

**The basic tools
of newspaper
journalism**

– a pocketbook

Tanya Farber

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Foreword

In the world of journalism, a great amount of learning happens on the job: out in the field and in the newsroom itself. There are, however, fundamental tools which can be taught as building blocks.

This pocketbook was created as a quick-reference for up-and-coming journalists who might have passed through the doors of academia and emerged with a sound understanding of the theory behind the profession.

Suddenly thrust into the newsroom, however, they might find it difficult to pinpoint the basic practical skills that are required of them.

And, with newsrooms not as well-resourced as they once were, news editors might lack the time to coach and mentor junior journalists who sometimes make up the bulk of the reporting pool.

This book, which is small, portable, and packed with concise information, is there to assist throughout the process, from coming up with a story idea, to gathering news, to finding an angle and writing an introduction, to structuring a story that is well researched and of sound ethics.

For seasoned reporters too, it is always helpful to refresh one's mind and go back to basics. There is always room for professional development, and for exploring new paths that lie outside of one's usual methodology.

How to use this book

- This concise booklet is not a detailed ‘how to’ when it comes to reporting. Instead, it is intended to be a quick, on-the-job point of reference.
- Each chapter contains a list of practical tools designed to open the door onto high-quality stories.
- The tools are derived from a lengthy process of research, but have been reformulated for easy reference. When you are out on a job, this booklet is your portable field guide, but remember, it is also useful to explore the theory behind each in your own time.
- Use the index page to find the tips you are looking for, and soon, the practical tools will become second nature.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1: News story genres	7
CHAPTER 2: Finding stories	10
CHAPTER 3: Gathering news	14
CHAPTER 4: Interviewing skills.....	19
CHAPTER 5: Being fair and ethical	23
CHAPTER 6: Multi-sourcing.....	27
CHAPTER 7: Story structure	29
CHAPTER 8: Introductions.....	32
CHAPTER 9: Grammar	34
CHAPTER 10: Quotes	36
CHAPTER 11: Quality writing.....	37

CHAPTER ONE

NEWS STORY GENRES

Make sure you understand what type of story your news editor is looking for, and discuss it further with him/her. This sometimes changes during the course of gathering news and writing. You might, for example, be working on a breaking news story when suddenly online media or a radio station breaks the story before you. You could be working on a feature when you stumble on some information that would make a good upfront news piece. This means you need to be flexible. Some stories might require you to write several pieces across genres.

Types and tips:

Breaking news:

- This is usually a ‘big’, sensational story that has just begun. It is something that has just happened, and has implications for many readers.
- Your intro should get straight to the point, and the rest of the story should be precise and clear with an indication of what the possible outcomes or follow-ups might be.
- The traditional ‘inverted pyramid’ is often useful as a structure.

Hard news:

- This is similar to breaking news, but is not as dramatic.
- It is usually something that has just happened, and could also be a follow-up to another news piece.
- Your style should be precise and clear, and guide readers as to why it is important. A summary of information from previous related stories should be included in case readers have not yet been following the story.

Investigative reporting:

- This type of journalism requires determination, and often courage too, as it entails uncovering a truth that someone might want to keep hidden from public view. You need to believe that it is in the public's interest to find out about it.
- You have to be very cautious with this type of work as it may place you or your source/s in a vulnerable position.
- Depending on its importance, your paper will usually run it as a breaking news story which is then cross-referenced to another page where this is more space for details.

Profiles:

- These are about a personality rather than an event.
- They are not just a factual account and should display a flair for writing rather than just reporting.

News features:

- These are longer pieces which delve behind the scenes of the news of the day.
- They deal with heavier topics but do not appear on the front page.
- They are usually time-bound human interest pieces.
- They need to be crafted very carefully to retain the readers' attention.

Features:

- These are longer pieces and the topic can be heavy or light.
- They are not bound by time as much as a news feature, but might become outdated if it takes a while before they're published.
- They need to flow easily and hold the readers' attention.

CHAPTER TWO

FINDING STORIES

- The world is full of stories waiting to be written. You, as a journalist, have the power to ‘conduct’ those stories into the written word. That’s why news editors lose patience with reporters who say they have nothing to write about.
- On some days, your news editor will approach you with a story idea. On many other days, you will have to generate your own. This can seem daunting at first, but there are countless avenues to explore.
- However you come by a story idea, make sure you apply some critical thinking. Your job is to research the idea properly, not simply relay your first encounter with the story’s tentacles.

