

# Pocket Guide for Stringers



**By Training and Doctrine Command Public Affairs Office  
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## Preface

This booklet is as a guide for “stringers” who assist Training and Doctrine Command’s Public Affairs professionals in telling the TRADOC and Army story. The booklet’s purpose is to inform the stringer of basic methods in gathering and writing news stories.

How good you become as a stringer depends on how much time you’re willing to put into learning more about the journalism field. If you have a sincere interest in reporting the news, you should keep this booklet handy. Its pocket size is meant to make it readily available. It’s also available on the Web at <http://www.monroe.army.mil/pao/>.

The first section consists of quick – almost bullet style – tips. The second section goes into more detail as it presents a “short course” in writing. The third section outlines common mistakes in word usage, but it isn’t meant to be a complete listing.

Thanks for caring enough to help tell the Army story.



**Cover:** A Fort Benning sergeant and his daughter share a quiet moment outside a child development center. *Photo by Lt. Mamie Murphy*

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## Introduction

Hello and welcome aboard.

A “stringer” is someone who volunteers to assist the Public Affairs Office in gathering news stories. It isn’t just another run-of-the-mill additional duty requiring a lot of time with little recognition. You’ll have a chance to develop hidden talents, earn recognition and see your efforts on your unit’s behalf appear in print. As the PAO’s eyes and ears in your unit, you’ll be able to ensure that what deserves visibility and recognition will find its way into print rather than go unpublished, unrecorded, unknown.



While no one from PAO will be standing over your shoulder dictating your every move, you’ll be able to count on your PAO staff for some direction. Make sure you touch base with your newspaper editor and get him/her to explain his/her needs and how you can fill them while getting recognition for you and your unit at the same time.

Don’t be discouraged by the fact that you’ve had no previous experience in public affairs. The PAO staff is there to lend you a professional hand.

## What will you have to do?

Being a stringer isn't complicated. The main thing to keep in mind when getting a story is to answer the five Ws and H. These are **who**, **what**, **when**, **where**, **why** and **how**.

When those questions have been answered completely and accurately, you have a story. Once you get the "scoop" on a story, inform the post newspaper editor. Work with the editor on whether the newspaper will put the story together, or rise to the challenge and write it yourself.



## Section I What is news?

News, simply defined, is information previously unknown. It can be about any subject that may be of interest to soldiers in your unit. Some examples of subjects to cover are training, human interest, pets, hobbies, children and sports.

Out of all the details you may gather for a story, what makes one fact more important than another, or more "newsworthy"? How do you figure out what elements make up your story's essence? This is definitely subjective, but know that people are interested in people (themselves and others): what people do, their challenges and how they overcome them, their triumphs and despairs, their weird habits, their fame. From your own values and experiences, you choose aspects of the facts that speak to these interests. But there are some guidelines, some common characteristics of news, known as "news values." The more of these news values a piece of information has, the more newsworthy it is.

The news values are:

- **Timeliness** – information that happened recently and should be printed without delay. "Recently" is defined by the publication cycle of your post newspaper; since the paper will most likely publish weekly – probably on Thursday or Friday – events that happened the previous week are timely.

- **Immediacy** or **currency** – publishing a story on events very soon after they happen reflects timeliness, but a "kissing cousin" of this element, immediacy, reflects information of current concern to a lot of people. An armed robber making off with \$5,000 from the Fort



Living Room Credit Union will generate a few paragraphs in the newspaper. But let's say the robbery was one in a string on Fort Living Room, making it bigger news because robberies (and the community problem becoming evident) are already the "talk of the town."

- **Proximity** – information has proximity if it happened nearby, such as on-post.

- **Impact**, also called **relevance** – the information directly affects your audience. A required change of patch unit-wide, for instance, would cause your readers to get their uniforms changed by a certain date.

- **Suspense** – information that has this element will keep the reader wondering what's going to happen next.

- **Prominence** – information has this element if it involves a person or organization all readers may be interested in.

- **Oddity** – information has this element if it's about something unusual or strange – something out of the ordinary. Editor Charles Dana once said, "If a dog bites a man, that's not news. But if a man bites a dog, that's news!"

- **Conflict** – information has this element if it involves a disagreement between two or more people, for example, or is an opposition of some sort, such as a sporting event.

