

Module 2:

Writing news stories

This module will help you understand:

- How to construct a basic news story
- How to write an effective lead
- How to create a compelling headline
- How to quote sources
- How to proofread and edit your work

What is news?

Simply put, news is telling a story about something that is new. There are many ways to tell a story, some of which will be explored in the chapter on blogging. But in this chapter we will focus on the craft of writing news, which requires a specific structure and a news ‘angle’.

News is...

- **New.** That’s a reasonable place to start, but we need to qualify things a little. Some news is old, in that it happened a while ago. To count as news, it would have to be something we have only just found out about. That means it is new to us. If it’s also new to our readers, it qualifies as news.
- **Evidence-based.** News stories are based on facts, not speculation. Information reported must be verified.
- **Out of the ordinary.** The most dramatic news stems from events that are surprising, unexpected, dramatic, sometimes shocking.

- **Mainly about people.** A reporter neglecting the human interest angle – the possible effects on people – neglects the most important part of the story. News is often about what people are doing, planning, feeling, thinking and saying about any number of subjects.
- **A well constructed story.** Why do we call news reports stories? It’s because a news story has many things in common with a fictional story. It has drama, excitement, conflict and characters interacting. It is your job to gather all the facts and present them in a way that demands the reader’s interest and attention.

Understanding the format of news stories will help you turn what you see happening around you into a compelling story that media outlets will want to publish.

“Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism what will be grasped at once.”

Cyril Connolly, British editor, 1903-1974

The idea

Good ideas lead to stories that readers remember, that galvanise a community and that keep audiences coming back for more.

Finding a good story idea is often as simple as asking why something is happening.

- Why has the price of food suddenly increased?
- Why does our community have so many teenage pregnancies?

Asking why something is happening can lead to a compelling story that helps people understand what is happening around them.

One effective way to come up with an idea is to approach an issue broadly, but then drill down to find specific community examples. Start by asking the following questions:

- What issues are affecting people in my country/community?
- What are specific examples of those issues?
- What do I want to say about this?

As we saw in the last chapter, it is important for you to know (1) what you hope to achieve by telling this story, (2) where you would like it to be published, and (3) who your audience will be. For example, if you want the story to reach a wider audience than just your immediate community, you should draw links between the local issue and how it impacts wider society, whether that is at a regional, national or international level.

News angle

Once you have your idea, you need to check it meets the following criteria:

- **Timeliness** – What is new in your story? It needs to be about an event that has just happened, is happening or is about to happen. Or it needs to be a new trend, a new report, a new angle on an issue – something that gives it relevance at this particular moment.
- **Relevance** – Think about your audience and make sure the story will have meaning for them.
- **Impact** – It may be new information, but is it really ‘newsworthy’? Will it make people sit up and say: “Wow, that’s new/shocking/different/surprising/fantastic/unusual”?

As you craft your story, the language you use, the weight you give to certain aspects of the story, the things you decide to include or leave out, will all add up to creating the news angle. Pay attention to current media topics and how they are being reported when working out your angle.

