**Reporting and Writing Basics**

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# **Reporting and Writing Basics**

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Accuracy and fairness are the hallmarks of Thomson Reuters journalism. Neither accuracy or nor fairness must ever be sacrificed for speed. Double-check facts, figures, names, dates and spellings. Watch for typographical errors. And make sure there is enough context in the story to ensure balance and fairness, including disclosure of important information that is not clear or or not known. We often need to write what we don't know and well as what we know, rather than leaving the reader to guess.

Accuracy in Reuters includes accurate "[coding](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=Cracking_the_codes)", the proper use of "[slugs](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=News_Presentation#Slugs_and_Slugging)", using the most appropriate "[headline tags](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=News_Presentation#Headline_tags)" and consistent style (see the [Reuters Style Guide](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=The_Reuters_Style_Guide)). Accuracy is also more than just getting the facts right – it is getting the right facts, and backing up our interpretation of the facts with authoritative and unimpeachable sourcing. We need to let the reader know how we know what we know.

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### **Who do we write for?**

Reuters writes for three main audiences:

Professional – investors, fund managers, brokers, lawyers, tax specialists and others who take actions based on the news or may use it as a talking point with clients and a source of ideas to inform a longer-term strategy.

Media – broadcasters, newspapers, national news agencies, news websites.

The broader public – financially and politically aware readers who get news on Reuters.com and mobile devices.

As we only write one version of the story, we need to ensure that the significance, context and background are properly explained for an international readership, while not making the story so basic that a sophisticated reader won’t value the news it contains. All readers want simple, clearly written stories that say what's happening and why it matters.

And to comply with the Reuters Trust principles, all stories, blogs and columns must display "integrity, independence and freedom from bias".

### **Basic story structure**

A good Reuters story gets straight to the point and has all the main elements, including some context, analysis, human interest, and color – woven in from the top, not just tagged on as an afterthought.

INTROS/LEDES

* SUMMARY INTRO: The 5 Ws – Who? What? When? Where? Why? Typical trunk story intro for breaking news including market reports.
* WRAP INTRO: Pulls together several urgents or updates on related events, or themes. The writer gets into the helicopter and looks for the big picture.
* ANALYSIS INTRO: State an argument, or forecast the implication of a trend, or come to a conclusion.
* FEATURE INTRO: Anecdotal, Scene setter, Narrative, Exemplar, Question, Quote.

NUT GRAPHS

"Nut graphs" answer the question, so what? What is the significance of this event, speech, development? Why should the reader bother to read on? If we can't answer that question, maybe we don't need the story at all.

To write the nut graph, answer the following questions: Assume the reader is new to the story, what is the context? Is this the first time? Is this a trend change? Is this a change in rank for the players as a result of the election, revolution, merger, takeover, earnings report, bankruptcy? What is at risk politically, economically, financially?

SOURCING

Tell the reader HOW you know what you know and WHEN you obtained the information.

Are there data and quotes back up the intro ?

You should source every new piece of information. Who told Reuters? Did the information come from a press statement or court document or email/letter or public or Reuters database? Was a Reuters reporter, photographer or camera operator on the scene as a witness?

Good sources and well-defined sourcing help to protect the integrity of the file and protect journalists against legal dangers (see [The essentials of Reuters sourcing](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=The_Essentials_of_Reuters_sourcing)).

QUOTES

Quotes should be used to source a story or news analysis or to add color. They should help to move the story along.

GROWING THE STORY

* Expand on the items, events, data, themes in your intro sequentially.
* Write yourself 2-3 subheads to create the building blocks. Subheads can usefully help the reader about every 300 words. .
* Each block should follow logically and add detail or data, a quote, and some analysis or context, just like the first 3-4 paragraphs of your story.
* What is changing and what is not?
* Who are the parties in conflict and why?
* What is at risk politically, economically, financially?
* For Reuters, national and international is usually more important than local
* Forward-looking is more important than backward-looking.
* Have I been fair to all parties and points of view? Have we given all relevant parties a chance to respond to each and every claim we make?

