

TRAILMARK YEARBOOKS

Copy Curriculum Series

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# *Writing the Yearbook*

A complete lesson in storytelling, body copy, interviewing,  
and the art of writing captions that actually say something.

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Storytelling · Body Copy · The Interview

Open-Ended Questions · Caption Writing · The 5W Caption Builder

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# *Writing the Yearbook*

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### **01 Storytelling in the Yearbook**

How to find the story beneath the event and write with honesty, specificity, and purpose.

### **02 Writing Body Copy**

Structure, voice, length, and the common mistakes that make yearbook copy forgettable.

### **03 The Interview**

How to prepare, what to ask, how to listen, and how to get quotes that are actually worth printing.

### **04 Caption Writing and the 5W Framework**

The two-sentence structure, what captions must do, what they must never do, and the interactive caption builder.



## SECTION 01

# Storytelling in the Yearbook

The yearbook is not a report. It is not a list of things that happened. It is a story — the story of a year of people, in a specific place, navigating specific moments. The difference between a forgettable yearbook and one people return to for decades is almost entirely the quality of the storytelling.

## *What Makes Something a Story*

A story has a subject, a tension, and a resolution. A report has facts. "The football team won the state championship" is a fact. "Three seniors who had never won a playoff game in their careers played the best football of their lives on the coldest night of the year" is the beginning of a story. Facts tell you what happened. Stories make you feel what it was like to be there.

Every event in your yearbook has a story underneath it. Your job as a yearbook writer is to find that story before you write a single word. The story is not the event — it is the human experience of the event. The story of homecoming is not the score of the game. It is the senior who almost quit the team in September, the student council president who pulled off the pep rally with 24 hours' notice, the marching band playing in the rain.

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*"Don't cover the event. Cover the people inside it."*

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## *Finding Your Angle*

The angle is the specific lens through which you tell a story. When you are assigned to cover a topic — the fall play, the science olympiad, spirit week — your first task is to find an angle that makes the story specific, interesting, and true to the experience of the people involved. A good angle is narrow enough to be focused but meaningful enough to represent the broader story.

Ask yourself: What was the most interesting thing about this? Who was changed by this experience? What almost did not happen? What surprised everyone? What was the moment that defined this event? The answer to any of those questions is probably your angle.

### **Broad topic: The spring musical**

#### **SURFACE ANGLE**

*The spring musical was a huge success. Students worked hard for months to put on a great show.*

#### **STORY ANGLE**

*Four students who had never been on a stage before auditioned on a dare. By opening night, two of them had the biggest roles in the show.*

## Scene-Setting and Specific Detail

The fastest way to improve any piece of yearbook writing is to replace vague generalizations with specific, sensory detail. Vague writing tells. Specific writing shows. The more specific a detail, the more universal it feels — because specificity signals to the reader that the writer was actually there, actually paying attention, actually cared enough to notice.

### VAGUE

*The gym was loud and full of energy. Everyone was excited for the game to start.*

### SPECIFIC

*The bleachers were so loud the scoreboard shook. With four minutes until tip-off, the student section had already run out of room.*

## Voice and Tone

Yearbook writing should feel warm, honest, and present-tense in spirit — like a vivid memory rather than a dry account. It is not academic. It is not overly formal. It is not breathlessly excited about everything either. The goal is a voice that feels like a trustworthy, observant friend recounting something that actually happened.

Avoid superlatives and hype words that drain meaning: "amazing," "incredible," "the best ever," "unforgettable." When everything is amazing, nothing is. Let the specific details carry the emotional weight. If the detail is strong enough, you do not need to tell the reader how to feel about it.

## The Lead

The lead is the first sentence — or first two sentences — of your story. It is the only part that every reader will read. Its job is to make the reader want to read the next sentence. A great lead does one thing: it is interesting. It can be a surprising fact, a scene, a question, a quote, a contradiction, or a moment. What it should never be is the obvious sentence everyone expects.