- **Emotion** – information may excite or disturb the reader, and thus have human impact; although it doesn't directly affect the reader, such as with the impact/relevance element, people will avidly read the story anyway. A soldier's 4-year-old son, for instance, is killed in a hit-and-run accident. Even though one person, the child who died – and one family – the one that must bury him – was directly affected, many readers will feel a strong emotional response to this story.

- **Progress** – information has this element if it details changes in the way the military is doing things.

More help with writing news can be found under "News writing" in this section and in Section II.

## Newsgathering techniques

Recognizing what makes news value is one thing; finding news is something else. Most news stories are obtained only after a lot of legwork and a bit of ingenuity.

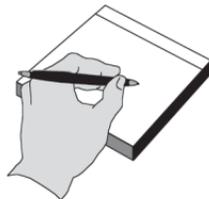
A reporter, in general, views news as coming from three sources:

- Reporter-initiated, where the reporter gets the idea and contacts sources for details;

- Source-initiated, where your source contacts you to request a story (here news finds you!); and

- Reporter-source interaction, where a casual conversation may lead to discussion that contains newsworthy items, such as a member of your unit being nominated for an important award. Military reporter-source interaction is often most valuable in the place where decisions/policies are made (the commander's area); where career/job information is kept and distributed (most likely the S-1 and/or PAC); where people meet and discuss what's on their minds (mess hall, dayrooms); and where "crossroads tenders" are (people who tend to keep track of what's going on, such as a switchboard operator or receptionist – distinguish this from gossips).

Once you've identified these places, get started on a "newsbeat" like a newspaper staff reporter by contacting your sources individually and getting acquainted. Visit the different sections



in your command and let them know you're interested in covering news events. Tell them you'll check with them on a regular basis (weekly or every other week). Take a greater interest in your unit, both from an operational and human-interest viewpoint.

The commander is an excellent source of news items, so ask him/her if you may attend organization staff meetings – or at least meet with him/her regularly. Other “newspump priming questions” to ask sources may include:

- Are you planning any trips, conferences, speeches or meetings in the near future?
- What major projects are you working on now?
- What kinds of problems cause you the greatest concern now?
- What new trends are evident in your work?
- What visions do you have for what the unit might be doing five years from now? (Good for commander and other senior leaders, both officer and enlisted.)
- If nothing new is going on, could the Army eliminate your section and save money/manpower? (Guaranteed to wake up “sleepy” sources but use with discretion!)

If you're not sure the subject has any news value, ask the editor. The editor may suggest a different angle you can take to make the story newsworthy.

Don't promise your source anything. The final decision is the editor's.

## The interview

Good interviewing skills are vital to you as a stringer. Not all information about a story can be researched in the post library or unit files.

When setting up an interview, tell your source what your story's about and “sell” the purpose of it to him or her. Approach your source something along the lines of, “I'd like to talk with you about such-and-so,” rather than saying “You wouldn't want to be interviewed, would you?” Too easy to say no; be positive in your approach.

When conducting interviews, keep in mind that first impressions carry a lot of weight. How your source responds to your questions will depend heavily on how he or she perceives you. You'll want to make it a point to look sharp and be prompt and courteous.

Plan your questions before conducting an interview. If research is needed, do it.

Remember your five Ws and H; ask questions that will not solicit a yes or no answer. Craft questions around this consideration: “What would my readers want to know if they had the chance to talk to this person?”

Don't be afraid to ask your sources to clarify their answers.

Stay in control of the interview by keeping your source on the subject matter. Don't let him or her ramble on.

To avoid embarrassing yourself by constantly having to ask your source to stop and repeat information while you laboriously transcribe his words into longhand, try the following tips:

- Develop a personal form of shorthand by using abbreviations.



● Get the key points (dates, facts, figures, correct names, etc.) and eliminate trivia.

- Remember vivid phrases.
- Avoid asking your source the same questions.
- Glance over your notes before you leave and confirm with your source that what you wrote is what he or she said.

Be sure to ask your source if it's OK to tape the interview. We recommend using a tape recorder rather than trusting to incomplete notes or faulty memory, but on the other hand, don't rely solely on the tape recorder – also take notes. The tape recorder may develop a mechanical failure. It may also pick up background noise that may make the tape inaudible.



Don't waste your source's time. Complete the interview as soon as you can without eliminating pertinent answers.

Remember to always maintain your military bearing and appearance.

Always thank your source for the interview.

After the interview, transcribe your notes into longhand or on the computer and fill in the gaps as soon as possible.

