

## **Writing & Editing for Digital Media: Reporting & Writing**

This assignment asks you to do what journalists and professional content creators do: Go out into the world, talk to real people, gather information, and write a story only you can tell because you are doing the reporting.

You have pitched your story. It has been approved. Now the real work begins. If the pitch was the architectural blueprint, this assignment is the construction. Just as no building ever goes up exactly according to plan, no reported story is ever exactly the story pitched. Be ready to pivot. A source you expected to be peripheral might turn out to be central, or vice versa. A detail you stumbled on in an interview opens a door you didn't know was there. The best reporters follow the story wherever it takes them.

### **Learning Objectives**

By completing this assignment, you will be able to:

- Conduct original reporting using human sources (and by all means primary sources, documents, and data, as well)
- Write a piece of publishable reporting at a minimum of 1,000 words
- Apply the story form you identified in your pitch
- Structure a story with a compelling lede, a developed body, and a purposeful ending
- Integrate direct quotes, paraphrase, and context

### **Part One: The Reporting**

The best journalism is nearly always produced by reporters who went somewhere. An interview conducted in person, in the subject's own environment, produces something a phone call or email exchange almost never can, which is the telling detail. The way the ceramicist's hands are permanently stained with iron oxide. The hum of the walk-in freezer in the background when the food pantry volunteer talks about the winter shortage. The photograph on the wall that the source glances at when she talks about her late husband.

Chapter 5 describes the "behind-the-scenes feature" as putting the reader there in the room, at the scene, inside the experience. This kind of specificity doesn't come from a screen. Go to where your story lives. Observe. Take notes on what you see, hear, and smell, not just what you are told. Interview with curiosity, not just a checklist.

Chapter 5 also recommends thinking like an 8-year-old, asking questions not because they are on your list but because you genuinely want to know the answer. Bring your prepared questions, but hold them loosely. The most important question is often the one that follows an unexpected answer, the one you couldn't have written in advance.

A few principles for strong interviewing:

- Seek the story behind the story. Don't just ask people what happened. Ask them what it felt like, what surprised them, what they wish they had known, what they would do differently. These questions produce the quotes worth quoting.
- Silence is a tool. When a source finishes answering, pause before your next question. People often fill silence with the thing they almost didn't say — and that is frequently the thing worth having.
- Ask for specifics. If a source says something was "really hard," ask them to describe a specific moment when that was true. Abstract claims produce abstract quotes. Specific moments produce stories.
- Verify what you can. If a source tells you something that can be confirmed through a document, a record, or another source, confirm it. Chapter 5's "documents state of mind" applies here: court records, annual reports, public filings, and census data can corroborate, complicate, or deepen what your human sources tell you.

## Source Diversity

Strong reported pieces typically draw on more than three sources, so consider this target a minimum. Think about who is missing from the conversation on your subject. Chapter 5 asks: Who deserves to be heard? If your story is about a neighborhood pantry, you need the person running it, sure, but you also need the people using it, and perhaps someone who studies food insecurity, and perhaps a city official whose policy affects it. Each source should add something the others cannot.

## Part Two: The Writing

Your lede, or the opening of the story, is the single most important sentence or paragraph you will write. It is the invitation and the argument that this story deserves the reader's time. Think of it as a door: it should open onto something, not just announce that a door exists.

There are two broad families of ledes:

- The summary lede states the most important fact(s) of the story directly and immediately. It answers, at minimum, who and what. It is the workhorse of news writing, efficient and clear.
- The narrative or anecdotal lede opens with a scene, a moment, a character, something specific and sensory that draws the reader in before the broader significance is explained. It is more commonly used in features and profiles. It should be vivid but not indulgent; it earns its length by delivering the reader somewhere worth going.

Whichever you choose, **the lede** must be earned. Do not open with a sweeping generalization ("Throughout history, communities have always come together in times of need"). Do not open with a question unless it is one the reader genuinely cannot answer. Do not open with a quote unless it is the single most arresting sentence in your entire notebook.

In feature and reported storytelling, the **nut graf**, typically the third to fifth paragraph, is where you step back from the opening scene and explain to the reader what this story is really about and why it matters now. Think of the lede as a close-up lens and the nut graf as the wide-angle pull-back. It answers the question the reader is asking after your opening: So what?

A strong nut graf tells the reader what is at stake, establishes the broader context for the specific story they are reading, and implicitly promises what the rest of the story will deliver.

### **Structure: The Story Has a Shape**

A reported article is not a list of facts in the order you gathered them. It has architecture. The structure you choose should serve the story's content and your chosen story form. Refer back to your pitch and the story type you selected.

Some structural options to consider, all from Chapter 5:

- The inverted pyramid places the most important information at the top and works downward in descending order of significance. It is efficient, scannable, and standard in straight news.
- The hourglass opens with a summary of the most important facts, then transitions into a narrative reconstruction of events in chronological order. It combines the immediacy of hard news with the readability of storytelling.
- The narrative arc follows a character or situation through a sequence of events, building tension toward a moment of revelation, resolution, or complication. It is well suited to profiles, human interest pieces, and behind-the-scenes features.
- The service structure moves from problem to context to solution, often used in how-to features and explainers.

Whichever you use, your story should have a beginning that earns attention, a middle that develops and complicates, and an ending that lands with intention. An ending is not where you ran out of things to say or a summary of things you did say. It is where the story arrives.

### **Integrating Sources**

Your reporting lives or dies on how you use what your sources gave you. Three principles apply:

- Quote what only the source could say. Direct quotes should capture voice, personality, emotion, or a claim so specific and well-phrased that paraphrasing would diminish it. Don't quote someone saying something mundane that you could summarize in fewer words. Quote them when the way they said it is part of the meaning.
- Paraphrase everything else. If a source explained a process, recounted a sequence of events, or provided background information, paraphrase it clearly and attribute it. Reserve the quotation marks for the sentences that earned them.

- Let sources complicate each other. The most interesting reported pieces are not ones where every source agrees. If two sources see the same situation differently, let that tension live in the story. It is not your job to resolve it; it is your job to present it clearly and fairly.

## **The Ending**

The ending of a reported piece should feel inevitable in retrospect, even if it surprised you in the writing. Some options:

- Return to the person or scene from your lede, completing a narrative circle
- End on a quote that resonates beyond the immediate story
- Leave the reader with a question, not a cheap cliffhanger, but a genuine, earned uncertainty that reflects the complexity of the subject
- End on a specific, concrete image or moment that crystallizes the story's meaning

What you should not do: **summarize** what you just told them, **editorialize** about what it all means, or simply stop because you reached the word count.

## **Second piece of content**

Produce and publish with your story the second piece of content that you pitched earlier. This can be a photo, short video, a chart or other information graphic, animation, etc. You are required to have at least one other content piece, but you are invited to develop even more, and to collaborate with AI in order to do this.