A view from the editor's chair

How WORLD Magazine organizes the stories it publishes

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WORLD Magazine readers sometimes wonder why we organize stories the way we do. Here's a view from the editor's chair.

First, a quick look back. U.S. newspapers in the 20th century had a simple formula: Reporters should answer six questions, 5 W's and an H—who, what, when, where, why, and how—as close as possible to the beginning of the article.

Journalism teachers called it the "inverted pyramid," with the wider part at the top showing graphically that the most important material should be in the first paragraph, followed by less important, and an eventual trickling out at story's end.

The 5W1H structure is still appropriate when reporting hard news. For example, here's a lead of a December 2016 WORLD Digital article: "A prominent Chinese Christian human rights lawyer and two publishers of human rights news websites (who) in China (where) disappeared (what) in the past two weeks (when), renewing fears of a crackdown on human rights defenders (why this is significant). The men could have been detained." That last statement was as much "how they disappeared" as we knew.

The 5W1H format is also useful as a logical exercise in thinking about news. Yet, most Americans today hear about top news via the internet or on television and radio, so newspaper and magazine editors have developed more flexible structures for feature stories when readers already know the basics. Those structures go by a variety of names. I call five of the most popular chronological, circular, linear, parallel, and multigrain.

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Chronological structure

Let’s run through the five, starting with chronological, a natural choice because children hearing bedtime stories want to know what happens next. “And then … and then …” is a storytelling mode that has suspense built in. For example, a WORLD Magazine story about growing up in a poor, gang-dominated neighborhood of Los Angeles started with 12-year-old David Trujillo joining a gang, then seeing his friend murdered, then attending his friend’s funeral, then becoming more tolerant of violence, then being ready to stab or shoot others who disrespected him, then coming to believe in Christ, then becoming a pastor.

Linear structure

A linear story is the equivalent in space of a chronological story in time. The linear story gives readers a closer look at a subject by moving them from outside to inside, or room by room through a house, or house by house down a street. For example, a profile of cultural radical Nat Hentoff began with a description of him working within a building plastered on the outside with posters advertising nihilistic bands such as “Lunachicks,” “Suicidal Tendencies,” “Haunted Toilet,” and “Hide the Baby.” A huge trash pile along one side of the building smelled of urine and sparkled with empty liquor bottles.

That specific detail showed the type of culture Hentoff and his newspaper, New York’s *Village Voice*, promoted in its articles. The story then moved readers inside, up a dark staircase brightened only by a taped-up flyer offering comfort to “Lesbian Survivors of Abusive Relationships.” That staircase brought readers to the editorial offices, then into the office of Hentoff, who believed in absolute existentialist freedom except on abortion. He fought the newspaper’s policy on that issue, deviating from the American cultural left, and so became a pariah: As Hentoff showed me around the offices no one spoke to or smiled at him.

This linear story was the equivalent of beginning with a wide-angle lens and then moving in. One variant: A linear story can also start with a telephoto lens that provides a close-up and then move out, contextualizing the individual.

Circular structure

A third kind of story structure, circular, starts like a linear story but eventually swings around a circle and ends in the same location or situation where it began. Example: One WORLD Magazine story began with a focus on a brass cross, the focal point of the chapel in a Texas prison, That cross, inmates explain, was to be removed, to the dismay of Eugene, a 35-year-old convict: “Ain’t that something?” he asked “It’s about the only thing in here doing any good.”

The story then provided information and perspectives before coming back to another statement from Eugene, who had spent many hours thinking about what can change a criminal’s heart: “People talk a lot about education. Let me tell you, there’s a whole lot of educated people in prison. Education doesn’t do it. Buildings don’t do it. You’ve got to change a man’s heart. Then you’ll see some rehabilitation.”

The article eventually ended where it began, with Eugene pointing to the cross and saying: “If I had not been sent here, I’d be in the ground by now. Here is where God talked to me. … They took God out of schools. Hope they don’t do that here.”

