

**Title:** Becoming Better Storytellers: The Use of Writing Workshops in an Introductory Journalism Course

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**Summary:** A journalism professor restructures the use of in- and out-of-class time in order to better focus on four key points that often proved difficult for students.

## **Background:**

### *Course Description*

Introduction to Journalism is an introductory course designed to equip students with basic journalism skills and to expose them to a wider philosophical understanding of the journalist's responsibility to society. It provides a basic survey of the field and instruction in the fundamentals of journalistic writing, interviewing, and editing. It is a required course for communication majors and minors, strategic communication majors, business communication majors, and journalism minors. Most students are sophomores and juniors who have little to no background in journalism. For the majority of students, this is the only journalism course they will ever take. For others, it provides the foundation for subsequent journalism courses. The course is capped at 24 students.

### *Intellectual Goals*

My intellectual goals for the course include:

- **Reporting:** Students will demonstrate the ability to report in depth, using a wide variety of sources to provide context, accuracy, and balance.
- **Writing:** Students will demonstrate the ability to produce stories that are clear, concise, and compelling.
- **Role and Responsibilities:** Students will demonstrate an understanding of the roles and duties of journalism in society, and recognition of the legal and moral implications of their work.

## Implementation:

I strive to make Introduction to Journalism a very hands-on, practical course. Previously, students prepared for class by completing required textbook readings and preparing occasional short preparation assignments. The students also had a current events quiz at least once a week, encouraging them to develop a habit of keeping up with the news. Class time was a mix of lecture, discussion, activities, and in-class writing and editing. While each class looked slightly different, this is an example of a fairly typical 75-minute class.

### *Sample class lesson: The Inverted Pyramid*

1. Five-minute current events quiz.
2. 25-minute combination of lecture and discussion. Students read a chapter preparing for class, so we spent time reviewing what the inverted pyramid is, why journalists use it, how it helps editors and readers, and some of its shortfalls. Using current stories in the news, I showed several examples of how the inverted pyramid is used to structure stories.
3. 30-minute writing lab. In pairs, students were given a set of facts. I asked them to write a short news story using the inverted pyramid style.
4. 15-minute debrief. As a class, we discussed the activity and looked at some of the students' leads and/or stories.

In my course redesign, I chose to more critically examine students' writing and reporting. Perhaps more specifically, I wanted to help students understand what it means to write like a journalist. I wanted them to develop their writing in a different genre, one that has perhaps a different audience and a different purpose than writing they have done in the past. This is a challenge for students, because they are used to writing papers where their teachers and professors have served as their primary audience. They are used to trying to stretch their writing to meet a certain page requirement. I ask them to write in a different way – shorter sentences and paragraphs, different structures, writing with their audience in mind, and selecting information and research somewhat differently than they do for academic writing.

In particular, students often struggled with key areas such as learning to write strong leads, writing tight sentences and paragraphs, organizing their stories with their audience in mind, and selecting and properly attributing quotes. In this project, I have addressed these specific challenges.

1. *Writing strong leads:* Students often struggle with writing strong story leads (which is hard!). Sometimes they try to write something catchy that fails to capture what the story is about. They might write a lead that is similar to the introduction to a paper that slowly warms up to the story. Some students write leads that don't entice the reader. They need to learn to write crisp leads and stories with a strong focus, because readers give you just a few seconds to capture their interest before they move on to the next story.

2. *Writing tight sentences and paragraphs:* Students often have difficulty learning to convey as much information as possible in as few words as possible. It is important for them to learn

this skill, because readers are short on time and want to be able to quickly scan a news article to get the information they need.

- Sometimes students struggle with finding their focus. They need to decide what the main point is and stick with that point from start to finish.
- They incorporate too many clauses.
- Students try to cram too many ideas into a sentence. They need to learn to incorporate just one or two ideas per sentence.
- They also write long paragraphs. Typical paragraphs in a news story are no more than two to three sentences. Short paragraphs are easier for readers to follow and easier for editors on deadlines to cut.

3. *Organization*: Readers have a finite amount of time. Stories need to be structured in a way that will hook them from the beginning and give them the maximum amount of information in the minimum amount of time. There are several typical news story structures (inverted pyramid, martini glass, kabob, etc.). Students need to learn when each would be the best type to use and why.

4. *Selecting and properly attributing quotes*: It can be challenging for students to learn how to properly use quotes in news stories. Some typical errors include directly quoting information that would be better as a paraphrase, failing to incorporate quotes at all, using boring quotes, quoting sources who don't really add to the story, and using long-winded quotes. Students also struggle with learning to properly attribute quotes.

To address these challenges, I incorporated more activities that encouraged students to prepare carefully for class. I assessed student achievement of the course goals through low-stakes writing assignments; weekly current events quizzes; and in-class discussion, activities, writing, and editing. However, after year one I opted to discontinue the weekly current events quizzes and also dropped a story assignment. In the localization story assignment, students had to make a story particularly meaningful to local readers. This story assignment was problematic for a variety of reasons. Therefore, during years two and three, students wrote three stories, completed three exams, and prepared a group project and presentation.

