

# News Writing Tips

From the Northern Star

<http://www.northernstar.info/nina/highschool/write.html>

"I want stories to startle and engage me within the first few sentences, and in their middle to widen or deepen or sharpen my knowledge of human activity, and to end by giving me a sensation of completed statement."

- *John Updike*

## The building blocks

As a Northern Star reporter, you'll do the same things and take on the same responsibilities of a reporter at any 'real world' newspaper, because the Star is just that: a real newspaper, read by thousands of people every day. Your audience is mostly students, but it's also NIU faculty and staff, alumni (via the World Wide Web) and DeKalb residents not connected with NIU.

### Reporting boils down to three things:

**1. Accuracy**--As a reporter, you have a lot of power. What you write can influence decisions, help form public opinions of people and contribute to the general attitude of your readers toward NIU and life in general. With that power comes responsibility that can't be taken lightly. Get a fact wrong, misspell a name or omit a vital piece of information and you not only can distort the truth and misinform the public, but you also damage the credibility of the Northern Star. Without credibility, a newspaper is finished. Guard it carefully.

**2. Clarity**--Newspaper writing is not academic writing. We don't use big words and long sentences to show our readers how smart we are. Newspaper readers are pressed for time. You have to give them the news quickly, concisely and without a lot of extra words or information they don't need. Every story competes for a reader's attention ... against other stories, against the TV in the background, against every distraction you can think of. With every story you write, ask yourself: **What is the news here? Why should my readers care? What does this mean to them?** Your lead, and then the rest of your story, should spring from those questions. Then, ask yourself (and the people around you), "What questions will the reader have that I need to answer?" Jot them down, and be sure none are left unanswered. Write short: short sentences, short paragraphs, short stories. Use simple language. Think hard about every word you use. Is it necessary? Is there a more clear, concise way to say this? Read your story aloud. It sounds dumb, but you'll spot places that don't sound right and might trip up the reader.

**3. Style**--Good writers are artists. Good news writers are, too. They can entertain, inspire, anger and educate. News stories don't have to follow the old, worn-out, inverted pyramid format. Sure, you'll still use it sometimes, particularly for important, breaking news on deadline. But look for opportunities to veer from that format into something more interesting. Never forget, though, that your No. 1 objective is to tell people what they need to know -- not to show them how much of a literary artist you are.

## First five paragraphs

All the work of producing a news story is futile if the story does not engage the reader immediately. Writing coaches have identified four key elements that should be present in the first five paragraphs of any news story (not necessarily in any particular order). They are:

**News**--The newest information: the basic facts of who, what, when, where, why and how ... the most relevant information.

**Impact**--What a situation means and who is affected. Tells readers what the news changes about their lives and, maybe, what they should do.

**Context**--The general perspective that frames the background of the news. It addresses the relationship of things around the news. Context helps readers understand whether something is normal or surprising.

**Emotion**--The human dimension. Takes a story from abstract to reality. Offers personal elements that help readers understand the story. This is not necessarily a quote, but it could be.

**Neil Hopp's "First Five" formula***(Hopp is the former writing coach at the Northwest Herald in Crystal Lake)*

1. Effective lead. Focused, short, memorable.
2. A second paragraph that amplifies the lead.
3. A third paragraph that continues to build detail.
4. Nut graph. Provides context or tells reader why this is important.
5. Power quote. An interesting quote that propels meaning. Not just a fluffy quote that gets in the way.

## Leads

Before you write, know your point: **What is this story about and why is it important?**

### Common problems in leads



Cluttered. More than one idea.



Flabby. It says, "I don't know what this story is about."



Dull. Ho-hum. No tension. No energy that drives the writing forward.



Mechanical. No human voice, no "music." Just another burger and fries.



Closed. A private conversation between those who speak the same jargon. It says, "Stay away. You don't know enough to read this."



Predictable. Written in journalese or bureaucratese. Cliches. No surprises, no unexpected words or phrases that are unexpected and that delight us as they capture and clarify a news event. No "chuckle quality."

### Qualities of Effective Leads



**Focus.** Make a specific promise to the reader, and then deliver.



**Context.** Involve the reader. Show clear, immediate significance. Answer the question, "Why should I read this story?"



**Form.** Implies a design, a plan, a structure, a pattern that will help the reader understand the meaning.



**Information.** Whets the readers appetite, promises delivery.



**Voice.** A human voice talking to the reader. Provides the "music" to support the meaning of what is being read.



**Surprise.** The promise of something new.

## SVO<24

What's that mean? **Subject-verb-object** sentences of generally less than 24 words.

Good writing starts with good sentence structure, and that means simple construction: subject-verb-object. Not blah, blah, blah, S-V-O. All that does is delay meaning.

This also is called the **right-branching sentence**: Think of S-V-O as the engine of a train. A short train.

Problem writers use a lot of commas and other punctuation. A good remedial exercise is to try writing a story with no commas. That, of course, means sentences should be short. Research shows that 20-word sentences are fairly clear to most readers. Thirty-word sentences are not.

