

# **Journalism 101 <Wby's way>**

## **The Basics**

Your job as a Baptist journalist is to write articles and take photos that show what God is doing with and through His Southern Baptists in Michigan and around the world, and how He is doing it.

Develop your observation skills. Note things that for whatever reason seem interesting and/or unusual to you, such as a 10-year-old drummer at the church you visit. Make a note of it, check on it, and see if you can enterprise an article out of it.

### **You might be enterprising several articles each year.**

Your assignment may be couched in very general terms – “I heard First Baptist is planning on building; check into it” – or very specific terms: “First Church has a car ministry. Find out everything you can about it – how long it’s been going on, who started it, why it was started, how it works, who’s ministered to, and be sure you get a quote from both those who do the ministry, and those who are helped by it. You will probably get more specific direction early on, and less later, when you know what’s expected.

## **Pre-reporting**

- Jot down questions in your reporter’s notebook so you don’t forget to ask them.
- Make appointments ASAP. This is CRUCIAL. You’re going to need to juggle your schedule with your interviewee’s, and that might take a bit, so work it out NOW rather than deadline day, when it may be too late. As soon as you have your assignment, MAKE THE CALL – get the appointment.

## **Reporting/Photographing**

- You’ll probably need background info to add richness to your article. Figure out what you want, and where to go to get it. For example, you’re writing an article about a new church starting in the association. How long has it been since a church was started in this association? Good question. Where could you find the answer?
- On the other hand, you’re learning to be a professional journalist. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. We WANT to help. Just don’t want until deadline day to ask for it. Ask as soon as you have a question you can’t figure out an answer for. In other words, keep the information flowing. Sooner gives you time; later makes everyone crunch and editors don’t like unnecessary crunching. They get enough necessary crunching!

## Interviewing

- When you set up your interview, make sure you and the person you are going to talk with agree on the time, AND day, AND date. Repeat it to them. “Okay; I’ll be here at 11 a.m. next Wednesday, Jan. 9.”
- Go prepared to the interview. Make sure you have two working pens and your reporter’s notebook, plus your camera and extra batteries. If you want to tape the interview, make sure you have extra batteries. ALWAYS take notes, whether or not you tape the interview.
- Maintain eye contact with the interviewee. Can’t write while you’re talking? Practice by taking notes while you’re watching television. At the least, look up and down. Don’t just look down. If you look confident in what you’re doing, the interviewee will be more comfortable in giving information to you.
- GOOD HINT: Before you go on the assignment, write your questions on the first page of your reporter’s notebook, and start with Who? What? Where? When? How? Why? Each on a separate line. Then write down your other questions. Before you conclude the interview, flip back to those first pages of questions and quickly read through them to make sure you got all your questions answered, saying, “Let me check. Did I ask you everything I wanted to?” That will give you time to read.
- Thank the interviewee for his time, and ask if it’s okay to call back if anything else comes up in the writing. That leaves the door open for a return call. If you do this, you won’t seem like a dunce if you do call, because you’re just doing what you said you might do.
- When you go into the interview, be prepared to start with minimal fussing. I like to walk in with notebook and pen in hand. BTW: Note on the front cover the date and subject of the interview. If you don’t, you’ll waste HOURS looking for the notes for that interview, sez one who has had to do just that too many times.
- Start out the interview with a couple sentences of small talk, probably from something you see in the office – a photograph, degree, book or geegaw from China. Only a couple of sentences, though, just enough to be friendly and for both of you to exercise your voices. Then say, “Thanks for agreeing to interview with me. I wanted to talk with you about <whatever>.”

## Pre-writing

Okay. The interview is done, as is the supplementary reporting. Back at your computer, remind yourself of the assignment parameters, and review the materials you have gathered. You may want to make some notes, such as a list of items/points/quotes/etc. you want to be sure are included in the article. This is where you’ll see if you’re missing anything you need for the article. If so, go get it.

