The Black Box system for organizing a story

Len Reed, environment and science team leader at The Oregonian, developed a system to help reporters handle unruly information.

The Black Box helps reporters sort through and prioritize the information they have and quickly and clearly make the case for their stories to editors. With the system, writing a story is essentially boiled into four phases:

### 1. Reporting phase

Gather - at minimum 5 sources(per page)

Search - make sure sources come from different mediums (people, websites, print, etc)

Ask - ask relevant and interesting questions. No one wants to read a boring paper about nothing

Interview - make sure that the person you interview is knowledgeable, don’t ask y/n questions

Sort - only after you gather all of the information do you begin to organize and develop a story

### 2. Black Box phase

What is this information?

What does it mean?

What does it signify?

What is the headline?

What is the lead?

What is its context – with what does it connect?

So what?

Who cares?

How can you quickly tell it to the clueless and make it count?

### 3. Editor(Teacher) phase

Succinctly tell your editor(teacher) what the story says.

Tell your editor the headline that captures the story.

Be prepared to defend your thinking.

### 4. Writing phase

You’ve got a lead; now order a sequence in telling: organize.

Write quickly, staying on track – you can go back and tweak.

As you write, periodically ask yourself: Who cares?

As you write, periodically frighten yourself: The audience is leaving.

When you finish, go back and ruthlessly cut words and sentences.

Before last reading, say “no one cares”; let the story change your mind.