

Exercise 1

Imagine you are a feature writer at your local newspaper. You are researching an article on a local business. The raw material you have collected is below.

1. What info would you use? Why? What information would you not use? Why?
2. How would you structure your article? What information would go where and why?

Joanna (9), daughter of John Semota and his wife

“I love Mum and Dad. They are my parents. I also love my little sister. Do you have a sister? Sometimes we go to McDonald’s for a Happy Meal. I like the clown. I wish we would go see the clown again.”

John Semota, principal Semota Steeplejacks

“I use rope wrapped around my body and around the towers or poles to climb. It was hard work learning the trade from my father. Yeah, some of the towers are, like, 300 feet high and narrow to a point, practically. It was hard doing that at first but you get used to it. Climbing a flagpole and doing the work we do, being out in the middle of the air, over hundreds of feet above the ground, it’s a rush.”

“The business was started by my grandfather. Then it was called Harold A. Semota Steeplejack. It began in 1936 in Dunedin. My grandfather was Harry. He opened the business when he was 16.

“Actually the story is a bit more complicated than that. The firm kinda really began with a guy called Gustav Hagan. He was a German sailor who settled in Otago way, way back after a life at sea. It was Gustav who taught Harry, who was his stepson (it’s a long story!), how to use ropes to lift objects and himself.

“Originally, the flag-maintenance part of the business wasn’t the main part. Harry’s son, also Harry, my father, joined the business in the fifties. Most of it was repairing steeples, industrial chimneys, water tanks, and painting them. My father and grandfather worked together in the business all their lives. At least neither of them is alive today to see how bad things have become.

“The family moved here, to Wellington, in 1964. By the time me and my brothers were at high school in the 1970s, we all wanted to go into the family corporation.

“The business was a financial success for a long time. We also helped teach the Boy Scouts about knots and ropes.

“The recession has hit us hard. I did apply for one of them Helping Hand loans from the council, but no luck. Our credit score was too low, thanks to several creditors’ complaints that we were a few weeks’ late repaying some debts.

“It’s got so bad I’ll take any job. One day recently, I did a small job for cash when I used to always issue an invoice and recently I went for a round trip, 200 kilometres just one way, to do three flag repairs in a day for an invoiced total of 352 bucks.

“These days the only other employee in the firm is my wife. As you know, she ain’t speaking. Our two kids go nuts that we can’t take them to McDonald’s for lunch.

“It’s not ‘Oh, I don’t have a job, I have to go find a new one.’ We’re losing a corporation that is 75 years old. We’re losing our house. We’re losing our credit. We’re losing, other than our own physical bodies, everything.

“Yeah, the park is no good these days. I hope and pray that we won’t be next, but I think we will.

“The family business did well in the 1980s and 1990s, ‘cos we benefited from all the building going on. At our peak we had six employees, all relatives. We were installing and maintaining flags and flagpoles for sports stadiums and expensive homes in the best neighbourhoods. Heck, one year the company brought in \$230,000 in business.”

“When the recession hit, the building work dried up.

“The Rugby World Cup did not push up sales much – very few people erected flagpoles or whatever for the cup, they just stuck some Warehouse flags on the car.

“We had reduced money coming in and creditors we needed to pay. I don’t mind telling you we have nearly \$340,000 in debt now and our bankers are talking about foreclosing.

“I find it hard to sleep at night now. Would you—knowing the business will probably close this year?

Statistics

Private-sector staff made unemployed (numbers)				
Size of business (by employee number)	Fourth quarter, last year	First quarter, this year	Second quarter, this year	Totals
0-19	2000	3000	2500	7500
20-200	1000	1500	1500	4000
201-1000	1000	500	500	2000
1001+	200	200	250	650
Total	4200	5200	4750	14150
Source: Statistics NZ				

“Yeah, about 95 percent of businesses with 0-19 employees are family-run. Hardly any in the other categories are family-run,” Jan Dryder, analyst, Statistics NZ

Your notes from recent National Federation of Independent Businesses survey of members

Small-business owners are reporting lower profits and fewer plans to add inventory or spend capital than at any time since the organisation began asking such questions in 1973.

Bill Dunkelberg, chief economist, National Federation of Independent Businesses

“The market’s being, I guess you could say, cleansed of goods and services that aren’t needed anymore.”

Paul Smith, Professor of Business, Victoria University of Wellington

“Yeah, I know Bill says that, but I think that ignores the broader civic and social role played by companies like this guy Semota.

“People don’t understand that business has often been an organising point for a family. Everyone works in it. It’s your livelihood and it’s a meeting place where family members form their own identities and the stories that carry them through life. In fact, I worked in my family’s olive business as a child, so I should know!”

Sarah Semota, John’s wife

Refused an interview as she is too upset about the company’s predicament.

Your sundry other notes

Semota Steeplejacks is based in a light industrial park. Of the park’s six spaces, two are now vacant.

A steeplejack is a person who climbs towers, steeples, flagpoles, etc. to build and work on them. Throughout its recent life, Semota Steeplejacks has focused on maintaining flags and flagpoles.

Exercise 2

Write your feature article. Newspaper features are relatively short, so your article should be about 700 words long.