

Booklet 7: WRITING



ASSIGNMENTS

ASSIGNMENT #1

In small groups, go through last year's yearbook and have each group pick five spreads. Have each group analyze the copy and make notes about the copy and if they followed the basic writing guidelines.

Once complete, reconvene as a group and discuss.

GATHERING INFORMATION

Good reporting is about keen first-hand observation, smart interviewing, and answers the five W's and one H: who, what, where, when, why, and how. Good reporting leads to good stories which lets your readers experience what you have experienced through your lively, informative copy.

Prior to leaving for an event, Reporters should always prepare themselves for their assignment.

Background Research: Before leaving for an event or activity, do some background research. Understand the event you're covering, define the purpose of your interview, conduct some preliminary research on your interview subjects. Interview people closely associated with the event or activity who may have different viewpoints on the event or activity. Reporters must listen to their source carefully and react to their responses thoughtfully to develop rapport, and an easy, back-and-forth conversational style. The more preparation, the more your coverage will be meaningful and filled with purpose.

Open-Ended Questions: Limit the number of yes/no questions. These kinds of questions do not allow your subject to elaborate or provide you with insight. Make sure you create a concrete list of open-ended questions that will allow your subject to provide you with all the details you need to provide a detailed picture of the event and experiences.

Know your Goal: Good interviewers have clear goals for what they want and need out of the interview. What obstacle does, or will the individual face, that may be difficult to overcome? What achievement, talent, practice, or experience did the individual draw on to overcome the obstacle head-on?

Details make the Difference: Each story is unique and different from other stories because of the details. That is why interviewers want to meet the person at the place that is the context for the story,

whether it is the locker room, the drama room, or the physics lab. That way they can do reporting before, during and after an interview. Such places are rich in descriptive detail, which they observe and write down in their reporter's notebook.

Take Good Notes: Write down everything you can about the conversation (do not hesitate to record the interview if the interviewee is ok with it). They need to pay attention to record concrete details – numbers, dates, statistics, key words, distinctive phrases, and direct quotations. Once the interview is over, make sure to get their contact information where they can be reached if you need additional information or clarification. It is very important to be accurate. The smallest error can cause embarrassment.

ASSIGNMENT #2

Breaking up the classroom into small groups, have each group create a reporter checklist. Make sure that each group understands that the checklist must cover the points discussed in the previous section.

Once complete, reconvene as a class and formalize on a checklist that will be used by reporters at all events/activities/interviews this upcoming year.

WRITING THE STORY

Good writing follows good reporting and interviewing.

Once you have gathered all the information you will need from the field, creating a narrative story structure is the next step. All you need now is a great story, great material that surprises and delights the reader while grabbing and holding the reader's attention, with great words presented stylishly.

COPY

Regardless of their complexity, all stories have a beginning, middle, and end.

- The beginning or opening establishes the scene, sets the mood and tone, introduces the main characters, and grips the reader's attention to draw them further into the story.
- The middle tells the main part of the story with facts and description that appeals to human senses (sight, sound, touch, and occasionally smell and taste) and emotions.
- The end concludes the story, sums up the action, and often returns to the opening scene for the conclusion.

In addition to these basic elements, stories have certain characteristics that should be followed. These characteristics ensure that you maintain order, objectivity, and accuracy.

Unity: Stick to telling one story. Eliminate anything that does not have some part in telling the story. Avoid padding the story with irrelevant details.

Mood: The overall mood of the story is determined by carefully chosen adjectives, strong verbs, and sometimes the facts of the story.

Focus: Only include relevant information. Know your reader and do not burden them with commonplace background or historical information they all know.

Angle: The point of view or perspective from which your story is told. Most stories are written in the third person past tense.

Sources: Be sure to include the names of people who do and say things in your story.

Objectivity: Do not include yourself in the story. Write "The Falcons had a great season" instead of "We had a great season." Never editorialize or express your opinions in the story.

