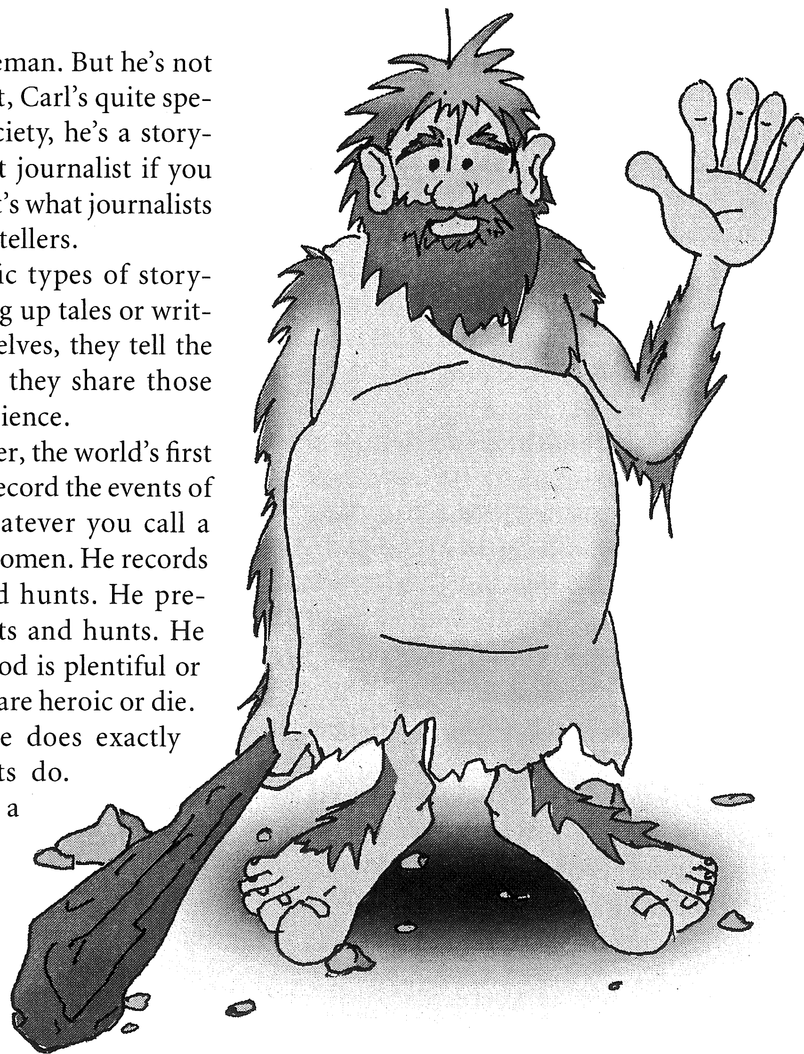
Introduction: Storytelling for a Sophisticated Audience



Meet Carl. Carl is a caveman. But he's not just any caveman. In fact, Carl's quite special. In his caveman society, he's a storyteller—call him the first journalist if you want because, really, that's what journalists are, right? They're storytellers.

They're just specific types of storytellers, instead of making up tales or writing stories about themselves, they tell the stories of others. Then they share those stories with a larger audience.

So Carl's a storyteller, the world's first journalist. His job is to record the events of his tribe or clan or whatever you call a group of cavemen and women. He records events like harvests and hunts. He previews upcoming harvests and hunts. He tells when and where food is plentiful or when others in the tribe are heroic or die.

In other words, he does exactly what today's journalists do. His messages may look a little different, but they serve the same function.

And that's an important point. When you really get down to

it — when you scrape away the technology, the modern-day advancements, all of that — the one element that human beings have had in common from day one to day one trillion and one is stories. As simple as that. Stories.

We humans like stories. Our lives are full of stories. Events happen to us. They happen to people near us. And we remember those events. We record them. We take pictures of them. We write about them in our diaries.

But more importantly, we share them.

The act of sharing stories is one of the most important parts of the storytelling tradition. Think about it. You're at lunch with your friends and someone starts telling a story. "You won't believe what happened today in Mr. Smith's class."

And then you're off, listening to or telling the story about how Mr. Smith "totally got Ashley in trouble today" or how "Chris just bombed his test in math" or "You won't believe how Mark asked Karen to the Homecoming dance."

And on and on and on.

Because once the storytelling starts there's really no end. Pretty soon, someone else has got a story to share just like the one you just told but better, and then someone else chimes in with, "Oh yeah? Think that's good? Well, you should've been there when..."

When you pare them down to their essentials, our lives aren't material possessions. They're not clothes or cars or X-Box 360s. They're stories. Stories built on stories. Stories that, woven together, create the tapestry of our lives. Stories that involve action, reaction, interaction, emotion. If only someone — some sort of professional storyteller —could help us make sense of it all. If only there were some medium where the myriad stories of our lives could reach a wider audience to help us validate our own experiences, to help us think, to help us understand, to clarify, to let us cheer and mourn together. If only such a person, a place, existed. If only ...

Meet Carl.

Carl's job isn't easy. No one said it would be. It takes a special kind of person to be a professional storyteller, a journalist. It takes someone who understands the tools of information gathering. Someone who knows what information is relevant and what is not. Someone who is innately curious about the world.

But above all, it takes someone who understands his audience.

Audience

An audience is merely the person or group of people for whom a message is intended. But understanding that audience and, specifically, how that audience accesses information, isn't as easy as it seems. Let's say you're asking your 93-year-old grandmother for money so you can buy a new CD or a shirt or a DVD. How do ask her? How do you speak (besides louder)? How do you present yourself to her? Now turn the tables. Say you're asking for money from your parents. The message is the same, but does the presentation change? What about asking your friends for money? Again, same message, different approach.

Journalism is no different. At this moment I am writing this chapter as a full-fledged member of the so-called "X-generation." I am a child of the '80s. I was 10 when MTV began (and it actually played music videos). As a child, I learned how to use some of the first computers. I grew up with the Internet. The list goes on and on. Fast forward to your generation. Take what I learned in my life and increase it by a power of 10. Of 100. Of 1,000. At no point

in our existence have human beings had so many ways to access information. Think cell phones. Think Web messaging. Think voice mail. Think conference calls. Think pagers. Think PDAs. The list is endless.

And it only gets more overwhelming.

