THIRD EDITION

DYNAMICS OF MEDIA WRITING

Adapt and Connect

Vincent F.
FILAK

Dynamics of Media Writing

Third Edition

To my mom, Lynn, who set me up at the dining room table with her old manual typewriter when I was a kid and let me write until my heart was content. To my dad, Frank, who taught me that the best things in life come to he who hustles while he waits. To my wife, Amy, who has been there for me and with me through everything life has thrown at us. And to my daughter, Zoe, who always asks, "Did you put me in your new book?"

Yes, sweet pea, I did.

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PREFACE

I always tell people that I learn more from my students than my students learn from me, and this book is the living proof of that truism. Two students helped me understand what this book should be and why it matters to anyone who wants to go into the field of media.

The first was a former editor of mine at the Advance-Titan, the UW Oshkosh student newspaper, who was charged with recruiting a staff of writers. He already had most of the "news" students in our department, and he was still short of bodies. He then went into public relations classes, English composition classes, and any courses that had the word "writing" in the title.

Each time he entered one of those classes, he was met with skepticism, but he presented the newspaper as a great way to get practical job experience in an important field. His pitch consisted of a two-word theme:

"Transferrable skills."

In other words, people who plan to work in a field involving communication will need to know how to ask questions and assess answers. They will need to know how to write effectively and clearly. They will need to understand the legal and ethical rules pertaining to communication.

In the end, he failed more than he succeeded, but he still made an impact on those people who chose to work for him. He also gave me a way to explain what it was I was trying to do in terms of teaching media writing across the various disciplines out there.

The second student was a woman who took my class on writing for the media as a sophomore and hated it. Her complaint was one I had heard too often from students:

"I'm going into PR! Why do I need any of this?"

After passing the class, she ended up on exactly the path she had hoped: She got an internship with a top-flight casino in Las Vegas doing public relations. She parlayed that experience into another internship with an influential public relations firm in New York, where she worked with clients in fashion and video games.

As part of her internship class requirements, she came back and spoke to my class about her experiences. She had the PR students hanging on her every word, but not one of them would ask a question. So I asked one for them:

"If Ashley now could talk to the Ashley who sat in this class back then, what would you tell her?"

The woman's face took on the look of someone who was just forced to eat a piece of rotten fruit. She then sighed and said two things:

"First, listen to this guy. He knows more than you'll give him credit for. Second, learn how to write. Write, write and write some more until you're really good at it, because all I did for my first internship was write like crazy."

The students in the class, especially those in marketing and public relations, suddenly looked as if she had told them that Santa isn't real.

WRITING ACROSS THE MEDIA

This book is rooted in those two stories and should work in a way that I hope will bridge the divides among media students who have, for too long, been taught in silos. Students are often required to declare a major or a sequence and then take classes that insulate them from other

disciplines. They also have social identities that relate to those choices. It took me a while, but I finally understood why students had trouble with my course if they weren't "newspaper people." I could talk a good game and lecture about the value of media skills, but at the end of the day, my textbook had the words "news reporting and writing" in bold letters across the cover. The chapters tilted in that direction and either ignored or diminished the importance of things that weren't directly related to "news."

The way this book approaches media writing is about finding common ground among the disciplines. Certain skills matter to you as a media writer, regardless of what part of this field you enter. You need to learn how to research, fact-check and interview. You need to learn proper grammar, style and spelling. You need to work on digital platforms, and you need to do so in an ethical and legal fashion.

Most textbooks on media writing start with writing for a newspaper or a news outlet and then provide a few tidbits about public relations and nothing about advertising. This book looks at the crucial skills that all media writers will need, from understanding an audience to learning the law, before moving into the various niche approaches to media writing. Given the media trend of professionals who work in news before shifting to public relations or work in marketing before shifting to news, these transferable skills are a bedrock for all learners.

The first eight chapters of this book will lay out those skills in a "discipline-neutral" fashion, using examples from news and ads to rock band contract riders and popular movies. The goal is to showcase these skills in a way that makes it clear how each one applies to a particular discipline as well as to the field as a whole.

DIFFERENT NEEDS FOR DIFFERENT PLATFORMS

Although skills matter across the board, a number of things will differ from platform to platform and from area to area. How broadcast journalists write will differ from how newspaper journalists write because of the needs associated with the platform and how the information is consumed. Marketing and advertising will differ in many ways from public relations, especially in terms of audience and approach. You might use the skills in the first half of the book regardless of where you go, but you will likely have to use them in slightly different ways, depending on your job.

The second half of the book will use a chapter-by-chapter approach to outline specific areas of media writing and the key elements associated with each one. Reporting, print writing, broadcast writing, public relations, advertising and marketing will each get a detailed examination, as the first half of the book will function as a lens through which to view these topics.

One of the primary elements that has been augmented throughout the chapters in this edition is that of digital media use. The days of relying on traditional platforms to tell stories are long gone, but in the time between editions of this text, we have seen continual growth in how much content people consume on digital media and mobile devices. Many of the basic storytelling techniques we have included since the first edition remain valuable, but we have added more to the social media and web chapters to improve them in these areas. Furthermore, examples, exercises and more have been added to impress upon the readers the importance of working in a "digital-first" mindset.

PROFESSIONAL THOUGHTS

One of the most important portions of the book (at least in my mind) is the "Professional Thoughts" feature in each chapter. Throughout the editions of the book, we have seen

shifts in terms of how people who do media writing for a living need to work across various platforms. People who began their careers at newspapers now write more heavily on social media and the web. Public relations practitioners find themselves moving beyond written press releases into promotional videos and blogging. Advertisers have shifted their approach to content from one of traditional ads to one that borrows heavily from news writers' story-telling techniques.

The professionals who were gracious enough to share their stories in this edition talk at length about how they meet the needs of their audiences every time they ply their trades. They offer suggestions as to what tools will be most helpful to up-and-coming media writers who want to be successful in their fields. They also talk about how the skills they gained as media writers have transitioned with them as they have moved from job to job and even field to field.

CENTRAL THEME: ADAPT AND CONNECT

The theme of the book, adapt and connect, is exemplified in the use of **Adapt** and **Connect** breakout boxes in each chapter. The underlying assumption is that the skills you learn in this text can be adapted to fit various disciplines within the field of media in the hope of connecting effectively with your audience.

Each **Adapt** box uses examples and anecdotes to help you see how a skill discussed in one area of the book can be valuable in another way. For example, an **Adapt** box could show you how a topic discussed in a news-writing chapter could benefit you as a public relations practitioner or vice versa. The goal is to show more of the commonalities among the areas of media writing and how truly interlinked the various disciplines are.

The **Connect** boxes reinforce the primary point of the first chapter: You aren't writing for yourself. You are writing for your readers. The ability to understand how audience members function will allow you to better reach them with your words. Each box applies audience-centric approaches to conveying content, thus helping you see ways you can connect to the people you serve.

EXAMPLES AND BREAKOUT BOXES

Beyond the **Adapt** and **Connect** boxes, several chapters contain examples and breakout boxes to help draw your attention to key ideas and illustrate important concepts. The use of small chunks of text, visual examples and self-contained content elements should help alert you to important topics in easy-to-consume ways.

For example, in the "Basic Media Writing" chapter, we break down how best to write a strong and coherent lead by showing you what doesn't work and then steadily improving it from example to example. This approach can show how simple changes can make your work much better.

In addition, we rely on larger examples of how to write a news story for print-style publications and how to write a story for broadcast. Again, in each case, we start with a piece that includes common mistakes beginning writers make, explaining why each mistake limits the writer's effectiveness. A second version of the story then corrects the errors and outlines how these improvements strengthen the effort.

The goal is to use these sparingly and yet effectively, so you don't become numb to their presence or learn to skip past them. Like everything else in the book, these elements are used only when there is a reason to use them. Keep an eye out for them and give them a look-see before moving on with your reading.

THE BIG THREE

At the end of every chapter, I have highlighted the three most important concepts and skills to remember, rather than trying to provide an overreaching summary of everything discussed. It is my hope that this approach not only gives you a sense of value but also improves your recall of key concepts that will have the most value to you as a reader.

TEACHING RESOURCES

This text includes an array of instructor teaching materials designed to save you time and to help you keep students engaged. To learn more, visit sagepub.com or contact your SAGE representative at sagepub.com/findmyrep.

CONSTANT DIGITAL UPDATES VIA DYNAMICS OF WRITING BLOG

Some of the major complaints about textbooks are that they are out of date before they even hit the shelves and that they lack the interactive elements students enjoy. In an effort to address these concerns, this text has an accompanying digital presence: the Dynamics of Writing blog (**dynamicsofwriting.com**).

The blog covers content outlined in both this text and "Dynamics of News Reporting and Writing," so it covers the field in various ways. It is updated almost daily with additional information, current examples of material discussed in the text and additional interactive elements that will keep students engaged and the material fresh. Professional journalists take part in the blog through interviews and discussions about current events in the media. Guest bloggers frequently post on topics of interest, such as improving local content or covering underrepresented groups. The author has also made the experience more interactive through the inclusion of digital elements, discussion-board opportunities and other web-based options.

This approach to content provision provides students with an opportunity to further their knowledge as they read these thought-provoking posts and seek direct feedback from the author.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vincent F. Filak, PhD, is an award-winning teacher, scholar and college media adviser who serves as a professor of journalism at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, where he primarily teaches courses on media writing and reporting. Prior to his arrival at UWO, he served on the faculty at Ball State University and also taught courses at the University of Missouri and the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He also previously worked for the Wisconsin State Journal and the Columbia Missourian newspapers.

Filak has earned the Distinguished Four-Year Newspaper Adviser award from the College Media Association for his work with the Advance-Titan, UWO's student newspaper. CMA previously honored him as an Honor Roll Recipient for his work as the adviser of the Daily News at Ball State. The National Scholastic Press Association presented him with its highest honor, the Pioneer Award, "in recognition of significant contributions to high school publications and journalism programs."

As a scholar, Filak has received 13 top conference paper awards, including those from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Broadcast Education Association and the International Public Relations Society of America. He has published more than 30 scholarly, peer-reviewed articles in top-tier journals, including Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Journalism and Mass Communication Educator, Newspaper Research Journal, the Atlantic Journal of Communication, Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism, the Howard Journal of Communication, Educational Psychology and the British Journal of Social Psychology. He is also the winner of CMA's Nordin Research Award, which goes to the best research paper completed on a topic pertaining to media advisers within a given year.

He has published several textbooks in the field of journalism, including "Dynamics of News Reporting and Writing" (SAGE), "Dynamics of Media Editing" (SAGE), "Convergent Journalism" (Focal) and "The Journalist's Handbook to Online Editing" (with Kenneth Rosenauer; Pearson).

He lives outside of Auroraville, Wisconsin, with his wife, Amy, and their daughter, Zoe.

