"Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light."—Joseph Pulitzer

Reporting and Writing News

SMPA 110W

WID Handbook

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Introduction to SMPA 110W and the Importance of Credibility

The importance of clear writing, based on responsibility, accuracy and fairness, is essential to all professions. Although SMPA 110W is a requirement of all majors in the School of Media and Public Affairs, the course has become increasingly popular to many other academic disciplines. This handbook is designed to facilitate the teaching of SMPA 110W to majors in all professions through assignments and lectures that are essential, above all, to future journalists.

Per the title of the course, SMPA 110W emphasizes both reporting and writing skills, starting with the initial building block of a good lead and moving on to developing longer and more challenging stories including spot news, interviews, features, profiles and coverage of disasters.

The course is designed for students to learn from reading materials, lectures and discussions and by doing practical exercises and assignments during the laboratory sessions and outside the classroom. SMPA 110W uses the textbook, "Writing and Reporting News", by Carole Rich, and "The Associated Press Stylebook". These are supplemented by discussion of the weekly Ombudsman and Media Notes columns in *The Washington Post.*

At all times, the course stresses the importance of the most essential requirements of our profession: responsibility, accuracy and fairness, what I call the RAF of journalism. Together, these basics of journalism give us our **credibility**, something that is essential for everyone who wants to be a professional journalist, and something that is important in all professions where the gathering of factual information is important.

Unlike professions such as law, where one needs to pass a Bar Exam to be a lawyer, or the medical profession, where a doctor must pass a Medical Board to practice medicine, anyone can be a journalist, but only so long as he or she has credibility.

The Course's Goals

Upon the successful completion of this course, a student will be able to:

- Be adept at writing basic and concise news stories accurately and on deadline.
- Have a solid grounding in the mechanics of writing: correct spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Be a good editor so that one can improve his or her own writing and---whether editing one's own stories or the work of others---be able to think critically to find holes in logic or unanswered questions.
- Understand the importance of adherence to a basic writing style through use of The Associated Press Stylebook.
- Understand the basic issues facing journalists today: ethical lapses, protection of sources, limited access, the right to public information and the right to privacy.
- Understand the fundamentals of libel.

Chapter 1: The Basic News Story

The First Building Block: Writing the lead

The objective of the first lecture every semester is to give students confidence that they can write news stories as clearly as experienced journalists in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The class reviews examples of straight-forward declarative news leads in the newspapers published that day to show how journalists organize their material in a clear, organized manner starting with the lead, or first, paragraph.

The late Jack Cappon, a legendary writing coach and news executive for The Associated Press, described the importance of a lead in his book, *The Word,* as follows:

"In the beginning of every news story is the lead---the bait, the lure, the tender trap for the reader, a source of much fear and loathing for the writer. Like a fiddle string, a good lead is the product of the right tension. Or, to get the metaphors out of the way, the lead is an hors d'oeuvre, supposed to whet the appetite, not to serve a three-course dinner."

The lead paragraph should contain what is known as the five W's of a news story: Who, What, Where, When and sometimes Why.

How these facts are assembled into clear sentences is the first building block in writing a news story.

The test of good journalists is to write a lead better than their competitors, even though they may all be working with the same basic facts.

Let's look at how The New York Times and The Washington Post wrote their leads from President Barack Obama's announcement on May 21 that he was naming Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. The leads are from the online editions of the newspapers and moved within an hour of the president's announcement:

The Washington Post lead:

President Obama this morning nominated U.S. Appeals Court Judge Sonia Sotomayor of New York to replace retiring Justice David Souter on the U.S. Supreme Court, hailing her as "an inspiring woman with a moving personal story and a broad range of professional experience."

The New York Times lead:

President Obama announced on Tuesday that he will nominate the federal appeals judge Sonia Sotomayor for the Supreme Court, choosing a daughter of Puerto Rican parents raised in Bronx public housing projects to become the nation's first Hispanic justice.

