DYNAMICS OF NEWS REPORTING & WRITING

Vincent F. FILAK

Foundational Skills for A DIGITAL AGE

SECOND EDITION

Dynamics of News Reporting and Writing

Second Edition

For my mother, Lynn, and my father, Frank, who made sure I always worked as hard as possible, and hustled while I was doing it.

For my wife, Amy, who has given me a completely fulfilling life, a wonderful kid, and the "OK" to buy a classic Mustang that I geek out about on a daily basis.

And for my daughter, Zoe, who has to put up with a lot of teen angst when her classmates ask her why her English teacher is reading one of the books I wrote. "Are you writing ANOTHER book?" she'll frequently ask.

Yes, sweet pea. And I snuck you into this one, too.

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Second Edition

Vincent F. Filak
University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

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/// PREFACE

A truly paranoid man would think this book is cursed.

When we were finishing the first edition, everything was fine until we were literally on the press and Twitter decided, at that precise moment, to change its character limit from 140 to 280. I had at least a half dozen examples of 140-character tweets in there and frequently talked about how to keep tweets under the 140-character limit.

I called my editor in a panic, yelping like a wounded dog, "We GOTTA get the book back! We're gonna look STUPID if we don't fix this!" Fortunately for me, we got it back, and with some of the worst finagling I've ever done, I got the social media chapter fixed without blowing deadline or screwing up anything else too badly.

This time, I'm rewriting the text surrounded by baseball memorabilia and beer signs, hunkered down in a corner of the basement, thanks to the coronavirus pandemic.

In reworking several chapters, I ended up in a revolving argument with myself about weaving in COVID-19 references and examples. If I put them in there, by the time this edition comes out, we might be looking back at this time in life like we remember fidget spinners or Tamagotchi pets, thus giving the book an "old" feeling. If I skip them, by the time this book comes out, we might be living in some version of a full-on hellscape related to this illness, thus giving the book an "old" feeling.

If it sounds like a no-win scenario, well . . . hey, that's journalism. Every day you start from scratch. What was right as rain at 9 a.m. is "fake news" by noon. What's news now is a distant memory in a week. The next "game changer" in social media that everyone must know how to use gets killed, bought out or replaced in the blink of an eye. (If you don't believe me, ask the people who were heavily into YikYak, Vine, Storify, MySpace and Periscope, to name a few.)

The purpose of this book is to give you the crucial tools you will need to succeed in this field, regardless of what trends emerge and disappear. Journalists have more storytelling options at their disposal than ever before, thanks to improving technology and opportunities for reporters to multitask. Journalists who once wrote a single story or collected video for a single on-air package are now asked to use Twitter and Facebook to update and promote a story, YouTube and Instagram to deliver visual components of a story and the web and print platforms to write stories and reach readers.

This book takes the skills associated with each of those elements, as well as others, and teaches them to you in a chapter-by-chapter approach. The analogy most frequently used here is that each chapter provides you with a "tool for your toolbox." The idea is that you learn each important aspect of reporting and writing

across multiple platforms like you would learn how to use a hammer or a saw. Then, when you go out and ply your trade, you make choices about which tool best serves you and your audience in each task you are attempting to accomplish.

THE BENEFIT OF AUDIENCE CENTRICITY

In introducing the concept of audience centricity, many professionals, reviewers and scholars worried that this book and others like it would drive that self-feeding loop of just telling people what they want to hear. These concerns have merit, as many people insulate themselves in "media bubbles" and refer to content they dislike as "fake news." So, why would a reporting text in this environment encourage "audience-centric" content? "If we keep feeding the bubbles, are we really doing journalism?" they asked. It's a good thought and a fair question, but it misses the point.

In the older days of journalism, reporters relied on a series of news values to craft their copy. We still do this, and it's a crucial aspect of how we determine what matters and what doesn't. The theory behind these elements of news was that they held within them the things people desperately wanted to know about. The readers were assumed to be homogeneous and geared toward a single set of important ideals, and it was the reporters' job to go get that stuff and bring it to them. In short, we write, you read.

The difference between bubble-breeding and audience centricity is best explained by comparing pandering with catering. When you pander to an audience, you write stories that will confirm their preconceived notions, regardless of the accuracy of those notions. You look for ways to hype the material, painting in black and white instead of the textured grays that traditionally constitute our society. You do whatever it takes to get the next big headline, the next traffic spike and the next series of comments declaring you to be a genius.

Catering to an audience is more nuanced and still relies on the traditional news values to guide the reporter. However, it also requires the reporter to engage in critical thinking to determine what matters most to the readers and how best to give them that information. For example, a story about budget cuts that affect education will have a lot of interest for a variety of audiences in many ways. Potential audience members include parents, teachers, administrators, professors and college students. A good reporter would know what would matter most to certain readers and thus place a stronger emphasis on the elements of those cuts that matter most to that audience. A reporter at a rural newspaper might focus on the K-12 cuts to schools in outlying areas. A blogger for a teachers union might examine the issues pertaining to class sizes and salary freezes. A college journalist at a student paper might focus on how the cuts could affect tuition.

Reporters who have an audience-centric focus will take those sharply focused stories a step further and explain more specifically what the cuts mean to the individual reader. In the case of the student journalist covering tuition, for example, the writer wouldn't focus on how the budget cuts will lead to the whole university system's needing to collect another $45 million in tuition next year. The reporter instead would focus on her own university's chunk of that and then break it down so a student reading the paper knows how much his tuition would go up next year if the cuts continue.

In short, audience-centric reporters take the traditional tenets of journalism and use them to answer each reader's basic question: "So, what does this mean to me personally?"

DIFFERENT NEEDS, DIFFERENT TOOLS

At its core, this book approaches journalism with two underlying premises:

1. Skills matter more than anything else, and they will help you regardless of where you go or what you do in this field. Thus, everything you pick up in this book should be considered a "tool" for your "toolbox" of skills.
2. If you take the skills you learn and apply a heavy dose of critical thinking with regard to how best to tell a story and how to reach your audience, you will be successful in this business.

With these two things in mind, each chapter is meant to introduce you to a skill that will help you tell stories. These become the tools that go into the toolbox that you will take with you into the field of journalism. The chapters then go further by layering critical thinking onto these tools, with the goal of helping you use the tools in the right situations to meet the needs of your audience.

This is a paradigm shift away from traditional media texts and courses that taught you one tool and helped you figure out ways to use it to solve every problem. For example, in the old days of the print versus broadcast demarcation, a broadcast text would teach you how to use video and audio to do every story, ranging from a city budget story to a Fourth of July parade feature. A print-based textbook would teach you how to use text to tell those exact same stories. The problem with this is that a broadcast story on a budget will be visually boring and factually limited, while a text story will never capture the action and vibrancy of a Fourth of July parade.

In keeping with the tool analogy, those texts handed you a hammer and told you, "Here's how you can use a hammer to open a ketchup bottle, eat a steak, cut some wood and pound a nail." The tool has value, but only for one of those tasks (two, maybe, if you have a particularly difficult ketchup bottle).

This book provides you with a working knowledge of each of the storytelling tools you can use in journalism as well as their benefits and drawbacks. It then helps you think about how best to use each of those tools in a given situation to best inform your audience.

In other words: "Here are all the tools you have at your disposal. Use the right tool for the right job: a hammer for the nail, a saw for the wood, a set of silverware for the steak and a rubber grippy thing for the ketchup bottle."

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Any effort to organize a text like this in a way that will satisfy every reader is like trying to catch yesterday's thunderstorm: No matter how you do it, you will never be successful. The reason the book is arranged in this fashion has to do with the critical-thinking and audience-centric mentality I wanted to drive home throughout the text.

Up front, I introduce the two key concepts that will imbue the entire book: how to write for an audience and how to think critically.

The next stage of the book focuses primarily on writing for text-based platforms, such as print, the web and social media. Once the reader understands what is required in the writing, it makes the reporting easier, which is why things like interviewing, basic news coverage and feature news reporting come next. Understanding the importance of visuals as a crucial reporting and storytelling tool requires the foundation established in the text-based chapters, so this is why the broadcast elements come closer to the end.

Finally, the issues of law and ethics bring the book to a close in a reflective way, allowing the readers to see how what they have been doing as journalists fits into a bigger picture.

FEATURES

In keeping with the "right tool for the right job" approach to the book, a series of examples, breakout boxes and special features are included at various points in the text. Not every chapter will have every feature, while some chapters will have a couple of one kind but none of another. The use of these features depends greatly on whether the feature makes sense for the chapter. Here is a quick look at what these elements are and what they are attempting to do:

- **Thoughts From a Pro** Things can change pretty quickly in the field of journalism, so understanding what is going on in the world of the profession is crucial for reporting students. The "Thoughts From a Pro" feature in each chapter provides an up-close look at a specific aspect of reporting and writing from a professional who is plying his or her trade each day. The goal here wasn't to find perfect people to give you a look at lifestyles of the rich and famous, but rather to showcase journalists who can offer practical advice on realistic problems facing rookie reporters. The people who agreed to provide these insights come from various parts of the field and have worked in a wide array of disciplines, thus giving you a broader understanding of how reporting works. However, if you pay particular attention to their "One Last Thing" comments, you will also likely find a common thread that can be both helpful and inspirational to you as you learn the process of journalism and prepare for a job in the field.
- **Helpful Hints** From lists of vocabulary to shortcut options, the "Helpful Hints" feature is meant to cover things that will give you some ways to save time or pick up important info in an easy way. This feature tends to be the most random, in that the hints and tips come from various experiences journalists have shared over time. These lists can translate jargon into English for you as you read the chapter or get involved in student media. The tips can provide you a step-by-step approach for dealing with a crisis or solving a problem. The bulleted items can give you a few quick thoughts as to how to immediately improve a piece of copy or change your view on a topic of interest. Each of these boxes should just help place a few extra ideas into your head as you move deeper into the chapter.

- **Consider This** Journalism often requires you to look at situations from various angles. In most cases, you can make a valid case for several positions regarding ethical dilemmas, reporting procedures and storytelling options. Throughout the book, whenever a topic that could inspire debate arises, a "Consider This" element appears. These outline a few thoughts on a topic of interest, bat around some possible suggestions and then leave it up to you to decide how you want to view things. These can lead to some class discussions or some interesting internal debates for individuals.
- **Best of the Blog** When we launched this title a number of years ago, my publisher had the same concerns I did about content getting stale between editions. Also, I come from an old Polish and Catholic family, where we worry that you never get enough to eat or drink or whatever, so I was worried that professors would look at this text and say, "It's nice, but it's missing X." With those concerns in mind, SAGE told me I'd need to write a blog. My response: "The heck do I know about writing a blog?" Their answer: "You'll learn." Well, about 500 posts later, I found that I managed to keep my end of the bargain. To give you some of the blog's benefits without making you sift through years of old posts, we've included a "Best of the Blog" feature with each chapter.

