# WRITING THE BASIC TEXT STORY

Chapter 5

"All the News: Writing and Reporting for Convergent Media" Multimedia Reporting Course

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

- This is the dominant format for text stories, especially "hard news"
- Dates to the American Civil War
- This style helps convey information quickly
- Does not try to build suspense
- Does not follow beginning, middle, end formula
- Gives most important facts and details first
- Then follows with facts/details of lesser importance in descending order of importance
- Benefits of Inverted Pyramid:
  - Many readers do not read entire articles, often just the first few paragraphs
  - Makes it easier for reports to be edited by deleting last few or several grafs, depending on space availability of the story (word count and layout factors)
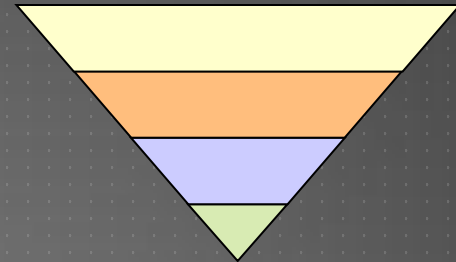
BUILDING THE INVERTED PYRAMID

▶ Most begin with summary leads, the "workhorses" of print reporting, which quickly report the key idea of the story

▶ Remember that summary (aka basic and central point) leads do not use unfamiliar names or too many other details that can be given later in the story- in the lead get to the heart of the story. Cut to the chase!

▶ The Inverted Pyramid lead is often followed by a short "nut graf" that helps the reader understand the importance of the news

▶ As paragraphs continue, add details to flesh out the lead and nut graf

▶ Add interesting, colorful details and quotes

▶ End with remaining facts

▶ In the lead be careful how you work in the "when" element (page 78)

OTHER WAYS TO TELL THE STORY

- The Chronology Story- some stories are best told chronologically, in the order in which events happen

- Chronological account usually follow a summary lead

- Use this order when the sequence of events is vital

- This is often the case in crime stories, when the police report, for example, will include a narrative starting when officers arrived at a crime scene

- Meetings, court hearings and other official sessions normally are not reported chronologically because the most newsworthy elements do not come out at the beginning

- See coverage of U.S. chief justice's speech in Charleston (class website)

- Review section on writing about crime (pages 84-85)

"ACCURACY, ACCURACY, ACCURACY"

- Legendary publisher Joseph Pulitzer said this is the main rule of good journalism. Before handing in a story, the writer should check the following:

  - Names- go back and check that names are correctly spelled; when in doubt check multiple sources or with the person directly, if possible

  - Dates- try to verify dates with reference materials; don't just go with dates people may tell you, especially if the date is critical to the story

  - Places- double-check spelling also of places- cities, towns, addresses, landmarks, etc. Places share names so be specific if you're writing about Lexington, S.C. or Lexington, Ky.

  - Corporate names- spell as the companies spell their own names: The Post and Courier not the Post & Courier, BellSouth not Bell South

  - Titles- get accurate job titles of people you reference in stories and use titles correctly per AP style. Example: S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley and Nikki Haley, the governor of South Carolina

  - Numbers- double check fractions, percentages and other numbers for accuracy and context. Example: after a large plant closes, a town's unemployment increases from 5 percent to 10 percent. Is this a 5 percent increase in unemployment? No, it's a 100 percent increase.

  - Graphics- when charts, graphics and other visuals run with your story, make sure they are all accurate, that there are no inconsistencies between those and what is said in your article

"USING QUOTES EFFECTIVELY"

▶ Good quotes add life to writing, give a sense of a source's personality and credibility and often add important or useful information

▶ They should be used to clarify, to provide opinion, credibility, perspective and color

▶ Routine information should not be used as quotes

▶ If a quote says nothing, don't use it

▶ Routine information used as a partial quote is known as an "orphan" quote. Example: She said the trip abroad will be "fun."

▶ Quotes should not repeat an idea just expressed in writer's own words

▶ Make sure the quoted words are the person's exact words- some news organizations allow corrections to grammatical errors such as "gonna" (going to) and gotta (got to), some do not, such as the Associated Press (I'm OK with making such minor corrections)

▶ When in doubt about using a quote, paraphrase it or use a partial quote

▶ Avoid overuse of ellipses… and (parenthesis) within quotes and stories overall- instead of clarifying, they often do the opposite: confuse. Write in a way that avoids the need.

▶ "Avoid inverted attribution," said Harwood. This construction is unnatural and clumsy. "So word it this way instead," Harwood said.

▶ Don't use double attribution- only attribute the quote speaker once per paragraph and quote

▶ Harwood said: "Use a colon before multi-sentence quotes. Don't use a comma."