Now, where does a yearbook or a newspaper or a school magazine fit into that group of information sources? It's probably not on many students' lists of priorities. But, saying that, don't fall into the same trap that many of your elders do. "Well," they say, "those kids are just stupid. They don't know how to read. Kids today," they say, "are not as smart as we were when we were their age."

Guess what? Your elders are wrong. Terribly, horribly wrong. If anything, kids today are smarter. And if not smarter, they're certainly more sophisticated. Information bombards you from every angle, and, unlike many from the older generations, you are able to weed through that steady stream of data to find what you want to know. You have abilities in information gathering that are astounding. So the problem is not that you don't know how to get information. The problem is that many of you — and many of your readers — don't know how to get information that you need to know. In today's information age, it's too easy to bypass news that doesn't directly affect you. Don't care about the lead story on CNN? Click here for a new link about fashion. Don't want to see this show about the war in Iraq? Change the channel.

Carl knew his audience much the same way that you should know your audience. For example, he knew that his audience couldn't read. He knew they lived in caves. He knew what they valued — good hunts and meat and furs — and he presented his information in such a way that his audience could easily access and understand it. To put it simply, he drew pictures on cave walls.

Your job is not so different than Carl's. What do you know about your audience? You could do a poll or a survey, but you really don't need to. Just take a look around. Or, better yet, look at yourself. What do you read? How do you read? Do you read? What catches your eye? What makes you stop and take notice?

You'll probably come to some conclusions. Chances are you'll determine that most of your peers say they don't like to read. Chances are, that's only half right. It's not that they don't like to read, they just don't have time to read. If you keep going, you'll probably notice that your peers, respond to visual stimulation — things like photos and graphics and colors.

These are pretty basic criteria and you could go further if you wanted, but it's a start. Your readers are visual people. Need more proof? Think about the kinds of magazines you or your friends buy. What do they look like? How do they feel? Where do you look first in these publications? What do you read? What do you skip?

Granted, many of the publications that students read aren't chock-full of earth-shattering information. I mean, how important can proper mascara coverage be? Or how pressing is the need to know which bikinis are in style this summer? But beyond the content (we'll get to that later), just take a look at the presentation of this information. These publications know their audience. They know what you like. They know how you read. They know how to present information. In fact, you pay good money for these magazines. You reach into your wallets and pull out hard-earned cash to purchase these periodicals. On the other hand, in the case of many school newspapers, you give your product away for free, and no one reads it. Why? Because many high school publications don't know their audience. They keep writing stories that stylistically would have

been applicable in 1963. But it's not 1963 anymore. It's not 1973 or 1993. And just like fashions change (take a look at your parents' high school yearbooks if you don't believe me), people change, particularly in the way they read and access information.

Your publications need to change along with your audience. But as you already know, despite the change in how we read, everything still starts with good stories.

People

In his book *Somebody Told Me*, a collection of some of his best newspaper stories, Pulitzer Prize winner Rick Bragg tells the tale of Margueritte Thurston, a tiny old lady who owns a 70-acre orange, tangerine and grapefruit tree grove in Florida. Her property stands in the middle of progress and is worth a fortune—appraised between $2 million and $4.2 million. But Margueritte won't sell. She likes the trees too much, the history, the nature that seems to be disappearing from so many other places in Florida. The grove, she says, is her home. And nobody can take that from her.

Later in the article, when Bragg mentions that Margueritte won't let a photographer take her picture and that she "bristles" when he asks her age, Margueritte says, "This is a story about the grove. This isn't a story about people."

She couldn't be more wrong.

For as much as Margueritte knows about fruit trees (and for all I know she still remains there—an island amid an ocean of progress), she doesn't know a lick about journalism. But despite what Margueritte said, Rick Bragg knew the secret about journalism, he's known it for a long time, and now you will, too.

Simply, every story, if it's worth covering, involves people. In some way, somebody is affected by every event that occurs, at least the ones worth covering. If events didn't have an impact, why cover them? Why waste the space, the newsprint, the time?

Remember this: Topics are not stories. Topics lead to stories, but they are not stories. In Bragg's case, the grove was a topic. Or to broaden the scope, the topic was about progress, or the lack thereof. The story, on the other hand, was about Margueritte Thurston, a little old lady who refused to budge.

For your publications, topics range from tattooing to tests, from homecoming to heartache, from soccer to school spirit. You know your school environment. Pick an event, any event, dances, club meetings, big games, driver ed, you name it—those are all topics. Journalists don't write about topics.

They write stories.

And the thing about stories, as opposed to topics, is that they are nearly inexhaustible. Everyone has a story to tell. CBS news correspondent Steve Hartman knows this. He's even made a career of it. In his segment called, simply, "Everybody Has a Story," Hartman throws a dart at a map of the United States. He then travels to the city upon which the dart has fallen and gets out a local phone book. Then, randomly, he selects a name from that phone book and calls the number. Whoever answers becomes the subject of his story.

The idea is this—topics run out. Each yearbook from the dawn of time (perhaps even in Carl's yearbook), has covered pretty much the same topics. Don't believe me? Take a look. There's prom. There's the football team. There's the car wash, the school play, the student council elections. Each year. Every year. Ad nauseum. For the most part, topics do not change.

But people do.

Take another look at that yearbook. Look closely at the faces. While the events that occur year after year after year change little, the people who participate in those activities change a lot. They get older. They graduate. New people take their places.

Don't ever let me catch you saying that there's nothing to write about. See all those people in your yearbook? See them surrounding you each day in the halls? In the cafeteria? The truth is, there's too much to write about. The problem should be not in "What are we going to cover?" but in "What do we have to leave out?" The former means you aren't digging below the surface. You can't see the trees for the forest (to badly switch that cliché around). The latter means you're looking at people, at individual faces. Too much to cover? The latter is a good problem to have.

The Purpose of Stories

All of this talk about audience and people is well and good, but it doesn't answer the primary question that you should have at this point, which is this: What is the purpose of storytelling in the first place? A person like me can discuss the primary purposes of journalism — to inform, educate and entertain. A person like me can divide that information into categories— what readers want to know and what they need to know. But that doesn't really get to the heart of the issue.

Why does storytelling really matter? Why will it matter for our student readers? What's the point?

And the answer to these questions is really the whole point of journalism. And here is the answer: Stories can provide experiences, and those experiences are the only way that we can change, challenge or reinforce existing attitudes and behaviors.