## Writing

At the top of your blank document, write a short headline. It doesn't need to be a grabber; it just needs to tell the editor what this article is about. "Saginaw youth enjoy camp" isn't a great headline, but it does tell the editor that this article is about Saginaw youth and camp.

Under the headline, write By <your name the way you want it in the paper>. Notice that capital "B." And write your name the same every time. Sarah Sue Hudson and Sarah Landry Hudson. Are these the same people? Don't confuse. Use the same name every time.

Under your byline, write Special to Baptist Beacon. BTW – save at least two copies of each article that appears in print. If you don't, you'll wish later you had. Double space, then type the city/association/whatever IN ALL CAPS followed by a space, long dash, another space, and start the lede.

How to write? Good writing is good thinking. I start from the lede and work my way through the article. Others get the info down and put a lede on it when they're done. I might spend four hours on the lede, but really it's not just the lede. I'm thinking about the whole article. Good writing is good thinking. If I am truly stuck, after all that thinking, I write the word "A" and ask myself, "A what?" Voila! A lede emerges.

At this point I save my article on my desktop as a short phrase that will remind me what the article is about ie: SaginawYouth020313.doc. If you're consistent in the way you name articles, you'll find life goes much easier for you. BTW, the photos need to have the same name ie: SaginawYouth020313p1.jpg.

Think of your article as a sketch, rather than as a finely-detailed oil painting. You don't need every detail in the article – it's interesting he was valedictorian of his senior class, but is that pertinent to this article? – but you DO need to answer every question as it comes up. Don't wait three or four sentences. The next sentence is best; second sentence is tolerated if everything is flowing smoothly. For example, "Johnson was one of three boaters to have survived the storm." You need to tell me about the other two, now that you've brought them up. If you don't want to talk about them, don't bring them up!

Your main job at this point is to satisfy your reader, and your editor is your first reader.

When you're done with the article, save it again, then copy it and paste it into the body of an email to me: beacon@bscm.org. Don't send any more than 3 photos in any one email, and two is a better max.

## Writing Formula

The best writing involves as many as possible of the reader's senses: hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, tasting.

The best writing involves the reader's emotions.

The best writing involves the best thinking.

The best writing is clear, concise and powerful.

The *Baptist Beacon* journalist is an observer, and not a participant. Don't write "The pastor believes ..." because you don't know what he believes. You only know what he tells you he believes. Don't write "It was a perfect summer's day" because that is a value judgment. Either quote someone saying that, or describe how it is a perfect day.

### Here is the basic outline for articles in news publications:

- The Lede – first paragraph (graf): 25 words or fewer. Purpose: to grab the attention of the reader. If your lede isn't good, your reader will not keep reading even if your article otherwise includes valuable information.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> graf – 35 to 50 words, shorter is better. Purpose: to provide more information and keep the reader's attention. Usually includes whichever of the Who, What, When Where that weren't included in the first graf.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> graf – usually a two-sentence quote to humanize the story and add the sense of hearing. 50 words max.
- 4<sup>th</sup> graf – the "nut" graf, shows the reader what the rest of the article is going to be about. In effect, it's the story in a nutshell. If you find yourself having problems writing your article, it's probably because you don't have a nut graf.
- 5<sup>th</sup> graf and those following – tell the story in organized fashion. This is the Why and/or How part of the article.

## Writing Techniques

### Be Concise

Thomas Jefferson once said, "The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do." The goal of news writing is to be as concise and clear as possible.

“Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will certainly misunderstand them.” – John Ruskin.

### **Most readers will peruse a news article only once**

Make sure your article consists of relevant facts and interesting details that people would most likely not get on their own.

“Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism, what will be grasped at once.” – Cyril Connolly.

### **Guidelines for writing effective articles** (from *Reporting for the Media* by Fred Fedler)

- Be concise; it makes it easy for the public to read and understand.
- Be specific – readers should be able to visualize the events.
- Use strong, active verbs
- Emphasize the magnitude of the story, to explain the impact the event had or will have on people sets up an emotional response, which is a mark of good newswriting.
- Stress the unusual.
- Be objective and attribute opinions. Gather and convey the facts. Don't interpret, comment or advocate.
- Strive for simplicity – be clear, simple and to the point.