REVIEW, DISCUSS AND PRACTICE

The book's pedagogical approach comes from my own experience with beginning writers, many of whom find themselves frustrated as they learn this new approach to telling stories. Each chapter provides not only content to learn and review, but also a chance to discuss the material and practice the craft. This approach allows students to learn on their own as well as in conjunction with their classmates. It also provides them with the ability to ply their trade and get better with each attempt they make. This allows them to experience success and growth over time while still learning in a variety of ways.

- **Thinking Ahead** Each chapter begins with some discussion of the purpose of the chapter and the broader ideas that will be discussed within. This approach gives the reader the opportunity to understand the overall value of the chapter and to know what will be coming throughout the chapter. This kind of roadmap makes it easier for the reader to work through the chapter and see how and why the information within is presented.
- **The Big Three** In an attempt to reach a distracted and busy audience, news organizations often use a few bullet points in a breakout box or at the top of a story to summarize the story. The goal is to give the readers the most important information in a quick and simple way. This book mirrors that approach with its summary section, "The Big Three," which is an attempt to pick out a few crucial things that will matter most to you. In other words, it's likely you won't remember everything you read in every chapter, and that's OK. However, it's important to make sure you take three crucial ideas with you as you move on to the next chapter. I hope that this is both a useful and user-friendly feature of the book that keeps you reading through to the end of each chapter.

- **Discussion Questions** At the end of each chapter, a set of discussion questions will give the readers a chance to work with others or to reflect privately on what they just read. The goal for these questions is to promote a broader understanding of the content based on varied interpretations of the students. Just as in journalism itself, there are no real "right" or "wrong" answers, but rather some better and some not-so-great ones.
- **Write Now! Exercises** The adage "Practice makes perfect" is at the heart of journalism and the core of this book. The "Write Now!" exercises give the students an opportunity to immediately practice what they have just learned. The exercises vary in approach based on the chapters and specifically do not include length or page limits in most cases. This will allow instructors to establish what they see as reasonable expectations for their own classes as well as the opportunity for students to focus more on doing good work as opposed to meeting an arbitrary content minimum set by the author. In addition, many of the exercises can be done multiple times, thus increasing the opportunity for additional practice attempts.

THE *DYNAMICS OF WRITING* BLOG

Two 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 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.

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.

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/// ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vincent F. Filak is 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.

Over his 20-year career in higher education, Filak has been honored for his work as a teacher, scholar and student media adviser. 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 named 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 Research Conference. 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 Media Writing" (Sage), "Convergent Journalism" (Focal) and "The Journalist's Handbook to Online Editing" (with Kenneth Rosenauer; Pearson).

He lives in the town of Aurora, in Wisconsin, with his wife, Amy, and their daughter, Zoe.

The ability to get content wherever and whenever has made audiences engage more frequently with various apps that provide news content. The goal of all content providers is to reach their audience in a way readers and viewers prefer.

NurPhoto/NurPhoto/Getty Images

CHAPTER 1

AUDIENCE-CENTRIC JOURNALISM

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand what makes today's readers different from news consumers in prior generations and how best to serve them based on those differences.
- Identify the tools you can use to define your audience and how each tool will provide specific value for you as a reporter.
- Examine the various aspects of "fake news" as it is discussed in the public as well as why audience members are often misled.
- Know and apply the interest elements that attract readers: fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact.
- Understand what we owe our audiences above all else, including accuracy, value, fairness and objectivity as well as why these matter to both us and them.

Thinking Ahead: Understand Your Audience

Why do you want to be a journalist?

If your answer was "Because I'm good at writing" or "I enjoy talking to people and hearing their stories" or even "I'm nosy," that makes sense. People who have these skills often find long and prosperous careers in various media fields. Good writing, good reporting and good nosiness are all crucial elements of being great in this field.

The main thing you need to understand about all of those skills is how to use them to benefit other people. If you just rely on those skills for your own interests, that is akin to stating that you want to be a famous chef at a top-flight restaurant because you enjoy eating.

No matter what area of this field you enter or on what platform you work, you won't be writing for yourself, speaking for yourself or even being nosy for yourself. You will be doing your work for an audience, a large group of specific individuals who seek information from you on a daily basis. Just as the famous chef should enjoy cooking great food for other people, you should receive joy when you find important things that matter to specific readers and viewers. You should also want to convey that information to them in a way they can use and in a form they understand.

Audience centricity is the core of everything journalists do today, whether it's when they use Twitter to send out important breaking news or cameras to capture gripping video. However, journalists these days must also understand that not every reader or viewer uses the same platforms for the same reasons or wants the same information in the same ways. This is why understanding your audience is crucial to your job.

In this chapter, we will explore who uses the media today, how they use it and what they expect from their media sources. In addition, we will outline the ways in which you can use the tools outlined in the rest of this book to give your audience members what they crave in the way they want.

MEDIA AND MEDIA USERS TODAY

Unlike media users of the past, today's readers and viewers can access vast volumes of content anywhere and at any time thanks to their mobile devices. How we serve them and what platforms we use to serve them require us to know who is in our audience and what they want from us.
alexsl/iStock.com

For decades, newspapers were the standard source of information. Reporters used a series of news values to define what was and was not news. Then, they wrote the content in a way they felt best met the needs of the sources, the readers and the newspaper. As radio and television became important news outlets, audience members sought information from trusted professionals like Walter Winchell, Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite. In each of these cases, the journalists chose the content and presented it to a mass audience in whichever way they saw best.

Today, social media has become a dominant force in the field of news, with new platforms and new sources supplanting traditional journalists. According to a 2017 study from the Pew Research Center and the Knight Foundation, two out of 10 people rely on social media frequently for their news. The study revealed that two-thirds of Facebook and Twitter users said they use those sites to get their news, making social media a major player in the news arena.[1] The study also found that YouTube recently became the second-most used social media tool for news among the individuals surveyed, while more than 60% of Twitter users said they relied on the platform for news content. Another Pew study, conducted in 2019, also supported the notion that people rely heavily on social media for information that matters to them.[2]

Journalists no longer have the luxury of providing "all the news that's fit to print" and assuming people will gratefully consume every last word. The idea of a mass medium has gone away and been replaced with fractured audiences, **niche** publications and a glut of information. News consumers today have so many choices that they can afford to be picky, and they can decide which sources best serve their interests. Here are some things that make this generation of audience members different from those readers and viewers of previous era:

Information However, Whenever and Wherever

Generations of journalists were taught in "**silos**" based on the fields they saw themselves entering. Students with an interest in newspapers went down one path, while those interested in broadcast went down another. When they became professional journalists, they became biased toward their own areas of the field and saw their competition as inferior. Even as digital media has become a force within the field, research has shown that both professionals and students in the field of news see themselves in terms of their **platform** choices.[3]

These days, this approach to journalism makes no sense, as the audiences we serve aren't as tied to platform-based biases as we can be. A study by the Media Insight Project found that audience members of all generations are essentially platform neutral when it comes to how they get their news.[4] The once-held beliefs that

older generations rely solely on print, while middle-aged media users prefer TV and young people gravitate to digital devices, don't hold water. The survey found that most Americans take more of a buffet approach to their media use, relying on upward of six devices, including television, newspapers and radio, to get their news. In addition, it is the content that drives their choices, with users turning to print publications for news about education and their local government while using mobile devices to keep up with breaking news.

These and other research findings drive home an important and yet uncomfortable point for up-and-coming journalists: It's not about you or what you like. The audience members are driving the bus now, and you have the choice to either present your information in a way they want in an engaging format or accept that they will go elsewhere. Journalists have to adjust their own perceptions when it comes to their platform-based biases and focus more on what audience members want.

The "Infotainment" Phenomenon

The idea of "**infotainment**" has gained traction in the past half decade and continues to be an issue for journalists. On one hand, **listicles** like those on BuzzFeed and humorous news accounts like those on "The Daily Show" and "Last Week Tonight" draw people into the news. On the other hand, the line between serious news and sarcastic commentary has continued to blur, much to the detriment of news providers. In a 2009 speech at the Poynter Institute, veteran broadcaster Ted Koppel noted that the media dedicates too much time to stories that are heavy on hype but light on facts and information.[5]

Just because news journalists must now think more about an audience than they once did, it doesn't necessarily follow that they have to pander to the audience's basest desires. The wide array of platforms has made it possible for people to post almost any kind of information they want, ranging from fan fiction to videos of cats falling off of TV sets. Although these bits of information show up on the same platforms as coverage of tensions in the Middle East or the president's State of the Union address, it doesn't follow that these items are news.

A clear example of news-meets-entertainment exists in the "Florida man" phenomenon. The concept began in 2013 with a Twitter account, @_FloridaMan, that catalogued various odd news stories that involved someone from Florida. The headlines referred to various Florida men, but the use of "Florida man" as an opening in headline parlance led the account's creator to refer to this person as "the world's worst superhero."[6]

Over the next five years, the "Florida man" concept grew virally, with everything from a day-by-day calendar that outlined whatever crazy thing a Florida man did on that day to a "Florida Man Night" promotion at a baseball game, in which a law would be broken every inning.[7] The "Florida man challenge" also emerged,

Former Vice President Joe Biden engages in some witty banter with late-night host Stephen Colbert. The line between news and entertainment has continued to blur over the years, making it more difficult for journalists to help readers separate fact from fun.
CBS Photo Archive/Contributor/Getty Images

in which people were encouraged to do an internet search with the term "Florida man" and their birthday to see what odd thing a Floridian did on that day.

Although each of the individual stories had merit for people who were geographically tied to the area in which they happened, as was the case with the "Florida Man Steals $300 Worth of Sex Toys While Dressed as Ninja" report,[8] the stories became more of a form of amusement for people outside that region. Journalists also questioned to what degree this phenomenon denigrated the homeless or those with mental illness as a way of amusing readers and driving web traffic.[9]

In serving an audience, journalists can walk a fine line between stories that stress oddity as an interest element and those that contain actual impact. (See a full outline of audience-based interest elements later in the chapter.) If a story is boring, readers won't spend enough time on it to understand how it affects them. However, if a story is nothing but hot air and buzzwords, the readers find themselves consuming nothing but empty calories of news content. As you develop your skills as a journalist, you will need to know how to make a story engaging to the reader without resorting to infotainment.

Info Glut: Choices, Choices and More Choices

American entrepreneur and computer developer Mitchell Kapor once noted, "Getting information off the internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant." Media users today can understand that concept fairly well, as they deal with a glut of information flowing rapidly at them from thousands of sources.

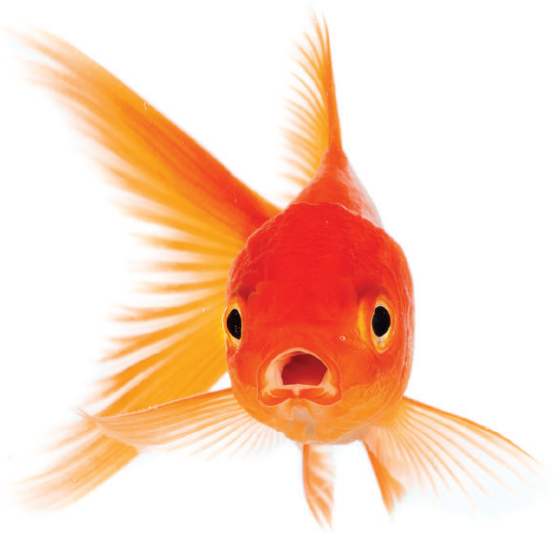
For generations, people who wanted to get the news were stuck with one or two newspapers, three TV channels, a few radio stations and a handful of news magazines. The lack of choices made for a homogenous understanding of what was going on in the world and a limited view as to how we define news. Although the number of dead-tree newspapers that can land on your doorstep today hasn't increased, the web has opened up a vast expanse of text-based news options for you. Cable TV provides you with hundreds upon hundreds of channels, many of them serving small-interest niches, including home repair and history. Satellite radio gives audiences access to not only a vast expanse of musical choices but also a number of talk radio stations and news outlets. Websites and social media outlets that aren't affiliated with traditional media also offer readers and viewers a wide array of perspectives on everything from "Star Wars" to knitting.

The sheer volume of choices can make it difficult for today's media users to make sense of the world around them. A 2018 Gallup survey revealed that almost 60 percent of the people surveyed found that today's media landscape makes it harder for them to be well informed.[10] Participants reported that they felt the deluge of media choices made it harder for people to discern fact from fiction and to feel as though they were caught up on valuable information of the day.

Shorter Attention Spans

If you have ever seen a bird chasing a foil gum wrapper across the yard, you know how "**shiny-object syndrome**" works: Something bright and shiny grabs the bird's

attention, and the bird goes after it. When something else shinier comes along, the bird becomes distracted by that thing, forsaking the original target. According to a 2015 study by Microsoft, people aren't much better than that bird when it comes to staying focused.



This is a goldfish, and it has a longer attention span than your readers do. That means you have to work a lot harder and a lot smarter to get their attention and keep it.
iStock.com/cookelma

The research found that the human attention span now sits at eight seconds, or one second shorter than that of a goldfish.[11] The study goes on to say that we lose concentration in that tiny bit of time due in large part to the way our digital lifestyles have affected our brain. What's more, a 2019 study revealed that the global attention span continues to shrink, meaning that people focus on more things in the same amount of time and that trends are likely to have shorter durations than those of the past.[12]

This means that readers no longer will spend several minutes reading the overly long narrative lead you put on the city council meeting story. They also aren't going to sit still for a two-minute video of a person standing at a podium, droning on about parking regulations. The stimulus must be strong and steady over time, as you use concise writing or valuable video to grab the audience members' attention and keep it until you are finished. In addition, you must continue to find new and novel ways to grab the attention of your readers, for fear of losing them to other trends that will spike up quickly.

Audience Participation and Spiraling Viral Coverage

It all started with a quest for more Busch Light.

In September 2019, ESPN's "College GameDay" show came to the Iowa State University campus to cover the Iowa/Iowa State football game. During the live shots that featured people cheering behind the television personalities, a 24-year-old fan named Carson King displayed a handmade sign that noted, "Busch Light Supply Needs Replenished." Along with his request for additional liquid sustenance, he included his Venmo account handle, which would allow anyone to send him money.

King told journalists he thought it was a joke and that no one would take him seriously. The internet thought otherwise.

King's sign went viral, and strangers poured in hundreds and thousands of dollars to his account. Journalists dug into his life in an attempt to figure out who the "beer sign guy" was. A reporter from the Des Moines Register interviewed him and later found out that King had posted racist tweets back when he was in high school. This information became part of the story on King, who apologized for his earlier behavior.

Twitter users slammed the paper for its inclusion of this information in King's profile, going so far as to find racist tweets the reporter, Aaron Calvin, had posted in his past.[13] Calvin lost his job, and the Register issued an apology and explanation for its actions.[14]

Meanwhile, King announced he would donate all of the money he received for beer to the University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital, keeping only enough cash to cover the cost of one case of Busch Light. Venmo and Busch Beer caught wind of his efforts and agreed to match the amount he raised.

In less than a month, the collective donations hit the $3 million mark.[15]

As a journalist entering the field at this time of viral content and heavy audience interest, life can come at you pretty fast. The ways in which you approach stories that go viral, how you cover these kinds of pieces and what the overall impact of this work can be rest within your ability to give the readers content they value and enjoy.

You can no longer dictate to the readers what matters, as writers and editors could many years ago when the printing press ruled the news. However, you can use those news values to help you ascertain when an audience's interest has reached a critical mass that demands coverage. You can also use those values to your advantage as you repackage information and disseminate it to your readers.

Consider This → How Does Knowing Your Audience Shape Your Work?

Quality reporters see themselves as helpful conduits of content from sources that have important information to readers and viewers who need to know and understand it. In doing this on a daily basis, reporters often become keenly aware of what matters to their readers and why it should matter to them.

Newer reporters can struggle at this initially, as audiences are more than data points on a survey or web analytics on a screen. To fully reach the readers, they need to develop a deeper understanding of what matters most to the audience and why it does. That said, even the best of reporters need to take time out to really evaluate who is in their audience, what those consumers need and how they want to be reached.

How often you think about your audience and its needs can determine the level of success you have in reaching the people in it, but it needs to be more than driving traffic or gaining followers. If you put some deep thought into who reads your content and what they gain from doing so, you can best shape your approach to what you report and how you tell your stories.

Some audiences, for example, might want the horse-race coverage of elections and the minutiae of governmental meetings. Others, however, might find a need to see the long view of projects and proposals presented to these governmental bodies to better understand their area more holistically. Some readers prefer school coverage that highlights the successes and shortcomings of sports teams and educational endeavors, while others want a deeper look at budgets and testing.

Thinking about those readers as you ply your trade can better help you shape your approach to coverage, the amount of coverage you provide on given topics and the ways in which you provide it. It will take a little more effort at the front end of your journalism journey, but it will pay off handsomely in the long run.

DEFINING YOUR AUDIENCE

Far too often, journalists make incorrect assumptions about readers based on ill-conceived notions or outdated data. To make sure they don't fail their audience members, media organizations often solicit reader feedback to help them refocus their coverage. Here are a few ways you can get information about your audience:

Readership Surveys

A readership survey allows a media organization to examine who is paying attention to its content, what content is most appealing to the readers and to what degree readers' wants and needs have changed over time. Association Media and Publishing lists several reasons for doing these surveys[16]:

- **It's been a while:** Media users' preferences change over time, based on various life factors and interest levels. Industry experts say that conducting a survey once every other year is considered a "best practice" within the field of media.
- **You're not sure where you stand:** The desire to "take the temperature" of your readers is natural if you want to know how best to keep readers happy. A survey can help you determine if the information you are providing is relevant and engaging to your readers.
- **You aren't sure if your approach is working:** News reporters occasionally assume that new ideas will be interesting to their readers because those ideas worked in other markets. These ideas could be anything from covering different types of stories to using various platforms to present information. A survey of readers will help a media outlet to confirm or reject those assumptions.

Most organizations have conducted surveys like these at some point, and it is important for reporters to look at them and see what the audiences really want.

Website Analytics

It's not always who is reading the news that is the most interesting aspect of **analytics**, but instead what those people are reading. Either as part of website surveys or through the use of third-party web analytics, journalists can determine what brings people to a site. These analyses can examine specific **key performance indicators (KPIs)** that allow you to measure the performance of your site against your objectives. Cameron Conaway, the director of marketing communication at Solace, outlined a number of key metrics journalists and marketers should see as valuable when rating their work on their websites.[17] These include:

- **Unique visitors:** These are measured based on the time frame under analysis. For example, if a reader visits a website at 9 a.m., noon, 7 p.m., and 11 p.m. during a single day, that reader would be counted as one unique viewer if the unit of measurement is "daily unique visitors." However, if the unit of measurement is "hourly unique visitors," that one person would count four times. Some analytics can now track whether individuals have made multiple trips to your site and what they viewed.

Helpful Hints → Demographic, Psychographic and Geographic Information on Your Readers

The various ways you can measure an audience can help you determine who is in your readership and what they want from you.
iStock.com/Lightcome

Identifying trends or interests within a large group of readers can seem daunting. The tools listed in this section will help you better understand who your readers are and if they enjoy what you created for them. Here are some ways to break your audience into some simple, useful chunks:

Demographic Information

Demographics usually include things like age, gender, race, education and relationship status. These categories can then be broken into more useful segments, such as age brackets and specific educational levels. When coupled with those other "check-box items," demographics can help determine the types of people who use the content you create. Even more, you can refine your coverage approach based on what those demographics tell you. For example, if your readership is predominantly men and women ages 25 to 36 who have one or more children under the age of 10, you can tailor your coverage toward the interests most normally associated with that type of individual. This could be early marriage, young parenthood and early education.

Psychographic Information

Demographic information alone isn't enough to determine common ground among readers. **Psychographic information** allows you to examine an audience based on personality traits, values, interests and attitudes. This type of data includes things like strength of opinion on political issues and social ideologies.

For example, sporting traditions might dominate the social identities of some universities, while other universities have half-filled stadiums for every home game. Certain towns may profess a conservative sense of local politics, even though the people there treat the town like a "bedroom community" and rarely vote. Other towns may have a wide range of political views, but have a serious dedication to the local high school's events and to shops run by local merchants and vote in every town election.

Geographic Information

People care greatly about things happening near them, making **geographic information** a crucial element in understanding an audience. When someone robs a gas station in a small town, people want to know what happened and who is responsible. When a reader's school district considers a bond referendum, that person wants to know how much taxes will go up if the effort is successful.