Put it this way. Let's say you're pro-choice (or pick any other hot topic of the day — gay marriage, religion in schools, politics, etc.) and you're sitting in a room with someone who is pro-life. You begin to argue. Back and forth you go, debating point after point, making counterpoints, trying to gain the upper hand. Sound familiar? But let me ask you, if you've ever been in an argument like this, have you ever won? Even once has the person you were arguing with slapped his forehead and said, "By George, you're absolutely right. I'm an idiot"?

Probably not. In fact, what you probably ended up doing in a situation like this is merely defending your position even further, entrenching yourself even deeper into your beliefs. You may also have made the other person angry (this is also the reason my mother always said, when dating, don't talk about religion or politics). But did you change that person's mind? Did you make him or her see the world differently? Absolutely not.

But let's say, for the sake of argument, that you are staunchly pro-life and then something happens in your life that hits right to the quick of that issue. In other words, it's not just an argument but an actual experience that deals with the issue. Maybe you're faced with a personal decision or one of your close friends is. Maybe it's a family member. Would it change your mind then? Maybe not.

But it might.

At the very least, that experience will challenge your beliefs in a way that no argument can. That experience may force you to see the world in a way that you hadn't considered. And at the end of that experience, your views will either be reinforced or changed. At the very least, your views will be challenged in a way that they've never been challenged before.

So what does that have to do with

storytelling, I can hear you asking? Everything. Have you ever seen a movie that made you cry? Have you read a book that made you laugh? Have you seen something on TV that made you angry? Or scared? Or nervous? That's the inherent power of the arts. They can safely transport you to another place, another time. They can make you see the world in a way that you've never seen it before. They can help you to experience something, given your own narrow opportunities, that you may never get to experience any way else. They can take you to the moon and back. Or they can transport you to the deserts of Africa. They can put you in a courtroom or in a jail cell or in the death chamber. They can make you see the world through the eyes of a 10 year old with a physical deformity or a 75 year old dealing with the death of a wife or a husband.

And they can, in some instances, make you change your mind about the world around you. I'm not saying they will change your mind. But they might. At minimum, just as if those were your own experiences, they will challenge those beliefs.

Journalism, in this respect, is no different than the rest of the arts. The only difference is that the stories we tell, the places we write about, the situations we bring up, are real. And in many ways, that makes those stories even more poignant and powerful.

A trio of reporters for the *St. Petersburg Times*— Monique Fields, Dong-Phuong Nguyen and Pulitzer Prize–winning Thomas French — wrote a lengthy series of articles for the paper titled "13: Life on the Edge of Everything." In it, the reporters chronicled the lives of several middle school students as they faced various trials and tribulations during their seventh-grade year. The story relied heavily on detailed observations of these kids' experiences, from overheard phone calls to classroom visits to time spent at parties, meetings and other typical events.

And what was the point? I think French put it best in his June 8, 2003, column that accompanied the series:

During the year we worked on the project, Phuong and Monique and I were struck by the creativity and strength of the students. The transition they were making away from childhood was painful and difficult, yet they were moving forward. Their lives were full of upheaval and melodrama, yes, but these were the signs of a profound and necessary transformation. To us, the kids were heroic.

In the end, I learned a great deal about my sons, especially Nat. I discovered the things Nat was struggling with were completely normal; having spent so much time with others his age, it was easier to see what an astonishing kid he was, even on days when he was withdrawn and sullen. I appreciated him all the more; I understood why, so often, he needed to push me away and figure things out on his own.

And French was not alone. If people took the time to read the story that they had written — if they saw these kids and lived their lives for a while — it might have challenged them to see their own world a little differently. The audience for *the St. Petersburg Times* is not students, of course. Demographically, they're skewed toward the adult side of the spectrum. So we must keep that audience in mind when we consider the effect of the story. But who would those readers have been specifically? Like French, parents of teenagers, for one. But also those whose kids were about to become teenagers. I'll bet teachers read it, too. And other adults, perhaps grandparents.

And what questions would those readers have after reading? Would the story challenge them to see teenagers in a

different light? Would they be more understanding? Less so? Would the story help those readers to relive their own teenage years perhaps? Would they see in the people the authors chose to spotlight a little bit of themselves or their friends?

And, inevitably, could those "mental experiences" make them change the way they perceive the world and the people who live in it?

Maybe.

Which is a better answer than no.

When Harper Lee published her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1966, it challenged the way the world looked at racial stereotypes. It might have changed a few minds. It might have prompted a few people to take a stand and make a difference in the world when, before, they might have merely sat back and let the world pass them by. Why? Not because Lee was preachy. Not because she told the book's readers to make a difference in the world. No, all Harper Lee did was tell the story of a kind lawyer in the south, Atticus Finch, a man who was asked to do the unthinkable—defend an innocent black man in the 1930s. I still remember the first time I heard that verdict from the all-white jury—"Guilty"—and, like Atticus's son, Jem, how angry I was. Even today, even though I have read the book a hundred times since that first time, I get the same reaction at that part. Did the book change my beliefs? Maybe. Maybe not. But it certainly gave me something to think about. It challenged me. It stirred me. I have never lived in the South. I did not live in the 1930s (or even the 1960s). I have never really faced the issue of racism firsthand. But because I read Lee's story, I was there. For a short time, Lee transported me to a different time and a different place. And I came out on the other side a changed person.

Well-told stories can create experiences for readers, and those experiences can alter behavior, as educator Rick DuFour writes in his book *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (1998):

> *Our attitudes are the result of our experience, and our experience is a product of our behavior. New experiences are needed for us to change our attitudes, and new experiences usually require us to use different behaviors. Thus, the effort to change attitude must begin with the effort to alter behavior in ways that result in new experiences.*

No doubt, Lee knew this concept quite well when, early on in her novel, Atticus told his daughter, Scout, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." Stories allow us to do that very thing.

And if you tell a good story, if you share that message with readers, if your words stir those readers to think and challenge themselves and their beliefs, then you've done your job as a journalist. Good writing and storytelling has power, after all. People remember it. They hold those stories close to them. In many ways, well told stories become part of their readers, part of a shared experience among many readers.