THE BASICS YOU NEED, REGARDLESS OF FIELD

WORDS TO LIVE BY

Suzanne Struglinski

"While it is unclear how much longer the traditional newsprint versions of newspapers will remain, the need for journalism — and those who help get information to reporters — should never go away."

—Suzanne Struglinski

Public Relations Manager, Industry Dive

For more helpful hints and sage advice from Suzanne, see the "Professional Thoughts" feature later in the chapter.

1

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Define an audience based on several characteristics, including demographic information, psychographic information and geography.

- Understand what readers want from you as a media professional, how you should deliver it to them and ways in which audiences change over time.

- Discuss the key interest elements that attract most readers, including fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact.

- Identify key needs of audience members and explain how to meet those needs through your writing.

Media outlets today have a singular purpose: Serve the audience. This truism applies to advertising and public relations, where practitioners craft messages to convince clients to create campaigns. In turn, those campaigns release messages that attempt to persuade consumers to purchase a product, trust a candidate for office or change their beliefs about an issue. This statement also relates to the field of news, where print, broadcast and online reporters gather material from sources and craft messages to inform their readers and viewers.

According to research published in the Journal of Communication, media users engage in selective exposure.[1] This means audience members will gravitate to topics they know, writers they like and information providers they trust. This can be good for media professionals who apply strong ethical tenets and good communication skills to reach readers, but it can also be bad, if people insulate themselves too much from outside information and opinion. A Pew Research Center analysis conducted in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election found that people tend to gravitate toward information that confirms their own ways of thinking, creating what some have termed "media bubbles."[2] This makes it harder, but not impossible, for us to break through to our audience members and inform them about things they need to know.

As audiences continue to fragment and specialize, media professionals can't assume that broad messages or generic bits of information will influence a wide swath of people. Instead, the goal for today's media professionals, regardless of the specialty they practice, is to learn as much as possible about the people they serve and put forth content that targets those people.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the importance of the audience as it relates to media writing, determine ways to define the audience and explain which information elements attract the most readers.
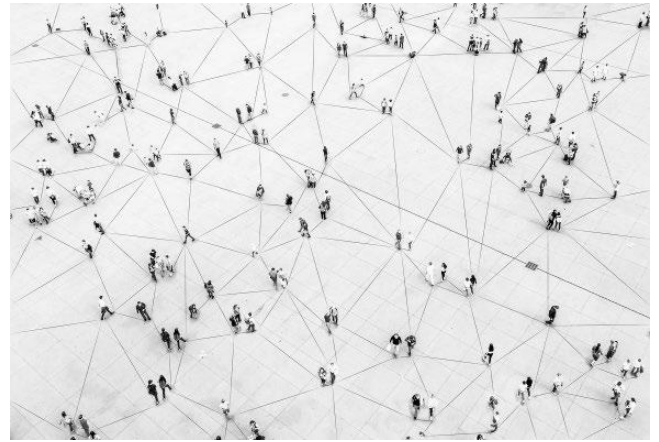
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HOW TO DEFINE AN AUDIENCE

Before you create effective content, you have to define your **audience**. When it comes to the various media disciplines, advertising professionals best understand the value of analyzing and segmenting an audience. In order to sell products, advertisers need to know who uses their products, why these people use the products and how best to reach active and potential users. Public-relations practitioners often deal with some of the most difficult audiences to reach, namely, news journalists who can use their media outlets to amplify the practitioners' messages. PR professionals understand the needs of these fellow media practitioners as well as the needs of the public as they craft a valuable and engaging message. News journalists began to focus on audience centricity a bit later than their colleagues in other areas of the discipline. In years past, reporters viewed **audience segmentation** as unnecessary, because their job was to tell people what mattered based on predetermined news values. In addition, many news outlets held virtual monopolies over geographic areas, thus allowing them to operate with impunity. However, with loss of unilateral control over what people receive via news outlets, mainstream news operations now spend ample time catering to their audience.

With the shift of news to digital **platforms**, more people have access to more news than ever. In addition, advertisers are now awash in even greater levels of message competition, and

FIGURE 1.1   ■   **Market segmentation allows you to figure out who is in your audience and how best to reach them. For media writers, understanding the demographic, psychographic and geographic backgrounds of their readers will help them write better for those people.**
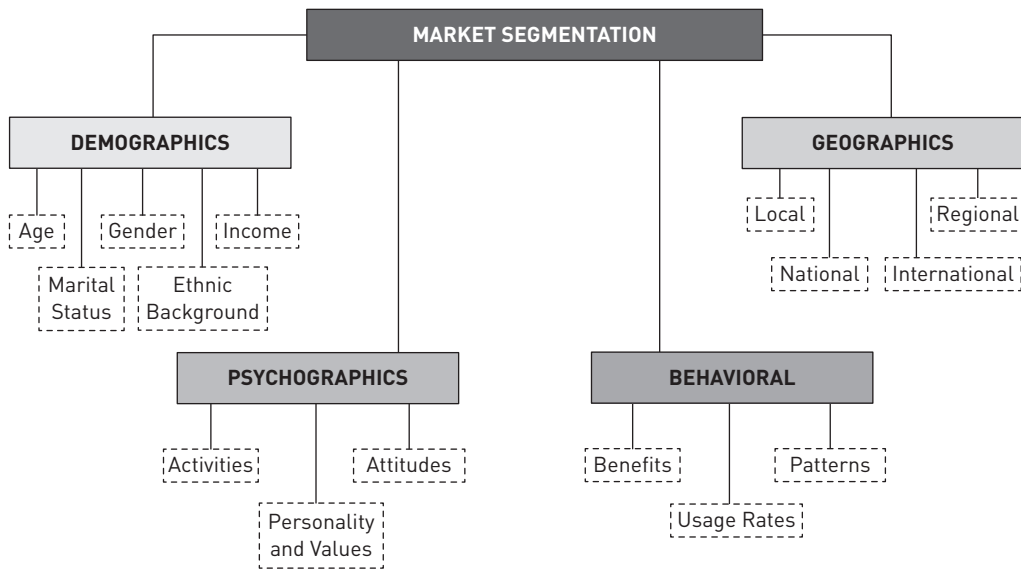
public-relations campaigns are expected to yield greater results with fewer resources than ever. As digital media continues to grow and to create fragmented audiences, all media professionals must be more vigilant in defining and understanding whom they serve. Here are the key ways in which you should look to define your readers:

Demographic Information

The most basic way to define an audience is through **demographics**. These statistics reveal the measurable aspects of a group you hope to reach. Demographics commonly include age, gender, race, education and relationship status.

Marketers traditionally use these population characteristics to divide a larger group into more manageable segments. For example, the purchasing habits of divorced women, ages 54–65, who have no children will differ from the purchasing habits of married men, ages 25–36, who have multiple children living at home. If you targeted both groups with the same types of material and the same products, you probably would fail to reach at least one of those groups.

Websites have also tapped into demographics in terms of audience centricity. For example, the website BuzzFeed has engaged in a series of **microtargeting** posts that Chadwick Matlin calls "demolisticles." These postings target people based on specific interests, such as attending a certain college or growing up in a certain religion.[3] According to an article on Slate, these posts are wildly successful because people have an inherent interest in specific personal attributes and how other people with similar attributes engage in shared experiences.[4] Thus, lists such as "32 Signs You Grew Up in Ealing" and "33 Signs You Went to an All-Girls Public School" tap into that demographic background and highlight the audience members' shared experiences.

Microtargeting has become a huge factor in political campaigns over the past decade. A 2020 Los Angeles Times article outlined the ways in which big data analytics are used to find the demographics of voters, as well as other public information about those individuals. Analysts then use this information to target individuals with specific information that is most likely to resonate with them, thus maximizing the impact of the message and minimizing waste. Critics argue that this approach further exacerbates the differences between individuals and can play havoc with important social systems, like elections.[5] However, like every tool we discuss in this book, demographic targeting can be used for societal benefit or detriment. It comes down to the media professionals using the tool and their conduct.

Geographic Information

People relate well to events that happen near them and care somewhat less about those happening far away. When you consider that a single death can draw more attention than a massive genocide simply based on where the event occurs, you realize that **geographic information** plays a large role in how to target your audience.

Area placement means a great deal to advertisers and event organizers. A person might fit a demographic range for a particular event, such as a 5K run. The person might also have an interest in the charity that the run supports, such as breast cancer awareness or muscular dystrophy. However, if the event takes place 500 miles from where that person lives, it is unlikely the individual will consider participating in it. This is where geography becomes important. Also, advertisers know that the needs of citizens of Madison, Minnesota, are not the same as the needs of those of Madison, Florida, when it comes to snow-removal equipment or alligator deterrents.

People want to know what is happening near them. When a restaurant burns to the ground in a small town, news reporters know that readers likely have eaten at that establishment or know its owners. When a school district requests a tax increase or fires a teacher, the issue of proximity figures prominently into audience members' interest in the issue.

Psychographic Information

Just because someone is your age, is your gender and has your level of education, it doesn't necessarily follow that the person has anything in common with you. **Psychographics** allow media professionals to examine an audience based on concepts like personal values, interests and attitudes. This category incorporates topics such as the strength of opinion on certain issues as well as general likes and dislikes associated with certain topics, activities and ideologies.

For example, if you were to examine the demographics of College X, you might find that it has a 55% to 45% split between men and women, with an age demographic that primarily sits in the 18–24 range. You might find that this school sees about one-third of its students come from within the state and has an 85/15 proportion of white students to those of various other racial groups. College Y might have similar demographics that show a 52–48 split between men and women, a similar age range and about one-half of the students coming from within the state. However, if you were to run a promotion at the first school for a bar's "Drink Like There's No Tomorrow" specials, you would probably do horribly poorly in sales, given that Brigham Young University has a policy and tradition against alcoholic consumption. If you did the same at the second school, you might do pretty well, given West Virginia University's consistent ranking among the top 20 party schools in the country.

CONNECT
THE PERSONIFICATION OF YOUR AUDIENCE

One approach you can take to conceptualize your readers more clearly is to view them in a way that makes them more real for you. Some media specialists refer to this as the **personification** of the audience. This approach to audience understanding has you create a mini-biography about your prototypical reader that lets you to reflect on his or her wants and needs as you approach your writing.

Here are a couple of personification examples:

"Anne is a 50-year-old public school teacher who has lived in the same medium-sized city for her entire life. She always wants to keep up with what is happening all around her, but she places a premium on local information. She still subscribes to the daily newspaper and reads it from cover to cover every day before work. She listens to local news radio during her daily work drives. She will shop where she gets the best deal, and she is an avid coupon clipper. She puts the needs of her two teenage children above her own, in terms of purchase intentions and educational opportunities. She owns a mobile phone, but it is several years old, and she turns it on only for outgoing phone calls."