REREAD for accuracy and fairness before you file: bullet proof the story.

* Ensure information in the story agrees and supports the headline, Are the headline tag and slug correct and appropriate?
* Confirm the day of the week and the date.
* Does the story make clear how we got the information, for example, from a newspaper pickup, interview, or news release?
* Check all the numbers. Do the components add up to the total, do individual percentages add up to 100? Double-check the period covered, conversions, whether the figure is up or down. Watch for confusion between millions and billions, misplaced decimal points, transposed conversions. Check share prices.
* Watch the spelling of proper names and ensure names are spelled consistently throughout the story.
* Ensure the story provides full company names, full and proper titles, and RICs or ticker symbols in both the text and header field. Check that unfamiliar RICs and web site addresses mentioned in the story actually work.
* Check for balance and legal dangers. Is the story balanced and fair? Does the story cast a slur on the good name of an individual, company or organization? If so it could be libelous and you may need to mark it ATTENTION EDITOR to get senior editors to review it.
* Use a second pair of eyes: Ask a colleague to read the story carefully to ensure that it is adequately sourced, accurate and fair, and written as concisely as possible. Your colleague must be critical. Most errors or problems can be caught in the bureau.
* Involve your bureau chief or an editor in charge in problem stories: Problematic stories should be copy edited by a senior reporter, bureau chief or editor in charge.

FINALLY...

* Don't "file and flee." Remain available to handle queries from the desk. If you must leave the bureau before your story is handled, make sure to provide a contact phone number.
* If you plan to advance a story, file a skedline to the GLOBAL SCHEDULES basket in Lynx Editor. Try to send sidebars, Updates etc. to same editing desk as original story - this helps improve coordination.

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### **Filing to Desk**

Reporters in Lynx Editor file to a regional editing desk by using the TRANSFER button to send the story to the desk, for example, EMEA-MPG-Taste, AMERS-Companies-Commods-Taste.

Even if permissioned for access to editing desk TASTE or EDIT baskets, reporters should NOT open a story in edit mode in an editing desk taste basket as it prevents editors from handling the story in a timely way and often causes confusion on busy desks.

If a reporter needs a story returned, he/she should screentop or phone the desk and ask for it to be sent back to his/her reporting team or bureau edit basket to work on. In Lynx Editor, stories cannot be returned to a reporter's personal basket as there is only one live version at any time.

### **Story Length**

Reuters uses a series of story formats (Alerts or Snaps, Newsbreaks/Urgents, Updates and Wrapups) to meet the differing speed needs of its readers. As a result we need to abide by line length guidelines to enable reporters and editors to move the copy quickly to meet readers speed needs.

NEWSBREAKS or URGENTS should be no more than about 100 words or TWO or THREE paragraphs. Newsbreaks that include pre-written material may run longer.

UPDATE 1s should be no more than about 300 words or FIVE or SIX paragraphs. Longer update1s may be cut by desk editors in order to move the copy quickly. Update 1s that include pre-written material may run longer, provided this does not prevent the editing desk from moving the story quickly.

The update series or "trunk" story format is designed to allow the reporter and editor to add information and analysis incrementally as the news breaks. Short, quick updates help meet the readers needs. Adding another 100 words or 10 lines to an update1 for an update2 and moving it quickly is more helpful on breaking news than waiting for a full write through. Editing desks should try to fix and move problematic early updates quickly by cutting the story and then asking the reporter for a better version for the next update.

While we are not constrained by space like newspapers, readers prefer short, easy-to-read stories and analyses, so newspaper story length guidelines are still useful. Most news stories in newspapers are between 300 and 800 words (30 to 80 lines in Lynx Editor) and most Reuters stories should be about the same. Desks are encouraged to cut overwritten copy. If a story cannot be cut easily because it is poorly structured, it may be sent back for a rewrite. This will delay publication.

MOST BASIC NEWS STORIES, INCLUDING UPDATES, SIDEBARS AND MARKET REPORTS, SHOULD BE NO MORE THAN ABOUT 400 WORDS OR ABOUT 40 LINES IN LYNX EDITOR.