Again, Rick Bragg, in his autobiography *All Over But the Shoutin'*, knows this. In the prologue to his book, Bragg tells of a story he was covering the night his grandmother died. He was interviewing the mother of a little boy who had been shot and killed by a stray bullet as the boy stood in the doorway to his home, "his book satchel in his hand, like a little man going to work."

> *She told me how the boy looked up at her after the bullet hit, wide-eyed, wondering. And as she talked, her two surviving children rode tight circles around the couch on their bicycles, because she was afraid to let*

them play outside in the killing ground of the project courtyard. As I left, shaking her limp hand, she thanked me. I usually just nod my head politely and move on, struck anew every time by the graciousness of people in such a soul-killing time. But this time, I had to ask why. Why thank me for scribbling down her hopeless story for the benefit of people who live so far and safely away from this place where the gunfire twinkles like lightning bugs after dark? She answered by pulling out a scrapbook of her baby's death, cut from the local newspaper. "People remembers it," she said. "People forgets it if it ain't wrote down."

I reckon so.

Yeah. Me, too.

Summary

Every story you write must focus on people. Every story you tell must show how news, how events, affect people. Every story must have a "face" on it. Most of all, every story you write must have impact in some way. Every story must challenge your readers to think, to respond, to react.

As a local television journalist said in her 2004 speech to the Indiana High School Press Association, "Good writers can tell a story. Great writers can lend perspective." Once you understand these concepts, we can do business. Until then, your publications will suffer.

Certainly, these are enormous tasks. So how can you incorporate all of this knowledge? How will you apply these storytelling skills? What are those skills? What tools will you need? How can you develop those tools, not only in writing but in design and alternative coverage?

Where should you start?

All are valid questions, and each answer has its own story. Each aspect of storytelling is unique, and each aspect is as important as the others in terms of the storytelling process. But if you're willing to risk a few bumps along the way, if you're ready to face a few obstacles, then the end will be worth it. After all, the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

So come along for the journey. Carl's coming. You should, too. In the end, you'll be glad you did.

STUDY GUIDE

Terms and Concepts

Audience— the person or group of people for whom a message is intended.

Story v. topic— Topics are things or events. Stories are about the people who are affected by those things or events. Good journalism focuses on stories, not topics.

Try This

1. Have everyone in the class bring in his favorite magazines from home. Start an "idea file" in the classroom. Whenever you're stuck for ideas, go to the idea file. See if you can get some inspiration from what you find there.
2. Take those magazines and see if you can guess what kind of audience reads them. How can you tell? What clues help

you to determine the magazines' demographics?

3. From your favorite magazine, find one article that you enjoy and clip it out in its entirety (that includes everything that goes with the article, not just the words in the story). Be prepared to discuss what information you accessed. Did you read it all? Only some of it? Which parts? If you didn't finish, why not? Where did you stop reading?
4. Evaluating your own publications: Take a recent copy of your school's newspaper, magazine or yearbook (you can make photocopies if you don't want to mess up the originals) and do the following steps:
   a. With a highlighter pen, highlight everything you actually read in the publication. Stop highlighting when you're done reading or if you've moved on. Highlight everything you access including titles and headlines, stories, cutlines, photos, alternative coverage (also called infographics or sidebars), etc. See Fig. 1.
   b. On a separate sheet of paper, write the following words: "headlines/titles/summary decks," "stories," "cutlines," "photos" and "alternative coverage." See Fig. 1.
   c. Count the number of each of these items that appear in your publication and then count the number of items your read in their entirety.
   d. Evaluate. What do these results tell you about how you read? What do they tell you about how your peers read? What do they read? What do they avoid? Of the items on your sheet, what element takes up the most physical space? How many people read that element in its entirety? What is the most well read element in your publication?

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School named 'Best Buy'

Stepping over the barriers

ADVERTISING

CHS Foreign Student Populations

Moving to new environment brings ups and downs

On the Move

Headlines	Stories	Cutlines	Photos	Alt. Cov'ge

Figure 1

SECTION I

Information Gathering

What Are the Stories and How Do You Find Them?

Before you write, before you design, before you take photos, before you do anything, your first step is to determine what exactly you need to cover, or else, what's the point? As a result, you get a series of questions: What is the news? What do we want our readers to think about? What do my readers need to know? What do they want to know?

So, three steps:

1. Figure out what news topics you need to cover.
2. Find the faces within those topics to help readers relate to those newsworthy events.
3. Gather relevant information to be able to write and package your stories for readers.

This section on information gathering will explore these steps in detail. In Section II, we'll discuss putting that information together into an organized story, but for now let's talk about the raw materials of news, the bare bones of storytelling.

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CHAPTER 1

Broccoli

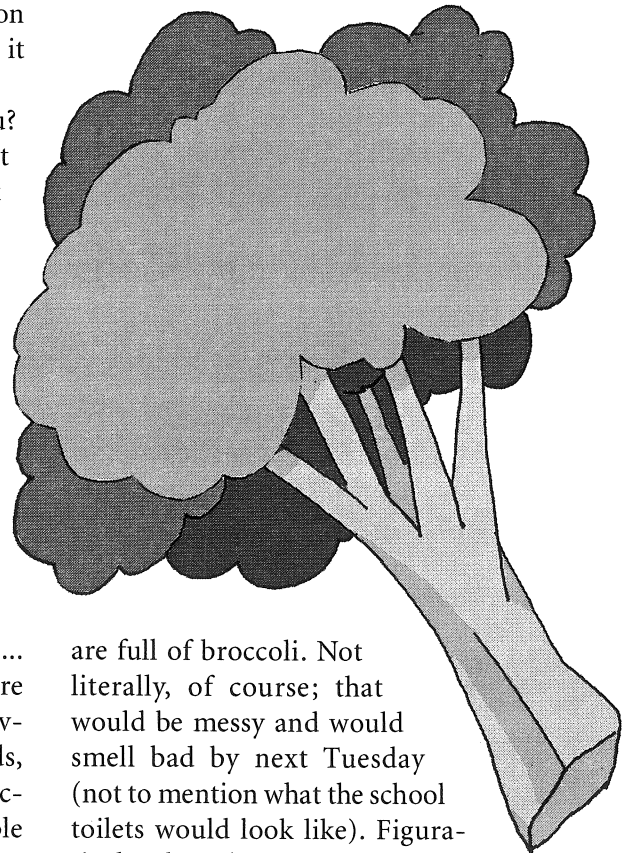
What Is News?

