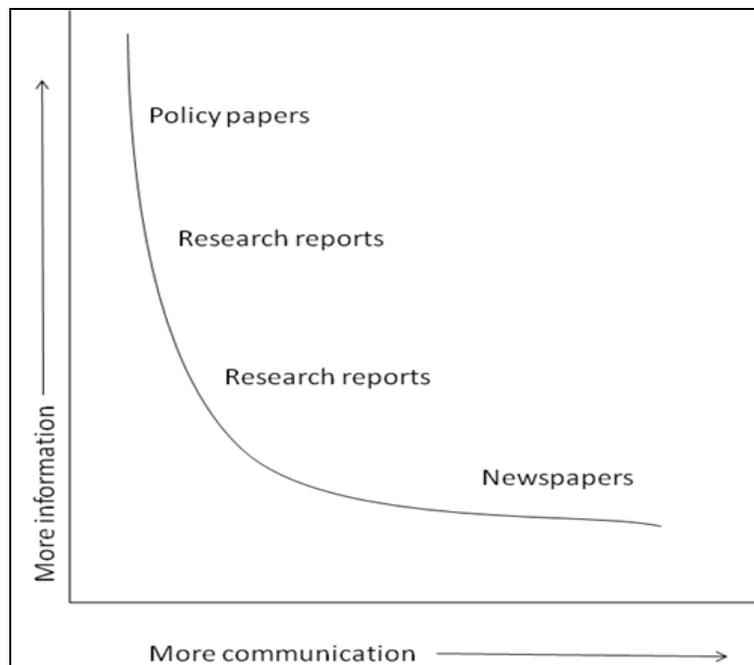


WRITING FOR IMPACT: LESSONS FROM JOURNALISM

WHY MASTER THIS SKILL?

Most of us obtain most of our information about what is going on in the world from some form of journalism – listening to the news on the radio, reading a newspaper, watching the TV or increasingly, from “citizens journalism” like Twitter. We are so used to hearing or seeing news stories that we may not realise that they are cleverly constructed and usually in a particular way. It is the way journalists are taught to communicate, and it is clearly influential. If we wish to have maximum impact when communicating our research findings then we can learn a lot by understanding how journalists package the information they gather.

There is a general inverse relationship between the amount of facts and the complexity of the information to be provided and the communicability of the information. The more information, the less likely it is that readers or listeners will absorb it all. However, by using journalistic techniques you may be surprised at how much information you can convey to people.



WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES USED BY JOURNALISTS?

The basis of any piece of journalism is to tell who did what to whom, when, where, how and why, and with what consequences. That is the actual sequence in which most news stories are told.

That sequence is how stories have been told by humans from time immemorial, and journalism exploits the power of story-telling to communicate information. It explains what happened in a way, and in language, that most people can understand.

There are four key techniques:

- Tell stories
- Keep it as brief as you can
- Use plain language
- Structure your report for impact

TELL STORIES

What is a story, and why are stories important? Stories are as old as humanity – indeed, it may be that the ability to tell stories are the one and only unique distinguishing mark that separates humanity from other animals.

Stories are generally told in a particular way – a sequence: who did what to whom, when, where, how and why and with what consequences, and usually they revolve around actions outside the usual frame of reference of the reader or listener.

Stories are always about living beings, whether humans, divinities or animals – creatures with whom we the reader or hearer can identify.

Stories are exciting: they engage the reader at an emotional as well as an intellectual level, which is why they are so memorable and can have such a powerful impact. They invite the reader or hearer to participate in the story by using her imagination so that they become involved with the fate of the protagonists.

Stories surprise the reader, they make her or him want to read or listen to the end and they invite him or her to repeat the story to their friends. Stories will probably be remembered long after we have forgotten abstract facts and figures.

So for Oxfam, whatever we write or broadcast should always be about people; what are people with whom we work doing, how are they affected, what are their names, their faces, their opinions, concerns – in other words, their stories. Even very abstract briefings that need to be full of facts and statistics should always explain at some stage what have all those facts and statistics got to do with real people.

KEEP IT AS BRIEF AS YOU CAN

Why is brevity a useful discipline? Think about the way in which stories are communicated on the radio, TV or in newspapers. You will notice that news stories are generally quite short, in order to keep the viewer's attention and in order to cram more news stories into the time or space available. News headlines on the radio may be only 30, 20 or even 10 seconds long. Reading a newspaper story is unlikely to take longer than two or three minutes. Many interviews on news channels are two or three minutes long, no more.

Brevity is an important communications strategy because it is about boiling a story down to its absolute essentials. It makes us think about what is the essential piece of information that I want to communicate to my reader or listener, and how can I communicate that best so that it makes an impression on him or her. Having to boil down our research to perhaps one essential fact is not unreasonable if we think of our own lives and how we digest news. We wake up and the radio is on but we are half awake, the baby is crying, we are in a hurry to leave for work, we are trying to have breakfast ...so though the radio is on we are probably only going to be absorbing one fact per story

– the headline – and it will take something quite compelling and out of the ordinary to really grab our attention so that we actually listen attentively.

