

Jim Corrigan: NOTES FOR JOURNALISM WORKSHOP.

(Talk given at UCCN conference on 28/2/2009.)

NEWS STORY – how to construct?

Start with the most important point of the story ... and build using Kipling's 'five stout fighting men': Who? What? Where? When? Why? .. and also How?

Keep it brief, flowing and CLEAR ... think of your reader, your audience – and always write for the new one who does not know about the subject – DO NOT ASSUME knowledge; all you can assume is a very basic general knowledge (e.g. newspapers always give the PM's name and title – they never assume).

CONTEXT is vital, always explain the essential background, however briefly (preferably briefly!) Do the work for your reader ... dates, what happened, what was it all about. Recap using shorthand rather than repeating detail – and if the background is very complex, you can just say that: e.g. 'it was a highly complex dispute, in which there were no clear winners.' DO NOT LEAVE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS in the mind of your reader.

Above all, make sure you yourself UNDERSTAND each point fully, including necessary background -- ask questions and find out facts, and then explain all clearly and succinctly IN YOUR OWN WORDS.

AVOID jargon, our own jargon too, 'growing congregations' etc (yes, even in our own journals, because there are always new readers!) AVOID acronyms and initials whenever possible in our journals – it usually is possible! They are messy and confusing. Instead refer on second reference to: 'the organisation', 'the chapel', 'the group' etc. Where you really can't avoid initials, give the full name first and then put the set of initials in brackets afterwards – but remember, no need to put these initials unless you use them again! Keep it all very accessible – and always think of the new reader.

Style of writing:

Look at George Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1946 – it can be found via a google search). Look at his examples of good and bad writing, partic Ecclesiastes passage.

Two faults he identifies:

- staleness of imagery
- lack of precision (so be very clear about what you are saying).

Orwell ends by advising:

- 1) Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- 2) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6) Break any of these rules rather than say anything outright barbarous.

Try to follow Orwell's advice, always re-read your piece, cut (including adjectives) and rewrite wherever necessary.

PRESS RELEASES:

Make sure you have an interesting or snappy headline, and date it. Follow style of news report – most important or arresting point first. Convey key facts and interesting details. **Always** put DAY as well as DATE when publicising an event.

Ask yourself: WHO IS THE TARGET? WHAT DO YOU WANT THEM TO PICK UP?

Look at targets – local newspapers, local broadcast media – so play up local angles, including human interest stories.

Who to send to?: individual journalists OK if they are still there – but the most important is always to send to the News Editor (for newspapers) or Newsdesk for radio and TV stations. Emailing often best these days, find out who to send it to via phone or website. But remember, generic addresses are safest.

National media – a different ball game, much more difficult to get coverage, has to be an exceptionally strong story.

Exercise on Press Releases – look at a fairly straightforward one (from Golders Green) on Open House weekend – main points.

Devise a press release for Newington Green chapel for its stand to suspend marriage services in solidarity with gay and lesbian couples.

FEATURES:

News-type feature: start with your main point, and amplify using colour (interesting detail). This style best for shorter features. Same principles apply: think of your reader, explain everything, never assume. What is interesting to you is likely to interest your reader, but keep it moving, flowing.

More complex features need a separate workshop.

BEING INTERVIEWED FOR BROADCASTING:

The interviewer will engage you, so you just respond in a natural way, but do project your voice. NEVER attempt to read from notes when responding to questions in an interview – the most you should ever note on a piece of paper is a name. And remember, complicated figures do not work on the airwaves.

Keep your answers conversational and focused -- aim only to answer the question you were asked – and when you have done so, END your sentence naturally and then KEEP QUIET, allowing your

interviewer to come in again. (Your interviewer may give you an idea beforehand of how long they want you to speak for – otherwise they will likely indicate to you by facial gestures when they want you to continue or to stop). Be guided by them.

It is important not to try to get all your points across in one answer. A typical news interview will invariably have a structure.

Structure of typical news interview (e.g. about a campaign you are launching, say to help refugees in your city centre).

First, a **preliminary question** to gauge the 'sound-level' of your voice (e.g. 'how did you get here today?').

FIRST STAGE: Q: Why are you launching this campaign now? An open question, but with a firm 'limiter' (the word 'now'), which is aimed at keeping the answer short and allowing the interviewer to but in. To ask a campaigner a wide open question, like why they are launching their campaign, is likely to involve a very long answer!

SECOND STAGE: Question(s) likely to be about aspects of the campaign (what?, how?), but also a probing question: 'what about needy people who are not refugees?'

THIRD STAGE: Casting it forward. e.g. 'How long is this going to last?' At what point are you going to be satisfied?'

So to repeat, because of this structure, **always answer simply the question you were asked -- and do not go further.** Also, **avoid seeming too eager to give a plug for your organisation** – it will normally have been mentioned in the introduction. If you are able to bring it in again naturally, then that is obviously good.

By all means rehearse what you want to say beforehand, and anticipate objections and criticisms – think how you may answer.

... ends.