

How to Write Fascinating Features

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How to Write Fascinating Features

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An approach to reporting and writing features

This workbook offers a set of techniques for planning and writing nonfiction stories. Feature writing has long been the province of journalists, but government agencies, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and others also have found it an effective way to communicate with large and diverse audiences. Whether you're writing a newspaper or magazine story, a press release, a newsletter, or a report, feature-writing methods will make your writing easier to read and more entertaining. As a result, it will have a better chance to make a lasting impression on readers.

This workbook is designed to help many kinds of feature writers. For journalists, it offers tips on interviewing and organizing stories. For business and government writers, it describes techniques for turning standard reports into stories that will appeal to new—and broader—audiences. For newsletter writers, it provides ideas about leads and quotes that will make their writing more compelling. And for writers of all kinds, it suggests guidelines on developing and refining messages in ways that will make their writing more effective and memorable.

What exactly do we mean by “feature writing?” The line between feature stories and other kinds of expository writing isn't sharp, and many of the techniques covered in other ClearWriter courses—*Edit Yourself*, *Stunning Sentences*, *Powerful Paragraphs*, and *Riveting Reports*—will serve you well in writing feature stories, too. But this workbook emphasizes the special purpose of feature writing—to make writing accessible, meaningful and memorable to a wide variety of readers. Feature stories seek to achieve these goals in many ways:

-
- They tend to focus on well-defined themes. Their different parts are carefully arranged to express, explain, and amplify these themes.
 - They are more concrete and specific than most reports, which tend to be abstract and comprehensive. But feature stories usually have broad, if not universal, relevance.
 - They are full of people—ideally, everyday people to whom a wide variety of readers can relate.
 - The best features have tension—elements that don't fit comfortably together and cry out for resolution. Tension can take many forms. It may involve people in conflict with each other or themselves, ideas that contrast with each other, trends that have uncertain or worrisome implications, unanswered questions, or mystery. Feature stories are organized to resolve that tension, or at least to illuminate it.
 - They tend to have distinct beginnings and endings. Because feature writing aims for maximum impact, these story elements—the first impression and the last impression on readers—are particularly important.
 - Unlike more formal kinds of writing, feature stories have a conversational tone. The storyteller can address the reader directly. Sometimes he or she can even be part of the story.

The chapters that follow take you through every stage of feature writing, from story conception to writing. You can go through each chapter in sequence. Or, you can focus on the particular chapters that most interest you. The first two chapters deal with coming up with a topic and shaping and refining a theme. The third chapter explores techniques for gathering information. Chapter Four turns to the process of organizing your material and choosing a structure for your story. And the fifth through eighth chapters address story mechanics, from how to write a lead to how to write an ending.

While that is a logical sequence, you actually should engage in every stage throughout the writing process. You have to develop a theme at the outset to shape your information-gathering efforts, for instance, but you must constantly revise that theme as you learn more about your topic. And often, the process of outlining and writing a story will suggest yet another theme. Similarly, the earliest stages of gathering information are not too soon to think about the best story structure, or how you want to begin or end your story.

How, then, do you write a feature story? For starters, have fun. Feature stories are supposed to be entertaining, and the first step in making sure your story pleases readers is to enjoy yourself and believe in what you're telling.

1 Develop a theme

Feature stories are tightly organized around themes that interest or concern readers. Stories that don't have clearly defined themes tend to meander aimlessly, losing readers along the way. Stories that have well-developed themes carefully lead readers to their conclusions, and make an enduring impression.

The first step in writing a feature is defining your theme. Before you start writing—and, if possible, before you even start collecting information for your story—put yourself in the reader's place. By asking yourself four basic questions you can develop a working theme to guide you through the information-collection stage of writing.

What is your topic?



Write your general topic:

Occasionally, a good story falls into your lap. You may stumble on a fascinating yarn while doing something else, or maybe an editor will tell you what he or she wants you to write. But most of the time it's up to you to find a topic that is timely and relevant to your readers. To find such a topic, consider several strategies:

- **Think like an everyday reader.** Feature writing seeks to reach readers “where they live”—to address their basic concerns. So forget you’re a trained journalist, a professional public relations official, or an expert in your field. What do you think a neighbor, a friend, or a family member would want to know about your topic?
- **Read other publications.** Find out what others are talking about. Then imagine you want to join this discussion. Try to shape your approach to your topic in a way that plays off what others are saying.

-
- **Think back.** Ask yourself how a contemporary issue first arose. Suppose energy prices are surging and everybody is talking about the high cost of gasoline and home heating oil. How did we get into this jam? Some of the most important—and easiest to document—trends are those that have gone unnoticed.
 - **Think ahead.** Ask what might happen if current trends persist. Will pressures rise to relax restrictions on oil exploration or construction of new power plants? Will tensions rise in the Middle East? Will small cars make a comeback? By asking the right questions, you might be the first person to uncover an important new trend.
 - **Seek a different vantage point.** Do you have a unique perspective on a current issue, or do you think you could build a story around somebody who has one? During the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement, when many Americans were complaining that U.S. manufacturers would move to Mexico to take advantage of low-wage labor, a Wall Street Journal reporter went south of the border to interview American companies who already had done so. They told him that lower wages were no advantage when poor productivity is factored into the bargain. The result was a fascinating—and enlightening—story.



Before you continue, reconsider—and if necessary, rewrite—your topic:

Who are your readers?

Feature writers tailor their writing to the audiences' needs. To assess your particular audience, think about the publication where your story will appear:

- Is it aimed at specialists in your field or generalists?
- Are its readers looking for a quick read (like somebody reading a press release or the breaking news pages of a newspaper), or are they likely to give a lot of time to your article (as many magazine readers are)?

The answers to these questions will help you decide how technical your language can be and whether you should plan a straightforward, no-nonsense delivery of facts (a "hard news" approach) or a softer, more anecdotal style that treats readers to interesting anecdotes, asides, and glimpses into people's lives.

Vague

The public



Precise

State and local government officials, scholars and journalists who track a wide range of policy issues and management concerns of state and local governments

-
- **Degree of audience interest and specialization.** In general, this audience wants to read stories that address how effectively government serves people. A few readers will have special, technical knowledge of your topic, but most will not.
 - **Audience preference for “hard” as opposed to “soft” news.** These readers are looking to be informed in an entertaining way. They don’t absolutely have to read this magazine, but do so because it sheds light on their interests in an easy-to-read format.



Now, characterize your audience:

Type of publication: _____

Audience: _____

Degree of audience interest and specialization: _____

Audience preference for “hard” as opposed to “soft” news: _____

What do your readers already know?

To ensure that your feature is timely and relevant to readers, consider what else has been said and written recently on your topic. List important books, articles, online sources, television, and radio and summarize their major conclusions in one sentence. You may want to conduct a few exploratory interviews to get a sense of what common assumptions and attitudes people have about your topic (for more on interviewing, see pp. 30–36).



Source

Conclusion

What do your readers *need* to know?

Your job as a feature writer is to tell readers something they don't already know. As you survey what others have already written or said about your topic, ask yourself how you might be able to advance your audience's knowledge and understanding. Specifically:

- Do existing sources contradict each other in important ways?
- Do they raise questions that beg to be answered?
- Do they point readers to conclusions that may be untrue?
- Do they overlook issues or ideas that need to be considered?



What questions should you try to answer for your readers?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Write a theme for your story

Now you're ready to move beyond defining a topic to developing a specific theme. A topic is what you want to write *about*. But a theme is much more: it's the point you want to make. Keeping in mind the needs of your audience, what you believe it already knows, and what you think it needs to know, what is the essential message you would like your story to convey? This is your theme. At this stage—before you have collected much information—think of your theme as a working hypothesis, a framework to guide your subsequent information gathering.

Here's how a theme was developed for our aforementioned audience of state and local government officials.

Topic

People are increasingly worried about invasions of their privacy.

Audience

State and local government officials, scholars and journalists who track a wide range of policy issues and management concerns of state and local governments.

What do your readers already know about your topic?

A wide array of books, Web sites, and newspaper and magazine articles demonstrate that privacy has emerged as a major public concern. Citing poll results and other sources, they demonstrate that people believe their online communications—email and Web searches—may not be private.

The existing literature suggests that public ideas about privacy are muddled. There appears to be no consensus about what personal information people should be required to share and what information they should be allowed to keep to themselves.

What do your readers need to know about your topic?

Public pressure is growing for state and local governments to enact new laws to protect personal privacy.

These governments will have to address privacy concerns as they put into effect ambitious plans to use computers and the Internet to improve their operations.

Working theme

Public concerns about privacy have become a major issue for state and local governments. Leaders will have to respond if they hope to achieve their ambitious objectives for electronic government.



Write a working theme for *your* story. Keep it short and simple—no more than two sentences, if possible.

2 Refine your theme

Before you start gathering information for your story, consider the practical challenges you face in producing it. This will help you focus your theme in a way that is manageable—and therefore give you a good chance of producing an effective story.

How long should your story be?

The answer to this question may be dictated by the kind of publication you hope will publish what you write, or it may be determined by how much time you think your readers will be willing to spend on your article. In general, people can read about 250 words—one double-spaced page—in a minute.

Here are some rough guidelines for the length of different types of stories:

Type of publication	Length of story
Corporate press release	500 words (two minutes)
Trade association newsletter article	100 words (half a minute). Some newsletters carry a mix of shorter and longer stories; the latter can run as much as 1,000 words (four minutes) or more.
Breaking news—general circulation newspaper	500–750 words (two to three minutes). The newspaper standard length is less if you're writing for <i>USA Today</i> , more if you're writing for <i>The Washington Post</i> .

Op-Ed article—general circulation newspaper	750 words (three minutes). This, too, varies according to the paper. Sometimes, papers accept longer op-ed pieces on Sundays.
Feature story—general circulation newspaper	1,500–3,000 words (6–12 minutes)
Magazine story	3,000–10,000 words (12–24 minutes)
Report or book	10,000–50,000 words (40–200 minutes)



How long should your story be?

Can you cover your topic in the space allotted?

