

WRITING PERFECTION

**How to develop great ideas
and write amazing stories
for your audience**

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What's News?

- **IMPACT:** Will it have an effect on their lives or pocketbooks? (taxes, schools, road construction)
- **HELPFULNESS:** News you can use (where to register to vote, get flu shot, food recalls)
- **IMMEDIACY:** Has this story just happened? Is it about to happen? (government meetings, arrests, fires, sports scores)
- **PROXIMITY:** How close is this story? Relatable to our town or a town like ours?
- **PROMINENCE/CELEBRITY:** Does this story involve a well-known public figure? (Kanye, Meryl Streep,)

What's News?

- **NOVELTY:** Is something new, odd or surprising going on? (Did a man bite a dog?)
- **CONFLICT:** A political battle? A sports rivalry? (IU-Purdue, Trump's Tweets)
- **EMOTIONS:** Does this story make us sad? Happy? Angry? (Heart donor recipient in wedding)
- **TRENDS:** Is this something that can continue for quite some time? (Teacher shortage, tech, debt)
- **ENTERTAINING:** Quirky, offbeat story (12-year-old who stumbled into a million-dollar painting)

What Interests Readers?

In descending order:

- **Dogs**
- **People (those involved)**
- **Facts (relevant & advance the story)**
- **People (observers/experts)**
- **Numbers**

Extrapolation

extrapolate: *to form an opinion or to make an estimate about something from known facts.*

- **A more significant, broader story lies beyond a particular event.**

Example:

A student is hospitalized after mixing Red Bull sports drink with vodka. How might you extrapolate a broader story from this?

More on Extrapolation

- **Think creatively.**

Example:

What might happen to unsold Super Bowl merchandise when the game is over?

Synthesis

synthesis: *the composition or combination of parts or elements so as to form a whole.*

- **Trend stories. Find the thread that ties several apparently unrelated events together.**

Example:

One student is touring Europe after graduation; another grad is staying in town to work as a waitress; another is joining the Peace Corps. What is the trend?

More on Synthesis

- **Two different people doing something could be coincidence. Three different people doing something could be a trend.**
- **Change is often the key to a great trend story. Watch for increases or decreases or new ways of doing things. It gives your story urgency and “newsiness.”**

Localization

- **Take a national trend or issue and see what's happening locally.**

Example:

A study just came out saying that many public school teachers are being fired for “inappropriate” social media posts. How would you localize that?

More on Localization

- **Read national news. Watch network news (not cable news). Listen to NPR.**
- **Watch for new studies and polls.**
<https://www.pewresearch.org/>

Example:

An NIH study says people in Wisconsin and Mississippi weigh the most. How would you localize that story?

Projection

- **Look to the future. Instead of focusing on what's happening right now, think what might happen down the road.**

Example:

You've had an unusually mild summer so far in the Midwest. What impact might that have in the future?

Viewpoint Switching

- **Assume the perspective or vantage point of someone not usually consulted for information.**
- **People like to read about real people.**

Example:

Who might have a different viewpoint on the Red Bull-and-vodka story?

Other Tips: Seek Change

- **Seek change. Good story ideas are expressed in terms of what is “new, different, changing or surprising.”**
- **Avoid “a look at” story ideas.**

Other Tips: Read

- **Read specialty publications. Look for ideas to localize.**
- **Stay curious. Even the Yellow Pages can produce good story ideas.**

“I must have been stuck on the B’s because I did baby models and bronze baby shoe salesmen and baby modeling agencies.”

-- Ellen Barry of The Boston Globe

Other Tips: Follow Up

- **Follow up big stories. Clip out or make a note of big stories then revisit them a year later. What has happened since? What are the people involved doing now?**
- **You can put events into a much clearer perspective after some time has gone by.**

Other Tips: Follow Up

Example:

What recent big stories might be worth revisiting a year – or five years – from now?

Other Tips: Eavesdrop

- **Eavesdrop. At home, at work, wherever you are. Be nosy. Listen to what people are talking about.**
- **Remember the synthesis rule: If two groups of people are talking about something, it could be coincidence. If three groups of people are talking about it, it's a trend.**

Before You Write, Answer These Questions:

- **Who are your readers?**
- **Who is this story about?**
- **Who does what to whom in this story?**
- **Who are the story's actors/characters?**
- **What do you want to tell about them?**

Now, Report!

USEFUL SOURCES:

- School yearbooks, newspapers & websites
- Community media
- Professional publications
- In-school polls, surveys & focus groups (watch sample size)
- Counselors
- Custodians
- Lunch workers
- Bus drivers
- Secretaries
- The “non-involved”
- THAT teacher
- Parents

Now, Report!

NOT-SO-USEFUL SOURCES:

- YOUR friends
- YOUR family
- YOUR coach
- YOUR club sponsor
- YOUR boss

Are we sensing a pattern?

Now, Report!

SO-SO SOURCES:

- School administrators
- School board members
- Superintendent
- Hall-of-fame coach
- Student body president
- Jane & Johnny Athlete

Basically, it's unlikely that those who are interviewed on a regular basis will give you information that hasn't already been distributed.

Now, Plan!

SIMPLIFY, SIMPLIFY, SIMPLIFY.

- **Study your notes. You know which parts of your story have to be there.**
- **You should be able to write a bulleted outline based on your main points. If you don't have any main points, you need more reporting.**

Now, Write!

WASTE NO WORDS.

- **Make every word count. Throw out the words that mean nothing and add nothing.**
- **Take out the jargon, the hyperbole, the unnecessary AP vocabulary.**

Now, Write!

NONE OF THIS:

- I, me, myself, my, mine, we, us, ourselves, our, ours, you, yourself, yours.

ALL OF THIS:

- He, she, it, its, him, her, himself, herself, himself, his, her, hers, they, them, themselves, their, theirs.

AVOID CLICHÉS LIKE THE PLAGUE.

- See? It sounds pretty stupid, doesn't it?

Now, Write!

USE STRONG VERBS.

- **The same old words bore readers. Lively up your work with what people do: verbs.**
- **Seek out and destroy adverbs. Wherever you see an adverb, you are likely to find a judgment being made and a weak verb beside it.**

Now, Write!

BE SPECIFIC.

- Not just who, what, when, where, why, and how, but what color was it? What did it smell like? What kind noise did you hear?
- You need detailed, accurate information.

Now, Write!

PROTECT YOUR QUOTES.

- Quotes are the gems of your story, your punch lines. Quotes lose their punch if you give away too much in the set up.
- Set up quotes for the drama of what is said. And if nothing dramatic is said, why are you using that quote?

Now, Edit!

ALL WRITING IS REWRITING.

- Your first draft is a beginning, not a finished product.**
- Read aloud and listen to the story. Replace passive voice with active verbs. Take out extra words. Delete or rephrase boring quotes (but keep the attribution, even if you paraphrase what someone said).**

What Do These Stories Look Like?

- **Final Salute by Jim Sheeler**
- **The Newest Normal by Emma Stiefel**
- **Tried by Deadly Tornado, An Anchor of Faith Holds by Rick Bragg**
- **The Girl in the Window: The Feral Child & Three Years Later by Lane DeGregory**
- **The Big Hero of Littleton by Rick Reilly**
- **The Manual Project by Matthew Tully**

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THANKS FOR YOUR TIME!