Traditional newspapers know the circulation of their publications, including where distributors deliver the print copies. Webmasters can use analytics to determine where people are when they log in and engage with content. This is helpful for journalists who want to know if an event is too far outside of the audience's geographic interests or if readers in certain areas might have an interest in the publication's reaching out farther into their territory.

- **Total pageviews:** This measures the loading of a single page as well as any reloading of that page. A single viewer could visit 10 pages on a single website for a total of 10 pageviews, or that viewer could continually refresh a single page 10 times for the same total. One area Conaway notes as important in terms of pageviews is the bounce rate on the site. This is the number of single-page visits users make to your site divided by all the visits you receive. This should help you figure out how much you are building an engaged and loyal audience as opposed to the one-hit wonders who look at a single story and then leave.
- **Visits:** This is the single time a viewer enters the website and navigates it until the viewer leaves. This information can be further parsed to determine where the person is coming from, what parts of the site accounted for the majority of the reader's visit and other similar bits of information.
- **Source:** Every visitor to a website has to come from somewhere. Source data can include things like the name of a search engine, a specific referring URL or whether the visitor came directly to the site using a bookmark. Source data will help you determine what got your readers to show up, which can help you with marketing or promoting your information to them. Conaway notes that it is important to distinguish between organic visitors, who arrive at your site via search engines or social media, and those who show up based on paid opportunities so you can see what really motivated the visitors' actions. Understanding page referrals will also help you ascertain what platforms are driving the most traffic to your site.
- **Overall engagement:** This takes into account multiple measurements, such as **session duration** (how long readers spent on a given site as well as how long they spent on any particular page), recirculation (how many people read one piece and then another on your site) and reader feedback (comments, shares and similar activities). These individual metrics can work in tandem to help you better assess what draws your readers' attention, keeps their attention and drives them to participate with your content.

Reporters can use these and other analytics to assess what stories drew the most people, held people's attention the longest and led to additional reading on the site. Just like any other tool, web analytics can be misused or overinterpreted, but for the most part, reporters should look at them to determine what mattered the most to the readers.

Real People

Surveys can give you a broad array of information from a large group of people, while web analytics can help you ascertain where people spend their time while on your site. However, neither of these can replace actually interacting with your audience members.

For years, reporters have relied on **official sources** to drive story selection and story angles. A number of logical reasons existed for this approach: Officials are easy to find, they carry a certain level of authority and their comments are "safer" for reporters than those that come from average citizens. (See Chapter 12 for more on the issues associated with absolute privilege and qualified privilege.) In addition,

journalists often developed patterns with regard to what merited coverage and how best to cover it. As scholar Warren Breed noted while reflecting on his own time in a newsroom, older reporters passed down expectations and values to younger reporters, thus leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of repetitive content.[18]

Thoughts From a Pro → Erik Petersen, Editor, Fort Lauderdale Magazine

© Erik Petersen

As a journalist with experience on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, Erik Petersen understands a lot about how an audience can shape content for a publication and how digital media has made that even more important.

Petersen serves as the editor of Fort Lauderdale Magazine, the monthly publication for the city. Prior to returning stateside, Petersen spent 11 years at the Nottingham (U.K.) Post, where he worked primarily as a features writer and columnist. He has also served as a bureau reporter for The Kansas City Star.

Throughout that time, Petersen said he learned how audiences shaped the various publications at which he worked.

"In the U.S. we've got a de facto national media thanks to papers like the Times and the Post," he said. "In the UK, it's much more explicit. You've got London-based national papers like the Guardian, Daily Mail and Telegraph, and then you've got local papers. Because of the split, national newspapers cover all the national and international news, while local papers are what Americans would think of as one giant metro section."

These differences lead to different approaches to what made for content and what the audiences tended to expect in certain publications, he said.

"Local British papers tend to run stuff that U.S. city dailies wouldn't—real cat-up-a-tree stuff," Petersen said. "There are entire websites devoted to people in British local papers frowning and pointing at things—potholes, closed public restrooms and so forth. This habit of local papers running these stories in print has always been a sort of endearing running joke, and in the early days of online, papers took notice of how much it could drive traffic. Nonsense stories would go viral."

Even though the papers enjoyed the traffic spikes on the web, Petersen said he often worried about how the audience viewed the publication.

"People who are tweeting your story with 'LOL, it's all kicking off in Bath' are helping give you a massive spike on that story, but they're not building a community of readers who are committed to your publication," he said. "They're not from your area, and they're only reading your story because they're mocking it. It was a lesson that in my view took a while to learn because stories that create huge spikes are hard to peel away from, but British local papers now focus more on the more long-term process of building a community of local readers."

When he returned to the States, Petersen said he took that understanding of audience building as he approached his new challenge of reaching the Fort Lauderdale community, especially through the interactivity available on the web.

"Unlike daily papers, where the challenge has been how to compete in a world where daily news is now a much more open game, city monthlies now get to interact more regularly with our readers," he said. "In newspapers, it often felt like 'this is a threat we have to understand.' Here it feels more like an opportunity. Our

readers are professionals who live in the city and have discretionary income. If a few times a week we can give them a product they find useful—say, something quick about a gallery opening or a new restaurant—it's a level of interaction we didn't have before."

In terms of moving forward in a digital world with an ever-evolving audience, Petersen said he worries less about the newest apps or devices and more about how best to reach his readers with quality content.

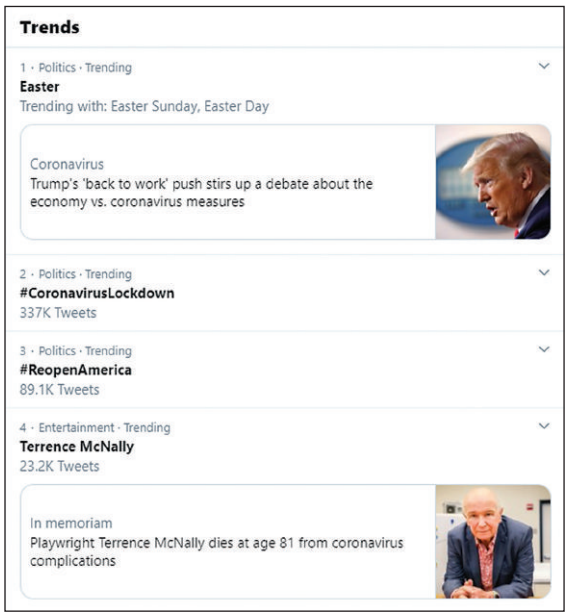
"I try not to get caught up in 'what works' as much as how we present it, because in most ways I think good journalism is still what works," he said. "For a while we heard a lot about how only shorter, quick-hit stuff would work in the new world. Well, I went to the University of Missouri with a guy named Wright Thompson who is one of the people proving that false. Just do good work, and then let the analytics side of things guide you in the particulars of how you present it."

One Last Thing

Q: If you could tell the students reading this book anything you think is important, what would it be?

A: "I think it's so important right now to be less top-down about building readerships and everything that comes with that, particularly in a big organization. Don't have one person with all the secret knowledge. Make sure every journalist—particularly the younger, junior ones—have ownership in what's happening. Likewise, journalists need to think like one-person media organizations. That's even down to the small things. It might not seem like the biggest thing in the world, but if I meet a journalist without a Twitter account, I wonder what they're doing. It's a simple tool for getting your work out there more—don't you want that?"

What no one really spent a lot of time thinking about in the newsroom, however, was the degree to which stories about robberies, city council meetings or formal speeches mattered to the audience members. In the days of limited media outlets, reporters didn't have to worry that they would lose readers to other publications. Even if there was competition, most journalists ascribed to a standard set of news values that would essentially guarantee that if a robbery occurred or a city council met, every media outlet would be there, dutifully covering it. Now, with a wider array of media options, understanding your readers becomes more important than ever.



This list of trending topics shows how varied the overall levels of interest in a wide array of topics can be on any given day.
Twitter

To help you reach your readers and understand what "**real people**" want to see, consider both traditional and digital options. As you work on standard stories, such as meetings, speeches and news conferences, you might take time out to ask audience members what they like to read or what things they think matter. When

you cover **lite-brite** stories, such as Fourth of July parades or the opening of a local library, you could spend more time talking to people about what they would like to know and why they read (or don't read) what your media outlet produces.

In a digital realm, you should read through reader comments at the end of your stories and other outlets' stories. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, often have ways for you to keep track of a topic as well as the people most directly interested in it. This will allow you to strike up conversations with these interested parties via email or Twitter and find out more about what matters to them. Always look for ways to find out from "real people" what they think matters and see if it merits additional attention from you and your media outlet.

THE RISE AND IMPACT OF THE "FAKE NEWS" PHENOMENON

A major concern for journalists and their readers is the rise of "**fake news**" and its impact on how people perceive the things they see in the media. The term gets thrown around the way the word "internet" used to be thrown around: Everyone is using it, dealing with it and thinking it's something it's actually not.

For the sake of this discussion, we'll define "fake news" as content whose authors know it to be false, posted with the intent of fooling readers into believing it to be real. To understand your audience, you need to know what drives people to fake your readers out and why your readers tend to fall for fake news.

Who Writes These Stories and Why They Do It

To better understand the fake-news phenomenon, it helps to determine who is driving the movement and why these people feel compelled to lie to the public. The people who post this kind of content include those with strong ideological positions they hope to propagandize and others who have no stake in what their readers believe or learn. Let's look at who posts this stuff and why they do:

Ideologues Who Want to Advance an Ideology

People often have a strong interest in a given topic and want to feel secure in that position. To make that happen, a lot of ideologically driven individuals will post content whose aim is to get more people to support a specific way of thinking about a given topic. We tend to think of this as a political issue, mainly because of how the term "fake news" rattles around in the world of politics.

The truth, however, is that ideologies can be anything: a position on faith, science, health or anything else. When people want to have "their side" seen as right, they will often push the envelope to get other people to see things "their way." That includes creating or sharing fake content.

The most famous argument currently under discussion (and likely to remain under discussion for decades to follow) is the degree to which Russian hackers (and other folks) spread misinformation to tilt the outcome of the 2016 presidential election in favor of Donald Trump. Researchers found that people who were hyperpartisans on both ends of the political spectrum tended to hit these fake stories more frequently than less engaged people.[19]

When unscrupulous people really believe in something and they want other people to believe it, there is little they won't do to force the issue. Thus, we get some false stories that emphasize what people perceive to be larger truths.