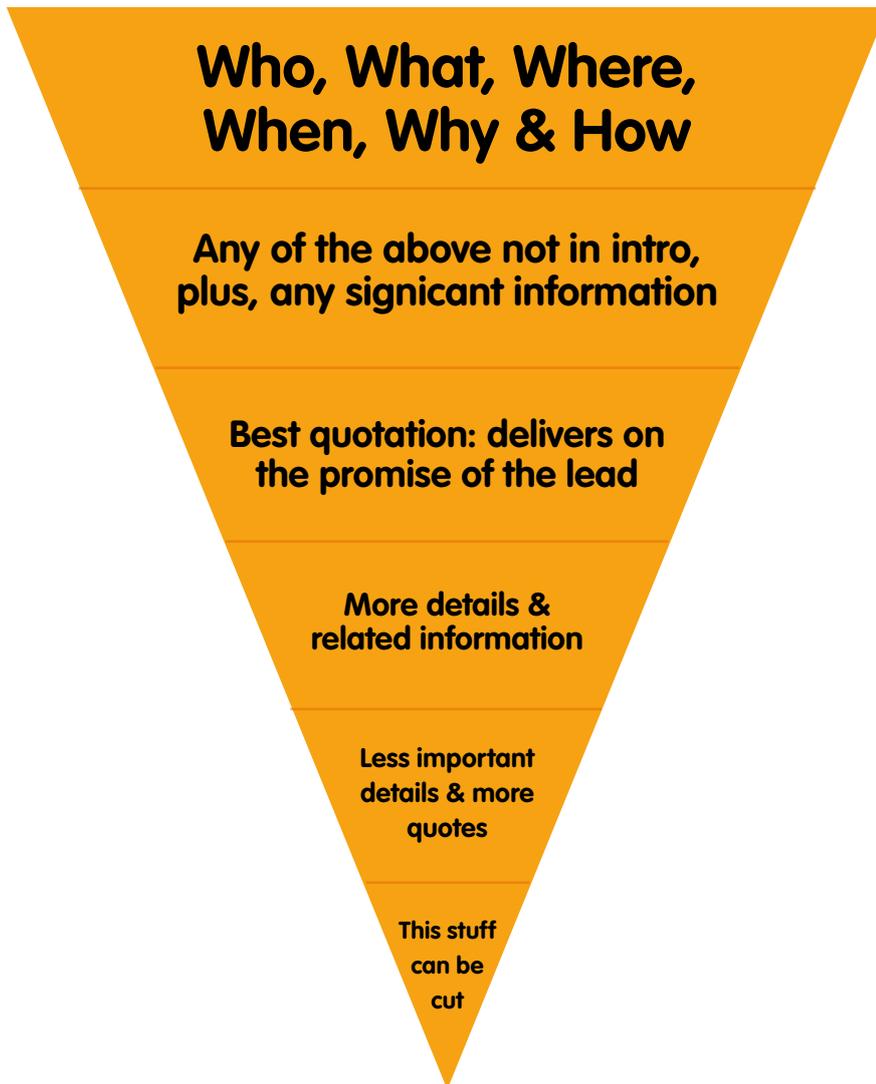
If your idea doesn’t meet the above criteria, you either need to think of a better idea or consider how a different type of story might be appropriate (see chapter five on blogging).

Community education on using condoms, Zambia (2006)



“When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that is news.”

*Charles Anderson Dana,
American journalist, 1819-1897*



Constructing a news story

Before sitting down to write a news story, you need to know the answers to six questions:

- **WHAT** happened (what's new)?
- **WHO** did it happen to (or who did it)?
- **WHERE** did it happen?
- **WHEN** did it happen?
- **HOW** did it happen?
- **WHY** did it happen?

The above diagram illustrates the structure of a news story. The acronym **WHAT** will help you remember this structure:

- **What** happened? (Or what's new?)
- **How** did it happen? (Or sometimes, why did it happen?)
- **Amplify** each of the points made in the above
- **Tie up** loose ends

Writing the lead sentence

The first sentence is your lead and, along with your headline, is vitally important in grabbing the reader's attention. It should try to answer the questions: who, what, when and where. You can save how and why for the body of the story.

For Example:

"In a milestone moment for the Indian state of Gujarat (where), lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender residents (who) filled the streets for the area's first-ever gay pride parade (what) last weekend (when)."

"The rate of new HIV infections (what) has decreased dramatically in the past decade (when), but millions of people who are infected (who) remain untreated (leading you to ask why?)."

Keep in mind that many people do not read to the end of the story, so you want to include all the important details at the beginning.

Two basic rules for the lead:

- **Tell your story in a nutshell**
- **Use a maximum of 30 words**

Remember that the lead is a hook, drawing the reader in to the rest of your story. If the lead isn't interesting, your story won't be read. Although you want to answer the main four questions in your lead, you don't want to be too specific at this point; it's a summary and it needs to tempt people to read on.

Good: "A popular HIV activist was found dead in his home this morning. Police suspect suicide."

Not good: "Jason Bishop, 43, was found dead at 7.10am this morning from a gunshot wound to the head as he lay in his bed in his home on the North Access Road, Mabale sub county, Soroti district, where he was a popular HIV activist. Police suspect that he shot himself."

Wherever possible you should start your story with people.

Good: "Teenagers in Zambia are being given free condoms as part of a new health scheme."

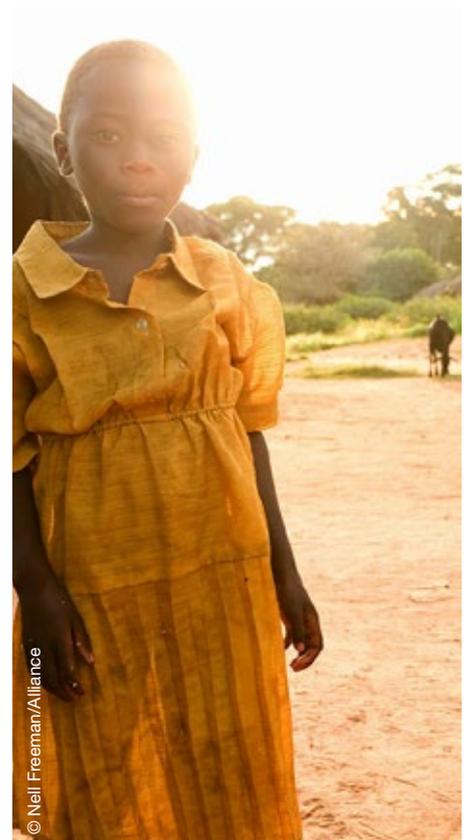
Not good: "Condoms are to be distributed due to a new scheme."