"Burt is a 19-year-old college sophomore at a small, private college. His school is rooted in a Christian belief system, but Burt puts more emphasis on the quality of his education than the underlying religious aspects of the institution. Burt has limited finances, but he enjoys being at the front of most trends. What his friends think about who he is and how he acts matters a great deal to him. Burt gets all of his information through social media sites and avoids mainstream media. He is never without his phone, and he uses various apps to manage his news, his schedule and everything else around him.

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He loves cheap eats and other great bargains, but he won't carry around a wad of coupons. He relies on internet codes and digital sharing to find good deals."

Personifying your audience can allow you to better conceptualize who is reading your work. This will also help you figure out if you are meeting the needs of those people you serve.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK IN SERVING YOUR READERS

As a media professional, you will be expected to ask a lot of questions during your career. Interviewing, which is discussed in Chapter 5, is a key way you will gain knowledge and gather information. However, to fully understand what you must do for your readers, here are three key questions you should ask of yourself:

What Do My Readers Want From Me?

In many cases, media writers write from their own perspectives. In other words, they ask, "What do I want to tell people?" Many writers believe that if a topic matters to them, it should matter to the audience. In some cases, your interests and your audience members' interests will intertwine, especially when you operate in a **niche** area.

If you start a blog that is all about knitting because you really enjoy knitting, you will have a lot in common with knitting aficionados who frequent your site. That said, some of the people will be interested in spinning their own yarn by hand, whereas others might rely solely on processed materials. Some knitters enjoy knitting socks, and some love sweaters. Even more, some sock knitters will only knit "toe up," while others are fervently "top down" knitters. Just because you prefer certain ideas and approaches, you shouldn't become myopic about them.

In writing promotional material for a company, an organization or a department, you can easily fall into a rut of writing lead sentences like "The Boone County Chamber of Commerce will host a comedy event on Saturday to benefit a local charity." It makes sense to you because you are writing what you think is most important: Your organization is doing something.

Don't write for yourself. Write for your readers. Ask yourself, "What is it that will be most compelling to those people who pick up this press release or read this promotional material?" As you answer this question, rely on information elements like fame, oddity and immediacy, which we will discuss below, to amplify the value to your readers.

> *Bill Smith, the only man to ever eat an entire elephant, will perform his comedy routine "One Bite at a Time" on Saturday, with all proceeds going to the Boone County Make-a-Wish Foundation.*

Work for the readers and figure out what those people want from you. If you give it to them, you will likely have a lot of readers who are interested in what you have to say.

How Do My Readers Want the Information?

Think about the last meal you ate. How much did it cost? Did you prepare it or was it prepared for you? Did you eat at a restaurant or did someone deliver the food to you? Did you eat your meal at a leisurely pace, at a table, with other people, or did you grab it on the go?

The point is, you were consuming something based on a variety of factors, and how you needed to eat played a big role in what you ate. If you were in a hurry to get to class this afternoon, a bagel from the school's food cart might have been your best option because you could eat it on the go. A porterhouse steak with mashed potatoes and a side of asparagus might have sounded much better to you at that point, but cost, time and portability made the steak an impossible choice.

Companies have been making these kinds of adaptations for years. For example, during the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, many restaurants were forced to shut down during the initial wave, as health experts worried about the spread of the disease. However, numerous restaurants adopted "touchless" protocols to allow them to safely provide services without fear of contributing to the problem. Restaurants that lacked delivery services began offering curbside pickup and other similar innovations to get people restaurant-quality food without violating social-distancing policies and public health concerns.

Delivering media content to readers is like delivering a pizza to a dorm room in some simple ways. How your readers want to get their information should factor into how you write and how you transmit your content.

Some readers want all of their content in a central location that will allow them to sift through everything at their leisure. Other people want bits of information sent to them as each item becomes available. Still others will want a mix of both forms, depending on the type of content involved.

In many cases, the lives of your readers dictate what they want, and intelligent media professionals will use that to their advantage. A recent Pew Research Center study found that 8 in 10 U.S. adults used their mobile devices to access news content either "sometimes" or "often."[6] An earlier study, this one by Deloitte, found that mobile devices have become essential for U.S. citizens, with more than 40% of them checking their phones less than five minutes after they wake up. In addition, the study notes that people review text messages, check email and surf the web via the small screen.[7] To that end, writing in a way that is easy to read on a smartphone and looking for ways to push content out to readers as it becomes available make sense. If you can be a convenient source of information, your readers will hear more of what you have to say.

ADAPT
SHIFTING CONTENT TO SATISFY AN AUDIENCE

When thinking about how to write, you should consider the platform (paper, television, desktop, mobile) and the **outlet** (New York Post, Vogue magazine, ESPN.com).

Some people will want a quick burst of information, and that's it. It could be a notification that a company is having a sale on a particular date or a simple sentence that reveals the results of a football game. Other people will want to sit down and study an extended analysis of why a company's stock is performing well or read a personality profile about a local community leader.

Analyze your audience for outlet and platform preferences. What your readers use and how they use it will help you tailor your approach. Most people won't want to read a 10,000-word profile on their mobile phone screen. However, those same people won't want to wait until a print newspaper arrives on the doorstep to find out who won that night's baseball game.

Take advantage of these preferences. You could use Twitter to alert the readers to that 10,000-word feature, thus piquing their interest and inspiring them to read the full version later on their tablets or laptops. You could pair that sports score alert with a link to other short pieces available on your mobile site, thus sponsoring more audience engagement on the topic while not forcing the readers to shift platforms.

In the end, you want to use the right tool for the right job and meet your readers where they are. Then you can use your writing and promotional skills to guide those readers to additional information that matters to them.

Does the Audience Change Over Time?

In some cases, audience characteristics remain constant over time, but the members of that audience will change. It is your job to figure out how this will influence your approach to content and what you need to report to your readers.

For example, the magazine Tiger Beat started in September 1965, catering to teenage girls with an interest in music, fashion and the inside scoop on the teen idols. The first magazine featured photos and stories on the Beatles and Herman's Hermits. It offered an "intimate, personal" examination of David McCallum and asked the all-important question: "The Righteous Brothers: Breaking Up?"

The cover of a 2019 issue of Tiger Beat offers posters of Max & Harvey, Why Don't We and Makenzie Ziegler. It offers a quiz to find out "Will you have a bae by Valentine's Day?" The main story explains why we are all "Hooked on Jacob Sartorius."

The magazine still meets the audience needs outlined above: teen gossip, music scoops and inside movie information. However, over the 50+ years between the first issue and the most recent one, the audience has changed. The idols of the 1960s don't cause the girls of 2020 to swoon. The people who read the magazine in 1965 have long since moved beyond the makeup tips and teen drama outlined in the pages of Tiger Beat. Although the specific information might change over time, the basic underlying tenets of this magazine have not.

Magazines often follow this pattern of writing as new members filter in and out of the audience. New parents will want to know if their children are eating properly or if their babies will ever sleep through the night. Engaged men and women will want to know how to plan a wedding, what to do about family drama and how to save enough money to make their dreams come true. In some cases, the underlying questions and answers the audiences have remain the same. In other cases, changes to social norms, trends or technology might lead writers to approach these topics in different ways.

A long-held tradition had the parents of the bride paying for a wedding, so early wedding magazines would list ways to address these issues with parents or how to establish the amount of money available to the couple. Now that tradition isn't as rock solid as it used to be, so while money still must be addressed, writers in this field must look at issues such as how couples can set aside money to pay for their own weddings or how to balance their current financial obligations with their nuptial desires. Even more, second weddings, same-sex marriages and melding families have become more prominent and thus are likely to be more germane to this generation of brides and grooms.

The core values and interests of a publication can remain the same over time, whether it is a corporate newsletter or a gossip publication. However, writers must continually assess the needs and wants of the audience as the members of that group change and grow over time.

iStock.com/David_Ahn

Magazines that cater to teens, brides and fashion will often have audiences that change over time. The editors will keep the content thematically constant, but will alter the stories and photos as the teen idols, wedding standards and fashion trends change.

WHAT ATTRACTS AN AUDIENCE?

As media outlets continue to divide audiences along demographic, psychographic and geographic lines, several concepts remain interesting to many audiences. You want your audience to see what you wrote as an important focal point of their lives, and these **interest elements** can help you do that. To remember them, you can use the mnemonic **FOCII**, like the plural of "focus" but with two I's.

Fame

In some cases, it's not what someone does but who is doing the deed that matters. For example, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 1.5 million people are arrested each year for drinking and driving. However, when "Vampire Diaries" star Zach Roerig was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence in 2020, it became big news. In this case, the status of the person drew the attention of readers and viewers to what is usually a minor criminal offense. The more important the person, the more likely people will pay attention.

News publications rely on the FOCII interest elements to determine what stories and photos they want to publish on a daily basis.

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Fame falls into two main categories. The first category is for people who are famous over an extended period of time. This can be due to their positions, such as president, prime minister or pope, or to their value to popular culture, such as actors, singers and sports stars. In some cases, fame can rest with the infamous, such as serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. The name Charles Manson still sends shivers up the spines of people, even though he spent the majority of his adult life in prison. The more famous the person, the more the audience members care about what that person is doing.

The second category of fame is based on artist Andy Warhol's well-known statement that "in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." In many cases, circumstance thrusts ordinary people into the spotlight, and they become the center of our attention for a limited amount of time. Once the fervor around them dies down, these people often drift back into anonymity and life moves on. People like Jeff Gillooly, Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, Samuel J. "Joe the Plumber" Wurzelbacher and Brian Collins became part of everyday conversations throughout the nation (and in some cases around the world) when they found themselves the subject of media fascination. If most of these names mean nothing to you, it only serves to further the point about this form of fame.

Oddity

"Holy cow! Did you see that?"

When a friend asks that question, he could be pointing out a thunderous dunk at a basketball game, a classic sports car rolling down the highway or someone eating the bark off of a tree in the park. Very rarely will someone be wowed by a free throw, a 5-year-old Toyota Corolla or someone jogging on a trail.

In other words, we like to see rarities.

The reason a video of a cat flushing a toilet gets 4 million views on YouTube is because not all cats flush toilets. The reason sports fanatics celebrate a perfect game in baseball is because of the nearly 220,000 professional games played since 1900, only 21 such games meet the standard of perfection, according to mlb.com. The Hope Diamond mesmerizes people because no other gem of its kind exists.

In the field of media, we focus on these rarities and highlight the elements that make them different from everyday occurrences. Advertising professionals accentuate the aspects of their products that separate them from competing products. These features could include having the lowest price in the field or having the best safety rating among the category's competitors.

Fundraising campaigns often use **oddity** to draw attention to a cause. For example, charities often use gimmicks such as important people who sit on top of a billboard until a certain amount of money is raised.

News is filled with oddities, such as Chuck Shepherd's classic "News of the Weird" features. In these cases, the writers promote weirdness to attract readers. Inept criminals who injured themselves breaking into a bank and had to call 911 for help make for great stories that keep people entertained. Beyond bits of weirdness, the novelty of firsts, lasts and "onlys" also engage audience members, whether the novelty involves the first person to walk on the moon or the only person to vote against the impeachment of a state official.