People Like Money

Many people who create fake news, especially the highly partisan content, do so with no real interest in our political system. A number of journalists and scholars investigated the people responsible for many of the fake news stories and found that they write them because those stories drive traffic to their sites, and all those clicks add up to serious cash. CNN found that a town in Macedonia builds websites with the intent of inflaming U.S. partisans for cash.[20] The ethical and ideological standards for their content producers start and stop with the almighty dollar.

A Washington Post writer tracked down two guys closer to home who were basically doing the same thing for the same reason. The owners of Liberty Writers News essentially use hyperbolic, partisan headlines to fan the flames of divisiveness because it makes them rich.[21] Whether it is the snake-oil salesmen of the Old West or the Ponzi scheme hustlers of the financial world, scammers often see dupes around every corner and an opportunity to profit from those people. As the line erroneously attributed to P.T. Barnum states, "There's a sucker born every minute." And there is always someone looking to make money from them.

Some People Are Jerks

Not to put too fine a point on it, but some people just like being idiotic. If they can be idiots and get a lot of attention for it, all the better.

After the attack in Las Vegas in which a gunman killed more than 50 people and injured several hundred others, a social media post appeared in which a young man said he was desperately seeking information on his missing father. It turned out that this was a fraud. The profile photo on the young man's Twitter account was the same one used elsewhere to pull the same stunt during an attack in Manchester. In addition, it's an internet meme.

The "lost dad" in the photo? He's porn star Johnny Sins.

When a reporter from Mashable reached the troll and asked why he used a national tragedy for his own amusement, he replied, "I think you know why. For the retweets."[22]

He also said he'd probably do it again.

Why Do People Fall for Fake News?

It's hard to think of many things that can make you feel dumber than falling for a news hoax, especially if you shared the content and then got called out for it. As journalists, we know that we should evaluate sources and research content before buying into a story. However, in many ways, we often get tricked into thinking fake news stories are true, just like our readers do. Here are a few reasons why:

More Weirdness, More Chances for Errors

It's not clear if society is weirder now than it was at previous points in time, or if we just know more about the weirdness because we have access to a wider array of news sources. It used to be, we had a few local weirdos and that was it. Now, we

have access to a world of weird, and there are some real hot pockets of weird out there. Thus, when we think about all these strange stories, we start to think, "Yep, that sounds like something I've heard before."

People who wish to mislead us will take advantage of our willingness to suspend our disbelief as they write things that sound similar to other wild stories we've heard.

Consider the following headlines:

- Florida man turns himself in for murdering imaginary friend
- Florida man arrested after recording himself having sex with dog
- Florida man arrested for hanging on traffic light and s—ting on cars passing underneath
- Tennessee man accused of dipping testicles in customer's salsa before online delivery

Two of these are actual headlines for real stories that ran in local media outlets, while the other two are hoaxes that went viral on the internet. Here's the question: Can you figure out easily which two are which?

These stories all seem completely ridiculous and appear fake on one hand, and yet they also seem totally plausible, thanks in large part to the "Florida man" phenomenon, as we discussed earlier in the chapter. People will often simply pass along these stories rather than checking to see to what degree each is factually accurate and which ones are con jobs.

Confirmation Bias

Another reason people fall for fake news comes down to the idea of stereotyping and the concept of confirmation bias. With so many of us finding ways to sit in our news bubbles and not look elsewhere for content that might not align with our points of view, it becomes easy to create stereotypes and look for things that confirm them.

If you think President Trump is a great guy and you read nothing but news about how great he is, it stands to reason that you might get sucked in by a fake news story that says he was endorsed by the pope. Or one that says he rescued a kitten from a tree. On the other hand, if you think the president is a racist, a liar and a cheat (to quote Michael Cohen's testimony), you could easily find yourself believing a far-less-than-truthful story that said he plans to bring back the word "Negro" as a descriptor for African Americans.[23]

In 2017, Scott Pelley investigated the fake-news phenomenon for "60 Minutes" and found a frightening world of news scams bent on pitting people against each other for sport and profit. One website garnered an audience of more than 150 million viewers publishing headlines like "Hillary Clinton Has Parkinson's Disease, Physician Confirms." (The story was based on the claims of a doctor who never met Clinton and was later denied by Clinton's own doctor and officials from the Parkinson's Foundation.) The people who published this site tended to lean toward political fakery because they found that more people were willing to click on stories like the Clinton one. A large part of this was because people disliked the politicians who were the subjects of these stories, and thus they were willing to read anything that painted the pols in a negative light.[24]

Con men, shysters and other peddlers of hoaxes are nothing new in this world. People swore they had seen the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot. Others claimed they could sell you a medicine to cure your ills or a controlling stake in the Brooklyn Bridge. What makes today's cons more problematic for us is the volume of lies purporting to be truths and the speed at which they spread throughout society. Partisan bickering and digital aids have helped create a lucrative field of fake news that can give real journalists incredibly painful headaches.

Not every story that readers disagree with should fall into the category of fake news. Just because you don't like a political figure or a societal movement, it doesn't follow that positive stories about these things are fake. However, scammers are taking advantage of media users who enjoy having their worldviews confirmed as they rake in cash based on click-driven advertising.

As a journalist, you need to find a way to break through this wall of fake news and illegitimate content if you want to reach your readers. Even more, you will need to find ways to convince these people that you aren't just one more carnival barker, crying out for attention with exaggerated claims and false promises.

WHAT DO WE OWE OUR AUDIENCE?

With all of this in mind, the job of the journalist can appear a lot harder and a lot more involved than it did at first glance. Although the discipline seems more complicated than you originally thought, some basic elements of journalism remain crucial. As we noted earlier in the chapter, you don't have to pander to an audience to drive readership. Here are a few basic things news consumers need from you:

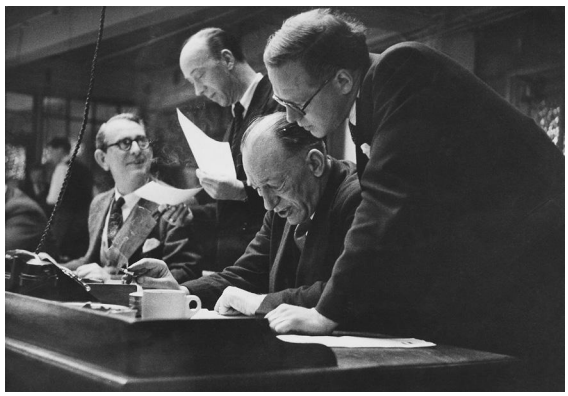
Accuracy Above All Else

No matter how fast you get information to someone or how incredible your mind-blowing visuals are, if your work lacks **accuracy**, nothing else matters. The first and foremost expectation audiences have of journalists is that we have put forth information that is factually correct.

This means you should go back through everything you write and make sure your facts are solid, your writing can't be misconstrued and your quotes are accurate. This might require one edit or it might take several, but spend whatever time you need to make sure you've verified everything. We will spend much more time on this throughout the book, but always remember that this should be your prime directive.

Clarification of Value

One of the bigger mistakes journalists make is to get into a rut when they report and write. This often emerges when city government reporters cover too many meetings or sports reporters rely on "who beat whom" coverage to fill their story quotas. The idea of "we've



The "copy-taster" (left) selects material, while Editor Arthur Waters (seated, center, right) decides on the treatment of a story with a member of his staff, on a Saturday afternoon in the newsroom at the News of the World, April 1953. Journalists historically have put extra emphasis into the issue of being accurate and fair.
Bert Hardy/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

always covered X" rears its ugly head when journalists forget that they're not covering meetings or games for the sake of covering meetings or games. They need to go back to the basic premise of this chapter: Write for the audience.

Journalists have often relied on who, what, when, where, why and how—the 5W's and 1H—when they write. When writing a story, it becomes imperative that we look at the idea of not only what happened but also why it matters to our readers. The lead will capture the core elements of who did what to whom, but the "why" element of the 5W's and 1H will drive home the value of the piece. Here's an example:

> Brown County firefighters responded to a fire at 123 E. Smith Drive late Wednesday night.

The core of this sentence picks up on four of the W's, but it lacks value because this essentially tells the readers that firefighters fought a fire. That's what they are supposed to do, and thus there's not a lot of value in that. The lack of an answer to "Why should I care?" leaves the readers without a sense of importance. A stronger lead can create improved value:

> A fire at 123 E. Smith Drive killed three people Wednesday and caused $280,000 in damage to Brown County's oldest historic home.

That shows value in terms of a sizable impact (death and damage) as well as an additional bit of insight regarding the importance of the house (oldest historic home in the county).

When you write for your readers, be sure you can clearly answer the question "Why should I care?" for them.

Fairness and Objectivity

Accuracy goes a long way to improving trust, but **fairness** and **objectivity** also contribute greatly to trustworthiness.

Journalists often hear that fairness means getting "both sides of the story," but in many cases, issues have more than two sides. A fair journalist gives stakeholders an opportunity to make their positions known. In some cases, those stakeholders may be less than genuine or may have their own agendas, which is why you need to be prepared with research and information when you speak to them. Fairness does not mean parroting your sources. Fairness means giving people the opportunity to put forth a viewpoint, which journalists have every right to question and challenge.

However, this leads to the idea of objectivity. Being objective is not akin to being blind to reality. The term "fake news" has taken over as a one-size-fits-all term for any news certain people dislike, leading to diminished approval ratings of the press and media credibility. However, objective journalists will examine statements presented as fact and push back against those that fail to pass muster.

For example, in March 2018, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross testified that he had nothing to do with asking for a citizenship question to be included on the upcoming census, instead noting that it was the "Department of Justice, as you

know." However, Washington Post reporters had dug into the issue months earlier and found that Ross had actively sought the question almost immediately after joining President Trump's cabinet. An email from May 2017 from Ross even noted that he wondered why no one in the government had acted "in response to my months old request that we include the citizenship question."[25]

What objectivity requires of a journalist is to approach each topic and each source with an open mind. Even journalists who research a topic well might not know everything about it. You have to be able to put aside your personal views and biases when covering stories and give your sources the opportunity to provide you with information on the topic. You also have a duty to your audience to be as informed as possible, so that sources don't pull the wool over your eyes, and to push back against sources when they present falsehoods.

WHAT ATTRACTS AN AUDIENCE?

Don't be discouraged when you realize that audiences now determine what matters most to them. Instead, realize that you still have a lot of input when it comes to how you can meet their needs while still maintaining your own set of best practices. To do this, you need to understand what attracts an audience to your content and then use those items as starting points to drive your coverage.