Consider some rough rules about the length of different parts of a feature story:

- A typical paragraph can run 100 words. That means a typical 1,500-word to 3,000-word feature story might consist of somewhere between 15 paragraphs and 30 paragraphs.
- At minimum, a feature story must convey some basic facts and observations, document them with supportive facts, and reinforce them with quotes. Each of these paragraph clusters can require three paragraphs (sometimes more, sometimes less). That means a feature that is 15 paragraphs long might have five clusters. (Paragraph clusters are discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four.)
- Most feature stories include at least one substantial anecdote—a colorful story that helps bring the theme to life. Although anecdotes can be truncated, a typical anecdote requires three paragraphs: one to set the scene, another to describe how the story was resolved, and a third to carry an illustrative quotation. Some—ones that are particularly interesting—can be longer.



Take the total amount of paragraphs you have to tell your story (one double-spaced page has about 3 paragraphs). Divide it by three. This is the total number of paragraph clusters and anecdotes available to you for telling your story.

How much time can you spend researching and writing?

This variable, too, may be beyond your control. But you can make sure that you align the effort you put into gathering information with how much you can write in the end. Only you know how long it will take to do your job, but consider a few general rules:

- Reporters typically have to write breaking news stories in one day. If you can find all the information you need in a few hours, and then take a few more hours to write 500 or 750 words describing what you know, you might be able to produce a feature that fast.
- If you are starting from scratch, without even knowing what your topic will be, it obviously will take longer. The actual time required to develop a working theme can vary according to how much you already know about your topic and how complex the topic is, but you should be able to do this initial spade work in several days.
- Gathering the information you need for a story is the most time-consuming part of feature writing. The people involved can be difficult to find—and it often is harder still to persuade them to give you the time you need to interview them.
- The number of sources you need for a story can vary widely. A few stories can be written with a single source—stories that describe the views of one individual or summarize the findings of a single research project, for instance. But others need numerous sources. A story consisting of five paragraph clusters, each of which represents a different point of view, might require five sources. But add to your calculations the strong probability that

you will spend some time going up blind alleys, contacting people who don't turn out to be good sources.

- All things considered, it is not unreasonable to spend two or even three weeks gathering information for a 3,000-word feature story if you are starting from scratch.
- There is a wide difference in how quickly different people can write. But a writer who can churn out 1,000 words a day is pretty productive.



Now, think about the time and space you have to write your story. Can you plan the story, gather information, and write in the time and space allotted?

- Yes
- No

If you answered *yes*, count your blessings—and skip the next section of this workbook. If you answered *no*, go to the next page.

Refine your theme

If you don't have enough space or time to produce a feature story on the theme you tentatively set, see if you can get by with fewer anecdotes or fewer sources. If that's not possible without doing an injustice to your topic, consider ways to focus your theme more narrowly. There are at least two ways to refine your theme.

Carve off a part of your theme, and leave the rest for another story. The privacy story discussed in Chapter One has at least two distinct aspects: how state and local governments are dealing with the issue of privacy in their own operations, and how these governments might decide to regulate private companies whose activities impinge on personal privacy. Why not focus on just one part or the other? For instance:

- **Possible focus: privacy and the public sector**

Advantages

Very pertinent to readers.

There seems to be plenty to say about this topic alone.

Disadvantages

The public may see this as less important than commercial invasions of privacy.

- **Alternative possible focus: privacy and the private sector**

Advantages

May be most pertinent to the general public.

May be a hot topic once legislatures convene in a few months.

Disadvantages

There are many proposals but few indications how state and local governments will deal with this issue right now.



Think of a narrower focus for your story:

Now, ask yourself some questions:

- Even with the narrower focus, can you still tell your readers the most crucial things you have to tell them?
- Will you have another opportunity to tell those parts of the story you are losing?
- Does the narrower focus enable you to concentrate on what is most relevant to your readers?
- Does the narrower focus enable you to emphasize what you know best?

If the answer to all these questions is “no,” consider a case study approach. But before you settle on a case study approach, be sure you can answer yes to all of these questions:

- Can you find a case study whose findings will be meaningful to all of your readers, including those from places not part of the case study?
- Can you find a case study that embodies enough of the issues you seek to explore that your feature will be meaningful even if it isn't comprehensive?
- Will the case study be sufficiently interesting—that is, will colorful people have interesting stories that readers will enjoy reading?



Think about how you could tell your story through a case study:

Now ask yourself again whether you have enough space and time to do justice to this theme. If you answer “no,” keep working to refine your theme. But if you now can answer “yes” to both questions, proceed to the next section.

Budget your time

Finally, set a schedule for yourself. One good way to do this is to think backwards from when you expect to finish. For instance:

Deadline: March 31

Finish first draft: March 26

One of the best ways to improve your writing is to set aside your final product for a few days after you finish writing it. That way, when you pick it up again to edit and rewrite, you can look at it with a somewhat fresher eye: mistakes or rough spots will jump out at you and will be easier to correct.

Preparation of first draft: March 21–26

While 1,000 words a day is a productive writing pace, budget some time to go back and check facts or fill some gaps in your reporting. Often, you won't know what key story elements you are missing until you start writing.

Information collection: March 7–21

After you have conducted your initial research and refined your theme, two weeks is a reasonable period for targeted reporting. But this can be the part of feature writing most beyond your control. You can almost count on falling short of your goals—a person you need to interview may be on vacation, or the perfect anecdote may prove harder to find than you thought.

Initial story planning: March 1–7

Ideally, a week would be a good period to survey what already has been written on a topic, to assess your audience’s interests and needs and develop a tentative theme. Don’t let this part of your schedule slip. When faced with a difficult task, procrastination is always an appealing option. But wasting time thinking abstractly about your topic won’t move you toward completion of your story. The sooner you develop a working theme and start working on it, the better off you will be.



Now prepare your own schedule:

Deadline: _____

Finish first draft: _____

Preparation of first draft: _____

Information collection: _____

Initial story planning: _____

3 Gather raw materials

You have a working theme, a target length, and a schedule for producing your story. You also have done some initial reporting to refine your theme. Now it's time to start collecting raw materials in earnest. This is the most important stage of feature writing. No matter how good a writer you are, the success of your story will depend more on the quality of the information you gather than on how deftly you can write. That, in turn, hinges on where you look and on how effectively you ferret out details—intriguing facts, fascinating anecdotes, and colorful quotes.

The information you collect come from three basic sources: published materials, experts, and players. Consider them in turn.

What previously published information can you use in your story?

You already have identified some sources in the early stages of your research, when you were trying to assess what your audience may already know about your topic. Now that your research is more focused, decide which of these sources to use in your story. If you are a journalist, you may want to do more research to turn up more sources. If your story deals mainly with the results of your own research, you may want to cite these sources to fill in gaps in your findings or to show how your findings either refute or advance the public's knowledge about an issue.

Be sure to look at:

- Published studies.
- Reports.
- Articles.
- Web sites.
- Television and radio programs.



Now list your published sources:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Who are the experts you should interview?

The first stories were told orally, and even today most of the information you see in stories got there by word of mouth. You can spend hours reading books and articles or surfing the World Wide Web for information, but that rarely is as efficient as picking up the telephone and talking for 10 minutes to the right person. Where do you find the best sources?

If you're writing a press release or a report for an organization, the experts may already be at hand, although your story might be stronger if you can find independent experts on the outside to corroborate your findings. Otherwise, you will have to dig deeper. Aside from names you have already turned up in published sources, look at:

- Think-tanks.
- Academic institutions.
- Trade associations.
- Government agencies.
- Foundations and other nonprofit organizations.

Often, you need only one source to get started. Ask the first expert you contact who else is prominent in the field. Be sure to ask for the names of experts who disagree as well as ones who agree with your

Who are the players you should interview?

The third group of sources consists of “players,” the people directly involved in the event or issue you’re covering in your story. Where you look for players depends on your story. For instance:

- If you’re writing about a specific event—say, the passage of a new law by the legislature—start with direct participants. In this case, that group consists primarily of legislators and their aides. Who sponsored the bill? Who were its main supporters and detractors? Ask these central players what experts, lobbyists, and constituents influenced them.
- If you’re more interested in public reaction to the legislature’s decision, look in shopping malls, hair salons, community centers, or even literally “on the street.” Make sure you find sources who reflect the full diversity of opinion on the issue.
- Often, experts can help you find people to interview. The head of a social program, for example, can introduce you to a caseworker who deals with individual clients. Doctors can help you track down people with specific afflictions, trial lawyers can help you find people with certain grievances, civic leaders can point you toward aroused and influential citizens, and so on.

Some words of caution:

Be sure to look for people with different perspectives.

- If you are writing about a controversial issue, look for advocates as well as opponents. If you are writing about a new social trend, look not only for people swept up in it but also for people who disapprove or are resisting it.

-
- If time has passed, track down former supporters and critics, and ask if experience has changed their views.
 - If you are writing about a government program, talk both to officials in charge and to beneficiaries, to policymakers who dreamed up the idea and to bureaucrats who have to put it into effect.
 - If you are describing a new product, talk to the manufacturer and to consumers—and perhaps to the manufacturer’s competitors.
 - Always resist the temptation to view the world in black and white. Look for lawmakers who are undecided about a proposal, and for experts who view a social trend from a detached perspective. Sometimes people who are ambivalent shed more light on the complexities of an issue than those who have taken sides.



Now compile a list of players you might like to interview for your story. (For an example, see Appendix 1.)

Players

Player/contact information

Reason to interview

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Conducting an interview

There are many ways to conduct an interview. Some reporters go into interviews with very specific strategies and questions in mind, while others prefer a looser, conversational approach in which the source is put at ease and encouraged to speak his or her mind. Whatever strategy you take, you should look for several things, including:

- **Who is the source and what are his or her qualifications?** Make sure to check spelling of names, correct job titles, and proper attribution (Appendix 2).
- **Is the source credible?** Ask whether the information the source provides jives with your knowledge and understanding. Can he document his assertions? Ask the source for specifics—hard facts and concrete examples are always more persuasive than generalities. If you have any doubts, you should seek independent verification through your own sources.
- **Does the interview confirm or contradict your theme?** Explain how. You will either have to account for contradictory information, or if it achieves sufficient mass, revise your theme to reflect what you have learned. As with the previous question, ask for specifics.
- **What were the source's best anecdotes or stories?** Anecdotes are the lifeblood of feature stories. If the source can't tell you a good story that illustrates his point, ask if he knows somebody who can.

