Tips for writing a strong story*

1. Ask yourself – What’s the story? Every story needs a single focus. You should be able to sum up the focus of your story in one sentence. If you have trouble narrowing your story to one focus, it may be that you have more than one story to tell. Every element of your story – introduction (lead), body and conclusion – must support your story’s focus (see #6).

2. Make sure you know the story inside and out. As the writer of a story, you need to be the expert on the topic. This will likely mean talking to others who are knowledgeable on the subject and asking lots of questions. Don’t be afraid of asking so-called “stupid questions.” If you’re wondering about something, your readers likely will too.

3. Remember your reader. You are writing your story for the reader, not for the subject(s) of the story. Include only information that will be relevant to the reader, and use language that the reader will easily understand. Ask yourself the question “Why should readers care?” and remember that “Because it’s important” is not a strong enough answer.

4. What makes your story unique? What is it about this story that made you laugh, cry or stop and think differently? Share that with your readers.

5. Hook readers with the lead. The opening paragraph of your story will determine whether readers decide to keep reading. If you don’t hook them with your opening sentence, they probably won’t keep going. Think about what makes your story unique (#4) and try to work that into your lead. For example, if you’re writing a story about a program that helps people who are unemployed find work, your lead could be:

“For the first time in two years, Karen Brown has a reason to set her alarm clock.”

Rather than: “The government has recently implemented a program to help individuals who are unemployed find work. Karen Brown is one such person.”

6. Make sure everything in your story supports your lead. If it doesn’t, you’ll confuse your reader.

You can compare your story to a dog.

Your lead is like the dog’s face. When a dog is happy, his ears perk up and his eyes are bright. His message comes across loud and clear (“I’m happy.”).
The dog’s body is like the body of your story. It supports what you saw in the lead. You would think it odd if your dog’s face was happy and his body was tense. It would send a mixed message.

And finally, the dog’s tail is like the conclusion of your story. It’s confirms what you saw in his face (the lead) and his body (body of story). The dog’s message is the same (“I’m happy”) but he’s conveying it in a different way (different words in the case of the story).

7. **Translate jargon.** Just because you know the latest technological or medical lingo doesn’t mean your reader will. Use simple language. Have someone unfamiliar with the subject matter read your story. If they are able to follow the story and accurately tell you what it was about, that’s a good sign. If the response is a puzzled look, you’ll need to clarify problem spots.

8. **Subjects must earn a quote.** Quotes can strengthen a story and lend credibility. But choose your quotes carefully, asking whether it adds anything to the story. For instance, if you are writing a story about an art show and you decide to interview a patron of the gallery, don’t quote someone saying, “I like coming to the art gallery.” You can paraphrase that saying, “Mr. Smith enjoys visiting the art gallery. ‘Being surrounded by art makes me feel as if I’ve stepped away from my life for a few hours,’ he says.” If Mr. Smith doesn’t say anything quotable, don’t quote him.

9. **Consider the best way to organize your story.** Here are a few options:

   Inverted pyramid: Begins with the most important information and works down to the least important.

   Chronological: Story opens with most compelling angle, and is then built according to a timeline. This happened first, then this, etc. Works well for stories with complex timelines.

   The whole and the parts: The lead and first few paragraphs summarize key elements of the story, and the rest of the story contains more specific details. Effective for stories such as budgets.

   Classic feature: Opens with an anecdote or opening scene – usually human interest – that gives the story context. Then moves into sub themes. Conclusion returns to the overarching theme introduced in the opening (human interest angle). Closing brings story full circle, leaving readers satisfied.

   Theme/Block/Chapter: Moves from one topic or theme to another, emphasizing order.

   **Note:** Taking a couple of minutes to draft a story outline may help you organize your thoughts and simplify the writing process.
10. **Read your story aloud.** This will allow you to test the flow of the story. If you stumble when reading aloud, or run out of breath before reaching the end of a sentence, you may need to go back and make changes. Try reading your story to someone you trust and ask them to provide you with feedback.

*Based on the teachings of Don Gibb, writing/editing coach, Ryerson University, at 2006 Canadian Association of Journalists Conference*

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