Raise your hand if you like broccoli. Go on, raise it high. (Looking, looking...) Don't be shy. Just signify if you like broccoli. OK. One, two, three ... about five of you. Sound about right? That's usually the case in most groups of young people. A small percentage of the larger population that likes broccoli. Don't believe it? Try it for yourself.

But what about the rest of you? What's the deal? You'd admit, wouldn't you, that broccoli's good for you? It's got all kinds of important vitamins and minerals. It's a good source of iron. There are even connections between eating broccoli and reducing your risk of some cancers, or diabetes.

So why, nonbroccoli eaters, do you avoid the leafy green goodness of broccoli? Tell you what. Try this. How many of you would eat broccoli if it were offered to you with a generous coating of melted cheese? How about then? Would you eat it? Raise your hands. Raise 'em high. Eight, nine, ten.... Okay. So what you're saying is that more people are likely to eat broccoli if it's covered with melted cheese. In other words, you're still getting the goodness of broccoli, but you're making it more palatable by packaging the vegetable in something that more people enjoy. Hmmm ... I think we're on to something here.

Let's carry this analogy away from the dinner plate for a moment and translate it into journalistic terms. Your publications



are full of broccoli. Not literally, of course; that would be messy and would smell bad by next Tuesday (not to mention what the school toilets would look like). Figuratively, though, your publications

are full of broccoli. You fill your papers and yearbooks and magazines with information that readers need to know. Like broccoli, it's good for them. It may not always taste great, but it's chock full of news that they should access. But also like broccoli, only a few people actually do, in fact, ingest that information. There are some, of course (just as there are some who will eat broccoli in any of its forms), who will read that information because they don't care how that information is presented. These are the same people who stay at home on Friday nights, sit in front of a warm fire and crack open the phone book for enjoyment. Or perhaps, as a hobby, they read legal contracts. Or dictionaries. But most readers— the majority of your readers— see "broccoli" and simply turn the page.

Fine, you say, what does that have to do with me? I'm not the one avoiding the information. I've put it out there for them to see. I've done my job. Go bother someone else.

Wrong answer. This has everything to

A WORD ABOUT "NEWSPAPERS"

Most high school newspapers are really newsmagazines in broadsheet clothing. Don't fight it. Work with a new outlook.

The truth is, you don't publish every day. The truth is, you don't publish every other day. The truth is, most of you don't even publish every week. The truth is, most of you publish about once a month (give or take).

The truth is, professional magazines exist in the world that outscoop you.

Why fight it?

Yes, yes. You look like a newspaper. You run on a broadsheet. You use that nasty black newsprint that rubs off on your new white sweatshirt on distribution day. I understand. But let me ask this: If I dress up like Jessica Simpson — the bustierre, the pouty lips, the Daisy Duke shorts, all of it — and walk into the room, does that mean I'm Jessica Simpson?

The point is, to merely look like a publication doesn't mean that you are that publication. Not at heart, at least. But don't get discouraged. You can still look like a newspaper, just stop pretending that you are a newspaper. Because you're not. Not really.

Unless, of course, you publish every day. Or even every other day. The true definition of "newspaper" has to do with timeliness. Chances are, your local professional paper comes out every day (maybe a little less frequently if you live in a rural area, but not much less). Professional newspapers publish more frequently because they can. Because they have full-time staffs devoted to publishing that often. Because they have the money and the ad revenues to do it. My guess is you don't have those kinds of resources.

So what do you do? Simple. Change your philosophy. Become a newsmagazine. Maybe not in appearance, but in the way you cover events.

And how do magazines cover events? What makes them unique?

1. They publish less frequently.
2. They focus on the hard-hitting news questions of how and why.
3. They write stories about people, not things.

do with you. If you consider yourself a journalist, at least, this should be what it's all about. Remember, in journalism, unlike many of the other classes that you're presently taking, the work you do affects other people. No longer should you only concern yourself with, well, yourself. In journalism, you need to think about others. In particular, your peers. The people with whom you attend school daily. The people in your math class. The people not in your math class. The guy at your bus stop.

Your readers.

See, there are two types of information in journalism — information that readers want to know and information that readers need to know. It's easy to provide the former. After all, your readers want to know it. Let's say your administration decides to hold a lottery, and the random students picked in that lottery will get a new car. It doesn't matter if you print that story in reverse with invisible ink, your students will find a way to access that information. They want to know.

But what about the other? The information that your student readers need to know? Let's say your school has a new dress code policy or maybe the rules of your state's standardized tests have changed. What about then? I doubt that you'll have readers beating down your door for that information, but does it make that information any less valid? Any less important? On the contrary, that information often tends to be the most important information for readers.

The problem is that it reads like plain broccoli; most people see it and move on. Look at it this way. If you write a story and it gets published in your paper or yearbook or magazine, you've only done half of your job. For those mathematicians out there (and you know who you are), half is 50 percent. In most school settings, 50 percent is a failing grade. I don't care if you spent weeks researching and interviewing and writing and rewriting. It doesn't matter if you taped your eyelids to your forehead each night so that you could stay awake to edit your article. If you've not thought of your readers and how they access information — if all you've produced is piles and piles of broccoli, in other words — you've failed. I'll say it again, with emphasis. Failing to think of your readers is to fail in journalism.

No pressure there, huh?

So What Exactly Is Broccoli?

What's the information readers need to know? We'll talk about what "cheese" is in Chapter 3, but for our purposes, we need to know what broccoli is before we learn how to make it palatable. After all, if we can't determine what makes news then we haven't done our job, cheese on top or not.

So, again, what is broccoli?

Broccoli — news — is simply one or a combination of the following factors:

- **Timeliness or timelessness**
- **Proximity**
- **Prominence**
- **Conflict**
- **Impact/consequence**
- **Human interest**

Timeliness or Timelessness

Time is an essential ingredient in good newswriting and storytelling. Events are either happening, soon to happen or happen continually. Your job as a reporter is to determine the type of story that you have. Newspaper writers tend to focus

more on the timely stories— they focus on the events that happen close to publication dates. Yearbook writers, on the other hand, look at the timeless tales, since their stories, unlike those in the newspaper, must stand the test of time. Magazines fall somewhere in the middle.