-
- **What were the source's best quotes?** A quotation puts the source directly in the story, enabling him or her to speak directly to the reader. As a result, your story becomes more real, more lively, and more credible. Look for quotes that make good points, use catchy phrases, paint vivid pictures, and are memorable.
 - **Who else did the source recommend that you interview?** You should always be on the lookout for other people to interview. So be sure to ask everyone you interview who they find interesting, influential, or worthy of being interviewed for your story.
 - **What interesting background or asides did your source provide?** Any good interview is bound to produce information that doesn't directly pertain to your theme. Sometimes you will be able to digress from your theme to include this information. Other times it may be fodder for your next story.

Becoming an effective interviewer can be a lifelong process. As an exercise, conduct an interview, and then summarize your results on the sheet that appears on the next page. You can use similar sheets to summarize interviews you prepare in writing stories.



Interview summary

Date and location: _____

Name and affiliation: _____

Source's background: _____

Information that supports your theme: _____

Information that contradicts your theme: _____

Best anecdote(s): _____

Best quote(s): _____

Other recommended sources: _____

Important background or asides: _____

4 Organize your material

A story is more than a collection of facts. It is a series of messages carefully assembled to support a theme. As you research your story and conduct interviews, think about the messages you want to convey and how you can structure your story to make these messages compelling.

Create paragraph clusters

Stories are made up of distinct paragraph clusters, which in turn consist of three elements:

- **Basic points** are the major facts and observations that make up your story. They all should relate directly to your theme.
- **Supportive facts** include information that documents or proves your basic facts, as well as examples and illustrative anecdotes.
- **Quotes** serve primarily to illustrate basic facts and observations and supportive facts. Techniques for quoting people in feature stories are discussed in the next chapter.

Here are sample notes for one paragraph cluster in a story that explored strains in the air traffic control system in the years after large numbers of controllers were fired for striking.

Paragraph cluster: System strains—supportive facts

- FAA has 9,800 full-performance controllers, compared to 13,133 before the strike. And many of the new ones are less qualified than the prestrike ones. Source: FAA press office.
- Many supervisors are still doing line jobs. Source: Interview with XXXXXXXX at Leesburg air traffic control center.

-
- FAA says controllers averaged 20 days of overtime last year—meaning they worked the equivalent of six-day weeks half of the year. In some centers, controllers still can't get two consecutive weeks off. Source: FAA budget submission to Congress, (date).

- **Quote:**
"The system isn't yet rebuilt. To put upon this relatively green system the same kind of traffic-handling responsibilities that the prestrike system had runs the risk of producing some very unfortunate consequences." Source: James Burnett, chairman, National Transportation Safety Board. Senate testimony on (date).



Organize this information into a simple paragraph cluster consisting of a basic point, supportive facts, and a quote.

- Dr. Larry Ponemon has conducted audits of more than 300 companies over the past three years to assess the quality of their consumer privacy protections. Their consumer profiles have an error rate of 85%. 76% of companies fail to comply with their own stated privacy policies.
- "You reach the conclusion that it's pretty awful out there. The invasions of privacy usually stemmed from ignorance, although in a few cases the companies were truly evil. Their profiles were riddled with errors. A national hotel chain shares lists of movie titles rented by its customers with their many affiliates, including other hotels and restaurants. Telemarketers employed by a major pharmaceutical company were looking up people they knew for sport. A national diagnostics laboratory sells the results of medical tests—blood work, biopsies, DNA screens. Say you don't have AIDS but are taking a drug that's also used to treat it. They could incorrectly conclude you have AIDS, put that in your profile, and sell your data to a hospice or insurance company."

Key types of paragraph clusters

While there are innumerable potential kinds of paragraph clusters, most stories have some or all of the following varieties.

- **The core facts.** What event, trend, or situation forms the core of the story? This can be a single cluster, or it might be a series of clusters that all relate to the theme. In addition, core facts may include not only the event, trend, or situation that prompted you to write the story, but also its secondary effects and ramifications.
- **Documentation.** Do the basic facts of your story require proof? If you're writing about an airplane crash, they probably don't. You might have to identify the source for the particular facts you report, but so many people will know that the plane went down that you don't have to demonstrate the obvious. But if the basic block of your story is an explanation of why the plane crashed, you may have to show how you know what you write.
- **Significance.** Why is this story important? Why should the reader care about what you are writing? The answer is an essential element in every story. The significance block will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.
- **Caveats.** What are the exceptions to your conclusions, the facts that run counter to your theme? It never pays to run away from these bothersome details. Try to account for them. And if you can't, acknowledge them. Honesty will only increase your credibility.
- **Background, analysis, and explanations.** Why are the events, trends, or situations described in your story occurring? The answer may be historical.

It may be an analysis of the forces that underlie your trend. Or it may be contained in the opinions of experts.

- **Perspectives.** Almost every story includes contrasting views and opinions. Many stories exist mainly to compare these differing opinions.
- **Predictions.** Everybody wants to know what will happen next. If appropriate, try to project the ultimate impact of the event, trend, or situation you describe.



As you gather information, keep a separate sheet or sheets summarizing your paragraph clusters. This will help you when you start pulling them together into a story. A sample summary appears on the next pages.

Paragraph clusters

Cluster 1:

Basic Point: _____

Supportive Facts: _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Quote(s): _____

Cluster 2:

Basic Point: _____

Supportive Facts: _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Quote(s): _____

Cluster 3:

Basic Point: _____

Supportive Facts: _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Quote(s): _____

Cluster 4:

Basic Point: _____

Supportive Facts: _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Quote(s): _____

Cluster 5:

Basic Point: _____

Supportive Facts: _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Quote(s): _____

Refine your theme—again

All the time you are gathering information, you should be thinking about your original working theme, testing it for accuracy, timeliness, and relevance. Now, as the information-gathering process draws to a close, take one more look back at it. Does it hold up? Or should you revise it to account for what you have learned? Think, too, about your audience. What details— anecdotes, individuals, and quotes—will most intrigue, amuse, or move your readers? Should you recast your theme around them?



What, finally, is the theme of your story?

Pick a story structure

All the time you are collecting and organizing information, you should be thinking ahead to how you can present your findings to readers in a compelling way. Stories can have any number of structures, but the four most common are:

- **Building blocks.** Imagine you are having a conversation with the reader. Present the major points in whatever order you think the reader will find most interesting. This often is the best way to organize a story that pulls together a variety of information and offers a number of different perspectives on a particular situation or trend. (For an example, see Appendix 3.)
- **Inverted pyramid.** Rank all the information you have collected in order of importance. The most important information comes first, followed by the next most important, and so on down to the end of your story. If your theme is a major event or an important finding, or if you are writing for busy readers whose attention may be hard to hold all the way to the end of your story, it may be the best structure for you. If the reader doesn't stay with the story to the end, at least you'll know that no matter where he stops reading, he will know the most important parts of the story. (For an example, see Appendix 4.)
- **Chronology.** People are naturally curious about how events unfold, and the chronological structure encourages readers to stay with a story to the end. But if you don't have a story that is full of interesting twists and turns that can be told sequentially, you should consider a different structure. What's more, chronologies usually deal with single groups of players. As a general rule, they are not an effective way to look at a broad issue, round up information from a variety of sources, or compare happenings in diverse places.

Chronologies don't have to run strictly from beginning to end. One of the most effective forms works like an hourglass: The story begins like an inverted pyramid, with the important information coming first. After the basic facts of the story have been told, a transition signals that the rest of the story will recount what events led to those described in the first part of the story. (For an example of a story using a chronological structure, see Appendix 5.)

- **Alternating viewpoints.** A good way to keep your readers' attention is to bounce back and forth between general observations and specific information. For instance, try beginning with an anecdote. Follow this with a general discussion of the issues the anecdote typifies. Then, return to the case study. In more complex versions, alternating viewpoint stories move back and forth between the general and the specific multiple times. (For an example, see Appendix 6.)



Now write a general outline for your story. Look back at your paragraph clusters on pages 42–44, and arrange them according to the story structure you have selected.

Cluster 1: _____

Cluster 2: _____

Cluster 3: _____

Cluster 4: _____

Cluster 5: _____

Cluster 6: _____

Cluster 7: _____

5 Write a lead

Now your research is done, and you have decided on a structure for your story.

The storyteller's first obligation is to grab the reader's attention and persuade him or her to give the story a chance. That's the role of the opening paragraphs. This chapter discusses six techniques for writing leads: being dramatic, highlighting tension, setting the scene, asking a question, making a promise, or telling an anecdote.

Seek drama, tension, or an intriguing scene

There are various strategies for getting the reader's attention. Here are three:

- **Be dramatic.** There's nothing like a dangerous event or a poignant situation to draw readers into a story. Here's a lead for a story about air traffic control problems:

"It happened in a flash."

Gilbert Merritt, a federal judge, is describing a flight he took in his twin-engine Piper Navajo last summer. He was near Chicago when suddenly he saw an American Airlines Boeing 727 just a quarter of a mile away, rising quickly toward him. In the next instant, the jetliner banked sharply to avoid a collision, flashing its silver belly at the judge.

"When you see something like that out there, your heart jumps into your throat," Judge Merritt says. The two aircraft came so close that he remembers feeling a bump at the large plane's wake hit him.¹

- **Highlight tension.** Conflict, problems, irony, contradictions, and mystery all arouse readers' interest. For instance:

The men and women in America's armed forces face unnecessary danger where they should be safest—in the military's own hospitals and clinics.

A year-long Dayton Daily News examination found the U.S. military operates a flawed and sometimes deadly health care system that lacks the most significant safeguards protecting civilians from medical malpractice.²

- **Set the scene.** You can draw a people into a story by giving them a vivid image of where your feature story takes place. Consider this lead on a story about large-scale hog-farming, for instance:

Imagine a city as big as New York suddenly grafted onto North Carolina's Coastal Plain. Double it.

Now imagine that this city has no sewage treatment plants. All the wastes from 15 million inhabitants are simply flushed into open pits and sprayed onto fields.

Turn those humans into hogs, and you don't have to imagine at all. It's already here.³



Now write a lead for your story. Can you describe a dramatic event that somehow captures the essence of what you want your readers to know? Is there tension that you hope to resolve? Or do have some interesting, colorful, or amazing facts that you can use to paint an intriguing picture for your readers?