The book "Dynamics of Media Writing" outlines a series of **interest elements** that can help you attract an audience.[26] To remember them, you can use the mnemonic **FOCII**, like the plural of focus, but with two I's. Here is a brief examination of those elements:

Fame

This interest element relies on the idea that important people will draw the attention of readers. As noted in "Dynamics of Media Writing," it isn't always what someone does, but who is doing the deed that matters. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States sees more than 800,000 marriages end each year with little fanfare. However, when former vice presidential candidate and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and her husband, Todd, headed for divorce, it became national news.[27]

Fame falls into two main categories. The first category includes people who are famous for an extended period of time, like heads of state, actors and singers. The second category includes those people who are living out their "15 minutes" of fame, such as Powerball jackpot winners and internet sensations.

Oddity and conflict will draw readers to your publication. However, if the material fails to deliver more than shock value, they won't stick around for long.
Images News/Getty Images

Oddity

People value rare things, which can be anything from the Hope Diamond to the kid in third grade who can belch the

alphabet. Journalists often focus on oddities and present them to their readers as being different from the everyday elements of life.

News organizations occasionally highlight **oddity** with positive superlatives, such as the "largest ball of earwax in North America" or "the longest filibuster in state history." In other cases, oddity could come from negative outcomes, such as the 45-year-old Muncie, Indiana, woman who was arrested on suspicion of stabbing a fellow partygoer in the eye with a fork. The reason? The stabbing victim took the last barbecued rib.[28] In terms of the criminally weird, some publications, like the Toronto Sun, even have "weird" news sections on their websites.[29]

Conflict

If two or more people or groups seek incompatible goals, conflict will emerge. Whether it is two people who want the last barbecued rib at a party or two political parties seeking dominance in the House of Representatives, when mutually exclusive endgames present themselves, you will see conflict.

As we will discuss in Chapter 2, reporting on **conflict** requires more than getting side A of an issue and then assuming there is a side B that you need to even things up. When it comes to a particular conflict, you can see its various facets if you put in some effort to examine the issue. For example, any building project could have financial, societal and environmental ramifications for the area and your readers. You need to understand those various facets and explain how each outcome can be good or bad for your readers.

Immediacy

People don't like to feel out of the loop, and news journalists understand this. To best serve their readers, journalists attempt to provide audience members with valuable information as quickly as possible.

When journalists "break" news or get a "scoop" on the competition, they demonstrate the importance of **immediacy** as an interest element. Digital outlets like websites and social media outlets can provide journalists with 24/7 access to their readers, meaning that immediacy takes on a whole new level of importance. Prior to these ever-present platforms, journalists measured immediacy in increments of days or hours.

Newspapers published multiple editions each day, with the final edition bringing a close to their day of information dissemination. Journalists working for the publication then had to wait to see what competing papers and broadcasters discovered that they didn't. Television journalists had three nightly broadcasts, with the final version of the news airing just before midnight, depending on the time zone. However, once those windows closed, the news went dark until the morning newscast.

Today, immediacy is measured in minutes and seconds, which leads to a hypercompetitive market in which speed dictates a lot of what we do. However, as immediacy becomes a primary issue in the field, we all have to make sure that speed doesn't trump accuracy. Fast is great, but fast and wrong is horrible.

Impact

As noted earlier in the chapter, people want to know "Why should I care?" Good journalists can answer that question when they focus on the **impact** of a story. In some cases, you can demonstrate impact with simple stories, such as pieces on tax-rate increases or business closings. In other cases, you need to go much deeper to show a longer-range impact, such as how the "too big to fail" banking crisis of the mid-2000s came to a head or how changes in environmental laws will affect the quality of water in an area.

You can demonstrate the impact of a story in a quantitative or qualitative sense. Quantitative impact measures the degree of the impact, such as how many people contracted the coronavirus in a city, a state or a nation. Qualitative measurements show the severity of an impact, such as the death of one student at your school.

/// THE BIG THREE

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

1. **The audience matters most:** You aren't writing for yourself. You are writing for your readers, and they have specific wants and needs that you must address. The better you understand this, the more connected you will become with your audience members, and the better you will be able to serve them.
2. **Journalists owe the audience:** When it comes to your readers, focus on what you owe them each and every time you ply your trade. You have to be accurate. You need to show them value in what you write for them. You need to be fair and objective. If you do these things, you will grow and retain a strong and loyal audience. If you don't, the readers can always go somewhere else for their information.
3. **Focus on the interest elements:** Fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact serve as crucial interest elements for all media writers, but they are particularly valuable for news reporters. Each time you sit down to write a story, consider each of these elements and see which ones you think apply. This will help you focus your work and build strong and valuable content.

/// KEY TERMS

accuracy 17
analytics 9
audience centricity 3
conflict 20
demographics 10
fairness 18
fake news 14
fame 19
FOCII 19
geographic information 10
immediacy 20
impact 21
infotainment 5
interest elements 19
key performance indicator (KPI) 9
listicles 5
lite-brite 14
niche 4
objectivity 18
oddity 20
official source 11
pageview 11
platform 4
psychographic information 10
real people 13
session duration 11
shiny-object syndrome 6
silos 4
unique visitor 9
visit 11

/// DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first question this chapter asked is "Why do you want to be a journalist?" What is your best answer to that question? What makes this field worthy of study in your mind?
2. What is the source of most of the media you consume? Think about not just the platform (newspaper, magazine, TV, web, apps) but the sources of media on those platforms. What makes that media valuable to you? How did you find the sources, and what made them a part of your consumption habits? What similar media did you reject or decide not to continue using? To what degree do you think the media provides you with audience-centric content?
3. Of the five interest elements listed in the chapter, which one drives you to consume media? Why do you think this is? Which one matters the least to you? Why do you feel that way?
4. Of the information you consume on a daily basis, how much of it do you think would fall into the category of "infotainment"? What draws you to this material, and how much does that bother you now as a reporting student?

/// WORK IT OUT

1. Examine the following sentences and determine which of the following interest elements would most likely apply to them:
    a. Taylor Swift accuses Selena Gomez of stealing one of Swift's unpublished songs and recording it as her own.
    b. A baseball player on a south Florida high school team had his fastball clocked at 123 mph, the fastest ever on record.
    c. Members of the local city council will vote today on whether to allow a developer to build condominiums on land that is sacred to a local tribe of Native Americans.
    d. More than 1 million people in the United States have contracted the coronavirus over the past three months, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stated today.
    e. Residents of a Pittsville, Wisconsin, neighborhood reported seeing a man wearing clown makeup while hang gliding naked over a city park.
2. Read the following headlines and determine which ones you feel meet the standards of fairness and objectivity as outlined within the chapter:
    a. Poll shows president's approval rating at 51 percent; Citizens report slow economic growth, international tensions as main concerns
    b. President is pointlessly arguing against statistics—and it's going about as well as you would expect
    c. Local restaurant revises menu, brings back "Garbage Burger" after customers protest in parking lot
    d. Why is the city council unable to accomplish anything?
    e. Senator defends her position on same-sex marriage, argues critics "purposefully misunderstand" her vote on bill
    f. Citywide poll reveals Chicken Hut's wings best around
    g. Environmental Global Conference issues warning that eating Tide Pods can kill you; Soap Eaters Anonymous president disagrees
3. Research the following stories online, based on the summary information provided below, and determine which ones are fake and which ones are based in truth:
    a. A Pennsylvania man sued a stripper and her employer for severely injuring him during a "special performance." The man suffered a ruptured bladder and nerve damage.
    b. A member of the U.S. government wished "Happy Birthday" to the U.S. Navy via social media. To make the message more

powerful, he included an image of a warship. Unfortunately for him, it turned out to be an image of a Russian battle cruiser.

c. As part of an antismuggling sting, officials found a child frozen alive in a small box. He turned out to be one of nearly 300 children frozen alive for the purposes of selling their harvested organs for transplantation on the black market.

d. A man in Louisiana stole a life jacket from a department store. This crime led him to be sentenced to life in prison. The cost of the lifejacket was less than $200.

e. The FBI conducted a raid on a Virginia retirement home in 2018, acting on a tip about illegal activity. The investigators found that the elderly residents were being forced to participate in a "Fight Club" activity. Nurses and other staff members placed wagers on who would win the hand-to-hand combat events. Seven employees were arrested as a result of the raid.

/// WRITE NOW!

1. Explore the demographic details of your school in terms of age, gender, race and the in-state/out-of-state gap. Look for specific details you think define your school. Then, select another institution within your state and examine the same elements. Use these findings to write a two-page essay that outlines the similarities and differences between these schools. Also, include your opinion regarding the degree to which those elements accurately reflect the similarities and differences between your two schools.

2. Select three articles that interest you from the media you consume. Look through them to identify the elements of interest outlined in this chapter. Write up a few paragraphs on each article, explaining why you found that these articles were of interest to you and which elements most and least factored into your interest.

3. Select an issue of your student newspaper (or online publication, depending on your campus) and compare it with the coverage of an issue of your local publication from that same day and time as well as an issue of a national publication from that same day and time. Write a short essay on each one of these publications to outline what audience(s) you think they serve and how well you think they are serving them. Use examples of stories that illustrate the points you are making regarding the quality (or lack thereof) of the coverage.

4. Conduct a short content analysis of one of your social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). Which of the people you chose to follow shows up most in your feed over the past 24 hours? What topics are "trending" in your feed, and how well do you feel those things represent your overall interests? To what degree would you say these items qualify as "news," and how do you think this reflects on you as a media consumer? Write a short paper that outlines your thoughts and findings.

5. Reflect on a time when you became an active participant in a social media phenomenon. It might have been your choice to tweet about an election or to post articles about a topic that you thought others should read. What drove you to do so, and how much thought did you put into your approach? Does this differ in any way from how you see yourself as an upcoming journalist, or is this part of a different way you see media usage?

6. Reflect on the issue of accuracy and how you feel it is or isn't present in the media today. As allegations of media bias, "fake news" and other similar issues come to the forefront, how do you see this overall field, and why do you perceive it this way? Write a short essay that clarifies your outlook.

7. Select a news piece from a local publication and assess it for audience centricity. How does it do in addressing the 5W's and 1H, and how well does it tell you why it should matter to you? If you feel it has done well, explain what works. If you feel it hasn't, explain what doesn't work and how you would go about fixing it.

/// BEST OF THE BLOG

The author maintains an active digital media presence at the "Dynamics of Writing" website, where he posts reactions to the news, helpful hints on media writing and additional exercises for readers. Here is one post that captures the essence of this chapter, with a few minor edits for context and clarification. For the original version of this post and others like it, visit www.DynamicsOfWriting.com.

