LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Define and differentiate among various types of events you could cover, including meetings, speeches and news conferences.
- Explain how to analyze an event for important news content and how best to share that information with your readers.
- Conduct research and locate human sources crucial to your reporting effort.
- Understand how to report for non-event-based stories, such as localizations, crime and natural disasters.

THINKING AHEAD: GETTING READY TO HIT THE FIELD

At the risk of oversimplifying the field, you can divide journalism into two basic types of stories: those you find as a reporter and those that find you. We will discuss the first type of stories in the next chapter, as stories you find are often more complex and require additional effort on the part of the reporter. The stories that find you crop up in everyday reporting and include planned events and natural disasters.

This doesn’t mean the second type of story is easy or not worth your time. Meeting, speech and news conference stories provide the bread-and-butter coverage for reporters who want to keep readers abreast of things happening in their area. Game coverage of area sports will draw readers who want to know which teams won or lost. Business owners and taxpayers need reporters who will localize broader topics and help explain what new national laws mean in their neck of the woods. Event stories will give your readers a lot of important information.
In this chapter, we will review the types of basic stories that need reporting. In addition, we will examine the things that make events beneficial or problematic from the point of view of a reporter. Finally, we will talk about coverage beyond events and discuss how to cover those stories. Once you feel comfortable enough with the various reporting techniques you learn here, you can pair them with the lead writing and storytelling techniques you learned in Chapters 3 and 4.

REPORTING BASICS

The core of your writing will come from your reporting. If you do a lousy job of preparing for an event or gather weak material at an event, you will have a hard time writing a story about that event. As a journalist covering something of importance to your readers, you need to have a solid plan in place as to how to approach the task at hand. The information listed below will help guide you through any reporting effort:

RESEARCH THE TOPIC

If you don’t feel well versed in a topic upon which you are reporting, you will be incapable of doing a good job as a writer. Think about it like taking a test: The more you study and the better you study, the more confident you will feel heading into the test. You want to understand what is going to happen at an event before it happens, and you want to know what questions you should ask of your sources. Here are some tools you can use to feel ready for action:

PREVIOUS STORIES

News rarely occurs in a vacuum, which means you won’t report on something that has never happened before. A county board meeting where commissioners will vote on an automobile tax is the result of several other meetings at which the commissioners discussed the topic. A controversial person speaking on your campus likely garnered coverage during previous speeches on other campuses. A political figure announcing her retirement at a news conference has likely received coverage of some kind from your publication at some time in the past.

Before you start working on your story, look at what other people wrote on your topic. You can find interesting angles that haven’t been covered, uncover more detailed background information for your story and get a better sense of the entire narrative. Previous stories will also help you look beyond your individual story to determine what will happen after this single event. It’s like the cliché about seeing the forest through the trees: You want to see the whole picture before you attempt to contribute to it.
SOURCE DOCUMENTS
You want to get your hands on original documents so you can compare what people say versus what has been done. For example, a story you find on a local political figure might note that a campaign volunteer filed a formal ethics complaint, charging the politician with voter fraud. The story might cite the complaint or even quote part of it, but you want to see the entire complaint before you consider including a mention of it in your work. The original journalist might have confused certain aspects of the complaint or could have an axe to grind with the politician. If you examine the source document, you can determine for yourself the degree to which you should take it seriously. In addition, you would want to see if other documents explained what happened to that complaint. Is it under review? Was it thrown out? Did the person recant? In short, until you know what happened, you want to play it safe.

Groups and organizations you cover generate a lot of source documents that can benefit you in your reporting, including meeting agendas, meeting minutes, official correspondence, formal emails and more. Ask for copies of these items as part of your reporting prep work so you can get a handle on the most accurate version of reality.

OFFICIAL WEBSITES
Public institutions like universities and governmental bodies maintain websites that list everything from official biographies on their leaders to official charters and bylaws. These sites can give you a glimpse into people who might become valuable sources. The sites can also help you verify crucial information, such as budget figures and the outcomes of prior votes.

Private institutions and individuals also maintain websites that contain important information for you. Corporate websites can give you the educational background on an organization’s CEO or the history of the organization. Sites like these can help you craft questions as you prepare to interview a speaker from that company at a news conference. The sites can also help you as you try to get a sense of what an organization that is petitioning the city council actually does and how its proposal could affect the readers in your area.

Even “nonofficial” websites can be insightful if you need to compile some information quickly on a quirky topic. Some niche sites will give you answers to questions like “Who was the last Major League Baseball player to win 30 games in one season?” to “How many more touchdowns did the players in the National Football Conference score than those in the American Football Conference?” Other sites can help you clarify concepts like “What does ‘footprint’ mean as an architectural and development term?” You never know what you will need to know for a given story, so don’t be afraid to research it before you attempt to report on it. As always, however, make sure you trust the website before you publish information you find on it, and double-check the information with your human sources.