Always try to use the active voice and avoid the verb 'to be' – it's boring.

Good: "A celebrity visitor surprised a group of students at a local school today."

Not good: "Children at a local school were surprised by a celebrity today."

In the first example, the use of the word 'surprised' is active; in the second example, the use of the word 'were' makes it passive.



A young girl watches a femidom demonstration in Kalungu, a small rural village in Zambia (2007)



© Benjamin Chesterton/International HIV/AIDS Alliance

Momina, age 22 from Adama in Ethiopia, refuses to be defined by her HIV status

Exercise one

The following lead sentences could definitely be improved. See how you can rewrite them, thinking about news values and the six big questions. Use active verbs and create impact in less than 30 words.

“In 1980 an epidemic that would later become known as HIV began and today, 33 years later, there is still no cure and people in our community still cannot get access to treatment.”

“While the head doctor in our clinic is mystified as to why there are not ARV medications available to treat his patients, the president of our country surely knows where the budget money allocated for these drugs has gone.”

“During a loud protest by HIV activists that disrupted a long session in the UK’s House of Commons several police officers reacted violently towards the protestors and as a result many ended up in the hospital.”

“It is impossible to get an HIV test as there are none available locally and attempts to disseminate the test kits widely have failed.”

“The Catholic Church has continued to have misguided aims as they promote abstinence as the only way to avoid infection and denounce sexual health education and condom distribution.”

The second paragraph

Put yourself in the role of the reader – what does the reader want to know and when do they want to know it?

Lead: “On 21 February (when), angry protesters (who) put a stop to the second annual Gay Pride Parade (what) in Thailand (where).”

In the second paragraph think about how you can answer any of the key questions you haven’t already covered in your lead sentence.

Second paragraph: “Parade participants were trapped in the temple Buddhasathan, the parade starting point, as an angry mob surrounded them (how). Police held back the protesters, known as the Red Shirts, who believed the Pride Parade did not represent Thai culture (why).”

Food market in Guatemala – a nutritious diet is vital for people on medication for HIV



After your lead and second paragraph, you will want the remaining paragraphs to include the following elements:

- Sources: quotes and supporting evidence
- Background information: What led to this event?
- Contextual information: What is the context and environment in which this story is placed?
- Resources: Is there supporting documentation, like a scientific study, a report or statistics?

Each of these elements should work to support and amplify the points you made in your lead and second paragraph and ensure you have fully answered the big six by the end of the story.

Research

Good news reporting includes evidence in the following form:

- Quotes from direct sources: The closer a source is to a story, the better. If you are writing about the issues facing someone living with HIV, interview someone living with HIV and include these quotes.
- Statistics: If you are writing a story about corruption at a particular organisation and you are aware of a recent report on national corruption, include these statistics in your article. Make sure you attribute them to the report.
- Facts: Always attribute new factual claims (eg ‘the lack of antiretrovirals in Mbale district is leading to a rise in new HIV infections, according to UNAIDS, who have conducted a report into the recent shortage’). If you are referring to accepted facts (e.g. mosquitoes spread malaria), there is no need to attribute them.

Distinguishing between new information and accepted facts is sometimes a hard thing to do. If you are unsure, attribute the claim. If the editor thinks this is unnecessary, they can remove the attribution.

“Comment is free, but facts are sacred.”

CP Snow, editor of the UK’s national paper The Guardian, 1872-1929

Quoting sources

Quoting is an important element in writing news stories. A direct quotation from a source is essential to verify a story's authenticity, as the writer is generally not a witness to or expert on the event.

A quote delivers on the promise of the lead. This means that after reading the first sentence, the reader asks: How do you know this? The answer is: Because this person who was there says so.

Quotes are also important to bring colour and opinion to a news story. A news story should not contain any opinions from the reporter. All opinions in a news report come from the people interviewed and must be attributed to a person either as a quote or reported speech.