Adopt a conversational tone

Often, the best way to start a story is to start a conversation. Here are some techniques.

- **Ask a question.**

As most parents can attest, kids love technology and the media. But when our children while away their time playing video games or lining up to see the latest animated adventure movies, many adults wonder: Can this really be good for them? Or will spending long hours passively engaged in a commercial fantasy world stifle creativity and imagination?⁴

- **Make a promise.**

In their last hours alive, Jo Rogers and her two daughters took a series of snapshots. One showed Michelle inside the motel room, sunburned and staring into the camera. But it was the very last photo that would be the most haunting. Shot from the motel balcony, it caught the sunlight fading over Tampa Bay. The three women were about to leave to meet someone who had offered to take them for a boat ride on the bay.

On June 4, 1989, the bodies of Jo, Michelle, and Christie were found floating in Tampa Bay. This is the story of the murders and their aftermath, a story of a handful of people who kept faith amid the unthinkable.⁵

- **Tell an anecdote that captures the essence of the bigger tale you have to tell.**

CHICAGO—Today is Lafayette Walton’s 12th birthday.

Evaluate your lead

Now read your lead, and ask yourself some basic questions about it:

- Do the paragraphs accurately reflect the theme of your story? If not, start over. Consider using the theme statement you wrote earlier as your lead.
- Do you only use words you would use in a normal conversation? And does it sound like you are talking? If not, replace words that are overly formal or unnecessary.
- Can you say each paragraph in one breath—with plenty of air left over? If not, look for ways to shorten what you have written.
- Do the words flow smoothly? If not, ask yourself where you stumble when reading, and rewrite that part.

6 Focus on essential paragraph clusters

In addition to a lead, two other kinds of paragraph clusters are particularly important. One explains why the story is significant—and hence, why a person should read it. The other makes any necessary caveats.

Write a significance cluster

Very early in your story—possibly right after your lead—you must demonstrate the importance and relevance of what you are writing. Suppose your reader is reluctant to commit his time to your story. He might ask, “So what? Why should I bother reading this?” Looking back at your theme statement, use it to complete the sentence, “This is important because...” Now take away the words, “This is important because” and you should have the essence of your “nut” paragraph (some rewording may be needed to connect this paragraph to the lead).

Here’s the significance cluster that followed the lead on page 50 for a story about a near midair collision. Note that its three paragraphs include the three elements of most clusters—a basic point, supportive facts, and a quotation:

Nobody was hurt that day, and Judge Merritt’s close encounter was only a minor blemish on the Federal Aviation Administration’s strong safety record as the nation’s air traffic cop. But a growing number of aviation authorities—including many air traffic controllers—believe such near misses demonstrate that the margin of safety in the nation’s airways is diminishing. They say the FAA, under pressure from commercial airlines and private fliers to allow unrestricted air travel, has unleashed air traffic even though the traffic control system hasn’t yet recovered from the 1981 controllers’ strike.

The FAA’s own records show hundreds of cases of planes coming closer together than the agency’s safety standards prescribe. From

Include any necessary caveats

At some point—possibly after you have finished your lead and significance paragraphs—you should come clean and admit any possible weaknesses in your story.

Note how this caveat that was added to the air-traffic control story gives authorities ample space to put across their point of view:

The FAA boasts that it can handle as much traffic as it did before President Reagan fired some 11,000 striking air-traffic controllers in August 1981. Last year, the agency juggled 29.4 million flights without an airborne collision, about the same number as in the 12 months before the strike.

Moreover, Donald Engen, who took over as FAA administrator this month, has a stronger safety background than many of his predecessors. He previously was a member of the National Transportation Safety Board.

“We remain vigilant to assure that traffic growth doesn’t exceed our capabilities,” asserts Michael Fenello, deputy FAA administrator. “That has been an inviolable premise of our rebuilding effort—safety may not be compromised in any manner.”

7 Concentrate on quotable quotes

Quotes are essential to stories because they impart a sense of immediacy and authenticity. Here are some hints for producing truly quotable quotes and integrating them into your story.

Choosing quotes

Look for quotes that are easily accessible and likely to catch the reader's attention. For instance:

- **Be conversational.** Just as you strive for an informal tone in your own writing, look for quotes that sound like everyday conversation.

Reject quotes like this one: *"Computers will increase the efficiency of constituent communication."*

Instead, look for ones like this: *"Computers make it possible for the legislature to reach out to constituents, and they make the legislature more accessible."*

- **Be colorful.** Don't bore your readers with stale language. Look for quotes that entertain or amuse.

Reject quotes like this one: *"My recommendation would be to return this IBM notebook to the Department of Information Services, which issued it to me and similar ones to all of my colleagues at the beginning of the year."*

Instead, summarize the basic information yourself and look for a quote that is more entertaining, like this: *This past January, when laptops were first issued to members of the assembly, Representative DuWayne Johnsrud, 59, told his colleagues he hoped the Capitol building's windows were open. "I don't want to break any glass when I throw mine out," he explained.*

-
- **Be punchy.** Don't down your readers in convoluted language. Look for quotes that express just one or two straightforward ideas and that do so directly and simply.

Reject quotes like this one: *"It is vexing, indeed, that when I rise to address the assembly, as I do whenever an issue of great importance comes before the chamber, that many of my esteemed colleagues are more absorbed in these machines, which the legislature got by without just fine for many years before and will undoubtedly survive without in the future."*

Instead, look for quotes like this one: *"I see this blitz of weird configurations, moving images and constantly changing geometric patterns," says Boyle, who detests the digital invasion of the hallowed halls of legislative debate. "It is extremely disruptive."*



Read this passage, and then pull a conversational quotation out of it:

In passing Sections 501–510 of the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, Congress gave consumers the right to prevent financial institutions from transferring their personal financial information to third parties. To that end, the Act requires the institutions to notify customers of the right to opt out and to provide convenient means of exercising it. However, in notices mailed out thus far, most financial institutions have employed dense, misleading statements and confusing, cumbersome procedures to prevent consumers from opting out. Such notices evince a clear failure of the Act's implementing regulations to effectuate congressional intent. Accordingly, we ask the Agencies to revise the regulations and require that financial institutions provide understandable notices and convenient opt-out mechanisms.



Now find a colorful or punchy quote from this passage:

We believe that many claims regarding school choice miss the mark, and that they do so because those making them have failed to focus on the most important stakeholders in this debate: suburbanites, especially suburban parents. Suburbanites, by and large, are not wild about school choice, either public or private. Suburban parents are generally satisfied with the public schools their children attend, and they want to protect both the physical and the financial sanctity of these schools. School choice threatens both. It creates the generally unwelcome possibility that outsiders—particularly urban students—will be able to attend suburban schools at the expense of local taxpayers. Choice programs also raise the possibility that some locally raised revenues will exit local schools as students leave to attend either private schools or public schools outside of their residential districts.

Presenting quotes

Quotes should enhance your story, not interrupt it. Make sure they flow logically from what precedes them, and lead logically to what follows them.

- **Don't use a quote simply to restate what you have just said, like this:** *Jean Gerstner, chief of the Wisconsin Department of Revenue's Audit and Technical Services section, hopes that data mining will increase tax collections and enable the state to target its audits on the people who really should be audited. "We'll bring in more tax revenue and audit more people who deserve to be audited," she said.*
- **Instead, use the quote to increase the reader's understanding:** *Jean Gerstner, chief of the Wisconsin Department of Revenue's Audit and Technical Services section, hopes that data mining will increase tax collections and enable the state to target its audits on the people who really should be audited. "This will mean less inconvenience for people who shouldn't be audited," she says. "It's a way to improve customer service."*

To integrate the spoken word into a smoothly written story, be sure to identify the speaker quickly.

- **Instead of this:** *"People felt violated. They were just beginning to learn that people can find out their addresses, phone numbers, Social Security numbers and other personal information over the Internet, and they reacted viscerally to the idea that the government was transferring personal information without their approval," said Feeney.*

-
- **Try this:** *“People felt violated,” said Feeney. “They were just beginning to learn that people can find out their addresses, phone numbers, Social Security numbers, and other personal information over the Internet, and they reacted viscerally to the idea that the government was transferring personal information without their approval.”*

● **Rewrite the following quote, bringing the speaker’s name closer to the beginning:**

“We want to reduce dependency on welfare and reduce poverty—and we want to do it all at low cost. We can’t have it all,” says David Butler, a welfare analysts at Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. in New York.

● **Clean up this passage so that it’s clear who is speaking:**

The state set aside just \$3 million to help welfare recipients pay for post-secondary school training—an amount that won’t come close to meeting the demand. “We expect these funds to be used very selectively,” says Tony Dietsch, acting bureau chief in the Department of Economic Development. “They have nothing to offer me,” complains Michelle Krough, a welfare mother in Ames who has been studying for a psychology degree.

Editing quotes

Almost all of us commit grammatical errors, repeat ourselves, or stumble over our words when we talk. An unwritten contract between reporter and interview subject allows—indeed, requires—the reporter to clean up these mistakes before committing them to print.

Consider this brief excerpt from a White House press briefing: (Please note: White House spokespeople are trained to produce quotable statements—most transcripts of actual quotes would be much messier than this.)

On violence, productive meeting and a productive discussion about how best to end the violence. Chairman Arafat specifically agreed to intensify efforts to end or stop, reduce what they can, acts of violence in the area, particularly shootings, to arrest those responsible for the acts of violence and to resume immediately security cooperation on—to combat terrorism.

I think everyone understands, as I said earlier today, everyone understands that we have a very narrow window of opportunity here and I think he fully appreciates that the time for this process is running short and that we need to hear back relatively quickly. But we are going to continue our work and will be consulting with Prime Minister Barak, and we'll let you know if they have more tomorrow.