Local newspapers and trash-sniffing bears: How audience-centric journalism works (Published Oct. 7, 2017)

Whenever I travel, I tend to grab a copy of the local newspaper to see what matters to the readers of that area. In the larger metro areas, you get a lot of the same types of things: crime, governmental wrangling, national news, international news and big-time sports. Over the years, I also noted a trend of unfortunate similarities among regional papers because most of them are now owned by a single company, Gannett. Thus, you get a lot of "USA TODAY NETWORK—(FILL IN YOUR STATE HERE)" bylines on stories that have a general local feel, but lack a clear connection to the specific town or city in which the paper lives.

Still, a number of true "local" papers exist in various parts of various states, including mine. When my in-laws used to live in a place called Beecher, Wisconsin, we would often visit them and a stop at a gas station along the way gave me a chance to sample the local press. The one vivid memory I had was during a spring trip "up north" at a time of heightened international tensions, some sort of congressional shriek-fest and a lot of worries about an upcoming state election.

The front-page story on the local paper? Six tips on how to keep bears emerging from hibernation from getting into your trash.

I couldn't find a single story on Obama or Europe or even our state legislature on the front page. It was about the local fishing forecast, a festival at a local church and, of course, the bear thing. The publishers of those papers were local folks, writing about local things that mattered to local citizens.

Sure, things like peace in the Middle East and who was likely to do what in the U.S. Senate mattered to those people in a broader sense, but the local press figured (probably rightly) that people who read their paper would have gotten that stuff from CNN or FOX or some big-news website. They didn't have a reason to rehash that stuff. On the other hand, it was a pretty safe bet that Anderson Cooper or Sean Hannity wasn't going to run a series on how deer were in heat and thus leading to more car accidents on Highway 141 (a real concern around these parts).

Use this link to take a look at two local publications that understand how to focus on what matters in the readers in their geographic area: The Omro Herald and The Winneconne News: https://dynamicsofwriting.com/2017/10/09/local-newspapers-and-trash-sniffing-bears-how-audience-centric-journalism-works/.

Top story: How local bridge work isn't going to hurt the fishing in the area. Other stories? The building of a new assisted living community, how the local schools are doing in state tests/budgets, local zoning laws and an upcoming Oktoberfest walk/run.

I'm not going to endorse or admonish the writing quality or design approach on either of these publications, but I will tell you that I'd bet a dollar to a dime that the content matters to the area readers. (**FULL DISCLOSURE:** I live in Omro, a city of about 3,300, and my wife desperately wants to raise chickens in our yard for reasons past my understanding. She's always keeping an eye on zoning changes that might allow for this. I pray that this never happens.)

The big takeaway here is that you need to know what matters most to your readers and then provide content that meets the needs of those readers. It might seem "unimportant" to cover things like this, especially when other people you know are writing about political unrest in Russia or North Korea's missile program.

However, if you ever walked out to your trash and saw a 300-pound black bear pawing through your garbage, you'd probably want to know how to keep that from happening again.

Open Road Films (II)/Photofest

CHAPTER 2

CRITICAL THINKING

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand the basic tenets of critical thinking and how they affect journalism.
- Assess the quality of your own thinking by applying the crucial aspects of critical thought.
- Apply critical-thinking skills to analyze stories for signs of "fake news" and other erroneous elements.
- Enhance your reporting through stronger analysis of your approach to content gathering and news writing.
- Demonstrate proactive and reactive skills during the process of reporting.
- Apply critical thought in analyzing content in terms of relevance and value to your audience.

Thinking Ahead: How to Fully "Get" a Story

As a reporter, you always need to get the story. However, the definition of "getting" the story differs from reporter to reporter. The central theme of this book is that getting the story means more than picking up facts and quotes as if they were items on a grocery list that you simply toss into your cart. Because you are the one "cooking the meal," so to speak, you need to understand how those items work to form the larger whole.

Getting the story means fully understanding your story and making sure that you can explain what is going on to your audience. It entails a lot of research beforehand, concentration during the entire reporting process and follow-up work once you begin writing. You have to understand how what you ask can lead to what your audience will know. You must be able to balance the perspective of your readers and viewers with that of the sources you will seek. In the end, you need to be both self-aware and aware of others as you attempt to put together your work as a journalist.

Learning how to think critically will make you a better journalist and help you not only get the story but also understand the story as you pursue it. **Critical thinking** often gets lost amid the time pressure of a 24/7 news-on-demand world. Unfortunately, with the deluge of information that comes at you in rapid-fire fashion and from the endless sea of "publishers" on the internet, understanding how to think critically has never been more important.

Critical thinking is a skill you can develop over time. Some people are naturally curious and have an intuitive sense of exactly what questions they need to ask. Others need time to come to grips with what they learned and make it part of the bigger picture. If you are the latter, don't worry. It doesn't mean you aren't or will never be a critical thinker. What it does mean is that you will likely need to practice critical-thinking skills a bit more in order to become better at it. The remainder of this chapter is geared toward helping you understand how to do that.

Bob Woodward (left) and Carl Bernstein, Washington Post staff writers who investigated the Watergate case, at their desk in the Post. As the reporters followed this difficult story, they relied on critical thinking as they determined what they could accurately report and what needed more work.

Bettmann/Getty Images

HOW DO WE THINK?

In their book "How Do Journalists Think," Holly Stocking and Paget Gross lay out a cognitive process by which journalists react to stimuli in their environment. The reporters then match those stimuli with previously understood categories they developed in their minds over time. In doing so, the journalists can use the old information stored in those categories to inform them about the new situation in front of them.

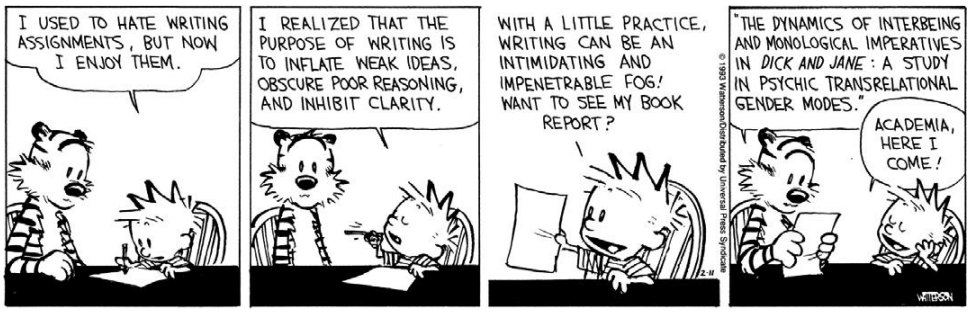
Perhaps this is a better way to look at it: Imagine your mind as a giant filing cabinet with millions of pieces of categorized information stored inside. When a term comes up, like "musician," you flip through your files quickly and see what you've categorized inside those files that fits that term. For some, it's country and western singers like Dolly Parton and Jason Aldean. For others, it's Post Malone and Halsey. For still others, it's the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. You then pull all the information from that file and use it to assess the current person being dubbed a "musician." Was there ever a time when your parents told you, "That's not music. That's garbage" when you were listening to something they didn't like? Their rationale comes from their own sense of what music is and is not.

Stocking and Gross note that the way journalists think and categorize and report is "fraught with bias." They argue that journalists need to do more to understand the process of how they categorize information and what the implications are for those cognitive shortcuts their minds take.[1] One good way to do this is to engage in a critical-thinking perspective. Because it's not possible to rewrite the way in which you think, instead this chapter will offer you suggestions on ways to think about how you think from a critical-thinking perspective. While this chapter is all about critical thinking, it is not here alone that we will engage in this process. This approach to thinking will be woven into each chapter of the book.

Defining Critical Thinking

The Foundation for Critical Thinking defines critical thinking as the art of analyzing and evaluating thought with a view to improving it. It is an ongoing process that provides individuals with the ability not only to examine a topic but also to reflect on how they come to understand it. In other words, it is a process, not a goal, that will perpetually provide individuals with the opportunity to see what they are doing, question why they are doing it and grow through that process.

In his essay on critical thinking, scholar Richard Paul writes that critical thinkers seek to improve thinking by analyzing their approach to thought and then using that process to upgrade their thinking. Unfortunately, Paul says, students at most colleges and universities do not get the chance to learn this way in the classroom. He notes that 97% of faculty who responded to a nationwide survey as far back as 1972 agreed that critical thinking was an important part of education. However, Paul also notes that education is still provided primarily by a series of lectures that



Don't try to snow your readers. The use of weak ideas and overblown jargon isn't helping anyone.

focus on the rote memorization of specific facts and the ability to regurgitate those facts when called upon.[2] While this is a bad thing for all education, it is particularly disturbing for those of us who teach in journalism, where thinking on the fly is crucial and the answers aren't on a Scantron sheet.

Learning How to Think

In his book "Thinking," Robert Boostrom outlines several cases in which students were accomplishing learning tasks but weren't thinking. One such case involved a conversation between Boostrom and his son, a middle school student. The boy was explaining that he needed to identify Thomas Jefferson in order to complete an assignment. When Boostrom suggested a few possibilities (signer of the Declaration of Independence, former president of the United States), his son explained that those answers were not correct. The boy then said that Jefferson was properly identified as the vice president under John Adams. When Boostrom asked how the boy came to this conclusion, his son explained that all he had to do was look through his textbook until he found Jefferson's name in bold and then copy down the phrase that followed.[3]

This example makes it clear that learning something is not the same as thinking, let alone engaging in critical thinking. Instead of examining why the "vice president" answer was the best answer, the boy simply knew that if he wanted to get credit for his homework, he needed to write it down. Many of the classroom experiences you have had to this point were likely similar in nature to what this boy experienced. You were told to memorize the states and their capitals. You were tested on whether you could remember the names or actions of characters in a play or novel. You had to complete timed tests based on applying specific mathematical formulas to a set of equations. While all of these activities give you knowledge, they don't make you think.

Memorization is not the enemy of thinking, but rather a complement to it in many ways. However, if you wish to succeed in journalism, you need to go beyond memorization and learn how to think critically about what you are doing, how you will go about doing it and why you are doing it in the first place.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF CRITICAL THOUGHT

In their volume on critical thinking, Joe Kinchloe and Danny Weil argue that critical thinkers possess "a radical humility" in which they are aware of the complex nature of life. They don't allow themselves to be limited by what they think

To become good at critical thinking, you need to practice it on a daily basis.
Godong/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

they know. Instead, they examine each situation as if it is a "great wide open" of possibilities.[4] Journalists who are good at what they do often approach their job this way and thus far exceed their less complex colleagues.