SEEK SOURCES AND PLAN INTERVIEWS
Your research should help you determine which people will matter to your story and who will provide what angle on it. Many of the events you will cover as a beginning reporter will have those sources available to you without too much trouble. In most cases, those sources will be offering information to you and anyone else in the room as part of the meeting, speech or news conference you are covering. This makes life a little easier on you, presuming that you know each source’s identity, because you can grab information and quotes while that person takes part in
the event. (If you don’t know who people are, this chapter includes an easy way to collect quotes from them anyway. See the box later in the chapter on quoting people you don’t know.)

The research aspect should help you figure out who the main players are at a meeting or who is likely to favor or oppose an issue. If you cover sporting events, your research should give you a sense of which players are stars and which ones are unlikely to contribute to the final score. You then know which people you need to find or to whom you should pay attention.

Prior to the event, make contact with the sources to let them know you will be there and you might like some one-on-one time with them. If a group brings in a speaker, contact the head of that organization to see if the speaker has time before or after the event for a few questions. Before you attend a news conference, check with the PR practitioners running the event to see if the main players will be open for extra interview time at some point. When you are covering a meeting, find out who put forth the proposals that most interest you, and reach out to those people before and after the event. The more time you put into the front-end reporting, the better your story will be when you are working against a deadline.

MAKE SURE YOU ARE SURE

Accuracy remains the core value of all journalism. If you fail to give your readers accurate information, they will distrust you and eventually stop reading your work altogether. In most cases, we don’t attempt to mislead our readers with our errors, but instead we just screw up. Here is a list of ways to fix avoidable errors before they make it to your audience:

CHECK SPELLING

Nothing can undercut your credibility faster than misspellings in your work. Fortunately, we live in a period of time when computers can autocorrect your work and word processing software includes spell-check options. Even with these technological blessings, you shouldn’t rely entirely on them to keep you out of trouble. As anyone who has texted a friend knows, the corrections your devices make aren’t always the right ones, and if you don’t look carefully before you publish your content, you can find yourself in a heap of trouble.

Go back through your work and read word by word to make sure you typed the right word or that a spell check didn’t make things worse. This will keep you from praising a “pubic speaker,” offering to “asses a situation” or something worse.

REVIEW PROPER NOUNS

Spell check can save you in some cases, but not in the case of how proper nouns are spelled. You need to go over each instance of names, places, events and more to make sure you spelled these words right. Errors often emerge in one of two ways when we fail to carefully examine proper nouns:

1. We assume that if every instance of a proper noun is spelled identically, all of them must be spelled right.
CONSIDER THIS

IS OBJECTIVITY DEAD?

In the early part of the 20th century, writers like Walter Lippmann noted the need for the media to become an objective, fact-based force that provides information to the general public. During that era, many publications had used scandalized content and what some referred to as “yellow journalism” to drive sales and galvanize public opinion.

In the following decades, journalists learned the values associated with objectivity, applying it to their writing and reporting. Journalists were told to avoid letting personal biases influence news coverage. Stories centered on conflict required a source from Side A and a source from Side B. Facts, not opinion, were central to good journalism. Many of those tenets remain part of journalism education, and many news outlets still aspire to the idea of providing facts to the audience members without interjecting any sense of bias.

Journalistic advocacy and opinion, however, have found their way into the media from the days of Lippmann until now. Edward R. Murrow famously sparred with Wisconsin Sen. Joe McCarthy during the days of the “Red Scare” in the 1950s. Walter Cronkite stated in a 1968 editorial that the Vietnam War was unwinnable. “Alternative” press outlets emerged in the 1970s that rejected objectivity in place of advocacy journalism, in the hope of bringing attention to important issues. Scholars also note that even when journalists had espoused the idea of objectivity, they could not fully detach themselves from the stories they told, and thus personal biases and ideologies crept into the content.

In more recent times, the line between fact and opinion has become further blurred. Partisan media outlets offer readers and viewers information that merely confirms their world-views. Anyone can start a website, blog or social media presence and blast out content that fails to meet the rigor and the standards of what journalism students are taught to embrace. The idea of “facts” as indisputable has become a point of debate, with some noting that we now live in a “post-fact” society. In April 2017, Time magazine asked a question on its cover that hit at the heart of this issue: “Is Truth Dead?”

Given these concerns, journalists now must deal with the issue of how to proceed with their approach to content. It can be easy to forsake the idea of objectivity under the guise of “fighting fire with fire.” On the other hand, journalists can decide to stick with the facts and only the facts, seeking balance even as other media outlets “don’t fight fair.” Neither approach offers a perfect answer, but in the current climate, how we deal with objectivity will define the profession and our relationship with our audiences for years to come.

2. We examine one or two instances of a proper noun and find that we spelled it right. Thus, we stop looking for other cases where we might have spelled the noun differently.

Go back to your source material and give each instance of a proper noun a proper examination before you publish. Even if you write something flattering, the subject of your work will be displeased if you get a name wrong.