Conflict

Anytime two or more individuals or groups seek a mutually exclusive goal, **conflict** will arise. The idea of watching people, teams, organizations or nations fight draws on an almost primal desire and tends to attract a lot of attention.

Celebrity feuds and Twitter wars happen frequently and provide a simple way to see one-on-one conflict. Perhaps the strangest feud of this nature in 2020 occurred between Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin and Axl Rose, the lead singer of the classic rock band Guns N' Roses. After Mnuchin appeared on television to tout travel during the COVID-19 outbreak, Rose tweeted, "It's official! Whatever anyone may have previously thought of Steve Mnuchin he's officially an (expletive deleted)." Mnuchin responded by asking what Rose had done for the country lately, whereupon the singer ripped the secretary for the 70,000 coronavirus deaths (at that point) and for telling people to travel during a pandemic.[8]

Conflict also relates to sporting events, where teams attempt to exert dominance over each other. In some cases, geography can intensify conflict issues in sports. For example, Duke and the University of North Carolina have a strong rivalry in basketball, enhanced to some degree because the schools' campuses are only 8 miles apart. Other rivalries, such as between Ohio State and Michigan or Florida and Florida State, are also geographically enhanced.

Aside from these clear-cut examples, conflict also tends to weave into the day-to-day lives of media professionals in every background. Advertising agents want more people to like their products or services as opposed to a competitor's offerings. Drinkers of Powerade are likely to remain loyal to that beverage and thus reject Gatorade's attempts to sway them.

People who raise money for a specific charity or cause know that people tend to set aside a finite amount of money that they will donate in a given period. If the money goes to Cause A, it can't go to Cause B. Conflict can also arise when organizations seek support and funds but are diametrically opposed in terms of philosophy, such as the National Pro-Life Alliance and NARAL Pro-Choice America.

In a news setting, conflict is ever present. When a company wants to build a store, conflict can emerge between that company and other companies that want to put facilities on that land. In addition, members of the boards and councils that approve land use might argue over the value of that type of land use. Citizens could protest the loss of green space associated with the construction.

In looking to serve an audience, you want to understand the multiple facets of an issue. Depending on who wins, the outcome will mean something to the people you serve. It could be good, or it could be bad, but it will matter.

Immediacy

The classic goofball comedy "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby" contains the immortal line "If you ain't first, you're last." If you skip past the grammar issues and logical lapses in that sentence, you see that Will Ferrell's statement perfectly captures the importance of **immediacy**.
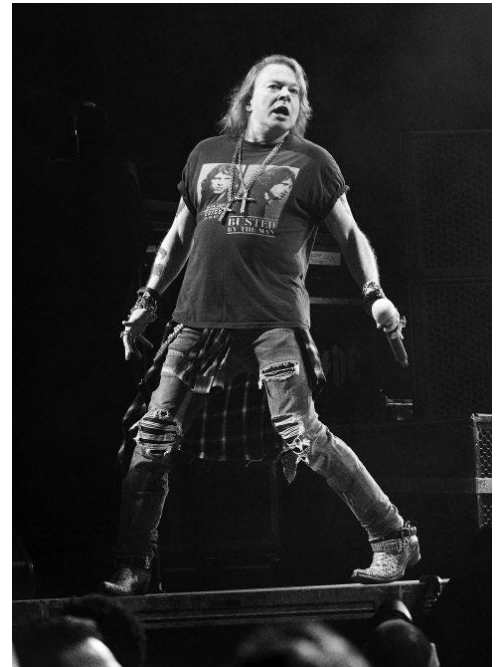
Lisa Lake/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

Rock icon Axl Rose took to Twitter to mock U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin's comments on air travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pool/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Mnuchin used Twitter to respond to Rose by asking, "What have you done for the country lately?"

People want to know what is happening around them at any given point in time, and they want to know before anyone else does. The surveillance need that people possess dominates the digital world, and media professionals need to understand how to meet it. In 2011, AT&T took advantage of the immediacy concept with its series of ads that demonstrated how quickly its phones could get users information on its 4G LTE network. A pair of men were at a football tailgate party while people asked questions such as "Did you guys hear that Chapman rolled his ankle?" or "Did you hear someone stole the other team's mascot?" Each time, one of the men responded with a statement like "That was so 10 seconds ago."

News journalists also value immediacy when they "break" news that is important to readers and viewers. Broadcast journalists cater to this interest element when they interrupt current programming to update people on a developing situation. During the 2020 presidential election, several states had not reported their vote totals on election night, because of a heavy level of absentee and early voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. When each crucial state, including Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, finalized its total, television stations announced the results immediately as their journalists scrambled for information. Almost 20 years before that event, television networks cut into their morning shows and went directly to New York City after the first plane slammed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

Today, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are used to provide users with information on a 24/7 basis. Audience members who choose to follow people, organizations and businesses can get up-to-the-minute updates on everything from product launches to celebrity sightings. As immediacy remains an important interest element, digital platforms and mobile devices will see their value increase exponentially.

Impact

This element of importance helps you explain how the information you put forth will directly affect the readers. In some cases, readers can feel the **impact** on an individual level, such as the amount of money a tax increase will cost each citizen. In other cases, the impact can be felt on a broader level, such as the positive effects that building a theater will have on a community or the negative effects of global pollution.

In most cases, you can measure impact from a **quantitative** or **qualitative** perspective. Quantitative perspectives measure the numerical reach of an impact, and qualitative perspectives examine the severity of the impact.

For example, a newspaper might report the death of a single citizen who was killed in a car crash. Death, something from which you can't recover, is a qualitative impact. In most cases, people have not experienced a fatal car crash, so the story has not only a serious impact but also an oddity factor.

However, that publication might also report ways in which people can deal with an illness, such as a cold. Although you might feel like you are dying when you are sick, you will probably recover from a cold within two weeks. Since the average adult gets two or three colds each year, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the quantitative reach of the impact is worth noting.

Some situations, like the coronavirus pandemic, have both qualitative and quantitative elements to them. When the impact is both wide-reaching and severe, people have a vested interest in keeping track of what is happening in a given situation. This is why news outlets provided wall-to-wall coverage and advertisers shifted their messaging to address changes in the way people consumed goods during the outbreak.

Make sure you examine the ways in which your writing can affect your readers and then focus on that during the writing process.

PROFESSIONAL THOUGHTS

SUZANNE STRUGLINSKI

In a career that spans two decades in the field, Suzanne Struglinski has worked at nearly every type of media job possible. At each stop along her professional life, one of the most important aspects of doing the job well was knowing her audience, she said.

"Knowing your audience is not just an empty phrase," she said. "Sometimes it is easier to know when something is wrong for your audience than describing what is right. Who do you want to read whatever you are writing or see what you are creating? A business proposal sent to a law firm is going to use much different language than a brochure encouraging someone to join an organization."

Struglinski spent the majority of her career after college as an online and newspaper reporter in Washington, D.C. She spent time at E&E Publishing's Greenwire, an online subscription-based news service focusing on environmental and energy news, before heading to a newspaper job. In 2003, she worked as the Washington correspondent for the Las Vegas Sun, and in 2005, she became the Washington bureau chief for the Deseret News. After the Deseret News closed its Washington bureau in 2008, Struglinski turned her suddenly shortened journalism career into one as a successful communications strategist.

"Some of my favorite elements of being a journalist were telling stories, meeting new people, making connections and the ability to figure out things quickly," she said. "Every job I have had since has used these skills. On top of this, journalists take for granted that we know how to write, meet deadlines and can juggle several projects at once."

Struglinski has worked as the press secretary for legislative affairs at the Natural Resources Defense Council, a writing specialist at global law firm Baker McKenzie, director of membership engagement at the National Press Club and a media relations manager at the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Today, she is the public relations manager at Industry Dive, a business journalism company in Washington, D.C., where she continues to rely on her writing, editing and storytelling skills to reach difference audiences with information about the company.

"I am curious when someone who wants to go into public relations says they do not need to know how to write, what they exactly think their job is going to be," she said. "The broad category of public relations has many roles and responsibilities under it, but solid writing, how to tell a story and how to know how to organize information are skills that apply across the board."

Even as the journalism world continues to change around her, Struglinski said the ability to know who is in your audience and how to their needs will always be valuable skills that employers will prize above all else.

"Whatever your job, you need to define your audience before you can meet their needs," she said. "If you are working for a cosmetics company's blog, that is one audience and style of writing versus an investment bank. Imagine if a preschool parent magazine's content appeared on a political news website and vice versa. Your audience is coming to you for a certain type of information so you need to deliver it in a way they will understand."

Suzanne Struglinski

WHAT AUDIENCES NEED TO KNOW AND HOW TO MAKE THEM CARE

The interest items outlined in this chapter can help you draw an audience, but once you have your readers' attention, you need to communicate with them in an effective way. If you focus on what the audience members need, you will improve the likelihood that your writing will do its job well. Outlined below are three key needs and the questions they evoke as well as the best ways to meet those needs and answer those questions:

Key Need: Value

Question: Why Does This Matter to Me as a Reader?

Media professionals often write their copy from the wrong perspective. They construct a story, a pitch or a proposal to emphasize the issues they see as important or ideas they would prefer as consumers. However, the audience and the writer aren't always on the same page regarding **value**, and since the audience matters most, the writer needs to adapt.

When rookie news writers cover stories on topics like tuition increases, they tend to focus on the numbers from a collective perspective. It sounds stunning when they write "School officials said the university would collect an additional $12.4 million from students due to this increase." The number sounds big and it sounds scary, but it lacks value to the individual readers who will see their tuition bills rise.

Self-interest is a human trait that media writers need to embrace. The people who are reading news releases, watching commercials, analyzing marketing pitches or surfing a news site aren't doing so for the greater good of humanity. They are looking at the very basic question of "what's in this for me?" Good writers will look for the opportunity to present the value of material in a way that clearly answers that question.

Meet the Need: Explain

Answer: Show Your Reader a Personal Impact

As a writer, you should use your expertise to help other people understand important concepts. The more difficult each concept is, the slower you need to explain it and the more detailed you should be in your descriptions.

In the tuition-increase example, the writer needs to explain the value on an individual level: What does this mean to me, as a student, in terms of the dollars and cents I need to come up with to stay in school? This is where self-interest drives the value.

A good writer would note, "This tuition increase means the average student will pay $130 more each semester to attend the university." In explaining the tuition increase this way, the journalist would create a more direct line between the story and the reader. Students who read this sentence can figure out whether they need more hours at their jobs or need to take out additional loans.

Regardless of the media platform you use or the purpose of your communication, you want to present your readers with value. Look for ways that you can effectively give your readers a clear sense of why they should buy a product, donate to a cause, take part in an activity or look at a specific side of an issue. People are more likely to pay attention to items and look at issues if they know what is in it for them.

Key Need: Engagement

Question: Can You Tell It to Me in an Interesting Way?

When small children dislike a book or television show, their complaint is usually voiced in a specific and clear way: "This is BORING!" The material the child is consuming might have value or contain interesting information, but the way in which it is being put forth has not engaged the child's interest.

Contrast this with the reaction of children who loved the "Harry Potter" book series. These school-age children would line up with their parents for hours outside of bookstores in anticipation of the midnight release of each new volume. They would voraciously tear into the books and read until they had consumed every page. Clearly, author J. K. Rowling tapped into something when it came to **engagement**.

The most important information in the world doesn't matter if the people who need it aren't paying attention.

Meet the Need: Stimulate

Answer: Tell a Story That Will Pique Reader Interest

How you tell a story is the difference between having an enraptured audience and having people who are bored stiff. The way you emphasize certain elements of your story will determine how well you stimulate your readers.

For example, children enjoy stories that contain characters who are like them. Successful children's novelists like Beverly Cleary and Barbara Park tapped into this with main characters who were dealing with the trials and tribulations of children. Stories about the "Stupid Smelly Bus" and sibling conflicts at age 8 helped engage children because the tales met the readers at their own level.

This basic idea can translate well to help pique the interest of your readers. If you work in a field where you are promoting financial growth products, chances are your readers will want basic numbers and facts. Use a direct approach in your writing that will outline the best numbers first and use them to draw readers into your work. If you work for the National Marrow Donor Program, instead of using numbers to draw in your readers, you might use a more narrative approach, focusing on a single individual. This personal approach, known as using an exemplar, will create an emotional tie between the readers and message, as you put a human face on a larger issue.

Key Need: Action

Question: What Can I Do With What You Just Told Me?

A classic New Yorker cartoon by Robert Weber has two people sitting on a couch at a party. One says to the other, "I used to be in advertising. Remember 'Buy this, you morons'? That was mine." Although most advertisers would avoid this kind of blunt and insulting statement, the underlying concept has merit: You have to tell people what to do if you want to succeed in this field.

Advertising copy often has a clear **action statement** because advertisements should persuade consumers to purchase the product. However, most other forms of writing fall short in this crucial area.

In opinion columns or persuasive pitches, action is about telling people what to do if they agree with you. Most writers assume this element is implied, but you don't want to rely on the readers to take that last step alone. You want to bring the main idea home and help your readers see what they should do next.

For example, when students write opinion pieces in the student newspaper that complain about the parking conditions on campus, they can clearly demonstrate value to the readers. On most campuses, parking is often at a premium, and students usually feel they don't get enough of it.

The column can then engage the readers with anecdotes about students who have to park several miles from the main part of campus. The writer can then support these claims with numbers that show how students get far less good parking than do faculty members.

At the end of reading the column, the readers will likely see the writer's point and feel the writer's outrage. However, if there's no action element present, the writer leaves the readers wondering, "OK, now what?" Should they complain to administrators? Boycott the parking system? Ride bikes to school? Take part in a protest at the parking office?

Meet the Need: Propose Options

Answer: Offer Readers Ways to Act

When you have the opportunity to tell people what you want them to do with the information you provided, you should do so. This concept extends beyond opinion pieces or promotional material and can be useful across all forms of writing.

In advertisements, the action is clearly implied: If you like what we are saying, go buy our products. However, other levels of writing in advertising require a more nuanced explanation of how action should occur.

For example, a creative pitch (see Chapter 13) should include not only the campaign ideas but also how much money should be spent, what types of ads should be purchased and how long the campaign should take. In addition, information such as start and end dates need to be explicit.

In terms of news, if you write stories about tax increases or changes to public policy, do so far enough in advance to give people a chance to attend meetings where officials will debate these issues. You can also include contact information so the members of your audience can reach out to the decision makers.

If you promote events, you must include time, date and place information so people know where to go and when to get there. You also could include other helpful information, such as whether tickets are necessary.

If you write "how-to" pieces, you should address every important issue at each step in a process so that people can make sure they are doing it right. In some cases, images can be extremely helpful, but your writing alone should be able to do the job properly.

The Big Three

Here are the three thoughts you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Focus on the readers:** You are the writer, but you aren't writing for yourself. You are writing for an audience that has specific wants and needs. The better you understand who these audience members are and what they need, the better chance you will have in reaching them.

2. **Content is king:** You need to reach people on a variety of platforms and devices, but what you tell these people will always trump any element of technology. If something is important, well written and communicated effectively, people will read it. Focus on the ways in which you can meet your audience's needs as you create your content.

3. **Rely on core interest elements:** Fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact are the primary interest elements for media writers. When you start writing content and you are unsure what to do, consider each of these elements and look for ways to emphasize them as you try to reach your readers. This will provide you a solid foundation upon which you can build the rest of your work.

Key Terms

action statement   15

audience   3

audience segmentation   3

conflict   11

demographics   4

engagement   14

fame   10

FOCII   9

geographic information   5

immediacy   11
impact   12
interest elements   9
microtargeting   4
niche   7

oddity   10
outlet   8
personification   6
platforms   3
psychographics   5

qualitative   12
quantitative   12
value   14

Discussion Questions

1. What media do you tend to consume to gain information? Discuss this in terms of both the outlets you use and the platform or format. For example, do you read the student "newspaper" in print or only online? Do you watch television on your mobile device? What about the content drives you to consume it, and what makes you prefer the platform you use?

2. Of the three types of audience segmentation listed in the chapter, which one is most important to you as a reader? Why do you think this is? Which one is least important to you? Why do you feel that way?

3. Reread the information associated with the three key needs listed near the end of the chapter (value, engagement, action). When you look at the media you consume, do you think the writers do a good job of working through all three needs? Which ones are traditionally handled the best? Which ones are usually handled poorly? Why do you think this is?

Give It a Try

1. Take 10 minutes and look up some basic statistics about the students your school serves. Most universities and colleges have this information on their websites. Then, look into some basic information about media consumption habits associated with people who fall into those statistical categories. Finally, write up a short personification of your audience that mirrors the approach in the chapter. Compare and contrast your personification with those your classmates have created. Take particular note of specific similarities and differences you find during your class discussion.

2. Find a story that is of interest to you on a website you frequently visit. Then, boil that story down from the computer version to something you would send out as a tweet or an alert. Make it a single sentence that fits the parameters of what you tend to see on your mobile device.

Write Now!

1. Review the five interest elements listed in the chapter and determine which ones are most influential when it comes to things you consume in the media. Then determine which ones are least important. Finally, pick a story that interests you from a local media outlet and see which interest elements are present and absent. Write up your findings.

2. Find a story topic multiple media outlets have covered and select two articles on that topic that serve different audiences. For example, you might look at a specific movie review that ran in a teen publication versus one that ran in a general-interest publication. You could also look at a story on a political topic on sites that tilt toward one side of the political spectrum or the other. Read through each of these and note how the coverage meets the needs of the audience. How much of the content is similar and how much is different between the two? What are your thoughts on how these publications covered these topics.

3. Explore the demographic details of your school in terms of age, gender, race and the in-state/out-of-state gap. Write a paragraph that outlines these details. Then select another institution that has a similar demographic breakdown and take the same approach. Now, compare and contrast your schools in terms of other details, including geography and psychographics. How similar are your schools and why do you think that is? Use examples to illustrate your point.

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Jennifer Morehead

"In an information economy, where writing and communicating are more important than ever, learning to edit is such a critical skill. It makes you a better writer. It makes you a better reader. It will make you look smarter. It may help you get a date. (My friend met her future husband online when his grammatically correct, typo-free Match.com profile caught her eye.) And some people will discover that they love it for its own sake. You know who you are."

—Jennifer Morehead

Copy Editor, Washington Post

For more helpful hints and sage advice from Jennifer, see the "Professional Thoughts" feature later in the chapter.

2

BEING ACCURATE, RELYING ON THE FACTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand why you need to be picky as a journalist.
- Understand the value media professionals have in the digital age.
- Assess ways in which you can fight against fake news.

> • Apply the basics of fact-checking for simple mistakes in areas such as spelling and math.
>
> • Define and differentiate between primary and secondary sources, especially in terms of their value and accuracy.
>
> • Identify places where you can find information and which sources of information are the best to use in specific situations.
>
> • Examine the broader issues of accuracy, including acknowledging potential biases, sticking exactly to what people said and using multiple sources to verify concepts.

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As you collect information as a media writer, make sure your content is as accurate as possible.

"By defeating the Soviet Union in the 'Miracle on Ice' game, the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team won the gold medal."

"Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world."

"Dr. Jonas Salk, born of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, invented polio in the 1950s."

If taken at face value and with a quick glance, each of these items would likely be viewed as a fact. The movie "Miracle" details the Olympic hockey team's triumph at the Lake Placid games, where they defeated the Soviets and prompted Al Michaels' famous broadcast call: "Do you believe in miracles?" The name "Mount Everest" has become synonymous with giant obstacles to be overcome, and a quick peek at the Wikipedia page for it notes that it is "Earth's highest mountain." If you Google the words "Salk" and "polio," thousands of entries show up.

However, these three statements are wrong.

The United States did defeat the Soviet Union in the Miracle on Ice game and did win the gold medal in those Olympics. However, winning the game didn't earn the team the medal. After beating the Soviets, the U.S. team had to defeat Finland in the finals to win gold.

Mount Everest is the highest mountain in the world, as mountain height is measured from sea level to the top of the peak. However, the "tallness" of a mountain is traditionally measured from the base of the mountain to its peak. This means that Mauna Kea in Hawaii, which has an appreciable amount of its base underwater, is 33,476 feet tall and thus is taller than Mount Everest (29,029 feet).

Dr. Jonas Salk was born of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents and was involved in polio research in the 1950s. That said, he invented the polio vaccine, not polio itself.

It would be easy to dismiss these errors as insignificant or a bit of nerd-level trickery. "Aw, you know what I meant," is often the complaint people make when confronted with errors like these.

However, you can't be almost right most of the time if you work in a media organization. You have to be entirely right all of the time or at least push yourself toward that goal. Accuracy is the most important aspect of your job, regardless of whether you are publishing a newspaper,

broadcasting a news report, issuing a press release or sending out an advertisement. A factual inaccuracy can crush the best writing, the most creative ad and the most innovative campaign.

In this chapter, we will outline why accuracy should be at the forefront of your mind. We will also examine where most people get tripped up in the world of facts. Finally, we will discuss how best to check the accuracy of your work and how to avoid major pitfalls along the way.

iStock.com/miodrag ignjatovic

Taking good notes and verifying your content with sources can keep your work free from errors.

WHY IS JOURNALISM SUCH A PICKY FIELD?

