

## Essential Background & Context for Political Stories

1. **For elected officials, we need to identify them**, usually on first reference, with (Yes, we do this even for broadcast – just with slightly different phrasing and placement):
  - ✓ Title/Office
  - ✓ Party affiliation
  - ✓ Geographic identifier
  - ✓ **In print**, for example:
    - U.S. Rep. John Smith, D-DeWitt
    - Sen. Charles Jones, D-N.Y.
    - state Sen. Jimmy Johns, R-Syracuse
    - Assemblyman Bill Sweet, D-Syracuse
    - County Legislator David Day, D-Salina
    - Common Councilor Jean Peters, R-Eastwood
  - ✓ Usually we also would follow that with the official district name: state Sen. Jimmy Johns, R-Syracuse, who represents the 50<sup>th</sup> New York Senate District.
  - ✓ But remember, few people recognize the official districts and their boundaries (Many people simply don't know what districts they live in – and we all live in several districts: School district, county legislature district and/or Common Council District, state assembly district, state senate district, Congressional District).
  - ✓ That's a reason to offer something like the town or neighborhood (DeWitt, Clay, Eastwood, Southside) – to help people have a sense of whether the elected official or candidate is close to them and might represent them.
  - ✓ For candidates, we wouldn't have a title so we would say something like:
    - Jim Johns, a Democrat from the Southside in the 25<sup>th</sup> Congressional District (if story's about the Congressional race)
    - Jane Right, a Republican from Eastwood in the Common Council 3<sup>rd</sup> District (if story's about the Common Council election)
  - ✓ **For Broadcast**, we would be more likely put the party affiliation and geographic identifier in separate sentences and/or as appositional phrases:
    - Congressman Dan Smith....Smith is a Democrat from DeWitt.
    - New York Senator Chuck Jones... Jones, a Democrat, proposed...
    - State Senator Jimmy Johns ....Johns is a Republican from Syracuse and represents the state's 50<sup>th</sup> senate district.
  - ✓ **Some exceptions**:
    - Mayor/ Governor/President – sometimes we need to give the party, though not usually on first reference. But we don't usually give a geographic

identifier. They are assumed to represent the whole city, the whole state, the whole country.

- With U. S. Senators, we'd give the party and state (D-N.Y.) but not usually a town. Senators are also assumed to represent the whole state.

2. **For election stories, ALWAYS include:**

- ✓ Names, identifiers of all who are running in the given race.
- ✓ Status – who is the incumbent and who is the challenger.
- ✓ Relevant history for each: The incumbent, Charles Davis, has been in Congress for 15 years. Or: Davis, a 10-year incumbent, is running for his sixth term. And/Or: The challenger, Howie Hawkins, has run and lost 14 times for various public offices.
- ✓ A description of the district (*District 1 of the Onondaga County Legislature includes all of Lysander and Clay between Belgium and Moyers Corners, and the development of Casual Estates.*)
- ✓ This will all go high in the story in the background/context section (see the Basic Story Diagram on my Knight Chair site.)

3. **For election stories, also ALWAYS include the date of the election(s):** The primaries are Sept. 15 and the general election is Nov. 3.

- ✓ For BDJ stories, the election date is a perfect ending. (It spins the story forward, ends it with a fact, and voters can never hear it often enough)
- ✓ For print stories, the election date is going to be high in the story – usually in the background/context section (see the Basic Story Diagram on my Knight Chair site).

4. **For many stories, you'll need the voter registration numbers:** In the 25<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, the Democrats outnumber Republicans by two to one. Democrats have xxx registered voters to Republicans' xxx.

5. Always think about what the audience needs to know to understand the story!

6. Every news organization has its own style for these bits of info. So be sure to check and use the right style.