
NEW NARRATIVES '24

Writing guide

LEARN BY DOING

Once you have watched this [Tipping Points webinar](#) – taking notes while you're at it – you'll probably wonder how to start writing your story. Your mind might feel bombarded. There will be so much to digest – far too much to cover in a story. What are you going to leave out? What are you going to include?

Our guess is that you'll probably soon be staring at a blank screen, wondering how to begin. You might feel that all the notes you took on the key points you gleaned from the webinar are important and relevant and must be included in your story. If so, you are on the wrong track, big time!

So, our advice is that before you actually start writing your story, first jot down:

- Your story idea in a nutshell (2 – 3 sentences).
- Why you think your story idea is exciting, unique, relevant, timely or newsworthy, i.e. why it matters and why it matters now (3 – 5 sentences).

Answering these questions will help you structure your thoughts before you start writing. It's also helpful to discuss your thoughts with someone else, who ideally is not particularly interested in what discussed in the webinar.

Why do we suggest this? Well, for starters, if you are able to spark the curiosity of someone who has previously, excuse my French, cared a rat's ass about the issues discussed in the webinar, it is likely your readers will have a similar response.

So, spend some time, probably at least half an hour thinking through several possible story ideas, and bounce these ideas off someone else. In a traditional newsroom that someone would be the editor or news editor. The last thing editors want is for you to spend hours writing up a story that few people will have an interest in reading. But, this is not a traditional newsroom. So, who is the best person to bounce your ideas off?

Often, the best choice is a child someone between the ages of about eight and 12. Why so? Well, first, kids have inquiring minds, innately so. That's a faculty we lose as we get older. Second, if a child gets bored by what you have to say, inevitably your readers will too!

No kid around to share your thoughts with? Chat to a friend or member of your family. Find out what piques their curiosity when you tell them about the webinar. Ideally, you want to tell them something that makes them exclaim out loud: *"Gosh! My, oh my! Hawu! or*

Whew!” Then, jot down whatever it was you told them that elicited such responses, and start writing, using this as the bare bones around which you can flesh out your story.

It’s all about finding your story angle and the narrative hooks that will draw your reader in.

And, once you start writing, avoid like a plague, working off the transcript of the webinar. Although useful to refer to in checking quotes and context, an hour-long speech or webinar if carefully transcribed can easily run from 7,000 to 10,000 words. We are in the realms of the novella here. This won’t do.

Rather sketch an outline of your story, and start writing, mostly from memory, filling in the spaces of your outline. The reason for this is because the stuff that stayed in your mind is probably what really counts. If something intrigued you and stayed with you such that you wanted to know more, it's likely true for your readers too.

And keep your story short and simple. As Roving Reporters writing mentor, Matthew Hattingh, observes below, most people don’t have the patience to trawl through long documents. They want the essentials.

TOSS OUT THE REDUNDANT STUFF

So, what do you leave out? Simple. Think of it like carving an elephant from a big block of wood. You remove all the bits that aren’t elephant and what’s left is the good stuff — pure pachyderm.

OK we are being a little facetious, but there is a germ of truth here: remove the redundant material. Or we might quote Elmore Leonard, the bestselling novelist, who advises would-be writers to, “Try to leave out all the parts readers skip.”

In other words, don’t write down the worthy things the speaker says just because it somehow seems the proper thing to do. Rather, tune your ear in for anything new, unusual or offbeat.

This might be some fresh development, a new way of looking at an old subject or sometimes a lively or colourful turn of phrase. Include these things in your story. — Matthew Hattingh.

MAKE THE WRITING YOUR OWN

And make the writing your own, says Jive Media Africa writing coach, Yves Vanderhaeghen.

Help the reader by engaging with the topic. Make the writing your own, and not just a transcription of a conversation or presentation. Verbatim reporting is the domain of stenographers and digital recorders. The art of a good report is to identify a theme that has emerged from the material. That is your news sense at work. Once you have zeroed in on the most important theme (which does not have to be the dominant or obvious one, which your reader may not be interested in) assemble all the other relevant information around the theme. Some information will get the

chop in the process. Be sure that it can be sacrificed before you discard it. By pursuing a theme, you craft a new product in writing, which is different in shape and tempo from the original audio or video. It allows you to jump between speakers, pull in your own background research, and not be wedded to the sequenced presentations of the webinar.