### *Three stories*

Students wrote the following stories:

1. Classmate profile. The first week of class, students broke into pairs and interviewed each other for a profile story. The students then interviewed two more people who were well-acquainted with the subject of the profile to give them additional insight for their story.
2. Event story. Students attended an on-campus event and wrote a story with a short turnaround time.
3. Multi-media story. Students wrote a story of at least 500 words in an online style for a web audience. For example, students should write short paragraphs, include meaningful subheads and incorporate bullet points (if applicable). They must include at least two related hyperlinks, at least one photo, a sidebar, and a complementary multimedia element. The students do not need to put the story online – they can simply mock it up.

To assess how well students met the learning objectives of reporting and writing, I used the same rubric for the first two stories. The multimedia project rubric and the group project rubric were similar to the first rubric, but added dimensions for the additional multimedia elements. Each of the rubrics considered the following six criteria:

- Lead
- General level of writing
- Use and quality of quotes
- Depth of information
- Organization
- Accuracy

### *Three exams*

Students took three exams, which were a mix of multiple choice, fill in the blank, identification, matching, and short answer/essay. The questions on the exams related both to textbook content and in-class discussion.

### *Final project*

For their final project of the semester, students worked in groups to create a multimedia package that they actually post online. Their package had to include a main story of 500-750 words, at least four direct quotes, at least three related hyperlinks, at least two original photos, at least three sidebars, and at least two complementary multimedia elements.

## Student Work:

For this project, I looked specifically at the final project.

Final project samples:

Year One:

1. Healthy Living
2. Finals Week

Year Two:

1. Kansas City Christmas
2. Various Christmas Traditions
3. Finals Week
4. New Housing Plan

Year Three:

1. Finals Week
2. Road Trips
3. KC Crime
4. Men's Basketball

I used the group project rubric to judge students' quality of performance. Each of the previously mentioned skills (leads, writing tight, organization, and quote usage) is a dimension of the rubric.

As listed in the table below, students in years two and three made modest to significant gains in each of the areas. The most significant gains were in the areas of depth of information, the use and quality of quotes, and in writing strong leads. Years two and three were fairly similar, with the largest gains occurring in year two (after the implementation of more writing workshops).

CRITERIA	Average Scores (percentages)		
	Year One	Year Two	Year Three
General level of writing	82.35	86.75	85.29
Depth of information	70	75	80
Organization	80	87.5	86
Use and quality of quotes	66.67	83.33	85
Lead paragraph	50	79.17	81.67

## **Reflections:**

My students are learning to “write like journalists” as my teaching has become more focused. Because I am more carefully considering what I want students to take away from the course, the course has become much tighter. I no longer feel a compulsion to cover every topic in the textbook. Instead, this project has given me the freedom and the confidence to recognize that I can carefully curate the course to address the learning objectives. Each lab, discussion, reading, lecture, and assignment has started to feel like it is working in tandem to help my students become better writers.

As the results from the project show, students are learning to write more engaging leads, to choose more descriptive quotes, and to include more pertinent information. Modest gains were also noted in their general level of writing and in their organization. Next time I teach the course, I will spend more time working with students to make sure their stories and story packages are organized with the reader in mind.

Going forward, I definitely plan to keep the labs as part of my instructional design. I plan to add a few additional “mini labs” for topics that might not warrant a full 75-minute lab, but could help scaffold students’ writing assignments. For example, I will ask students to plan out the organization of their multi-media stories by writing all of their various elements on index cards and then arranging those index cards in a hierarchy that will make the most sense for their readers. While I wouldn’t devote 75 minutes to this activity, 20 or 25 minutes might make a difference in how students conceptualize their designs. I also plan to keep the three exams, the profile story, the event story, and the final project.

As part of the redesign, I opted to discontinue the weekly current events quizzes. As I’ve discussed, my goal is to sharpen my focus on improving student writing, and I don’t think this element of the course was necessarily working toward that goal. It also had the unintended consequence of putting students on edge in anticipation of a quiz. While I expect students to prepare carefully for class, I also want the class environment to be supportive, and the current events quizzes seemed to create a great deal of tension. As noted in the implementation section, I also dropped one of the story assignments from year one.

If I had not carefully considered my students’ work, I would not have felt confident making these changes to the course. Close attention to students’ work has influenced my practice by making me more observant about what is working well and what could be better. It has also given me license to make adjustments or tweaks to the course, sometimes even in the middle of a lesson, because I now trust myself more. I’m more attuned to what I want students to learn or be able to do after they complete my courses. Quite frankly, this has made teaching more enjoyable because I am taking ownership of my classes in new ways.