To draw a cleaned-up quote from this passage, you might:

- **Cut to the essence:** *“Chairman Arafat agreed to intensify efforts to end violence,” said White House spokesman Jake Siewert. But he added: “Time is running short, and we need to hear back relatively quickly.”*
- **Use just a fragment:** *Time is “running short,” warned White House spokesman Jake Siewert.*
- **Paraphrase:** *Arafat agreed to try harder to stop the violence, according to White House spokesman Jake Siewert, who added that the Clinton administration is almost out of time to broker a Middle East peace agreement.*

Now, consider this statement, which was delivered at a press conference:

Richard Ravitch: “Housing is the single biggest expenditure for every American family and it has so much to do with family stability and the well-being of communities, and yet interestingly enough, housing is not very high on the political agenda for most elected officials for three very separate reasons. One, because a large part of Americans are indeed well housed; two, because there are so many issues associated with housing, some of which are complicated politically and have to do with much broader issues than just housing adequacy. Last of all, perhaps at this point in our history because any significant change in federal policy probably has a high price tag to it and at this point given the budget conditions that are faced, it’s unlikely that anybody’s going to want to raise expectations that they cannot fulfill financially because of budget limitations. But nonetheless, I believe that a careful analysis particularly of the housing needs section of our report will demonstrate that it’s only a matter of time before this problem will assume a high, far higher profile politically, and my message to my friends on the Hill is you want to start looking at this problem now because you, one

day you're going to have to face it very seriously and it's going to be a lot more expensive to do it then rather than starting now."



Use a quote that presents the essence of the statement:



Quote a fragment of the statement in a sentence that sums up the entire passage:



Paraphrase the statement:

8 Write your ending

It's time to wrap it all up. Unless you are writing a feature with an inverted pyramid structure, try to save some gem for the end of your story—a bonus for the reader and a final opportunity to drive home your theme.

Take the reader back to the beginning

One good way to end is to take the reader back to the beginning. In a story about welfare reform, for instance, the lead dramatized how the government was pushing people off welfare but that many of the jobs the former welfare recipients could find didn't pay enough for them to become self-sufficient. The ending returns to the scene where the story began, adding a twist to drive the point home.

Beginning:

"How come I don't see pencils moving? Write this down."

Todd McGee, an interviewer for the Iowa Department of Employment Services, is serving up a dose of tough love to 22 new welfare recipients in Des Moines. He explains that Iowa will help them find jobs, and provide some rewards if they succeed—including the right to keep a good portion of the income they earn without immediately losing benefits. But with the carrot comes a big stick: If their effort to land work is deemed wanting, their welfare payments will come to an abrupt end.

"Don't confuse the state with big-hearted, warm, kind individuals," McGee says. "Welfare reform means nothing else but 'Get off welfare and get a job.'"

Ending:

The troubles that low-skill, nonwelfare families face weigh heavily in discussions among state officials about whether to spend more on training for welfare families. "We have to look at whether we are delivering advantages to the welfare population that aren't available to the rest of the population," says Norma Hohlfeld, Promise Jobs coordinator for the state.

Tell the reader one last story

Anecdotes work at the end of story for the same reason they work at the beginning—they are colorful, memorable, and entertaining.

Consider this ending to a story exploring whether computers are changing the way legislatures operate. The story concentrates on one state, Wisconsin. The ending reaches into the past to tell a new story that is only loosely related to what precedes it (it deals with technology and legislatures) but is interesting and thought-provoking in this context:

The truth is that decisions about the kind of legislatures we want rest ultimately with citizens, not machines. The biggest challenge for the members may be, as Representative Schneider argues, to ensure that “technologies and the technologists don’t drive us.” But history offers evidence that political institutions—including the institutions of representative government—will bend technology to their own purposes rather than the other way around.

The Wisconsin Assembly boasts the nation’s first electronic voting system, which was installed in 1917. Lawmakers didn’t adopt that innovation, now standard in state legislatures, without carefully considering its impact, however. In fact, the first electronic vote-recording system had been invented much earlier, in 1868. But the inventor, Thomas Edison, could find no market for the device because state legislators and members of Congress feared it would reduce a legislative minority’s ability to filibuster.

Broaden the reader's perspective

Throughout your story, readers have focused on the small slice of life you have chosen to present them. As they pull away at the end, show them a glimpse of something they haven't seen. This gives your story greater power by placing it in a larger context. It also can increase the impact of the story by showing the issues from a different perspective.

Here is the ending to a story about a political activist who believes computer networks—in his case, a type known as an electronic bulletin board—could enable more extensive and meaningful public discourse about issues. The activist (Hughes) lives in a big city, but the story ends by describing the views of a small-town official (Hackett) who is sympathetic to the activist's views. During his interview with the reporter, Hackett just happened to talk about his hobby—visiting the closed and somewhat secretive world of Indian tribes. That would seem to have nothing at all to do with the big-city computer aficionado who is the subject of the story, yet it actually is quite relevant:

Excerpt from the middle of the story:

Hughes believes that such bulletin boards could combine the virtues of the Chautauqua and the New England town meeting in a modern setting, reviving debate in a public numbed by sound-bite politics and apathy.

In extended online discussions, Hughes contends, voices frequently tend to soften over time, and areas of agreement emerge. Even those who disagree with the outcome tend to accept it more readily if they believe their views got

Appendix 1 Sample list of interview subjects for a story on how computers are affecting a state legislature

- **Representative A**—Known as an enthusiastic advocate of computerization.
- **Representative B**—A vocal critic of the use of computers on the House floor.
- **Representative C**—A member of the House leadership. Knows about legislative history and procedures. Views on computers aren't known.
- **Representative D**—Works for a computer software company. Knows how computers are used in businesses and other institutions.
- **Representative E**—A farmer and legislative old-timer. Known for his crusty personality. Tells amusing stories about fellow lawmakers, and is the subject of many such stories told by others. Has joked that he'd like to throw his computer out the window.
- **A comparable group of senators**—The House and Senate are very different institutions. Any differences between the two chambers in their reaction to computerization could be instructive.
- **Lobbyist A**—One of the legislature's leading lobbyists. Has been around longer than most lawmakers.
- **Administrator A**—Responsible for installing the legislative computer system. Should know what technical problems have arisen.
- **Administrator B**—Responsible for tracking the flow of legislation. May have ideas about whether computers have made legislature more effective.

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- **Administrator C**—Runs one of the government’s biggest departments. Knows how administrative agencies use computers, and has experience working with the legislature on major bills.
 - **Expert A**—A political scientist who is recognized as an authority on legislatures and how they operate.
 - **Expert B**—A scholar who has written about the effect of computers on institutions.
 - **Expert C**—A National Conference of State Legislatures staff person who specializes in computers and automation.

Appendix 2 A note on attribution

Whenever you contact a source, you should identify yourself and your affiliation and explain why you want to conduct an interview. At that point it is generally understood that you may print anything the source tells you, and cite him or her by name. But the source may want to impose certain ground rules. The general rules are described below, but you should clarify what they mean since people sometimes have differing interpretations.

- ***“Not for attribution”*** means you can use the information but you cannot identify your source. If you agree to this condition, clarify what kind of attribution would be acceptable—sometimes you can provide some information about the source, such as a job title, that makes your information credible without revealing the source’s identity. Beware of any personal attack or salacious information provided on a “not for attribution” basis: it is fundamentally unfair to print a personal attack without giving the source, and you may undermine your own credibility by doing so.
- ***“On background”*** means the source is giving you the information to enhance your general understanding, but that you can’t use it without obtaining independent confirmation. Obviously, you also can’t identify your source. If you want to use such information, take steps to determine that it is accurate—perhaps by confirming it with another source.
- ***“Off the record”*** means you can’t use the information under any circumstances, with or without attribution. Reporters often agree to take information “off the record” in hopes it will give them insights. But it is a dangerous step; you may find yourself knowing something that should be

made public but that you are ethically bound by your commitment to shield from disclosure. In some cases—suppose a public official tells you he is about to be indicted—you can be forced to the sidelines as an important story develops.

Appendix 3 The flexible story structure

Most feature stories simply combine paragraph clusters in whatever order the writer believes readers will find most interesting. This flexible structure is especially handy for stories that pull together a variety of information and offer a number of different perspectives on a particular situation or trend.

Advantages of this structure:

- This is the most versatile story structure. Paragraph clusters can be arranged in whatever way you think best serves your priorities and your readers' needs.
- Because paragraph clusters generally consist of several paragraphs, they give you a manageable way to organize your information. Instead of having to plan, say, 30 separate, free-standing paragraphs, your outline may consist of 10 discrete clusters.

Disadvantages of this structure:

- Because of its versatility, the building block structure presents you with so many choices that picking the best way to order your clusters can be a challenge.

Key elements of this structure

Here are some specific types of paragraph clusters that can be assembled in a flexible structure story. No story has all of these clusters, but most will have at least several.

- **The core facts.** What event, trend or situation forms the core of the story? This can be a single cluster, or it might be a series of clusters that all relate to the theme. In addition, core facts may include not only the event, trend or situation that prompted you to write the story but also its secondary effects and ramifications.
- **Documentation.** Do the basic facts of your story require proof? If you're writing about an airplane crash, they probably don't—you might have to identify the source for the particular facts you report, but so many people will know that the plane went down that you don't have to demonstrate the obvious. But if the basic cluster of your story is an explanation of why the plane crashed, you may have to show how you know what you write.
- **Significance.** Why is this story important? Why should the reader care about what you are writing? The answer is an essential element in every story. The significance cluster is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six of this workbook.
- **Caveats.** What are the exceptions to your conclusions, the trends that run counter to your theme? It never pays to run away from these bothersome facts. Try to account for them. And if you can't, acknowledge them. Honesty will only increase your credibility.
- **Background, analysis, and explanations.** Why are the events, trends or situations described in your story occurring? The answer may be historical. It may be an analysis of the forces that underlie your trend. Or it may be contained in the opinions of experts.

-
- **Perspectives:** Almost every story includes contrasting views and opinions. Many stories exist mainly to compare these differing opinions.
 - **Predictions:** Everybody wants to know what will happen next. If appropriate, try to project the ultimate impact of the event, trend or situation you describe.

Here is an example of a story with a flexible story structure.

Adoptees Battle Secrecy of Records

By David Crary

AP National Writer

Lead cluster:

Two anecdotes give the basic theme of the story—adopted children are trying to find their birth parents.

NEW YORK (AP)—Abigail Lovett searched for her birth mother for six years before finding her in a psychiatric hospital on Long Island.

Tony Gambino pursued a similar quest, only to discover his birth mother had died of cancer while desperately trying to locate him.