LOOK INTO THE NUMBERS

Journalists often portray themselves as math-phobics who entered the field to avoid playing with numbers. Even if that describes you perfectly, you will still have to deal with numbers in journalism, so get used to checking your math in your stories. Sometimes, the math is as simple as realizing that the numbers don’t add up:
Running back Chester Charles rushed for 178 yards in the game, gaining exactly 84 yards in each half.

Children’s book author Emma Mae Fleeger died, Sunday, Oct. 25, 2016, at the age of 87. Fleeger was born in 1929 on Christmas Eve to Karl and Becca Sue Fleeger in Hope, Oregon.

State Superintendent James Francis argued that a 3 percent reduction in his $5.3 million budget would be easily handled by drawing down school reserves by $150,000.

In each case, you can clearly see that the math doesn’t add up:

- If you multiply 84 by 2, you get 168, not 178.
- Fleeger’s December birthday would make her age 86, not 87.
- A $5.3 million budget with a 3 percent cut leaves a $159,000 hole, not a $150,000 one.

In some cases, the math is more complicated, as you need to check figures against a detailed budget or you need to calculate interest over a protracted period of time. If you aren’t sure that the math works, ask an expert to help you. If you still aren’t sure, don’t publish the material until you feel confident in your arithmetic.

Overall, the best bit of advice to which you can adhere is this: Be suspicious. Each time you see a fact, consider a way in which that statement might be wrong. Then, use credible sources to verify the fact. If you approach every element of your work with the idea that it’s probably wrong until you can prove it right, you will create clean copy with fewer chances for errors.

**EVENT COVERAGE**

Rookie reporters often cover preplanned events that will provide some basic information to their readers. The goal of covering these events is to tell people something valuable, interesting and engaging about what occurred during the event. As a reporter, you serve as both a conduit of information that helps connect the readers to the event and a sieve that sifts out all the minor elements of the event and shows the readers only the most important things that happened.

Below is a list of potential events you might cover as well as the benefits and drawbacks of each:

**SPEECHES**

A speech is an opportunity for someone to talk to a group of people for a specific period of time on a topic of interest. Speeches often become one-sided affairs, as you have one person discussing a subject without any pushback from another source. For example, if you have the head of the state’s Democratic Party speaking about the many benefits of voting for Democrats, you don’t hear about the potential problems with voting Democrat or the benefits of voting for another party.

Even with those drawbacks, a speech is often the easiest type of event to cover for beginning journalists. The person at the front of the room is presenting information that he or she has tailored to a specific audience. You will likely have enough advance notice to research the speaker and the topic, so you will have a lot of background available for your story. The people who
sponsored the event will have additional information for you, and you have an audience full of people who can tell you what they thought about the speech.

As a reporter, your goal is to contact the people in charge of the speech (or the speaker) to get some individual time with the person before or after the speech. You want to get information from the group that sponsored the speech, so you can better explain why this person matters and why the speech occurred at this point in time. During the event, you want to find the core message of the speech so you can convey that to your readers in your lead. You also want to keep an ear out for valuable and interesting quotes that will support your lead. After the speech, you should interview people in the audience to get reaction quotes that will give you a sense of how the listeners felt about the event. As always, keep an eye out for things that happen outside the lines or when the speaker goes off script and says something particularly newsworthy.

For example, in September 2016, Milwaukee Bucks President Peter Feigin was speaking to the Rotary Club of Madison about the basketball team’s mission statement, prospects for the season and the excitement surrounding its new arena. During that speech, Feigin spoke out about Milwaukee itself and its history of race relations, noting, “Very bluntly, Milwaukee is the most segregated, racist place I’ve ever experienced in my life. It just is a place that is antiquated. It is in desperate need of repair and has happened for a long, long time.”

The quote was buried deep in the original story, but it became a hot topic for other publications and sports journalists who spoke out on each side of the issue. Later that day, Feigin issued a statement praising the city and his love of that part of the state, but the issue continued to be a point of discussion in the following days.

MEETINGS

Groups, organizations and governmental bodies use meetings to create rules, decide on actions and move society ahead a little bit at a time. As a conduit to an interested public, you should look into various meetings and see what might matter to your readers. Much like a speech story, the goal of a good meeting story is to find out what happened at the event, not to report that the event happened. In addition, you don’t want to report on every aspect of the meeting but rather the few items you see as critically important.

You need to get a copy of the meeting’s agenda prior to the event. Most states and governmental organizations have a rule requiring public bodies to post an agenda in advance of any meeting. The rules that govern the posting of the agenda vary from state to state, with some requiring only 24-hour advance notice while others require that the agenda be posted several days in advance. Once you obtain a copy of the agenda, look for any items that seem interesting to you or that would affect your readers. If the agenda states the group will enact policy, spend money or fire someone, you probably want to keep an eye on those items. If you aren’t sure what the agenda is telling you, call a source or two prior to the meeting to get a better understanding of what is likely to happen.
At the meeting itself, you need to gather information on those key items, including if the measures passed or failed and who voted on each side. If you know who voted which way, you can ask each person for their rationale after the meeting finishes. For example, in 2011, Illinois’ then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich was in the process of being convicted of abusing his power as the state’s leading governmental official. The most eye-catching charge was that he tried to sell the state’s U.S. Senate seat that Barack Obama vacated upon becoming president in 2008. The state’s lawmakers set about an attempt to impeach Blagojevich, and the measure passed the Illinois House of Representatives by a 114–1 margin.³

As noted earlier in the book, “oddity” is an element of interest, and this singular dissenting vote clearly fits that category. If you covered this story at that time, you could easily find a “pro-impeachment” source from the House, but the most interesting source would have been the one “no.” That vote belonged to Milton Patterson, a Chicago-based Democrat, who noted that he would need more information to vote on the measure. He also argued that he didn’t feel it was his job to impeach Blagojevich.⁴

As the people speak during the meeting, write down bits of information you think will be helpful in telling your story as well as any good quotes that people provide during the meeting. After the meeting, you can interview your sources to clarify the points they made during the event or to seek elaboration on the things they said. You can also double-check basic facts like name spellings and contact information before you pack up and head back to the newsroom.

**NEWS CONFERENCES**

When people or organizations understand that a given topic will interest a lot of journalists, they usually call a **news conference** to meet the needs of the media. The goal of a news conference is to create a singular, well-polished message that the host can deliver once. This will prevent the source from answering the same question over and over throughout the day as various reporters catch on to the story. This approach gives a specific set of information at one point in time and allows reporters to all ask whatever they need to all at once.

As a reporter, this kind of event can seem easy to cover. The host will provide all the material you need in a usable format, the sources you need are present and everyone seems interested in meeting your reportorial needs. The event is essentially built for your benefit. That said, you need to consider potential problems associated with a news conference:

- **Everyone gets the same story:** In some cases, this isn’t a big concern, because everyone wants the same story. For example, after an important basketball game, most of the reporters want to hear from the coach, the team captain and an important player. When all three of them show up at a set of microphones, answer all the basic questions and move on, this is much easier than having to track each of them down and ask questions they have likely answered for other reporters. However, when it comes to more nuanced stories, like a company
One of the more difficult things you face as a rookie reporter is quoting people you see at public events before you can learn their names. In meetings, for example, you have people sitting around a table, talking about crucial issues and putting out great information. The quotes might be perfect, but if you can’t attribute them to a named source, your editor won’t let you use them. If you wait until after the meeting to get names and then interview the people, you will miss out on what these people are saying when it counts the most.

Here is a simple way to gather quotes and information from your sources before you know who they are.

Take a look at this image of a simple meeting:

You have four people in the frame, and you don’t know any of their names. To make life easier on you, draw a quick sketch of the table and position the people around it based on what you see.

Then, try to pick out a defining characteristic of each person. For example, you might notice that the woman speaking has blonde hair or is wearing a red shirt.

Whatever characteristic you most associate with her, use that to label her on your diagram. Pick out similar characteristics of the other people and fill in the other spots at the table.

Then, use those characteristics to label your quotes like this:

**Red Shirt:** We can’t continue to fund the program at this level.

**Beard Guy:** I understand the need to save money, but we need these services for people who can’t afford health care without the county’s assistance.
Red Shirt: I know this is hard to deal with, but we must consider how much assistance people are getting for each dollar we spend.

Blue Tie: We also have to consider the ramifications for not spending that money.

Ponytail: We spend the money either way. County emergency rooms cost a ton and we spend more money if we don’t keep investing in the health care.

Beard Guy: I agree with that. We need some broader thinking here.

After the meeting, you can go introduce yourself to the people at the meeting and get their names, including the proper spellings. You can also use this opportunity to ask a few more questions, gather extra information or clarify your earlier notes.

Before you leave, add the names to your diagram to “decode” your notes.

Red Shirt: Jill Jankovich
Beard Guy: Alex Crosse
Blue Tie: Anthony Thomas
Ponytail: Carole Clarque

announcing that it will lay off a few hundred workers, you might want to ask questions based on some intimate knowledge you received from an inside source. If you ask those questions at the news conference, you lose your chance at an exclusive story. When it comes to writing a story from a news conference, it will take extra effort to find an angle that distinguishes your work from that of your competitors.

- It turns news reporting on its head: As a journalist, your job is to determine what matters most to your readers, seek sources for that topic and ask those sources questions. This process leads to your writing a quality story that is audience-centric. A news conference inverts this process because a source is calling you and saying, “This is important. You should come here and write about it.” In some cases, your sense of the event’s value and your source’s sense of it are similar. However, in other cases, reporters just kind of go along with the source’s way of thinking and cover whatever is presented at the conference as important news. The duty to report is not the same as the duty to publish, so make sure you feel what you learned at the event is worth writing before you put the story out for your audience.
• **It can be a snow job:** Just because an organization or a person hosts a news conference to announce something, it doesn’t necessarily follow that the information is accurate. In the early 2000s, energy giant Enron collapsed into bankruptcy as corporate scandals engulfed the company. A three-year Department of Justice investigation found that the company often lied about its holdings, used fraudulent measures to prop up its stock value and engaged in other unsavory activities to increase profits. At the center of this was the company’s CEO, Ken Lay, who was charged in 2004 with 11 counts of conspiracy and fraud. After his arraignment on these charges, Lay and his defense team held a news conference near the courthouse and categorically denied that Lay did anything wrong. In 2006, Lay was found guilty and faced a possible 45 years in prison, although he died of a heart attack before his sentencing. If you go back through what Lay said at his news conference and compare that with what the court determined, you can clearly see that Lay’s media event was nothing but a snow job.

Not every news conference will be filled with tall tales and outlandish lies, but you should always be aware of the goal of a news conference: to tell one side of a story. Your goal as a journalist is to make sure you are telling all sides of a story, which means you need to find sources who could offer you another way to look at the issues raised in the news conference. If you have a hard time coming up with anyone who might disagree with the people hosting the news conference, consider asking those people for potential sources.

**SPORTING EVENTS**

The field of sports journalism is far too vast to outline all of the various intricacies associated with it in this book. Much of what you have learned in this book, from how to write strong leads to how to do quality interviews, will apply in sports as well. That said, one key event not covered above applies to sports journalism: the game story. **Gamers** require you to attend an event that has an unknown outcome and determine what matters most so you can communicate it to your readers. However, each sport has a series of rules that can make it difficult for you to capture the essence of the event. Some things seem simple: In American football, the players catch and run with the ball in their hands, while in soccer, the rules forbid players to use their hands. Other things are more complicated: In basketball, only the player who passes the ball to the person who immediately scores gets credit for an assist. In hockey, two players involved in helping a teammate score will each get an assist.

Authors Scott Reinardy and Wayne Wanta list the following items as essentials for any game story:

• **The score:** Game outcomes are important, so who won and who lost (or if a tie occurred) will matter to your readers. Reinardy and Wanta note that although some authors get leeway to try various forms of storytelling, the score should appear in game stories no later than the third paragraph.
• **The atmosphere:** The feel of the crowd can vary from place to place and sport to sport. You could witness Game 7 of the World Series with a packed stadium full of crazed fans or observe that a few folks were sleeping in the stands while two last-place teams battled it out in the middle of the year. The overall feeling of the event can play a major role in telling your story to your readers.

• **Records:** If two undefeated teams are facing off for the right to claim a championship, that can be a major part of your story. Conversely, if two teams are battling for futility, as neither has won a game this year and you are watching the last game of the season, this can lead to some drama as well.

• **History:** Rivalries are a major part of sports and can turn a midseason game between two .500 teams into an epic battle. It can be something as simple as a conference game between two high schools or as complex as the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox rivalry. Before you attend a game, find out if any historical significance is attached to the two teams fighting it out. If you miss that, you could miss the whole point of the story.

• **Statistics:** Sports stories are often buried in numbers when writers don’t know which statistics matter most. The goal in covering a game is to gather accurate statistics that help explain how it was that one team got the better of the other team. The value of statistics will vary from sport to sport, as will the amount of value you should place on specific statistics. Also keep in mind that you should look for statistical anomalies, including record-breaking performances or novel outcomes.

For example, an August 2013 Boston Red Sox/Houston Astros game had a number of potentially memorable moments: The Sox won 15-10, making it a high-scoring game. Steven Wright made his first major-league start and didn’t make it past the first inning. The win helped keep Boston at the top of the Eastern Division, pushing its lead over second-place Toronto to 1.5 games. However, it was Red Sox catcher Ryan Lavarnway’s efforts that became part of the record books when he allowed four passed balls in one inning. Wright’s knuckleball, a pitch that is often erratic and difficult to catch, eluded Lavarnway enough times to help him tie a record set by Ray Katt of the New York Giants in 1954 and equaled by Geno Petralli of the Texas Rangers in 1987.8

• **Injuries:** Any time someone is hurt, be it a serious or minor injury, readers will want to know. In some cases, it can be a devastating injury that leads to the end of a career, such as New York Jet Dennis Byrd, who was paralyzed on Nov. 29, 1992, when he slammed head first into a teammate during a game against the Kansas City Chiefs.9 In other cases, it can be something almost far-fetched, such as what happened to Kansas City Royal George Brett, who missed part of a 1980 World Series game because of hemorrhoids.10

As with other events you cover, you should check to make sure you got things right.
Interviews with players, coaches and fans should help you fact-check your information as well as gather some crucial quotes.

**BASIC TIPS FOR ALL EVENT STORIES**

As noted earlier, all events have pros and cons. Regardless of which topic you cover or which event you attend, here are some basics to help you navigate event coverage as a beginning reporter:

**UNDERSTAND YOUR PURPOSE**

If someone else assigned you to cover the event, meet with that person and find out why this event merits coverage. Editors often have a strong sense of what makes for audience-centric content, given that they likely started as reporters. For example, your editor might know that a specific item on a meeting’s agenda deserves special attention. If you don’t know that going in, you might be looking at something else entirely when it comes to the core of your story. This will lead to an awkward situation when you come back with Story A and your editor is expecting Story B.

**IMPROVISE AND ADAPT**

Although preparing is crucial, the ability to adapt to a changing event can help you salvage your story when things change. You might head to the city council, fully prepared to write a story about how the city will use $6 million to fund a road-repaving project. You met with city council members in advance to get good quotes before the vote and spoke with contractors who are expected to get the contract. Then, without any warning, someone on the city council gets upset about another topic and the mayor decides to table the repaving vote so the council members can dig into the new topic. This means you now have to adjust to a new topic, new information and a whole new story.

Speakers can change their minds and decide to talk on a different topic than the one you have planned. Events can get changed or moved. Meetings can take all sorts of twists and turns. A good journalist can adjust on the fly to these changes and look for the core of the story, even if that story isn’t the one that was expected. When these things happen, go back to what makes for the core of a good story:

- What is going on?
- Why does it matter?
- How does this affect my readership?

Once you focus on these items, look for the people who can tell you the most important information and the sources who can provide you with the best background on the topic.

**LOOK OUTSIDE OF THE EVENT**

An event story isn’t always what was planned, nor is it always what’s happening on the agenda or at the podium.

In May 2016, Univision anchor Maria Elena Salinas spoke at California State University, Fullerton as part of the school’s graduation ceremonies and ended up becoming national news.
Salinas delivered part of her speech to the College of Communications in Spanish, and she also called out presidential hopeful Donald Trump. Audience members shouted for her to “get off the stage” and some called her “trash.” When she noted that she would like to “say a few words in Spanish,” someone shouted back “No!” Whatever she had planned to say was lost along the way, and the issue of her back-and-forth with the hecklers became the bigger story.\textsuperscript{11}

A 2008 Kirkwood, Missouri, city council meeting turned deadly when Charles Lee “Cookie” Thornton arrived and began shooting at people in City Hall. Thornton had a long-standing grudge against the city after his demolition business had received several citations and Thornton himself had been ticketed for disorderly conduct. Six people, including Thornton, died as a result of the shooting.\textsuperscript{12}

A Big 10 college football game between 11th-ranked Wisconsin and 7th-ranked Nebraska in 2016 went into overtime, with the Badgers upsetting the previously undefeated Huskers 23–17. However, the bigger story that emerged nationally was the action of several people who showed up for the Halloween-weekend game dressed as political candidates. A person wearing a Donald Trump costume was photographed using a noose to “lynch” a person in a President Barack Obama mask and prison-striped clothing. The photo went viral on Twitter, forcing the university’s police and administration to respond to the image.\textsuperscript{13}

Not every story from an event comes as an agenda item or a key play in a game. You need to keep your head on a swivel and look for all sorts of items that might make for important and newsworthy content.

**STORIES BEYOND STANDARD EVENTS**

Somewhere between covering your first speech and conducting a massive investigative project will be a series of stories that will require you to do some additional work. Two types of stories tend to fall into the middle of that spectrum: localizations and disaster coverage.

**LOCALIZATIONS**

The most basic question readers want answered when they read news is, “How does this matter to me?” Instead of bemoaning the nature of self-interest, journalists should use it to their advantage. For example, if you read a story about state budget cuts and how much money is being allocated to which projects, you might get bored quickly and put it down. However, if the lead on the story discussed how budget cuts were leading to a 50 percent increase in tuition at your school, that story would probably hold your attention from the first word through the last.

When it comes to broader topics on state, national or international levels, people will often pass those stories by with the attitude of, “This doesn’t affect me at all.” However, journalists can draw readers in through the use of **localization**
When a famous athlete speaks from his or her locker, a throng of microphones, notepads and recorders encircle that person, hoping to capture a few important bits of news to share with a passionate and unyielding fan base. These reporters follow teams from city to city and state to state, asking questions about everything from specific plays in games to allegations of criminal activity and “friction” between teammates.

Ryan Wood, a Green Bay Packers beat reporter for the USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin, is often behind one of those pads or recorders, as he dispatches content about this football team from the National Football League’s smallest city.

“I’ve seen good—potentially great—reporters peel out of the business because there are other jobs that provide better lifestyles,” he said. “Why haven’t I? Because I honestly can’t imagine myself doing anything else. If it weren’t for that, I’d probably be doing something else.”

Wood began his career as a sports reporter and an editor at his college newspaper before he transitioned to his professional career. He worked the sports beat at the DeKalb (Illinois) Daily Chronicle, where he covered Northern Illinois University athletics. He also covered the athletic programs at the University of South Carolina and Auburn University before taking on his current job covering the Packers.

As a reporter in a demanding field, Wood said he relies heavily on the basics when he’s digging into his stories. “Accuracy is unequivocally the highest priority,” he said. “While I’ve been covering the Packers for less than two years, my readership grew up consuming everything they could about the team. If I misspell a player’s name from 50 years ago, someone is going to notice. Knowing that creates a healthy amount of paranoia; I cannot get facts wrong, no matter how seemingly insignificant.”

Wood said he learned a great deal about how to report in each of his previous jobs, especially how important it is to work well with sources.

“Probably the No. 1 lesson I didn’t understand in college was the importance of reputation with the people you work with, especially sources,” he said. “This business is based on relationships. There is a constant give and take. In college, I had a hard time seeing the gray in situations. It was either black, or white. No middle ground. So I ended up dying on a lot of hills that weren’t my hill to die on.”

Wood also said that he not only prepares based on the interview topic, but he also does a lot of prep work based on the person he is interviewing.

“‘It’s a real trick to get answers from people who would truly prefer to say nothing at all,’” he said. “Reporters have to be creative in their approach to interviews, and also smart. While some questions simply have to be asked, the goal of...”
an interview is to get the best answers possible. Too many reporters fall in love with their own questions, and the interview becomes more about what’s asked than what’s answered. There is more than one way to ask a question. When I’m interviewing a player, I know there are trigger words that need to be avoided because they’ll raise red flags, and you’ll wind up getting nothing more than clichés.”

In this line of work, 40-hour weeks are a myth and the salaries can be less than ideal, but Wood said even with all the chaos associated with his field, he loves the job.

“You’ll probably have to move a lot, always willing to go where the job is,” he said. “You have to be at least open to the idea of living away from family. You have to be willing to work nights, weekends, holidays. I’ll probably never have a normal Christmas while I cover the Packers. . . . If you accept the profession’s less glamorous aspects, it can be an awesome job. Obviously, it’s a lot of fun covering the NFL. Sure beats working for a living. But the best part of this job is the chance to wake up every day and tell a story.”

ONE LAST THING

Q: If you could tell the students reading this book anything you think is important, what would it be?

A: “The most important thing for anyone entering the field is to horde as much experience as you possibly can. Get involved in student journalism. When I was in college, I lived in the newsroom. Ate there. Slept there. Pulled all-nighters doing homework there. Made my friends there. Met my wife there. The newsroom was my home. I’ve gotten emails from folks with English degrees and zero student journalism experience who wanted to know how to enter the business, just because they wanted to write. I never have anything positive to tell them. They can’t, at least not in a full-time basis. If you want to give yourself the best chance to succeed, learn the tools of the trade. Nothing prepares you for life as a professional journalist like being a student journalist.”

stories that take those wide-reaching concepts and bring them home for the readers. Here are a few stories that might seem pointless to you as a reader of a school or local publication:

- An explosion demolishes an oil refinery 1,000 miles away from your town.
- A Chinese firm has received permission to build an engine that was previously constructed only in U.S. cities.
- The Environmental Protection Agency passed new guidelines about chemical runoff concentrations in the wake of several groundwater contamination outbreaks.

As a reporter, you could look at these issues quickly and dismiss them, or you could look at them critically and think about how each could affect your audience. For example, the explosion at the oil refinery means that a company has one fewer facility that is creating usable petroleum products. That could mean higher gas prices for people in your area if there is less fuel in circulation. It could also mean other products refined there might be in shorter supply, thus producing either scarcity or price hikes for consumers.

In the case of the Chinese factory building engines, that story might matter to your readers if your city housed one of the factories that previously had a monopoly on construction. This could mean job losses or wage cuts. On the other hand, if a company nearby is responsible for supplying parts used in the construction of the engine, it might be a financial boon for people in your readership area. The same pro and con are possible in the EPA story: Local farmers might
be upset about the guidelines and how they affect their ability to fertilize their fields. Conversely, if your area had chemical problems, it might be a great day for your readers, who will now see improved water.

Not every story will have a local impact, but you should dig around on everything from the latest cooking craze to the international deployment of troops from your country, just to be sure. Look at stories that happen elsewhere and see if they matter to your readers. If you have a good local angle, use it to drive your story.

CRIME AND DISASTERS
Reporting on things like hurricanes, car crashes and other mayhem doesn’t lend itself to a lot of hard and fast rules. Some people become passionate about covering breaking news, including murders and robberies, while others will do their best to avoid ever seeing blood on the job. How you react during each of these incidents will be an entirely individual thing.