The question then becomes, how does one engage in critical thought and see these larger ideas in more comprehensive ways? Linda Elder and Richard Paul of the Foundation for Critical Thinking state that critical thought comes from reasoning. It is one thing to assert something, but it is quite another to be able to develop a logical framework from which one can make a clear and coherent point that can be defended against contradictory arguments. This approach to thinking comes from a well-trained mind, developed through practice and honed by challenge.

In other words, you learn how to do this through practice. Don't worry so much if you don't have a complete mastery of critical thinking right off the bat. Nothing you've ever done in life has come without some level of trial and error. For example, think all the way back to the first time you successfully tied your shoelaces. Whether you tried the "bunny ears" technique or the "loop, swoop and pull" method, you likely didn't get it right the first dozen times you tried. Then, finally, you found just enough loop and barely enough swoop that when you pulled, you got a partial knot that was hanging there by a thread. Still, you did it. The knots eventually improved until the point where tying your shoes became second nature. Chances are, you don't even remember the last time you did it or what you were thinking about at the time.

Critical thinking will eventually come to you as well, as long as you practice it.

HOW TO APPROACH A STORY AS A CRITICAL THINKER

A journalist zooms in on the action as part of a story that includes photography and writing. What the core of the story is and how best to tell it will be part of the critical-thinking process this reporter uses during the writing.
Iya Forbes/Moment/Getty Images

Researchers Susan Fiske and Shelly Taylor once noted that humans are cognitive misers; we like to expend as little energy as possible when we are asked to think. To conserve that mental energy, we draw on previous experiences, break things down to the simplest way to look at them and find

ways around hard thinking.[5] Even now, in your classes, it is likely that you're sitting back listening to a professor lecture. The professor is pouring information out and you are picking it up in dribs and drabs like a sponge. It is easy, it is simple and it is not what journalism is about.

Elder and Paul argue that critical thinking is the ability to ensure that you are using the best possible thinking measures in any situation in which you find yourself.[6] You want to figure out "the lay of the land" or better understand the entire puzzle. To do this, you need as much information as possible as you reason out how to approach a problem, such as how to write on a given topic or how to tell a specific story.

Perhaps a better way of explaining this is to understand what makes certain people good at a game like chess. Great chess players understand the moves each piece can make and understand what strengths and weaknesses are inherent to those pieces. In addition, they can see the whole board, much like how a conductor sees a whole orchestra or a quarterback sees the whole playing field. The great chess player not only can see what is happening, but understands what is likely to happen. Great players can see a few moves ahead and anticipate what they will see next.

Inferior players obsess about the pieces or become fixated on one portion of the board. They don't understand the entirety of the game well enough to make rational choices as to what to do several moves down the road and thus are stuck making simple decisions without looking ahead.

Good journalists are both proactive and reactive as they survey the chessboard that is their story. Rather than looking at the story as a single incident, good journalists look for patterns in behavior. They see what has happened before this moment in time and what ripples will continue to move outward in the future from this moment. To become good at critical thinking, you need to be prepared for what is likely to come next, adapt to changes that occur during the process and synthesize all of the incoming information into an overarching understanding of what is going on and why it matters.

A deeper look at content and questioning what you are told are both trademarks of good critical thinkers. In addition, the critical thinker:

- Raises vital questions and problems by coming to grips with the topic.
- Gathers and assesses relevant information.
- Thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing as need be their assumptions, implications and practical consequences.
- Communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

Let's consider each of those items in turn.

Raising Vital Questions by Coming to Grips With the Topic

Fully immersing yourself in a specific topic or area is one of the best ways to fully understand the stories on which you'll be asked to report. Some of the best bloggers are folks who focus on one issue: health care, politics or safety. Newspapers

often have beat reporters who cover a specific topic or geographic location. Beats for public safety, education, city government, religion, finance and sports are common in newspapers. If you examine some newspapers' bylines closely, you will notice that specific individuals tend to cover the same types of stories. Television stations, while often using the general assignment approach with their reporters, have journalists who cover specific time slots and certain parts of the coverage area. The media outlets do this because it gives the reporter a chance to develop relationships with sources through repeated contact.

One of the risks of this focus is that journalists can fall into patterns of coverage that allow them to create stories that look like they come off of an assembly line, each the same as the previous one with a comfortable narrative baked into each piece. The problem associated with this is when reporters fall into a rut with their work and don't question what it is that they are writing or why they aren't looking beyond the basic day-in, day-out coverage to inform their readers. Even when reporters find bigger-picture stories by seeing the individual stories that come out of a beat over time, it doesn't necessarily follow that they are engaging in high-level critical thought.

For example, let's look at the case of a school district that wants to build a high school. To get the money needed to construct the school, the district must put a referendum on the ballot and ask the public to approve the borrowing of $20 million. The referendum has failed three times before, and the current school continues to fall into disrepair. Each time, the vote is approximately 60/40 against the project.

A solid reporter can look at the issue and note that it's been up three times before and failed all three times. It is a simple case of reviewing previous stories, talking to the school board members and interviewing district citizens about the plan. The story is important, but the author is failing to come to grips with the topic.

What makes the people vote against the project? Is there a particular aspect of the plan that people think is not worth the cost? Is that Olympic-class swimming pool that adds $2 million to the price tag a real thorn in the side of people who voted it down? How about the $3 million sports complex for the football program? Are people dissatisfied with the costs of things they don't believe are tied to academics?

A story that digs into the people and groups that opposed the project could reveal if there is one key thing, like the pool or the sports complex, that led to the referendum's failure. On the other hand, it might be something else entirely that nobody was looking at, such as a collection of people on fixed incomes who did not believe they could afford to pay any additional taxes. It might be a group of people who live in town, but send their children to a private school and fear improvements at the public high school could undermine enrollment in their educational academy.

A data-driven story would compare the costs of this referendum with those put forth by other nearby towns and cities. Showing readers what they will get for the cost of the new school compared with other approaches might improve their opinion of the project ahead of the next petition for funding. Conversely, it might reveal that the costs of the proposed project are too high compared with other similar school districts, thus forcing the school board to rethink its approach to the funding proposal.

On the other hand, who is voting for the plan? What do they see as the benefits of the new school? Will it provide better overall education and improve the

community, or will it give students something they can't get right now? Is it cheaper to build than to renovate the existing school?

A story on who these people are could create a sense of understanding between the two sides, perhaps persuading people who voted against the proposal to back it. Or, it could showcase something about the proposal that will diminish support for it, as those who voted for it now understand an ulterior motive of those who drove the proposal forward. Again, a data-driven story could showcase to what degree school improvements lead to better towns, smarter kids or higher property values. Conversely, the story might show that money spent in this fashion is as fiscally responsible as throwing gold down a toilet.

Gathering and Assessing Relevant Information

Usually, journalists are pretty good at gathering information. We go back through previous stories on a topic, read relevant documents on the topic, ask questions of sources and get as much information as we can about the upcoming event.

In his book "Newsthinking," Bob Baker notes that skilled reporters have a sense of what they will see when they attend a meeting, cover a fire or interview a politician. They have a sense about what makes the story newsworthy, and that sense helps them break down the story into simple pieces. They then develop a checklist of sorts, which helps them determine what information they have and what they need to make the story complete.[7]

However, gathering information is only half of the job. Assessing the information is the other half, and it matters more. In assessing the information, we allow ourselves to think about the story and what it is really going to tell people. Even more, it gives us a chance to see if what we have gathered makes sense.

Fairness and balance are two important aspects of journalism, but they should not prevent you from thinking critically about the story at hand. A quote often attributed to journalism educators at the University of Sheffield captures this perfectly: "If someone says it's raining outside and another person says it's dry, it's not your job to quote them both. Your job is to look out the window and find out which one is true." In other words, don't just take what everyone tells you as gospel and pour it all into your story. Think about what you were told, determine what makes the most sense and get to the heart of the story.

Let's say you're doing a story on a city council's decision to increase taxes to fund a public park. You've got a direct split on the issue, with five council members voting each way on it. When you start to question people about their position, chances are, most of them have a pretty polished answer as to why they support or don't support the tax

Gathering information requires you to research your topic and interview key sources. How you do this will determine the overall quality of your work.

Wavebreakmedia Ltd UC11/Alamy Stock Photo

increase. For those who support it, they might say, "Our children are our most precious resource. They need to be able to experience things that this park can provide." For those against the tax, they could tell you something along the lines of "This tax places an undue financial burden on the citizens of this city."

Good reporters know they need to get quotes from both groups on this. An even better reporter would talk to folks who aren't on the council about their feelings on these issues. However, a reporter who engages in critical thinking breaks out of the mold and questions the underlying assumptions in this story. What is an "undue burden" in the minds of those people? How much will this tax increase really cost citizens? How many kids will this park likely serve? Even if the cost is low, if no one uses it, does the park have value? What happened the last time a city built a park or raised a tax? Did the citizenry end up in the poorhouse?

There are dozens of other questions that could come up through this process of analysis, but the big thing to keep in mind is that you need to look beyond the simple aspects of the well-polished answers and get some bigger questions on the table. Sometimes, the end result is that the story is very simple: some people like the park, others don't. However, you won't know that until you start asking more complex questions.

Thinking Open-Mindedly

It is a good idea to come to a meeting, a speech or a news conference with some sort of idea as to what is likely to happen and what it will mean. That's what pre-reporting does for you. That said, you need to think for yourself and adapt to the situation. In "Newsthinking," Baker notes that good journalists tailor their approach to the circumstances surrounding the story. Journalists need to improvise and adapt to what is going on so they can make it mean something to the audience.

When we take on stories, journalists often ask, "What do I want to tell the readers?" If you really want to do quality work, you need to realize that your story isn't all about you or what you want. Instead, you need to ask yourself, "What would I want to know most if I were reading this?" or "What would my readers need to know for this story to have value to them?" This means reacting to changes that occur in front of you, reassessing the value of the information you gather as you continue to report and keeping an eye on the best possible story at all times.

If you attend a meeting and you plan to write a story on how the city council will approve a plan to build a skating rink, you obviously need to know all you can about that area, the plan, the cost, the council's feelings on the plan and so forth. However, you also can't get tunnel vision and focus solely on that idea. If someone takes the podium and expresses disgust at the way in which a developer has polluted the city's rivers or if a council member resigns in protest over a proposal to ban smoking from local restaurants, you can't just stay focused on the skating rink. You've got to think fast and get on these other developments.

Communicating Effectively With Others

As we noted earlier, good journalists always want to tell stories that matter to their audience members. The ability to do so goes beyond finding the stories that