While your article must be a fair reflection of the source material, you want it to read as its own thing, independent of its source, even as it draws from it. Do your own thing! – Yves Vanderhaeghen

ANCHOR YOUR STORY IN CREDIBLE EVIDENCE

While it helps if you are well read or informed on the topics you are about to write about, this is not essential as you should conduct some of your own research and readings before you start writing. This helps put you in a good position to assess whether something is new or just new-to-you, and to answer that key question: Is your story idea exciting, unique, relevant, timely or newsworthy, i.e. why it matters and why it matters now.

STORY STRUCTURE

Once you have a clear idea of what the focus of your story is, we suggest structuring your story along these lines.

LEAD-IN

2 – 3 short paragraphs to hook the reader's attention.

NUT GRAF

2 – 3 paragraphs that explain "in a nutshell" what the webinar was all about, who took part, and one of the key themes arising from the discussions.

KEY THEME

Brief commentary on a key theme arising. (2 – 3 paragraphs)

SELECT HIGHLIGHTS

The most engaging, insightful and relevant inputs from the panelists on this key theme or topics arising. About 150 words to be given to each panelist.

WRAP UP

A neat summation of the facilitator's closing comments, or one of the panelists concluding words.

KICKER

A kicker is a surprising or poignant revelation at the end of an article. This can be a quizzical point, a very pithy quote, or some kind of arty flourish. A good kicker often links back, or alludes to the intro.

TIPS ON STORY STRUCTURE

The lead-in

Your first two or three sentences should hook the reader in by repeating a direct quote or better still, paraphrasing in pithy language one of the most interesting things or comments that you heard in the webinar that also relates directly to your story focus. This might be a provocative statement by one of the speakers or a revelation or really interesting fact that is

little known. Anecdotes (a story within the story) can also work very well for the introduction of a popular media story.

The Nut Graf

In the next few paragraphs, you should say who is speaking and briefly explain the nature of the webinar, who has organised it, when, where and why. Then expand on the opening paragraphs, explaining it in context and adding in one or two more insights and where appropriate biographical details about the speaker.

Highlights and story flow

In reporting on a webinar, once you have identified the three or four of the most interesting themes or subjects that came up under the spotlight you can deal with them in the order that they arose. But, while this is often the easiest approach, especially when working to a tight deadline, following the order of the speakers is not always the best.

Often, if you have time on your side, you can bring in the most interesting material very early in your story, and then look for quotes or other material that allows you to segue from one speaker to the next. Again, with each new speaker, limit yourself to the most interesting stuff. If you structure your story in this way you will probably have to jump among the speakers a bit as you reflect their views. You might have to work hard to get this to flow properly, but if you get it right this approach can be very effective.

Don't assume the reader is familiar with the subject. Fill in any important gaps by adding background information or explanatory notes where necessary.

Generally, you should use a mix of direct and indirect quotes to keep the story lively.

While you are busy with all this, keep an eye on the word count. Your finished story should be no more than 1200 words, but often your first two drafts might be well over that word count. That needn't be a problem, as the final trimming often becomes a key part of the story revision process.

Revision and fine-tune editing

In your first draft, don't get all pedantic or hung up on semantics and begin correcting small errors. That comes later when you do your final revision and fine-tune editing. We say "bash out" because that is precisely what you should be doing in writing your first draft. It's all about sorting through what you consider to be the most salient and important information to include in your story, including stand-out quotes and anecdotal content that will enliven your story. Once you are happy with the overall content, the revision and fine-editing process begins. And often, a good, well-crafted story only begins to emerge once you have worked through three to four story drafts, with each draft undergoing substantial revision.

The kicker

Lastly, it's good to end your story with a bit of a bang or what journalists often called a "kicker". Here you might allude back to the beginning of your story or give the reader a particularly good quote or insight that you have saved for this purpose. You are looking for something telling, witty or emblematic.

TAILPIECE ADVICE

One of most successful young writers on our New Narratives training project, Maxcine Kater reckons she found Roving Reporters, [Ace card approach](#), most helpful in reporting on the series of Tipping Points webinars and in profiling presenters at the annual Oppenheimer Research Conference.

Ace card approach



Think of everything gleaned from your interviews or research as a deck of cards, representing everything you have in hand to write a story. To win the game, you need at least one ace card. Most of the rest you can ditch. >> [Read more.](#)

We hope you have found this introductory writing guide useful, and we look forward to receiving your story.

>> [Click here](#) to submit your story.