Direct Quotes: Quotes are a great way to bring in the subject's emotions or spirit in a short, concise manner. Always indicate who the speaker is and do not forget quotation marks.

WORD TRAPS TO AVOID

- 1. Slang:** It's amazing how quickly neat, far-out, and hip phrases can go out of style and become meaningless. Grok?
- 2. Nicknames:** Not everyone knows that Matthew B. is sometimes known as Stinky, and maybe he'd like to keep it that way.
- 3. Rhetorical Questions:** Should we really be asking this, or is it self-evident???
- 4. Redundancy:** Repetition, reiteration, and re-statement make your stories long, boring, dull, and uninteresting.
- 5. Flowery Prose:** Watch out for overuse of smart, clever, witty, bright, and brainy phrases.
- 6. Vague Details:** It's hard to say how often this word trap can almost be the downfall of your story.
- 7. Bad Puns:** Unlike old cheese, say a cheddar, these bad puns won't get any beddar.

To yield the best result for your copy, writers should develop their stories in stages. This will ensure that they do not miss any pieces and hit all the key elements:

- 1. First Draft:** Look for a good opening and closing. List story elements in point form. Try for story completeness, but do not worry about spelling, grammar, or composition just yet.
- 2. Second Draft:** Work on content. The story elements should all be there by now but not completely polished.
- 3. Final Draft:** Perform spelling and grammar checks. Proofread carefully for errors not found by spellcheck. Have other individuals read your story. Make any corrections and submit it to the editor.

ASSIGNMENT #3

Choose one of the following topics to write a short article about (200 to 300 words).

- New changes to the school
- The Student Handbook
- The Christmas Auction [or other relevant events from your school]
- Jersey Day [or other relevant events from your school]

Have students do research for this article and interview someone in the class.

HEADLINE & SUBHEADS

Like other page elements, the headline should evolve as the rest of the page elements are developed. Study the photos, the copy, and any graphics that will appear on the spread. Highlight phrases that describe the story, look for key ideas in the pictures, and list words and phrases that seem relevant.

PURPOSE OF HEADLINES

- A headline catches your attention.
- A headline summarizes what the spread is about.
- A headline teases, tantalizes and creates anticipation for what's next.
- Show don't tell.
- A headline sells the story to readers.
- A headline helps direct the reader's attention, so they know where to start.
- A headline reflects the style and personality of the publication
- A headline connects with readers' emotions to create a sense of drama and consequence

The headline introduces the opening metaphor or premise of the story. If the headline is clever and witty, a reader might expect the story and spread to offer up more of the same.

A second headline called a subhead, usually written in sentence form, performs the heavy lifting by introducing the opening action of the storyline. It sets up the story. It usually follows the main headline in smaller type, but it can also be used as a reading or read-out to the main headline.

Never take the reader for granted. You should still 'sell' the story package to your reader. Readers are timid, and they should be rewarded when they stop on the spread and engage. That, of course, is what you really want — a reaction — and then interaction with the carefully planned bits of the story you have presented.

TIPS FOR WRITING A HEADLINE

Because headline type is big, you do not have much space to get your point across. There are some habits, grammatically speaking, that will save space and use words economically:

Write in present tense. It uses fewer words than past tense.

Use active voice. It uses fewer words and is more action oriented.

Use picture nouns and action verbs. They create imagery in the reader's mind.

Do not split from one line to the next: a noun and a verb, a verb and an adverb, a noun, and an adjective, or split a prepositional phrase.

Keep it short and simple.

Write headlines like sentences: Capitalize the first letter of the first word, and proper nouns. Nothing else.

Do not state the obvious.

Do not repeat the lead or introduction to your story.

Tell the truth. Be accurate.

Be creative, but do not distort the story.

Avoid the familiar. Lead with unusual details.

Capture the feeling or emotion of the moment.

Focus the headline tightly on the unifying idea of the spread.

ASSIGNMENT #4

Have students go through last year's yearbook and rewrite the headlines for 5 spreads each. Present the results to the class and discuss.