If you want to represent an event as 'amazing', get someone to say it is amazing. If you want to describe something as 'shocking', get a quote to back it up.

Here are some important tips on quoting sources:

- What is inside quotation marks is exactly what the source said.
- Quoting gives insight – the witness tells it better in his or her own words.
- Be sure to get the relevant details about the person correct (name, age, where they are from, job title, etc).
- Always use 'said' to attribute a quote.
- Usually, include a quote after the second paragraph, by which time you should have answered who, what, where, when and how. The quotation should amplify these points and explain why.

The first time you quote someone, write the person's name and job title before the quote, using one of the following formats:

Michel Sidibé, executive director of UNAIDS, said: "This is my quote."

UNAIDS executive director Michel Sidibé said: "This is my quote."

If you quote the same person again later in the story, simply use their last name:

Sidibé said: "This is another excellent quote."

Balance

In good journalism a news story should be balanced. This means you should put all the main sides of the story in the piece. If you are writing from a particular angle (say a mother criticising local health workers) you should at least make space in the article to put the other point of view (in this case the health workers' point of view). This is called the 'right to reply'.

It is important to remember when writing a news story that all stories are constructed – the way an introduction is written, the choice of people quoted and how they are quoted (in full or just certain phrases), the information given and the order it appears – all serve to create the story's angle, which helps to inform the way the facts of a news story are understood.

Reporting both sides of a story can be a delicate thing to get right, especially when writing about sensitive subjects such as the stigma faced by those living with HIV.

For example, how would you report a story about a religious group holding a protest about men who have sex with men?



© Sarah Oughton

The religious group are protesting about men who have sex with men living openly in Lusaka. The group claims: “The men spread HIV to innocent women and babies and should be given the death penalty.”

How do you report this event in a way that addresses the injustice of stigma men who have sex with men face rather than adding to the stigma?

One way is to begin the story with the point of view of those who criticise stigma and discrimination rather than those who make stigmatising remarks. You can also give more weight to the words of those defending stigmatised groups by quoting them in full and less space to the words of those who justify stigma and discrimination.

Reporting that increases stigma:

A religious group is calling for men who have sex with men to be given the death penalty as they infect women and babies with HIV.

The protesters from Fictitious Religious Group met in Lusaka, Zambia on 24 October to raise awareness about their belief that men who sleep with men are evil.

Iguasa, from Fictitious Religious Group, said: “Homosexuality is wrong and these people should be killed.”

Reporting that helps reduce stigma:

Human rights activists have condemned a religious group for claiming that men who sleep with men infect women and babies with HIV and should be killed.

Stop Stigma, FRANK and the Rainbow Coalition have added their voices to the growing number of organisations criticising the actions of the Fictions Religious Group, who held a demonstration on 24 October in Lusaka, Zambia to air their views.

Kawarsa from Stop Stigma, which fights for the rights of men who have sex with men in the country, said: “These outrageous and outdated views have no place in modern Zambia. Men who have sex with men are no threat to women, babies or anyone else. They are human, just like the protesters themselves, and it is disgusting that a group should call for them to be put to death.”

You would then put a quote from the Fictitious Religious Group towards the bottom of the article – but present it in a way that shows that their views on men who have sex with men are just their opinion and not facts.

Radio is a primary source of news for many rural communities in Africa



© Sheikh Rajibul Islam, duc.krabbitt/International HIV/AIDS Alliance

A youth club leader in Addis Ababa joins in a group debate on sexual and reproductive health issues

Top tip:

Look through your story for themes, key words and interesting phrases from quotes when brainstorming ideas for your headline.

Headlines

People often read the headline of a story and nothing else. After all the effort you put into writing your story, it is worth the extra effort to think carefully about your headline if you want the reader to stop and read your story.

You should wait until you finish your story before refining the headline as that is when you will know what is the most important and interesting part of the story.

The dos and don'ts of headline writing:

- Use the present tense.
- Keep it short and simple.
- Provide enough information to interest the reader.
- Use the active voice: good verbs move the headline along.
- 'To be' verbs, such as is, are, was and were should be omitted.
- Keep it conversational; headlines should use common words.

- Don't use the articles a, an and the. They waste space unnecessarily.
- Only the first word is capitalised, except proper nouns which are always capitalised.
- Don't use people's names in the headline, unless the person is widely known or the publication is local.

