

Asimov's Dirty Dozen Elements Of a Standard News Story

By Nanette Asimov, San Francisco Chronicle

The following are general guidelines for writing a basic news article. Each number represents a new paragraph. Their order is somewhat flexible. Some of the elements may be augmented. Some may be dropped, though never the lede* or nut graf. These are not firm rules, but the ingredients of a successful story.

** Note some strange spellings, such as "lede" (the first sentence) and "graf" (paragraph). Certain code words date back to the days of hot lead type, when intentional misspellings were used to communicate with printers in the backshop. This way, printers could recognize instructions meant for them, and would know not to let them be printed in the newspaper.*

1. First sentence ("lede")

Make the first sentence the NEWS. No dilly-dallying. News is the newest thing. Was there a vote? Did someone die? Was someone appointed? Was there a protest? Is big money being offered? Wasted? Time for background later. Lede should be SHORT, yet must tell who, what, when and where. Don't overload it with details.

EXAMPLE: The San Francisco school board voted unanimously last night to raise the hurdle for high school graduation by adding more mandatory math and science classes.

IMPORTANT: Recognize news; don't bury it. Sometimes the news is more than one thing. If the teachers union had threatened to sue the board, then your lede must include that key fact in a single, tight sentence: Despite the threat of a lawsuit by teachers, the San Francisco school board voted unanimously last night to require more math and science classes in high school.

2. Second sentence gives more details about the first. Save details for the second graf. Avoid packing them into the lede:

EXAMPLE: The board voted 7 to 0 on the proposal by Superintendent Jill Rojas to require high school students to take a third year of math and science; a second year of foreign language and the arts; more health classes and fewer electives, such as wood shop.

3. Sexy quote.

Select the quote that best illustrates the points made in the lede and second sentence. When out gathering news, a reporter should remember to listen for that "sexy quote," or ask the question that is likely to produce it.

EXAMPLE: "It's shameful to think that in the 21st century, a student can graduate from a California high school after completing only two years of math and two years of science," Rojas told the board. "Four-year colleges do not seek to admit students with such minimal requirements. Doors are closed to some students before they are 18 years old."

4. The "nut graf."

In this essential paragraph -- or paragraphs -- the writer steps back from the immediate events to provide context. This graf tells how the current news fits into the larger picture. It tells what's been happening lately or elsewhere, so the reader knows why story matters.

EXAMPLE: The school board's action mirrors efforts around the country to raise academic standards. Embarrassed by American students' poor performance on international achievement tests in recent years, and pressured by colleges to produce better-prepared graduates, public educators nationwide are turning back

to basics. And that means students everywhere are facing more lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic -- and less art, music and perennial favorites like wood shop.

5. Summary of what's to come.

Here the writer lays out the varying points of view, foreshadowing the details of the rest of the story. This summary is key to fairness: No one's point of view is paramount if all are summarized toward the beginning of the story.

EXAMPLE: At the school board meeting in San Francisco, several teachers said the plan was long overdue. But others were furious. Many who teach the highest levels of math and science predicted that the quality of their rigorous courses will inevitably be watered down if students of all levels are forced to take them. A number of teachers also warned that dropout rates would rise if art and shop classes are neglected.

6. Supporting quotes, in backwards order.

This quote should support the last point of view summarized in the previous graf.

EXAMPLE: "I'm very worried," said Sylvester Smith, a 10th-grade English teacher. "You board members don't realize that wood shop keeps kids coming to school."

7. Transition, then another supporting quote.

Quotes from two people should never be back to back. A transition is needed as a bridge from one idea to another. Then follow up with the relevant quote. Quotes are usually in a separate paragraph to set them off.

EXAMPLE: For months, several of the district's top teachers have spoken out against the superintendent's plan to raise graduation requirements. At school board meetings, those teachers have said the plan looks better on paper than in reality because many students are ill- prepared to do well in higher-level math and science classes.

"This won't help poor students do better," said Jon James, a chemistry teacher. "It will hurt the students who do well."

8. Transition, then final supporting quote.

Notice that the supporting quotes go in reverse order from the way they were summarized in #5, the summary graf.

EXAMPLE: Not all teachers opposed the plan, and some were downright enthusiastic.

"I teach in middle school," said Mary Mustard, "and I think the new requirements will give students a reason to study harder in the earlier grades."

9. Real-time color, anecdotes, examples.

This need not be confined to this section. "Color" means brief descriptions of sights, sounds and mood.

EXAMPLE: School board members debated the graduation plan for almost 90 minutes. Restless students, teachers and parents waited for the vote, the sound of their private conversations rising with their impatience. As the din from their chatter grew louder, board members called for quiet and even ejected some offenders from the auditorium.

10. The past

Is there additional history that can help the reader understand more about the subject? Has this sort of thing happened before? How is this time different or similar?

EXAMPLE: It has been 20 years since San Francisco's high school graduation standards were raised and 10 years since they were lowered again.

11. The future

Wind up the story by looking toward the future. What is the next step? Or if an anecdote is used up toward the top, a useful technique is to refer back to the beginning, or to the anecdote, to look to the future.

EXAMPLE: After the vote, a delighted Superintendent Rojas said she plans to propose new academic requirements in the lower grades, too.

12. The kicker

Usually a short, high-impact sentence. It may be a poignant or telling quote. In some stories, the kicker can be something that brings the reader back to an idea or anecdote told at the beginning. Or it may be a surprising bit of information that works best at the end.

EXAMPLE: Turning to a group of supportive teachers who lingered to chat, Rojas suggested that calculus be taught as early as the fourth grade. The happy teachers frowned collectively. "Well," said Rojas. "It's just an idea."