### PREDICTABLE LEAD

*This year, the yearbook staff worked hard to document all the events of the school year.*

### COMPELLING LEAD

*Nobody expected the debate team to make it past regionals. They almost did not show up.*

## SECTION 02

# Writing Body Copy

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Body copy is the written story on a yearbook spread. It is almost always the element students read last — after they have found themselves in the photos and skimmed the headlines. That makes it the most undervalued element on the page. It is also the element that, when done well, is what people remember years later.

## *What Body Copy Is For*

Body copy does what photos and headlines cannot: it provides context, emotion, and the human voices of the people who lived through the event. A photo can show you that someone is crying at graduation. Body copy can tell you why those tears meant something different to different people. The photo captures the moment. The copy captures the meaning.

## *Length and Structure*

Yearbook body copy is typically 150–250 words per story. That is not a long time to work with. Every sentence needs to earn its place. A useful structure for most yearbook stories has four parts:

- The Lead — Your opening sentence or two. Scene, tension, or the most interesting thing about this story. Do not start with "This year..."
- The Development — Two to three sentences of specific context. Who was involved? What made this event or moment distinctive? What was at stake?
- The Quote — One or two direct quotes from people who were there. The quote should add something the writer cannot — feeling, specificity, voice. It should not repeat what the copy already said.
- The Close — One final sentence that either returns to the opening image or leaves the reader with a feeling. Do not end with a generic wrap-up. End with something specific.

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*"A good yearbook story is not about the event. It is about what the event did to people."*

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## *Active Voice*

Active voice means the subject of the sentence is doing the action. Passive voice means the action is being done to the subject. Active voice is shorter, clearer, and more immediate. Yearbook copy should be almost entirely active.

**PASSIVE**

*The championship was won by the swim team after a close competition.*

**ACTIVE**

*The swim team won the championship in the final heat by two tenths of a second.*

## Integrating Quotes

A quote should do something the copy cannot — express a feeling, provide an insider perspective, or reveal a personality. Do not use a quote to deliver a fact you could just write. Do not use a quote that says exactly what the sentence before it already said. Introduce each quote with the person's full name and a relevant descriptor on first reference.

**GENERIC QUOTE**

*"It was an amazing experience and I am glad we did it," said junior Maria Torres.*

**SPECIFIC QUOTE**

*"I had never missed a free throw that mattered before," senior Jaylen Brooks said. "Every practice I had taken for granted suddenly cost us the game."*

## Common Body Copy Mistakes

- Starting with "This year..." or "Every year..." — These leads are so common they have become invisible. Start in the middle of the story.
- Using the word "very" — It almost never adds anything. "Very tired" is not stronger than "exhausted."
- Writing in the future tense about things that already happened — All yearbook coverage is past events. Past tense.
- Listing everything that happened — Body copy is not a game summary or a schedule of events. It is a story with a focus.
- Ending with "Overall, it was a great year" — This is the writing equivalent of a shrug. Find a specific ending.
- Not naming people — Every person mentioned in the copy should be identified with full name and year or grade.

## SECTION 03

# The Interview

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The quality of your yearbook writing is directly limited by the quality of your interviews. Generic questions produce generic quotes. Thoughtful, open-ended questions produce the kind of quotes that make people stop on a spread and actually read.

## *Why Interviews Matter*

You can describe what you observed. Only the people who lived through something can describe what it felt like from the inside. That inside perspective — the nervousness before the curtain goes up, the frustration of the losing season, the disbelief of winning state — is what makes yearbook writing matter. Interviews are how you get it.

Most student journalists go into interviews without enough preparation. They show up, ask the first questions that come to mind, get short answers, and leave with nothing worth printing. The reporters who come back with great quotes are the ones who prepared three times as many questions as they will use and who actually listen to the answers.