Another circular story in WORLD Magazine came from our East Asia bureau. It began:

> “Inside a sleek steel building in an artist community on the outskirts of Beijing, editors, producers, and videographers gather for a brainstorming meeting in their heavy snow jackets and boots. The temperature is in the teens outside. Dirty snow and slush cover the parking lot, but the landlord has turned off central heating to save money, meaning the staff of 7g.tv, a Chinese Christian video production company, must plan the week’s upcoming short videos in the cold.”

After providing an overview of Chinese media, the story came back to its first scene:

> “Back at the chilly 7g.tv office, the new generation focuses on seeking inspiring testimonies, filming talk shows on motherhood against a green screen in the studio, and brainstorming music video ideas with unsigned Christian artists.”

Parallel structure

A fourth structure useful for comparing rhetoric and reality is the parallel story, which uses a cutting back-and-forth approach familiar from movies. For example, a WORLD Magazine story set in Washington, D.C., first described U.S. lawmakers showing their “compassion” by spending other people’s money. Then came a contrasting sentence: “Several miles away from the Capitol, residents talk of four children found locked up by their mother in two filthy, roach-infested rooms. None was able to speak more than simple sentences.”

Then back to the lawmakers:

> “On Capitol Hill, where lawmakers say the word and create a federal bureaucracy out of nothing, the child welfare program has a simple solution—more money. Whenever a child is killed emotionally or even physically by an abusive parent, the story is the same—the system is overloaded and underfunded. While Congress is trying to give more money to child welfarists in order to ‘preserve families,’ critics charge that the child welfare system is so deeply flawed that bigger bucks will not help.”

Then back to the streets:

> “Quintessa Murreld of New York City died in foster care last year at the age of three. Her uncle, who was also her foster father, pleaded guilty of manslaughter. Quintessa had been placed in foster care because her mother, a crack addict, neglected her. After six months in that foster home, she was not placed for adoption, but was moved into foster care with her aunt and uncle, who made it clear that they had no intention of adopting the child.”

The alternating portraits directed readers’ attention to the lawmakers’ distance from reality.

Some parallel stories begin with a catchy lead and then deliberately alternate individual or group achievements and warts. Such a story often concludes with an anecdote that tries to reconcile the contradictions.

Multigrain structure

Let’s call a fifth useful story structure “multigrain” because it is a healthy melding of various images. After reporting in Cuba I wrote a WORLD Magazine story that started this way: “Three Spanish expressions common in Havana summarize what I saw during a recent trip to Cuba.” Then, a paragraph for each:

> “First, heard regularly: *No es facil* (It’s not easy). Every aspect of life— from gaining basic material sustenance to traveling across town to remaining psychologically relaxed when any neighbor or associate might be an informer—is difficult.
>
> “Second, heard as an explanation of why a failing government resents attempts to fill the gaps, *Ni comen ni dejan comer* (They don’t eat, neither do they let others eat). Churches are ready and willing to do better than the government in helping the poor and particularly the elderly, but it is officially and ideologically the responsibility of the state to provide all social services. Officials turn down church requests to build homes for the elderly and even citizen attempts to organize the collection of garbage that is rotting in the streets. Everything compassionate people do is an indictment of government failure—and Cuba’s Communist Party is desperately trying to avoid facing the truth.
>
> “Third, abundantly seen on billboards, the favorite Castroite slogan: *Un mundo mejor es posible* (A better world is possible). Marxist sloganeering tends to have three stages: belief, cynicism, and flipping the slogan on its head. Some Cubans may still believe that the regime can produce a better world; many appear to be cynical; but the future is with Christians who have faith that a better world is possible and are willing to take reasonable risks in striving toward that goal.”’

Other story structures

The story structures I’ve described—chronological, linear, circular, parallel, and multigrain—are the big five, but other story structures, such as opening question or day-in-the-life, can also work. Journalists sometimes start off with a big question—say, “What is an immigrant?”—and proceed to answer it. Or, journalists may ask, “Who are the immigrants?” and then paint portraits of a person or persons. Stories that offer an account of a person’s day may lack drama but provide a sense of realism.