Conclusion: Same basic facts in each lead, but each written in a unique manner. Which one do you prefer and why? How would you improve each lead?

In-class exercise: Writing leads from fact sheets.

Chapter 2: Writing the News Story

The Second Building Block: Writing basic news stories

You have all the information to write a comprehensive story. Your facts are accurate. You have good quotes. How do you put together all the details into a well-written, well-organized story? There are different formats and techniques for writing hard news stories. The traditional methods are:

Inverted Pyramid: Put the main, most important news at the top of the story and then write the facts in decreasing order of importance. In this way, an editor who needs to cut your story can easily do so from the bottom up, and a reader with limited time can get the most essential news in your article from the very beginning.

Hourglass technique: This technique often is used in crime stories. Start with a hard news lead and then proceed in chronological order for part or the rest of the story. The technique avoids attribution in every sentence, since a single overview attribution can be used at the start of the chronological hourglass portion. Two examples: "Police gave this account of the robbery," or "Eyewitnesses described the rescue this way."

List technique: This technique is used to list several developments in a single story. It often is used in stories reporting on news conferences or meetings. For instance, in a U.S. presidential conference, there often may be a number of major news developments to report. Ideally, separate stories might be written about each development. But space is not always available for multiple stories, and even if there is, readers still like to read a single, wrap-up story containing all the news from a single event. Thus, after the main news from an event is reported in the first several paragraphs, the list technique would be introduced with a sentence that says something to the effect: In other developments, the president: (Then use bullet points to list the other developments, expanding on each of them as appropriate after you have completed the list of bullet-pointed items.)

Writing tips

Take an imaginary glass of water: I had a journalism professor in graduate school who told students to "think before you write," even on deadline, and do so by swallowing an imaginary glass of water before starting to write while you organize your thoughts.

The right lead: "Wow!" That's news. That's the lead. When covering a story, there should be a development that stands out from all others. It is something that makes you say, "Wow!" It is what you want to tell your friends and relatives if you were writing a letter or calling home. In this case, it is what you want to convey to your readers. Put the development into your lead paragraph and then go on to write the rest of the story.

Backup paragraph: Use the second or third paragraph to give some additional facts---or ideally, a good quote---to back up the lead paragraph.

Focus or Nut graf: This is an important paragraph that provides key background and puts the story in perspective and explains the point of the story.

The middle of the story: Here is where you expand on the lead and provide background as needed so that your readers gain a better understanding of the news and its implications. Weave in some background to enlighten your readers, but try to do it in a way that does not impede the flow of the story by putting all the background in one large chunk. Break it up and sprinkle and weave it through the text.

The ending of the news story: In an inverted pyramid style, the story just ends itself naturally, with the least important development or background in the last paragraph. But, if possible, and if you are satisfied there is space, it is always good to have a nice "kicker," or strong finish, perhaps a quote that sums up the news. If your story retains the readers' attention from the first paragraph, there is a good possibility the readers will stay with you until the very last word of your article!

Attribution: Journalists are writing instant history, often on deadline, and do not have the luxury of being able to check out every detail they are reporting from multiple sources by the time they must complete their stories. That is why it is essential to attribute information to the source who provided you the information. Oftentimes, especially in dealing with sensitive and controversial issues or in breaking news stories such as disasters, you will be faced with conflicting and continually updated information. The best way to ensure your stories are written in a responsible manner is to attribute the information you are using to the source who provided it to you.

Use quotes as much as possible: Quotes contribute to dialogue and bring the subject of a story alive, in his or her own words, much as a video interview does on a televised newscast. The best way to report on what someone says is to use his or her actual words verbatim, within quotes. Use them effectively and selectively.

Set the scene: Use good description to paint the scene that contributes to a visual image of the written news story. People are reading your stories, not viewing them, and they are relying on you to describe those details that are appropriate: the weather, the type of room or scene where the news took place, any applause or jeering, any placards, any detail that catches your eye that you want to convey to your readers.