## News writing

A typical news story begins with details that answer the six basic questions of the "five Ws and H" (**who, what, when, where, why** and **how**). As you may guess, news writing is a type of formula writing. The writing ingenuity comes in capturing the reader's attention in the first paragraph, called a "lead" (pronounced LEED).

Lead example:

*An armed robber escaped with \$5,000 from the Fort Living Room Credit Union today.*

**Who** was involved: the armed robber. **What** he did: escape with \$5,000. **Where** he did it: locally, from the Fort Living Room Credit Union. **When** he did it: today.

The next paragraph provides elaborating details beyond this first paragraph, so our next paragraph building from the preceding paragraph may be:

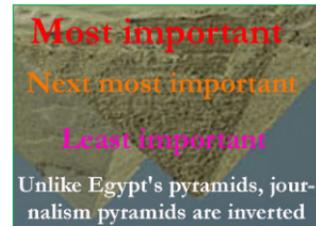
*Military police said a bearded man dressed in a leather jacket drew a gun on the teller shortly after the credit union opened at 9 a.m.*

This paragraph tells more about **how** the robber carried off the robbery. In a story like this, the **why** is implied – to enrich himself – although certainly the reasons for a **why** can run much deeper.

Elaborating details beyond this fill out the rest of the story.

Let's look at the news value elements in this story. It has timeliness and proximity. It may also have the immediacy/currency element. Elaborating details in the same story or in follow-up articles can bring in the impact/relevance element – for example, if the credit union was going to close because of that robbery or was implementing more security measures, such as a strip search at the door. Another follow-up article may outline those security measures, treating them as progress (better security = depositors' funds in credit union safer).

Beyond including the five Ws and H, another basic principle in news writing is to write your story in the "inverted pyramid style," putting the



most important faces in the first paragraph, with the story's details following in descending order of importance, ending with the least important facts at the end of the story.

Your story will then have a lead, bridge and body. The reader can get at the meat of the story, even if he or she reads it only partway through. If the editor doesn't have space to run the entire story, he/she can trim it from the bottom without losing any of the important elements.

The lead should be short, around 25 words, and should capsule the story by covering most of the five Ws and H. The bridge can introduce any of the other five Ws and H not covered in the lead and eases the reader into the body. The body can be used to expand the material covered in the lead and bridge.

In any case, use the ABCs of journalism:

- Accuracy – get it down right;
- Brevity – keep your sentences and paragraphs short;
- Clarity – avoid using too many words. Don't be repetitious.

Keep related ideas together. Keep it tight and simple.

## Sports writing



Writing sports is much like writing straight news – with a few minor variations.

The lead should emphasize how the event was won, identify the teams and include the score, tell when and where the game was played and give the name of the sport.



As you develop your story, key on significant plays or individual performances before going into the chronology of the game. Since you were an eyewitness to the event, you can write this way without it being considered “editorializing.” However, add quotes from coaches about individuals who had key performances or quotes from the individuals themselves. Superficial quotes such as: “The guys all pulled together in playing defense. I couldn't have done it without them” should not stand alone -- add depth by getting the “star” to say what his/her teammates did to “pull together” or how he/she “couldn't have done it without them.” Interview the “star” or coach just as you would any other source, avoiding questions that would invoke a yes/no response.

In sports, **what** and **how** are the underpinnings of the story -- the story suffers if you don't include quotes from coaches and players on what they perceive they did to win or achieve certain individual accomplishments. Be sure these quotes add to the readers' understanding of what happened in the game; beware of “braggart” quotes that only serve the player's pride.

Doublecheck names and numbers.

## Submitting “copy”

Your post newspaper editor will expect you to submit your article – often called “copy” – in a particular format, whether you type it on a typewriter or write it on a computer.

Type your story on 8 ½ x 11 paper. Double space and use only one side of the paper. Indent paragraphs five spaces. If more than one page is needed, center the



word “more” at the bottom of the page. In the upper left corner of the next page, type whatever the topic of the story is and “Page 2,” 3, etc.

At the end of the story, center the number “30” under the closing paragraph.

Be sure to put your name and phone number on the top of Page

1. Submit your story to the editor on computer disk. (If you don’t have a computer, they can be “checked out” in the post library.) Be sure to check with the editor for any other requirements.

## Copyreading

Don’t waste your time rewriting or erasing when you make mistakes. There are ways of correcting your mistakes by using copyreading symbols. (See Pages 13-14.)