### **Doublecheck even the simplest of names.**

This is career-breaking important. A journalist is only allowed one misspelled name every 10 years – at the most. Remember that the paper's reputation for accuracy slips with every error made by a reporter. Don't give an editor a reason to fire you.

### **Content editing**

Your editor will be asking several questions when she is reading the article you turn in.

- Does the lede make me want to read the second graf?
- Is the article organized correctly? Does it have a focus or does it wander?
- Do the words show, or just tell, the story?
- Does the writing flow smoothly from one point to the next?

- Is the article fair and balanced? Does it show both side of the story?
- Does the article make sense?
- Will readers respond appropriately to the article? (Love or hate are okay; “Who cares?” is not okay.)

The best thing you can do for your career as a journalist is to LISTEN to the editor’s comments. Then, back at your computer, figure out why the editor said what she said. Think of the editor as a “first reader.” If the editor doesn’t catch weaknesses, a slew of subscribers – and future employers – will.

Remember that this is a God-provided training time in your life. You do not have to prove you are the best writer who ever lived. Take advantage of every bit of direction that comes your way. All of it will help you become even better at using one of God’s gifts – and who knows where that will lead!

Remember also that you are a person created specifically and uniquely by God for His purposes. He wants you to be the best you can be, and the way He designed for gold to be refined – improved – was by fire. So take the heat with joy!

Also remember that you and your writing are NOT one and the same. You are you. God created you. You created your article. See? Two separate entities. So don’t take correction negatively. Realize your work is being corrected as one way of helping you develop even more of the skill God gifted you with.

### **Copy-Editing**

Copy editors are responsible for catching spelling errors, grammar issues, cut-off words, run-on sentences, anything that doesn’t make sense, and much more.

Step One, of course, is that writers turn in clean copy, error-free copy. Doublecheck the spelling of that name, and then check it again. Do the math over, just to make sure. Look at what the spell-checker tells you, but don’t be satisfied with that. Read each word separately and within context. “Out” is a word, but if what you want that word to be is “ought,” then you’re at the least being not clear.

### **Copy editing basic primer**

- Abbreviate months when they have dates, but not if they don’t. November 2009 but Nov. 10, 2009.
- Do not use “th” after a date, as in Nov. 10<sup>th</sup>; it’s just Nov. 7.
- Time is written this way: 9:30 a.m. 11 p.m.
- Rule is time, day, date, place – 7 p.m. Wednesday, June 10, in the lobby of Grand Theater.

- Spell out days of week; Abbreviate all months but May, June, July.
- Use AP Style Guide for journalistic abbreviations of states. It's Minn., not Mn.
- Use last name on second reference.
- Do not use "Dr." as a title. Use whatever the title is after the name ie: John Smith, DMin.
- Doublecheck all names – of cities and states as well as people and buildings.
- Doublecheck the math.
- Attribute all facts. Attribute everything! You are not the sources of the information; state who is ie: the new computers will arrive Thursday, Schmidt said.
- Use "said" most all the time. Don't get clever with "commented, noted" etc. Okay to use "explained" or "continued" for variety.
- Rule of thumb is proper noun, pronoun, proper noun, pronoun.
- Watch those pronouns; they quite easily lead to lack of clarity.
- People do not believe, think, feel, understand. They SAY they do.
- Do not editorialize. If a value judgment is made, make sure you attribute that. "It was a hot day" is a value judgment. "The courthouse thermometer read 105 degrees" is a fact.
- Reporters are observers, not participants. Write always as if watching the action, even if you're a central player.

### **Cutlines**

Write two-sentence cutlines, in present tense.

### **The Command, and the reason for it**

Go now, write it on a tablet before them, inscribe it on a scroll, that it may be a witness forever. – Isaiah 30:8