Grammar: I was fortunate to have had an excellent 8th Grade English teacher who drilled good grammar into our class. Not everyone is so fortunate. In this class, we review grammar through at least two quizzes at the start of the course so that I can gauge how much more work needs to be done in this area.

Check Spelling: While spell-check programs can be helpful, use your own eyes to double-check that every word is spelled correctly, especially the names of all persons.

Do a final read-through of your article before hitting the "send" button: When you have finished the article, go through it carefully as if you are the reader. Does it flow smoothly? Does it have any holes that need to be filled with more reporting? Are there any

excess words that can be deleted? You began writing the story with an imaginary glass of water. Take another glass as you do a final read of what you have written.

In-class exercise: write news stories from fact sheets or breaking news developments

Chapter 3: Accuracy and Media Law

Following completion of the first two building blocks, on writing leads and basic news stories, it is time to once again stress the importance of accuracy and libel law. While an entire semester can be devoted exclusively to Media Law, I find it useful to introduce the subject during a full 75-minute-long class lecture, followed by an exercise on Libel. The main points of the lecture:

- Freedom of the Press is enshrined in the First Amendment, which declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press…"
- Accuracy is paramount for journalists to maintain credibility and avoid law suits.
- Truth is the best defense in libel suits.
- Libel is a falsity that causes injury to someone's reputation. Slander is an oral or spoken defamation.
- *Times v. Sullivan:* A landmark case that put the onus on public officials to prove libel by having to demonstrate that journalists knowingly published a falsity without bothering to check the truth. The case was brought by L. B. Sullivan, the then police commission of Montgomery, Alabama, who sued for libel after *The New York Times* published an advertisement in 1960 by a civil rights group seeking to raise money for the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King. Sullivan maintained the ad contained falsities and damaged his reputation. He originally won in lower courts and the Alabama Supreme Court. But the Supreme Court reversed the decision and invoked the principle of "actual malice." The court wrote:

  "The constitutional guarantees require, we think, a federal rule that prohibits a public official from recovering damages for defamatory falsehood relating to his official conduct unless he proves that the statement was made with "actual malice"—that is knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not."

  Justice William Brennan, in a separate opinion, wrote:

  "Thus, we consider this case against the background of a profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust and wide-open, and that it may well include vehement, caustic, and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials."

- Privilege: Journalists have "qualified privilege" to print defamatory statements from public officials who themselves have what is known as "absolute privilege" and when reporting from public proceedings or public records, **as long as the reporting is considered fair and accurate.**

- Invasion of privacy issues. Key court ruling in *Dietemann v. Time Inc.:* "The First Amendment is not a license to trespass, to steal, or to intrude by electronic means into the precincts of another's home or office."

In-class Exam on Libel

Chapter 4: Interviewing—The Next Building Block

Mastering the art of interviewing is essential for good reporting and writing. It is the best way to gather information for any type of story---hard news, features, profiles, disaster coverage, investigative articles.

The interview might take place over the phone, in an office, at a restaurant, at a disaster site, or wherever it is most convenient to talk to your subject. Here are some tips for a successful interview:

- Be prepared. Know your subject and the issues to be discussed. The better prepared you are, the better the interview will likely be.
- Have questions prepared, but don't restrict yourself and be ready to open up new lines of questioning as the interview evolves. Use follow-up questions when you are not happy with a response or if you want the subject to elaborate further.
- Conduct the interview as if it is a conversation. Get the subject to relax, to feel comfortable with you. The more relaxed the interviewee is, the more forthcoming he or she will be.
- Listen. Listen. Listen. Your object is to get the interviewee to speak. Do not try to dominate the interview by asking questions that become speeches. You are not there to impress anyone. You are there to elicit answers. Pause between answers occasionally to give the subject the opportunity to elaborate on his own.
- Closed-ended questions: Use these to get basic information about the subject. such as name and title and other details. These are the questions that answer the *who, where* and *when* for the interview. They can often elicit simple "yes" or "no" responses.
- Open-ended questions: These are used to get the interviewee to open up, to give you good quotes, anecdotes and longer responses. These questions try to find out the *what, why* and *how* of an interview. Keep the questions brief. No more than two sentences. Don't waste valuable interview time with long-winded questions or commentaries.
- If you are interviewing someone who is happy to see you, perhaps to discuss an award or promotion, you should have no trouble getting the person to give good responses. However, if you are interviewing someone who is seeing you reluctantly, perhaps to discuss a sensitive or controversial subject, then open up with some "icebreaker" questions to introduce yourself and then weave in the harder questions. I call it the Columbo-style of interviewing, the way the TV detective Columbo with his crumpled trench coat would soften up someone with easy questions before he lunged at them with a hard, poignant question.
- Take good notes on:
  --What the subject says. Get the key quotes verbatim so that you can use them quickly in your story. But don't take excessive notes so that you have to waste