Quote: rounds out the beginning.

Lovett rekindled a relationship with her mother, whose condition improved so dramatically that she was able to leave the hospital after 18 years as a patient. Gambino, though devastated at learning of his mother's futile search, tracked his 92-year-old grandmother to a tiny town in east Texas. "I've been so enriched to be able to meet her," he says.

Significance cluster:

Nut paragraph: The basic issue to be explored in this story is the growing demand by adopted children to gain access to their birth records.

Universality paragraph: This paragraph demonstrates that the anecdotes and issues in this story aren't isolated. This is a real trend.

Tension paragraph: This paragraph points out that this is a controversial issue. Readers are notified that some people oppose the trend.

Today, Gambino, of Bethesda, Md., and Lovett, of New Hope, Pa., are part of a legion of adopted Americans who want to dispel the secrecy of adoption records. They believe that adoptees who reach adulthood should have access to original birth certificates that include the names of their biological parents.

A law allowing such access took effect in Oregon in May, 18 months after approval by voters in a referendum. A similar law, passed by legislators, took effect Aug. 1 in Alabama. The two states joined Alaska, Kansas, Delaware and Tennessee as exceptions to the more restrictive practices prevailing elsewhere.

Advocates of openness hope the trend is irreversible, but grueling state-by-state struggles lie ahead. In several legislatures, defenders of adoption privacy have kept open-records proposals from progressing to a floor vote.

"We just have to be persistent," said Cynthia Betrand Holub of Philadelphia, an executive committee

member of the militant adoptee-rights group Bastard Nation.

Quote: This anchors the story by introducing a key player who underscores the element of tension.

“The opposition won’t give up, but they see the writing on the wall,” she said. “The momentum will build, like a popcorn effect—a few kernels burst, then the whole lot. I see it happening in 10 years. It’s way overdue.”

**Paragraph cluster 1—
background:**

This puts the trend in historical perspective: unwed pregnancy is less stigmatized, and adoption agencies already are changing their approach to confidentiality. The Internet also is speeding up adoptees’ search for their birth parents.

With unwed pregnancy no longer as stigmatized as it once was, many adoption agencies already have modified their approach to confidentiality. Some now advise birth mothers that they should anticipate contact from their relinquished children at some future date. Other agencies promote “open adoption” that encourages contact between birth parents and adoptive parents.

Meanwhile, the Internet provides adoptees with new tools to search for information. For fees of perhaps \$250, professional searchers offer to trace hard-to-find birth parents.

**Paragraph cluster 2—
opposition to the push for
openness:**

This cluster introduces the reader to those who oppose efforts to break through the tradition of confidentiality. First, it identifies the groups who make up this opposition.

Then it identifies a key individual in the opposition.

Then it demonstrates that the opposition is powerful.

Quote: anchors this cluster with a quote.

Despite these trends, opposition to open records is both fervent and diverse. Some state affiliates of the American Civil Liberties Union have defended birth parents who want to protect their privacy. Some Roman Catholic and anti-abortion groups contend that loss of privacy might prompt pregnant women to choose abortion over adoption.

One of the feistiest opponents of open records is William Pierce, founder of the National Council for Adoption. His group monitors legislative developments nationwide and provides e-mail links so its supporters can contact key state officials.

Proposals for easier access to adoption records have foundered recently in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Washington. Pierce doesn't expect to prevail everywhere, but he refuses to accept that Oregon-style laws are inevitable everywhere.

"Personal privacy is a major concern for most Americans, whether it's health records or adoption records,

your video rentals or your grocery list,” Pierce said. “The American people ultimately are not going to go for this.”

**Paragraph cluster 3—
a proposed compromise:**

This cluster introduces a possible compromise between the two sides: a voluntary system where adoptees can be reunited with their birth mothers if the mothers consent.

Pierce favors voluntary state registries that enable adoptees and birth parents to reunite through mutual consent, but says mothers who were promised confidentiality deserve the option of protecting their privacy.

Tennessee’s open-records law, unlike those in Oregon and Alabama, acknowledges the privacy concerns by allowing for a “contact veto.” Though birth parents in Tennessee can’t block release of original birth certificates, they can stipulate that the adopted child should not contact them. Adoptees who violate this provision can be prosecuted.

**Paragraph cluster 4—adoptees
oppose compromise:**

This cluster shows that advocates for adoptees oppose the compromise, and explains why.

Marley Greiner, one of Bastard Nation’s cofounders, finds the contact veto offensive.

“In effect, it’s a restraining order, without having to go to court to get one,” Greiner said. “If you don’t

want a reunion, you can just say 'No.' The cases where people don't take 'No' for an answer are very rare."

One of the most passionate arguments on behalf of open records is that adoptees are entitled to potentially vital information about their birth parents' medical histories, such as whether cancer or heart problems run in the family.

Pierce and other defenders of adoption privacy say medical information can be provided without divulging the parents' names. But in states with closed adoption records, adoptees often must go through costly, time-consuming court procedures to obtain medical data.

To Bastard Nation, adoptees deserve access to their birth certificates whether or not they seek medical information or yearn for a reunion.

"At issue is not search and reunion, but the constitutional rights of millions of American citizens," the

group’s manifesto says. “To continue to abrogate these rights is to perpetuate the stigmatization of illegitimacy and adoption.”

Paragraph cluster 5—how birth mothers see the issue:

This cluster introduces a different perspective: that of birth mothers. They support the principle of confidentiality.

Such declarations are too simplistic for Cheryl Ramette, a birth mother who understands adoptees’ yearning for information but believes that open-records laws go too far.

Now a learning-assessment specialist at Oregon’s Portland State University, Ramette and her high school boyfriend put a newborn daughter up for adoption in Minnesota in 1971, when Ramette was 17.

“It is impossibly difficult for a woman to give up her child,” Ramette said. “Once done, a door is closed and you make your peace with it all; you have to for your sanity, even though the heartbreak, love and loss are eternal.”

The daughter, Wendy, contacted Ramette in 1988. The ensuing years were an emotional roller-coaster.

“It was great to meet her, fabulous, and then it got very difficult quickly,” Ramette said.

In a complicating twist, Ramette, who had divorced her first husband, reunited with Wendy’s father and married him in 1997. Wendy came to the wedding, and in 1999 Ramette and Wendy’s father visited their daughter in Florida.

“We had an absolutely horrible time,” Ramette said. “Her husband didn’t think we should have any part of her life.”

Ramette has mixed feelings about her relationship with Wendy, but she emphatically opposes the Oregon-style laws that prevent a birth mother from deciding for herself whether to have contact with a relinquished child.

A birth mother from Pennsylvania, who asked to be identified only as Emily in order to guard her privacy, said her life was shattered when the son she put up for adoption in the 1960s recently contacted her.

“Way back, I was told the files would be sealed forever—I was told to put all this behind me and get on with my life,” Emily said. “When he contacted me, I was devastated. I freaked. I was hysterical.”

She said it was an ordeal to inform her current family, including a grown son, about the adoption.

“Maybe I shouldn’t be ashamed, but I am,” Emily said. “Even today, if I’m asked how many children I have, I say one. The person I gave up for adoption is not my child, he’s the child of the parents who adopted him.”

Paragraph cluster 6—the lead anecdote amplified:

This cluster returns to one of the two adoptees cited in the lead cluster. Now it explores his case in some detail, in the process demonstrating the complexity of the issue. Unlike the previously-cited birth mothers who favor confidentiality, his birth tried desperately to find him—without success. Moreover, a voluntary system didn’t work.

Tony Gambino used to feel that way. Adopted by a lawyer and his wife in Cincinnati in 1956, he entered adulthood feeling well-loved and uninterested in his birth mother.

Now a Central Africa specialist with the U.S. Agency for International Development, Gambino changed his mind six years ago and received court approval in Ohio to obtain his birth certificate. Then he went to

the agency that had handled his adoption, and what he learned there broke his heart.

His mother, he was told, put Gambino up for adoption in Cincinnati after trying to keep her pregnancy a secret in Texas. “It took her literally years to get her life together again,” Gambino said. “She moved to California, got married, but she never had any other children.”

In the mid-1970s, as Gambino was turning 20, his mother tried to find out about him, entering her name in a voluntary contact registry. That did no good because Gambino hadn’t entered his name. The mother’s search turned urgent in the late 1980s when she was diagnosed with brain cancer.

“She wrote a letter to the adoption agency in 1988 saying, ‘I’m dying. Can’t you tell me anything?’” Gambino said. “The agency wrote back basically, ‘No.’ I find that nearly criminal.”

His mother died in 1989, five years before Gambino began his own search.

Still, he's grateful that he tracked down his grandmother, Norma Simpson, and other relatives in Texas, including a cousin who tells him he is a lot like his mother.

"She told me, 'You look like her, you walk like her, you talk like her, you act like her,'" Gambino said. "Instead of this woman being this really scary 'other,' I find out that this woman was me."

Now, he sees his grandmother as often as he can. "She's a wonderful person," he said, "a critical person in my life."

Gambino sympathizes with birth mothers who do not want to be contacted by the children they put up for adoption.

"But they are likely to be a tiny percentage of the cases," he said. "They shouldn't penalize the overwhelming majority."

Paragraph cluster 7—the second lead anecdote amplified:

Along with the previous cluster, this cluster brings the reader full circle, back to the beginning. But it also introduces a conclusion of sorts—namely, that the controversy over access to adoption records cannot be resolved without a broader change in social attitudes.

Abigail Lovett, who found her mother in the psychiatric hospital, says increased openness about adoption records should be part of a broader change in attitudes.

“Birth mothers should be proud of what they’ve done,” Lovett said. “Instead we shove them in a corner and tell them, ‘Don’t talk about it.’”

Lovett initially used official channels to search for her mother, but county social workers couldn’t find her.

Lovett kept up the search on her own, trying “all kinds of underground things” over a six-year period. Finally, almost 10 years ago, she found out where she was and called.

“She was tentative,” Lovett said. “She kept grilling me for details to verify I was who I said I was.”

Later, Lovett spoke with an astounded social worker at the hospital, who said the mother’s condition had improved swiftly. The mother, now 60, was released and lives with a grown daughter.

“The diagnosis they had for her was completely wrong,” Lovett said. “No one ever knew she had placed a kid for adoption; no one ever asked her.”