The final wrap up on a breaking top news story that is likely to appear on a top news webpage or media wire news schedule, or significant exclusives, or especially well argued analyses tagged INSIGHTS, or features may run to 800 words or 80 about lines in Lynx Editor, but you should check with your editor, bureau chief or regional desk.

Longer form pieces carrying the headline tag SPECIAL REPORT may run to magazine length of up to about 2,000 words.

### **Make the headline strong**

Headlines should be sharp and informative. Use short words and an active verb and avoid unfamiliar abbreviations. It is better to convey one idea crisply and clearly than to cram in two ideas awkwardly. Often a geographic locator is also necessary. The headline field in Lynx Editor turns red after 64 characters, including headline tags such as “UPDATE 1” and so forth. This is a warning that your headline may be getting too long.

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### **Don’t neglect the slug**

Keyword slugs in the Lynx Editor header field are used by media clients to track and package stories.

Slugs are made up of two parts - a packaging slug that is the same on all the pieces of a story that belong together and a "wild" slug extension that describes that particular item.

The packaging slug should quickly describe the story in one or two words. A good story slug catches the eye, and should provide a strong pointer to what should appear in your headline and in your first paragraph.

For example PHILIPPINES-HOSTAGES/ is a very strong pointer that both that the words Philippines and hostages will appear in the headline and the story intro. The format indicates that the entire package of news will be about PHILIPPINES-HOSTAGES and that this item is the lead story, or trunk story.

Newsbreaks or Urgents that advance the story, or related sidebars, would carry a slug extension to distinguish them from the main story, e.g. PHILLPPINES-HOSTAGES/SHOTS.

### **The key words approach to story structure**

Try making a list of 10 key words without which you simply could not write the story. They don’t have to be the exact words you will use in the story. Think more of the facts or concepts which must be there to guide your story structure.

### **How long before you reach a crucial word in the intro?**

This is a variation of the key words approach to story writing. Read your lead and then count the number of words you use before you reach the one word that is strong and essential and cannot be thrown away. This is very often the news point. If you go beyond three or four words before reaching that “must have” word then stop and rewrite. You should be hitting strong, essential words very quickly after you start to read the first sentence.

**Try this one:**

“A Baldonian woman, who appeared to be in very poor health while held hostage by Philippine rebels for 12 weeks, is remarkably well despite reports that she had contemplated suicide, a doctor said on Tuesday after her return home to Baldonia City.”

That’s a 42-word intro, and you have to count 13 words before you reach the first word that grabs you: “hostage”. You get there much sooner this way: “A Baldonian woman, held hostage for 12 weeks by Philippine rebels, is remarkably well despite reports she was ill and had contemplated suicide, a doctor said after she returned home on Tuesday.” The attention-grabbing word “hostage” is the fifth word and the news point that she is well is reported sooner in the sentence.

### **Count the words in your first sentence**

If there are more than 25 words in your first sentence, it may start to get hard on the reader's brain. Simply breaking the sentence in two can be a very useful way of shortening your lead.

Don’t get weighed down by too many details in the lead Shorten and summarize titles and positions, geographic references and time frames in the first sentence. You can be more specific further down the story. Think about whether the reader needs to know this detail this soon. Use only the most telling details in the lead and give the broad picture in the intro.

Support your intro with a quote Direct quotes add color and strength to your story and prove you have spoken to someone who knows what happened. Try to support your lead with a direct quote within the first few paragraphs, and be precise about who said this and where it was said. Listen for that “golden quote” – the one that will best illustrate the main point of the story.

People rarely speak eloquently or succinctly. They do not order their facts in a way a journalist should. So use one or two short quotes in a story rather than several long ones. Make sure your quote pushes the story forward rather than simply echoes what you have just written.