time sifting through a virtual verbatim of the entire interview. If you are using a tape recorder (with permission of the subject), write down the number shown on the digital counter when there is a comment made that you want to hear again.
--Descriptive. Set the scene. Describe the interviewee, the surroundings, facial expressions for specific questions. Paint a visual picture of the interview.

Out-of-class assignment: Conduct an interview and write story for the next class.

Chapter 5: Using the Building Blocks

Writing and Reporting Five Types of Stories

You have mastered writing leads and basic news stories and have learned the importance of libel and accuracy and the techniques of interviewing. For the remainder of the course, you will apply these building blocks to do five different types of assignments that will prepare you for your first jobs as journalists or will help you do projects in other disciplines that require sound, clear writing skills.

Writing Obituaries

Many newspapers assign beginning journalists to writing obituaries because they provide the first tests of accuracy, reporting and writing.

There are two types of obituaries: the spot news story on someone's death and the obit preparedness profile written in advance of a death of an important person.

As Deborah Howell, the former ombudsman of *The Washington Post* wrote in a column: "Good obituaries make the dead come alive."

The most common technique for writing an obituary is to use the inverted pyramid starting with the lead paragraph that will contain the basic facts---the five W's of who died, what was the cause of death, where and when did it happen and, if appropriate, why.

Here's how *The New York Times* began its obit on the death of Luciano Pavarotti in September 2007:

Luciano Pavarotti, the Italian singer whose ringing, pristine sound set a standard for operatic tenors of the postwar era, died Thursday at his home near Modena in northern Italy. He was 71.

His death was announced by his manager, Terri Robson. The cause was pancreatic cancer. In July 2006 he underwent surgery for the cancer in New York, and he had made no public appearances since then. He was hospitalized again this summer and released on Aug. 25.

The story broke late at night New York time, but the newspaper was still able to publish a lengthy, several-thousand-word obituary about his life. All that was written on deadline when the news of Pavarotti's death came into the newsroom were the first two paragraphs. Then the newspaper used the obit profile that had been prepared in advance of his death.

As a reporter on a local newspaper, you will have to write obituaries on local persons who have died. They will not be as famous as Pavarotti, but they will still be important to the local community and the family of the deceased.

The hardest part of writing an obituary often is calling a relative or friend to get details about the death and about the person's life. Begin your call by expressing condolences and explaining that you are phoning to ensure that you are able to write a full, accurate story that does justice to the person's life.

Obit preparedness profiles are written in advance based on available material that has been published. This is one assignment where you do not interview the subject to ask him or her about his life. Instead, you concentrate on research.

Important tip: Always double-check the spelling of the name of the deceased to avoid embarrassment to you and further grief to the family.

In-class Assignment: Writing spot news obituaries from fact sheets
Out-of-class Assignment: Write a 700-word obit preparedness profile.

Speeches, News Conferences and Meetings

These assignments provide the material for reporting many hard news developments. All require good, detailed reporting with stories written on deadline. Your role as a reporter will differ for each type of assignment.

Speeches are a one-way communication: the speaker speaks and the audience (and the journalist) listens.