The mother was 16 when she put Lovett up for adoption in 1954. She went on to marry and have five children—half-siblings Lovett has now met.

“For the first time, I met people who looked like me,” said Lovett, recalling her amazement at traits she shares with her half-sisters.

Ending cluster:

Like any good ending, this one adds an ironic twist to the story. Under current practices, strangers—an unwed mother’s doctor—may know more about an adoptee’s life than the adoptee herself.

Lovett began searching for her mother after a chance encounter with the elderly doctor who had delivered her in 1954.

“He gave me some details—he knew my mother got married and had other children,” Lovett said. “But he wouldn’t tell me how to find her... I was really angry that he could play with me like that—that he could know more about me than I knew about myself.”¹⁰

Appendix 4 The inverted pyramid structure

Is your theme a major event or an important finding? If so, this may be the best structure for you. To create an inverted pyramid, rank all the information you have collected in order of importance. The most important information comes first, followed by the second most important, and so on down to the end of your story.

Advantages to this structure:

- Your reader gets the news fast and straight.
- If your reader doesn't stay with the story to the end, he still gets the most important information. Indeed, no matter where he stops reading, he knows that he got the most important part of your story.

Disadvantages to this structure:

- It is more difficult to hold onto your reader to the end of the story. In fact, the structure almost invites the reader to stop reading as soon as his interest begins to sag.
- It is harder to introduce "softer" parts of your story—amusing anecdotes, interesting digressions, or colorful characters, for instance. The inverted pyramid is all business. That can make it less fun for the reader.

Key elements of this structure:

- **The basic facts.** These are the famous “who, what, when, where, and why,” followed by their cousin, “how.” If you have all of these, it’s hard to go wrong.
- **Secondary facts.** Often, an event or a finding causes other things to happen. In addition, you often collect facts that relate to the major facts, but themselves are less important.
- **Context.** How do the basic facts fit into the bigger picture? If your basic fact is an event, what led up to it, and what is likely to result from it? If your basic fact is a new finding, how did it come to light, and what will be the impact of its revelation?
- **Significance.** Why is this story important? What does it mean to the reader and to society?
- **Documentation.** How do you know this story is true? In many stories, you can thread documentation throughout your text. Quotes offer powerful confirmation, and few stories should be without them. Some events—a major plane crash witnessed by many people, or a presidential inauguration, for instance—are so patently true they don’t need to be documented at all. Other times, event stories can be documented simply by identifying the source. For stories revealing important findings, documentation might include the source, details of the findings (how were they reached, where were they published) and testimony by experts about the information’s authenticity or plausibility.
- **Balance.** Stories should warn readers away from obvious conclusions that may be inaccurate. They also should point out what is not known, as well as what is known. And they should acknowledge any facts that run counter to the implications of the story or its conclusions.

Here's an example of an inverted pyramid story, which helped win its newspaper a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in 1997.

Three-Drug Therapy May Suppress HIV

By Michael Waldholz

Wall Street Journal

Lead: The basic fact

A new "cocktail" of three antiviral drugs can force the lethal AIDS virus into hiding, at least temporarily, according to new research.

Context: What led to the new development in the lead paragraph?

The findings cap a 10-year search for a medicine to disable a key enzyme in the AIDS virus. When first identified in 1986, the enzyme, called protease (pronounced PRO-tee-ace), triggered a worldwide race that at times involved more than a dozen drug makers.

Context 2: What triggered today's news?

At a week-long conference in Washington, D.C., that started yesterday, Abbott Laboratories and Merck & Co. will show that each of their protease-blocking drugs, when combined with two existing AIDS medicines, packs an unprecedented antiviral wallop.

Significance: Why is this story important?

If early test results hold up as researchers expect, the three-drug

regimen will be the first major advance in AIDS therapy since AZT was introduced in 1987. The first protease-blocking drug was approved by the FDA in December, and two more may gain marketing go-ahead in the next few months. Two others could be released for general use next year.

Documentation: What evidence is there to support the lead?

In preliminary tests, the triple-drug cocktail eliminated 99% of the AIDS virus detectable in the bloodstream of almost all of 45 patients tested for between four and six months. And one combination study involving Abbott's drug, Norvir, produced one of the most remarkable results yet: In six of 21 AIDS patients, the virus was impossible to detect, suggesting to researchers that they may have eliminated the virus from the patients' blood altogether.

Documentation quote: Introduces the key newsmaker behind this story. He provides balance—in this case, a cautionary note—that sets up the subsequent paragraph.

"We're not saying we have a cure," says John Leonard, Abbott's protease project director. "But [the new results] show we are making very significant strides in that direction."

Balance: This reminds the reader what the new development does *not* mean.

Few scientists truly expect the three-drug therapy to rid the body of HIV, the deadly AIDS virus. Past experience has shown that the virus may be lurking somewhere in the body and is likely to develop resistance to the drug cocktail eventually, perhaps re-emerging as dangerous as before. The drugs will likely produce side effects making them unusable for some patients, and the three-drug therapy costs more than \$12,000 a year.

Documentation: After the cautionary balance, this returns to the central element of the story—that this is a breakthrough.

But the new results are exciting because the combination of drugs is so effective against HIV that researchers can't detect the presence of the virus in many patients' blood even when they use the most powerful detection techniques available.

Documentation quote: An expert lends credence to the story.

"It's a very extraordinary result," says Anthony Fauci, who directs the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases. "There are some important questions to be answered over the next few months about how valuable [viral suppression] is for a patient's well-being. But what we're hearing is impressive."

Background: This section elaborates on the first context paragraph above, and explains what preceded the new development and made it possible.

Excitement about the protease inhibitors has been rising since early last year, when Merck, Abbott and Hoffmann-La Roche Inc. publicly presented results that demonstrated the drugs' significant antiviral potency in patients. Since then, all three companies have aggressively stepped up patient testing and, under a special program sanctioned by the Food and Drug Administration, offered drugs free to several thousand seriously ill AIDS patients in the U.S. and abroad.

Detail: Elaborates on the news that will be disclosed today.

The FDA approved the first protease blocker, Roche's Invirase, for use when combined with at least one of two already-used drugs, such as Glaxo Wellcome PLC's AZT.

In one of the new studies to be released later this week, Merck tested its protease-blocking drug, Crixivan, in combination with AZT and another Glaxo Wellcome drug, 3TC. After four months, 24 of the 26 patients taking the three drugs had virus levels so low they couldn't be detected. The same was true of 13

of 26 patients taking Crixivan alone. Patients taking AZT and 3TC had “their virus lowered, but the virus remained detectable,” says Emilio Emini, Merck’s director of antiviral research.

In addition, patients taking the three drugs had an apparent increase in their bodies’ infection-fighting “CD4” cells, which are destroyed over time by the AIDS virus. Healthy patients have CD4 “counts” of about 1,000; many AIDS patients tested had counts below 100. The triple-drug regimen produced a median increase in CD4 counts of 146, Crixivan alone resulted in a median increase of 96, and a combination of AZT and 3TC brought a median increase of 22, Merck says.

“Leaders in AIDS research have theorized that by adding a very potent protease inhibitor like Merck’s Crixivan to other [antiviral AIDS] drugs, one could knock down the virus to undetectable levels and significantly reduce the [virus’s] ability to reproduce,” says Dr. Emini.

“While these results are early,” he adds, “they are the strongest evidence to date that this approach may work.”

Dr. Emini described Merck’s findings briefly in an overview speech yesterday at the Third Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections. A full presentation of Merck’s results will be presented Thursday. Abbott’s 21-patient study, done in France, will be formally presented today.

Secondary significance: Another impact, but one that is less important than what has been described earlier.

Tomorrow, Abbott will present the results of still another test, which, for the first time, will describe whether patients’ health significantly improved as a result of taking the triple-drug regimen. Abbott officials declined to divulge those results early.

Context: Elaborates on the issue of secondary significance.

AIDS researchers and doctors say that if the findings do remain positive, the new drugs may be used by as many as 100,000 patients in the U.S. If true, Merck and Abbott each could generate sales of several hundred million dollars each—or more.

At present, Roche is charging about \$6,000 at wholesale for a year's supply of its drug, and some people close to Merck and Abbott predict their drugs will cost about the same, possibly making the therapy inaccessible to many patients.

End: A final cautionary note.

Researchers who have heard about the drug companies' test results are being cautious, arguing that the new therapy must be tried in many more patients over many more months before its true importance will be known. "We now must find out how long the striking effect being seen lasts," says the government's Dr. Fauci. "It's my guess that even in patients where the virus is undetectable that some virus is hiding in the body. But we now need to find that out."¹¹

Appendix 5 The chronological structure

Is your story essentially a sequence of events? If so, it is a chronology. The quintessential story is a chronology that begins “Once upon a time...” Journalists frequently write chronologies to reconstruct major events, to describe the life history of a public figure, or to explain how a major decision was made. Chronologies can take several different forms:

- **Beginning to end.** This is the classic chronology. It runs one way on a time line, from beginning to end.
- **Present, past, future.** Often, readers need a hook, something that will grab their interest, before they commit to a chronology. One solution is to start your chronology in the present, describing a situation whose importance to readers is obvious. Then go back to the past to describe how today’s situation came to be. When you get back to the present, your story may be complete, or you can try to project what will happen next. (This is also a very useful structure for stories that argue for a change in policy or outlook. The opening section, instead of being a strict chronology, makes the argument that it’s time for a change. The middle section, then, explains how we got into the untenable situation we’re in. The final section, then, prescribes a solution.)
- **The hourglass.** This structure combines the inverted pyramid and chronology structures. It is particularly useful for a story about a major event which itself is the culmination of a series of less important events. Picture an hourglass. The story begins like an inverted pyramid, with the important information coming first. After the basic facts of the story have been told, a

transition signals that the rest of the story will recount what events led to those described in the first part of the story.

Advantages to this structure:

- Most readers readily understand and relate to chronologies.
- Readers are naturally curious about how things work out. Chronological structures encourage readers to stay with the story to the end.

Disadvantages to this structure:

- Chronologies must have good plots. If you don't have a story that is full of interesting twists and turns and can be told sequentially, consider a different structure.
- Chronologies usually deal with a single group of players. They are not an effective way to look at a broad issue, round up information from a variety of sources, or compare happenings in diverse places.

