

Writing for News

Television shows about TV news stations have been popular for a long time. Jeff Daniels famously brought “The Newsroom” to life. Before that, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” combined comedy and the news and became hugely successful. Now, “The Morning Show” starring Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon is taking a shot at the media art form.

It’s simple: the news has fascinated audiences for decades.

We love it, we hate it, and we love to hate it.

But what does it mean for someone looking to get into the industry? Maybe you’re looking at a career in journalism and thinking that you’d like to be a news anchor. Or maybe you’re looking for a writing job and see an opening for a news producer at a local station. Or maybe, you’re just simply curious about what goes into making the news that you or your parents watch on television every night.

That’s where this guide comes in. Over the next few pages, we’ll be looking at different aspects of the news. Specifically, we’ll be focusing on these four topics:

Television News v. Print Journalism

It’s All About the Audience

Understanding Biases

The Basics of Writing for the Small Screen

Television News v. Print Journalism

For any kind of news, you want to stick to the facts. When you’re writing for fiction, or even some non-fiction works, language can flow more freely (in fact, it should). When writing for news, you want to stick to the facts, no matter what kind of media you’re working with. You’re telling your viewers or your readers what happened in the most efficient way possible.

The viewers and readers don’t want to know how you feel about what happened.

We'll come back to that later.

The main idea to understand about print writing versus television writing is the difference between a word count and script timing.

When you're working on a newspaper or magazine, it's all about writing efficiently, but elaborately enough to fill out the word count, make things flow well together, and get the point of the story across.

When you're writing for TV news, every single word matters. An entire script might only be 50 words, but the more important thing is how long it takes the reporter or anchor to say those 50 words. Depending on the words or the reporter, it could take anywhere from 10 to 35 seconds, and time is precious when you're working on a live program.

The other aspect of writing for television news is telling the facts of the story, getting viewers the important news of the day, but being conversational at the same time. The length of the word matters, word choice matters. Viewers don't have time to go and grab the dictionary to look up a word they've never heard before to understand a story that's going to be done in less than 30 seconds.

Print journalism is all about telling the story in 200-300 words. Television journalism is all about telling the story in 30-40 seconds.

So, you're first assignment: write 200 words about a current event. Remember: facts not feelings. Now, read what you wrote out loud and time yourself. See how long it takes you to read without sounding rushed. For some, this may mean reading more intentionally. Try using hand gestures. Watch examples of television reporters to understand how they time their reads.

Now, imagine telling that same story in 30 seconds or less. You'll probably have to cut out a lot of words. How efficient can you make your writing? What is the necessary information the viewers need to know? Try it and see what happens.

It's All About the Audience

This is the golden rule for any and every kind of writing. Who's reading your work? Who's watching your programs? And that means having a basic understanding of everything from demographic information, political and/or religious beliefs, educational background, etc. It's not necessary to know specifics, but a liberally biased television program in an extremely conservative community probably won't receive the ratings a conservatively biased news program would, for example.

Your second assignment is to find an article in your local paper and read it. What can you tell about the audience that paper caters to? How old are they? What kinds of things do you think they might believe in? What kinds of stories do you think they would be the most interested in? Human interest pieces? Politics? Business? Entertainment?

When doing this assignment, it's important to remember we're not here to judge the audience who views our work!

Understanding Biases

This part requires a little introspection.

Every person on the planet has biases. A bias is just a preference for something that prevents us from being completely objective or non-judgmental about an issue or situation. An easy example of a bias is choosing a teammate between a sibling and a stranger. You're more than likely going to choose the sibling because you already know them, and that's preventing you from making an impartial decision. (It could also push you into choosing the stranger for the same reason, especially if don't get along with your sibling!)

There are all kinds of biases that prevent us from being completely judgement-free, and that will never change.

In the news world, you might see this the most in the political affiliation of a news source. Whether television or newspaper, every news source has a political bias.

A couple of things to know about biases: unless it's something that is actively harming you or someone else, biases are not a bad thing. Everyone has them. The key is to recognize the ones you do have.

Your assignment for this section is some self-reflection. Pay attention to your own personal biases. None of us are judgement-free. It's not about labeling, good or bad. Just start to notice your preferences for information.

The Basics of Writing for the Small Screen

Writing for television is not like writing for film. For one thing, there's the time-limit we mentioned earlier.

This is also where knowing your audience comes in handy, because you need to know how to talk to them. That's one of the most important things about television news. Think of the news like a one-sided conversation. If the person talking to you is using words that you don't understand, using more sophisticated grammar, vocabulary, and idioms than what you're used to, you're probably going to start tuning them out. It's sort of like sitting in a class, listening to a teacher or professor drone on about a subject you're not at all interested in.

You can also think of it the other way around. It wouldn't make much sense for someone to teach a college course like they would teach a group of kindergarteners.

The good news about writing for news is that there's a lot of material to work with when writing your scripts. You might have access to press releases or news wires or even content from other stations. When using any of these sources, keep in mind that your news audience might be different from their news audience. Then you'd want to tailor your scripts accordingly by paraphrasing, using synonyms, or even re-writing.

Another thing to keep in mind is that a lot of these sources have extraneous, or extra and unnecessary information. The trick when writing any news script is figuring out what information is vital for your audience to know, and what information is less important. When writing a news story, you're summarizing the information for your viewers. Give them the facts, the things they need to know, and anything left over is most likely just filler. You may or may not need the extra information, depending on how much time you have available for the story.

As a final assignment, find an article in a newspaper or magazine, then cut it down. Summarize it. What are the most important pieces of information that you would want an audience to know? Then, as an extra challenge, take a look at your audience. Think about the people around you: your family, friends, the town you live in, etc. How would you adjust the summary (without changing the facts!) for your audience?

And then...time how long it takes to read it! Can you get it under a minute? Thirty seconds?
Challenge yourself, but have fun.

For any kind of writing, proper spelling and grammar is important, of course, but keep this in mind when writing for news. It's highly possible you won't be the person to read what you wrote on camera! Even reporters write stories for anchors to read!

There's a lot that goes into making the news, but if you understand each of these four topics, then you're well on your way to becoming the next great reporter. Keep writing, and remember to breathe! The news changes every day, so there are plenty of chances to practice!