Sources: Build up a list of sources with whom you stay in regular contact. As you develop a relationship with them, they will call you with story ideas. When you call them, they will give you up-to-date information which you can then analyse as possible story ideas.

Police and emergency services: They are the front line of all crime and accidents in your city. Stay in touch with them, or speak to your news editor to see if anything interesting has come up.

Press conferences: These can be a mine of information, and a good

opportunity to get comment and pose questions to various parties. Do research on background information, and craft some questions, beforehand. Caution against simply regurgitating what you hear there. Find a unique angle, and hang around afterwards to ask more questions and build your contact list.

Press releases and invites: The story may seem like it has been dished up on a platter, but your job is to explore the topic thoroughly, from various points of view. Never simply paraphrase what you find there. Keep an eye out for ‘hidden agendas’ and ‘spin doctoring’.

Witnessing an unplanned event: Being in the right place at the right time is a stroke of luck. The trick, then, is to think on the spot about your angle and any questions you could ask others who are also on the scene.

Brainstorming: The news of the day always has spin-off story ideas. It is useful to brainstorm with a group of reporters across beats to generate many story ideas.

Follow-ups: Readers love to find out what happened next. Do not leave them dangling. Keep following a story you have already written to see if a newsworthy event follows in its footsteps.

Morning shows and radio: Breaking stories delivered by more immediate channels, like television and radio, are limited by their timeframes. Good newspaper story ideas can develop from these initial short reports.

Internet and other technology: There is no limit to what you can find on the internet. Websites, social networking tools like Twitter and

Facebook, chat rooms, blogs ... the list goes on. Remember to keep an eye out for any new technological tools as they are a mine of story ideas.

Conversations: Casual conversations with family members or friends – or eavesdropping in public places – can trigger a thought for a story.

Community leaders: They are often the window onto a range of stories or issues affecting a specific community. It could be, amongst others, a geographical community, religious community, or people united by their language, work, or culture.

Community workers: People who work out in the field have excellent knowledge of what is happening ‘on the ground’ in various communities. Building a relationship with them is important. The more they trust you to handle stories sensitively, the more they will give you information.

Local newsletters and community papers: Local news stories sometimes shed light on a story that has broader significance or is interesting to a readership beyond its location.

Non-government Organisations: Often engaged in both research and fieldwork, non-government organisations often have knowledge of ‘hidden corners’ of society and can introduce you to some useful contacts.

Lobby groups: People involved in a cause love being heard. This makes them excellent sources, though one should never become their mouthpiece without finding balanced information.

Official reports and research papers: Academic research, reports and statistics often contain information that is of interest to a mainstream readership. Your job is to make it more user-friendly for the public, and to place it in context.

Foreign publications: Stories from overseas can ignite an idea for a local exploration of the same or a similar topic.

Mailing lists: They might annoy you by clogging your inbox, but mailing lists often provide small nuggets for much greater stories.

CHAPTER THREE

GATHERING NEWS

- Time is a scarce commodity for journalists. Before you begin any story, take five minutes to come up with a game plan: define exactly what you need to do to write the story properly.
- But, however scarce time may be, adequate news gathering is fundamental, whether your story is a short news piece or a longer feature.
- A quick reference in your mind for newsgathering is the 3-P and T method: People, places, paper trail and technology (see below)

3-P and T

“People, places, paper, and technology”

People

Without people, there is no story.

Once you have got your story idea, you need to speak to a wide range of people (even for a short article) to develop it further. These include, amongst others:

Sources: While you develop your story, stay in touch with the person/people who gave you the initial information that ignited the idea. Things can change from minute to minute.

Contacts: They can provide you with expert or insider information, and as you build a relationship with them, they will contact you with information on a regular basis.

Witnesses: They are your eyes and ears for an incident they experienced first hand and which you are now reporting on.

Ordinary people: They have no hidden agendas, and the readers can relate to them. They’ll tell you about their own experience as it relates to the story.

Main players: Spokespersons, politicians, leaders and other ‘top dogs’ provide important information and comment but these must be balanced against other views and well-researched facts.

