

# The five W's

Facts usually fall into these main groups.

And your success as a journalist depends upon your ability to keep your facts straight. In the early 1900s, cards were posted in the newsroom of Joseph Pulitzer's New York World that shouted:

**ACCURACY! ACCURACY! ACCURACY!  
WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? HOW?  
THE FACTS — THE COLOR — THE FACTS!**

Now, you can argue about the number of W's here. (Are there four? Or five? Does "how" count as a W?) But you can't argue that good journalism combines facts and color, as Pulitzer observed. By "color," he meant description and flavor. But in the example at right, we'll take "color" even more literally:

# WHO WHAT WHEN WHERE WHY

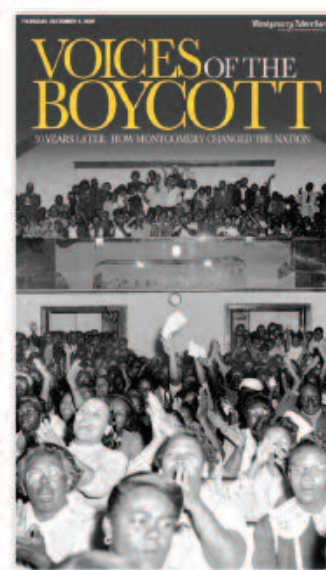
**EXAMPLES OF THE FIVE W'S** in a typical story, with facts color-coded to match the words in the headline at left:

Swimming was prohibited in **Cooper Lake Monday** after a **dangerous amount of algae** was found in the water **last week**.

**Polk County health officials** declared the lake off-limits **because of blue-green algae blooms**. **Ingesting the water can make people ill and kill small pets**.

The restrictions include **windsurfing and sailboarding** but **not boating**.

"We hope it won't last **longer than two or three weeks**," said **Robin Fox, the county's director of environmental health**.



Some news stories happened in the past (*The Beavers lost Friday night's game*). Some will happen in the future (*The Beavers play the Warhogs next week*). And some go on and on, through the past, present and future

## THE WHEN

(*The Beavers are in the midst of a 20-game losing streak. When is it ever going to end?*). Timeliness is essential to every story. In this media-saturated, 24-hour cable-network-and-online-delivery culture we live in, readers want news that's fresh and immediate. They depend on you to tell them *when* events happened, when events *will* happen and how long they'll last.

Being a reporter, then, means constantly keeping your eyes on the clock, for two reasons:

- 1) so you can include the "when" in every story, and
- 2) so you can finish every story before deadline.

◀ **THIS SPECIAL SECTION** from the *Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser*, published on the 50th anniversary of the *Montgomery Bus Boycott*, examines life in the 1950s, a key period in civil rights history.

## EMPHASIZING THE "WHEN" ANGLE:

*This story from the Las Vegas Review-Journal is all about holidays, so it begins:*

Clark County public school students don't go to class on Labor Day, Nevada Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents Day or Memorial Day.

In the past, they've had to go to school on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, when it fell on a school day.

This year, the district's 258,000 students will have Monday off because administrators deliberately scheduled the first of four teacher training days to coincide with Yom Kippur. . . .

*Here's how a British newspaper starts a story headlined, "The twilight angels who come out after hours":*

While most of us are just settling down for a night in front of the TV at seven o'clock in the evening, for a special team of Plymouth nurses work is only just beginning. . . .



No, we're not talking about that legendary 1960s rock group, The Who — although we *could* be, if we were writing a story about classic rockers. And that story might be popular, too, because readers love stories that focus on people: Celebrities. Movers and shakers. The rich and powerful. The weird and wacky.

## THE WHO

Reporters generally love writing "people profiles," too, because it's so fun to interview fascinating folks. Journalism provides a perfect excuse for letting you ask intimate questions of total strangers.

When you start assembling facts for even the hardest hard-news story, always look for the "who" elements: Who's involved? Who's affected? Who's going to benefit? Who's getting screwed? No matter how abstract the topic, it's the "who" angle that keeps it real.

◀ **THIS OBITUARY** from the *San Jose Mercury News* explains who *Pope John Paul II* was, who's mourning his death around the world and who might replace him as the next pope.

## EMPHASIZING THE "WHO" ANGLE:

*This lead from the Medford (Ore.) Mail Tribune makes it instantly clear what the story's about:*

A self-described miser who drank outdated milk, lived in an unheated house and held up his second-hand pants with a bungee cord has left a \$9 million legacy that will benefit Southern Oregon social service agencies.

*This feature story centers on a number of "whos" — film critics, film characters and film actors:*

The Online Film Critics Society, an international association of Internet-based cinema journalists, is sharing its love with the character we're supposed to hate.

The society has announced its new list celebrating the Top 100 Villains of All Time.