That's not to say that newspapers can't run timeless articles or that yearbooks can't also be timely. On the contrary, some of the best articles in your publications may be out of the "usual" strain. But knowing what kind of story you have will determine where it goes in your publication. Is it news? A feature? Speaking specifically of newspapers, the timelier articles tend to be more newsworthy. Thinking always of readers, the closer an event is to publication, the more readers care (or should care) about it. We will discuss styles of writing later in this book, but suffice it to say for now that **news and feature are not styles of writing (see Chapter 6). Rather, what those terms refer to is time. News stories tend to be more timely while features lean toward being timeless.**

Proximity

Location of events is key to newsworthiness. The closer something happens to your readers, the more they should care about it. For example, the news may be that a school in your state has adopted a new attendance policy that allows seniors to call themselves in sick at the attendance office. That's newsworthy. It's interesting. Right?

Now imagine that that same event happened, not just in your state, but in your own school. Which story is more newsworthy? Which would more readers care to peruse?

But again, that's not to say that news that happens only in your own backyard should make it to print. No, what good journalists need to do is learn how to localize news events. Even if they happen miles away, most (if not all) stories can be made more proximal. You just have to ask the right questions, questions that, inevitably, your readers should ask.

Let's say the story is that a high school golfer in (insert name of state here other than your own) has been kicked off the team

CLUBBING YOU OVER THE HEAD

Don't use "news" and "feature" when referring to types of stories. Think "timely" and "timeless" instead.

Timely	Timeless
Definition: Information that has a definite time angle and must run in a certain issue of your publication (i.e., when readers access the information they can take immediate action).	Definition: Information that could run in any issue of your publication.
Example: Testing procedures for next week's schoolwide standardized state exam.	Example: An investigative report on fire safety in the average home in your community.
Purpose: To get important breaking information out quickly.	Purpose: To give readers information to think about.
Where it goes in your paper: Generally on the front page.	Where it goes in your paper: Anywhere, really, but most likely a little deeper in your publication. Consider, however, anchoring your front page with a timeless, in-depth story.

for using illegal clubs. Just ask the right questions. How could you localize this story? Could this happen at your own school? Why? Why not? What are the rules governing club use in golf? What are the rules to prevent cheating in other sports? Do some students get around those rules? How?

See what I mean? Even events that don't happen next door have meaning. It's up to you to provide that "closeness," that proximity, to your readers.

Prominence

Let's face it. Certain people at your school are more important than others. It's a fact of life. As a whole, we care more about these "important" people than we do the "unimportant" people. Why else do we spend so many hours watching music, movie and television awards programs? Why else do we pay money to see professional sporting events? Why do some people keep autograph books filled with signatures of celebrities?

Simply, prominent people are more newsworthy. If events affect prominent people in your school, then readers are more likely to care about those events. Likewise, your readers are more likely to listen to the words of prominent people than they are to listen to those who hold less prominence.

OBJECTIVITY: AN IMPOSSIBILITY

You've heard it too often: Keep opinions out of your writing. But how? As you see here, unbiased reporting can't be done.

Terms to know

Objective: without bias or prejudice; detached.

Subjective: personal; opinionated.

Journalists should strive to remain as objective as they can in their writing. They should talk to sources from all sides of an issue. They should research. They should make relevant observations.

But true objectivity is a myth. Journalism itself is riddled with subjectivity. Here's why.

1. Writers decide which sources get quoted, how much they say in a story and where in the story those sources appear.
2. Designers and editors decide which stories get placed, how long those stories are and where in the publication those stories are located.

INTERPRETATION: A PROBABILITY

Just because journalism is subjective doesn't mean you should write dry, uninteresting prose.

Terms to know

Interpretation: providing explanation, meaning.

Analysis: providing opinion based on information.

There is a time and place for both of the terms listed in today's journalism. Interpretation is fine for most journalistic stories, whether timely or timeless. In other words, journalists take the information supplied and help readers to understand its impact or significance.

On the other hand, reporters should reserve analysis for a newspaper or magazine's op-ed pages since this type of writing purposely includes a writer's opinions.

Your school is full of prominent people. Your principal is prominent, as is the rest of the administration. Teachers are prominent. School nurses. Counselors. Media specialists. All are prominent people and all make good sources for stories (more on this later).

But put yourself into the heads of your readers for a moment. Who do you listen to most? Your teachers? Your parents? Your principal? I doubt it. Certainly you should listen to these people. They are wise. They have lived. They have experience and fancy degrees from expensive universities. But if you're like most readers who have a choice, the words from these people go in one ear and out the other.

That leaves one group. Students. Your peers. Take a look around. Which students at your school are more prominent than others? There are the obvious ones— student body president, class senators, team captains. But there are others as well. Seniors, for example, have prominence for the underclassmen. Smart students have earned prominence. Class clowns (in some cases) have prominence. You need to identify the people, or types of people, that your student population looks up to. Quote these people and your readability increases.

Conflict

When people or events or ideologies are at odds, that's newsworthy. There are obvious conflicts— war, protests, sporting events between rivals, fights in the halls. But there are some less obvious ones (or, perhaps, less noticeable ones), too— debates over new school board policies, weighing students' rights to free speech with the school's right to limit that speech.

Your job as a journalist is to find where those conflicts lie and illuminate them for your readers. In his Pulitzer-Prize–winning story, *New York Times* reporter Ron Suskind writes about Cedric Jennings, a good kid from the worst school in Washington, D.C. Suskind shares obvious conflicts— Cedric, because he is smart, becomes the brunt of other students' taunting and threats— and also deeper-seated conflicts— Cedric struggles to achieve top grades, but because he is from a bad school his education does not stand up to the education of minority students from other, better schools. Over the course of the article, the reader begins to understand Cedric's struggles and realizes that Cedric represents a much larger problem that isn't so easily fixed.

Impact and Consequence

When events happen, they mean something. That's what makes them newsworthy. Events that you choose to cover should have some significance for the students in your school. But sometimes that significance isn't always obvious. That's where you come in. It is your job to share with your readers the significance of certain events.

You must answer (or, better yet, have sources answer) the two most important journalistic questions— how and why. Certainly who, what, when and where are important questions to answer. But of the five W's and an H, the two most important are the last two always listed. I say again, how and why? Thinking like a reader, how does this event affect me? Why should I care? Why is this important? How can I do something about this? These are the questions you should ask yourself as a journalist every time you write a story. Readers will care more if you make the news mean something to them. And the more they care, the more they will read.