CAPTIONS

When someone looks at a picture, they'll look at the caption for the specifics (name, place, context), but every caption should also intrigue in a way that makes them look back at the picture because they just learned something they didn't know before they read the caption. Reward readers by revealing new insights and information with every few paragraphs.

ELEMENTS OF A CAPTION

Lead-In:

A mini-headline that grabs the reader's attention and directs you from the caption to the photo.

Basic Info:

An introductory sentence that indicates who and what is occurring in the photo. It uses present tense.

Necessary Details:

You need a past tense sentence that adds information that is not obvious in the photo. The outcome or consequence of the action in the photo is usually found here.

Direct Quote:

Quotes capture the thoughts of those who were attending the event as they happen. The quote should be by someone in the photo. The quote can sometimes come before the necessary details.

CAPTIONS DO'S & DON'T'S

DO:

1. Begin captions with colourful, interesting words that have impact. Also vary the openings, the first few words of the first sentence.
2. Captions should be written concisely, yet include specific information rather than broad, general statements.
3. Captions should supplement the story content of the picture with additional information. They should not repeat the content of a photo but expand on that content. Paint a word picture to supplement the action.
4. Identify all or at least the most important people in the photograph unless it is a large crowd shot. In action photos involving several students, it is well to identify all individuals when five or less are featured.
5. Write in present tense, active voice in most cases, as though the action were occurring now.
6. Use colourful, lively verbs. Avoid 'to be' verbs (is, are, was, were).
7. Captions should be written in complete sentences. Higher level captions usually include two or more sentences. The first sentence refers directly to the action in the photo and is written in present tense. The succeeding sentence(s) provide specific additional information and are written in past tense for clarity.
8. Use titles and full names of subjects for both students and adults. Preferably use short titles before a name rather than after, which will help the rhythm of the sentence and will not break up the flow of the description.
9. In group shots identify people by row, clearly specifying row position. Never use "First Row" or "Row One," since the reader will not know whether it is the top or bottom row. Use "Front Row" and "Back Row" or "Bottom Row" and "Top Row." Number the rows in between ("2nd Row" or "Row 2"). Use a type variation for row designations so they stand out for the reader (bold face, italic, full caps). However, you identify people in group shots, be sure that all group captions throughout the book use a standard, consistent style. Do not indicate left to right as that is the normal way.
10. Select an effective typographical 'lead-in' to capture the reader's attention (headline, bold face, italics, full caps, or a combination).
11. Select a type size and/or style so that captions are distinguishable from body copy. Yearbook captions are generally smaller point size than body copy.

DON'T:

1. Do not state the obvious.
2. Do not repeat facts that are included in the copy.
3. Do not make up a caption. The reporter must find out what was taking place when the picture was taken.
4. Do not editorialize.
5. Do not personalize captions with words such as 'our' and 'your.'
6. Do not use first or second person, except in quoting 'I' or 'you.'
7. Do not use abbreviations, except those that are widely known and recognized.
8. Do not use nicknames.
9. NEVER write 'gag captions' that are silly, cute, or sarcastic. They are usually poor attempts to be humorous. Feelings can be hurt too easily, and they may even be libelous.
10. Do not start captions with a long list of names. In fact, avoid beginning any caption with a name.
11. Do not include in-picture identifications such as "pictured above" or "left to right." Such information is understood, and it merely becomes clutter. But be sure to name people from left to right.
12. Avoid beginning with 'a,' 'an' and 'the.'
13. Avoid 'to be' verbs.
14. Do not say that John Doe does something while so and so looks on. Do not say that someone concentrates on whatever he is doing. Do not say that someone demonstrates something (they're actually doing, not demonstrating).

ASSIGNMENT #5

Project five action photos. Have someone act as the person(s) in the photo and allow students to interview them. The captions they write need to have a headline (a visual-verbal link between the headline and the photo), a present tense sentence that tells what is going on without stating the obvious, a background sentence in past tense that tells something specific and a quote.