The greatest screen villain, according to the 132 members, is Darth Vader, played by David Prowse and voiced by James Earl Jones in the original "Star Wars" trilogy.



The bigger the news organization, the broader its coverage area. USA Today, for example, calls itself "The Nation's Newspaper," and it covers the entire world.

But most American newspapers are small dailies and weeklies that focus exclusively on their cities, counties or school campuses. Which means the "where" of every story is crucial: the closer the event, the more relevant it will be to readers.

## THE WHERE

But explaining the "where" of a story isn't always easy. That's why the more complex a topic is, the more you need to supplement your reporting with visuals such as a map (*Where will they build the new airport?*), a diagram (*Where will they expand the gym?*) or a photo (*Where did police find the body?*).

◀ **THIS TRAVEL STORY** from *The Oregonian* focuses on a specific place — *Costa Maya* — relying on maps, photos and detailed description to paint a picture for would-be visitors.

## EMPHASIZING THE "WHERE" ANGLE:

*This story from the Washington Post immediately transports you to a dramatic destination:*

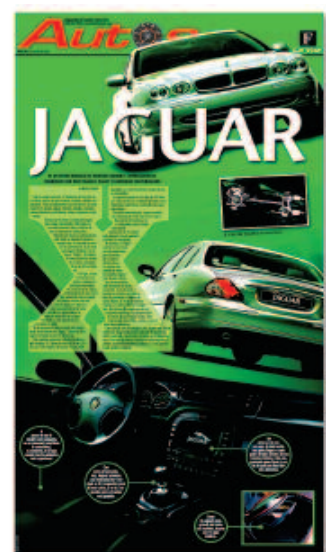
Fishermen call it the "Hell Hole," this place of whistling winds and smashing waves in the north Atlantic Ocean. Above a chasm in the Northeast Channel, which runs between the submerged Georges and Browns banks off Nova Scotia, fishermen catch cod, haddock and other fish with hooks at the ends of long lines, and by dragging nets along the sea floor.

"It takes guts to fish 'Hell Hole,'" said Sanford Atwood, a 54-year-old fisherman who has braved Hell Hole's elements aboard his boat, the *Ocean Legend*. . . .

*And here's a classic "where" lead by Bob Batz:*

When it comes to advertising the location of its monthly meetings, the Global Positioning System Users Group is different than most groups.

They gather on the fourth Thursday of the month at N 40 37 18 W 80 02 50 W. . . .



What's "what"? It's the stuff that news is *about* — events and ideas, projects and problems, dollars and disasters. And it's your job, as a journalist, to monitor and explain the stuff that matters most to your readers, whether you find it in a classroom, dig it up on a government beat or watch it on a football field.

## THE WHAT

Now, here's something you may not have realized before: The "what" gives news its substance; the "who" gives news its humanity and personality. Why does that matter? Because news stories become dry and dull when they focus too much on, say, meetings and money (the "what") and forget to connect them to real people (the "who"). Which is one reason why business reports and scientific papers are so boring: They're all "what" and no "who."

◀ **THIS CAR REVIEW** from *La Voz* is unconcerned with *who*, *when* or *where*. It's all about *what* the car looks like, what its features are, what works, what doesn't — and what everything costs.

## EMPHASIZING THE "WHAT" ANGLE:

*Notice how this USA Today business story begins with a list of famous "whats":*

The Empire State Building. The SUV. The Incredible Hulk. The Boeing 747.

When it comes to big, no place does it better than the USA. But after a 34-year run, one of these icons is starting to see its popularity fade.

The 747 — synonymous with "huge" as the world's largest commercial jetliner — is increasingly being pushed out of airline fleets worldwide for being too expensive to operate and too hard to fill. . . .

*Here's a Toronto Star story about a pop-culture trend:*

Plastic surgery reality shows are setting a frightening example, bringing the practice of cosmetic surgery into disrepute, doctors say.

"It is barbaric, the whole premise of changing the way they look completely," says Dr. Frank Lista. "It's turned plastic surgery into a freak show." . . .



Good journalism reports the news; great journalism explains it. And explaining the news requires asking, over and over, the question "why": *Why is this law necessary? Why will it cost so much?* And most important of all: *Why should we care?*

## THE WHY

When news breaks suddenly, finding the explanations for events can be difficult. But for most stories, remember, the "why" is what makes the news meaningful.

◀ **THIS SPECIAL SECTION** from *The Seattle Times* explains the causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Good reporters are good teachers. They know how to explain things in a clear, concise way. And explaining the "how" of a story often requires detailed explanation: *How will this plan work? How did that prisoner escape? How do I decorate my dog for Halloween?*

## THE HOW

For short stories and news briefs, the "how" is often omitted to save space. But readers love a good "how-to" story, especially in the feature section.

▶ **THIS FEATURE STORY** from the *Marion Chronicle-Tribune* provides a beginner's guide to doing the laundry.