Do not write: The hostage was released on Sunday and was in remarkably good health, the doctor said. "She is in remarkably good condition," Joseph Smith said. That is called a "parrot" quote or "echo" quote and bores the reader. Rather, look for a quote that is different and strengthens the lead while pushing the story forward: The hostage was released on Sunday and was in remarkably good health, the doctor said. "I’m very satisfied with her health, but she’s tired and suffering from the tension of recent weeks.” That reinforces the lead but pushes the story forward.

Avoid “broken” quotes unless the words are unusual, contentious or highly colorful.

**Quotes can also be used to:**

* Catch distinctions and nuances in important passages of speeches and convey some of the flavor of the speaker’s language.
* Document and support statements made in the lead and elsewhere.
* Set off controversial material, where the precise wording can be an issue, as in legal contexts.

When using indirect (or reported) speech, instead of direct quotes, sources either say something or they do not. Innuendo is rarely acceptable in news reporting. You should never guess at what a source means. To write in a news story that someone hinted, implied, indicated, suggested, or signaled is to editorialize or interpret someone’s actions, words, or thoughts. This is rarely acceptable unless you have some other evidence to support the interpretation.

### **Structuring the body of the story**

* Build your story in blocks that follow logically. Try to group all the information relating to one element of your story in one block of paragraphs. Touching on an issue in the third paragraph and then returning to it in the eighth often confuses readers.
* Write sequentially. Each sentence should connect to the next like a link in a chain. You make a statement, expand on it in the next paragraph, illustrate it with a quote in the third paragraph, and give some figures or background in the fourth paragraph. Then you move on to the next “block” by using a signpost sentence.
* Use signposts to let readers know you are moving to the next theme. A signpost or marker can be as simple as a “but” or it can be a short sentence which summarizes what follows.
* Don’t leave holes. Don’t mention an element without explaining it. If you have just said that a merger will create the second-largest widget maker in the region, don’t make the reader wait five paragraphs before revealing who is the largest.
* Using “cross-heads” to break up the story about every 300 words can help the reader to follow your thinking.

### **Some checks for error-free copy**

Many corrections can be prevented by checking simple things. Here are some tips to keep errors down before you send your story to the desk:

* Ensure information in the story agrees with the headline, and if appropriate, the Alert (Snap or Bulletin).
* Does the story make clear how we got the information and when, e.g. newspaper pickup on Monday, interview on Tuesday, news conference on Wednesday?
* Make sure there is are quotes or evidence to back up your intro.
* Confirm all times and dates. Ensure there are time references in the story to the readers knows when the events occurred or what time period the data covers.
* Check for balance and legal dangers. Is the story balanced and fair? Does the story cast a slur on the good name of an individual, company or organization? Does it expose anyone to ridicule, hatred or contempt? If so it could be libelous and you may need to mark it ATTN EDS to get it legalled.
* Check all the numbers – do all the components add up to the total, do individual percentages add up to 100? Double check the period covered, conversions, whether the figure is up or down. Watch for confusion between millions and billions, misplaced decimal points, transposed conversions. Check share prices.
* Watch the spelling of proper names and ensure names are spelled consistently throughout the story.
* Ensure the story gives full company names, full and proper titles, and RICs or ticker symbols in both the text and header field. Check that unfamiliar RICs and web site addresses mentioned in the story actually work.
* Are the headline tag and slug correct and appropriate?
* Ensure the Unique Story Number (USN) matches that of the Alert/Snap (if any).
* Ensure tabular material carries tabular formatting in the Lynx Editor header field.

### **The Attention Editor flag**

The warning flag ATTN EDITOR (or ATTN EDS) should be included in the slug line or the first line of the text field if you think your story may be legally dangerous or may affect the status or reputation of Reuters. When a story is flagged ATTN EDITOR the reasons should be explained to the editing desk in a separate message. The desk receiving such a story should refer it to the editor-in-charge. All reporters must clearly understand when and how to use the ATTN EDITOR flag. See [Attention Editor items and Hoaxes](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=Attention_Editor_items_and_Hoaxes) for full details.

[Category](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=Special:Categories): [Guide to Operations](http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=Category:Guide_to_Operations)

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