In the movie version of the Neil Simon play "Biloxi Blues," the main character maintains a journal in which he writes his thoughts about people and life in general during his time at a boot camp in 1945. When one of his musings leads to a confrontation among several men, he finds himself understanding the power of the written word:

"People believe whatever they read. Something magical happens once it's put down on paper. They figure no one would have gone to the trouble of writing it down if it wasn't the truth. Responsibility was my new watchword."

If you take that concept and pair it with the line famously attributed to Mark Twain about how "a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes," you can see why journalism requires the utmost attention to accuracy.

The goal of good media writers is to inform the readers of something that will benefit the media organization and its audience members. This shared bond of trust is what keeps people showing up at public events, heading to the stores and reading news stories. The more mistakes we make in journalism, the harder it is to maintain that bond. Even more, not everyone who publishes information, sends out tweets or reaches out to the public in other ways shares our professional duty to the truth. As you will see later in this chapter, many people have no problem starting rumors and spreading lies. For some people, it is a joke, whereas for others it is a chance to take advantage of an unsuspecting public. In any case, this misinformation makes it harder on media practitioners who hold themselves to a higher standard.

WHY MEDIA PROFESSIONALS MATTER MORE THAN EVER

The role of media professionals has changed a great deal over the past several decades. In the pre-internet era, newspapers and TV newscasters selected and presented information, giving certain stories and ideas a sense of importance. This selection process, known as **gatekeeping**, allowed media professionals to determine what people would and would not see. Public-relations practitioners were often limited in how they sent their messages to the audience, as news reporters could pick and choose which events were covered and which topics were highlighted. Advertisers had fewer venues they could use to publish advertisements, because of the limited number of broadcast channels and the presence of only one or two newspapers per geographic region.

Today, the internet has opened up the floodgates of information, making the job of professional media operatives different but even more crucial. Anyone can start a website and post content of any kind. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media channels give people the opportunity to spread information quickly. Public-relations practitioners and advertisers no longer need to rely on newspapers or TV stations to reach potential audience members with important content.

However, these endless possibilities can overwhelm readers and viewers, leaving them at the mercy of unscrupulous or uninformed individuals. Therefore, media writers are important not only as content creators but also as tour guides. They help people separate fact from fiction, reality from myth and honesty from dishonesty.

Your goal as a media practitioner, regardless of the area in which you work, is to establish a bond of trust with your readership and do your best to present accurate information. In doing so, you will help guide your readers as they decide what to think, what to believe and what to do. Every time you provide accurate information, you give your readers another reason to believe what you tell them. However, any error, no matter how minor, can destroy all the good work you have done.

ADAPT

THE FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS

Fake news takes on a variety of meanings, depending on who uses the term. To some people, fake news includes satire sites like The Onion, which seek to mock news or poke fun at public figures. Others argue that any partisan news that fails to reflect their own worldview falls into the category of fake news. Still others see fake news as being hoaxes that internet trolls use to trick journalists and readers into believing and spreading false information. As a media professional, producing or sharing incorrect information is something you need to avoid, regardless of whether it comes from a source who has an axe to grind or a person who just wants to fake you out.

Hoaxes crop up on social media often and gain momentum when people fail to check sources or question the veracity of the information. During the coronavirus outbreak in 2020, dozens of hoaxes emerged on social media. In one case, a list of tips on how to fight the virus began circulating on Facebook, claiming to be from a "Stanford Hospital board member." This list included things like drinking a few sips of water every 15 minutes and holding your breath for 10 seconds. "Drinking water or other liquid will wash (the virus) down through your throat and into the stomach. Once there, your stomach acid will kill the virus," the "expert" noted. As for holding your breath? "If you complete it successfully without coughing, without discomfort, stiffness or tightness, etc., it proves there is no Fibrosis in the lungs, basically indicates no infection." An epidemiological scholar referred to the advice as "totally bogus."[1] Another coronavirus-related claim, this time on Twitter, erroneously stated that action movie star Chuck Norris died after contracting COVID-19.[2]

Breaking news events, like the helicopter crash that killed basketball legend Kobe Bryant, can lead to misinformation and disinformation. Reporters must remain vigilant in their coverage.

David McNew/Getty Images News/Getty Images

In many cases, the desire to be first on an important development can lead you astray. In January 2020, basketball icon Kobe Bryant died when the helicopter he was riding in crashed into a hillside near Los Angeles. The other eight people aboard the copter, including Bryant's daughter, Gianna, died immediately as well. In a rush to beat others to the story, ABC chief national correspondent Matt Gutman stated on air that four of Bryant's children were on board instead of just Gianna. Although Gutman later realized his error and apologized for his mistake, ABC News suspended him for making a false statement.[3]

Unlike in previous eras, fake news is everywhere, and it is becoming exceedingly difficult to distinguish

it from real news. To help you avoid getting faked out, here are some helpful tips:

- **Consider the source:** Where information comes from is crucial in determining how much credence you should put into a story. Think about when you were in grade school and you heard some unbelievable story from "that one kid" on the playground who always was making stuff up. Chances are, you learned to stop believing him after you discovered that there wasn't a pool on the roof of the gym and that there was no such thing as "No Pants Wednesday." However, when your teacher or the principal told you something, you tended to give it serious consideration. Apply the same basic rule when you consider information you find online. "Who told you that?" should be one of the first questions you ask when you get information that doesn't seem to pass the smell test. Also, as copy editor Jennifer Morehead notes later in this chapter, it makes sense to rely on official sources like .gov sites instead of places like "IAmTheMasterOfAllCoolThings.blogspot.com."

- **Strength exists in numbers:** If you get information from a single source online, don't pass it along without looking for similar information from other sources. Just because the source you found isn't one you know all that well, it doesn't always follow that the information isn't accurate. Sites outside of the mainstream media break news and share information all the time. However, if the information is incredibly important or shocking, the mainstream media outlets will follow up with their own stories. However, if you find only one source for your story that the president of the United States is actually an alien from Saturn, it's a pretty safe bet you're looking at some level of fake news.

- **The root of the rumor:** Along the same lines as the previous point, just because a quick Google search reveals dozens of stories on a given topic, it doesn't always follow that the information is true. Some

sites frequently refer to their own content only and create an echo chamber of information that lacks external support. Good media writing will have multiple and varied sources. Most media outlets will find similar sources, but they don't all tend to rely on the same people. In other words, if 12 media outlets produce a story on the importance of a new drug or the impact of a new virus, all 12 will likely talk to a scientist or a doctor. However, each outlet will likely use different scientists and doctors than the other 11 outlets. If everyone is talking to the same "root source," you have reason for concern. Dig into stories that cite only a single source or all come back to a single story online before you pass the information along as true.

- **Click the links:** The purpose of links is the same as the purpose of citations in a research paper you would do for a class: Support the claims you are making. However, just because a link exists, it doesn't always follow that the information behind it will support or validate the claims in a story. Click the links and see where they lead you. Does the information at the other end of that click really support the key aspects of what author says it does? Does the link lead you to a credible outside source, or does it lead only to other stories by the same author, spouting the same general information? The more you examine the links and the sources to which they lead, the less likely you are to believe something that isn't true.

- **Be suspicious:** One of the best ways to avoid letting fake news trick you is to be a bit paranoid about every piece of information you receive. The Russian proverb "Trust, but verify" should guide you through anything you read. Independently verify the information in a piece before you pass it along to others. Check the quality of the sources before you put your own reputation on the line. A good way to process "facts" in a piece is to assume everything you see is incorrect until you can prove it to be true. Some people may say that's a bit too paranoid, but it's better to be overly suspicious than to be wrong.

MAKING SURE YOU ARE SURE

Journalists often use the line "if your mother says she loves you, go check it out" as a basic rule for accuracy. In other words, don't assume that something is true, even if you believe it to be. A mild sense of paranoia will keep you on your toes and force you to view every fact you use with a sense of suspicion. This can help you make sure that you are sure before you state something with certainty.

PolitiFact is one organization that examines the claims of politicians and rates how accurate they are through the use of its "Truth-o-Meter."

Some things may seem unworthy of your attention, but you should realize that someone is always watching. One famous example comes from the contract of the rock band Van Halen in 1982. The "rider," which lists specific demands the band makes beyond the common contract language, was 53 pages long and told promoters that they needed to provide M&M's candy but added this: "Warning: absolutely no brown ones." This requirement forced some employee at the venue to pick through the bowls of candy and remove all the brown and tan M&M's. The band members later explained that this was not a case of being ridiculous with their demands, but rather a way to test the staff at the venue. If brown M&M's were in the bowls, they assumed that bigger issues, such as lighting, staging and security, might also be suspect.[4] The lesson here is a simple one: If your readers can't trust you with the simple issues, how can you expect them to trust you with the bigger ones?

As a writer, you want to get everything right on the first try. You want to make sure all of your facts are solid, the names are spelled properly and the content is unimpeachable. This is a noble effort, but more often than not, you will make mistakes, and somebody needs to catch them before your piece goes public.

To make absolutely sure that you are as accurate as possible, you want to edit your own work with the presumption that everything you have just written is wrong. Assume that every name is spelled wrong, every number is wrong, every address is wrong and every statement on the screen is factually inaccurate. Then, start your edit with the approach that you need to prove that each thing on the screen is right.

In other words, don't assume "Jim Smith" is spelled correctly. Assume it's wrong until you can find a source that shows you the name really is spelled "J-I-M S-M-I-T-H." Do the same thing with every other element in your piece, and you will solidify the overall accuracy as best as you can. If nothing else, when your boss asks, "Are you sure this is spelled right?" you can reply with, "Yes. Here is my source."

Basic Fact-Checking

A simple **fact check** can take a significant amount of time if you do it right. You need to examine each fact you put into anything you write and then look for any way in which that item might be inaccurate or misleading. Here is a short list of steps to take during a basic fact check:

Check Spelling

Accuracy is about making sure you are right, and to that extent, you need to spell all words correctly. If you have a document full of typos or misspelled words, you will have serious credibility issues. As you write, if you are unsure of the spelling of a word or you aren't sure if the word means what you think it means, stop and look it up right away. Don't just punch down something to hold its place and think, "I'll get to this later." Media professionals of all kinds have found themselves squirming of embarrassment when they forget to go back and swap out their "decent guess" for what they should have written in the first place.

You should always run a computer-based spell check on every piece you do and examine each spelling suggestion carefully. Don't click the "replace all" button or rapidly click the "replace" button as errors pop up. Look at each offering the software provides, and then pick the right replacement.

You also need to do a line-by-line examination of your pieces for words that might be spelled properly but weren't what you meant to write. For example, if you want to study something carefully, you want to "assess" it, not "asses" it. Also remember that there is an "L" in "public." One of the more embarrassing examples of this mistake happened to WLOS-13 in North Carolina during the coronavirus outbreak. As part of a segment regarding social distancing and avoiding contact with others, a graphic titled "Touching Pubic Spaces" ran behind the journalist throughout the entire piece. In each case, the word was spelled properly, but it wasn't an accurate representation of what the writer meant. Spell check doesn't catch your best intentions, so carefully reread your work for any spelling errors or word glitches.