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RAISING THE ISSUES

Publications should help readers to determine what to think about

With the exception of editorials, columns and reviews, newsworthy items should drive a publication's content. However, the news isn't just a random collection of facts, statistics and numbers. If it were, anyone could do it—just fill in the blanks and, voila, your publication is done. You should leave your opinions (and the opinions of the rest of your staff) out of the content of your publication.

In other words, don't tell readers what to think. It's not your job. Half the time, they won't listen to you anyway. It is your job, however, to give readers something to think about.

That's a big difference. With the former, your stories are rife with opinion and conjecture. Often first and second person as well as unattributed claims creep their ugly heads into this type of writing. With the latter, the goal is to get readers to say, "Hmmmm, I never thought of it that way before." Or even, "I never even thought to think of that before."

See the difference?

With what to think about, journalists must take newsworthy events and make them make sense for readers in a way that, perhaps, they've not thought of before. If a hurricane hits the coast of Virginia and you live in Iowa, does it affect you? Not directly, of course. But a good reporter is able to help readers make a relevant connection. Using the same example, could lessons learned from a disastrous hurricane be comparable to tornadoes in your area? Could readers learn how to make themselves more prepared in the event of a natural disaster? Were there schools in Virginia that were affected by the hurricane? Is there anything your school can do to help?

Think like readers. What questions will they have? Or perhaps more important, what questions should they have?

Open that line of communication in your publications and you will reap the benefits of better readership.

Human Interest

Sometimes stories fit none of the categories above. They are simply interesting for the sake of being interesting. These are the human interest stories. Perhaps you have a student at your school who is eight feet tall. Or maybe a freshman has decided to take the SAT and scored a perfect 2,400. Could be a kid likes to dress up like Superman on the weekends. Or maybe someone's got so many body piercings that her ears whistle when she sticks her head out of a car window.

You get the idea. These kinds of stories are in their own category. They're not really broccoli because most readers will read these stories no matter how you present them. However, they should still be a part of your publication. Not the only part, mind you, but part. Actually, a smattering of readable human interest pieces can do wonders for the rest of your publication as a whole. To carry on the analogy, they are cheese for your whole publication. They make the entire work more palatable.

The Point

Take a hint, young journalists. You must have a point to make when writing your stories or else you're not doing your job. I'll say it again — have a point when writing. With no point, you are merely a Chatty Cathy doll, an inanimate toy where you are the one pulling the strings to see what random thoughts emerge from your pen or word processor. And your readers, who have no time for such nonsense, will give you the worst "tongue lashing" you can possibly have as a journalist — they won't read what you've written.

Don't get me wrong. Saying, "Have a point," is not the same as saying, "Be subjective." On the contrary, you should be as objective as you can when telling stories. But being objective doesn't mean being boring either. Good journalists can and should tell readers, not what to think, but what to think about. That's a big difference. With the former (what to think), you're running into the realm of columns and editorials and reviews. With the latter (what to think about), you're presenting information and viewpoints and interviews that make a reader step back and say one of two things: "I never thought of (insert topic here) that way before" or "I never even thought to think of that (insert topic here) before."

Make sense? Maybe not, so here's an example that might help. Let's say your school has adopted a new dress code for the school year and you've been assigned to write the story covering the changes (no pun intended). The boring journalist will write something like this:

This school has adopted a new dress code for the 2007-08 school year. No longer will students be allowed to wear hats of any kind or shirts that reveal bare midriffs.

"We think this is a good policy," Principal John Hawkins said. "But as with any new policy, this will take some time for students to get used to."

The policy came as a result of many students wearing inappropriate clothing last year, according to Hawkins. It requires students to wear "tuckable" shirts and no hats. In addition, boys are no longer allowed to wear pants that sag so low that their underwear shows.

"I think the policy stinks," sophomore Jeff Dawson said.

Junior Michelle Reed said, "I don't like the new rules, but I can see where the administration came from."

Certainly the story is newsworthy. It's a policy that will affect most students in your population. But does this story say anything beyond outlining the policy alterations and the new language in the rulebook? Look at the quotes. Do they actually say anything? Do they make you care one way or the other?

So the story's not bad journalistically, except for the fact that no one will care about the story and no one will read it. Not to mention that, since most high school papers don't come out more frequently than once every two weeks or so (or even less frequently), the information is actually old news. But if getting your readers to actually access the information you provide is not important to you or your staff then read no further.

The good journalist, however, will start the procedure by asking some preliminary questions. Things like, "Is there a correlation between proper dress and student academic success?" Or, "How difficult is it for students to buy contemporary fashions in light of the new dress code?" The good journalist will then focus on one of those questions and explore it, finding a "face" to illustrate both (or more than both) sides of the issue. Having a point will

also help narrow the focus of the reporter's questions when interviewing. It will help him to determine what types of observations would be most relevant.

So if I'm the reporter and I have chosen to explore the question of contemporary fashion versus dress code, I could start by finding a student who no longer has anything in her closet that will meet the new dress code requirements. I could go to her house and have her go through the contents of her closet with me. I could ask her questions about how she plans to cope. Will she go out and buy new clothes that do meet the requirements? Will she just wear her old clothes anyway, despite the new policy? And what about other relevant sources? I can talk to those who made the policy, finding out what went into the decision. But what about the stores? Are places like The Limited and Express losing business because of schools' dress code policies? Will schools' dress code policies affect the sales market? Have they ever affected it historically?

So your story might look something like this:

When senior Jessica Green went back-to-school shopping last June, almost three months before this school year began, she thought she would get a jump on the competition. She spent more than $300 on several outfits, including almost a dozen midriff-revealing shirts.

Just a week ago, she found out that her pre-planning was all for naught.

"I heard about the new policy and my heart jumped in my throat," Green said. "I mean, almost everything I bought doesn't meet the new requirements."

Green is not alone. Many students must reevaluate their wardrobes because of a new policy just passed at last week's school board meeting. Now the dress code rules state that students must wear "tuckable" shirts. "That's, like, everything I own," junior Mary Skelding said. Skelding, like Green, shopped early to avoid back-to-school store crowding. In addition to shirts, students can no longer wear hats and they can't don pants that reveal undergarments.

"We had to do it," Principal John Hawkins said. "I know there will be some dissention, but students' clothes can certainly be a distraction to the learning environment, and we want to provide the best environment possible."

But this explanation doesn't help Green.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with all of these clothes," Green said. "I can't take them back because it's been more than 90 days since I bought them. I guess I'll just have to buy something else and wear these on the weekends."

See what can happen if you have a point? No longer is the story just about dress code. It's about what the dress code means, or can mean, to students.

Looks Can Deceive

So here's the story: A student on my newspaper staff looks at the front page of our publication — the one that's scheduled to go to press in, like, an hour — and she says, "Who wants to read about that?" She's pointing at the screen, her face looking like she's just bitten into something sour.

The editor, a nice young man who can't stand the sight of his own blood (another story entirely, but *funny*) looks up and says, innocently enough, "Why?"

The girl is incredulous. "Because she's riding a lawnmower in the street," she says, still pointing, as if that answers the whole question. "Why is this story about a girl riding a lawnmower on the front page of the paper?"

The editor cringes. He's pretty proud of the page. I can tell he doesn't want to rock the boat any further. He stays quiet.

"Kids don't want to read about that," the girl says. "They want to read about sex and drugs and parties."

At this point, I decide to step in. "Did you read the story?" I say quietly.

"Well, no," she says casting her eyes down. But then her finger regains its previous prone position. "But she's on a freaking lawnmower in the street. What's she doing?"

"Learning to drive," I say.

"But you can't learn to drive on a lawnmower."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"Hmmm," I say. I like that word, "Hmmmm." It catches students off guard, as if to say, "Hmmmm, you may have a point," or, "Hmmmm, you may want to think about that," or, "Hmmmm, you're a big moron." It says all of these and more.

The girl looks more carefully at the story. She starts to read. It's a good story, about a sophomore girl who, for a lot of reasons, has chosen not to take the traditional driver education course to learn to drive. First of all, a busy, 4.0 student, she doesn't have enough time to devote to a class that teaches her to drive. Second, she and her family don't want to shell out the hundreds of dollars it costs to take driver ed from one of only three accredited driver education schools in the area. Third, the lawnmower girl did her homework and found out that the only benefit of taking an approved driver ed course is that teens can get their licenses six months before those teens who opt not to take the course. Six months. For hundreds of dollars, not to mention the countless hours of class time and driving time.

So the story wasn't about a girl on a lawnmower. It was about more than that. It was about the system and how one girl decided not to be a part of the system. It was about options and choices that students can make even if they thought they didn't have those options. It focused on a girl riding a lawnmower to avoid taking driver ed, but she represented a whole group of readers who may be dealing with similar situations. And not just driving situations. Driving was the focus, but the story could be about any situation where students felt they were being monopolized.

After a minute or two, the girl steps back from the page. She shakes her head. "I see it, but I still don't like it," she says.

"Fair enough," I say. "But you don't have to like it." I look at the page for a second. There's the girl, riding high in the saddle of her lawnmower, regular traffic whizzing by her. There's the title and summary deck, "Cutting Out of Driver Ed: Sophomore Replaces Class with Riding Lawnmower."

I look back at the newspaper girl. "The thing is," I say, "it made you have a reaction, right? I mean, like it or not, you saw this story and you took notice. Maybe, just maybe, it made you read at least part of the story. And maybe, if you read, you learned a little something. Just maybe.

"A minute ago you said that students want to read about sex and drugs and parties. I agree. But those aren't the only stories out there. I mean, we'll run stories like that as long as they have something new to bring to the discussion, but, honestly, how many of your peers don't already know about those topics? What can we say in the newspaper that approaches those topics in a new and interesting way?"

I point back to the screen. "Now how many of our readers know about this?"

"I guess," she says, but I can tell she doesn't really mean it. The girl shakes her head and walks away.

Granted, the story wasn't Pulitzer-

Prize–winning stuff. Most of the stories that we write from issue to issue aren't. But that doesn't make the story any less important. It's easy to tell readers what they want to know. It's not so easy to tell them what they need to know. As journalists, we have a job to provide both kinds of information.

Here's the bottom line: Good journalism takes time and effort. You have to have a point and you have to make all of the information in your story — from research to interviewing to observation — relevant to that point. As a reporter, you must know why you're writing a particular story. What do you want readers to think about? Why should they care? How does, or should, the news affect them?

Know the answers to these questions and you'll be on your way to telling better stories in no time.

STUDY GUIDE

Terms and Concepts

Timeliness— An element of news referring to events that happen close to publication dates.

Timelessness— An element of news referring to events that have global themes and can be run in almost any issue of a publication.

Proximity— An element of news referring to events that happen close in location to readers.

Prominence— An element of news referring to events that affect people with more perceived "importance."

Impact/consequence— An element of news referring to how events affect a publication's readers.

Human interest— An element of news referring to events that are interesting for the sake of being interesting.

Interpretation— Providing explanation, meaning. Appropriate for "objective" news stories.

Analysis— Providing opinion based on information. Appropriate for "subjective" stories like reviews, editorials and columns.

Finding the "News" at Your School

Newspaper

Step 1: Jot down a list of all of the publication dates for this year's newspaper.

Step 2: Write a list of timely events that will occur during the year (i.e., Homecoming, prom, Valentine's Day, scheduling, etc.)

Step 3: Write a separate list of timeless events and topics.

Step 4: Use the list for future reference for ideas and planning throughout the year.

Yearbook

Step 1: Jot down a list of all of the proofing dates for your publication (this may come from the yearbook plant).

Step 2: Write a list of timely events that will occur during the year for events that will occur within those proofing dates.

Step 3: Write a separate list of timeless events and topics that could be incorporated throughout the book.

Step 4: Use the list for future reference for ideas and planning throughout the year.

Example:

First semester Issue dates	Timely events (must run in specific issues)	Timeless events (can run in any issue)
Sept. 10	State academic testing Freshman Class elections	Censorship Students who volunteer for Habitat for Humanity
Sept. 30	Homecoming	Students enrolled in peer facilitating classes
Oct. 15	Halloween Fall sports tournaments Presidential election	Males enrolled in “traditionally” female classes (and vice versa)
Nov. 12	Thanksgiving	Student First Amendment rights
Dec. 2	Student council blood drive Care-to-Share program	How businesses market to teens