Do:

"President praises young as 'actors of change' in fight against HIV"

Don't:

"The president has praised young people as 'actors of change' in the fight against HIV/AIDS"

Do:

"International aid cuts prompt fears of more HIV in Vietnam"

Don't:

"Cuts to international aid funding are prompting people to fear there will be more HIV in Vietnam"



Left: In Lusaka, Miriam Shamabobo runs a busy corner shop, a back room of which is the meeting room for the **Zambian Network of People Living with HIV** (2007)

Below: Anuar works on a plantation which employs people who use drugs, **Malaysia**



Editing and proofreading

When you have finished writing your story, it is important to edit and proofread it before submitting it to an editor. You should focus on improving three elements of the story:

1. Grammar, spelling and punctuation

- Spell check everything, but re-read your story closely as spell check doesn't catch misused words (eg your/you're). Sometimes it helps to read your story aloud.
- Keep a dictionary close by or visit an online dictionary for help.
- For punctuation, take a close look at your story when it's done to see if you've missed any full stops, question marks or quotation marks.

2. Word choice

- Be descriptive: show, don't tell.
- Fit more information into a sentence without adding more words. Instead of 'The man ran down the street,' say 'The doctor sprinted down Main Street.'

- Avoid jargon. An emergency fire vehicle is a fire truck. Medical professionals are doctors and nurses. If you can't completely avoid jargon, explain what it is.

3. Clarity and brevity

- Keep sentences short. Include one idea per sentence, especially in the lead.
- Use a simple verb. Instead of, 'Jane has delivered the pizza,' use 'Jane delivered the pizza.'

Peer editing

Key Correspondents are encouraged to share stories with each other for feedback and editing before submitting to the editor. Providing feedback on other people's articles helps you develop your editing and writing skills. Everyone benefits from peer editing.

Top tips:

George Orwell's advice to writers from *Politics of the English Language*, written in 1946, is still as useful today:

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Acronyms and jargon busting

Always avoid unnecessary acronyms and jargon words or phrases. Use simple language and be specific about what you mean. Writing should be accessible to non-specialist readers, especially those whose first language is not English.

Jargon:

- Capacity building
- Community mobilisation
- Positive behavioural change
- Effective intervention
- System strengthening (eg. health system strengthening, community system strengthening)
- Key populations
- Framework (eg. investment framework)
- Community service delivery systems
- Sensitise people (use: raise awareness/educate/inform)
- Intervention (use: work/project, etc)

These are just some examples of jargon, but there are many more. The problem with such language is that it is not specific enough. To people who work in other fields, these phrases mean nothing – or, worse, they mean something completely different. It is better to explain details instead of using these terms as shorthand. Remember: use plain English!

Because these phrases mean nothing, it's hard to come up with alternatives unless there is a story that helps put them into context. For example, 'positive behavioural change' might actually mean 'encouraging people to use condoms' or 'encouraging people to be faithful' – so be specific. Similarly, with 'key populations' it's important to be exact about who you mean; if you are talking about sex workers, men who have sex with men, etc. then use those phrases instead.

Acronyms:

- ARVs are antiretroviral drugs or medication to treat HIV
- CD4s and T-cells are white blood cells that fight viral infection
- LGBT refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people
- SRHR is sexual and reproductive health and rights
- STIs are sexually transmitted infections

Again, there are many more acronyms and, as a general rule, HIV and AIDS are the only acronyms that are acceptable to use. All other acronyms will only be known to people who work in the sector, and sometimes even they don't know them all. As a journalist, your goal is not to show off your own in-depth knowledge of a subject; rather, it is to ensure every single reader can understand exactly what your story is about.

Another reason to avoid acronyms is that they dehumanise people. Always say 'a person with a disability' rather than PWD, or 'men who have sex with men' instead of MSM.

Note: when acronyms are written out in full, they do not require capital letters.



© International HIV/AIDS Alliance

Suharizal is an outreach worker with people who use drugs, he is also a former drug user, Malaysia

Exercise two

“Accessibility to ARVs can mean longer and healthier lives for people with HIV, particularly if they are able to get routine testing on their CD4 levels. Community mobilisation aimed at sensitising LGBTs about the transmission of HIV and other related SRHR measures has meant the decline in new cases. However, transmission of HIV and other STIs is still on the rise in heterosexual communities.”

Read the above paragraph and think about how many people would actually be able to understand it. Rewrite it in plain language.

Check list

- Does your first paragraph (lead sentence) contain answers to most of the big six questions?
- Can the reader understand the crux of the story by reading the first paragraph?
- Is your headline in the active voice?
- Are you quoting your sources accurately?
- Have you done enough research and included relevant links in your story?
- Are you sure your readers will understand all the terminology you've used? Have you avoided using acronyms and jargon?
- Have you edited and proofread your story and shared it with a peer for feedback?