

# NEWS WRITING

## WRITING GREAT NEWS

*A news story is more than a list of facts, quotes, and opinions. It takes opposing views, insight, and relevant background to make most news accessible to a reader, who probably isn't researching an issue the way you are. It needs to be timely—especially in a digital-first era—and interesting. Imagine how you would tell a story to a close friend.*

### WRITING YOUR STORY

Diversify your sources! Don't only interview three people and quote them all—your sample size is too small and you might not get an accurate account of the overall sentiment. Talk to several people and take mental notes on what you want to use and what you want to leave out as you go along. Talk to experts, talk to regular people, talk to bystanders, talk to those involved. Once you've completed research and interviews, talk with your editor to help sort your thoughts out. Before you type anything, go over your notes and underline all the important quotes and tidbits. It is good practice to put them down on paper or in the computer and play around. Try reading the ideas in different orders to get a feel for what could eventually be your story's flow.

Select the most important and relevant information. Make it the first paragraph (the lead) of your story. Statements made in the lead are supported by facts in the following paragraphs. The body of the story elaborates and should answer any questions raised in the lead.

Keeping sentences short, write your story from the most important element to the least important. This is called the inverted pyramid style. The idea is to grab the reader's attention right away and get them to finish the story. Comment pieces, art reviews, opinions and features don't necessarily follow the inverted pyramid style. But every story must have a lead.

### HOW TO FIND A STORY

First thing's first: read the news. To write news, you need to know news. Download media apps, follow journalists on Twitter, follow reddit news, browse through google news headlines, listen to CBC radio, follow news podcasts—whatever works for you. Make sure you're always aware of the big world and local stories.

How do you find stories, and how do you decide what isn't a story? If you haven't already, read The Link archives. Just because it's been written before doesn't mean it isn't still relevant. Stay up to date with beats you're interested in covering. You can find story leads or ideas online (press releases / newsletters, social media, calendars, mainstream media, and Canadian News Wire) or through word of mouth, and panels and workshops.

### WRITING LEADS

A lead can make or break a story. Good leads not only grab the reader's attention, they also give the readers-on-the-go information to decide whether or not they want or need to know the rest. A bad lead says nothing or says something in such a garbled or boring manner the readers are turned off.

It's usually one sentence and less than 30 words long. It answers at least three of the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How questions:

"At a lecture held last Friday in H-110 at 8:45 p.m., Jean Broue, vice-president in charge of marketing for Acme Brewer, told an audience of 150 captivated persons that students at Concordia University are the heaviest drinkers in Canada." Terrible. The writer is trying to fit too much into the lead and has buried the most important part of the story. Try this instead:

"Concordia University students are the heaviest drinkers in Canada, consuming five times more beer than students at any other Canadian university, an industry leader told students Friday."

### WRITING STYLE

Your writing style should be direct, concise and lively. This is a business of information, though sometimes it's nice to use literary techniques. Be correct and accurate but use simple words and structures. Refrain from clichés, they eliminate the need for thought and reflection. You probably aren't the story: so don't use "I," "me" or "mine."

“The words you use are important.”

## JARGON & NUMBERS

It's easy when talking with an expert to get caught up in specific terminology rather than the overall message, so ask questions. Assume if you don't understand something, readers won't either. Also, journalists often get it wrong when dealing with statistics or other numbers. So check. And re-check. Then have someone else check for you.

## BE WORD-WISE

The careful choice of words should not be mistaken as political correctness or dismissed as semantics. The words you use are important.

It's the difference between writing:

“Twelve of Concordia's handicapped were invited to speak to the Rector last week about accessibility on campus.”  
and

“Twelve Concordia students who are differently-abled were invited to speak to the Rector last week about accessibility on campus.”

Put people first and don't identify them by their differences. Think about the connotations of referring to “survivors” and “victims,” about the difference between “the elderly” vs. “older adults” or “seniors.”

Words matter, and they shouldn't be used to victimize or marginalize groups that are often ignored. They should empower them.

## HOW TO COVER A MEETING

The most important thing to remember when covering a meeting is that the meeting itself is rarely the news. Too often, student journalists will bury the lead, beginning their article with some variation of “A meeting of a group took place on a certain date.” Remember to find the most newsworthy outcome or event in relation to the meeting and build your story around that from the beginning.

The other common pitfall is giving in to the temptation to give a play-by-play. The reader doesn't care about that. Instead, focus on organizing your story so that it provides good context and flows logically from the most important information to the most tertiary, regardless of the order in which events took place. Further, remember not everything at a meeting has to be reported. Constantly ask yourself what is newsworthy and why, and remember that typically it is best to focus on one element per article, or at most two.

## HOW TO COVER A PROTEST

Protest coverage is a cornerstone of The Link. We take pride in highlighting causes and events that bigger outlets might miss, and it is a big part of the value we provide to the Montreal community. Therefore, it's important to familiarize yourself with how to report on a protest.

First, it is critical that you interview an organizer of any demonstration you cover. It is not enough to simply report what happened. To be safe, it is best to contact organizers ahead of time in order to ensure you will be able to speak with someone. At smaller protests, organizers will often be easy to identify and approach. In general, organizers are inclined to make themselves available to the media, so do not be intimidated! In many cases, you can expect them to be enthusiastic for the opportunity to bring attention to their cause through your article. Find out what motivates them and what they hope to achieve.

Similarly, get some flavour by interviewing a couple protesters. Why are they there? Why is this cause important to them? What's at stake? Include these perspectives.

As in meetings, avoid bland leads. One way to do this is to present the central demand of protesters. Avoid constructions such as “A crowd of protesters gathered at some place on some day to protest a vague category.”

## OBJECTIVITY

We choose to cover certain events and not others. We choose whom to interview and whom not to interview. And lastly, we choose what to highlight and not to highlight in our stories, in our layout and in our comments pages. All these choices are governed by our own opinions and backgrounds. Let's not be hypocrites by pretending to be above all these prejudices. Be honest, be fair. As a reporter, you should answer the question “What's up with that?” and diligent reporting will also answer “Who bears responsibility?”

Keep in mind whose voices you're platforming, whose voices you're leaving out, which facts you choose to present, which ones you leave out, and what truth you are portraying. Who are we holding accountable? And who are we empowering?

Make sure you dig deep. Find research reports, experts, articles, interview several people (even though you won't quote all of them). Make sure you have a large pool of information to source from you're giving an accurate portrayal of what's going on.