoidable, but most of the time it is not. Let's go over a few examples:

Active: Dozens of students at John Burroughs High School in Miami Gardens participated in a protest against funding cuts Tuesday.

Passive: A protest against funding cuts was held Tuesday, and students from John Burroughs High School in Miami Gardens took part.

- **Titles.** This is a big one. Many get confused about when to capitalize, and when not to do so. Here's a quick refresher.

In general, capitalize only when it is a formal title used before an individual's name. **E.g., Miami Mayor Carlos Gimenez BUT Carlos Gimenez, mayor of Los Angeles.**

Honorary titles like **Mr./Mrs./Ms. are generally not used.** The title "Dr." is only used when talking about people with **medical degrees**, NOT Ph.Ds.

Titles are often used as descriptors. These are lowercase. For example, teacher Joan Allen, movie star Charlie Sheen, peanut farmer Jimmy Carter.

When talking to people with long titles, use the name followed by a comma, followed by a title. For example: **John Dean, vice-provost student affairs for FIU.**

When someone has a title that does not describe what they do, at least as it relates to their story, **do not bother with their formal title.** It is irrelevant to the reader's understanding, and mostly distracts. **For example: If you're writing about Asst. Supt. Human Resources for Faculty Mary Boger,** it may be best to describe her as "Mary Boger, who serves as the district's personnel director for teachers, said..."

- **Numbers: Write out one through nine.** Use digits for 10 and above. There are a ton of exceptions. **Look at the AP guide.** Learn it. Love it.
- **Ellipses:** Try to avoid. They look strange in a sentence. Best to recast the sentence to use the full phrase. If you have to use it, don't use it at the break in a quote. **For example, do not do this:** "This has got to stop," Jim Nance said. "...I'm losing it completely."

Better phrased: **Jim Nance said the noise outside his window was getting worse and worse each night.**

"This has got to stop," he said. (Note the space between the paraphrase and the direct quote.)

- **If you get stuck about how a particular word or phrase is styled, a quick and easy trick is to put the phrase into the search field of the NYT or Miami Herald.** Rest assured, that's what I do when I don't know, and the AP Stylebook is hardly a complete resource for all things style, as I'm sure you've realized by now.

The Use of Color in Stories

This is something you have to feel. It's a bit like seasoning. You want a bit, but not too much. **A story without color is dry and boring, like boiled chicken without any salt.**

A story with too much color, though, is worse. Like a meal with too much pepper, cloves or hot sauce, such articles vary between unpalatable and unreadable.

The use of color requires a deft touch, as you can be going right up to the line of editorializing, which you should not do. Show, don't tell is a good rule of thumb for all writing, and goes doubly when using color.

For instance, saying someone is fat, old, attractive, unpleasant, nice, etc. are judgment calls. Instead, say what makes someone fat. Does their gut hang over their belt? Is their head so large it appears they lack a neck?

Types of stuff available to you: **Sight/Sound/Smell/Tactile/Color/Action/Emotion**

You can report on what people are wearing, if it's somehow relevant. **Like race, however, reporting on clothing can be problematic.** Generally, reporters --both male and female -- only focus on women's clothing. Don't be one.

Tips for Good Reporting

- **Know your beat or area of coverage as completely as possible.** This means contacting the obvious sources (politicians, police, large businesses). However, this also means contacting and becoming familiar with less obvious people. These include:
 - **Executive assistants**, clerks and other gatekeeper
 - **Small business owners** (like hair salons, bakeries or any other place where people hang out)
 - **Clergy** of all stripes and traditions
 - **Involved citizens**, including people that volunteer on government boards or agencies
 - **Workers (including executives) of nonprofits**
 - **Clients** of those nonprofits

- **Your goal in coverage should be to create as accurate a mirror as possible** of the world around you with your pen. It's a challenge, to be sure, but if you always keep that in the back of your mind, you'll be on the right path.

- **This mirror, by the way, means embracing the entire tapestry of the world around you**, not just the six or seven go-to sources. This is somewhat less of a problem in school, but out in the world, reporters often fall victim to always going to the sources they found are reliable and interesting. **They fail to move outside their comfort zone, and as a result, the reporting becomes bland, and that mirror is warped.**

- **Fixing this requires more than simply "let's quote a black guy because we haven't for a couple weeks."** No. It requires developing and maintaining sources across ethnic lines. This, again, takes time and **there are no shortcuts.** However, by getting sources with different backgrounds, traditions and points of view, you are getting ever closer to what the world really looks like. **Think of your sources like a light source. Some are very powerful, like a stadium light, and others are more like a candle.** However, they all only point in a particular direction, and by developing as many as possible, **you can begin to see the room from the darkness.** (Can you tell my undergraduate degree is in philosophy?)