Key elements of this structure:

- **Details.** Chronologies can—and in some cases should—provide the readers context and significance, but they usually do so in an abbreviated way. Their heart and soul lie in recounting what happened, step by step.
- **Timeline.** The connective tissue in a chronology is time. Give your readers some guideposts that tell the reader when certain events are occurring. Once he realizes that they are moving chronologically, transitions from paragraph to paragraph take care of themselves. If you use a modified chronological structure—the hourglass, for instance—you must provide transitions that show when you are taking a leap from one part of the timeline to another.

For instance, you could link the inverted pyramid to the chronology with such phrases as “It all began last October, when...” or “Nobody could have predicted this week’s strange events a year ago. Then,...”

- **Asides.** While some stories can be entirely plot driven, most storytellers diverge at least occasionally from their plot to provide some background, explanations or other kinds of points.

Here is an example of the beginning of a chronology (to save space, the entire story isn’t reprinted here). This story, an account of how a government auto-safety inspector determined that certain vans had a serious defect, begins at the beginning, offers a one-paragraph preview of what is to come (paragraph seven, underlined), and then settles back into his chronology.

Delayed Impact:

Six Seconds, 2 Dead:

A Police-Van Crash Exposes a Bombshell

By Anna Wilde Mathews

Wall Street Journal

MINNEAPOLIS—Tires squealing, the police van lurched forward, ricocheted off a squad car and careened through the holiday revelers on the sidewalk. The runaway Ford slammed into an office building and finally stopped, its still-spinning wheels spewing burnt-rubber smoke.

Blood and glass littered the concrete where a woman sprawled, dead. Next to her, an infant boy lay still in a mangled stroller. His frantic mother snatched him up and raced down the street. “My baby is dead!” she shrieked.

Four days later and 1,000 miles away, Bob Young sat down in his tidy home office in the Maryland suburbs on a cool gray December morning. He dialed up

a voice mail from his boss at the federal government's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: "There's been a double-fatality sudden-acceleration involving a police van in Minneapolis. The state police are asking that we help."

Mr. Young, a 45-year-old with a salt-and-pepper beard and an easy manner, hung up the phone and grimaced. He didn't really want to help. He felt sorry for the victims, but he dreaded the scene in Minneapolis—lawyers preparing lawsuits, reporters chasing stories, politicians demanding answers.

Besides, Mr. Young figured he already knew the cause of the crash: The driver had stepped on the gas instead of the brake, and the van had accelerated unexpectedly. Mr. Young had studied "sudden acceleration" for more than a decade. In the esoteric world of car-crash investigation, he was famous for debunking every case he had encountered in which a vehicle was said to have mysteriously lurched into motion. He believed the Minneapolis accident would prove to be a typical instance of a driver making a tragic mistake.

Still, his boss, Richard Boyd, chief of the NHTSA's vehicle control division, worried that Minnesota's congressional delegation might complain if the agency didn't get involved. "Just go, he told Mr. Young, "and get it done quickly."

But answers didn't come quickly. Over three months, Mr. Young learned that the Minneapolis crash wasn't typical at all. His detective work uncovered a peculiar safety problem that affects tens of thousands of police vehicles made by Ford Motor Co. And now, the case that Bob Young never wanted to take up has become one he can't seem to put down.

The crash took less than six seconds.

Just before 6:30 p.m., last Dec. 4, Katie McCarty, 19, and her aunt, Denise Keenan, 49, joined the crowds along Nicollet Mall for Holidazzle, a nightly holiday parade staged to draw shoppers downtown....¹²

Appendix 6 Alternating viewpoints

Is your story a case study? If so, one of the biggest challenges you face is how to relate the very specific facts and circumstances of your story to broader truths. One solution is to alternate between the general and the specific. Besides being a good way to present a case study, this story structure can be useful for describing change in individuals, institutions, or society over time: such stories describe a particular person, place, or thing, then explain what forces shaped this subject of the story, and then describe the subject some time later, showing how the forces of change have played out.

In its most simple form, the alternating viewpoint has an A-B-A structure: It begins with an anecdote drawn from your case study. This is followed by a general discussion of the issues the case study typifies. Then, the story returns to the case study.

In more complex versions, alternating viewpoint stories bounce back and forth between the general and the specific multiple times.

Advantages to this structure:

- If your case study is interesting, you can hold readers' interest even when you are telling them the dull but important parts of your story.
- This kind of story enables you to focus on what you know well—your case study—while still drawing broader conclusions.

Disadvantages to this structure:

- If the unique aspects of your case study outweigh those that are characteristic of a broader situation, this structure can be confining. As a result, in many of the most effective alternating viewpoint stories, the specific parts of the story are more important than the general ones.

Key elements of this structure:

- **Details.** Alternating viewpoint stories, like chronologies, thrive on interesting details, anecdotes, and quotes.
- **Setting.** Because alternating viewpoint stories shift back and forth between abstract discussions of issues and a specific place, the concrete aspects should be rooted in a place. Look for details that will ground your story, or at least the specific part of it, in a unique place.
- **Relevance.** To produce an effective alternating viewpoint story, you must be able to relate the general to the specific. If the case study, or specific half of your story, is dominant, look for background or explanations that help make sense of the phenomena you describe. If the abstract half is dominant, look in the case study for concrete manifestations of the more general forces you describe.

Here is an example of the beginning of a simple alternating viewpoint story.

Will Workfare Work?

By Christopher Conte

Governing

Lead cluster—specific:

Puts readers at the scene of the action, introducing them to Iowa's welfare reform program at its most basic level—the office where new participants have come on their first day in the program.

“How comes I don't see pencils moving? Write this down.”

Todd McGee, an interviewer for the Iowa Department of Employment Services, is serving up a dose of tough love to 22 new welfare recipients in Des Moines. He explains that Iowa will help them find jobs, and provide some rewards if they succeed—including the right to keep a good portion of the income they earn without immediately losing benefits. But with the carrot comes a big stick: If their effort to land work is deemed wanting, their welfare payments will come to an abrupt end.

“Don't confuse the state with big-hearted, warm, kind individuals,” McGee says. “Welfare reform means nothing else but ‘Get off welfare and get a job.’”

Significance cluster—general:

This section relates the Iowa program to national trends and concerns. It contains a general discussion of the issues to be explored through the case study.

That may oversimplify Iowa's Family Investment Program, one of the nation's longest-running and most comprehensive efforts at converting welfare to workfare. But it does capture the spirit of welfare reform all over America in the mid-1990s. Almost anywhere you choose to look, the formula for ending "welfare as we know it" is coming to focus on the simple notion that welfare recipients not only can find jobs but must find them—and without a great deal of fanfare or delay.

Will it succeed? The answer may depend on your definition of success. If you're satisfied simply to see more welfare recipients working, the answer is at least a modest yes; the evidence from Iowa and several other experiments appears to be that about one-third of welfare recipients can be moved into jobs fairly easily. But if the goal is to make these people truly self-sufficient, the prospects are less encouraging. In even the most successful state workfare programs, many recipients who find work are stuck in jobs that pay less than subsistence wages and

offer little security. And a substantial number of welfare families don't even get that far.

Workfare proponents contend that more welfare recipients would move beyond the fringes of the labor market into the mainstream if they could get more education, more help paying for child care and, for the hardest-luck cases, more intensive counseling and social services. But all that costs money, and governors and legislators are looking to welfare reform as a way to reduce government spending, not as a reason to increase it.

Virtually everywhere workfare is being tried, it is caught between these contradictory goals. "We want to reduce dependency on welfare and reduce poverty—and we want to do it all at low cost," says David Butler, a welfare analyst at Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. in New York. "We can't have it all."

Still, workfare is getting increased emphasis as more and more states consider limiting how long anybody

can receive welfare over a lifetime. Twenty-four states already impose some form of time limit, and Congress seems likely to include time limits in any welfare reform bill it writes in the near future.

Advocates contend that this tough sink-or-swim approach will force welfare recipients to break the cycle of dependency. But critics argue that time limits apply pressure at exactly the wrong moment—just when a person is going off welfare, when it's too late for the state to exercise a positive influence, rather than at the beginning, when the state has the most leverage. Further, critics insist that time limits are too rigid because they fail to consider individual circumstances that may add up to a legitimate need for welfare even after a time limit runs out.

Back to Iowa—specific:

Having established a link between Iowa's experience and national trends, the story now returns to look more closely at the Iowa case study, which it follows to the end.

Iowa's program is designed to meet both these concerns. It requires welfare recipients to begin working to get off the dole as soon as they file for benefits; with just a few exceptions (such as mothers with children under six months of age), all welfare recipients must report to

the state's jobs program, called Promise Jobs, and start preparing for work soon after they first apply for welfare.....¹³

Notes

1. Christopher Conte, "Near Collisions Aloft Are Said to be Rising As Air Traffic Picks Up," *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 1984, p. A1.
2. Russell Carollo and Jeff Nesmith, "Unnecessary Danger: Military Medicine," *Dayton Daily News*, October 5, 1997.
3. Joby Warrick and Pat Stith, "New Studies Show Lagoons that are Leaking," *News and Observer*, February 19, 1995.
4. Christopher Conte, "How Access Benefits Children: Connecting Our Kids to the World of Information," U.S. Department of Commerce, September 1999, p. 4.
5. Thomas French, "Angels and Demons," *St. Petersburg Times*, October 26, 1997, p. 1.
6. Alex Kotlowitz, "Urban Trauma: Day-to-Day Violence Takes a Terrible Toll on Inner-City Youth," *Wall Street Journal*, October 27, 1987.
7. Christopher Conte, "Near Collisions Aloft Are Said to be Rising As Air Traffic Picks Up," *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 1984, p. A1.
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9. Christopher Conte, "Teledemocracy for Better or Worse," *Governing*, June 1995, pp. 33–41.

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10. David Crary, "Adoptees Battle Secrecy of Records," Associated Press, November 14, 2000.
 11. Michael Waldholz, "Three-Drug Therapy May Suppress HIV," *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 1997.
 12. Anna Wilde Mathews, "Delayed Impact: Six Seconds, 2 Dead: A Police-Van Crash Exposes a Bombshell," *Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 1999.
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