## Photographs

Photos will bring your story to life. Your editor is always looking for photographs full of action and interest, pictures that will turn the reader on.

Ask the editor if a staff photographer can take a needed photo if you can’t, or ask someone in your unit to do the shooting. Use black-and-white film and don’t use Polaroids, please.



Fill the camera frame with the subject. Get in close.

Avoid putting too many people in one shot, and make sure the subject is in focus.

Watch for objects in the background; they may be distracting. If someone will look like he/she has a flagpole growing out of his/her

## Copyreading symbols

### Symbol meaning

- Capitalize
- Make lower case
- Make caps and lower case
- Insert letter
- Change letter(s)
- Delete letter, close up
- Delete letter, leave space
- Insert word
- Change word
- Delete word, close up
- Delete word, leave space
- Insert space
- Close up
- Insert period
- Insert comma, colon, semicolon
- Insert hyphen
- Insert dash

### Edited copy

- ft. Knox
- the Mayor
- FT. KNOX
- news stories
- action photo
- typewriter
- first sergeant
- news photos
- record pictures
- news paper worthy
- the men
- news photos
- news paper
- the end. The
- three, four and
- re-enter
- fact for example

### Effect

- Ft. Knox
- the mayor
- Ft. Knox
- news stories
- action photo
- typewriter
- first sergeant
- news and photos
- record pictures
- newsworthy
- the men
- news photos
- newspaper
- the end. The
- three, four and
- re-enter
- fact--for example

## Symbol meaning

Transpose letters

## Edited copy

captain

Transpose words

fast|run)

Transpose sentences, paragraphs

Apply same principle as above, or circle first item and draw arrow to desired position? note with (TR)

Make opposite

Doctor  
Dr.  
twenty-one  
21

More of story to come

more

End of story

30) or ### or (end)

Not a new paragraph

battle. )  
Soldiers

New paragraph

battle. |Soldiers

Correct as written

Jane Austen

Let it stand as before corrected

(STET)  
the M16 rifle

Center in column  
(heads and subheads)

]The Dog[

Insert quotes, apostrophe

"We believe..."

Insert exclamation point,  
question mark

Wow!

Delete punctuation

white and blue

## Effect

captain

run fast

Doctor

Dr.  
twenty-one  
21

battle. Soldiers

battle.  
Soldiers

Jane Austen

the M16 rifle

The Dog

"We believe..."

Wow!

white and blue

head, try to move him/her to one side or the other.

Try to shoot pictures that have people moving into the center of the photo, not out of it.

The best photos are those that show action. Avoid "grip and grins" – one person handing something to another one while shaking hands, and both are staring at the camera! Get the subject doing his or her job.

If you can't avoid a grip and grin, such as photographing an award presentation, at least try to get the presenter and presentee close together. They won't be comfortable standing that close, so try and move them so that they're almost head to head and both looking at the award. Otherwise, there will be "lotsa wall" – a gap that will look huge in the resulting photograph.

Again, it's best to get the subject doing his or her job and avoid this altogether. This is what the newspaper editor will prefer and will more than likely print.

## Photo cutlines

A photo cutline serves several purposes. It identifies the people in the photo, equipment and other subjects.

The cutline should also describe the action and provide background information.

The best way to remember what to write in the cutline is to keep the five Ws in mind.



Photo by Cynthia M. Caughman  
Sgt. Mark Gabriele, Sgt. Kevin Helton, Spc. Steven Burch and Spc. Robert Tamez load an MK-19 grenade machinegun onto a humvee in the Warfighter competition.

## Section II

### Short writing “course”

#### Readability

Writing well will be the most important task of being a stringer, so this section revisits some things to know in writing news stories. It’s meant to help ensure you write a quality story that the post newspaper will publish and that represents your unit well.

Report the news. Make sure your story contains all the relevant facts: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Make it readable. To do this, use:

- **Short sentences**, an average of 15-20 or fewer words. Short sentences are easiest to understand. Vary sentence length to avoid choppiness. In longer sentences, use punctuation properly to help the reader.

- **Short paragraphs**, one main idea/concept to a paragraph. One or two sentences per paragraph is usually enough.

- **Easy words**, three syllables or fewer. If you must use a longer, harder word, such as a technical word, explain it with a simple definition or pithy analogy, then refer to it thereafter in a shortened or simplified form.

- **Personal words**. These bring in the human interest: “I,” “you,” “me,” “they,” plus names and quotes.