Here's an even easier test: If you can't read a sentence aloud without taking a breath, it's too long.

### Ten guidelines to clearer writing

#### 1. One idea per sentence.

*No*: Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., experienced the largest of recent high school murder rampages last week, and DeKalb schools, along with police, are reacting to a rumor of violence at DeKalb High School. *Yes*: School officials and police are reacting quickly to a rumored threat of violence at DeKalb High School. The response follows last week's high school massacre in Littleton, Colo.

#### 2. Limit sentence length to 23-25 words. If you can't read a sentence aloud without a breath, it's too long.

*No*: After the announcement was made by President John La Tourette that he will be retiring early next year, Boey, under his board authority, created an ad hoc committee that will find representatives to sit on the actual search committee. (38 words)

*Yes*: President John La Tourette announced last month he will retire early next year. (12 words) Boey has since created a temporary committee to choose a search committee. (12 words)

**3. S-V-O: Subject-Verb-Object.** Right-branching sentences (think of a train engine). Don't delay meaning. Don't use a lot of commas.

*No:* Mauger, who worked as a bursar at DePaul University in Chicago prior to working at Beloit, said she missed the university environment. *Yes:* Mauger was a bursar at Chicago's DePaul University before her Beloit job. She missed the university environment.

**4. Use strong verbs and an active voice.**

*No:* The poem will be read by La Tourette.  
*Yes:* La Tourette will read the poem.

**5. Reduce difficult words to their simplest terms.** Don't let bureaucrats dictate your word choices.

*No:* The search committee will be constructed in accordance with Article 8 of the NIU constitution.  
*Yes:* NIU's constitution dictates the search committee's makeup.

**6. Don't back into a sentence.**

*No:* The end of the academic year and the end of the legislative session were two reasons La Tourette cited. *Yes:* La Tourette cited two reasons: the end of the academic year and the end of the legislative session.

**7. Don't use more than three numbers in any one sentence.**

*No:* Wednesday, the NIU baseball team's winless streak hit 22 as NIU (4-37-1) dropped a twin bill to Miami (21-18-1), 8-2 and 10-5, at Oxford, Ohio. *Yes:* Oxford, Ohio Ñ NIU's baseball losing streak reached 22 as the Huskies dropped a doubleheader Wednesday to Miami, 8-2 and 10-5.

**8. Use no more than three prepositional phrases per sentence.**

*No:* Students who will be graduating from NIU will be honored at a senior luncheon from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday in the Regency Room of the Holmes Student Center. *Yes:* Friday's senior luncheon will honor students about to graduate. The event runs from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the Holmes Student Center's Regency Room.

## 9. Choose the precise word.

*No:* This will increase the number of participants from 55 students a week to 200 students a week, and in that extra 145 students the age for attendance also will change. The present center is only equipped to handle children ages 2-6, but the new center will have the capacity to serve infants, too. (2 sentences, 53 words total) *Yes:* This will increase the center's weekly capacity, from 55 children to 200. And, while the current center takes children ages 2-6, the new center will take infants, too. (2 sentences, 28 words total)

## 10. KISS (keep it simple, stupid).

*No:* Biological sciences professor Karl Johnson passed away Tuesday at the age of 55, following a long, courageous battle with cancer. *Yes:* Biology professor Karl Johnson died of cancer Tuesday. He was 55..

## Using quotes

The best quotes are short and bright. They surprise, shock or amuse. They reveal insights or secrets. They prove points. They allow experts to give perspective, and real people to air grievances. Don't quote simple statements of fact.

### Sins to avoid when quoting people



**Stutter quotes:** Saying the same thing twice.

*Mayor Bessie Chronopoulous said Tuesday she will seek a second term. I intend to run for a second term," Chronopoulous said.*



**Partial quotes:** Often, it's less awkward just to paraphrase.

*Weak: Smith said the money was "spent by me" in order to buy "better-looking plants for the office."*

*Better: Smith said he spent the money on better-looking plants for the office.*



**Parenthetical info in quotes**

*WEAK: "We can't get (the concrete barrier) to stay in one place because (La Tourette) keeps driving into it," Smith said.*

*BETTER: La Tourette's driving habits appear to be the main obstacle to keeping the concrete barrier from being moved. "We can't get it to stay in one place because he keeps driving into it," Smith said.*



**Junk quotes.** Vague, bureaucratic. Quotes that say nothing.



**Stacking quotes.** Just stringing a bunch of them together rather than constructing a story.



**Weak lead quotes.** Empty, boring, vague, repetitive.



**Weak end quotes.** Using any old quote just to finish off the story.

## Story organization

### Are you a planner or a plunger?



Planners execute four or five elements in advance. Plungers start right in and discover what they want to say in the process. But they tend to write long and then cut back. They're slower. They may run out of time and give editors gray hair.



Both ways can and do work. But writers need to understand which one they are and what works for them.



Being a plunger requires a good memory and the ability to formulate in your head. Being a planner requires marking up notes.



Plungers are better on breaking, deadline stories. Planners are better on more-complicated, non-deadline stories.