Theme influences structure

Journalists often choose particular structures because they go well with the themes they plan to emphasize. Circular structures often contribute to a sense that many people are talking about problems but few are finding solutions. Alternating structure works well when we are contrasting Biblical and ungodly approaches. Linear stories give readers the sense that they are looking deeper into an issue, situation, or personality.

When it’s hard to figure out which structure to use, we need to ask ourselves three questions:

What interested me about this story? What is it really about? What do I want to teach the reader? The key to successful organizing of a major story is a firm grasp of the theme. It’s helpful to summarize a main theme in a sentence that has a noun and a verb—in other words, subject plus action. Then we can see if we have sharpened an angle enough to be able to write a tight article rather than a dithering report.

As we organize, we may realize that the story we thought was about “x” is actually about “y,” with “x “ as a subtheme. Some journalists create an elaborate outline before they write, but others find that getting into the flow of writing will help them understand more about the nature of their story. Outlines should be spines, not corpses, and brief enough so journalists can do quick spinal taps while thinking about the material.

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Narration, description, and quotation

As reporters prowl through notes and think through organizing the sections of a story, it’s important to consider narration, description, and quotation. Interspersing those three can keep *telling* to a minimum. The tendency of many inexperienced journalists or those only trained in newswriting is to take down lots of quotations and write stories that are successions of sound bites linked by expository sentences. That’s a boring type of reporting, one that might please the person quoted but will excite few others. It’s much better to provide description, then pause to introduce major characters, and then show those characters in action.

Pacing is vital. WORLD Magazine senior writer Lynn Vincent speaks of alternating medicine and sugar: After readers read through statistics or difficult exposition, reward them with anecdotes, colorful detail, or humor. Other writers speak of scattering gold coins throughout a story, so readers who find several will keep on reading for more. Successful publications are often travel guides, taking readers to areas or situations foreign to them and introducing them to people they are unlikely to meet.

For example, a story about big-city addiction began:

> “Walking down Brooklyn’s Fourth Avenue, Leroy Shepherd isn’t talking about the New York mayor’s race coming next month. Instead, he’s explaining how to spot a crack cocaine addict: They walk along the sidewalks, and you’ll see them looking into the gutters for old crack vials, in hopes of finding one with a little crack left at the bottom. Sometimes they find enough; maybe that day your car won’t get broken into.”

Good journalists are always on the lookout for anecdotes that can illuminate issues. For example, one story about Mexican political changes pointed out what was new this way:

> “Mexicans for years have told a little inside joke. They grin and say that citizens of the United States have nothing on them when they brag that they can know the results of a presidential election within a few hours after the polls close. 'In Mexico,' residents boast, 'we know who the next president is before the polls close.' For 65 years that has been so. The nominee of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (known by its Spanish acronym PRI) has been assured the presidency. … Something is different this time.”

Good editors would rather coach early in the process than fix organizational efforts later on. Both methods improve stories, but coaching improves journalists as well. A reporter should not be offended if an editor reads the draft and then comes back with questions like:

What's your theme? What are the most interesting things you saw? What's your evidence for this? What did it look like? What does the reader need to know? How can you clarify this?

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Structural editing

The editor's key role at this point is structural editing, based on an analysis of how the story moves from start to finish. Editors may demand reorganization: The editor's job is to explain why, and the reporter's task is to be of good cheer through what is at times painful. Reporters may feel that everything they have written is important, but a story in which everything is equal most often has the excitement of a posed class or team photograph. A good editor is anti-egalitarian, emphasizing certain elements and downgrading the importance of others.

Good journalists learn to emphasize material by placing the most important words at the beginning or end of the sentence, the most important sentences at the beginning or end of paragraphs, the most important paragraphs at the beginning or the end of stories. It's also possible to emphasize words within a sentence from least to most important, by varying sentence length, by repeating key words or phrases, and parallel structure.

Introducing character and action at the right pace is art, not science, like all writing. A good storyteller does not list the plot details at the beginning of his story, and good journalists do not recite facts without drama. They introduce characters who are forced to confront problems in realistic ways, and do so at a pace that places readers on a slope with a gradual ascent.

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Comments

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