- **Active verbs**. These are words that show action, such as those found in a newspaper’s sports pages. Avoid passive voice as much as possible because it’s indirect, unfocused and often hides the doer of the action. By contrast, the active voice is direct, natural and forceful. It emphasizes the doer by putting the doer before the verb and showing who or what does the action. It makes sentences clearer and



shortens sentences. (Eliminating passive voice can tighten a story by about 20 percent.) The standard English sentence order of subject-verb-object is best.

- **Concise sentences**. Avoid extra words – don’t use two words to express an idea where one will do. Examples: delete “in order” in the phrase “in order to”; delete “of all” in “first of all”; delete “future” from “future plans” (“plans” implies they are yet to happen).

- **Correct spelling, grammar and punctuation**. Mistakes will distract your reader from your story.

Tips to write concise sentences and eliminate passive voice:

- Watch for “Latinized suffixes” such as “tion,” “ment,” “ize,” “ility.” A Latinized suffix often means the word was a verb, but the suffix made the word a noun. Example:

*The NCO is responsible for the motivation, development and supervision of his squad.*

Rewritten, this sentence should read:

*The NCO motivates, develops and supervises his squad.*

The correction gives the sentence action verbs and gets rid of extra words. A classic example of Latinized suffixes comes from George Orwell:

*Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.*

Orwell, tongue-in-cheek, was rephrasing the better-known

verse from Ecclesiastes:

*I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all.*

- To recognize (and get rid of) the passive voice, look for one of the eight forms of “to be” verbs (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) or a verb ending in -en or -ed. Example: “is requested,” “were eaten,” “was completed.” To fix the sentence construction, put the doer of the sentence as the subject. For example, rather than write “The PT test was passed by Jones” (passive), write “Jones passed the PT test” (active voice; the doer, Jones, is before the verb).

- Word choice is important, and that’s what makes writing hard work. Avoid a profusion of adjectives and adverbs, and choose your nouns and verbs to *show* your reader, rather than *tell* him/her. Be specific; try to avoid abstraction. If you’re too vague, the reader may think you mean one thing when you mean another. Example: If you want to describe “fat,” try also to have a doctor say that “fat” is 300 pounds. If you use statistics, “translate” them into terms the reader can understand, that have meaning and can be visualized. Example of what not to write:

*Six thousand people die every year on America’s highways.*

Example of what to write:

*About 170 people die every day or Enough people die every year to fill Yankee Stadium.*



Again, *show* the readers; don’t cite dry facts alone.

- Avoid clichés and Army jargon. These do not convey useful information.

## Inverted pyramid

Closely aligned with making a story readable is getting to the point fast. Readers and editors don’t have time to wade through a bunch of words before finding out what the story is all about, so write in an “inverted pyramid” style and pay special attention to the lead.

The inverted pyramid was adopted because editors cut stories from the end to make them fit into the newspaper’s available space, but busy readers like the inverted pyramid style as well because they only have to read the headline and first paragraph or two to get the story’s gist. “Inverted pyramid” is a metaphor for the broad base of important points first, then facts of lesser importance, then the least important but relevant information.

The inverted pyramid style, with some practice, should come naturally to you. After all, it’s actually the way *you* tell friends about something important in your life. Or: how do children tell a story? You ... children ... most human beings ... have this in common: normally you blurt out the important facts fast, using plenty of action verbs.

Inverted pyramid writing is the same concept. You start with a lead – probably one sentence, averaging 20 words, which summarizes the story’s most important information and contains specific facts. (An article’s “sections,” including the lead, are outlined in more detail under “Lead,” “Bridge and body” and “Ending.”) This kind of lead is called a “summary lead” – surprise, surprise – and its function is twofold: to not only state important facts first, as mentioned, but to



### Building a news story: lead, bridge/body and ending

more on these details.

You choose what goes in the lead, what follows the lead and indeed what even goes into the story by selecting facts based on their news value, already mentioned.

### Putting it all together

Let's start to put all this together in a practical way. Say you've gathered a bunch of facts for a story. Now your task is to write the story, but where do you begin? What out of your collection of facts would attract a reader, state important facts first and include most or all of the five Ws and H?

Fortunately the important facts ordinarily are the five Ws and H, so from there you select which of the five Ws and H is most important, and that ordinarily will be what attracts the reader.