Places

Get out of the office and into the world

Hard evidence: A story is more credible when you have witnessed it – or its immediate aftermath – first hand. The public is relying on you to give an account of events.

Many people in one place: Being out in the ‘field’, whether it is a conference, the scene of an accident, or the courtroom, will give you access to many sources at once for face-to-face questions.

Colour and atmosphere: There is nothing like ‘being there’ to give yourself, and therefore your reader, a real sense of a story. Use all your senses.

Observation: Look, listen and keep quiet for a while. Your powers of

observation will reward you with crucial information which is more subtle than ‘hard evidence’.

Interviews: Sources will often refuse to meet up for an interview because they are too busy, but if you catch them ‘on the scene’, they’re more likely to give you a slice of their time.

Time and convenience: With today’s technology, you can be on the scene of the story, write it while you are there, and email it your news editor before you get back to the office. That way, you are not just relying on notes after the fact.

On their own turf: Many interview subjects are more relaxed in their own environment and will therefore be more candid if interviewed elsewhere.

Time constraints: There is not always time to be on the scene for a story, but you always have to measure this against what you will gain from it. If you are on deadline and you cannot be there, contact a reliable source who is there and who can feed you some colourful details.

Paper

There it is, in black and white

A paper trail provides clues, information and confirmation, and it might come in the form of a long academic report from a university, or a person’s death certificate, to mention but two. It gives your story credibility as the reader is given the hard facts thanks to your efforts. Paper-based research is without limit, but here are some examples:

Public records: Birth, death and marriage records are very useful. Birth certificates verify someone’s real name, the place and date of their birth, and their parents’ names. Death certificates indicate time, place and cause of death. Marriage records include the names of both parties, and the date and place of marriage.

Police and court records: These shed light on someone’s criminal record and what their convictions, if any, were for.

Telephone directory: You can find your way to sources and confirm physical addresses with this age-old treasure.

Old newspapers: Articles that never found their way into new forms of computer-based technology can be very useful when researching the history or background of a story.

Other: You can find information in the property register, traffic department records, judgments from legal cases, and many other such documents.

Technology

The IT (information technology) revolution has changed the nature of research

Internet: One wonders how reporters managed to conduct research on deadline before the internet came along. Online dictionaries, digital news sites, data bases, blogs, information websites and many other useful tools are available at the click of a button, but make sure you assess them critically.

Email: This has exponentially sped up the process of asking people for information. It also means you have their answers ‘in writing’ should a legal problem arise at a later stage.

Cell phones: As you write stories, keep a list of all the cell phone numbers you acquire. It is then easier to conduct research on deadline if you can get hold of the right people immediately. Text messages have also come to play an important role in the process of gathering news.

Social networking: Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking tools are increasingly playing a role in helping journalists mine the information they need.

The sky’s the limit: Technology is changing and developing at a rate faster than ever before. As a journalist, you need to be aware of any developments that might aid you in collecting information for your stories.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERVIEWING SKILLS

There are different types of interviews, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. In your work as a journalist, you will conduct face-to-face interviews, telephonic interviews, and interviews over email. The interviews you conduct – whether for five minutes on the phone or an hour in person – can make or break a story. There are certain skills you need to master for the ‘before’, ‘during’, and ‘after’ phases of an interview. *Please note: some of these points are only applicable to the face-to-face interview.*

Before

Know what you want: Different interviews have different purposes. You might be seeking information, or exploring someone’s personality, or hearing the ‘other’ side of a contentious issue. Whatever the purpose of an interview is, you must be clear about it before you begin planning.

Proper briefing: Make sure you know what your news editor has in mind for the story, and express your ideas too. This will play a role in how you plan and conduct the interview.

Background research: Displaying ignorance or wasting time asking basic questions can put the interviewee off.

Preparing questions: Write up a list of questions before conducting the interview. As you do this, keep checking them against your ultimate ‘purpose’ for the interview.

Dress: You need to strike a balance between looking professional and placing the subject of the interview at ease.

Punctuality: Being late is unprofessional, and can get your interviewee’s back up.

Time allocation: Estimate how much time you need for the interview, and let the subject know how long you are hoping to meet with him/her. Allow for flexibility, however.

Put yourself in the readers’ shoes: Your questions should be designed to elicit information that the readers would want to know. Try to imagine what the readers themselves would ask the subject if they were given the chance, but avoid clichés and ‘the obvious’.

