

YAH Workshop: Story Structure

From Idea to Story

Topic idea – Is there a good story? - What is it? – **What structure is appropriate for this story?** – First draft

Types of stories

- Hard News: News of the day, time-sensitive, focus is on getting important information across quickly
- Feature: Human interest story, not time-sensitive
- News Feature: not time-sensitive, but focus on significant issue (e.g. story about a community's struggle to deal with AIDS)

Purpose of the Story

Community News -> to inform about an issue that is of interest to the community. The facts are out there – our job is to select and structure the information -> Find a focus!

Story Focus- What is the story really about?

- What's the news?
- What's the story?
- What's the image?
- How can I tell it in six words?
- So what?

Example:

- What's the news?
A fire destroyed two houses in the mountains east of the city, but no one was injured and the city business district was spared.
- What's the story?
Two families are homeless but grateful to be alive.
- What's the image?
Family members hug each other near the smoking ruins of their house.
- How can I tell it in six words or less?
Fire destroys homes but not spirits.
- So what?
Property damage from a dangerous fire was limited.

Leads

- Hard Leads:
 - ‘What’s the News?’: Opening sequence summarizes the essential facts
- Soft Leads
 - What’s the story?: Opening sequence sets the scene/ introduces a character

Example:

Hard Lead:

“Former rebel leader Joshua Smith was elected prime minister tonight, winning more than 80 percent of the vote in the country's first democratic election since 1993.”

Soft Lead:

“Growing up in Youngtown, Joshua Smith was a little boy with big dreams. Always small for his age, he says the bigger boys at school bullied him. When he told his grammar school teacher he'd be prime minister some day, she laughed.

No one is laughing now. Smith won yesterday's election with more than 80 percent of the vote, becoming the country's first democratically elected leader since 1993.”

Story Structures

- Inverted pyramid:
 - Starts with most newsworthy information, followed by other information in the order of descending importance
 - Mostly used for breaking news stories
- Hourglass:
 - Starts with most important information, but then turns into a narrative
- Diamond
 - Starts with the introduction of a character (soft lead), then broadens to show wider significance, and returns to the individual story in the end.

Example: Story about devastating snow storm

Inverted pyramid: Starts with describing the worst damages, how much snow etc., then goes to more details or secondary information (e.g. clean-up by the city, should the city change it's way of dealing with the situation etc.)

Hourglass: Start with describing the hard news (snow damage), then turns to how one individual experienced the storm (usually in chronological order): e.g. family was sitting at the dinner table when the roof gave in to the weight of the snow...

Diamond: start with describing individual character: Refugee family who came to the US 10 years ago, just managed to buy their first house, now the snow storm destroyed it, details of snow storm, back to family, outlook on future struggle...

The Ending

Viewers remember best what they see/hear last – a good ending is particularly important in broadcast news.

Different possibilities:

- Summary of story
- Echo of the beginning (return to place or person at the beginning)
- Offer of solution to a problem
- The end of a sequence of events (if story in chronological order)
- Future outlook
- Quote or soundbite (only if it's very powerful)

Additional considerations for Video News

Different ways to tell the story:

- “Reader” Story: Anchor reads the story
- “V/O” (voiceover): Anchor reads story over video
- V/O-SOT (voiceover and sound-on-tape): Anchor reads story over video, but soundbites are included

➔ all these story types are usually short (often as short as 10-15s)

- Typical YAH news story would be called: “Package”: Reporter’s narration + natural sound + sound bites.
- “NATSOT”: a story that is told fully by the people featured in the report (no narration by reporter)

Resources:

- Handbook of Independent Journalism:
<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/journalism/index.htm>
- Rosenthal, A. Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos.