

8 Paths to defining a storytelling approach

- 1. A profile.** Find the people behind a story, the characters driving the issue. You can profile not just a person, but a place, an event, even a building.
- 2. Explanatory piece.** Show readers why something happen or how something functions.
- 3. Issues and trend stories.** Ask yourself if there is a larger picture to explore. Trends are not exclusively related to culture or lifestyle; think crime or economy.
- 4. Investigative.** Look into wrongdoing, "follow the money," analyze power struggles, and make use of available documents.
- 5. Narrative.** A story with a character, scenes, and tension.
- 6. Descriptive/Day in the life.** The alternative to a narrative, focusing on a particular moment, such as a ride-along with the police, a visit to the new museum.
- 7. Voices or perspective story.** Have people tell a story in a unique way: Q&A, roundtable discussion, a rail of quotes, or vignettes.
- 8. Visual story.** Photographs, graphics or illustrations might be the best ways to tell some stories.

4 questions to find a focus for your story

Ask these questions during the editorial process: when planning a story, when doing the reporting and photography, when writing and editing, when deciding how to present it, and in determining if follow-up is warranted.

1. What is the central point?

- What's the story really about? What question or questions must the story answer to be worthwhile?
- Why do people need or will want to know about it?
- If it's a "big" topic, how can it be broken down so it's easier to explain?
- If it's a "small" topic, is there a story behind the story? Does it reflect a larger trend or theme?

2. What is the central evidence?

- What kinds of evidence can be presented to verify or explain the central point of the story?
- What kinds of evidence can be presented to prove that the story is relevant or newsworthy?
- How good is the evidence? Will the reader be able to distinguish verified information from assumptions or assertions the story may also include?

3. What is the central place?

- Where is the central place of the story?
- Will the reporting and photography include covering the central place?
- What information will come from somewhere other than the central place or places?
- What will not be covered in the story?

4. Who are the central characters?

4 questions to find a focus for your story (cont)

- Where or from whom can the facts be learned?
- Who can put the facts in perspective?
- What is the relationship between the central characters and the central places of the story?

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:

The Black Box System

1. Reporting phase

- ☐ Gather
- ☐ Search
- ☐ Ask
- ☐ Interview
- ☐ Sort

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 phase

- ☐ Succinctly tell your editor 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.



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Page 1 of 2.

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The Black Box System (cont)

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

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

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