Review Proper Nouns

The spell-check function on most word-processing systems will catch errors in the spelling of common words. However, the names of people, places and things often look like mistakes to the electronic dictionaries.

If you misspell someone's name or the name of someone's group, you will insult that person and make him or her less likely to work with you. That is why you need to do a letter-by-letter examination of every proper noun in anything you write.

When you interview a source, as you will learn how to do in Chapter 5, have the person spell his or her name. It also helps to ask at that point how the source wishes to be cited in your work. Richard Smith could prefer Rich, Rick or Ricky, so it helps to ask. As you take notes on this, write each letter in your notebook carefully so you can go back and check your finished piece against your notes. A recording to back up your notes is also a good idea, when possible.

If you need to use other material to check a proper noun, use a source you trust, such as a company directory or an official website. Again, go letter by letter to make sure you get it right. Also, take a quick check of any style guides your organization might use. The stationery might list your group as "Smith-Rock Corporation," but your style guide might require that all references in formal documents refer to it as "Smith/Rock Corp." The Associated Press Stylebook also is helpful in standardizing official company names and titles.

Finally, check the entire document for consistency. If one part of your news story mentions "Gov. Charles Smith," and five sentences later, he is referred to as "Smyth," one version of the name is obviously wrong. You should also check what you wrote against other pieces you or your organization already published. If one press release lists your boss as Chairman Roman Meijas and the second one lists him as Assistant Chairman Roman Meijas, you will likely confuse your readers. Even worse, if your audience is a media outlet, that confusion will then be broadcast to a larger population, and the error will continue to propagate.

Look Into the Numbers

Media professionals often joke that they got into journalism because they can't do math. Like it or not, math is a part of this field, and you need to come to grips with it, because numerical errors can create a lot of problems for you and your readers.

Look at math in your writing and make sure it's right. In obituaries, do the math from the person's birth date to the person's death date and make sure the age is right. Just because someone was born in 1940 and died in 2020, it doesn't mean the person was 80 years old.

When someone is talking about money or percentages, take the time to walk through the math. Think of it like a story problem from grade school. "OK, if the tax brought in $50,000

and the fees brought in $90,000, how does that add up to $150,000?" You might locate math errors that need to be addressed, or you might be missing part of the equation that makes this odd-looking math make sense.

Understand the difference between percentages and percentage points. If your company institutes a policy stating that it donates 10% of its profits to charity, you might need to write a press release about that. If your company says that it plans to increase that amount by 50% next year, this means it will be donating 15% of its profits to charity (10% × 0.5 = 5% plus the original 10% = 15%). If it says that it will increase its donation by 50 percentage points, you have a huge increase (10% + 50 percentage points = 60%).

Always do the math yourself to double-check any figures you want to use. Also, make sure to check back with the source of those figures to verify your conclusions and your approach to the math.

Check Places

When you list places for your events, double-check the addresses against a map and a directory. If you hold an event at 1111 S. Main St. and you list it as 1111 N. Main St., you might be a bit lonely. Also, differences exist among streets, avenues, boulevards and more. In some large metropolitan areas, like Manhattan, both streets and avenues are numerically based, so you need to know whether you are heading to Fifth Street or Fifth Avenue.

If you decide to include a set of directions, make sure the directions work. Drive or walk the route yourself or have someone who isn't familiar with the area examine the route to see if it makes sense. Physically doing this will help you find out if you missed a turn or if you accidentally have someone going the wrong way down a one-way street.

CONNECT
THE TELEPHONE GAME

If you want to connect with your audience in terms of accuracy, you can think of a game that almost always ends with a disconnect. Children often play "telephone," a game where one person whispers something to another person, that person whispers it to the next person, and so on. Somewhere along the way, the message inevitably will be misinterpreted or mangled, and in the end, you will end up with something that is nothing like the original statement.

As you examine your work for accuracy, keep the telephone game in mind. If you don't have a **primary source** or a solid **secondary source**, you run the risk of passing along information that might have been altered. A primary source allows you to take information from someone or something that was present for whatever it is you are researching. These sources can include a person who witnessed a shooting, the original text of a speech or a video of a news conference. Secondary sources are like the second person in the "telephone" game: They retell or interpret what the primary sources provided them. Wikipedia, a magazine article and a person who is telling you a story they heard from a friend are all examples of secondary sources.

You want to get as close as you can to the original source so you have fewer chances to make errors.

Where to Find Your Facts

When it comes to fact-checking, you want to have confidence in the sources of information you use to verify your writing. Here are some places you can go to complete your fact check and verify your information:

Source Documents

Whenever possible, get copies of original documents so you can compare what people have told you with what someone wrote. People have an uncanny way of being inaccurate or confused, while documents tend to remain exactly the way they were written.

Even some of the most famous quotes are factually incorrect when you check them against the source material. The phrase "Money is the root of all evil" attempts to convey the way in which materialism can lead decent people to make horrible choices. However, if you look up 1 Timothy 6:10 in the King James Bible, you will find that the quote actually reads, "The love of money is the root of all evil."

Humphrey Bogart's character, Rick Blaine, never said "Play it again, Sam" in "Casablanca," Darth Vader never said "Luke, I am your father" in "The Empire Strikes Back" and Hannibal Lecter never said "Hello, Clarice" in "Silence of the Lambs." Each of these is off slightly in some way, which is just one more reason you need to look things up at the source.

If you can get your hands on source material, you can cite it with much more certainty. When you are researching a topic, or interviewing a source, seek email correspondence, meeting minutes, official documents and other similar items. Keeping copies of these items handy can be helpful in checking your work.

PROFESSIONAL THOUGHTS
JENNIFER MOREHEAD

Regardless of the size of the story or overall impact of the piece, Jennifer Morehead subscribes to a simple philosophy when it comes to checking writers' copy for errors.

"I've tried to approach stories of every kind in the same basic way: They *must* be accurate, they *must* be clear. . . . Someone always notices," she said. "Errors in any story, from local crime briefs to big features, erode credibility."

Morehead has served as a copy editor for some of the country's most recognized and exalted news sources. She currently serves as a copy editor at the Washington Post. She edits the Sunday op-ed section and handles copy editing for print and online stories and blogs for the national, foreign, metro, life/arts and business desks. Prior to her stint at the Post, she was a copy editor for the New York Times, the Houston Chronicle, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the San Francisco Chronicle.

Morehead said that no writer ever creates perfect copy, but the more mistakes a media organization makes, the less credibility it will have in the eyes of its readers.

"It's easy to think that 'no one will notice' the little stuff," she said. "A misspelled name? A math error? An incorrect statistic from a baseball game that was played in 1973? When dealing with details, keep three words in mind: Someone always notices. How do we know? Because news organizations get multiple emails, tweets, calls and letters every day from readers pointing out even the smallest factual mistakes, not to mention grammatical ones."

Jennifer Morehead

To catch and correct these errors, Morehead said she uses several editing techniques, including reading a story multiple times.

"My first read of a story is the fact-checking read," she said. "I start at the beginning, and anytime I come to a proper name, a date, a number (any kind of number, from a percentage to a death toll to someone's age), statistics, a quote from a previously published source (such as another article, a book or a transcript), a title, a time, historical references or just about anything else presented as fact, I check it, most often using the Internet. I most heavily rely on articles from my own publication, for consistency's sake, as well as primary documents or official websites. If I'm checking the spelling of an

(Continued)

astronaut's name, for instance, I go to NASA.gov, not something like ThisIsMyAwesomeSpaceBlog.com."

Morehead also said she uses her own internal compass to note statements that don't seem entirely accurate so she can check them against other sources.

"I'm also on the lookout for statements that just seem 'off,'" she said. "Real examples I've encountered: No, Robert E. Lee is not buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The movie 'Xanadu' is about a roller disco, not a roller derby. No, Americans don't have a right to the 'ballet'—that would be the ballot."

The editing process for Morehead is about more than parsing arcane grammar rules or picking at a writer's story. She said the value of editing is about making a piece of copy valuable to the people who are reading it.

"Editing is about clarity and getting to the point—choosing the right words to express your idea in an effective way," Morehead said. "The bits of writing that newspaper copy editors do as part of our jobs—headlines and captions—are intended to connect with an audience; successful display type makes readers pay attention. I can imagine either of these skills being useful in a PR or advertising setting. For instance, my mother sometimes writes fundraising letters for charitable causes she's involved in. These letters have to be compelling from the start, so people will continue reading and be moved to respond, hopefully with a check. My mom will often call me to work out those opening lines, and I draw on years of editing good and bad newspaper leads to help come up with attention-grabbing language."

Regardless of the field, Morehead said learning how to fact-check, clean copy and improve writing will provide anyone in media writing with an important set of skills.

"Editing helps you develop attention to detail, fact-checking skills, a wide range of knowledge about all kinds of subjects, and a certain kind of diplomacy and tact that comes from having to nicely explain to writers why they're wrong," she said.

Legacy Media

Newspapers, magazines, books and other publications in the realm of "legacy media" aren't always infallible, but at least you know from where they came. Whether they are in a traditional "dead-tree format" or posted to a legacy media's website, you can be sure that editors, copy editors and other experts have likely seen the content at some level before it was disseminated publicly. This should make you feel slightly more confident in what you get from these publications than you would from a website that has an unknown origin. In addition, most of the **dead-tree publications** will archive their content both physically and digitally, which allows you to research as far back as the archives reach.

Official Websites

When you use .gov or .edu websites, you are accessing information from a governmental or an educational outlet. In most cases, these can be more trustworthy than .com, .net or .us sites, which anyone can start. Beyond those sites, you can look at official sites for specific organizations associated with your writing. If you are building a media kit for a client and you want to provide some history about the client's organization, you can use the organization's website as a solid source. If you are writing a news article about the hiring of a chancellor at a local university, you can find biographical data for that person on that university's website and the sites of the chancellor's previous jobs. You can both cite this information and link to it as you support your statements.

Your Own Work

In some cases, you become the expert on a topic as you research it, cover it, publicize it or market it. After a while, you know more about the issue or product than anyone else. When this happens, you can rely on your previous work to prevent you from having to redo all

your research every time you work on that topic. If you digitally archive your work, a search can be easy. If you keep boxes of papers around you, it can be more difficult, depending on your approach to organization. However, when you do quality work at the forefront of your research, you can reap the benefits again and again.

EXAMINING THE BROADER ISSUES

You might have everything spelled right and the math done perfectly, but that doesn't mean you have an accurate piece of writing. Anything you produce can have errors that go beyond corrections you can make with a Google search and a dictionary. Bigger concepts, nuanced word choices and similar issues can put you in hot water just as easily as a misspelled name or an incorrect street address. Below is a list of some key areas you should examine before finalizing any piece of writing:

Become a "Nondenominational Skeptic"

As we have said repeatedly in this chapter, the goal of good journalists is to be accurate above all else. That can be easier or harder depending on the nature of what we are fact-checking.

