Hints for Better Stories

1. **Use the News Values to guide your thinking, reporting and writing.**
   What are the News Values? See Grimes' 2nd Law!

2. **Use this rule: What has the greatest effect on the largest number of people?**
   - ✓ That's usually the most newsworthy item – and the lede.

3. **Start with a focus statement to clarify your thinking:**
   - ✓ This story is about….
      - ✓ Be specific.
      - ✓ A version of this is probably your lede.
      - ✓ This story is about a man collapsing in Schine and dying.
      - ✓ This story is about classes being canceled because of the snow.

4. **For the lede, CUT TO THE CHASE!**
   - ✓ Get the most important thing FIRST.
   - ✓ Think about what will engage your audience (what affects the largest number of people).
   - ✓ Often that will be WHAT (as in Who/What/When/Where/How/Why).
   - ✓ Your audience should know what the story is about within the first five words.
   - ✓ Avoid long ledes: They become big, intimidating blocks of gray type.
   - ✓ Try to make the lede ONE clear, simple, short sentence – 25 words or fewer.
   - ✓ Use appropriate words that grab people's attention.

NO: *At its recent meeting, the Student Government Association talked for three hours about whether to increase student fees. Five members voted to raise fees and two voted against it. The SGA approved the fee increase. It will go up by 15 percent next year.*

YES: *Student fees will go up by 15 percent next year.*
The increase was approved Monday by the Student Government Association. The vote was five to two in favor.

5. **Support the lede – use a supporting quote/soundbite.**
   - ✓ You need to get a human voice high in the story.
   - ✓ Quotes that need explaining with info in ( ) or [ ] are inherently weak.

6. **Keep sentences simple and direct: Subject/Object/Verb. One idea to a sentence**

7. **Use clear, everyday language – not big, fancy words. Keep the writing conversational.**

8. **Use the Basic Story Structure (see the Chicken Little diagram)**

9. **Avoid the Cheshire Cats!**

   - ✓ Avoid letting sources pop in and out of the story, like the Cheshire Cat.

- ✓ Assign each source a role to play (the Poor-Player Theory) in the story: Source A will talk about Topic 1; Source B will talk about Topic 2. On any topic, use the source or sources that BEST explain it.
- ✓ If you must have a source return, you must briefly re-identify the source: Fire chief Jones / Smith, of Southside Baptist Church,

10. **Use transitions to help the audience get from one subject to another.**

- ✓ At the White House,
- ✓ On Tuesday,
- ✓ On education,
- ✓ From Smith's perspective,

11. **Signal a change of speaker – introduce new speakers before quoting or using soundbite.**
   (See The Art & Craft of Setting Up Quotes/Soundbites)

12. **Always think about the audience:** Make the info understandable for someone who doesn't know what you're talking about.

13. **Read your stories out loud –** and preferably to someone unfamiliar with your subject. Be aware of how it sounds to you – your ear is a good tool for testing stories. Be aware of having to pause for breath as you read – that means the sentence is probably too long. Use your roommate, friend, relative as a test audience – if that person doesn't understand the story, neither will anyone else.

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