## *Preparing for an Interview*

- Know your subject. Before you interview the debate team captain, know the team's record, what the competition was, and who else was on the team.
- Prepare at least 8–10 questions. You will not use them all, but having them means you never run dry.
- Write your questions in order from broad to specific. Start with the big picture, then go deeper.
- Plan your follow-ups. The best interview questions are often the ones you ask in response to what someone says.
- Never read questions off your phone while interviewing. Know them well enough to make eye contact.

## *Open-Ended Interview Questions*

Closed questions produce yes/no answers. Open-ended questions produce stories. The difference is in how they are constructed. Here are strong open-ended questions you can adapt to almost any yearbook coverage situation:

- 1 *Walk me through what it was like in the moment when \_\_\_\_\_ happened.*  
Forces a chronological, scene-by-scene account. Produces vivid, present-tense detail.
- 2 *What was something that surprised you about this experience?*  
Breaks past the expected answer. Surprise reveals what someone actually noticed.
- 3 *What is something most people don't know happened behind the scenes?*  
Unlocks insider perspective — the stuff that never makes it into the game recap.
- 4 *What was the hardest part — and how did you get through it?*  
Creates narrative tension and resolution. Two questions in one that produce a complete mini-story.
- 5 *If you could go back to one specific moment from this year, which one would it be and why?*  
Forces prioritization. The moment they choose tells you what they actually valued most.
- 6 *How did this experience change you or your perspective on something?*  
Produces reflective, emotionally resonant quotes that go beyond the surface of the event.
- 7 *Describe what it felt like the moment you knew \_\_\_\_\_ was going to happen.*  
Captures emotional specificity at a peak moment — exactly what yearbook copy needs.
- 8 *What do you wish the rest of the school understood about what your team/group actually does?*  
Great for clubs and teams that feel misrepresented. Produces passionate, authentic quotes.
- 9 *What is something you will still remember about this 10 years from now?*  
A legacy question that makes people reflect on meaning rather than recite facts.
- 10 *What would you tell a freshman or underclassman who wants to do what you do?*  
Produces advice-based quotes with voice and earned authority. Works especially well for seniors.

## ***The Follow-Up: Where Quotes Are Made***

The best quote in any interview almost always comes as a follow-up to something the subject said that you were not expecting. When someone says something interesting, do not move to the next question. Stop. Ask: "Tell me more about that." Ask: "What do you mean by that?" Ask: "What happened next?" The follow-up is where generic answers become specific stories.

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*"The most important skill in an interview is not what you ask. It's being quiet long enough for the answer to finish."*

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## ***Getting Quotes That Are Worth Printing***

A quote worth printing is specific, personal, and says something the writer could not say for them. It sounds like a person talking, not like a press release. It reveals feeling, personality, or knowledge that no one outside the situation would have. If a quote could have been said by anyone about anything, it is not worth printing.

- If a quote is vague, ask for an example: "Can you give me a specific moment when you felt that?"

- If a quote is too long, do not cut it down arbitrarily — ask for the one sentence that captures it.
- If a quote is perfect but unclear out of context, use a partial quote with attribution in your copy.
- Never change the words in a direct quote. You can leave words out with an ellipsis, but you cannot change what someone said.

## SECTION 04

# Caption Writing and the 5W Framework

Captions are the most-read words in any yearbook. Students scan photos looking for themselves and their friends, and when they find a photo they care about, they read the caption. That makes the caption the single most important piece of writing real estate in the book — and the most often neglected.

## *What a Caption Must Do*

A caption must answer the questions a reader has when they look at a photo: Who is this? What is happening? Why does it matter? A caption that only answers "who" is incomplete. A caption that only describes what is already visible in the photo is useless. Every caption in your yearbook should contain information the photo itself cannot communicate.

