

WRITING NEWS

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There's no "I" in NEWS

"I" and "you" are two words that should NEVER appear in a newspaper, except within in a quote from a source. In a news story, anything outside of a quote MUST be fact, or supported by a statement actually made by a source (it goes without saying we do NOT fabricate quotes).

Example:

John Q. Interview says, "I think education is worthless, and all funding should be cut."

INCORRECT WRITEUP:

While John Q. Interview says he thinks education is worthless, I disagree completely, and so should you.

CORRECT WRITEUP:

John Q. Interview is against funding education. "I think education is worthless, and all funding should be stopped."

INCORRECT WRITEUP:

John Q. Interview is strongly against education. "I think education is worthless, and all funding should be cut." *Why is this incorrect? It uses the word "strongly," which is a judgment that cannot be directly supported by his statement. Had he said "I am strongly against education.." that would have been acceptable.*

News is purely about fact

News stories can be given an angle, however, resist the temptation to inject personal opinion. Instead, find sources to give quotes that support (or oppose) a specific position and print THOSE as fact. A truly GOOD news story attempts to present BOTH sides.

Example:

Reporter Sally Scoop decides to cover a story on the decision to put additional parking on campus. However, she herself thinks the location is inconvenient, and a bad idea.

INCORRECT APPROACH:

The new parking lot proposed by the administration is a poor solution to the parking shortage. There are many students against the proposal. The new parking lot proposal is just a bad idea all around. *This is rife with judgment without justification. Even if there were interviews that support it, this is the reporter's opinion until quotes are used to support positions.*

CORRECT APPROACH:

Students oppose the proposed parking lot as a solution to the parking shortage on campus. “It’s too far away, and won’t have enough spots,” said Jim Student, representing the sentiments of several other students. However, not all students agreed with that. “It’s better than what we have now, and it attempts to address the issue,” said John Parker. “It was the most inexpensive, viable solution we could find,” said Anne Murray, vice president for Student Affairs.

Note: This implies I actually talked to Jim, John, and Anne, and found the students’ opinions represented by their quotes based on other students I talked to.

News cannot be investigated and written from the Internet

It’s altogether too easy to sit in front of a computer screen, or even with copies of local/national papers, and piece together a story based on the facts contained within. It’s also very poor journalism. A real news story attempts to report on events that affect the readership directly. This means capturing stories in such a way as to be relevant to your readership.

Example:

A story is needed on the presidential candidates, and their views on education. The story is assigned to Marvin Martian, who promptly pulls up the candidates’ Web sites, CNN, the New York Times, and reads several articles, stories and ideas.

INCORRECT APPROACH:

Alexander Hamilton, Democratic candidate for President, is in favor of increasing taxes slightly and increasing funding for education. “Without schooling, we cannot compete in a global market,” Hamilton says in a key statement on his Web site. Thomas Jefferson, Republican Candidate for President, offers a different approach. Jefferson supports increased privatization of education, saying it would reduce the overall load on public school, thereby freeing up resources and making for a more effective system. *Why is this incorrect? There’s nothing in here that can’t be read on a Web site. My readers won’t read this in my paper; if they do; they’ll simply see it as a cheap repackage worth nothing.*

CORRECT APPROACH:

Several students reacted Thursday to Democratic Presidential Candidate Alexander Hamilton’s stance on education. “I think he’s right on, public schools are in dire need of more funding,” said Jeremy Irons, 18-year-old HVCC freshman. Local public school officials also agreed. “There’s no way we can move forward without increasing resources, and protecting these kids,” said Charles Barkley, principal of Lansingburgh Elementary. “Right here at home, we’re not getting what we need, and Hamilton would fix that.” Not everyone agreed. “I’d rather see [Republican presidential candidate] Thomas Jefferson’s approach, because it takes away the burden from poor schools trying to raise rich kids,” said Preston Peeper, 21-year-old HVCC senior and political science major. *Again. Balanced. Both sides are represented. The story is relevant because local people react, and demonstrate the local impact of a federal story.*

News means getting out there and asking questions

We can't theorize on what people think and feel, or hope we will find out what's going on. We only know what WE think and feel, but when we're writing a new story, our opinion doesn't count. News happens everywhere BUT the newsroom, so get out there!

Example:

Four staff writers are sitting in the office when suddenly five public safety officers drive up in three vehicles, jump out of the vehicles, and race into the building directly across the campus quad.

INCORRECT ACTION:

"Wow, I wonder what just happened," says one student. "I don't know, maybe we'll hear something about it later," says another. "Yeah, we can call Public Safety tomorrow if we don't hear anything. What are we doing for lunch, I'm hungry?" says a third.

CORRECT ACTION:

One student grabs a camera, another student grabs a notebook, and all four immediately race over to the building. They clearly identify themselves as members of the student press, and start asking questions of anyone they can find – public safety officers, nearby witnesses (students, staff, and faculty). They write down everything they can, take pictures of everything they can see, and after things quiet down, return to the newsroom.

News reporting requires valid information, and lots of it, and reporters can't be shy.

One of the most critical things to do when interviewing someone for a story is get their vital information. Name, age, address, contact information, and position that make them "qualified" to speak on a subject. This could mean they are a vice president of a college, a witness to an event, an expert on a specific subject, or even just a neighbor who knew a person.