That said, here are three universal truths to this kind of reporting:

**STAY CALM**
When you arrive on the scene of a fire, you may come face to face with a group of firefighters desperately trying to revive a heavily burned victim. If you go to a traffic accident, you could see mangled cars and blood strewn across an entire city block. At these or any other unsavory disaster scenes, you might be fighting the urge to throw up. Whatever you feel at that point, you need to keep your head in the game. Take a deep breath and collect your thoughts. You need to do the job you were sent to do: Talk to people, gather information and be prepared to tell a story. A panicking reporter is a useless reporter.

**STAY SAFE**
Rescue professionals like firefighters and police officers are trying to do their jobs at the scene of an accident or during a standoff with an armed individual. You are also trying to do your job at that point in time, which means asking questions and gathering facts. In some of these cases, regardless of how important you feel about yourself, their job needs trump yours. If the officials put up special crime-scene tape or tell you what you can’t touch, you should listen to them. If you don’t, you could get arrested or injured. Worse yet, you might mess up a crime scene and make it impossible for them to find out what happened.

Even when there aren’t people telling you what to do or what to avoid, use common sense in determining your best course of action. Don’t drive into a flooded area and expect the police to rescue you. Don’t enter a wildfire zone to get some video and assume everything will be fine. A dead or wounded reporter is about as useless as a panicking one.
STAY FOCUSED

As is the case with sports reporting, you have a few crucial elements to gather at the scene of a crime or a disaster. Here are some things you should consider getting when you go after a breaking news story:

- **Any death or severity of injury**: We talked earlier in the book about impact as one of the interest elements, and you will rarely see a more severe impact than death or serious injury. If someone sustains an injury severe enough that loss of life is possible, you will want to find out who can keep you updated on that person’s condition.

- **Damage amounts**: You can also measure an impact in terms of property damage or loss. In the case of a fire, everyone in the home might have escaped safely, but the house burns to the ground. In the case of a rainstorm, poor drainage might lead to massive amounts of damage in people’s basements. Experts, such as insurance investigators and fire marshals, can give you a dollar amount associated with these kinds of losses, thus helping you show the magnitude of the impact.

- **Identities of people involved in the incident**: Fame is another area of interest that will matter to your readers, so you should do your best to figure out who was involved in this situation. In some cases, a person involved in a crime or disaster can have broad-reaching fame. For example, in October 2016, two men burst into a luxury apartment in France, tied up the resident at gunpoint and stole nearly $9 million worth of jewelry. Although the dollar amount alone would have drawn attention locally, the event became an international story when the name of the victim was released: reality TV star Kim Kardashian West.14 Even if the person involved in the incident isn’t famous in the broadest sense of the word, the identities of people involved in accidents, fires, robberies, shootings and more matter to your readers. It could be a small town’s mayor, the head librarian at a local school or even just someone everyone seemed to know. People in your audience will likely know someone involved in these incidents. Get that information out there for your readers to help them connect to your story.

- **What happened**: Actions matter a great deal when it comes to a disaster story. You need to figure out for your readers what happened. The officials at the scene of a crime or who are helping abate a disaster will be able to fill you in on the nuts and bolts of the situation. You need information from them to help walk you through how the incident started, what made it continue and what will happen next. Their insight is crucial for you to help explain the situation to your readers.
THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Be prepared:** You will never feel worse as a reporter if you go to an event and you have not prepared for it. If you don’t study the topic, understand the intricacies of the event or know what to expect, you will have a difficult time gathering information and an even harder time writing a good story. Do enough prep work to feel grounded in the topic and ready to gather information with confidence.

2. **Find the story:** The point of covering events isn’t to note that the event happened, but rather what happened at the event. Not every element of one of these gatherings is worth your attention, so figure out what will matter most to your readers and focus on it. This is particularly true of news conferences and meetings. A lot of things will happen during the course of these types of events, but you need to boil down the event to its most crucial elements for your audience.

3. **Be safe:** In terms of covering disasters, you need to take care of yourself and stay out of harm’s way. In every other story, you need to be safe in terms of keeping errors away from your copy. Always double-check everything you do as a reporter and a writer before you decide to move on to the next thing.

KEY TERMS

- agenda 119
- gamer 127
- minutes 119
- breaking news 133
- localization 130
- news conferences 124

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the pros and cons associated with speeches and news conferences? In each case you have a person of importance speaking on a given topic. Which do you think is easier to cover? Why? Which do you think is likely to generate content that is valuable for your audience? Why?

2. When you see interviews with people on television, what makes them good and what makes them awful, in your opinion? How would you go about improving the overall value of these interviews?

3. Of all of the story types we discussed in the chapter, which one sounds most appealing to you? Why? Which one sounds least appealing to you? Why?
WRITE NOW!

1. Analyze a meeting story in your local paper. What elements of the story were valuable and helpful to you? What aspects of the story did the writer touch on that you think didn’t work out very well? Explain what could have made this better.

2. Analyze a game story from a local publication, examining it for the elements listed in the book as critical for all game stories. Did it meet the expectations for these key story components? Did it use these elements in the proper spots and effectively? What is your overall sense of the quality of this game story?

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