The most important fact that comes first is not always to name a person (**who**) (discussed more under "Lead"). For example, some stories emphasize the time element (**when**) because it plays the most important part. Such as:

*With only five seconds to play, Army fullback Todd Stevenson crunched Navy linebacker bodies on his way in for the winning touchdown in*

also attract the reader.

You follow in the next paragraph by developing more details from a piece of information introduced in the lead. (Don't begin here with a chronological narrative.) Your third paragraph (and consecutive paragraphs) expands even

*the services' annual football classic last week at ProBowler Stadium, Honolulu.*

Or, if your story's setting (**where**) is unusual or important, play that up. Such as:

*One hundred miles above the earth, an Army paratrooper celebrated his re-enlistment with a buddy skydive (facing each other, linked at the wrists) with his pupil, his company commander.*

When a thing or action is noteworthy (**what**) and overshadows other facts, it should be featured at the beginning:

*Pitching two no-runs, no-hits games back-to-back in a do-or-die doubleheader, John Doe led his team to the champion's circle in last week's armed forces softball tournament.*

You may not know the **why** or **how** when you first report a story, and if you do, it may not be necessary to answer these questions in the lead sentence. (Second or third sentence may do.) However, there will be times when a person's motive, cause or reason (**why**) may be compelling and should come first:

*Because he started life in an orphanage, Capt. Teddy Chin has a special interest in Iraqi children who live in that country's orphanages. He and his unit have "adopted" an orphanage, bringing the children clothing, food and toys, and making badly needed repairs to the neglected facility.*

*Although they are very afraid of soldiers, the curious children find Chin a gentle, calming presence, said the orphanage's administrator through an interpreter. They don't share a language, but they do share a smile.*

Or, the circumstances or way something is accomplished (**how**) is often most important:

*By shouting a timely warning and shielding another soldier with his body, 1st Lt. Mark Hero sacrificed his own life but was credited with saving the lives of about a dozen fellow soldiers when a suicide bomber, using a child as a decoy, attacked a guard checkpoint in Tikrit, Iraq, April 14. The bomber and child were also killed in the blast.*

Now try your hand at this by crafting a story about a change of command. Here is the information:

*A change of command ceremony occurred. It happened April 9. The change of command was at Company B. The ceremony took place on General Field. The outgoing commander is Capt. Johnny B. Goode. The incoming commander's name is Capt. April T. Showers. She has been in the Army 15 years. She was a staff sergeant before becoming an officer. She served in Operation Iraqi Freedom. She is married to Timothy S. Showers and has two children, Spring L. Showers and Harry K. Showers. Capt. Goode is PCSing to Seoul, Korea, to become the assistant S-1 at Soldier Brigade there. Capt. Showers is moving from Officer Directorate on-post, where she managed officer career issues for XYZ Personnel Proponent. "I look forward to commanding this company," Capt. Showers said at the ceremony. "My first goal is to have everyone max the PT test. I saw firsthand in Iraq how important physical fitness is for everyone – not just the frontline soldier, whatever that is, since Operation Iraqi Freedom proved if nothing else has that the supply line, or any line, is the frontline. I also saw how good American soldiers really are at what they do, and I want to do my part to reward them. My other major goal is to do everything possible to help everyone get promoted at least once."*

In this case, the **who** is most important. The **why** of Capt. Showers' taking command is implied – because the Army assigned her to do so – and the **how** was via a typical Army ceremony. (The

**why** and **how** of her goals are certainly important to her soldiers and should be explored in another story, but here the focus is on the change of command itself.) So the lead will contain the **who**, **what**, **where** and **when** – and probably in that order. Like so:

*Capt. April T. Showers succeeded Capt. Johnny B. Goode as Company B's leader when she took command in a ceremony held at General Field April 9.*

Change-of-command stories follow a "formula" where the incoming commander is emphasized over the outgoing commander. (Do not include family information for either commander.) So your next and succeeding paragraphs may be:

*Showers was reassigned from Officer Directorate here, where she managed officer career issues for XYZ Personnel Proponent. A veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, she said one of the first things she wants to do is achieve maximum physical fitness in Company B.*

*"My first goal is to have everyone max the PT test," she said at the change-of-command ceremony. "I saw firsthand in Iraq how important physical fitness is for everyone – not just the frontline soldier, whatever that is, since Operation Iraqi Freedom proved if nothing else has that the supply line, or any line, is the frontline."*