It's easy to dig into a piece or challenge a statement when the information comes from a source you dislike or espouses a position with which you disagree. It can be much harder to accept facts that run counter to your own personal belief system, or to challenge statements with which you agree. This is an unfortunate byproduct of living in a society in which people have gotten comfortable with the idea that they are entitled not only to their opinions on issues, but also to their own facts. Making things worse, people can quickly and easily find support for their opinions with an internet search, even if those opinions are laughable at best. When anyone can espouse an opinion online as fact and others can cite it as "proof" that their position is real, life can be quite difficult for journalists, who need to be factually accurate.

One of the best things you can do for yourself in the bigger picture of fact-checking is to become a "nondenominational skeptic." What this means is that you should treat all content as equal, regardless of whether it confirms or refutes your personal worldview. Treat every statement as if it must pass a rigorous vetting, no matter if it came from your best friend or your worst enemy. Question each statement with the same level of concern, regardless of whether it came from a religious leader or a loan shark.

No matter the source or the content, give it all equally strong vetting and your work will be much stronger overall.

Stick to What People Said

One of the most famous headlines in New York history came from a complete falsehood. In the mid-1970s, the city of New York teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. Officials had asked President Gerald Ford to provide federal funds to help the city stave off the financial crisis. On Oct. 29, 1975, Ford gave a speech in which he explained that he would not bail out the city. The next day's headline in the New York Daily News proclaimed: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD."

The president never used those words and would later say that the headline wasn't accurate and "was very unfair." Even though the headline wasn't in quotation marks (something we will discuss more in Chapter 10), it still sounded as though the president had said those words. Decades later, he continued to speak out against the way in which the paper portrayed him.[5]

Although an extreme example, this headline reveals what can happen when you use poetic license and alter the words associated with your sources. When you rely on words that are "close enough" to what someone told you or you swap similar-sounding words, you can land in a big heap of trouble.

If you interview the CEO of your company for a profile on the company's website, she might say, "We're going to make consumer confidence a top priority this year." However, if you write "CEO Jane Johnson said the company will make consumer confidence its number one task," you have significantly altered what she said. "A" top priority means that this is one item of several at the top of the priority list. That's not the same as "the" top priority, which means that it is the most important task on the company's list of priorities. Even worse, if some other news release or profile quoted her saying that something else was "the" top priority, now she looks foolish, and you are to blame.

When you have to write something and attribute it to a source, you want to stick to what the person said. The more you stray from the actual verbiage the person used, the more problems you can cause for everyone involved.

Avoid Vague Terms

Accuracy is often in the details, and the details aren't always easy to find. Journalists tend to try to "write around" these problems with vague terms and soft language. Unfortunately, that usually leads to the kinds of "telephone game" problems discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

The use of certain words has led to a number of online "reporter dictionaries" that humorously define what certain words actually mean when you see them. A few vague words that made the cut:

Recently: The reporter lost the press release with the actual date on it.

Allegedly: Someone did something bad, but we can't prove it.

Reportedly: We stole this from someone else's report.

Unknown: We can't figure it out.

Likely: We can't figure it out, no one will tell us and yet we need to say something about it.

In most cases, you can find terms like this in your own writing, but the reason for their presence is far less funny: You don't have the facts.

If you find yourself saying something like "arguably," it means you want to make a statement of fact, but you haven't done enough research to do so. If you say, "in recent memory," it means you are afraid you didn't look far enough back into the history of something.

Instead of sticking with these and other vague terms, do more research to solidify your claims or attribute the information to a source. Instead of saying "This is arguably the biggest merger in recent memory," tell people exactly what is going on: "The merger of Smith Corp. and Johnson Inc. will create $15.8 billion in revenue, making it the largest merger of this kind since 2001, according to Smith Corp. CEO Bill Smith." Then do more research to back up your statement and make sure you are sure.

Say Only What You Know for Sure

As Chapter 13 notes, people often rely on **hyperbole** to make their points, which leads to suspicious consumers and empty promises. The desire to state that something is "the biggest" or "the first" or anything along those lines can lead writers to create overblown copy that lacks value and that fails to engage readers.

Logical lapses can happen when you state something with absolute certainty that isn't absolute. "All people drink diet soda." How do we know this? How can we assume that every person on the face of the Earth has participated in this behavior? In most cases, stating an absolute is the first step toward trouble. Watch yourself when you see words like "all," "always," "none" and "never," to name a few. The same is true of words like "worst," "only" and "greatest."

When you are writing, you need to make sure you say only what you know for sure. In news, this can be extremely difficult when a breaking news situation has information pouring out of every media outlet and you are worried you might be lagging behind. In the moments after the first plane struck the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, early reports inaccurately stated that the aircraft was a small Cessna-like plane instead of an airliner.[6] In the aftermath of the disaster, it became clear that this statement was false. The rush to get information on the air from any possible source led to these early errors. Although speed matters a great deal in news, accuracy always trumps it.

As we say in newsrooms, "If your mother says she loves you, go check it out."

If you are promoting a cause, an event or a sale, the desire to inflate the importance of your efforts can make it difficult to avoid hyperbole. As we noted in Chapter 1, audience members react well to oddities and one-of-a-kind opportunities, so pushing your language in that direction seems like a good idea. However, you must explain how you came to your conclusions. If you state that your organization's charity walk is "the largest in the state," you need to quantify that statement. Are you saying it has the most participants or it raises the most money? Does it draw the most spectators or lead to the highest number of overall donors? What makes it the "largest?" If you can't explain it, don't write it.

Find More Than One Good Source for Key Facts

The ability to support an argument often rests on the quality and quantity of your source material. If you were arguing astrophysics with a friend who cited the research of the holder of a doctorate in that field, you would look foolish if you said, "According to my 10-year-old cousin . . . ." The quality of your source is clearly not as strong as the one your friend has cited.

Oddly enough, it doesn't necessarily follow that your cousin is wrong and that the Ph.D. is right. This is where examining multiple sources can come into play. It is possible that your cousin's statement is the same as 99% of the people in the astrophysics community and the expert your friend cited is in the minority.

The key is to examine as many sources as you can, assess the quality of those sources and make an intelligent statement based on what you learn. Always examine the facts from both a qualitative and quantitative angle, and then write only what you can prove or what you can attribute.

The Big Three

Here are the three key thoughts you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Accuracy matters most:** Of all the skills you will learn as you read this book, accuracy is the most important one. A tiny spelling error can crush even the best writers, most creative minds and strongest advocates. Keep accuracy at the forefront of every action you take during your writing and editing processes.

2. **Look it up:** If you don't know something for sure, look it up. You will feel a lot better when you know you have the right answer. If you are certain you know something, look it up anyway. It will feel great to confirm how smart you are. You always want to support your statements with the best information available.

3. **People can be cruel:** Don't assume that everyone operates under the same ethical and accuracy guidelines you are expected to use. People start internet rumors for their own amusement. Some groups and organizations don't care if they are accurate or fair when they make statements. Don't assume that all information you find is of high quality. Verify, reassess and scrutinize anything you find and the sources in which you found it before you put your reputation on the line.

Key Terms

dead-tree publications   28

fact check   24

fake news   22

gatekeeping   21

hyperbole   31

logical lapses   31

primary source   26

secondary source   26

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been the victim of a media hoax? Maybe you heard that your favorite band was getting back together or that a famous actor was dead. How far did you go in checking it out before telling people about it or sharing that information online? When you found out someone "got you" with the hoax, how did you feel?

2. What do you see as the biggest problems regarding accuracy in the media today? This could be the prevalence of minor errors, such as spelling or grammar gaffes. It could also be issues related to bias, which is a charge often leveled against certain PR firms, CNN, Fox News and other media outlets. Why do you think your choice matters most in how people consume information?

3. In some countries, journalists need a license from the government to publish content. The rationale, in some cases, is that licensing creates a common standard of accuracy and integrity among "official" journalists. Do you think licensing journalists is a good idea? Why or why not? Outside of licensing, what do you think should be done to better assure accuracy and limit hoaxes and rumors?

Give It a Try

1. Think you can tell fake news from the real deal? Check out this online quiz called "Factitious," which was developed by a veteran journalist and a game designer through the game lab at American University. The quiz provides you with clues as to the source as well as hints after the

fact to help you sharpen your fake-finding skills: http://factitious.augamestudio.com.

2. Take a trip back to grade school and play a game of telephone in your class. Have one person start with a basic fact and develop a simple sentence. The person should write it down and give it to your instructor. Then, do the whispering part of the game, with each person in a row sharing the sentence until it gets all the way around to the final person. How close was the final version to the original version? Where did it go off the rails? How much effort did it take for you to keep the information accurate? Keep that in mind the next time you see an internet rumor grow and morph over time.

Write Now!

1. Research one internet hoax that has recently circulated. It can be an erroneous report of someone's death, a major factual inaccuracy in a story of great significance or even an internet meme that has taken on a life of its own. Write a few paragraphs about the hoax, explaining what it is, the origin of the hoax and how eventually it became debunked. Then outline at least three things you learned from this and how you would use those bits of knowledge to help you avoid making a similar mistake.

2. Prepare five statements that could be factually accurate but would require research to disprove.

In at least one of those statements, make a factual error. Then exchange your list of statements with a fellow student and set about analyzing the list of statements you received. Determine each statement to be true or false, explain why that is the case and then cite a source for each answer.

3. Select a story that interests you from a newspaper, magazine or website. Examine each fact within the story and verify its accuracy. Explain where you found the information that supports your verification. If you find an inaccuracy, explain how you determined the item to be inaccurate.

Notes

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3. N. Andreeva (2020, Jan. 29). "ABC News Suspends Correspondent Matt Gutman Over Inaccurate Report on Kobe Bryant's Helicopter Crash." Deadline. Accessed at: https://deadline.com/2020/01/abc-news-suspends-correspondent-matt-gutman-over-inaccurate-report-kobe-bryant-helicopter-crash-1202845594/.

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WORDS TO LIVE BY

"It's easy (and essential) for a copy editor to focus on the little stuff—typos, repeated words, inadvertently italicized commas—but please remember to pull back and get the big picture as well. . . . Think about what would help the reader. What is the package missing? What parts are redundant and would be better cast aside? How can you best draw people in and lead them to the information they're seeking? This line of thinking will help whether you're working on a traditional print publication or a website or a PowerPoint presentation in a business setting."

—Shay Quillen

Copy Desk Chief, San Francisco Chronicle

Shay Quillen

For more helpful hints and sage advice from Shay, see the "Professional Thoughts" feature later in the chapter.

3

GRAMMAR, STYLE AND LANGUAGE BASICS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand the value of grammar, style and other language basics as they relate to media writing.

- Use a simple sentence diagram to assess the structure and value of a sentence.