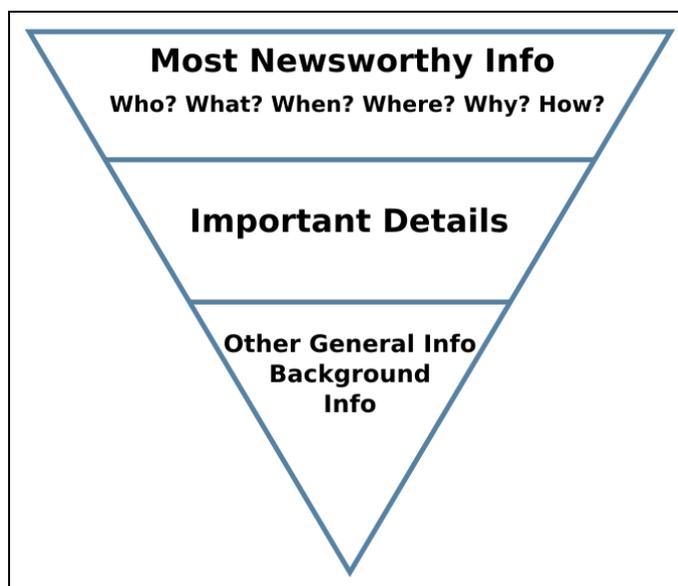
So think, how would you explain your research findings to your partner or friend over breakfast in those circumstances? It has to be short, simple and unusual. It follows that you should not cite 10 facts when one will do, and you only need to use one telling example, not five. And to make the fact stick, you should say what it means to a person or family – briefly tell the human story.

USE PLAIN LANGUAGE

It follows that we have to talk to people in language that they understand in order to communicate so keep your language simple. Use ordinary words and familiar terms. Avoid jargon and acronyms. Imagine how you would explain your argument to a relative who doesn't know much about Oxfam or what you do for Oxfam and who is likely to be slightly sceptical.

STRUCTURE YOUR REPORT FOR IMPACT

Most news stories have a particular structure. We are so used to the way news is presented that we may not notice the underlying structure but you can easily observe this if you analyse a newspaper. The structure is dictated by the need to grab a reader's attention, and by the need for brevity. A news story can look rather like a pyramid. This is how it is usually conventionally represented (this is from Wikipedia):



Note though that in terms of the SIZE of the text that is written, this inverted pyramid is actually exactly the opposite of what we see in a newspaper or magazine. In practice a news story looks more like a pyramid the right way up – the first paragraph (the top of the pyramid) is essentially the entire story in miniature as it contains all the facts (what happened i.e. who did what to whom, when, where).

The second part expands on this with more background information – usually why something happened. The remaining paragraphs expand on the story, perhaps with the implications i.e. what is this likely to mean. But if you only read the first couple of paragraphs, you would know the essential story.

So the way to think of writing a story is better represented like this – the most important facts come first and they go into what is actually the smallest space:



Writing in this way – and thinking in this way – is actually quite a discipline to learn and is not necessarily natural. In fact it is the opposite of the way that one would tell a joke, or even tell a story to friends. To tell a joke you would first set out the scene then say what happened and finally deliver the punch line. The listener doesn't know what happened until the end. In news, you almost do the opposite; the punch line comes at the very beginning, the rest is an expanded explanation of why that thing happened.

The reason for this is that if another, bigger story came in to the news desk, and your story had to be cut to accommodate it, the editor would usually cut your story from the bottom up, on the grounds that the least essential information was near the bottom. In the end the whole story could be cut except the first paragraph or two, and yet the essential facts would still be intact "in brief".

Some people, especially in research and academia, find it hard to adopt a journalistic style of constructing a story. They are taught to make a linear argument, setting out the whole scene first, finally culminating in a conclusion. This is perfectly valid, but the way in which a journalist would communicate the report would be to go straight to the conclusions and state them in the first paragraph of the news story.

Thinking what is the key fact or conclusion that I really want to communicate in my report, and setting it out at the beginning, is useful discipline. So any research report should have at the beginning an executive summary - and maybe an abstract, which is an even shorter version of the executive summary- which sets out simply and clearly and up-front what is the essential finding of the report and the basic argument that it is making. Some of your audience (particularly perhaps politicians) will probably only read your executive summary; much as you would like them to read your entire report, they only have time (or inclination) for the essentials.

In fact, it is good to write the executive summary of your report first, not write the report and then attempt to summarise it. By doing it this way round you will know clearly what the core argument is and the report itself should just be an expansion of each part of your executive summary.

ALLOW ENOUGH TIME

The purpose of research is to have impact to create change, and that cannot happen without effective communication of the results. But the time needed for effective communication – to prepare it and to do it – is not always factored into research timetables. Time must clearly be allowed for sign-off but many other people then have jobs to do to disseminate any report. They include editors, designers, printers and publishers, including those people who have to get the report into the right format to go on websites. Finally, the media team are responsible for gaining the attention of journalists and this can be a time-consuming process given the many other stories that are competing for space or airtime.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information about writing like a journalist in a pyramidal fashion – including an example of a famous news story – see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted_pyramid

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This guideline has been prepared by Oxfam's Global Research Team and Oxfam GB's Policy and Practice Communications Team for use by staff, partners, and other development practitioners and researchers. It was written by John Magrath and edited with the help of Martin Walsh.

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB under ISBN 978-1-78077-223-3 in November 2012.

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Oxfam is a registered charity in England and Wales (no 202918) and Scotland (SC039042).

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