*Another career-related topic of interest to the former staff sergeant is promotions. "I saw how good American soldiers really are at what they do, and I want to do my part to reward them," said Showers. "My other major goal is to do everything possible to help everyone get promoted at least once."*

*Goode has been reassigned to Soldier Brigade in Seoul, Korea, where he will serve as the assistant S-1.*

Notice how each paragraph has a logical connection to the preceding one. The second paragraph, for instance, is linked to the

lead by the repeated name, Showers. A quote as the third paragraph naturally follows the quote paraphrase (“she said one of the first things she wants to do”) from the second paragraph. In the fourth paragraph, the word “Another” ties back to the goals already brought up in the second and third paragraphs. These word links are called transitions, and they’re necessary to keep the story’s flow smooth and logical.

The fourth paragraph, wrapping up what has happened with the outgoing commander, may seem out of place. Newspapers may include this as the last paragraph, or they may include it as the second, to “dispose” of the outgoing commander since he will not be mentioned anymore. Then succeeding paragraphs are all about the new commander. Ask your editor how to handle the outgoing commander information.

The logical connections among paragraphs can also be seen – and will be constructed – as natural sections within the article. These sections are the lead, bridge, body and ending, discussed next.

### Lead

The first five to 10 words should count. The first sentence should count. The first paragraph should count. The lead should



count. Your article’s first words ... first sentence ... first paragraph ... “hook” the reader in, establish your subject, set the article’s tone and guide your reader into the rest of the story. The lead should captivate readers in the first line or two, letting them know why they should take the time to read your article.

There are seven common mistakes to avoid when writing your lead sentence. Consider them the seven deadly sins of lead writing:

- **Periodicity.** A periodic sentence is one that doesn’t yield its meaning until its end. As a lead, such a sentence slows the reader, maybe confuses him because it throws too many facts his way and will lose his interest. Don’t write:

*Increases in the cost of cloth and buttons to the Army, and the necessary flow-through of these costs to soldiers, are the reasons the Army is radically decreasing soldiers’ monthly clothing allowance.*

This sentence is more than twice as long as the recommended average and uses an abstract adjective (radically), but its worst error is that the reader must go to the sentence’s end before he gets to the important point (the smaller monthly clothing allowance).

- **Date first.** The date usually is the least important of the five Ws and H, even on a daily newspaper that reports that day’s events, yet stringers will start their stories:

*On April 16, 552<sup>nd</sup> Training Battalion’s tax adviser office, located at 1552 TRADOC Road, will close.*

Preferred:

*The 552<sup>nd</sup> Training Battalion’s tax adviser’s office will close April 16.*

Then comes the next paragraph with elaborating details:

*The office, located at 1552 TRADOC Road, ...*

● **Person's name first.** The announcement is more important than the person making it, even if that person is the commander. What the person is announcing is most important and therefore comes first, with the fact that he/she is doing so of secondary importance. Instead of:

*Lt. Col. Gordon Jackson, 552<sup>nd</sup> Training Battalion's commander, announced April 9 that Good Friday would be a battalion training holiday and "to hell with those who holler about separation of church and state."*

Write:

*Good Friday is a battalion training holiday and "to hell with those who holler about separation of church and state," 552<sup>nd</sup> Training Battalion's commander, Lt. Col. Gordon Jackson, declared April 9.*

● **"There" or "The."** It may be difficult to avoid beginning a sentence with either of these words, but if a writer begins this way, he/she will probably write in the passive voice. Remember the example, "The PT test was passed by Jones"?

● **Cutesy/clever but nothing to do with the story.** You may think it's snappy and it may attract the reader, but it will eventually irritate him/her as well. The reader wants to get to the story as soon as possible and will resent being tricked. You also have the danger of cutesy being degrading. An example of cutesy/clever:

*Sugar and spice and everything nice. That's what little girls are made of. But what are big girls made of?*

The actual story has nothing to do with sugar, spice or little

girls – it details the challenges of a female military police officer in an all-male environment. Would you like to read this type of lead? No? Then don't write it for others to read.

● **"So" statement.** There's no possible disagreement with these beginnings and evoke a "So?" response from the reader. Example:

*Retirement means many things to different people.*

What does retirement mean to the person being portrayed in this story? That's the lead.

