



# WRITING THE BASIC ONLINE STORY

Chapter 7

“All the News: Writing and  
Reporting for Convergent Media”

Multimedia Reporting Course

# ONLINE NEWSWRITING FACTORS

- ▶ Stories can be harder to read online than on paper (due to lower resolution) so readers can fatigue quickly
- ▶ Print readers usually pay for their publications while online readers have no investment in most news sites so they may more easily move to another site in an instant
- ▶ Online readers are more likely to be multitasking, searching for news and information while working, watching TV, sending messages, etc.
- ▶ For these reasons, online readers are best served by stories in which the main points and key facts jump off the screen

# ONLINE WRITING TIPS

- ▶ Stories written with summary leads and structured in the inverted pyramid format can help the key facts be absorbed more easily online
- ▶ Keep sentences short and punchy
- ▶ Keep paragraphs short, as you would newspaper stories (or even shorter)
- ▶ Keep stories short to hold the reader's interest
- ▶ BBC News, for example, tells writers for its online site to limit main stories to no more than 400-500 words, and other stories to 250-350 words

# ONLINE NEWS STORY ELEMENTS

## ▶ Headlines

- ▶ Good ones help the writer and reader narrow the story's focus
- ▶ In as few as three or four words let the reader know what the story is about
- ▶ Online headlines don't do as much play on words- they are more simple, straightforward
- ▶ This is because in the online environment, headlines often appear independent of their stories on home pages, in indexes, and on search engine results
- ▶ Are often written in present tense to let the reader know what's happening now

## ▶ Blurbs

- ▶ Sit just below headline and in 20-50 words summarize the story
- ▶ Can be used on a news homepage to link to the full story
- ▶ Blurbs help readers decide whether they should take the time to read the full article

## ▶ Subheads

- ▶ These can be inserted to break up longer stories
- ▶ They help break down the story into bite-sized chunks
- ▶ Guide readers to pertinent sections of an article
- ▶ Offers skimmers a sense of the overall content of the article

## ▶ Examples:

- ▶ [MSN.com](#)
- ▶ [Huffington Post](#)
- ▶ [Charleston Currents](#)

# MORE ONLINE ARTICLE ELEMENTS

## ▶ Bullet Point Lists

- ▶ Help present more information to readers in a way easy to comprehend
- ▶ They can help introduce the major aspects of the story, with each aspect addressed in the body of the story
- ▶ And they are well-used for listing multiple things that in a regular paragraph would be more difficult to absorb

## ▶ Finding and Adding Links

- ▶ Hyperlinks are the basis of the online universe
- ▶ In the early web days, they weren't used so much in news because of fear that readers would not return
- ▶ But well-selected links enhance the value of your own news service to users, increasing loyalty and repeat traffic to your site
- ▶ Using links can help preserve limited resources by not, for example, sending a reporter to cover something that many other news organizations are already covering and that citizen journalists may be blogging about— link to some of these postings instead

# WHERE AND HOW TO LINK READERS

- ▶ Definitions
- ▶ Previous stories
- ▶ Related stories
- ▶ Resources for further research
- ▶ Source documents
- ▶ Related websites
- ▶ Related audio, video, animations
- ▶ Forms or email links to contact the reporter, editor, producer
- ▶ Choose precise link words to help readers not only determine where they're headed but also to interpret the information once they get there
- ▶ Links should be transparent and compelling
- ▶ Avoid the phrase "click here"
- ▶ Link words should give readers a sense of what's around the corner should they choose to go there
- ▶ Example: "The National Association of Poodle Breeders offers 10 suggestions on choosing a pet."

# SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT BLOGS

- ▶ We are seeing the emergence of blogs as a unique form of online writing
- ▶ They can be used to provide breaking news, commentary, corrections and background on items in the news
- ▶ A typical blog post runs two to five paragraphs, though some take no more than a sentence and others go on for 10 paragraphs or more
- ▶ Blog posts are as different as the individuals who write them
- ▶ A blog template of sorts:
  - ▶ A snappy headline grabs the reader's attention
  - ▶ A lead summarizes a recent news report or other online posting and includes a link to that item
  - ▶ One or two paragraphs provide pertinent quotes from the item
  - ▶ One or two paragraphs offers comments from the blogger
  - ▶ A link to comments others have made on the blog entry

# WAYS WRITERS AND REPORTERS DO OWN BLOGS

- ▶ To relate stories from their own beats that do not make it into their regular stories or publications
- ▶ To give “behind-the-scenes” look at the reporting process
- ▶ To engage readers in discussions of story topics
- ▶ To seek story and coverage ideas
- ▶ Blogs, even by trained journalists, can tend to be:
  - ▶ Written less formally, more conversational
  - ▶ Have more first person opinions (even by journalists)
  - ▶ Be edgier, more risque
- ▶ Post and Courier [Blogs](#)
- ▶ Charleston City Paper [Battery Blog](#)
- ▶ Other notable news, communications and PR blogs:
  - ▶ [mediabistro](#)
  - ▶ [Drudge Report](#)
  - ▶ [RepMan](#) (Steve Cody, Peppercom/CofC communication advisory council)
  - ▶ [Fits News](#)- founder/editor [Will Folks](#)