At a news conference, the journalist is representing the public audience that is not present. At meetings, the reporter is observing.

Some tips for all three assignments:

--Be prepared. Do your homework. Take good notes about what is said. Describe the setting for the event. Arrive early to get a good seat and to meet possible sources whom you way want to interview afterwards.

--Speeches: Find out information about the speaker and the topic of the speech. If an advance text is distributed, check to ensure it is delivered as per the text or report on any substantive deviations, which in themselves may make news.

--Meetings: Try to get advance details of the agenda and get background on each item. Be sure to take notes on reaction from the audience if the meeting is dealing with a controversial subject.

--News Conferences: Prepare advance questions and study the issues likely to be discussed. The person conducting the news conference probably will have an opening statement. However, the questions the reporters ask are likely to generate more news than any

prepared remarks. That is why the questions are more important than any opening statement. Ask good, brief questions rather than making a commentary.

--Writing the story: In multi-action developments, especially at meetings and news conferences, try to focus on one or two main breaking news developments in the lead and then consider using the list technique to report on other items.

--Important tip: Avoid "wooden leads" that say that a meeting "took place," or that the Board of Education "met this evening." Instead, say what action happened that made the event newsworthy.

Feature Writing

Here's your chance to write "out of the box" of a formatted hard news story and demonstrate your creativity and originality.

As with hard news, the key to a successful feature is excellent reporting and especially getting good quotes. They are essential for using dialogue that enhances your storytelling and keeps the story moving.

But, first, you must have a good topic for a feature. It might be the weather, a typical feature often assigned to new reporters, or a unique angle to what seems to be an ordinary story. The textbook gives an example of a feature written about a midnight baptism of four children at a state fair. The reporter went to cover the annual fair as she always did, but she kept her eyes open for a new angle, something different. And then she found the baptisms taking place. Her story is an outstanding example of how a journalist covers a large event though the experiences of one family, one idea, one theme.

Writing features begins with generating ideas for stories of this type, and this is why it is important for journalists to have insatiable curiosity. This trait may also help you get a job. I attended a conference on careers in journalism, and a news executive for USA Today said when he does the final interviewing of applicants, all of whom have shown they can write and report well, the deciding factor often is which applicant has the best ability to suggest good ideas for stories.

Once you have all the details for your feature, then focus on excellent writing that flows rapidly using descriptive and dialogue, weaving in news facts and background, and creating a tone that conveys the mood and emotion of the feature.

The feature may be light or serious, long or short. But it must be well written.

Just as with hard news stories, you need to "hook" the readers into your article and keep their attention until the end. And, finally, try to finish with a nice "kicker." . It might be a poignant quote or a surprise you are holding for the reader or something that takes the feature back to the original lead to make the story complete.

Have fun with your feature. It is an opportunity to show how journalists can be great storytellers!

Out-of-class assignment: Writing a feature

Profiles

Readers want to learn in depth about people in the news or even ordinary folk who may not be newsworthy but who are interesting nevertheless. As an example, I always suggest that someone may wish to interview one of the hot dog vendors and find out about how he or she came to work on the GWU campus. There are numerous other potential profile subjects at GWU from the ordinary to the more famous.

When a president makes a major appointment to his Cabinet or to the Supreme Court, there is always a quick, hard news story. But there will inevitably be a separate profile written that tells story of that person's life. We will review in class a published profile in *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* based on recent news developments.

Writing a profile is a challenge, and the best way to be successful is to try to interview the person whom you are profiling. For purposes of the profile assignment in SMPA 110W, you will select a subject whom you will be able to interview and thus use the interview techniques you learned earlier in the course.

Another technique for writing a profile is to use what the textbook describes as the GOAL method.

- "What were your original goals? What are your next goals?
- "What obstacles did you face in accomplishing your goals, and what new problems loom?
- "What pleasure or problems have these achievements brought?
- "What background (logistics of who, what, when, where) led to your current situation?"