Look beyond: Also think up some off-beat or quirky questions which will provide greater insight into the topic you are writing on or personality you are profiling.

Choose equipment: Dictaphone, notepad or laptop? All these have their advantages and disadvantages. Make sure you choose the right one for each specific interview.

Check equipment: Malfunctioning equipment can spell disaster in an interview situation, so you should always check that it works before you go. If you are opting to use a Dictaphone or laptop, have a notepad and pen with you just in case.

During

Prepare but be flexible: Research and pre-written questions are useful, but you should also allow the interview to take its own natural course.

Your own bias: Go to an interview with an open mind. Let the interviewee really ‘speak’, even if you do not believe or agree with what he or she is saying. Leave your own assumptions out of it.

Body language: Remain professional at all times, but place the interviewee at ease.

In context: In some instances, a source will be more relaxed in their own environment which will also help you to rely on visual clues to add some colour to the story. In other cases, the work or home environment might prevent them from telling you the ‘full’ story.

Spelling: Make sure you have the correct spelling of every name that comes up in the interview, particularly if it is something you cannot check on the internet later. It is embarrassing to have to call an interviewee again to get the correct spelling.

Steering the interview: With your purpose in mind, guide the process so that it feels like a natural conversation but still draws out the information you are seeking. Within that, do not be too rigid.

Asking uncomfortable questions: You need to strike a balance. Being pushy or abrasive does not encourage interviewees to open up, but asking uncomfortable questions is part of the job.

Awkward silences: Avoid the temptation to jump in during awkward

silences. This is often when you will get the best information out of an interviewee.

After

Take a breather: If you have time, let the interview settle down in your mind before you tackle it. What is important and what is not will become clearer.

Start looking at your notes or listening to your recording: The first time you go through them, just read them or listen to them as if it is your first encounter with them.

Start putting notes into some kind of order: Group all the information under different themes.

Brainstorm angles: Make a list of all the possible angles for your story as informed by the interview. Decide which will be most unique or interesting and which will easily engage the readers.

Go back to the question of ‘what will readers want to know?’: One can lose perspective on the overall topic after an interview, so go back to thinking about the readers as the target of your story.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEING FAIR AND ETHICAL

Above all else, a journalist must serve the public good and write responsibly. With many stories you work on, sticking to that definition will be clear. Other stories will pose an ethical dilemma.

Basic fact-checking and accuracy: This is a non-negotiable rule in the newsroom. Make sure that your sources are reliable, and that you have counter-checked every fact in your story.

Watchdog: The public relies on you to play the role of the ‘watchdog’. This means reporting without bias on anything in the public interest.

Law versus ethics: You, as a journalist, are bound by the law just like anybody else. Make sure you are up to date with legislation pertaining to the media, particularly the concept of ‘libel’. Ethics, on the other hand, refers to principles that ensure moral behaviour. They are usually contained in a Code of Conduct (see below).

Consult a lawyer: When in doubt, speak to your news editor about consulting a lawyer.

The whole process: You need to be fair and ethical from the moment you conceptualise a story to the moment you send it through to your

news editor. When you think of your topic, gather your information, conduct interviews, and write up your stories, you need to think of all sides of the story and how you are representing them.

Code of Conduct: Your newspaper will have a written Code of Conduct. This is your moral guide as a journalist. Make sure you read it and refer to it as often as necessary.

Conflict of interest: Anything which threatens your impartiality as a journalist results in a conflict of interest. This includes, amongst others, receiving payments or gifts from sources.

Deception: You might sometimes ‘embed’ yourself as a journalist. This means ‘blending into the crowd’ to gather information through observation. You may not, however, conduct an interview under the guise of being something other than a journalist.

Prejudice: All your writing should be free of discrimination and prejudice, whether it is obvious or subtle. It should also not incite discrimination or prejudice in others. If you are not sure, discuss this with your news editor.

Sensitivity to grief: While you should always do your best to ‘get the story’, this should not be at the expense of a grieving family or friends.

Diversity: Sources should be as varied as possible, therefore representing a wide cross-section of society.

Quoting out of context: If the meaning of a direct quote changes if you only use part of it or do not provide enough background

information, this is referred to as ‘quoting out of context’ and is an unethical practice.