- **Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you cannot get someone to call you back or give you the information you need for a story. When this happens (not if),** you have a few tactics at your disposal. These include:
 - **Persistence.** Continue to call or email until you get an answer. You can also show up at someone's office. As long as you're polite, this is not aggressive. Showing up also puts a type of social pressure on your source, as we are generally trained to assist those who ask for our help.

- **Public Records.** If you believe the information you see is a public record, you can ask for it either informally (e.g. “Hey Tom, can I get the salary schedule?”) or formally (via a Sunshine Act or FOIA request). Informally is always better because it’s quicker.
 - **Research.** Though you should be doing this in all instances, a Google search on your source or subject of interest can (but not always) give you enough background to break through to a hesitant source. Which leads to....
 - **Pressure.** With this information, you can ask about things that don’t seem to make sense, and inform your source it’s in his/her best interest to talk to you. For example, “Hey Tom, Dan calling again. I’m seeing on Redfin you recently bought a house for \$1.5 million. We’re planning on using that information in our salary story tomorrow. Given your salary is \$40,000 a year, people are probably going to wonder about that. **Please give me a call. My deadline is 4 pm**”
- **When talking to sources, especially ones that are difficult, it’s important to give a deadline.** In the world, this deadline is fairly well set by your publication or editor. **In school, it’s a bit more flexible, and giving one to your source may feel a bit arbitrary. Despite this, setting a deadline will very much help you.** Why? Because after that point, you can use the “did not respond to requests for comment” without making an additional phone call. If they call you back past that point, great. If not, oh well.

Pros/Cons of types of interviews

In-person PROS

- Can't hang up on you
- Create a personal connection, source sees you as a human being, and you see your source as one
- More likely to get more detailed information
- Can tell emotion or veracity by tone or pauses
- Can press for more information.
- Very certain (close to absolute) you're talking to the person you believe you're speaking to
- Possible to talk about other topics that lead to further stories (tangential conversations)
- Actual conversation

In-person CONS:

- Much, much more time consuming than any other method
- People may flake on appointments, gatekeepers (e.g., executive assistants) may not let you see them
- Requires more guts
- If recording, transcribing time
- If not, more potential for errors
- Hand cramp from taking notes

Phone PROS

- Easier to get ahold of people, as taking a phone call is less time consuming (for you and them) than an in-person meeting
- Can find cell phone to get around gatekeepers, easier to take notes while typing on the phone
- Geographic concerns do not apply... You can talk to someone in San Diego on deadline, but you can't talk to them in person
- Can tell emotion or veracity by tone or pauses
- Can press for more information (similar to in person but not as effective)
- Certain, though less so than in-person, that you're talking to the person you believe you're talking to

Phone CONS

- You can get hung up on
- Gatekeepers can refuse to take messages or fail to deliver them
- Personal voicemails may get lost or ignored
- Can't see body language

Email PROS

- Extremely time efficient. You can send an email and do other things while waiting for a return email.
- Record of response (or lack thereof)
- Little to no chance of misquote

Email CONS

- Less sure the person you're reaching out to is actually writing the response. You could be talking to a hacker, a spoofer, or someone speaking on that person's behalf
- Easy to be ignored or claim an email was never received.
- Stilted response. People don't write like they talk. Almost, but not quite
- Rarely get an accidental slip of information
- Follow-ups are more difficult than other methods; initial email may be answered but follow-ups ignored.
- Your emails can be forwarded (and will be forwarded) to others without your consent or knowledge
- If talking to public official, emails are part of public record

On the Record / Off the Record

- As soon as you've identified yourself as a journalist, all further communication is **considered on the record** unless explicitly stated otherwise.
- Going off the record is an **agreement** (contract) between you and your source. As such, you can refuse to go off the record. In such instances, the best way to word this is "I'm sorry, I would prefer to remain on the record. What can you tell me for attribution?"
- In this class, all **off-the-record quotes or paraphrased information** (aka blind attribution) must be cleared by me. I will deny all requests unless the safety or the livelihood of the source is at stake.
- Going **off the record is not retroactive**. That is, if someone starts talking, and then says "well, that was off the record" well, too bad. It wasn't. If you are dealing with non media-savvy sources (the elderly, non-political people, working folks), it is generally considered polite to give such people a pass on this rule. If you choose to do so, you should educate them on the aspect of journalism, as the next person may not be so kind.
- Again, as a member of SFNS and/or a student in one of my classes, anything **except full attribution for a direct quote or paraphrase needs to be OK'd by me before you use it in a story**. That includes those only giving **first names**, **"ghost quotes"** (e.g., "A man in the crowd said...") as well as the more common **"a person who asked not to be named..."**
- **When we use anonymous or quasi-anonymous quotes**, we must also state the reason why we are providing this to the source. That is, "A man, who requested not to be named because he feared for his daughter's safety, said..."