Example:

A story is done on a fire on campus and three people are interviewed as witnesses to what happened.

INCORRECT ACTION:

Only first names are recorded, along with quotes regarding the fire. *Why is this a problem? What if later on, follow-up questions need to be asked about the event? There is no way to get in contact with the people.*

CORRECT ACTION:

The first questions should always be: "What is your full name, and how do you spell it? How old are you? What is your official title? What is your current address?" *Some of these pieces do change a little depending on the story. For some type of official (elected, appointed, corporate, etc.) Age and address is not necessary, but always helpful. Official title may mean neighbor, or friend, too, but then age and address are required.*

Objectivity Guidelines

- Stick to the facts.
- Be neutral. In a news story that's supposed to be objective, *keep your own opinions out of it.*
- Be fair. Present all sides as best you can, giving people a chance to respond to charges or criticism.
- Be impersonal in a hard-news story. Don't try to sound creative or original or write in your own unique "voice."

ed·i·to·ri·al·ize

intr.v. ed·i·to·ri·al·ized, ed·i·to·ri·al·iz·ing,

ed·i·to·ri·al·iz·es

1. To express an opinion in or as if in an editorial.
2. To present an opinion in the guise of an objective report.

edi·tori·al·i·zation n.

edi·tori·al·izer n.

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Main Entry: ed·i·to·ri·al·ize

Pronunciation: \,e-də-'tôr-ē-ə-,līz\

Function: intransitive verb

Inflected Form(s): ed·i·to·ri·al·ized; ed·i·to·ri·al·iz·ing

Date: 1856

1 : to express an opinion in the form of an editorial

2 : to introduce opinion into the reporting of facts

3 : to express an opinion (as on a controversial issue)

— ed·i·to·ri·al·i·za·tion \-,tôr-ē-ə-lə-'zā-shən\ noun

— ed·i·to·ri·al·iz·er noun

from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/editorializing>

edi·to·ri·al·ize (-īz')

transitive verb, intransitive verb editorialized -·ized', editorializing -·iz'·ing

to express editorial opinions about (something)

to put editorial opinions into (a factual news article, etc.)

Related Forms:

editorialization ed'i·to'·ri·ali·za'tion noun

editorializer ed'i·to'·ri·al·iz'er noun

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Seattle Times accuracy verification guidelines

Statement of responsibility

Any staff member who generates content for The Seattle Times is responsible for the accuracy of that content. The person primarily responsible for gathering the information (reporter, photographer, researcher, graphic artist or editor) must take every reasonable step to verify the accuracy of information before submitting it for publication. The responsibility to verify information as part of the reporting process has always been a fundamental tenet of journalism.

That becomes even more imperative in the age of the Internet, when reports go directly from

reporter to seattletimes.com, without the usual editing backstops. Editors should randomly but regularly double-check information and ask news gatherers what was done to verify their report.

CQ policy

Factual information that is deemed especially crucial to the credibility of our report or that, if incorrect, could cause particular confusion or inconvenience to the public or harm to the subject of a published report, bears a special burden of accuracy. To that end, the following information must be CQd by the primary reporter (or photographer, researcher, graphic artist or editor) as a formal statement of verification. If the information is verified by someone else, the CQ should include that person's name.

- Phone numbers (verified by calling from final text file, not notes, press releases or story drafts)
- Website addresses (logged on from final text file)
- Times and dates (include date in notes mode next to a day reference)
- Unusual, variable, unfamiliar or hyphenated name spellings (e.g., Michele/Michelle, Marion/Marian, Jon. de Leon, Banaszynski, Matassa Flores). Don't assume you know the spelling of a common name or just ask another staffer. Look it up.
- Mathematical conclusions or terms (ex: percent/percentile, median/average)

In addition, news gatherers should double-check the following information:

- Numbers
- Titles
- Institutional names and acronyms

Verification tips

- Keep a checklist posted of information to be regularly double-checked
- Double-check information through a secondary source whenever possible
- Don't assume officials, reports or press releases have provided accurate information

- Spell names back using some form of letter sounds (ex: Apple, Boy, Charlie)
- Have a primary source/subject print their name in your notebook

Practicing bias-free journalism:

A thinking guide for working journalists (from the Seattle Times)

What is my perspective?

- How do my values or life experiences affect how I approach a story (verbal or visual)?
- What steps have I taken to ensure those values or experiences don't unfairly influence my story?

What are my motives?

- Do I have self-interest in or strong opinions about a story, subject or source?
- What steps have I taken to disclose or detach from any personal motives or interests?

What are my assumptions?

- Have I taken a mental inventory of my own knowledge about or reaction to a subject?
- What have I done to ensure that my assumptions don't unfairly limit or influence my story?

Who are the stakeholders?

- How might various members of the public be affected by my story?
- What steps have I taken to discover and address their perspectives?

How deep is my reporting?

- What questions or knowledge would various members of the public have about a subject?
- What steps have I taken to report beyond my comfort zone, and to develop sources with varying perspectives on an issue?

How impartial is my story?

- How might my story be perceived by various members of the public?
- What have I done to ensure that my story is free of loaded language or

unintended
slants?

- What steps have I taken to exercise independent judgment, detached from any agenda?
- What have I done to ensure my actions and work are free of the appearance of bias?
- Will my work process, and story, stand up to professional and public scrutiny?