



THE CRAFT OF BROADCAST NEWS WRITING

Broadcast Writing Style vs. Print Writing Style

12 Differences

And the Importance of “Leads”

First be clear. It’s all about “clarity.” Radio and TV news writing and reporting are written for the ear. Broadcast reports cannot be reread as print stories can, so they must be written very clearly to be understood the first time.

1. Attribution—Broadcast puts attribution at beginning of sentences for better flow

Newspaper: Sennett lost control of his motorcycle, crossed over the center line and collided with the oncoming pickup truck, Midcity Police Department Public Information Officer David M. Cohen reported. (note attribution is at the end)

Broadcast: Midcity police spokesman David Cohen says Sennett lost control of his motorcycle, crossed the center line and collided with the oncoming pickup truck. (note attribution is at beginning, long job title is shortened, and middle initial not used)

2. Attribution—Use when a statement is opinionated, questionable, controversial, and when it would better establish the credibility of the statement. Attribution is not necessary to use when the statement is a known and indisputable fact.

Examples of when attribution not needed:

- A jet crashed at the Midcity Municipal Airport
- Three men died in the traffic accident
- World War II ended in 1945.

Example of when attribution is needed:

- Most college students party too much.
- The oil companies are ripping off the public.
- Pilot error caused the plane crash.

3. Time element—Broadcast strives for immediacy. Avoid “yesterday/last night” in leads. Instead, update the story to say what is happening now or today.

Newspapers: Charles O. Sennett, 24, of Midcity, died last night when his motorcycle collided with a pickup truck on Magnolia Avenue.

Broadcast: A motorcycle accident has claimed the life of a 24-year-old Midcity man.

4. Use of Quotes—Broadcast stories include “...and this is a direct quote” wording

Newspaper: “I will not allow the Morris Island Lighthouse to collapse into the sea,” the governor said.

Broadcast: The governor says...and these are his exact words...I will not allow the Morris Island Lighthouse to collapse into the sea. (note: don’t use quotation marks)

You can also paraphrase: The governor says he will not allow the Morris Island Lighthouse to collapse into the sea.

5. Middle Initials—Broadcast is more informal and doesn't use middle initials unless they are part of a well known person's name-- Edward R. Murrow or Michael J. Fox for example.

Newspaper: Officers Marc P. Waxton and Regina S. Moreno are credited...

Broadcast: Officers Marc Waxton and Regina Moreno are credited...

6. Use of names with titles or positions and age—broadcast puts titles and ages before names for better flow and so the listener can better assess the credibility of the source

Newspaper: Dr. William P. Bates, an EPO research chemist, said...

Broadcast: E-P-O research chemist Dr. William Bates says...

Newspapers: Mary R. Carter, 21, a College of Charleston senior, won the lottery.

Broadcast: Twenty-one-year-old College of Charleston senior Mary Carter won the lottery. (note: always spell out numbers when they begin sentences)

7. Approximations or rounding off numbers—broadcast rounds off big numbers for better listener comprehension

Newspaper: School is out for 76,212 Midcity students.

Broadcast: School is out for more than 76-thousand Midcity students.

8. Verb Tenses—Broadcast uses present tenses (“says” instead of “said,” “is” instead of “was” for example) to sound more immediate, current and timely

Newspaper: The residents said the storm was the worst they've ever seen.

Broadcast: The residents say the storm was the worst they've ever seen.

9. Active vs. Passive Voice—Broadcast uses active voice for flow and to sound more immediate and punchy. The passive voice can slow the flow and add unnecessary wordiness.

Newspaper: Midcity University was awarded a \$500,000 grant by the Ford Foundation.

Broadcast: The Ford Foundation has awarded a 500-thousand-dollar grant to Midcity University.

10. Contractions—Broadcast uses more contractions than print because they are conversational. Broadcast writing is more informal than print writing.

Newspaper: Doctors say there is a “significant cancer hazard.”

Broadcast: Doctors say there's a quote...significant cancer hazard.

11. Abbreviations—Don't use in broadcast copy; use hyphens to separate initials

Newspaper: 7621 Ramsgate Blvd. EPA research chemist

Broadcast: 76-21 Ramsgate Boulevard E-P-A research chemist

12. Symbols—Broadcast spells out symbols such as \$ and %

Newspaper: Revenue grew by 10% to \$50 million.

Broadcast: Revenue grew by 10 percent to 50-million-dollars.

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WRITING BROADCAST NEWS LEADS

Functions of the Lead Sentence

- Grab the listener's interest. The lead is the hook, the bait used to lure the listener into the story
- Prepare the listener for the information to follow
- Set tone for the story to follow
- Broadcast leads are best when they are short and have only enough information to suggest the guts of the story. Leads of 12 words or fewer are often best.
- Don't try to answer all of the questions-- who, what, when, where, why and how—in the lead, only the one or two most important questions, often “what” and “where”
- Don't use unfamiliar names in leads. Instead characterize the person by what has made him or her newsworthy.
 - Example: A Mount Pleasant woman is going to be on the popular game show Jeopardy. (use name later in story)
 - Example: A Summerville man died in a fire today. (use name later in story)

Strive for Leads that are...

- Catchy—but not flippant or insensitive
- Clever—use the language, be creative
- Concise—don't cram too much information into the lead, usually just what and where. Don't use unfamiliar names in leads.
- Current—avoid “yesterday” and “last night” in leads. Strive for fresh “today” angles to stories, try to update, give the latest developments
- Conversational—write it the way you would tell someone. Speak it out before writing it. Write in the active voice with the subject committing the act placed first in the sentence. This writing style is smoother, punchier and easier to follow.
- Clear—make sure your writing is understandable; read copy aloud while preparing it to ensure clarity

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