● **Jamming everything into the first sentence.** You may not even get everything into the first paragraph – those are the elaborating details to be contained in the story's "bridge" and "body." Here's an example of a sentence that tries to contain too much:

*The 2003 noncommissioned officer evaluation survey is now underway, and promotions are being delayed while an Army-convened panel analyzes the recent glut of every NCO being rated "top block" as well as clarity of regulations and guidelines governing NCO-ERs.*

## Bridge and body

The bridge is usually a one-, two- or three-sentence paragraph between the article's lead and main body. The bridge should back up or add information to the lead and link the lead to the body of the story.

The body should develop the story and continue the lead's mood or tone. The body should have a single focus and not sidetrack into other topics. (Supporting information that will



help your reader understand your topic better can be placed in a “sidebar.”)

Use transitions throughout the body – from paragraph to paragraph, section to section – to maintain your article’s flow.

## Ending

A news article doesn’t have an ending, per se – it ends when all the pertinent facts have been included. If you prove yourself as a news stringer, the newspaper editor will welcome features and commentaries from you. For those articles, the ending is nearly equal in importance to the lead.

A feature article’s conclusion should summarize the story; wrap up any loose ends; tie back to an idea, key word or quote planted earlier in the story; present a surprise to the reader (called a “stinger” ending); or combine any of these methods. Whatever conclusion you choose, it should be appropriate to the type of article you’ve written.

If the article is an opinion piece in which the reader is asked to do something or avoid something, there should be a clear “call to action” – specifics on what to do or avoid – in the conclusion.

Opinion pieces should not contradict or criticize Army or command policy; hold the Army or any of its members up to ridicule; take sides in political issues; hold any race, religion or ethnic group up to ridicule; violate host-country sensitivities; or be written to air personal complaints. (Of course, if you do any of these things, the article won’t be printed.)

## Section III

### Common word goofs

**Affect, effect:** *affect*, as a verb, means *to influence*. *Affect* as a noun is best avoided; it’s occasionally used in psychology but not in everyday language. *Effect*, as a verb, means *to cause*. *Effect* as a noun means *result*.

**More than, over:** *over* is a physical position. When dealing with numbers, use *more than* – such as *more than 90 percent* (not *over 90 percent*).

**Compose, comprise, constitute:** *compose* means *to create or put together*. It’s commonly used in both active and passive voices. *Comprise* means *to contain, to include all or embrace*. Use only in active voice. *Constitute*, in the sense of *form or makeup*, is used if neither *compose* nor *comprise* fit.

**Include:** use when what follows is part of the total. Do not use *etc.* at the sentence’s end. Example:

*My job includes sizing photographs for the magazine layout.*

Not:

*My job includes sizing photographs, etc.*

**Dimensions:** use figures and spell out inches, feet, yards, etc., to indicate depth, height, length and width. Hyphenate adjectival forms before nouns. Use an apostrophe to indicate feet and quote marks to indicate inches (5’6”) only in very technical contexts. Examples:

He is 5 feet 6 inches tall.

The 5-foot-6-inch man

The 5-foot man

The basketball team signed a 7-footer.  
The car is 17 feet long, 6 feet wide and 5 feet high.  
The rug is 9 feet by 12 feet.  
The 9-by-12 rug  
The storm left 5 inches of snow.

**Ensure, insure:** Use *ensure* to mean *guarantee*. (Steps were taken to ensure accuracy.) Use *insure* only for references to insurance. (The policy insures his life.)

**Who, that, which:** When a phrase or clause refers to an animal with a name or to a human being, introduce the phrase/clause with *who* or *whom*. (Do not use commas if the clause is essential to the sentence's meaning; use them if it isn't.) *That* is the preferred pronoun to introduce clauses that refer to an inanimate object or an animal without a name. *Which* is the only acceptable pronoun to introduce a non-essential clause that refers to an inanimate object or an animal without a name. *Which* may occasionally be substituted for *that* in introducing an essential clause that refers to an inanimate object or an animal without a name. In general, this use of *which* should appear only when *that* is used as a conjunction to introduce another clause in the same sentence:

*He said Monday that the part of the Army which suffered severe casualties needs reinforcement.*

Follow this rule even if your word-processor's spelling and grammar check function prompts you to change your use of *who*, *that* or *which* in your writing.

## Conclusion

The few tips provided in this booklet aren't meant to make you an expert reporter. Don't expect miracles to happen overnight.

Remember: when in doubt, ask the editor for help.

Again, thanks for caring enough to help tell your unit's and thus the Army's story.

Good luck and have fun.



Adapted from *Pocket Guide for Stringers*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, November 1995

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