

Chapter Four

EIGHT STEPS TO WRITING NEWS

Let's write, as a starter, a brief news story about Elizabeth Klinski's house fire. You can do so in eight steps.

1. *Identify a news incident or situation.* News agencies routinely visit (often by phone) such places as police headquarters or the Fire Department to learn of incidents like the Klinski fire. Sometimes they monitor via radio scanner a community's emergency frequencies. When they learn something newsworthy, they assign a reporter to obtain the details.
2. *Gather the facts.* By contacting authorities (the Fire Department in this instance) and witnesses (Klinski herself), a reporter assembles the bits and pieces that you saw in Chapter 3.
3. *Determine the news value.* Some people claim to find great mystery in the way journalists judge news values. Perhaps they fail to realize that a lot of it derives from what people talk about. Imagine yourself walking home one evening. You pass nine houses where nothing much is happening. The tenth is on fire. What would you talk

about when you got home? Chances are you'd say something like "The Klinski house is on fire! There's a lot of smoke coming out the window. A fire truck's on the scene. I saw Mrs. Klinski there and she's okay—maybe a little shaken but okay."

You've just defined news and "written" a news story. This is a minor one, lacking prominence, magnitude or even rarity. But the event is timely, local, concrete and active. It even contains a tiny amount of conflict in the dramatic scene of fire crews fighting to avoid destruction. That sense of drama can be a news element, too. A community newspaper might give it a paragraph; broadcast news might give it 15 seconds. A big-city newspaper would probably ignore it unless somebody important were involved.

4. *Define the essential elements of the story.* It may be interesting to learn that Klinski was born in a log cabin in Illinois and reads the classics. But these elements don't belong in this story, which must deal strictly with the facts that made it news. Defined by the essentials, the story appears to have these elements (not necessarily in order of importance):

1. the fact of a house fire
2. the death of a pet
3. the dramatic discovery: coming home to find the house afire
4. \$10,000 property damage
5. Fire Department put out the fire
6. cause: electrical short circuit in kitchen
7. no injuries
8. identity of the owner, Elizabeth Klinski
9. definition of locale
10. time of incident

5. *Apply the 5W+H formula.* You can identify the essentials through a time-honored formula for the recounting of incidents. The essentials come in five words that begin with **W** and one with **H**: *Who, What, Where, When, Why and How*. When you organize your thinking this way, you can see how each factual element has its place:

Who? Klinski and the Fire Department.

What? House discovered on fire. \$10,000 damage. Fire extinguished. Cat died.

When? Last night about 10.

Where? The Klinski house, 1133 Market Lane (see *City Directory* in Appendix C for addresses and correct spelling of names).

How? How started: bad wiring. How coped with: Fire Department brought in.

Why? Don't confuse Why with How. The superficial answer to Why is via the How—the fire started because of bad wiring and was extinguished because firefighters were brought in. The Why is more complex and less well-defined. Yet ultimately it may be the most important question of all to a perceptive newswriter. Why do house fires start? Why do short circuits occur? What can be done to prevent them? This story is probably not the vehicle to answer such questions. However, the newswriter who asks them will ultimately prove to be a more perceptive reporter than one who ignores them.

6. *Rank the elements by order of importance.* When we communicate important personal news, we tend to state the essence of it first—"The Klinski house is on fire!" Then we provide the details. The news media do the same. Within the neighborhood two essentials emerge (1) a house afire and (2) identification of which house. A news agency might take a more detached view because to say "the Klinski house is on fire!" has meaning only to the neighbors who know her. An early broadcast report, coming before all the facts are known, would sound like this: "Firefighters are at the scene of a house fire on

Market Lane tonight. They were called to the home of Elizabeth Klinski around ten o'clock after Klinski returned from a concert and found smoke pouring out of a window. . . ." In short, from the wider perspective, the station considers the fact of a house fire more important than the identification of a nonprominent citizen. To neighbors, however, identification of *which* house is vital. Both are valid news judgments given the different circumstances.

Let's assume now that all the essential facts are in, as a newspaper reporter might encounter them at the Fire Department the next morning. The report can now be more complete. Here is one possible ranking of elements, from most important to least.

1. \$10,000 damage
2. drama of returning to see smoke from window
3. Fire Department saves house
4. cause: faulty wiring
5. absence of injuries to humans
6. death of cat

7. *Write your lead.* The writing of the opening paragraph of a news story involves two procedures. The first is defining the most important element—the essence of the story. The second is assembling the words that represent your definition. Neither procedure is easy. Newswriters don't always agree. The traditional news pattern for a story like this one is to cite damage or injury to humans (the "concreteness" criterion) as the most important. Thus:

A fire caused about \$10,000 damage to the home of Elizabeth Klinski, 67, 1133 Market Lane, last night.

Another writer might consider the drama of coming home to see your house afire (the "action" criterion) as most important. Thus:

Elizabeth Klinski, 67, returned to her home about ten last night to find her house on fire.

8. *Write the elaborating details, more or less in order of descending importance.* Follow your outline (Step 6) as you relate the remaining details. Here's the rest of Version 2, starting with Paragraph 2. Note that the story could be cut from the bottom up (a common practice) without deleting the story's essentials. The last paragraph, in other words, is the least important.