## *What a Caption Must Never Do*

- State the obvious — "Students smile for the camera" under a photo of students smiling.
- Start with a name — Lead with action, not identification. "Running the ball up the sideline, junior Marcus Lee..." is stronger than "Junior Marcus Lee runs the ball..."
- Use "pictured above" or "seen here" — The reader can see the photo. Point them to information, not the image.
- Use passive voice — "A goal was scored by..." should be "Senior Avery Kim scored..."
- Omit the year or grade — Always identify students with their year. "Junior" or "12th grader" tells the reader important context.
- Be vague about the event or context — Always name the event, the opponent, the date, or the occasion.

## *The Two-Sentence Caption Structure*

The most reliable caption structure in yearbook journalism is two sentences. The first sentence is written in present tense and describes the action in the photo with specific identification. The second sentence is written in past tense and provides context, result, or significance that the photo does not show.

### WEAK CAPTION

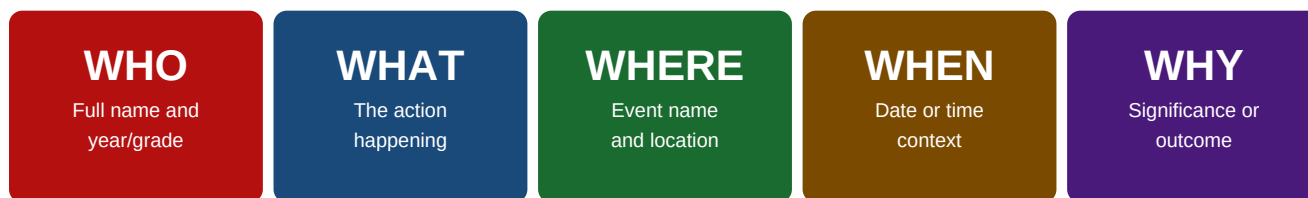
*Junior Sarah Chen plays volleyball. The team had a good season.*

### STRONG CAPTION

*Junior Sarah Chen digs a back-row save during the third set of the regional semifinal. The point extended Westview's lead and sparked a 7-0 run that clinched the match.*

## The 5W Caption Framework

Every great caption is built from five pieces of information. Before you write a caption, answer all five — then build your two sentences from the answers.



## The 5W Caption Builder

Use the interactive 5W Caption Builder (available as a separate digital tool in your TrailMark Adviser Resources) to practice building captions. Enter the five W answers for any photo and the tool will generate a properly structured two-sentence caption you can refine. The goal is not to use the generated caption verbatim — it is to build the habit of gathering all five W answers before you write.

| 5W INPUTS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | GENERATED CAPTION                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>WHO: Senior Jaylen Brooks   WHAT: Makes a game-winning three-pointer   WHERE: In the gym at Westview High School   WHEN: During the fourth quarter of the state quarterfinal   WHY: The shot gave Westview its first lead of the game with 40 seconds remaining</i> | <i>Senior Jaylen Brooks drains a three-pointer in the fourth quarter of the state quarterfinal. The shot gave Westview its first lead of the game with 40 seconds remaining and sent the student section into a frenzy.</i> |

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*"If you can't answer all five W's for a photo, you are not ready to write the caption. Go find the answers first."*

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## Caption Tense: Present for Action, Past for Context

The first sentence of a two-sentence caption is written in present tense because it describes the frozen moment in the photo — what is happening in that image, eternally. The second sentence is written in past tense because it describes events, outcomes, and context that occurred in time — before or after the photo was taken.

- PRESENT (Sentence 1): "Junior Mia Torres threads a pass through two defenders in the second half."
- PAST (Sentence 2): "Torres finished the season with the third-highest assist total in school history."

## Identifying Multiple People in a Photo

When a photo includes multiple people, identify the primary subject in the caption and use directional identifiers for others if needed: "from left," "center," or a brief description of position. Never leave an identifiable person

unnamed in a caption unless they are part of an unidentified crowd. Students notice when their name is missing.

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This lesson is one part of the TrailMark Adviser Resource Library. The 5W Caption Builder referenced in Section 04 is available as an interactive digital tool in your adviser resources portal.

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