The profile needs a focus that explains why the subject is newsworthy or is otherwise interesting to readers.

Describe the person being profiled so that the readers can visualize him or her just as clearly as if they were seeing a photograph or a video.

As with features, write the profile in a style that uses dialogue, description and background so that the story moves smoothly from start to finish. Avoid writing the entire profile in chronological order, although a good technique is to begin with an anecdote about someone's childhood to illustrate his or her origins and aspirations as a prelude to writing about the subject's achievements.

Remember: the profile is not the telling of the life history of a subject; it is organizing his or her life experiences in a way that enables the reader to know why the subject is worthy of the profile.

Out-of-class assignment: Write a profile of at least 800 words on someone whom you will interview from the campus community or in the DC area.

Disasters, Weather and Tragedies

Covering disasters is the most challenging assignment for a journalist, and it is fitting that writing about a simulated disaster will be our final assignment, because you will need to use all the skills taught in the course.

A disaster can happen anywhere at anytime, from what happened on September 11, 2001 to air crashes, bombings and weather catastrophes.

They require journalists to be alert, to think fast and to stay calm even if they may be emotionally tied to a disaster in their cities. There often are conflicting news reports, changing facts and constant new developments. Journalists have to report the news as it breaks by the hour. They are writing instant, literally moment-to-moment, history. They do not have the luxury of waiting for all the facts to be verified. On deadline, they have to "go with what they've got," as the late Professor John Hohenberg at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism often told our class (of 1962).

Thus, some important tips:

- Attribute all information until independently verified to an authoritative source.
- Try to get to the scene of the disaster to do on-the-spot reporting. Know our cities well, since you might have to get around detours set up by police and other emergency agencies.
- Get quotes from eyewitnesses and survivors.
- Covering tragedies and disasters requires sensitivity.
- While disasters come unexpectedly, be prepared nevertheless. When I arrived in Tokyo as The AP bureau chief in 2001, the first thing I reviewed was the contingency planning for a possible major earthquake in Japan, to which the country is prone.
- When I studied journalism nearly five decades ago, our class always was told to be sure to have enough dimes in our pockets so that we could use public telephones if we had to call in a story. Now my advice to my students is: make sure your mobile phones are charged, and have a spare battery with you.

Writing disaster stories:

The main story for the class assignment will be written in inverted pyramid style, with a summary lead with the five W's. The hourglass and list techniques may be used within the body of the story.

There will be massive amounts of information that will be given to you, and the test of a good writer of breaking news of this magnitude will be to organize the information into a coherent story.

Key tips: use good quotes and solid attribution for information that is not independently verified.

Conclusion: Successful Writing is Key to Success

Why, I often am asked, do I want to teach journalism---especially an introductory course in Reporting and Writing News---to students who may have an increasingly difficult time finding jobs? Last year, daily newspapers cut nearly 6,000 editorial positions, more than double the 2,400 lost in 2007.

My response is that I teach journalism because I am optimistic about its future; our profession will survive because people will always want to get the latest news and information from both traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television and the many new online sources via the Internet.

I also believe strongly that whether my students go into journalism or other professions, they will benefit from having learned the techniques of good news writing and sound reporting based on the principles of responsibility, accuracy and fairness. In my view, anyone who can write better than his or her peers in any profession will have the better chance of success in the future.

Some of my alumni of SMPA 110W are already on their way to success. Here are two recent examples from different academic backgrounds:

One student, who was a major in the Elliott School of International Affairs, decided while taking the course in her senior year in Autumn 2008 to apply to Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She was accepted as a member of the Class of 2010.

Another graduate, who majored in economics and minored in statistics, is now working at an economic consulting firm in Foggy Bottom. He wrote as follows last April:

"*I truly believe I draw on the writing skills you helped me develop any time I draft a memo or other correspondence."*

Dedication

This handbook is hereby dedicated to all my students whom I have been privileged to teach at The George Washington University since Autumn 2005 and to future students who hopefully will benefit from learning the skills of good writing and reporting.