Comment clearly identified: Never take an allegation or comment from a source and present it as ‘fact’. All comments and opinions should be clearly attributed to their origin.

Yourself: Be aware of, and think critically about, any prejudices that you may bring to your story because of your own background, gender, upbringing, religion, sexual orientation and other factors or experiences which have shaped you.

Getting too close to sources: While it is good to build trust between yourself and your sources, developing too close a bond will bring about a conflict of interest.

Spin doctoring: If a source puts a certain spin on their information (for example, if they are covering something up, or justifying bad behaviour, for example), it is your fundamental duty as a journalist to explore the other sides of the story. If you fail to do so, you are involved in ‘spin doctoring’ which is the opposite of unbiased, fair and impartial journalism.

Plagiarism: Never present someone else’s work as your own. You will read previous articles on the same topic by other journalists during your research, but you may not copy their work at all.

Press releases: While they provide useful starting points for stories, they should never be regurgitated or even paraphrased. They should set you off on a path of investigation so that you get both sides of the story.

Photographs: Photojournalists are also bound by law and guided by a Code of Conduct. When you are out on a story together, it is important to discuss any sensitive issues.

Multi-sourcing: This is a key element in being fair and ethical (see next chapter).

CHAPTER SIX

MULTI-SOURCING

A journalist's job is to mediate the world around us to the reader. If only one person has been interviewed, it is a single-source story – and that is not journalism.

Accuracy: While true objectivity is an elusive thing, accuracy is of vital importance to a story. Multi-sourcing is a means of counter-checking information.

Balanced facts: Single-source stories are not fair or balanced, and newspapers should not be publishing information as fact just because someone said it. There are often two sides, or more, to the story.

Different opinions: Multi-sourcing ensures that different – and sometimes contentious – perspectives can be put forward to give the reader a well-rounded take on the topic.

Going beyond: Multi-sourcing adds colour and depth to writing, even if it is for a very short article. New voices add new food for thought for the reader.

Credibility: Single-sourced stories immediately lack credibility in the eyes of the reader. This affects the reputation of the journalist, his/her colleagues, and the newspaper in general.

More than a mouthpiece: A newspaper that runs single-sourced stories can quickly attract sources looking for a ‘soapbox’. Anyone leaking a story to the paper, or providing them with any information whatsoever, should know that that information will be double-checked, and multi-sourcing is part of that process.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STORY STRUCTURE

The way you structure your story will determine its impact on the readers. If it is well structured, it will be compelling to read. Whether it is a short news piece written on deadline, or a longer feature that has taken a while to research, the way you structure your story is of utmost importance. Stories need to be ‘crafted’ just like any work of art.

Angle: You cannot decide on the structure of your story until you have decided what your angle is going to be.

How you would tell a friend: It is useful to imagine how you would tell your friend the story in a conversation. A sense of structure will begin to emerge.

Active structuring: Typing up your written notes does not mean you have structured your story. You need to select and re-order the information to give you your first draft.

Themes: You should group all your information into different themes or ideas. You can then see what type of order they should follow.

Theme sentences: These alert the reader what you are about to tell them next. What follows is the information and who or where you got it from.

Chronology: Some stories work best as a description of what happened from one moment to the next. This is a chronological structure, but the story should still be placed in context with some guidance for the reader as to why it is newsworthy or significant.

Logical flow: A story needs to move from one theme or sub-topic to the next in a logical manner. It should never read like a 'list'. Think of obvious questions that would arise next in readers' minds.

Linking sentences: The reader should be able to 'glide' from one theme to the next if intelligent linking sentences are used. The connection between one theme and the next should be clear.

Headlines, blurbs, captions and pictures: Your story will not exist in isolation. It will be on a page with a headline, and very often, a blurb, picture and caption too. Bear this in mind when deciding on structure, and feel free to make suggestions to the layout and copy editors.

Genres: Your structure should be appropriate for the genre of story you are writing. For example, a hard news piece would not begin with a lengthy description, while a feature allows more space for each theme.

Beyond the inverted pyramid: Before, journalists were always told to cover the 'who, what, where, when, how and why' in the beginning of the story. Today, this structure is only suitable for some stories, so you must think about it critically before you begin.

Introductions: The way you begin your story is closely related to how you structure it. The first paragraph gives the reader a sense of what

the story is about, so make sure your structure echoes that.

