

Conference 2004: News Writing Advice

13 Things about News Writing: Some Common Problems at the Coal Face.

By Jim Tucker, executive director of the Journalists Training Organisation.

Journalist, tutor and former JEANZ member Jim Tucker spent the latter part of 2004 back at the coalface as stand-in chief reporter for the *Sunday Star-Times*. He was concerned about some of the problems he found with staff copy, so issued the following guidelines to the newsroom. They formed the basis of his address to the JEANZ annual conference.

1. Tenses: Most daily newspapers follow the standard past tense reported speech style - indirect quotes are in past tense. However, there are parts of a story that can be in present tense:

- The intro - to add urgency
- The opening indirect quote, including the attribution verb (ie "says") - again, to add urgency.
- Any parts of the story that are your (the reporter's) summary.

This all means that you will be moving in and out of present and past, a complicated matter. Take a careful look at what is appearing in the paper and if there are changes from what you originally wrote, note them. Another general rule that helps is: After one par of present tense used for your first source at the top of the story, move into past tense reported speech. Eg:

Gnome painters **are** fed up with the quality of paint they'**re** expected to use in their work on the country's 20,000 garden gnomes.

Painters **are** on the verge of striking over the issue, **says** Resene Paints head painter Michael Small.

NOW MOVE TO PAST TENSE:

"We're sick of having to use low quality acrylic paint," he **said** at yesterday's gnome painters of New Zealand annual convention in Auckland .

If the issue **was** not resolved within a fortnight the 100 members of the gnome painters union **would** strike, he **said**.

2. Second paragraphs: Too many second paragraphs are impenetrable - they begin with the title and name of a source, meaning a line of caps and proper nouns that is a strong deterrent to the reader:

Par 1: Intro

Par 2: The general manager of the Union Steamship Company in New Zealand, Ronald Palenski, says the poor state of navigational aids around the country's coastal waters has increased the risk of a ship wreck.

The solution is simple: usually all you need to do is begin with the quote and end with the attribution:

Par 1: Intro

Par 2: The poor state of navigational aids around the country's coastal waters has increased the risk of a ship wreck, says Union Steamship Company New Zealand general manager Ronald Palenski.

3. Attribution: Following on from the example above, subsequent sources must be identified at start the sentence, so we know the voice is a new one and not a continuation of the previous source. That means you must start a new source with an indirect quote, otherwise the punctuation gets too complicated. EG:

Par 3: Blah, blah, blah, said Palenski.

Par 4: Maritime Safety Authority director Bill Moyes said blah, blah.

Par 5: "We're working on fixing the aids," said Moyes. "We think it'll all be sorted by the end of the year."

Note something else here: I've put **he said** after the first sentence of his direct quote. This is to make it clear to the reader that it's still Moyes being quoted. Not always necessary, but sometimes advisable in the interests of clarity.

4. Verb of attribution: Almost always use "says/said" - it's neutral and therefore safer.

5. Balance: In contentious stories (and aren't they all) be sure to give a one par summary of the "defendant's" case high up (maybe par four or five), then roll out that person's full rejoinder at the bottom of your story. If you don't do that you can be accused of not being fair. Remember, many people don't read to the end.

6. Titles: Usually try to shorten titles and run them without "the" in front, because the latter means you have to put a comma each side of the name. Note the change made in the example in 2 above.

7. History and background: In some follow-up stories, a good intro is sometimes followed by a par or three of background/history before the intro angle is further developed. That's a turn-off for any reader. Concentrate on developing your intro angle at the start of every par, with any required background added in the form of secondary clauses. EG:

Blah, blah, blah, said Palenski, who was last week implicated in a shipwreck investigation.

8. Dates: Rarely ever start an intro or a stand-first with a date. It's often a signal to the reader that this story isn't new.

9. Commas: They can change the entire meaning of a sentence. If you are in doubt, read the sentence to yourself and note where you pause slightly - usually that's where a comma goes. Almost always, the word "but" in a sentence is preceded by a comma.

10. Length: Reporters are encouraged to cover every base and it's better the subs have stuff to cut than leave information holes, but don't feel you have to let every source run off at the mouth. Quotes should be fighting to get into your story on merit and readability.

11. Abbreviation: It's okay to use abbreviations like "there's" and "they'll" in indirect speech in an intro (it adds pace), but anywhere else in the story it must be in a direct quote. In indirect, the correct grammatical use is to write such things in full.

12. Ellipsis: That's the three dots (note: three). They don't have a gap either end. Use sparingly, usually to indicate a par of direct quotes has got some bits left out.

13. Partial Quotes: Use these sparingly because they're messy and distracting. Don't overuse them to indicate something is unusual. And remember the punctuation:

The man said he was “totally sick of the whole thing”. The full point goes after the closing quotes.