Substantiation: All information in a story has to be substantiated. For example, throughout your story you might be attributing quotes to your sources, describing what you saw with your own eyes, or explaining where you got your statistics from. This all has to be woven into the structure of your story.

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTRODUCTIONS

Ask yourself:

- Why is this story going to be in the newspaper?
- Why will it be significant to the reader?
- What will ‘pull’ them into the story so that they carry on reading?
- Of the *where*, *what*, *who*, *how*, *why* and *when*, which is the most important for this particular story?
- What is my angle on the story?
- How can I add an element of human interest?
- In conversation, how would I start this story if telling it to a friend?

Other handy tips:

- Your intro must match the genre of your story. Hard news should start with a hard newsworthy lead, whereas a feature might start with a description or a quote, for example.
- Keep it simple and punchy.
- It should not be more than 30 words.

- Some journalists find it easier to write a ‘dummy’ intro just to get them started, and then return to it once they have crafted the rest of the story.
- Others spend a long time crafting the introduction and then find that the rest of story flows easily.
- Endings are also very important and again, they should match the genre of the story. They should be punchy, give an indication of the next event related to the story, and tie up any loose ends.

CHAPTER NINE

GRAMMAR

- The quickest way to lose credibility with your reader is to have a story full of grammatical errors.
- Journalists often rely on subeditors to ‘clean up’ their mistakes, but this should not be the case. Subeditors have a heavy workload and should not be expected to fix basic mistakes. They also might not spot a mistake before it goes to print.
- Always run a spell-check before you submit your work, but do not automatically accept every correction offered by your computer.
- When in doubt, read it aloud. You might ‘hear’ a mistake that you could not see.
- Avoid long, complicated sentences. They often introduce unnecessary errors, and also put the reader off.

The main culprits

1. **Incorrect:** The couple were waiting for the ordeal to end.
2. **Correct:** The couple was waiting for the ordeal to end.
3. **Incorrect:** Either of the two players are on the final list.
4. **Correct:** Either of the two players is on the final list.

5. **Incorrect:** The organisation is reconsidering it’s position.
6. **Correct:** The organisation is reconsidering its position.
7. **Incorrect:** Its now up to the weather to play along.
8. **Correct:** It’s now up to the weather to play along.
9. **Incorrect:** There were less people at the match.
10. **Correct:** There were fewer people at the match.
11. **Incorrect:** I had plans for lunch, however, they were cancelled.
12. **Correct:** I had plans for lunch. However, they were cancelled.
13. **Incorrect:** There house is over their, and they happy with it.
14. **Correct:** Their house is over there, and they’re happy with it.

CHAPTER TEN

QUOTES

Quotes are a fundamental part of the journalism industry, since stories are built upon what people have said. They also add lustre to any story which might appear dull without those ‘voices’ to infuse the writing with a sense of humanity and personality. This means it is vital to use them correctly, or your story will lose credibility and your writing will appear as a lifeless block of text.

The basic rules of using quotes:

- **Avoid** repeating information by using direct and indirect speech about the same thing. For example, it is redundant to write:
Crime has soared on campus, but the chancellor says it is not the university’s fault.
“It is not the university’s fault,” he says.
- **Remember:** Direct speech often sparkles more than indirect speech, and maintains the accuracy of what someone said. It is, however, tedious if the entire story is made up of direct quotes.
- In most cases, the word “said” or “says” is preferable with direct speech so as to avoid bias by the journalist.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUALITY WRITING

Ten top tips for quality writing

1. **Conscious writing:** Even on deadline, a story needs to be carefully crafted. With experience, you learn how to do it under pressure.
2. **Simple is stylish:** Stories should appear simple but be packed with meaning, and that comes from careful crafting. Excessive wording drags a story down, so make sure every word has been hand-picked for your story.
3. **Human interest:** Good stories, even shorter ‘hard news’ pieces, are improved if an element of human interest is included.
4. **News angle:** The converse is that softer, longer features are improved if a news angle is included.
5. **Show, do not tell:** Use physical descriptions rather than abstract concepts to convey your information. Use all your senses when gathering news and writing stories so that the reader can do likewise.
6. **Avoid clichés:** News editors and readers are looking for something unique. Using clichés in your attempts to include description and meaning can bog your story down.

